

Beast

Tom LaPille

From set *Magic 2015*

Garruk Wildspeaker was once deeply in touch with nature, a potent beastcaller, and master of green magic...until the necromancer Liliana Vess cursed him using the dangerous artifact known as the Chain Veil. Suffused with black mana and cut off from the voice of the wild, Garruk became a feral killer with only one goal: find Liliana and make her reverse what she had done.

Garruk tracked Liliana to the world of Innistrad, where they again faced off. Liliana gained the upper hand long enough to get away. In the aftermath of that battle, driven half-mad by the Veil's curse, Garruk faces a crucial moment of decision...

I wake up and open my eyes. The air reeks of death and undeath. The witch's scent is in there somewhere, but it's faint. I'm prone, half-submerged in water. The cries of carrion birds ring in my ears. Everything hurts.

A stinking black bird lands on my chest. I grab it with both hands, snap its neck, and throw it. Its corpse makes a splash.

I inhale a lungful of moldy air and sit up. I'm in a swamp, at night. The marsh around me is littered with birds feasting on hacked-up pieces of things once undead. There's no light, but I can see in the dark.



Swamp | Art by Adam Paquette

The remains of the witch's servants surround me. I killed them.

She nearly killed me.

Where is she?

Where is my axe?

There's a long thin shape under the water next to me. I reach in and my hand closes around a wooden shaft. I pull my axe out of the swamp and lean it against a fallen log. Carrion birds around me scatter, alighting in the trees above.

Exhaustion hits me again, and I'm back inside my room at the last inn I slept at, weeks ago. The fallen log is the bed, but no beds are large enough for me. I lie down on the floor, and sink again into the muck.

A beast as tall as me and as wide as it is tall approaches me and sniffs my still form. It smells mostly right, but there's decay underneath, the same as what's always coming off of me now. Under its fur, its skin is shot through with black veins, just like mine.

I summoned it during the fight with the witch.



Art by Dave Kendall

I raise my head to look at it. It jumps back, then winces as it lands on its back legs.

It makes a rumbling growl, and when it speaks, it is the innkeeper, trembling with fear. “You scare the other patrons,” he says. “You can’t stay here again tonight.” He’s not sure he could take me in a fight, but the desperation in his posture says he might try.

He edges backward, slightly, and almost chirps. “They say there’s a pack of werewolves around here that tries to do good despite their curse.” He just wants me gone. “You should look for them. They only take in the strong, though. They kill the weak.”

“Do I look weak to you?” I snarl.

“No, sir,” he snorts. He turns and limps out of my room, splashing with each step.

More splashing noises come from the opposite direction now. They are slower, and louder, and a wave of rotted air rolls over me. I sit up again. I’m outside the inn, and the thick clusters of trees are buildings huddled together in the tiny town. There’s a huge mass of bloated corpses, a little bigger than the beast I was talking to, coming right for me.



Skaab Goliath | Art by Volkan Baga

The birds scatter with an explosion of noise. “Stitcher attack!” they cry, as they fly away. “Save the children!” If it wants to kill the townsbirds, it’ll have to kill me first. I stand up, pulling myself up with the axe. I’m still bleeding from cuts on my arms. A few of them ooze black. My back hurts when I stand straight, but I have enough strength to take this thing.

And if I don’t, I’ll die. I was probably dying out here anyway.

I charge it, screaming. It’s a ball of human corpses, maybe five feet across, with another corpse as each of its three legs and two arms, and a pitted rotten wolf embedded into it on top where a head should be. My axe slices into the thing’s shoulder with a wet sound. One of the wolf’s legs flops freely where I severed it from the body. Its left arm comes around to rake me with glistening silver claws, but my axe’s impact pushes the thing back six inches. It only makes a surface scratch. I pull my axe out. Its right arm is coming for me, but I duck inside its range and turn the axe into its upper arm, which is a fused pair of human legs. I make a deep cut, and its claws miss me, but its left arm is coming back around and I’m stuck.

