Arcane Laboratory 007 – Akuta, Born of Trash

If there's one thing I've learned from the past two weeks, it's that there are more people reading these articles than I thought (more than my girlfriend and Andy, and least). If there's a second thing, it's that people like pointing out mistakes, which is good, because I can trust people to point out any stupid things I say.

In the Sasaya article, I commented on how Candelabra of Tawnos and Cloudstone Curio combo. Well, if you actually read Cloudstone Curio, it clearly says non-artifact; something that completely slipped my mind. Almost every single one of the decks I build has a slip like this, where I completely forget how cards work because of how cool an interaction is if it did work. The most recent example of this is when I tried to use Sovereigns of Lost Alara to put an Eldrazi Conscription on my Progenitus to get in for 21 points of general damage. Let me tell you, that went over REALLY well. In short, I appreciate people pointing out mistakes like this so I can fix them and (hopefully) not make stupid mistakes like that again in the future.

But, moving on, besides having a really lame title (Seriously though, how do you make a pun out of ANY name from Kamigawa?) this week's article is a continuation of my most recent project, building a few reasonable mono-colored decks that (hopefully) don't fall into the same patterns that many decks in that color tend to fall into. We've already done Green and White, and this week I'll be moving on into black. So let's take a look at some of the more popular black generals, and the archetypes they tend to lend themselves to, and then some of the less commonly played generals.

As far as I can tell, these are the most popular commanders and themes:

Geth, Lord of the Vault - MBC/Reanimation
Maga, Traitor to Mortals - MBC/Combo
Shirei, Shizo's Caretaker - Reanimation/Attrition
Skithiryx, the Blight Dragon - MBC/Voltron Beatdown
Drana, Kalastria Bloodchief - MBC/Vampire Tribal
Balthor, the Defiled - Reanimation/Zombie Tribal

So, the first of two key themes here are mono-black control, usually involving some high number of board sweepers, Necropotence, Drain Life, and mass discard, usually finishing with some Eldrazi stuff. The reanimation decks usually involve some kind of dredge/Buried Alive into stuff, then Balthor them back into play. Personally, I'm a big fan of the Iname, Death Aspect style of decks that use their general as a tutor AND an enabler to go broken early on with mass reanimation. It's kind of cool how many spirit-based combos there. Still, even though those decks aren't that common, they're pretty linear and done to death, so I want to do something a little different.

So, there really aren't that many things that Black does besides grind out card advantage. I think the most interesting thing that can be done is to find a more unique way to do that as opposed to going through the typical Decree of Pain + Damnation + Cabal Conditioning route. Here are some of the generals that I'm thinking about:

Endrek Sahr, Master Breeder
Greel, Mind Raker
He Who Hungers

Akuta, Born of Ash
Kalitas, Bloodchief of Ghet
Kuon, Ogre Ascendant
Mirri the Cursed

Well, let's start with Endrek Sahr. Everyone loves tokens, you can do all kinds of fun things with them. Black is especially good at managing the number of tokens in play, since it's the color that likes sacrificing things as a cost for all kinds of shenanigans. Seems kind of interesting, but you'll have to play all kinds of terrible creatures just to start making tokens, for what that's worth. You could definitely do some cool things with this, but I don't know if it's what I'm looking for.

Greel, Mind Raker is something I REALLY want to be good, but will probably never quite be good enough. You'd just be SO reliant on Geth's Grimoire to keep your hand full, and Greel is just going to get hit with removal before you get to activate it. Paying 3BBBX for a repeatable mind twist seems okay, but paying 2 more for it each time you get hit with removal seems like a real blow to any kind of tempo you could generate.

He Who Hungers seems really, really bad, but it's my kind of bad. You get to use all kinds of hilarious spirit-based synergy, sacrifice triggers, and even the long-forgotten SOULSHIFT mechanic! The real problem is that you have to target a single player. You do get to pick apart hands, but singling out particular players, even if you spread out the hate, is a great way to make enemies. This is definitely going to happen at some point, I just don't know if this is his day.

