

# Chronicle of Bolas: Blood and Fire

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No one gave Naiva permission to leave the rock shelter and creep out into the heart of a dragon tempest, but she didn't ask. She grabbed her spear and raced out the tunnel, emerging into an overhang partially screened by the surrounding boulders. Wind blasted her face with slivers of ice. The air prickled at her skin, making her hair rise.

At dusk most of the sky had been clear, stars a scintillating presence overhead. Now when she peeked out from under the rock, she saw nothing but darkness. The howls and shrieks of newly birthed dragons deafened her as the tempest raged overhead.

Lightning split into a hundred jagged lines that revealed dragons falling and flying in a ceaseless agitation like children at brutish play or warriors in relentless battle. Churning clouds crackled with energy. The blackness engulfed her again.

A shape leaped down off the rocks and ducked in beside her. By the smell of wet fur, she knew it was the quiet ainok, Darka.

"Where is First Mother?" he said.

"Here!" Grandmother pushed out beside Naiva.

Lightning flashed. A burst of hot rain slammed through, hissing as it struck the ground. Sparks danced on the air.

"Trouble!" he called. "She's here!"

*What she did the ainok mean?* Naiva wondered.

Lightning flashed in a long chain of bolts that traced a path across the entire arc of the heavens. It splintered into a vast architecture of antlers wreathed in fire. A roar like the crash of a hundred thunderclaps drove Naiva to her knees, where she gasped for breath. Darka also fell, barely catching himself on a hand. Only Grandmother remained upright, unbowed, grasping her staff.



Fearsome Awakening | Art by: Véronique Meignaud

“She’s found the dead broodling.” Her shout was barely audible in the tumult.

Limned with an unearthly aura of that same malevolent light, the huge dragon rose out of the boulders where the broodling had fallen and flew into the heart of the storm. Slashing and raging, she drove the fledglings deeper into the night. Streaks of lightning marked her path. Thunder crackled in her wake.

The wind’s scream lessened to a rumbling bluster. The rain sheeting down faded to a light mist. A patch of stars appeared high above the maelstrom.

A flash of golden light flared like the sun rising at zenith, but the brightness was extinguished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving the stars again to shine. Yet some of those stars vanished in a descending trail, blotted out and then reappearing in a trail as if a large shape was falling out of the heavens. Naiva rubbed her eyes, thinking the storm had injured her vision, but when she looked again all the stars shone steadily. The clouds began clearing off as the rain ceased. Surely the falling blot had been nothing more than a distortion of wind and churning cloud.

The promise of coming dawn bled a trickle of light into the air, enough that the shapes of boulders came into view against the dark sky. Fec emerged from the passage and halted to inhale deeply.

“The tempest is gone,” he said.

Grandmother nodded in her decisive way. “Make ready. Call Oiyan in. We’ll move out as soon as there’s light enough.”

“Won’t we be visible, easy prey, if Atarka returns?” Naiva asked.

“She’ll drive the fledglings back to Ayagor and take them hunting,” said Grandmother grimly. “That’s the only skill she cares about.”

“What about the offal? Are we leaving it behind after all the trouble you took to cut it out of the dragon?”

“The river will keep it cold. We’ll fetch it later. It’s not safe now.”

“When will it be safe?” Naiva asked irritably.

“Safe merely means the last dragon we’ve seen is flying away from us.” Grandmother looked toward the east, where the horizon was shifting to a shimmering gold. “Fec, you take point. The rest of us will follow as soon as we’re ready. Tae Jin and Baishya, you stay close to me. Naiva, go with Fec.”

“But Grandmother—” Naiva broke off when she saw Tae Jin’s look of surprise that she had the temerity to protest a command from her elder. Baishya caught her eye and shook her head reprovably.

She slouched forward to join the old orc. Why did Grandmother always keep Baishya beside her when Naiva was the better hunter and could protect her if anything went wrong? It just wasn’t fair.

“Young Naiva joins me today, with keen, quick eyes to shade my age-whitened orbs,” said Fec as they headed out through the jumble of boulders. His limp was pronounced, but he used his staff skillfully, like a third leg, to negotiate the uneven ground.

“Yes, thank you, we should be quiet and no talking.”

His laugh rumbled softly. “You’d rather be walking beside the handsome young stranger.”

Not for the first time she wished she had Baishya’s calm facade or Grandmother’s stern mask, but her feelings bled onto her whole body. She tried to close down her expression, to look strong and dispassionate, but she was sure Fec was silently laughing at her, although he probably wasn’t paying attention to her at all. As they came out of the boulders onto the open tundra, his gaze roved in the way of an experienced hunter who knows how to read the land for signs of game: broken stalks of grass, prints sunk into the ground, a carcass stripped to the bone, fresh scat. No matter how she tried to focus, her thoughts kept swirling back to her grievance. It wasn’t fair that Grandmother protected Baishya while she got stuck with a half-crippled orc who mocked her and didn’t even belong to the clan. Just because Grandmother said he was one of them now didn’t make it true. She kicked a rock onto a shallow puddle. The rock cracked the skin of ice on the water and sank out of sight.

He glanced her way. “Speak your mind, young Naiva. Better not to choke on words that should be loosed like arrows.”

Very well. She was up to the challenge!

“Why did Grandmother shelter you?”

“Shelter a half-crippled orc, do you mean? Yasova always has her reasons.”

“What answers does Grandmother really think we can find at Ugin’s grave? What kind of answers do dead things have, except for signs that tell us how they were killed?”

