

Rage of the Unsung

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From set *Ravnica Allegiance*

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I crouch in the brown grass, eyes locked on my prey. Not twenty feet away, a maaka sniffs the air, feline tail whipping in aggravation as it scouts the area for threats. I'm safely downwind from the beast, but my heart is beating so wildly in my chest, I fear the maaka will hear me and tear me to bits with those massive, black claws.

Its rib cage is visible through brittle fur, and all six of its emerald-hued eyes have lost their luster. There's no time to go in search of a healthier beast, though. War is already raging, and the ground rumbles from the fighting in the distance. On the horizon, I can just make out the red-hot coils of siege magic—cindervines whipping around the foundations of buildings and turning them to rubble. Dryzek's work for sure. His return from prison has stoked the fire within the hearts of the Ghor Clan—well, *most* of us—and tonight, the Rubblebelt will expand its domain as lands are brought back from the brink of civilization.

The celebrations tonight will be many, and there's a good chance I'll get to tattoo these war triumphs upon the legendary warrior himself. Giants like Dryzek have thick skin that's notoriously difficult for a needle to pierce, but I've developed a technique that's twice as fast and three times as painful as the traditional method, which allows the skin to absorb more of the magic imbued ink that is, if I can get enough ink to cover Dryzek's massive arm.

The recipe for the ink is a simple one, passed down through generations, but I take care to gather the ingredients myself:

Five pieces of charred pine bark,

One hydra egg yolk,

And the freshest, greenest maaka scat available.

I turn my attention back to the maaka, who finally feels comfortable enough to do its business, and as soon as it's kicked up dirt behind itself, it's dashing off, and I'm rushing over. I frown at the specimen, a dull greenish brown, but it'll have to do. I set my clay bowl on the ground and quickly pound the charred bark into a fine powder. Then I crack the egg, careful twisting the shell so that only the yolk falls into the bowl and mix until it's an even paste. Finally, I add the scat, stirring and stirring, but this mixture refuses to turn green. It's duller than my last batch even.

I double the amount of scat, and the mixture finally takes on some color. I conjure magic from the soil itself, and red flames rise up from the earth and flicker around the bowl. The ink starts to bubble, and I hold my breath, waiting for the familiar glow that signals the mixture is viable and will shine brilliantly upon the skin when the Rage takes hold.

The sun sets, shadows stretch across this expanse of reclaimed nature, and suddenly I'm feeling less like the hunter and more like the hunted. Out in the wild, cold and all alone, is the last place a viashino like me wants to get caught, so I desperately add more scat to the mix until finally the ink brightens. My reservations about tampering with the recipe melt away as swirls of yellow-green marble across

the surface. Perfect. I put the lid on the bowl, wrap it up in leather straps, and ignore the howls of the wild as I rush back to the warfront.



Art by: Wesley Burt

There, in the wake of rampant destruction, I breathe in the dust from pulverized stone and revel at the cracked backbones of lumbering architecture. Most artists don't bother to walk the ruins they tattoo upon the skins of our warriors, but I find that it brings a quality to my work that can't be duplicated by secondhand tellings. All around me, goblins froth at the mouth as they chase off remaining civilians. Gruul children sift through the rubble for loot—such beautiful wild creatures with dirt under their nails, bugs in their hair, grit in their smiles. And then I see *him*, Dryzek the legendary berserker, harnessing his Rage to stack massive chunks of rubble in the shape of tusks as a tribute to the Raze-Boar.

Not to be outdone, Ruric and Thar pile up a tribute of their own, making a point to howl and grunt as their stack overtakes Dryzek's in height. Others join in the fray, expressing their support for our clan leaders. But the ogres, big as they are, are no match for Dryzek's girth, and as he stacks another rubble block, his backers beat their chests and snort like boars, fewer in number but just as vocal. And just like that, Rage ignites. It travels like an infection from one Gruul to the next, hackles raising, tattoos

inflaming, eyes shining bright. The berserker closest to me catches it, and then I pretend to catch it as well, throwing my head back and yelling at the top of my lungs. I smash stones, break glass, gnash my teeth, secretly praying to the Raze-Boar for a flicker of Rage to enter my heart, but, like always, it remains as cold as week-old ash.

Finally, things calm, and we retreat to the bonfire to enjoy the spoils of war.

“Good battle today,” grunts Jiri, my littermate, squatting down next to me and presenting me with his bicep. “Eighteen blocks destroyed.”

“Aye. Shame I missed so much of it,” I say, setting my needle in his skin, continuing the map of ruined civilizations running down his arm. Six Boros blocks, and twelve Izzet. Izzet couldn’t construct a straight road if their lives depended on it, which makes for interesting work on my part. Their labs would pop up in any odd place, encroaching upon thoroughfares and sometimes other buildings, but seeing those spectacular beacons of chaos fall, smoking and shooting sparks into the sky is a thrill like no other, and I try my best to capture that feeling in ink.

I tap the end of my inked needle with a small mallet, puncturing Jiri’s scaled skin. I fall into a trance, working quickly, diligently, like a fire moving through a forest, but I keep getting distracted by the sound of Jiri tapping his spiked tail on the ground over and over again. When I pull back, I realize the olive green of his skin has brightened to a more aggravated hue.

“What’s going on with you?” I ask.