Akuta, Born of Ash. So bad…it's so, so bad. Not only do you have to have more cards in hand than the blue deck, but you've also got to sacrifice lands and put yourself behind the ramp player. So, you've got to be playing a really, really weird deck that doesn't mind sacrificing permanents, but can keep its hand full. On the bright side, having a recursive beater is a good way to win games in some metagames. A 3/2 haste isn't THAT bad, especially when it's your general, and you could probably do some pretty interesting things, but it definitely won't be too powerful. You'd be hard pressed to win games, but that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Kalitas, Bloodchief of Ghet is a general I really want to be good. He has a powerful effect, and you clearly want to give him haste, and I'm going to DREAM about putting a Thornbite Staff on him, but other than that he's just generic mono black control, which is boring and uninteresting.

Kuon seems fine, but it's another generic MBC general. You're going to kill a bunch of guys, and that's going to enable you to kill more guys. I like attrition/stax-y decks as much as the next guy, but…when you can only interact with one resource, and focusing on other ones makes it harder for your general to get online AND you don't have a built in win condition with your general… it just seems like it'd fall short.

Mirri the Cursed is interesting, and I really want her to be good. The problem is that you have to ask why you're playing Mirri over Skittles. I mean, your clock is twice as fast if you play skittles, and any equipment makes power gap between the two even more noticeable. It's just really hard to justify playing Mirri for any reason other than flavor, and I can't stand playing a really bad version of another deck.

So, I'm clearly going to be building some kind of Spirit-based deck, either with He Who Hungers or Akuta. Those are the most interesting to me, particularly because I get to build graveyard-based decks,

which are always a blast to build and play. He Who Hungers seems a little slow to build around, and since black likes having creatures to sacrifice and isn't lacking in sacrifice outlets, I think I'm going to go against my better judgment and build around Akuta. Feeling stupid? I know I am!

The key thing to keep in mind here is that in order for Akuta to be ANY good, you have to have more cards in your hand than any other player. That means you've got to be able to fill your hand with cards, and you've got to find ways to avoid playing cards whenever possible. You can also empty other players' hands as necessary, but I think the key here is to avoid playing cards as much as possible, as counter intuitive as that is.

Let's start by taking a look at the pieces of the engine that will let you avoid casting spells as often as possible. You want as many ways to turn one card into a long-term advantage as possible, and it turns out that black is actually pretty good at that.

More Recursive Guys

Reassembling Skeleton
Bloodghast
Nether Traitor
Bitterblossom

These are your engine pieces in addition to Akuta. The deck has a sacrificial/recursion theme to it, since that's really the best way to Black to attrition other decks out. You need a constant stream of bodies to turn into other resources so that you don't need to cast the cards in your hand. It's important to note that between Bloodghast and Nether Traitor you can get upwards of 4 bodies to sacrifice per turn, more if you've got fetchlands or Thawing Glaciers or some other shenanigans. Still, just as important as the recursive creatures are the things you're doing with them:

Sacrifice Stuff!

Attrition
Sadistic Hypnotist
Malevolent Awakening
Skullclamp

Grave Pact
Sangromancer

So there's four "real" sac outlets here, but honestly, I think that's enough. These cover most of the important bases, but you could add more cool things like Mind Slash or Gate to Phyrexia if you think the effect is necessary. Being able to turn your recursive guys into additional resources is KEY to this deck, since it lets you continue to play the game while keeping your hand full for Akuta recursion when the time comes. The next part of the deck follows nicely from this one. The real question is, how are you going to stock your graveyard full of good stuff? Here's how:

Bury them Alive!

Buried Alive

Entomb
Iname, Death Aspect
Undead Gladiator

Dakmor Salvage
Golgari Thug
Stinkweed Imp
Darkblast
Necroplasm

First set of cards are pretty straightforward, they dump important creatures into the graveyard, and that's about all there is to it. Undead Gladiator is the only exception, but he interacts nicely with the second set of cards, the dredgers. It's unfortunate that you can only play the black-based ones, but that's workable. It's important to note that you can "loot" multiple times with Gladiator during your upkeep to dig for reasonable spells to cast.

Necroplasm is one of the worst dredgers here, since you'll almost never want to cast it. However, the creatures are going to be better in general since it's easier to get them from hand to graveyard and back. Darkblast is pretty easy to recycle, but the creatures can be recycled for advantage. Here's what you want to do with your dredged stuff:

Bombs!

