

PREVIEW

THE COMPLETE COMMANDER

THE UNOFFICIAL GUIDE



“If you’re only going to read **one book about Commander, **read this one.** Bennie Smith cuts to the heart of the format and exposes it like no one else could.”**

—Sheldon Menery, Judge Emeritus and co-founder of the Commander format

Multiplayer Strategy	Politics of Choosing Your Commander
Illustrated Deckbrewing	Building up Balthor
Commander Tactics	Prossh’s Food for Thought
Original Deck Ideas	“I Didn’t Sign Up for This Crap!” -Rafiq
Haymaker Community Tales	Red Raths All in New Jersey
Fiction	Command Tower by John Dale Beety

Now read on to see what all the fuss is about...

SPARK IGNITED, YOU'RE READY TO BATTLE
ACROSS THE MULTIVERSE.

NOW, CHOOSE THE ULTIMATE ALLY
WHO WILL ALWAYS FIGHT AT YOUR SIDE...

The Complete Commander: An Unofficial Guide is the first of its kind. This shiny eBook you're about to explore is an informative, edgy, graphically stunning **Magic: The Gathering** grimoire that's a celebration of the game's most popular multiplayer format: Commander.

Designed for lovers of casual multiplayer game experiences, *The Complete Commander: An Unofficial Guide* takes you from Commander concept and theory to choosing your Commander, and includes a full deck-brewing walkthrough, providing you with all the tools you need to build a solid 100-card deck that's both fun and flavorful. Features include Budget Starter Kits, Commander Staples, and three sample Commander decks designed to jump start your deckbuilding imagination. Trying to get someone into Magic? We've got you covered with the Magic 101 section. A more advanced player? Then it's the ideal reference for starting new brews.

And the book wouldn't be as epic as we desired without the extra swag: a foreword from "the godfather of Commander" Sheldon Menery, an introduction by DailyMTG.com's Command Tower writer Adam Styborski, and an afterword on the evolution of Commander design from Robby Rothe. Plus, we've included new **Magic: The Gathering** fan fiction from the community's best fantasy writers, breathing life into some of your favorite characters in fun and unique ways. Last but not least are the Spirit of Commander Vignettes—quite possibly written by someone from your playgroup!

The Complete Commander: An Unofficial Guide began as an email between two friends but quickly grew, much like the format itself, to a true community project you have to read to believe. You've got epic stories to tell, and this book will guide you to countless unforgettable adventures!

To future haymakers and tales worth the telling,
Bennie Smith & MJ Scott

Edited and Produced by MJ Scott | Cover and Interior Design by James Arnold

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BENNIE SMITH

First and foremost, I want to say thanks to all my readers over the years.

Your kind words and positive feedback provide me fuel for writing my heart out. You gave me the idea for the initial “EDH Primer” series I wrote on Starcitygames.com some years back, and your requests to revisit the primers and update them gave me the vague notion to offer it up in a consolidated book form.





1

WHY PLAY COMMANDER?

- INTRODUCTION
- THE GENIUS OF SINGLETON MAGIC
- THE JOYS OF MULTIPLAYER MAGIC
- EMBRACE THE CHAOS!
- HAYMAKER MAGIC

THE PLAYER TO MY RIGHT ENDED HIS TURN AND I SURVEYED THE BATTLEFIELD.

I had a Multani, Maro-Sorcerer on the board which was the biggest threat, and I could sense that all of my opponents were maneuvering to end me before Multani could take each of them out 1 by 1. I noticed the blue mage had no mana untapped, so I didn't have to worry about counterspells. I put Pyroblast and Red Elemental Blast in my deck to handle a counterspell or 2, but having my blue opponent mana-less was even better insurance.

It was time to make a move.

I ask, "How many cards does everyone have?" We all count our hands and figure out Multani is a 30/30. I sacrifice him to Greater Good, drawing 30 cards and then having to discard 3. Relief at having Multani gone ripples around the board, along with a little confusion as to why I got rid of my most powerful threat. There was only the tiniest amount of concern about the fact that I now had a gigantic hand of cards, since I was only playing a green and red deck. It was fairly early in the game, everyone had healthy life totals. What could I possibly do?