“You don’t feel it? The tension?” He nods in Dryzek’s direction.

The giant leans back against the husk of a stone building, the light of the bonfire flickering in his eyes. Several humans tend to him, soothing his wounds and massaging his battle-worn muscles. His gaze shifts my way, and I immediately avert my eyes in submission.

“I think he’s going to challenge Ruric and Thar for clan chieftain,” my brother says.

I shake my head. “Dryzek? He’s got to be a thousand years old.”

“Means he’s wise.”

“But he just got out of Udzec. He’s got no idea of how the social order has changed.”

“Means he’s got a different way of seeing things,” Jiri says, his voice perfectly neutral. Too neutral.

I’ve never heard my brother speak ill of Ruric and Thar, but there are those who aren’t happy with their leadership lately. The two-headed ogre is all rage, all the time. Smash now, ask questions later, or usually not at all. Sometimes, I feel like they’re too busy fighting to remember what we’re fighting *for*. But Dryzek gets it. He’d grown up learning the Old Ways and is more patient and practical in the matters of war. Our fight is not about rampant destruction, but of curing Ravnica of the disease that manifests as gratuitous construction and institutional corruption.

“What if he *does* challenge for chieftain?” I whisper. “You picked a side?”

“I’ll side with the winner. You’d do best to do the same.” Jiri’s tail goes still. “I’ve seen the way you look at him. He’s just a Gruul like any other Gruul.”

“Dryzek is a legend! You remember when we were kids, gathering around the fire and listening to stories about how he pounded his fist into the middle of a town square and made all the buildings topple?”

“Those were stories, Arrus. You stick your neck out for that giant, and Ruric and Thar will slash it.” Jiri gets up, even though I’m only half finished with his tattoo. He tosses me a raktusk tail in payment.

I know he's right. Jiri is the reason I've got this job, instead of off starving in the wilds of the Rubblebelt, clanless. The runt of our litter, I was never in any shape to fight. My skin is a pallid yellow-green, the color of maaka bile, and my spikes never erupted, leaving me smooth from my head to the tip of my tail. But I became decent with a needle and ink, and as my siblings returned from war, I marked their skin with detailed maps of the territories they'd destroyed. I lived vicariously through the battlefields I tattooed onto their skin, while my own adventures consisted of nothing more than scavenging materials for my ink. The pride I held for my siblings showed in my work, though, and soon they were bringing their friends to me, and their friends' friends, and so on until I received an invitation to ink up the clan chieftains themselves.



Art by: Craig J Spearing

My eyes cut toward the legend, Dryzek. Inking *those* arms, though

I get up, approaching him with a subservient hunch, hands open and stretched to the side. His human servants all stop what they're doing and form a loose barrier in front of him.

"Can we help you, brother?" says the one holding a wooden spit with a pitched fork meant for cooking, but it could easily become a weapon. Even within the clan, *especially* within the clan, there is no room to let your guard down.

"I'm the artist here," I say. "Arrus, you can call me. That's my name. I'm the artist here." I whip my tail nervously. "I said that already, didn't I? Need ink?"

"Aye" the legend bellows, a deep voice I can feel in my own chest. He moves closer to me and swats his humans away. They return to their duties, the one with the spit ramming the pointed end into a fresh drake carcass. They heft it up over Dryzek's personal bonfire, and the smell of cooking flesh makes my mouth go slippery inside.

"The way everyone is avoiding me, I was thinking we weren't welcome among Ghor Clan anymore," Dryzek says. "Seems like I could raze all of Ravnica and still not fall into Ruric Thar's favor."

“Ruric *and* Thar. They’re two—You know what? Never mind.” Without another thought, I press one of my fingers against Dryzek’s bicep like I’m testing the firmness of a melon. “Eighteen blocks?” I squeak out.

“Skin’s thick,” Dryzek says.

“Never a problem,” I say. I unroll my tattoo sash and get to work. The deep bronze of his skin soaks up the ink like it’s thirsty for it, and I’m able to add contours and shadows, giving the tattoo a three-dimensional feel. The Izzet lab takes center stage, though, as I coil a serpentine pattern within the block, representing the electrical fire that had consumed the sky for a whole twenty minutes.

“Smash civility,” he grunts when he sees it. “Smash it to bits.” He punches me in the square in my chest with his massive fist. I think it was supposed to be a friendly tap, but it feels like my ribs have caved in.

“Arrus!” my brother hisses. “Arrus, you’ve got a line forming over here. You’ve got blocks to ink.”

I turn and see my brother standing there, several of his mates behind him, as sharp as a wall of knives. Maybe I didn’t feel the tension much before, but I feel it now. No one else in the clan dares come within twenty feet of Dryzek.

“But I’m not done with—”

“It’s all right,” says Dryzek. “Come back and finish tomorrow. I’m not going anywhere.”

He waves me off as his humans present him with an enormous plate of perfectly roasted drake, a bright yellow melon rammed in its mouth. I clear my throat, eyeing the drumstick on the drake as payment. Certainly, more of a delicacy than I could hope for, but a viashino can dream.

“How’s this for a tip—” Dryzek says with a grin, “—Rage isn’t all fighting and destruction. It speaks to different people in different ways.”