Kuro, Pitlord
Horobi, Death's Wail
He Who Hungers

Steel Hellkite
Massacre Wurm
Myojin of Night's Reach
Geth, Lord of the Vault
Helldozer

Necrotic Ooze
Myr Propagator

Pretty straightforward here. The first three are ones that you WANT to get with Iname, Death Aspect. There are pretty common interactions that people play in Iname decks, but they're powerful here too. Kuro + Horobi is a machine gun. He Who Hungers is really powerful with Bloodghast + Nether Traitor + stuff that's really good at keeping blue players under control, and helps you keep your and size bigger than everyone else.

The other set of cards are bombs that you want to reanimate over and over until you win the game. Steel Hellkite is necessary to answer most of the permanents that the deck tends to have trouble with. Massacre Wurm is one of the most awesome cards from the new set. Wrath the board, take 10? Sign me up! Activate Myojin once, and you'll be ahead on cards for most of the game after that. Geth is one of the best bombs I can think of to get you ahead on the board after you cast it. It's unfortunate that you can't target your own graveyard, but it should be good enough to go after everyone else's. After all, hypothetically

you've been making people discard all their sweet stuff all game. Helldozer is a guy that's sort of fallen by the wayside, but he was broken during Ravnica block constructed, he saw brief play in legacy for awhile, and is just absurdly powerful. Hate on non-basics all to your heart's content.

Now, something that most of these have in common with one another is that they have activated abilities. That makes Necrotic Ooze a sweet catch-all, especially when you can spend a slot making Ooze busted: Myr Propagator. With Propagator in the yard, you can make copies of Necrotic Ooze, each of which can do broken things with other guys in your graveyard. Seems pretty sweet, right? With He Who Hungers, they can even sacrifice themselves so they don't get exiled with Corpse Dance and Dawn of the Dead, which is always important.

Reanimate!

Dread Return
Corpse Dance
Beacon of Unrest
Dawn of the Dead
Victimize

Here are the reanimation spells you're going to use to go broken. Dread Return is the most synergistic, since you can just dredge it up and then go for it. The rest need to be worked around a little. You've got to tutor or draw into them before you start dredging your deck away, so that you have a way to abuse your graveyard.

Victimize is the most powerful one-shot effect. Corpse Dance is probably the best overall, since it can be cast multiple times in a single turn once you've got the resources to do it. Dawn of the Dead requires the least investment, but Beacon provides the most utility. These are the most efficient methods of recursion, since they move things to play directly from your graveyard, but you do have some other mechanisms that also help keep your hand count high.

Keeping Your Hand Full

Tortured Existence
Krovikan Horror

Oath of Ghouls
Oversold Cemetery
Phyrexian Reclamation
Death Denied
Grim Discovery

Viscera Dragger

Graveborn Muse
Phyrexian Arena
Ancient Craving
Ambition's Cost
Skeletal Scrying

Dimir House Guard
Demonic Tutor
Vampiric Tutor
Beseech the Queen

So, the first two cards are the hidden gems here. Krovikan Horror doesn't get NEARLY enough love as a black Genesis/Squee AND sac outlet. With Twisted Existence it's like Phyrexian Arena that draws the best creature you've played so far. This is a REALLY powerful engine, and it's a budget one! I'm seeing nothing but upside here!

Oath of Ghouls and Oversold Cemetery are two of my favorite cards in the format, though I don't usually get a chance to play them. I "broke" these in legacy back in the day by pairing them with Aether Vial and Voidmage Prodigy. It might not have worked there, but this is definitely the format where value engines can be powerful tools. Phyrexian Reclamation is one of the most broken cards that you've never heard of. Go on, look at it. This card is INSANE, and it barely costs anything, but no one's playing it. I mean, sure, it's no recurring nightmare, but what is? Seriously think about running this thing in the next black deck you play. It won't disappoint.

Grim Discovery and Death Denied are pretty much exclusively ways to restock your hand late game. They aren't the most powerful effects, but they do what needs to be done. The best part? Instant speed! Not only do they get you a ton of value, but they help protect your key creatures from graveyard hate. Seems good.