I play Multani's little brother Maro. He's as big as Multani was due to the number of cards I'm holding, and I go ahead and sacrifice him too, to double my hand size, and finally draw it.

Firestorm!

I've got enough cards in hand to discard and be able to Firestorm everyone to death. The only problem is that I need 50 more targets for Firestorm to make it large enough to kill all my opponents. I scan through my gigantic hand and finally find the card I need. I cast Spontaneous Generation and make a ton of 1/1 saproling tokens. My opponents nod grimly—that's a lot of token creatures, and even though they're small the swarm could prove even more lethal than Multani. Still, they aren't overly concerned until I cast Firestorm and pitch nearly my entire hand, targeting each of them, all their creatures, and enough saprolings so that I can kill them all.

"Force of Will the Firestorm," says the blue mage, casting it for no mana and pitching a blue from his hand to do it.

I smile. Lucky for me one of the few cards left in my hand is Pyroblast.

I counter the Force of Will, preventing the blue mage from shutting down my storm of fire and destruction. Everyone is stunned.

Victory is mine!



READ
MORE
IN
CHAPTER

1

THE COOLEST THING ABOUT PLAYING THIS FORMAT IS THE COMMANDER ITSELF,

and the rules that surround it. While the randomness and chaos of playing a singleton format is mostly a lot of fun, it can sometimes be a little frustrating—which is why it's so fantastic to nearly always be able to count on casting your Commander whenever you have the mana for it. You'll find that your Commander is the most reliable and consistent element of your deck and it pays to keep that in mind when building the rest of your 99.

THE FIRST STEP

Choosing a Legend as your Commander can be as simple as asking yourself *what colors do I want to play?* Do you have a bunch of cards throughout Magic's history that you miss playing with? Not long ago, I realized that most of my favorite Magic cards of all time could be found in green, black and white, or were gold cards that spanned 2 of those colors, so I built a deck stuffed with as many of my favorite cards and combos that I could squeeze in. There aren't too many Legends that are green, black and white but I went ahead and picked Doran, the Siege Tower because several of the cards in my deck had a high toughness that could benefit from Doran's ability. Also, Doran can hit hard and is aggressively costed, so if I needed to rely on Commander damage to take someone down I could do so.

While it's perfectly fine to build a Commander deck this way ("from the bottom-up"), it's often a lot more fun to craft your deck to complement the abilities of your Commander, or to play a lot of cards that get a whole lot better when your Commander is in play. Legendary cards in Magic are often infused with a lot of great flavor and you can get a lot of satisfaction from letting that Legend's flavor and personality infuse itself throughout your deck. Since your Commander is nearly always available to you from the Command Zone, it's not unreasonable to build your deck with the expectation of having that Legend in play quite frequently.

BUILDING AROUND YOUR COMMANDER'S ABILITIES

Since building your deck with an eye towards having your Commander in play is the icing on your Commander cake, take a good look at this Legendary creature. Take in all the lines of text, the static and activated abilities, its casting cost, the creature type and its power and toughness. All of these can have bearing on what sort of cards you'll want in your deck.



Let's look at Jarad, Golgari Lich Lord. His first ability says he gets +1/+1 for each creature card in your graveyard. To maximize this ability you should play a high quantity of creatures in your deck. You may also want to figure out a way to get a lot of them into the graveyard, such as creatures that self-sacrifice like Viscera Seer or Sakura-Tribe Elder, or using spells like Stinkweed Imp or Life from the Loam that have the Dredge ability which will quickly fill your graveyard with cards from your library.

His second ability lets you sacrifice another creature, and each opponent loses life equal to the sacrificed creature's power. To maximize this ability you should play creatures that have high power, and there are certainly plenty that fit the bill in green and black. Cards like Mortivore and Lord of Extinction are particularly good in this role since you may already be pushing a lot of creatures into your own graveyard to feed Jarad's first ability.

His last ability may seem like a throwaway if you've got him already as your Commander since if Jarad dies you can just put him into the Command Zone and recast him—but depending on how removal-happy your opponents might be, the Commander tax might get so high to recast him that it might be preferable to just let him go to the graveyard and sacrifice a Swamp and Forest to bring him back to your hand.