The thing jerks left, off of my axe, and falls on its side into the muck with a big splash. My beast is there, head lowered, short tusks now covered in glistening black. I’m soaked, but my axe is free. I raise it and bring it down across the thing’s shoulders, slicing the rotted wolf’s corpse off the top. The whole thing shudders and stops moving.

No more bird children will fall to this monstrosity.

The beast rumbles up to me, slowly, and makes a low groan. Now it’s Pavel, the werewolf who leads the pack the innkeeper told me about. “I’m Pavel,” he says. “We’re all werewolves. You’re...something

else...but we're hunting the stitcher who did this. She's tough, and we could use your help. Want to come with?"

He can help me find the witch. "Where?! Where is she!?" I grab him by the tusks and scream into his face.

He steps backward, haltingly. I move with him. He snarls. "You need to show more control than this, or we'll kill you, too." His tiny eyes glisten with a little sympathy and a lot of calculation.

I let go of his tusks and stand as tall as I can despite the pain. "You could try."

He rests back on his haunches, no longer threatened, and almost purrs. "I hope we won't have to. Come with me." He turns his back and lumbers into the blackness of the swamp.

I totter along behind him. We walk in silence for a while. He twists and turns through the forest, seemingly at random. A few times, we recross our path. "Where are we going?"

He rumbles a low growl. "We live far away from civilization, where our condition cannot harm anyone but ourselves. The others will not accept you immediately; you will have to earn their trust."

"But you kill stitchers."

Pavel turns his head to face me as we walk, and grunts. "We kill zombies. We do not kill sentient creatures. We disable them, and leave them with the proper authorities." He turns his head back to the path before us. "If you insist on killing your prey, you will not be allowed to remain with us."

I hear an elk cry nearby. My stomach rumbles. "Wait here." I pace away until I can't hear Pavel anymore, climb ten feet into a tree, and watch.

It's coming this way.

I stand on the branch, ready my axe, and wait.



Dawntreader Elk | Art by John Avon

The elk walks right under me. I drop off of the branch, and the flat of my axe slams into the back of its head as I land. Its corpse falls sideways and lands in the muck with a dull splash.

I pull it onto a dry embankment. It smells clean, just like I don't. I pull my knife, cut a long vine from one of the trees, hang the elk by its horns, and open it from hip to neck. Dripping blood collects underneath the corpse, first pooling and then draining off into the swamp. I reach in, hold the bladder closed, slice it out, and drop it into the water. The intestines go into the muck next with a plop and a slurp.

Pavel limps up to me again, purring, as I pull out the elk's liver. "Your hunting has been invaluable to us. We would have starved without you. We have decided that you can stay."

I toss the liver to him, and he snatches it out of the air with his muzzle.

I'm starving, and the meat smells amazing, but Pavel is probably hungry too. I cut off three ribs, skin and all, and toss the chunk toward him. "So when do we go stitcher hunting?"

"Tonight," he says before ripping a piece off the hunk of dead elk. I skin the rest of it, cut off a rib, and tear into a chunk of meat myself. It tastes incredible.

We finish the elk between the two of us with ease. He lays down on all fours, and groans when his stomach hits the ground. I lay down on my back. We share a long moment, each of us resting and breathing in the swamp, as we digest my kill.



Garruk's Packleader | Art by Nils Hamm

I sit up, bored. "So where is she?"

He looks at me, irritated, and grunts. "We don't know exactly. Somewhere near Gatstaf, probably on the way to Gavony."

"I'll find her." I stand up and shoulder my axe.

"Be careful," he says. "Any stitcher worth her salt will have guardians. You should not face them alone." I turn away. "And if you kill her," he groans, "you will not be allowed to return. We are not beasts." I pace away from him into the woods.

I wander through the swamp, looking for any sign of her. I sniff the ground occasionally, but I can't make out her scent over my own.

There's something on a branch over there. I approach, and find a ripped piece of purple silk. I hold it to my nose and inhale. It's her.

I put it into a pouch on my belt, crouch, and sniff. There it is. It's faint, but she must have come this way. There are broken branches over there, too, cracked by human feet. Small, just like hers are. I take five paces and sniff the ground again. Still there. Fifteen more and another sniff of the ground, and I know I've got her.