“Not everything that is dead is gone, or absent. The ancestors still have tales to tell us.”

“Atarka killed my mother for speaking to the ancestors. It’s better to let the dead go and concentrate on the hunt.”

“Better for the dragonlords. Maybe not better for us who must serve them rather than rule ourselves as we once did.”

“Talk like that will get you eaten, if it comes to Atarka’s notice.”

“Will you tell her?” His tone dared her.

“If it means saving the tribe, I will.”

But the thought of turning him over to Atarka grated. He wasn’t wrong for pointing out that the rule of the dragonlords was harsh and uncompromising, that it made the people more like servants than proud hunters. She did not want to become one of those spineless tale-tellers who scraped and whee-

dled in Ayagor to try to win the favor of Atarka, as if the dragon cared anything for her mortal subjects except that they brought her meat and more meat.



Dragon Whisperer | Art by: Chris Rallis

“Is forbidden talk what got you kicked out of your tribe?” she asked.

“What you call forbidden talk I would call truth-telling. But that is not why, young one.” He pointed to his dragging right leg. “In the Kolaghan clan those who cannot keep up are left behind.”

“Then why didn’t you accept death? Wouldn’t that have been more honorable?”

“There are many roads to honor. Many ways to fight, even if my tribe does not recognize their worth.” He tapped his brow with fore- and middle fingers. Unlike the humans, he needed no gloves because the tough skin of his hands withstood the worst cold. A network of thin scars wove a harsh pattern across the back of each hand, the mark of no claw she had ever seen. Maybe it was just how orcs got old, like age spots on the hands of wizened elders kept alive by their sentimental children. “Many things worth saving, as Yasova Dragonclaw knows well.”

“You know that word is not allowed!”

“If we do not use it, then the young will forget.”

“It’s better to discard what we can’t use. Atarka rules us now, not the dragonclaw, not a khan. Even though we don’t like it, that’s just how it is.”

He gestured across his throat, cutting her off. Humiliated by his high-handedness toward her—Yasova’s granddaughter!—she flushed. If only she were a dragon. She would burn him. Burn him.

But he hadn’t been reacting to her words. His tongue licked the air. His back stiffened. He stuck the staff into a loop along his back and tugged free both swords with a swift motion whose efficiency impressed her. Made of brass, they were the most valuable objects he possessed, although they did not have nearly as sharp a cutting edge as the obsidian weapons used by the rest of the tribe.

“Naiva, run quickly back. They must hide in the shelter.”

Her anger poured away like rain off her felt mantle. She swung around to look for danger.

A vast darkness sped toward them, monstrous and silent. Only one creature possessed such a frightening spread of spiky, glowing antlers. Naiva sprinted back toward the boulders, but although she was young and fleet, she was not a dragonlord. Atarka's huge form passed over her in a wash of shadow and heat. The dragon slammed down to earth right at the edge of the boulders. The ground shook. Naiva stumbled, catching herself on her forward hand, then leaped back up and kept running.

But it was too late. The dragonlord had caught Grandmother and the others a spear's toss away from the outermost boulders and placed herself between them and the safety of the rocks. Naiva slowed to a walk. She knew better than to move quickly. Atarka might look ungainly but nothing moved faster than the dragonlord when her ire was roused.

The dragon's growl rolled as loudly as the avalanche that had torn away half the snow field on Eternal Ice. With a long, hot hiss, she reached out and closed her claws around Darka.

"A tasty snack!" she rumbled. "Almost as good as bear."

The ainok did not struggle or beg; he was too proud, and there was no point anyway.

Grandmother strode forward and tapped her spear on the dirt three times, demanding to be seen. Never would she bow. Never would she cringe. "Atarka! For eighteen years my people have brought you meat in honor of our agreement. I have something better and more substantial for you than a skinny ainok."

The great eyes blinked. Sour scorching breath gusted over them. "How did my broodling die? He was my favorite."

Naiva doubted that any of the broodlings were Atarka's favorite but the dragon was a wily, greedy beast.

Grandmother said, "The fledglings must have killed him."

"The fledglings scented his blood and went to feast. They did not kill him." She bit off Darka's head before tossing his body in a high arc. It fell out of sight but close to the spot where, Naiva knew, the carcass of the broodling lay. His death sickened her, but they all faced death every day. At least his had come quickly.

"Tell truth or I eat the other ainok," Atarka rumbled, lowering herself closer to Yasova. "Did you kill him?"