I go stiff. All my life, my heart has been cold, but I learned how to fake the Rage early, and no one has ever challenged me on it before. I grit my teeth and growl for good measure. “What are you talking about? I Rage all the time. Every day, nearly. So, so angry.”

Dryzek lifts a thick, skeptical brow. “I’m eight hundred and thirty-something years old, Arrus. I know Rage when I see it, and that ain’t it. But it’ll find you. Took me a hundred and six years to figure out what I was mad about.”

No. Not Dryzek. How could that be? But before I get a chance to question him about it, Jiri’s pulling me away. Soon the ink is flowing, the drinks are pouring, and merriment starts outweighing the tension. That is until Dryzek makes a move toward Ruric and Thar. The crowd parts around him as he nears our clan leaders. The drinking stops. The music stops. The breathing stops. Jiri was right. The legend *does* plan to challenge for chieftain. Just when the tension can’t get any thicker, Dryzek lowers his head and kneels as his human servants place the glazed drake at Ruric and Thar’s feet. “A token, my chieftain, of my loyalty to Ghor Clan. May your Rage ever guide us toward destruction.”



Ruric Thar, the Unbowed | Art by: Tyler Jacobson

Ruric and Thar look surprised by the gesture, but in the next instant, they each rip a wing from the drake and bite down into the flesh. “It is undeniable that *your* Rage has stoked a much-needed fire in the clan,” Thar says, pieces of drake meat tumbling over his lips, “and we are honored to have you fight among us.”

The deal is sealed with a blood kinship, and all the walls between factions come crashing down. We celebrate once again, and I breathe a sigh of relief that I’ve narrowly avoided getting caught in the middle of a coup then, the screaming starts.

I look over and see it’s Jiri, his new tattoo glowing as bright as the moons before his arm bursts into flames. He wails, and his mates try to put out the fire with dirt and cloth scraps, but then Dryzek’s tattoo goes aflame as well, and there’s so, so much more ink. The smell of cooking flesh fills our campsite as one by one, each of the other warriors I’d inked today starts to burn. I cringe and skitter away before the blame can fall on me, but I’m caught by the tip of my tail, and then I’m dangling in the air, the world swinging back and forth. Ruric and Thar come into view, and I try to explain that this isn’t my fault, that something is wrong with the ink, that it’s been fading, that the maakas are looking sicker and sicker, but all that tumbles out of my mouth is senseless whimpering.

I expect to be pummeled, beaten, torn to bits, but what happens is much, much worse.

“Your services are no longer needed here,” Ruric grunts, then tosses me to the ground, and all of the sudden, I’m clanless.

In the heart of the Rubblebelt, the wild has taken root in the ruins of civilization long past—trees twisting through old doorframes, a family of boars turning the remnants of an Orzhov cathedral into their den. Vines cling to the shell of the crumbled building, patiently turning stone to dirt over the course of a millennium or two. Stained glass that once adorned windows now lies in piles, sharp edges rendered smooth by time. Still, nature feels like it’s choking here. Tree leaves yellowing, vines browning. Even the dirt seems pale and sickly. Barely surviving.

Like me.

A Gruul without a clan is days from becoming wurm food, or so the saying goes. Skittish and alert, I hide in shadow, blending into my surroundings. I scavenge what I can, watching a pair of goblins wrestling over the carcass of a raktusk calf. While they've got each other in head locks, I sneak up and steal a piece of meat for myself.

"Hey!" one of the goblins growls as he notices me. It takes a moment for them to untangle from each other's grip, but in that time, I've already scampered off with a juicy raktusk leg and lose them in the tall grasses. I let my skin go a few shades browner to better blend into my surroundings. The grasses conceal me, but I notice they aren't dried and brittle like they lack for water, but thin and limp, like they lack for nutrients.

I hold my breath, waiting for my pursuers to give up looking for me, and when all is quiet, I take a bite of the leg. The meat is sour, almost like it's gone off, but I'd seen the goblins kill the calf myself. I eat it anyway, my mind churning over being away from my clan, but when I get down to the bone, I'm taken aback by how malleable it is, bending like a tree branch in the wind.

Wilting vegetation, bad batches of ink, rancid meat. Something's gone wrong with the Rubblebelt, and it's only getting worse. Someone needs to do something before it's too late. I'm just one person, though. I need help—the help of my former clan, if I can get it. I know it's a risk, but I gather my proof and wait until the dead of night to make my way back to their camp.

The festivities have wound down, save for a few ogres, two giants, and a centaur huddled close to the fire, drunkenly reliving the day's conquests—heroes of new stories that will be told for generations to come. Everyone else has dozed off, and I tiptoe around mounds of snoring warriors. With all the fur and leather and skulls, it's hard to tell where one ends and the next begins.

I see Jiri, nesting with his mates, a filthy scrap of cloth bandaged around his bicep. I nudge his shoulder, and a bloodshot eye opens, taking a moment to focus upon me, then slowly and quietly, he extracts himself from the pile.

"What are you doing here?" he breathes, beyond aggravated.

"I need to talk to Ruric and Thar," I whisper, shoving the rubbery bone and wilted vegetation at him. "Something's been sucking the life out of the Rubblebelt these last couple months. The grass is dying. The creatures are sickly. If we don't do something, we'll be the next to starve."