Her trail takes me through the swamp, dodging over trees and around pools of standing water. Had she gone through them, she might have lost me, but who knows what's lurking under the surface? Some swamp creature might have eaten her. She'll be dead anyway after I smash the back of her skull in.

Just when I think I'm getting close, deep footsteps rumble slowly toward me, maybe two hundred feet away. I pad into a pool of water mostly covered in plants and drop onto my haunches until only my head is exposed, and even that is covered by foliage. A rotting beast comes into view, its skin all shot through with black, and its gaping maw and tusks dripping fresh blood. It reeks of death magic. It pants, breathing heaving breaths, legs trembling. It sniffs around, but doesn't see me behind the leaves.

The stitcher's guardian. Poor thing. Whoever did this to you deserves to die.

I sit still, and it rumbles past me without even a glimpse in my direction.

Ten minutes later, I creep out of the pool, half-covered in thin green vines. I shake most of them off and keep following the trail.

After another five minutes, I hear slow and heavy footsteps a hundred feet behind me. I turn, and there's the stitcher. It's not the witch—it's huge, green with black veins, maybe nine feet tall and nine feet wide, and has gleaming black tusks. I expected a woman, at least, and smaller, but I guess this is what necromancers look like here. She'll die all the same.

I charge. She just sits down, and watches me as I come, probably waiting to surprise me. I wind up with my axe as I approach, and she still just sits there. Her eyes go wide as the blade sinks into her skull, and she drops onto her stomach with a wet crunch and a squeal. She flails for a second or two, and then dies.

Pavel's words run through my head again. "We are not beasts."

Maybe *they* aren't.

A white light flashes in the distance, illuminating the horizon, and then reaching all the way to the sky. We all watch it as it rolls toward us, brighter and brighter as it comes. Then it washes over us, and all I see is white.



I'm standing in a swamp, over a dead beast. It smells fresh. From the black veins on its skin, I must have summoned it. From the axe wound in its head, I must have killed it.

It is only a beast. Not the innkeeper, not Pavel, not the stitcher's guardian, not even the stitcher.

I can't see in the dark anymore, but I can see color, and I smell normal now. The sun is starting to come up.

I flex my right arm. The black veins are gone, and I am strong, as strong as I was before. I take a deep breath, and let loose a roar. It echoes throughout the swamp. Birds scatter, and do not speak as they fly away.

I'm on *Innistrad*, in some swamp. The witch almost killed me.

And her curse is gone.

What did she do to me?

How far gone was I?

An overwhelming wave of nausea hits me as my vision goes black and white again. I drop to my knees, clutch a thick branch on a fallen tree with black-laced hands, and vomit. By the time the retching stops, half the elk I ate is on the ground in front of me. I feel a little better, but the curse is back. And I am very tired.



Garruk, the Veil-Cursed | Art by Eric Deschamps

I sniff the air. The witch's scent is still here, mixed in with the half-digested elk, and one of her footprints is right there in front of me.

I keep following the trail, now supporting myself with the axe. Twenty minutes of tracking takes me to a road. I emerge from the swamp, blinking in the breaking dawn.

The road extends as far as I can see in both directions. The blinding light came from the right, where the sun is rising now. It was enough to cure me, if only for a moment. I don't know what it was, but it was powerful.

It is the only thing that has ever helped. If I had been closer, would it have saved me?

If I found the source, I could be free. I could stand tall, walk straight, call healthy creatures to my side.

I could stop hunting her.

What would I do instead? I have hunted her for so long. What did I do before?

I look to my left, and see a broken branch. I crouch down to it and sniff, and a growl rumbles in my gut. It's her.

I may not get another chance at a cure. If I leave the light behind, I'll have to kill her before I lose myself again.

If I follow the light, though, I'll lose the trail.

I sniff the ground again. She's still there, and it's fresh enough to follow.

I turn to my left, away from the blinding dawn, and begin to walk.



Art by Brad Rigney