The real question is: what do you DO with all this recursion? If you haven't got bombs and the like yet, what are you doing with your Oversold Cemetery? Viscera Dragger seems like a good place to start; turn them into free Phyrexian Arenas until you find more broken things to do. You could run Twisted Abomination too if you wanted. You can sacrifice key creatures to avoid removal and buy them back. These are slow engines that don't do a ton, but the utility and protection that they provide to your engine makes it worthwhile. You might not need ALL of these effects, but you definitely need some of them. Sidenote: You know what would be REALLY awesome with all of these? Xiao Dun, that stupidly expensive Portal legend. That's more than a little out of my budget though, but a guy can dream, right?

This section gets rounded out with the most efficient card draw and tutors available to black. Feel free to substitute things like Sign in Blood, Promise of Power, and other powerful black cards; these are your flex slots. They don't do anything specific besides keep your hand full and help you find your engine pieces. As long as you replace them with things that accomplish the same goal, the deck will run fine.

Ramp

Crucible of Worlds
Rings of Brighthearth

Solemn Simulacrum
Wayfarer's Bauble
Expedition Map
Gauntlet of Power

This deck is mana hungry. REALLY hungry. When your general wants you to be sacrificing lands, that can definitely cause you trouble. I mean, when you're thinking about adding Storm Cauldron just for the extra land drops, you know you've got a problem.

Crucible lets you keep land-parity when you start sacrificing things. Rings of Brighthearth interacts positively with several of your cards, but is REALLY there for fetchlands, to help you get ahead on lands, even when you're sacrificing some.

Solemn Simulacrum is really powerful here. You cast it, sacrifice it, recur it and do it again. It's definitely one of the best creatures in the deck. Wayfarer's Bauble is another positive interaction with Rings of Brighthearth. Gauntlet of Power makes it so that you don't need as many swamps to function, so you can sacrifice more lands without hurting as badly.

Expedition Map is, as usual, one of the best cards for mono-black in the format. It finds the pieces of the Urborg + Cabal Coffers, even Vesuva or Deserted Temple if you want to go even more broken. This is the little map that could, providing you with some really powerful plays and approximately infinite utility. Here's the rest of the mana base:

Mana

Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoth
Cabal Coffers

Deserted Temple
Vesuva
Scrying Sheets
Thawing Glaciers

Bojuka Bog
Mouth of Ronom
Reliquary Tower
High Market
Miren, the Moaning Well

Strip Mine
Dust Bowl
Wasteland

Terramorphic Expanse
Terminal Moraine
Evolving wilds

26 Snow-Covered Swamp

Pretty standard fair, honestly. Urborg + Coffers is the bread and butter of black-based decks. The second set of lands is an engine that goes into most of my mono-colored decks, and even two colored decks that need consistent ramp. Having things to do with your extra 1 or 2 mana is important , since it means you get extra value that you wouldn't ordinarily. The fetchlands are there pretty much exclusively for the

interaction with Rings, so hold them if you can. You've got a pretty high land count in this deck, 43 if I'm not mistaken, so you've got a pretty consistent mana base, and shouldn't have to worry about holding back on your fetches. You could definitely substitute those for the Zendikar/Onslaught fetches, I just don't like the idea of using what are effectively two or more colored lands in a mono colored deck. While it's not against the rules, it just feels wrong to me.

So, this deck is actually one I'm pretty disappointed in. It's got some powerful interactions, some slow but strong value engines, but it's really just a slower version of Iname, Death Aspect combo, and a less resilient version of Savra, Queen of the Golgari. Honestly, it's a reasonable deck, it'll probably make your group start playing more graveyard hate, but it's definitely not the strongest or most interesting thing I've ever come up with.

So….Bonus decklist time. Want to make your group start playing combo hate on a strict budget? Maybe you're like me and don't have the head for 100 card singleton storm combo. Whatever your reason, here's another mono black deck, built to combo off in a simple and consistent fashion. This one I have played, and it's a metagame wrecker if everyone's playing ramp decks and bombs. You want to make people play more answers and less bombs? Give this a shot:

Awesome Bonus Budget Combo Decklist!