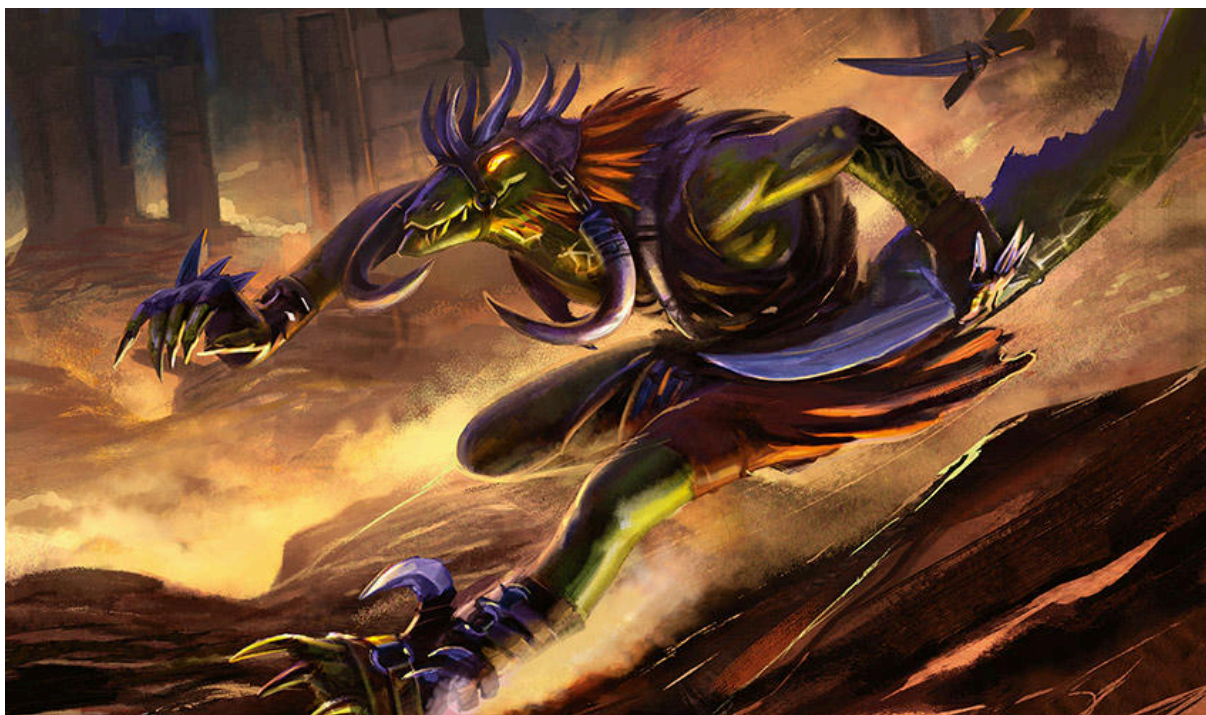
Jiri laughs. "Didn't you notice? We're at war. Ruric and Thar don't have time to look at grass and bone."

"Please," I beg. "This is important."

"You know what's important to me?" Jiri unwraps his bandage. "Not having an arm that's half burned by bad ink."

"But that's exactly what I'm—"

He bares his teeth and flexes his skin spikes. "Go, Arrus. Don't come back here."



Art by: Deruchenko Alexander

I skulk off, but before I get very far, I notice that the group of warriors gathered next to the bonfire aren't just over there telling stories. My eyes narrow and my scales prick at a hulking ogre in long robes, boar skulls capping each of her shoulders. Her right arm ends below the elbow and attached to that is a prosthetic made of intricately carved battleboar tusk with leather straps bearing an assortment of fine tools. A modified tattoo needle juts out from the end of the prosthetic, set at the perfect angle.

She taps the butt of the needle with a small mallet, moving at a steady rhythm across the centaur's hindquarters. The bright green hue of ogre's ink is like nothing I've ever seen, shimmering in the night as if the whole pot's been consumed by Rage.

I had no idea they'd replace me so quickly. I wait in the shadows, stewing silently as she breezes through each of the warriors. It's nearly morning when the last of them leaves her side, and I slip up next to her, and from this close, I see she's got a face full of shaman tattoos.

"Hey there, slick. What can I do for you?" The ogre glances at my thin, bare arms.

"What kind of ink you using there?" I ask. "Never seen anything like it."

"Special blend. Proprietary," she says, picking a large piece of roasted battleboar from between her blunted teeth. Should be *my* roasted battleboar.

"Can I trade you for some?"

"You can fight me for it," she says with a laugh, then starts to pack up her tools into the pockets in her shaman's apron.

The way she carries herself, you can tell she's born from strong family lines steeped in heroism and might the ones that children begged storytellers to hear. But there are less-told stories of sneakiness and cunning, of the unsung viashino guerilla raiders with poor impulse control and quick hands, taking their enemies by surprise. Their names may be forgotten, but I channel the stealth of my own ancestors, and while the ogre's back is turned, I extend my sticky fingers, grab the clay pot that holds her ink, and without a sound, wrap it up into the folds of my cloak.

And with a movement quick as a tail whip, my arm is pinned to the ground, and the ogre's knee is in my chest. Ink spills upon the malnourished earth.

As you would expect, a fight ensues, and as each of her punches and kicks land, I am reminded of why her ancestors got stories and mine didn't.