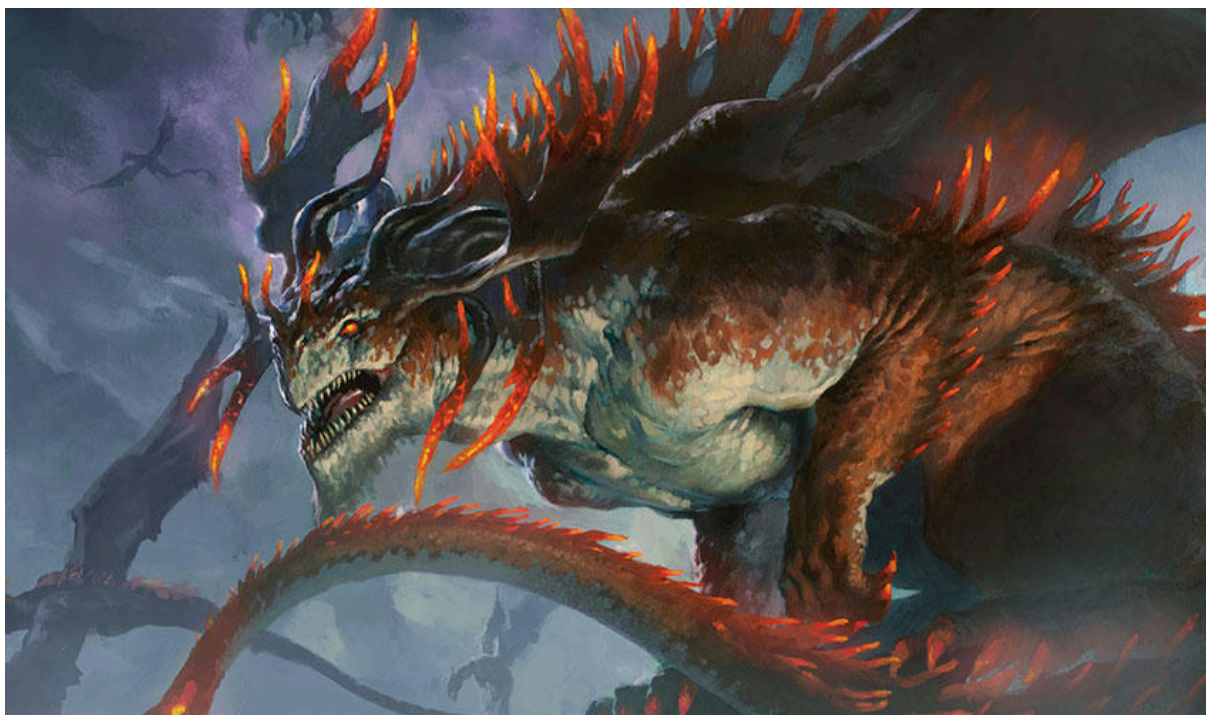
Grandmother did not move, keeping herself between the dragon and Darka's kinsman, Rakhan. "I did not kill the broodling. But as I was saying before you wasted the meat of my ainok, we have killed you something better."

"Better than ainok flesh?"

"Much better. One of Ojutai's kin killed your broodling and fed on its innards. We avenged your broodling's death by killing the outsider. A dragon for your next feast!"

Atarka raised her head and tested the air. The pungent odor of the tempest still lingered, woven in with the smell of grass, of dirt, of drying blood and old rock.





Dragonlord Atarka | Art by: Karl Kopinski

“Show me.”

Grandmother gestured for the others to remain behind and started walking, alone, toward the distant scatter of boulders where the broodling had deposited the dead Ojutai dragon. Atarka slammed a fore-claw down on the ground in front of the old woman.

“All come. All.” A huff of sparks steamed up from her nostrils. “I know your tricks. I will eat all if I am not satisfied.”

Grandmother signaled with a hand for them to fall in line behind her.

Naiva kept her back rigid and her gaze ahead; every child was taught never to challenge a dragon by looking them directly in the eyes but also never to cringe submissively or run away. It was better to die than to cringe. She let the others pass, exchanging a glance with Baishya. Her twin hesitated, making ready to fall back with her, but Naiva gestured for her to go ahead. Only when everyone else had gone ahead did she fall in at the end of the line. Nothing but air separated her from Atarka. The dragonlord paced behind them, each footfall an earthquake. When the dragon exhaled, sparks swirled past her body. It was so hard not to glance behind, not that a look would save her. One swipe, one blast, and she’d be dead, obliterated, but she wanted to do as Grandmother would do. She wanted to prove herself worthy of being Yasova Dragonclaw’s granddaughter: undaunted, a living shield between danger and the tribe.

Her sense of the world around her expanded: each step might be her last, each intake of breath her final measure, each heartbeat the end. Tae Jin glancing back at her; Baishya’s shallow breathing; Rakhan’s stifled grief; the other hunters silent and alert, ready for anything even if that anything was the death that awaited all in the end.

But Atarka let them live, or maybe she had crueler sports in mind to play with her hostages. They lived on her sufferance. The dragonlords were more powerful than the old ways, so what was the point of cherishing the ancestors when they had been crushed and defeated? If they had been worthy, surely they would have won.

Unexpectedly, Atarka leaped upward and with a howl of glee flew in a quick hop over them to drop down beside the body of the Ojutai dragon. The slender dragon was badly torn up after the titanic battle, but they all braced themselves as Atarka snuffled around the body and inhaled a taste of his congealed blood. Would she realize no human weapons had cut the body?

She whipped her tail back and forth to force the hunting party up against a boulder, trapping them there. Thinking of their mother, Naiva placed herself in front of Baishya, but the dragon's gaze fell not on the inheritor of their mother's shamanic gifts but on Tae Jin. Fortunately, the mended tunic covered his ghostfire tattoo, but his facial features and shaved head marked him as different from the other humans.

She huffed several times. "What is this outsider?"

Grandmother took a step toward the dragon. "He belongs to my hunting party."

"Fah! He smells of Ojutai, that pompous, ice-breathing windbag."

Tae Jin took a step forward, lifting his arms, palms up, and bringing his forearms together in the gesture that would birth the ghostfire blade in his hands.

"Tae Jin! Do not begin that which you cannot end." No one crossed Grandmother. As he obediently lowered his arms to his side, she returned her attention to the dragonlord. "He has come to join us because he heard of your great stature and ferocity, Atarka. What use for a brave warrior is it to serve a pompous, ice-breathing windbag when he can hunt in the service of a true dragon like you?"

Atarka rumbled, her head swaying mesmerically back and forth as she considered first the carcass and then the slight young man. "He looks not sturdy enough to hunt for me."