Maralen, the Mornsong

Expedition Map
Boseiju, Who Shelters All

Ad Nauseam
Sickening Dreams
Dark Sphere

Here's the deck. No, really. You can fill the rest in with rituals, Peat Bogs, Lake of the Dead, and other ridiculous stuff to get Maralen out as quickly as possible. Add tutors for more consistency and to reduce your reliance on Maralen as a general. You've got Boseiju to force through Ad Nauseam if necessary, and Expedition Map to try to find it without using Maralen. Just how budget is this deck, you ask? While not quite as inexpensive as 99 Mountain Ashling the deck, you can buy the all of the necessary cards for the deck from Starcitygames for about $8. Probably for less at your local game store or some other online store if you're willing to shop around to find Dark Sphere for less than a dollar. Hurry up, there's only 1 NM Dark Sphere in stock as I'm writing this! How exactly do you win? Well, here's the combo spelled out:

Tutor up and cast Ad Nauseam, draw your entire deck. Sure, this mandates that you keep the total CMC of your deck below 20 or so, but that shouldn't be too much of a problem, I mean, look at the required cards. You could add a bunch of expensive tutors and still be fine. Once you've drawn your deck, you can play Boseiju and pass if you're afraid of countermagic, or just cast Dark Sphere, cast sickening dreams, discarding 40 cards. Sacrifice Dark Sphere in response to halve the damage from your own sickening dreams, deal 40 to everyone at the table, win the game! Seems simple, right?

The problem with Maralen is that it's absurdly easy to hate her off the table if anyone wants to do it. They just have to play a few spot removal spells. The thing about magic players, and Commander players in

particular, is that we're GREEDY. Everyone wants to do broken things instead of safe things. Everyone on TEH FORUMZ says that if you cast Maralen, the next player will just tutor up removal to kill her and you'll have been gotten pretty bad. You know what? In my experience that couldn't be further from the truth. Here's what usually happens:

You cast Maralen on turn 3 or 4 and pass the turn. The green player to your left COULD find Desert Twister or Brittle Effigy, but he figures the next player will take care of it, so he wants to get Primeval Titan and cast it instead. The blue player figures that the BGW player will tutor up a vindicate, so he taps out to Clone Primeval Titan. The BGW player figures that everyone else has gotten value off of Maralen, what's the worst you could do? One of the other guys can tutor up removal next time. He decides to get a Sun Titan or some such. You get to untap, ritual up, and win the game!

Hopefully at least one of these decks was interesting. The Maralen one is a pretty cool take on the budget EDH deck. It's pretty simple and repetitive, but it does force your metagame to adapt. More importantly, it forces players to stop being greedy, and actually spend their time evaluating threats. And honestly, you don't CARE if Maralen gets killed a couple of times. Your deck is going to be 70ish lands at the least, you'll be able to cast her multiple times, I promise.

The Akuta deck…well that's about as close to a trainwreck as I've come so far in these articles. It's definitely got some powerful things going on, but it's really easy to have off the table. Anyone with too much removal or graveyard hate sneezes too hard at you and you're probably scooping your cards up. Still, not bad for building around Akuta, right?

I've got a couple of reader-submitted decks I won't be looking at until I finish my series of mono-colored decks, but there are only two colors left, so I'm still looking for content! Be sure to send me any emails with questions about decks, or just asking to see how I'd build a deck. Even if I won't use it for an article in the immediate future, I'm still happy to talk decks with anyone who's interested.

Next week I'm excited to be building a red deck. I'm a Johnny true and true, but sometimes you've just got to Lightning Bolt people in the face! Going all in on the beatdown plan is so much fun, and I'm excited to bring one of two builds I've been playing for the last couple of weeks. After that I'll be rounding out the series with a Blue deck, but I've been dreading trying to build the blue deck. I've never been able to build a "fun" or "interesting" blue deck, since all the good cards are…well…good, but boring. If you've got any suggestions for a fun or off the wall blue deck, be sure to send them in! I've been kind of stuck, honestly; I've got a couple of ideas, but nothing too concrete yet. There may or may not be a Quest for Ula's Temple theme deck in the works!

As always, I'm looking for question, comments, and criticism. If you've got any ideas, critiques, or decklists you want looked at, shoot me an email. I'd be glad to hear from you!

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