"Touch my ink again, and I'll make a pair of boots out of your hide," she growls, holding out her now empty ink bowl. The beatdown had been so swift, it didn't even wake the others.

As I lie here, broken and bent, staring at the sky, waiting to die, I feel something brush against my cheek. Agony strikes as I turn my head to the side and notice a lush green vine growing up from where the ink had soaked into the ground, leaves unfurling and reaching toward the rising sun before my very eyes. The vine meanders down my shoulder, then loops around my arm. Slowly, but surely, I feel my broken bones mend.

"What magic is this? Who—" I croak, shortly before vines find their way into my mouth, down my throat, touching all those bleeding spots inside me. Selesnyan magic, no doubt—a guild kindred in the ways of nature, though their shortsightedness keeps them busy trying to bring order and calmness to what should be wild and invigorating. I cannot deny their healing magic is what I need in this moment, though. As soon as I'm properly mended, I'm tempted to sit up, look for the source of the magic, but I keep playing half-dead, listening carefully as the ogre cusses to herself, complaining about the wasted ink and how she'll have to go make more. She finishes packing up and leaves, and I follow after her, mind set on finding out her secrets.

I keep low to the ground, far enough behind her that she won't notice me, and if she does, I'll be able to scramble away before she can pummel me again. We've trekked clear out of the Rubblebelt, the withering foliage transforming into vibrant greens, so bright they fall well above the color range of my scales. A huge outcropping of limestone rises high into the air before us, and a series of cave mouths gape wide like black maws daring us to come inside.

And I know exactly what the ogre is after: hydra eggs.



Art by: James Paick

Usually, hydras lay two or three clutches a year, but this season has been plagued with empty nests and eggshells too fragile to handle. I've got a good feeling about this nest, though. I watch as the ogre sneaks inside, and I get as close as I dare, letting my coloring go the pale gray of the cave walls. I sneak farther, farther into its depths, feeling like I'm descending a cold, damp throat.

The hydra enrages at the sight of the ogre, hissing and spitting. You haven't seen Rage until you've seen a mother hydra protecting her clutch. The beast rears back, but right before it strikes, the ogre starts humming a low-pitched note, her arms waving back and forth in a hypnotic motion. At the tip of her prosthetic, she skillfully balances a thick, oblong skull. Goblin, probably. Within seconds, she's got all the hydra heads mesmerized. And then carefully, the ogre pulls a chunk of meat from the pocket in her apron, tucks it inside the skull, and launches the skull into the dark depths of the cave. The hydra breaks from the trance and chases after it.

While the beast is distracted, the ogre starts digging. Looks like a decent clutch, maybe forty or fifty eggs. She tucks one into her apron, then tiptoes back toward the mouth of the cave as the hydra heads fight over the skull, trying to remove the irresistible morsel inside. Interesting technique. Goblin skulls are difficult to crush, even for a beast that size, but then there's a crunch of splintering bone and more hissing, and then the chalky sounds of a hydra slithering against rock.

The ogre looks back startled, and then breaks into a dead sprint. I can't help but wonder if weak bone has already made its way up the Rubblebelt's food chain, but I don't have time to wonder long, because now the hydra has noticed her clutch has been disturbed. My coloring might blend in here, but no amount of camouflage is going to stop me from smelling like dinner to that hydra. I've got no choice but to start running as well.

Cusses echo off the cave walls as the ogre sees me, and when she passes me, I know I'll be a hydra snack for sure. Then the ogre slings a cindervine glowing hot with orange-red magic in front of us, whips it down into the ground, and heaves. The ground erupts, spewing rock and stone as a steep ramp forms ahead of us. We scale the ramp as it chokes off the mouth of the cave, leaving just a narrow band of daylight for us to escape through.

We tumble safely down the other side—me out of breath, her not so much. I know she’s a shaman, but the way she moved back there didn’t match up with being a tattoo artist. She’s built more like someone’s who seen battle, and lots of it. I stare at her facial tattoos again noting the meandering line of a familiar river and the blocks of the surrounding Azorius neighborhood that now sits under fifteen feet of water. “Wait. You’re Baas Radley. The shaman who collapsed the Jezeru dams?”

She raises a brow, then starts walking, putting some distance between us and the hydra still snarling at us from inside the cave. “It’s just Baas, now. Feel free to get lost, slick.”

“Eighty-two blocks decimated in a single day!” I say, following right behind her, star-struck. Oh, what I would give to tattoo her skin. “And then there was that bridge collapse in the Smelting District, and the absolute carnage at the Tin Street Massacre, so much—”

“That one wasn’t me. I’m partial to crushing dams and bridges, not bones.” She shoots a glance my way. “Unless someone’s *asking* for it.”

Baas doesn’t seem like the talkative type, but maybe if I get on her good side, she’ll let me tag along while she collects the rest of her ink ingredients and I could hear some of her amazing battle stories as well. “The colossal fissure you put in the Transguild Promenade? Was it as deep as they say? That you couldn’t even see the bottom?”



Transguild Promenade | Art by: Noah Bradley

I pause, waiting for a response. Nothing. Her gait grows, and her step quickens, and I’m practically running to keep up with her.