You'll also not want to overlook his creature types as a Zombie and an Elf. Both of these creature types have had a lot of tribal support over the years, and you might consider making Jarad, Golgari Lich Lord the Commander of your green/black Elf or Zombie deck.

THE POLITICS OF CHOOSING YOUR COMMANDER

When choosing your Commander you also want to keep in mind that multiplayer Magic has a very important element that dueling Magic does not have: politics. There are Legendary creatures that can hugely impact how other players interact with you. For example, let's look at Phelddagrif's special abilities:



Phelddagrif gains trample until end of turn.
Target opponent puts a 1/1 green Hippo creature token onto the battlefield.



Phelddagrif gains flying until end of turn. Target opponent gains 2 life.



Return Phelddagrif to its owner's hand. Target opponent may draw a card.

In multiplayer Phelddagrif is like Santa Claus, the gift that keeps on giving—as long as you're nice and not naughty. If you make it clear you're willing to hand out hippos, life and cards, your opponents will often be willing to help with whatever onboard issues you might have. Politics 101: you scratch my back I'll scratch yours,



and Phelddagrif's abilities are custom-made to do that. Many players will be hesitant to come after you early in the game in the hopes of reaping the benefits of some of your activated abilities, so even before you play your Commander you may get some positive rewards just from choosing this Legend.

Let's take a look at another Legend, Grand Arbiter Augustin IV. Here are his abilities:

White spells you cast cost **1** less to cast.

Blue spells you cast cost **1** less to cast.

Spells your opponents cast cost **1** more to cast.

At first blush he seems like a perfect Commander. He helps you cast your spells for less mana and his Mana Tithe affects all opponents around the table. While that's technically true, more importantly what that last ability actually does is annoy the living crap out of everyone at the table while not really locking them out of playing spells. That's a recipe for disaster; no matter how strong your position in the game if multiple players flat out gang up on you from the beginning it's trouble. At a bare minimum every piece of creature removal will be pointed at your general. Worst case scenario, multiple players decide the best way to remove the Grand Arbiter annoyance is to just take you out of the game. Even before you've cast your Commander, he could be negatively impacting your chances simply because of the choice you made.

An important question you need to ask yourself when choosing a Legend as your Commander is: how will the other players react when this Commander gets played? Multiplayer is tricky because you don't want all your opponents to be enemies until the time is right to take them out. The best Commanders tend to be powerful without being too overtly threatening or provocative. A Legend that's extremely powerful can drive your opponents' actions against you just like a Commander that's extremely annoying.

Now I'm not saying you shouldn't ever play aggressive, powerful, or annoying Commanders. The takeaway is this: make sure you think through the reaction the other players will have when you play your Commander—or in some cases, the reaction they'll have when they merely *find out* that you chose that Legend as your Commander—and plan accordingly. Maybe you'll want to add in a lot of defensive measures to protect yourself from getting ganged up on, or maybe you'll want to make sure your deck can function fine without the Commander in play if you figure a lot of people will try to prevent you from keeping the Commander on the battlefield.