"A hunter may also succeed by being clever."

Tae Jin took a step forward. "I am useful in other ways, great Atarka. For example, I can tell you many stories."

"Words bore me. They are not tasty like meat." She swung her lambent gaze back to Grandmother. "You may watch while I eat him alongside this Ojutai dragon."

"As you wish, Atarka. But consider this. Ojutai himself sent his own favored broodling to hunt down the man. He did not wish the man to leave his domain and serve another, greater dragonlord. You win a victory over Ojutai by keeping this man alive in your tribe when Ojutai wants him dead."

Atarka's cruel laughter washed over them like an icy bath. "I like that. Tell a story while I feast. Then I decide."

Grandmother looked at Tae Jin. Undaunted, he walked forward to stand beside the old woman.

"I will tell a story my mother told me when I was a boy. She learned it from her master."

As the great dragon began ripping into the smaller dragon's cooling flesh, Tae Jin began to speak.

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A very, very long time ago, there ruled a king of great beneficence, greater than any other king in all the land. This king was a dragon of particular wisdom and strength. Once called the least of his siblings, Nicol had traveled the continent of his birth with his brother Ugin to discover the truth of the world. But alas, the truth was harsh. The world was harsh. Violence and murder erupted even in the most orderly of humanoid realms, even when there was plenty of space for all where vegetation grew lushly and beasts roamed in abundance.

Troubled and distraught by this revelation, the young dragon journeyed to the mountain of his birth with his brother. He wasn't sure what he sought but hoped to discover enlightenment. A far more terrible prospect greeted him when at last he reached the ancient peak.

The humans who lived below the bright radiance of the birth mountain had elevated a killer as their chief, and his heirs were also killers.

Dragon killers.

Atarka raised her head, sinew and flesh dripping from her jaws, and fixed a hot, golden gaze upon Tae Jin. The air snapped with anticipation. He had her attention now, and that was not a good thing.



Student of Ojutai | Art by: Jason A. Engle

He rubbed at his eyes, shook his head as if to clear it, and muttered, "That isn't the story I meant to tell. Let me try again."

With vile sorcery the chief and his heirs preyed upon dragons, caring nothing for the noble superiority of the magnificent ones. These feeble humans fed on the blood and bone of those greater than themselves, hoping to steal that strength. With spear and sorcery, the chief crushed his subjects under his heel. Those who pleased and flattered him prospered, and those who were caught whispering treason under their breath died. Those who could not fight labored hungrily in the fields to feed him. The healthy and strong were given spears and whips with which to thrash the rebellious and the stranger into submission. As the years passed, the chief came to rule more people and extend his sway over more of the land. The greedy prospered, and the weak groaned under the burden of their endless toil.

But dragons do not suffer such indignities for long. Such an affront must be answered. When the young dragon arrived at the birth mountain and saw the injustice and abuse being meted out to the vulnerable, he knew he must act. It is true his brother was not as bold; he caved; he hesitated. But to do nothing to avenge the death of one's kin is the same as killing them yourself.



Outnumbered and unable to match the cruel sorcery of the humans, the young dragon outwitted the humans instead. With matchless cunning, he set the heirs against each other so that they fought one against the next until all lost the war for succession. In the course of the war, his brother was swept away into nothingness by a blast of human sorcery, their own claw of revenge. But the dragon triumphed. Dragons always triumph for that is their nature, to rise above all.

In place of the brutal chief, the young dragon was acclaimed as savior of the realm and offered the throne. Those who had once worshiped the drinker of dragon's blood now bowed before the dragon. He ruled according to the precepts he had discussed at length with his brother, for they were ever eager to understand the world's scope and heart. He knew that he could best honor the memory of his beloved brother by acting as he would have done, as he would have urged his brother to do.

So it was that he reigned justly and fairly, with order and peace, for many generations.

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Atarka spat out a claw, having just gulped down a large hank of leg.

"This is not a story!" she growled. "Where is the hunting? Where is the blood and the shattered bone?"

Tae Jin pressed his hands together and tilted his head forward to show respect. "Great Atarka, please let me continue and you will be satisfied."

"Or I will eat you." Lashing her massive tail, she lowered her head to continue feeding.

"In the last days of Shu Yun's leadership," he said, then faltered. His mouth shaped words but no sound came out. Again, he pressed fingers to his eyes as if his vision was failing him. After a moment of struggle his lips opened as if of their own accord, and he went on.

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So it was that the young dragon who became known as the second sun. He reigned justly and fairly, with order and peace. The tale of the fall of the dragon killer's dishonorable rulership was handed down from elder to child, generation to generation, and celebrated with a yearly festival over which the benevolent dragon king presided.

But envy breeds dragons, and thus dragons multiplied in the lands beyond the harmonious kingdom. The king was but one dragon, his kingdom modest. He held his border strong and safe for his subjects for as long as he could.

One day, a rampage of dragons raided through the peaceful settlements along the river that separated the harmonious kingdom from the plains territories and badlands where Palladia-Mors had long hunted.

At once, he hurried to meet this threat, flying over a line of burned villages and frantic refugees fleeing the carnage. He found seven large, loud dragons munching noisily through a stockyard of terrified, stampeding beasts. The marauders merely glanced at him circling above before going back to their feast. Such insolence would be rewarded as it deserved!

He blasted flame in a ring around them, not to trap them—since they could easily fly out—but to get their attention.

"Why do you trouble my blameless subjects and eat their valuable herds?" he demanded.