“And the Concourse collapse, where you took out three support pillars simultaneously! Ha! Selesnya spent months rebuilding. Just you and that Bolrac berserker were responsible, right? Oooh, I remembered the uproar when you married outside the clan, but you two worked so well together. That cyclops, right? Named Daeska Sol—”

Baas stops, turns, and fixes me with the most feral glare. “Finish that sentence, and I’ll punch your throat out.”

I swallow hard, but before I can change the subject, the ground starts quaking like war is close by, but that can't be it. Forest surrounds us for miles. Then I see the leaves shaking, treetops swaying, and I realize something's moving toward us. An enormous set of tusks emerges into the clearing—a battleboar. And they never travel alone.

I turn to run, but Baas grabs me by the nape of my neck.

"Never turn your back on a battleboar," she says, "unless you want to be trampled into paste. Best chance we've got now is to stand our ground."

"The two of us against a whole herd?"

"We don't have to fight them. We just have to *look* like we want to fight them. Chances are they'll back down." She takes me by the shoulders and kicks my feet apart. "Wide stance, lean slightly forward, like you're about to pounce. Shoulders high. Teeth bared."

"Like this?" I say, channeling my inner berserker, but my cold heart bucks in protest.

She jabs her knuckle two thirds of the way down my back, and my posture shifts, my chest widens. "Better," she says, then takes a fierce stance of her own.

The battleboars grow closer—I can't help but notice how their massive hooves are polished to a high shine and their thick, wooly coats gleam like silk in the sun. Nothing like the matted beasts I'm used to, but make no mistake, even with this ridiculous parade of overgrooming, there's no way I'd want to find myself at the pointy end of those massive tusks.

"Make eye contact with the lead beast. Don't break it. She's the only one we have to deter."

The lead beast stops, and the rest of the herd does, too. She sniffs at us. I raise up onto the balls of my feet, straining to look more formidable than I am. The boar grunts, then moves on, changing course ever so slightly. They pass within inches of us, so close their fur tickles the tip of my snout, but we hold our stances until the very last boar has passed.

"That's the second time you've saved my life today," I say.

"And the third time you've put your life on the line just to get a little ink," Baas says, shaking her head. "Your name's Arrus, right?"

I go stiff. "You know who I am?"

"You burned half of the Ghor Clan," she says with a laugh. "Everyone knows who you are."

"It wasn't my fault! Something's wrong with the land, and I can't get the right ink mix anymore. You've noticed it, right? Why else would you trek all the way out here?"

Her arms cross, but the rest of her body language softens. "I've noticed."

"Well, why haven't you told anyone? They'd listen to you!"

"I just got out of Wargate, slick. Need some time to get my head right, and I'm afraid that doesn't involve getting everyone all riled up about the potency of maaka scat. But, I've seen your work. You're too good to toss to the Wilds. I know some people in Burning Tree Clan, and they'd be glad to have you. I'll show you how to make the ink. It's potent. It can even heal fighters when the Rage strikes. Not like it healed you you must have had a couple hundred blocks' worth of healing magic. But it helps, and we need all the help we can get."

"Wait " My mind tumbles slowly, trying to put everything together. "Back at the camp you knew that ink would heal me. And you knew I would follow you?"

Baas smiles. "Maybe. Now do you want the ink recipe or not?"

I do. I absolutely do.

So we trek into the forest in search of pine bark. The trees here are majestic, tall specimens reaching toward the sky, but something eerie pokes in the back of my mind. There's a pattern to the trees—oak, twelve steps, pine, eight steps, pine, fifteen steps, willow, then another oak. Over and over and over again.



Selesnya Guildgate | Art by: Dimitar Miranski

“We’ve crossed into Selesnyan territory,” I say.

“You mean that pack of battleboars straight from the salon didn’t give it away?” She laughs, then steps up in front of a towering pine, balls her fist, and delivers a solid gut-punch to the tree trunk. A couple dozen bark chips fall to the ground. I go to pick them up, but Baas laughs again. “I bet you’re the type that just grabs the first bark he sees. The strongest pieces will cling to the tree after you’ve given it a little love tap. Give it a go.”

I pound my fists against the trunk a few times. Nothing happens except scratching up my knuckles. “It’d be easier if I was built like you,” I mumble.

“You think size is the only thing that matters on the battlefield?” She steps up so we’re standing eye to navel. “Here, flip me. Put your arm around my neck, twist, then lean in with all your weight.”

I follow her instructions, and I’m able to take her down with more than a bit of assistance on her part. But I get the gist. With a little practice, I could see it working. Maybe not on someone quite her size, but next time my brother tries to steal my tips, I can teach him a thing or two.

My heart goes cold at the thought. Well, colder than it already is. Who knows when I’ll see Jiri again. Burning Tree’s territory is so far off. Maybe he’ll come visit when the war dies down, but the way aggressions have been ramping up these past few months, who knows when that’ll be.

“Why are you here, running from battle?” I ask her. “We need you out there fighting. Did Wargate ‘rehabilitate’ you?”

“Ha, no. I’m all about bashing civilization to bits. I just can’t be on the front line while *you-know-who* is out there. Too many memories of us fighting side by side.”

“Daeska?”