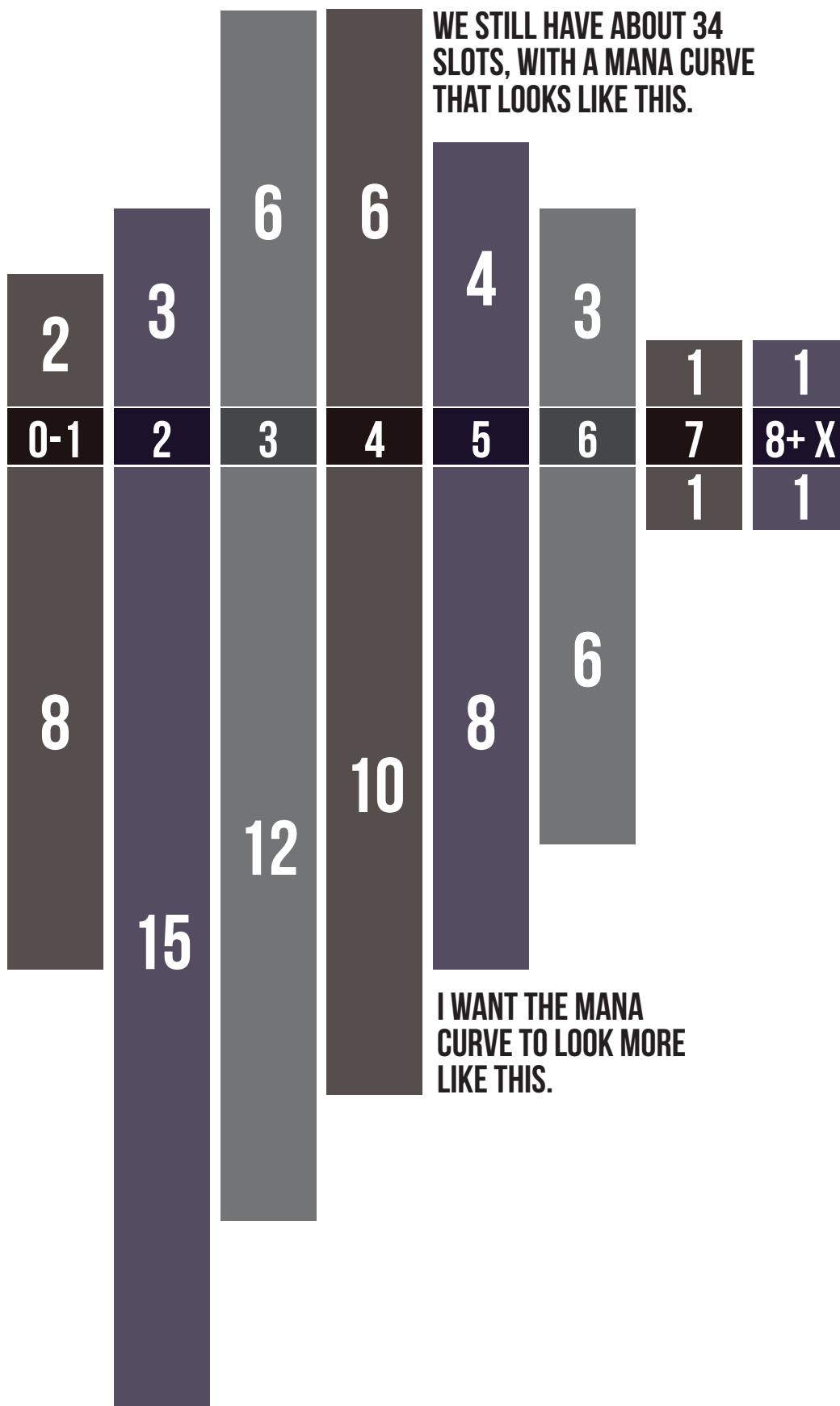
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FULL DECK BREWING WALKTHROUGH



- FICTION: THE VENGEFUL DEAD
- WHO LEADS THE WALKING DEAD?
- SIDEBAR: TRIBAL STAPLES
- CASTING A WIDE NET
- SAMPLE DECKLIST
- KILLING YOUR DARLINGS

EXCERPT FROM 'FULL DECK BREWING WALKTHROUGH'



0-1 MANA ●●●●●●●●

HAVE 2, NEED ABOUT 6 MORE

We'll want some creature removal, so I'm going to search for *destroy creature* that's black or colorless, sorted by casting cost, and looked for cards costing 0 or 1 mana first. Slaughter Pact pops up, and is not too expensive—just make sure you put a reminder on top of your deck so you don't forget to pay the upkeep cost and lose the game! Bone Splinters isn't bad when you've got a bunch of expendable undead lying around, just make sure to save it for something big. I like Executioner's Capsule as a "rattlesnake" card that could wave people away from attacking you, else you pop off their most powerful creature. I'll round out the list with a few utility artifacts.