"We are the descendants of Vaevictis Asmadi and may raid where we wish!" they cried, lashing their tails and brandishing their claws.

“What happened to Palladia-Mors?” he asked, honestly amazed that lesser dragons could chase off his savage sister.

“We drove her off to go hunting elsewhere. Now we will drive you off and take your rich lands and docile meat for ourselves.”

Like their progenitors, they were belligerent and small-minded. Yet even a dragon as magnificent as himself could not defeat them alone. But he was not alone. He had subjects who sang his praises with poems that asked for no higher honor than a chance to prove themselves worthy of his regal generosity and noble perspicacity. He had armies of eager warriors and an academy packed with clever sorcerers he had taught, all seeking to challenge their skills against the mightiest of foes. He possessed the weapons of the long-dead dragon killers.



Art by: Yongjae Choi

An irritating flash of thought crackled in his mind with the timbre of Ugin’s voice scolding him: *If it is wrong to kill dragons when the humanoids do it, then it is wrong for us to kill our kinfolk. Or did Merrevia Sal die for nothing, Nicol? Was it never about her at all but only about the humiliation you felt at not saving her?*

Their sister’s death and the vengeance he’d taken had been different, not that Ugin had the wit or discernment to acknowledge this truth. And anyway, Ugin was wrong. Vaevictis was a bully, and his descendants were bullies who would rip apart the harmonious kingdom for the sport of it. Even Ugin would have had to acknowledge they were useless marauders. Furthermore, Ugin wasn’t here. It was time to put his powerful weapons to use.

With plangent bells and bellowing horn calls the army assembled, hauling ballistae and their venom-laced bolts. Sorcerers draped in gold and black robes strode in disciplined columns, singing as they marched. At the river’s edge they met the seven young dragons, and the proud armies poured venom and sorcery onto the enemy in a relentless hail.

It was a rout. A slaughter.

How intoxicating it was to see the venom-laced bolts fly true, piercing scaled underbellies softened by cunning sorcery! Viscera spilled onto the ground, burning those caught beneath. The gloating shouts of the victors blended with the agonized screams of the dying dragons.

How satisfying it was to watch the loud-mouthed braggarts tumble to earth on paralyzed wings, breathing their last as their hearts and lungs failed and their eyes dimmed. Triumph was sweet, and sweeter still because he had dared attack dragons, the most dangerous and mighty of all creatures.

But one of the dragons survived, flying away at a speed the young dragon king could not match since he was not yet full grown.

“Do we pursue?” his generals asked ardently.

“Yes!” He recalled with stark clarity how Vaevictis and his brothers had once tormented and chased him for no other reason but because it entertained them to be despicable. At last he could avenge the insult.

Emboldened, the great army rumbled into motion, marching, riding, rolling beyond the stoutly guarded border. They pursued the trail of the dragon across the great plains where Palladia-Mors had once hunted, taking supplies from towns and villages they passed. The land grew drier, and soon they reached what appeared from the distance as a wall but which was a stark barrier of rugged hills, twisted gullies, and spectacular pinnacles. Beyond, to the north, rose the grand mountain range where Vaevictis and his brothers laired.

Some among the troops grumbled, for supplies were growing scarce and water scarcer. After the young king ate the dissenters—cowards invariably taste sour—the rest dauntlessly marched north over the flat prairie with the badlands at their back.

The sun was rising when he spotted four dragons flying toward them. Seen from a distance they did not appear particularly formidable, but as they came closer, their massive size and fierce demeanor became evident. The three brothers, Lividus, Ravus, and Rubra, bellowed insults as they approached, calling him “runt” and “least born.” That their insults weren’t even clever just made it worse.

The largest was Vaevictis himself, flying out in front because of his superior strength. In his foreclaws he held the limp body of the dragon that had fled the lost battle.

With a roar that shook the ground, Vaevictis flew right over the army and released the dragon. The body plummeted to earth as soldiers shoved and shouted, trying to get out of the way. The corpse hit hard, instantly crushing an entire company of slingers. Blood soaked the dusty ground, and fires broke out where the final sparks of the dragon’s breath kindled in dry grass. The injured screamed, clutching at bones broken through skin, while healers tried to haul comrades out from beneath the dead weight of the dragon.

With a laugh, Vaevictis cried, “Run, little Nicol. Run, and I’ll spare you.”

Earlier in his life, anger might have gotten the better of the young dragon king as he writhed and fumed over such mockery. He assuaged his anger by decapitating several of the generals. But his underlings’ shortcomings weren’t the important thing now. The days of letting Vaevictis bully him were over. He whipped the panicked army into new ranks, promoting officers who hadn’t lost their heads.

Vaevictis’s rash challenge offered him an unexpected advantage. Vaevictis might be big and mean, but he wasn’t as smart as he thought he was.

The young dragon king ordered the ballistae to draw up, using the long stretch of the dead dragon’s broken neck and twisted tail as a fortification. As Vaevictis circled back to join up with his approaching

brothers, the artillery began to launch their venom-tipped bolts. They were skilled; they had to be, since those who did not make muster were demoted to slavery.

So their bolts struck true, time and again. Rubra took a bolt to the eye. Though the shot did not kill him outright, the numbing venom seeped into his brain. He struggled away toward the barrier wall, perhaps hoping to take refuge on one of the pinnacles, but lost consciousness and fell to earth just beyond the baggage train. The rear guard raced with swords and spears to wreak havoc upon his sluggish body, shouting and dancing with glee. The young dragon king was too busy dodging the fire-breath of his cousins to reprimand his soldiers when they triumphantly bathed themselves in the dead behemoth's hot blood.