Baas slits her eyes at me. “Yeah,” she grumbles. “We were at the Tin Street Market, browsing around, spending a minute away from the battlefield together, when the mayhem broke out. Boros soldiers started getting handsy, saying they saw us assault a couple of old minotaurs. Liars, all of them. Rage got the best of me and made a bad situation worse. I got arrested. Daeska got away. Came to visit me a few times, promising to wait ten years for me to get out of Wargate, if that’s what it took. Turns out, I got released early, only to find out that tramp hadn’t even waited ten months.”

“Cyclopes,” I say, shaking my head.

“Anyway, I figure I’m still doing my part. Helping the cause, and—”

We both perk up at the sound of a feral roar from deep in the woods.

“Maaka,” we say in unison. Source of the final ingredient.

We cut through the perfectly spaced trees, noticing how even the detritus upon the earth looks like it’s purposefully spread. Every sixty steps, I’m leaping over the same pile of rocks, and every eighty-eight steps, we pass the same fallen oak. The brambles in between trees become thicker, denser, sharper. Just when I think we won’t be able to travel any further, we see the source of the roar, what has got to be the biggest, most beautiful maaka I’ve ever seen—bulging muscles barely contained by its lustrous red fur. We track it for nearly an hour before it does its duty, and then Baas pulls out her clay pot and mixes the ingredients together, using the stump from one of the fallen trees as a makeshift table. The ink’s glow sets in almost immediately, and without asking, she pours half of the mix into my bowl.

“Thanks,” I say, preparing to set off for whatever awaits me in the Burning Tree Clan. But then I take a second look at the tree stump. That eerie feeling overwhelms me as I count the too-wide rings. I shake my head. This massive oak, probably forty feet tall, is only five years old.

On a whim, I put my sticky fingers to good use and climb up to the top of a tree. From this vantage, the forest looks less like a forest and more like a giant fence dividing the Rubblebelt wilds from a stretch of Selesnyan territory.



Art by: Sung Choi

I was right. There *is* a war raging beneath our feet, only it's not one fought with knives and cudgels. It's a silent war fought with growth magic. Selesnya had planted thousands and thousands of saplings, and then accelerated their growth until they had the perfect impenetrable barrier. And they've been leaching magic from our lands to do it, thinking we'd never have the smarts to figure it out.

We wouldn't starve, of course. Even if all the plants and animals in the Rubblebelt died off, there would always be war to feed us. We'd press further into civilization, tearing down Izzet labs and Orzhov basilicas and Azorius training facilities, doing Selesnya's dirty work for them. Meanwhile, they laugh and sing and hold hands within their manufactured gardens, pretending like they are above the "savagery" of fighting.

This *this* is something that I can get mad about. I feel a spark in my chest, a kindling of Rage waiting to be stoked. Now all I have to do is summon the courage to get the rest of the clan mad about this, too.

"I challenge for the position of clan chieftain," I say, legs spread wide, body leaned slightly forward, scowl on my face that could scare off an entire herd of battleboars. Ruric and Thar might not have time to listen to theories about limp grass and brittle bone, but they can't turn down a challenge.

The camp goes silent. It is not the silence of tension, but that of barely contained laughter.

The two-headed ogre sighs, and they rise from their throne of skulls and step up to me. Ruric smiles, revealing a chunk of meat caught between his jagged incisors. "I suppose I could use your scrawny bones as toothpicks. Who says we're uncivilized, see?"

"You're unfit to be our leaders," I say, raising my voice so it cuts through the laughter, and I cling to hope that this altercation will be resolved with the aid of aggressive body language. "The Rubblebelt is practically withering right under your noses, and you don't even bother to look up and ask what's causing it."

"Do you want to fight, or do you plan to bore us to death with your words?" says Thar.

Ruric and Thar step closer. Talking isn't going to work. Violence is all they'll listen to. I throw my whole body behind a punch that lands in their gut, but it gives less than the tree trunk had. Ruric pounds his huge fist on the top of my head, and I crumple to the ground, white spots blooming in my vision. I scramble back up to my feet, struggling to keep the world under me as Ruric and Thar head back to their throne.

"I challenge for the position of clan chieftain," I say again. The ogres growl this time.

Jiri steps in and grabs me by the shoulders, his eyes desperate. "Arrus. Don't do this. Beg them for forgiveness and come back to the clan. Look, the burns didn't come out so bad." He turns his arm to me, now healed up into a mesmerizing pattern of shimmering scars. "Some of my mates want the same for their next set of tattoos. Please."

I step around Jiri, focused on the burn smoldering in my heart. "My challenge stands."

"You won't be standing for long," Thar says. The ogres beat their chest, and the Rage ignites within them. Their tattoos gleam, some of it the work of my own two hands. I recall the takedown move Baas showed me. I use my quickness to get behind the lumbering brutes, then climb up their back and set my hold. I lean. Lean harder. I think I hear vertebrae snap, but turns out, it's just Ruric and Thar popping their knuckles. Ruric reaches up, grabs me, throws me. I hit the ground hard and go rolling, stopping inches away from the bonfire.