ADD

BONE SPLINTERS

CLAWS OF GIX

EXECUTIONER'S CAPSULE

GLARING SPOTLIGHT

SLAUGHTER PACT

WITCHES' EYE



2 MANA ●●●●●●●●●●

HAVE 3, NEED ABOUT 12 MORE

There are some good creature removal spells at 2 mana, including a zombie—Skinthinner! I'd like to add some artifact mana for acceleration, and Swiftfoot Boots for general awesomeness. We still need about 5 more cards, so I search the card database for zombies that cost 2 mana, and find some good candidates. Withered Wretch is good in particular to blunt the potential symmetry of Balthor and Tombstone Stairwell.

ADD

BLOOD SCRIVENER

BONEKNITTER

CABAL INTERROGATOR

DOOM BLADE

EVERFLOWING CHALICE

FELLWAR STONE

GO FOR THE THROAT

MIND STONE

PLAGUEBEARER

SKINTHINNER

SWIFTFOOT BOOTS

WITHERED WRETCH



3 MANA ●●●●●●●●●●

HAVE 6, NEED ABOUT 6 MORE

At 3 mana we have the nifty Stronghold Assassin—who's been errata'd to be a zombie in addition to being an assassin! Attrition is a way to sacrifice a creature that's dying anyway—say, from chump blocking—into death for a threatening creature an opponent controls. Seal of Doom is like Executioner's Capsule, a good "rattlesnake" card. A little card drawing would help, and Underworld Connections does the trick quite nicely. To offset the life loss, let's toss in Loxodon Warhammer, which is just an all-around great Commander card.

ADD

ATTRITION

LOXODON WARHAMMER

MURDER

SEAL OF DOOM

STRONGHOLD ASSASSIN

UNDERWORLD CONNECTIONS



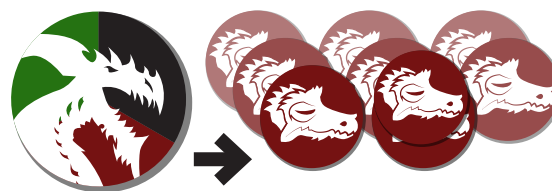
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A few other musings on building a deck around Prossh: appropriately enough, the first I want to mention is the enchantment Food Chain. Food Chain is another card that lets you sacrifice (or technically, put a creature in exile) for profit. When you exile a creature using Food Chain, you're rewarded with mana of any 1 color equal to the converted mana cost of the exiled creature plus 1 (this mana can only be used to cast creature spells). One of the nice things about playing Commander though, is if your Commander is put in exile, you can instead move him to the Command Zone. So, imagine this scenario:

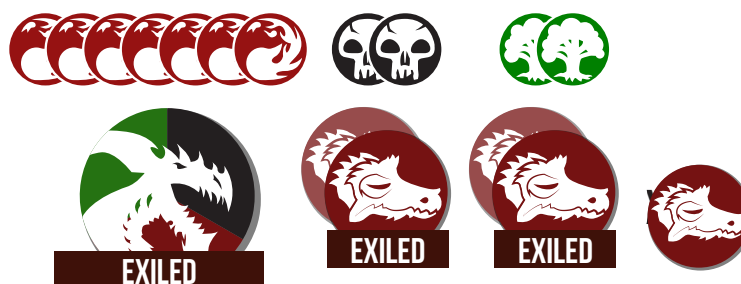
Exile Prossh for **7 red mana** (moving him to the **Command Zone** instead), and 2 kobold tokens for a **green** and a **black** mana (the kobold tokens are considered to have 0 converted mana cost, so exiling them with Food Chain nets you 1 colored mana).



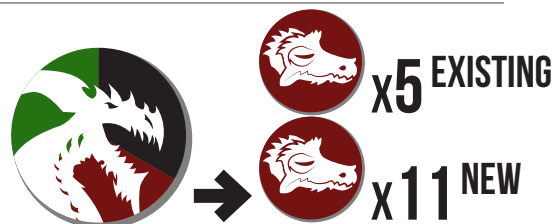
Cast Prossh from the **Command Zone** with a **2 mana** Commander tax, giving you 9 kobold tokens.



Exile Prossh for **7 red mana**, and **exile** 4 kobold tokens for at least **1 green** and **1 black** mana, netting you 5 kobolds.