Art by: Scott Murphy

The rest of the army was not faring so well. Vaevictis himself took five direct hits, but iron could not pierce his thick hide. He roared fire across the artillery lines, sending ballistae up in goutts of flame. Lividus and Ravus swooped down to snap up soldiers and fling them through the air to their deaths. Mounts panicked, throwing their riders as they fled. The wagons in the baggage train began to burn together with the hapless drivers and grooms. Smoke billowed upward, throwing ashy patches across the ground.

“You’ll regret challenging me!” roared Vaevictis as he circled around with a brother at either flank. “We’ll pin you to the ground and rip your flesh from your bones while you’re still alive.”

With much of the army dead or in shambles, the threat wasn’t an empty one. Brute strength would not serve him now; only his superior wits could save the day.

The young king had long since gained control of his sorcerers through his supple mind touch. At his command, they wove a great spell of concealment, blanketing the battlefield in a sooty haze. Under its cover, he slipped away with the remnants of the army toward the rugged hills and twisted gullies. Two ballistae had survived, hauled by soldiers given strength by desperation. The rear guard, still damp with blood, fell in; they had survived because, their captain called up to him, the holy dragon’s blood protected them from dragon’s fire.



A point to consider, once he could catch his breath. He drove his exhausted, stumbling army like a wounded leviathan into a deep gully hemmed in by cliffs on either side.

“Great King, isn’t this a death trap?” opined one of his generals.

“Only if you don’t survive the coming battle.” The question annoyed him, but there wasn’t time to discipline the general. Sometimes you had to delay punishing an offender in order to move fast to save yourself.

Beyond a sharp curve in the canyon he allowed them to halt. Perhaps a third of his army had stayed with him, along with seven bolts for the two ballistae. Though the bolts had pierced the scales of the lesser dragons, these elder dragons were tougher. But the eye was vulnerable. And he had his sorcerers as well, of whom one squadron remained.

At odd moments, when he visited the birth mountain or when he was flying above water, he thought of Ugin. In his hearts, he felt obliged to believe an invisible wind roused by sorcery had ripped Ugin away, because if it hadn’t been sorcery, then Ugin was nothing more than a coward who had abandoned his brother just when Nicol needed him most. He could not bear to believe Ugin was so weak and dishonorable. For generations he had toiled in concert with his academy of sorcerers to recover or devise a magic that could replicate Ugin’s disappearance. No one had managed it yet, but the sorcerers were able to disintegrate large rocks.

They had a chance, if everyone managed their task at the right moment.

A bellow echoed down the canyon walls. The heavy thuds of a massive body approaching shook the ground.

“Wait,” he commanded the restless, frightened troops. “Wait.”

Lividus loomed into view, blocking the canyon.

The ballistae released with a thud, sending bolts straight into the huge dragon. The first glanced harmlessly off his shoulder while the second caught between scales in his foreleg and dangled there until he shook it off. And laughed, looking up.

A shadow darkened the canyon as Ravus dropped down from the sky.

“Now!” cried the young king.

Working in concert, the sorcerers flung the disintegration spell at the dragon overhead. It hit like an invisible wave pouring through him. Ravus splintered like rock heated until it explodes. Scales hailed down in deadly discs upon his troops. Half the sorcerers were killed outright, punctured by sharp bone fragments or smashed by slabs of raining flesh.



Art by: Even Amundsen

“Ravus!” With a cry of enraged grief, Lividus flamed the ballistae just as a second set of bolts flew. The force of his blast sent the bolts skittering against the canyon walls, leaving the young king vulnerable with the charred ballistae, the last sorcerers, and the blood-soaked rearguard as his sole companions.

*“This isn’t what you learned from Arcades,”* Ugin had cried at the last moment of his existence when he’d been furious at Nicol’s attempt to manipulate his thoughts. The touch did not work on dragons. So Nicol had believed at the time. But maybe it just hadn’t worked on Ugin.

Staring up at Lividus, he knew he had one bolt left to shoot, a rash and dangerous chance to take.

“Now you’ll die, you slithering worm,” Lividus hissed.

“Cousin!” He captured Lividus’s gleaming gaze with his own. He sunk a shadow claw of doubt into the other dragon’s hearts, seeking to excavate his grievances. “No wonder Vaevictis sent you ahead. He knew the risk, and exposed you and Ravus instead of himself. Doesn’t he always do that?”

The big dragon’s hesitation, a shiver of suppressed resentment, spurred him on.

“He flies ahead only when he knows he’ll not be touched. Don’t you tire of his rule? His hectoring, domineering ways? It’s his fault Ravus and Rubra are dead. Didn’t the three of you conspire once to supplant him, but he beat you into submission? Now what will you do when he has only you to bully? He’s always been afraid of you, since you’re the only one as big as he is. That’s why he keeps you down. I can help, but we have to work together.”

He pressed the venom-tipped spear of his sharp mind deep into Lividus’s simmering rancor. It was so easy, after all, just as easy as it had always been with humanoid. His cousin was strong in body but weak in mind.

“Here he comes! If you attack him, I’ll whip my sorcerers after him. We’ll be rid of him forever more.”

Here came Vaevictis. Lividus rose to meet him with a roar. Of course, Vaevictis did not suspect an attack, so the first swipe took him off guard, drawing blood from his right shoulder. His rage exploded as he swatted back, a blow that would have sent the young king tumbling tail over horns. But Lividus

was as big as Vaevictis. While the blow staggered him, he recovered quickly, and with a blast of fire and the hammer of his tail, struck back.