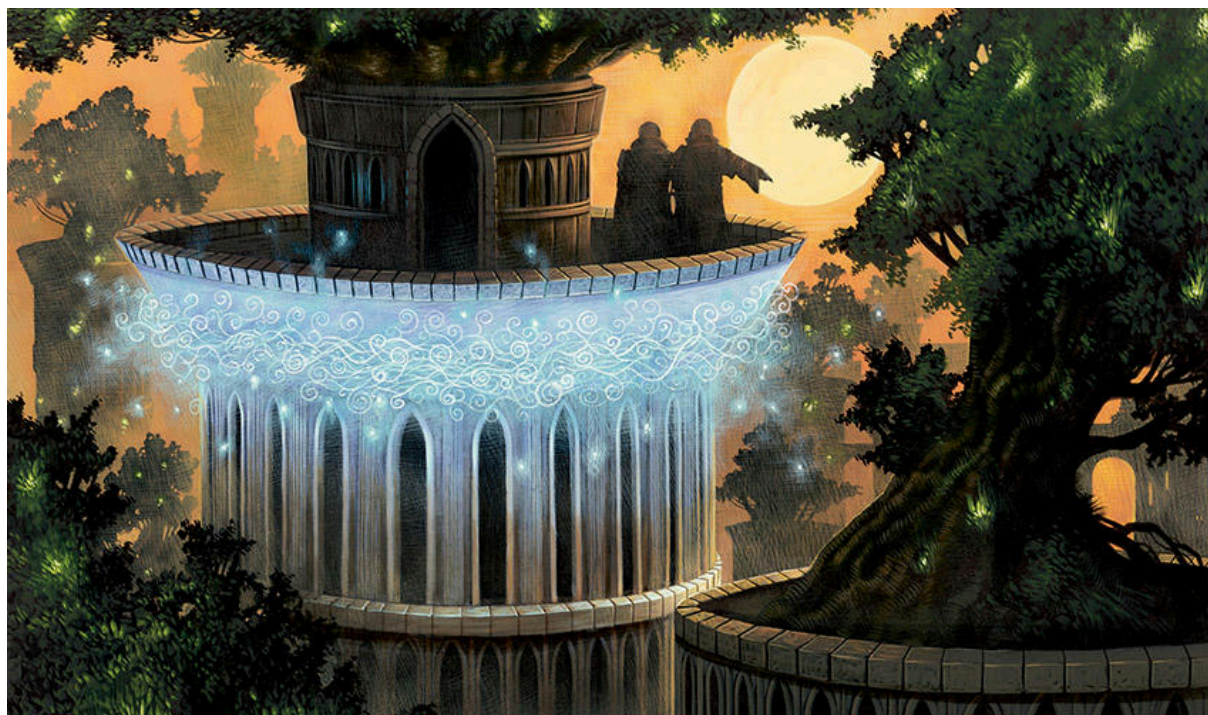
I lay there, sure I've broken a couple ribs. Then I find myself caught in the shadow of a hulking figure. I cringe, thinking it's Ruric and Thar, come to stomp the life out of me, but a familiar deep voice rumbles the pit of my stomach.

"Good. You found your Rage," Dryzek says, looking down at me with a smile. "Now *use* it."

Use it? Isn't that what I've been trying to do? I focus on what I'm mad about, ignoring the bonfire embers drifting onto my skin. I'm mad at the Selesnya Conclave, sure. I'm mad our lands are being drained of magic, paved over by civilization, poisoned by industrialization. But what I'm mostly mad about has been sitting with me for a very long time, before any of those things ever mattered to me. I'm mad that my people's stories have been lost, that my heroes have been hidden from me. I'm mad that not once as a young viashino had I sat down before the bonfire to hear stories of warriors with green scales and lashing tails, people like me, smashing civility with reckless abandon.

I force myself back up onto my feet. Ruric and Thar are already knuckles deep in what's left of a stack of raktusk ribs, and I hobble toward them. After a couple steps, my limp eases back into a steady gait, though the soles of my feet feel like I'm walking across hot coals. That feeling spreads my knees, my gut, my lungs. My heart. There's no more pain, only Rage.

"I challenge for the position of clan chieftain," I say for the third time. Ruric and Thar start to get up again, but something in my eyes must spook them, because they sit back down and press hard against the back of their throne. "Listen to what I'm saying. The Rubblebelt is *dying*. The plants are decaying, the animals are sickly, and it won't stop there if we don't do something about it. The Selesnyan Conclave is behind it. They're sucking the magic from our land to grow their own. We can't waste a day longer, a minute longer ignoring the problem, or there will be nothing wild left for us to fight for."



Privileged Position | Art by: Wayne England

I take a deep breath, let it out. It's then I notice that I am completely engulfed in red, roiling flames, a lifetime's worth of pent up Rage magically surging out from me all at once. I dial it back until the flames merely flicker.

Jiri steps up next to me and puts his hand on my shoulder. The flames spread to him, and soon he is engulfed as well. "I stand with Arrus," he says.

Baas puts her hand on my other shoulder. She catches the flames, too. "I stand with Arrus."

"As do I," Dryzek's voice booms. He stands behind me, and my flames all but leap for him. Others join us, until together, we burn brighter than any bonfire ever could.

"I challenge you, chieftain, to do something about this," I say to Ruric and Thar, speaking for our clan and for *all* Gruul clans. "We've fought for you. Now we need you to fight for us."

"If Selesnya wants a war, we'll give them a war," Ruric and Thar say, walking up to me. Ruric reaches out, places his open palm upon my head. Red flames wick up his arm, then set our leaders fully alight. "Stories will be told of this war for generations, and your name, my fierce warrior, will be at the center of them."



Art by: Tyler Walpole