Cast Prossh from the **Command Zone** with a **4 mana** Commander tax, giving you 11 kobold tokens.



Exile Prossh for **7 red mana**, and **exile** 6 kobold tokens for at least **1 green** and **1 black** mana, netting you 5 more kobolds.



I'VE GOT A STASH OF ARTIFACTS THAT I OFTEN USE IN COMMANDER DECKS

or the occasional Modern tournament, but then I've got a dusty old box of stuff that doesn't really call to my soul for play. I like to go through this box every once in a while just to see if any of the cards get any new life from the latest cards that've been printed. In this vein a cycle of 4 artifact creatures from *Visions* caught my eye a couple years ago—Brass-Talon Chimera, Iron-Heart Chimera, Lead-Belly Chimera and Tin-Wing Chimera. I remembered way back in the day thinking these creatures were a cool concept, but never quite good enough for constructed tournament play. I put together a casual Chimera deck, but once I started playing Commander—where you can only have 1 copy of a card—they didn't seem worth messing around with.

When I ran across the Chimeras more recently the last time I rifled through the musty artifacts box, I thought of Runed Stalactite, and it occurred to me that card might be nifty to turn my Commander into a Chimera and then be able to put those funky Chimera counters on him. I mean, it's not a devastating combo or anything, but rather it's just strange, cool, and likely something that no one at your table may have seen before. Blazing uncharted Magic territory is one of the finer joys of Commander, so I set those 5 cards aside waiting for a deck idea to drop them into.

Then *Theros* came out and we suddenly had a few more Chimeras to work with and I knew it was time to make my move. So now the question was—which Commander should I pick? Since Runed Stalactite was important, I figured I'd want white in the deck to make use of white's equipment searching: Quest for the Holy Relic, Steelshaper's Gift, Stoneforge Mystic and Stonehewer Giant. I'd want to use green to help search out the 4 Chimeras with cards like Fauna Shaman and Survival of the Fittest. I might even want to dabble in blue for a few cards that can give creatures all types like Amoeboid Changeling, along with a few buyback spells like Whispers of the Muse and Mystic Speculation to work nicely with Prescient Chimera.

"I DIDN'T SIGN UP FOR THIS CRAP!"

So I knew I probably wanted a Bant (green/white/blue) Legend for my Commander, but which? After scanning the list, I knew I had my man—Rafiq of the Many! Now, Rafiq is a pretty popular Commander because he's a powerful Legend, relatively cheap to cast and can have a pretty dramatic impact on the board. People will typically build him with a bunch of "good stuff" cards in Bant colors or they'll use him in a Voltron-style deck, boosting Rafiq with equipment or Auras until the Commander damage he can potentially inflict reaches lethal levels. This all fits in with the flavor of Rafiq as a military commander; I can imagine him being no-nonsense and matter of fact. What you see is what you get.

So how much fun would it be to pick that sort of guy for the kind of crazy Chimera-themed shenanigans I had in mind? "*Commander Rafiq... I have a very unique mission for you...*" I can just imagine the look on a hard-nosed soldier's face when you explain to him the crazy crap you want him to do.



THE SPIRIT OF COMMANDER

DANIEL ZALOGA - NORTHERN NEW JERSEY

I love red. It is hands down my favorite. Of course, this means Ashling, the Pilgrim is my favorite general (no, I do NOT play 99 Mountains and Ashling).

I was sitting down to a 5 player game. By this time, the guys at the shop had seen my Ashling deck wreak havoc at tables before, so they knew it wasn't safe to just ignore me. Who goes after the mono red player? Well, all these guys did; I simply could NOT get Ashling to stick. Between board wipes and targeted removal, the Commander tax was quickly reaching the point where I wouldn't even be able to cast my favorite little 2-drop! Any other creature I played was also killed off... to be fair they are a fairly trollish lot, like Dragon Mage and Balefire Dragon. So I decided I needed to play smart. I had to sit back, watch the game, and know when to make my move. I had 2 lovely cards in hand I knew I needed to save. If I played out one or the other, they'd surely be destroyed. Oh yes, these were 2 particularly tasty cards to a red mage like me who loves to watch the world burn...