“Now,” said the young king to his surviving sorcerers.

Again, they threw the disintegrating spell against the great dragons, but either because it had to spread between two giant bodies or because six was too few working in concert, the magic did nothing but stagger the dragons momentarily.

Yet each howled in pain and anger, thinking the other had hit first.

“Traitor! Backstabber!” cried Vaevictis, flinging himself at Lividus just as, long ago in Arcades’s town, a mild-mannered young man had been goaded to attack and kill his own brother.

Their battle renewed with a ferocity whose impact and clamor thundered through the rugged hills and echoed down the deep canyons.

Revenge was sweet. But the winner would still be bigger than he was.

The young king retreated. The blood-soaked rearguard, of course, had to all be killed lest they pass on the knowledge of how the blood of an elder dragon protected weak humanoid flesh. The sorcerers he allowed to live for long enough to create a smoky mist of concealment that would carry him some ways onto the plains, but he killed them after so there would be no one to talk of how there were bigger, stronger dragons in the world whom his subjects might choose to worship instead of him.

As he flew away in haste, he contemplated what he had learned. Greed and envy are goads that never cease clawing at even the dullest of hearts. Dragons will succumb as easily as others, if you can just find the kernel to ignite them.

Vaevictis would come after him, he was sure of it. So he had to find a way to keep his cousin busy.

Instead of returning to his harmonious kingdom, he traveled up into the craggy mountains, seeking out the descendants of Lividus, Ravus, and Rudra. What terrible news he had to bring them! Vaevictis had turned on his own brothers. What a disgrace. Most likely the big dragon meant to eradicate his brothers’ descendants as well so no trace of perfidy could possibly survive.

The ease with which the gullible could be turned to his purpose was surprisingly pleasurable. Returning to his kingdom seemed unadventurous and bland. Instead he journeyed on to a new lair of dragons, a new territory to enflame. He sought out Palladia-Mors. She remembered him with a dismissive clout to his head, but she listened avidly to his tale of how vulnerable Vaevictis now was.

Ah. Revenge was indeed sweet.

In years to come, the stories would be told at hearth fires or by refugees huddled around campfires seeking safety, not that they would ever be safe.

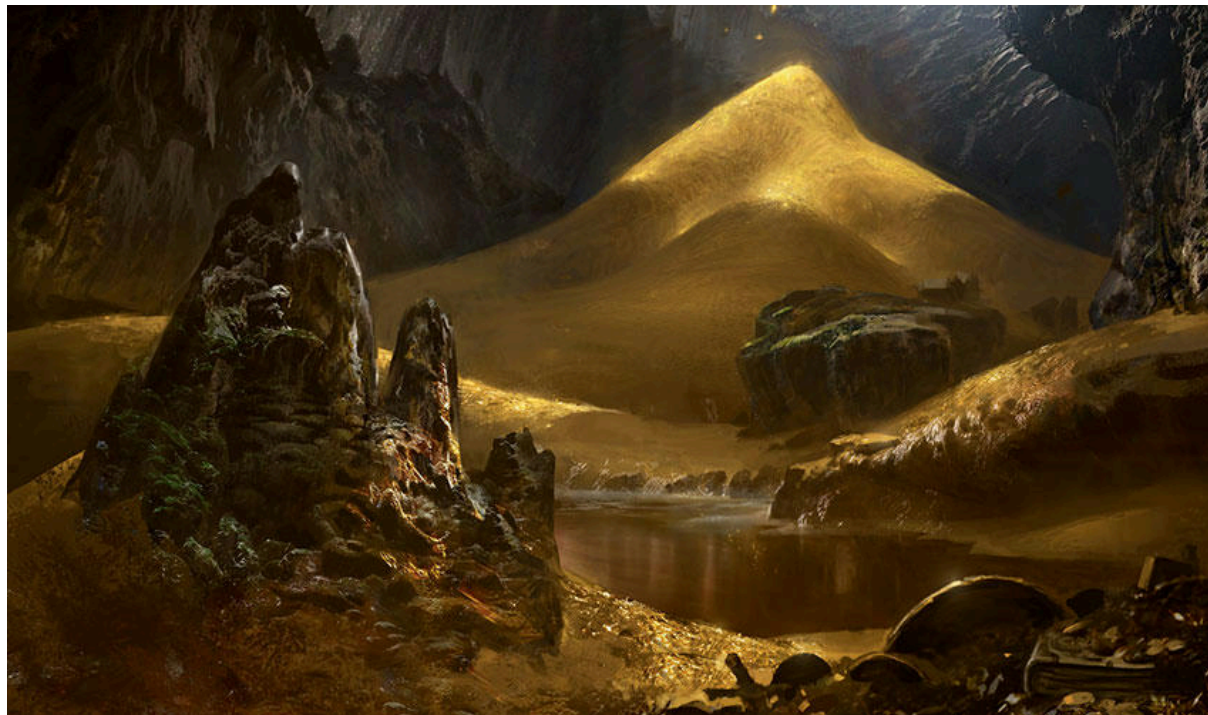
Dragons from one clan raided the mountain fastnesses of a cousin clan. Amid the snow-capped peaks the dragons fought in thunderous battles, claw to claw, fire to fire. Charred flesh rained down from the heavens. Bone shattered at the base of cliffs. Those whose hunger could never be sated tore their way through the dying, feasting upon the bloody flesh of their own kind.