Then, the player immediately to my right cast a Tombstone Stairwell, and it was like a light shone down on me from above. With a wicked smile on my face, on my turn I calmly played my Vicious Shadows and my Furnace of Rath and passed the turn. From the look on my face, the guys at the table knew something was up, and that's when I looked at them and said, "I win."

You see, 19 or so Gravespawn tokens hitting the graveyard gave me a hell of a lot of Vicious Shadows triggers to pass around. Thanks to the Furnace, I was able to kill all of them in a single turn, even those who had managed to get their life above 40. This prompted the Teneb, the Harvester player to stand up and give me a high-five while proclaiming, "And mono-red sucks in Commander, right?!"



I feel sorry for the Planeswalkers I've met who don't have a family or a place to call their own. I've seen too many worlds to want to stay in one spot *all* the time, but I'll keep my cozy fire and my extended clan. There's no plane like home.

Home's where I went a while back. I landed at my usual spot: Uncle Jack's Junkyard, Command Tower, my alcove on the ground floor. The guard in the lobby didn't even blink when I walked up. She just straightened her thick gray gloves and picked up the crystal on her desk, one of a set I'd acquired at a quarry in Otaria.

"Uncle Jack? The kid's back." She listened, nodded. "He says to head on up."

There are 32 flights of stairs in the tower, which is why I'd put on my running boots before 'walking over. I went up them lickety-split, caught my breath at Uncle Jack's door, and knocked.

"Come on in, kid."

Uncle Jack looked fat and happy as ever when I entered his office, though I'd learned long ago not to read too much into his smile. He waved with a gray-gloved right hand. His left hand was bare to write and tan like the feather-barbs at the top of his quill.

"Just let me finish this column... there." Uncle Jack put up his quill and blotted the page. "Welcome back, kid. I was hopin' you'd come."

"Thanks, uncle." Everyone called him uncle, even his blood-cousins. In my clan, you're an aunt, an uncle, or a kid. Or in my case, *the* kid. "How's business?"

"Fair to middlin'. Just got a contract to scrap a haunted house. How's your monster-huntin'?"

"I just figured out how to summon the soul of a world."

Uncle Jack tilted his head. "That's not one of your metafigures of speech, is it?"

"Nope. The locals call it 'Progenitus.'"

"Huh." Uncle Jack stood and jerked his thumb toward the tower's west window. "Does it eat magic goats?"

"Maybe? I haven't fed it one." I blinked. "Wait, do you mean *atogs*?"

"Atogs, goats, same letters. Take a look out the window."

I went west. "So you never told me how those atogs were working out for you—"

"Take a look."

I saw, and I swore.

"Where'd you learn to talk like that, kid?"

"Otaria," I said without thinking. We stared at each other a while. "Uh, Uncle Jack, I didn't give you that many atogs."



“Yeah. You didn’t tell me how fast they breed, either.”

“They do?”

“*They do?* asks the kid.” Uncle Jack snorted. “You gave me magic goats and you don’t even know how they work.”

“Of course I do. They eat what I tell them to eat. I summon them, I use them for a third of a day at most, and then I send them back. You’re the one who wanted to keep them.”

“Unh-unh. You can’t pin this on me, kid. You should’ve known better than to give me a girl magic goat and a boy magic goat.”

I looked out the window again. “One was a girl?”

“The lith-goat.”

I closed my eyes. “So you’re telling me that the Lithatog and the Thaumalog were reproductively compatible enough to make a bunch of baby atogs.”

“Yep.” Uncle Jack folded his arms. “Fix it. Send them all back.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Uncle.” I shrugged. “I can send the Lithatog and the Thaumalog home, but those babies? This right here is home.”

“Yeah? Well, they’re eatin’ their home.” Uncle Jack pulled a scope from his desk. “Take a look down there.”

I retrieved the scope and peered through it. What I’d assumed were just rough patches on the ground were craters with tooth-marks.

“Uh-oh.”

“Uh-oh’s right.” Uncle Jack took the scope back. “I was calculfigurin’ their growth rates when you showed up. I give it two days before they start eatin’ the Command Tower.”



THE STORY DOESN'T END HERE.



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