Greed and envy grow the more they are fed. Maws open to swallow larger portions, and claws reach for yet more distant prey.

Dragons turned their gaze upon the fields and herds of the humanoid settlements. Some wished merely to devour the humanoids as they had hunted down and devoured wild herds. Others wished to manage them like cattle, ripe for culling when their hunger grew sharp. A few wished to teach and guide the humanoids, but their efforts were often met with ingratitude and misunderstanding. Even the clever

Chromium Rhuell took to hiding himself while he pretended to be something he was not, lest he be scorned by the humans he claimed did love him or eaten by the dragons who despised his mealy-mouthed philanthropy.

No cage can confine greed. No chains can bind envy. As they grow, they are lashed by desire and anger, and so the dragons were not sated. Their hunger did not abate.



Art by: Adam Paquette

Dragons crossed the mighty seas to find new lands in which to feed their hunger for flesh and for power. When even those distant shores became too crowded, then dragons fought each other with tooth and claw, with fire and ice. Under dragon standards, they raised proud war bands from among the humanoids who worshiped or feared them. Sorcerers who sought a dragon-like power through mastery of their magical gifts came crawling to offer their services, for in all the wide world no creature is as powerful as a dragon, not in the beginning of days and never across all the unending span of eternity.

Even the wise Arcades Sabbath, who had scolded and harangued upon the topic of order and peace and the proper way to rule, threw his might into the great war as he listened to the whispers of wisdom that brushed through his mind.

*The others will not respect your autonomy or your wisdom. They will come for you if you do not go after them first.*

Even Arcades marched his followers against fortresses ruled over by his distant kinfolk. When he had defeated them, he threw their marrowless bones into the sea where the waters churned them into pale sands that washed shores all the world round.

So the wars raged, while only one dragon kept faith with those he ruled. He had not forgotten the promise he made to his twin: that there should not be one law for them and a different law for us. There should only be one law.

There would only be one law.



Tae Jin broke off and, mouth slack, stared at the ground as if he had forgotten what he'd been saying or even who he was.

Atarka raised her head. Ligaments dangled from her mouth. She'd swallowed the liver and hearts whole and torn muscle and fat from bone. A slimy ooze coated her forelegs where she'd waded into the innards of the Ojutai dragon after tearing open its belly. She opened her mouth wide and wider still, displaying the fearsome topography of her teeth, then snapped her jaw closed with a rumble of laughter.

"There is only one law: to eat. This was a good feast. You may keep the outsider."

The dragonlord leaped skyward in a battering of wings that sent them all to their knees. She soon vanished from sight, flying northeast toward the Qal Sisma.

"My head." As if his bones had turned to liquid, Tae Jin collapsed straight down, standing one moment and seated the next, hunched over with head resting in his hands.

Naiva ran over to him, but Grandmother got there first and waved her off. She crouched beside him and tilted his head back so she could look into his eyes. What she saw there made her frown.

"Are you conscious, Tae Jin?"

"Yes just struck with a headache that makes my eyes water."

"What tale was that you told, so like Ugin's story and yet not his story at all?"

"I don't know. I meant to tell the tale of the last days of Shu Yun's leadership. Of the last meeting of the khans and how they fell to the dragons."

"I remember that day and its aftermath too well."

"I thought such a tale of victory would entertain the dragonlord."

"Where did this tale come from, then?"

Again, he rubbed his eyes, then cautiously rose as if unsure his legs would hold him up. "This other story came into my mind in a whisper. Maybe it's a story my mother told me when I was very young that I have forgotten until now."

Grandmother stood. "This is an ominous turn of events. Once before, a whispering voice sought to alter the events on Tarkir. To my shame, I listened. Ugin's death is partly to be blamed on me. Maybe the visions your master and the windfolk received didn't come from Ugin. But if they did, it's more important than ever that we reach Ugin's grave quickly. First, we must honor Darka for his hunting prowess in life and his unflinching acceptance of death."



Ainok Tracker | Art by: Evan Shipard

They pulled the ainok's mangled remains from amid the bloody ruins left by Atarka's feeding. His knife and amulets they wrapped up to return to his ainok kin. The items from his pack they split between themselves. Such objects were too valuable to be abandoned. Afterward, in the ainok manner, they lay his body on the ground and ringed it with stones. Each spoke a brief prayer and a single memory, nothing elaborate. Every spirit passed into the realm of the ancestors, and with another hunt always looming, the greatest honor they could show the deceased was to continue on, year after year, generation after generation.

"His spirit walks ahead of us into the unwritten now," said Grandmother as she placed a large rock atop his chest as a reminder of the weight of obligations that bound each member of the tribe to the others. The sun, too, was part of the kinship network, and the sun would watch as the birds and beasts and bugs devoured his remains.

She stepped away. "Is everyone ready?"

Naiva looked around. Of course they were ready, spears and knives in hand, packs slung across their backs. The tribe was always ready.

"We must reach Ugin's grave before the storm hits."

Grandmother led them away from the boulders and the gnawed remains and shattered bones of the two dead dragons. Vultures circled overhead, awaiting their chance to feed on the wreckage. Up ahead, Fec was waiting to fall in with them.

Naiva scanned the sky. The dregs of dark clouds had been blown into the southeast like a fleeing herd. The rising sun poured its golden light across the tundra. Far away, at the edge of the hills, a strange, warped spiral of stone rose up from the ground, the feature so sharp and delineated that for an instant, she believed the illusion she could reach out and touch it.

"Do you think another dragon tempest is coming?" she asked Grandmother.

"I think it's already here."