

Beneath Riverroot Tree

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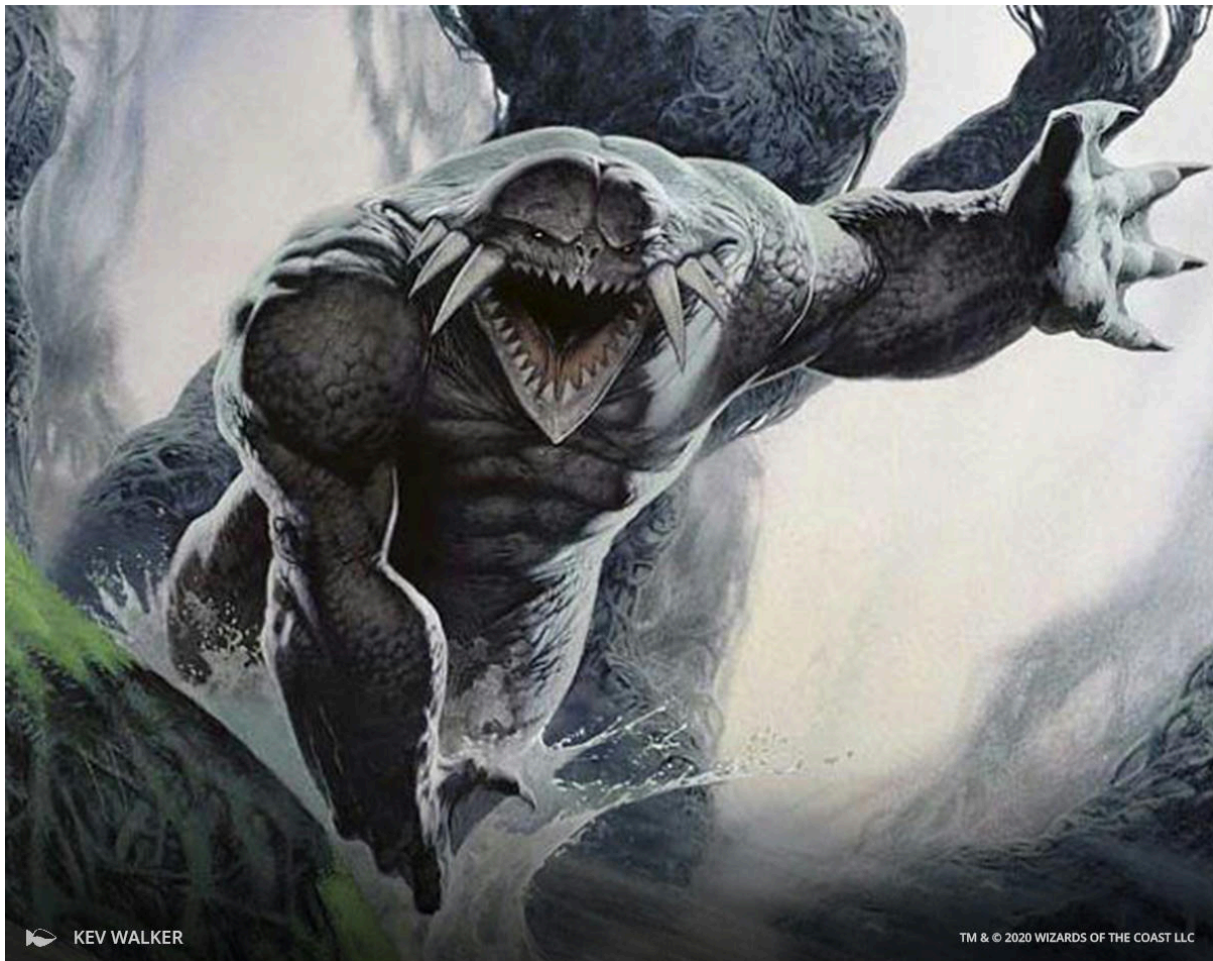
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Bala Ged Skyclave hung in the air above the sprawling canopy of the Guum Wilds, a great moon that never left the sky and stared Obuun down, unblinking. It dared him to admit defeat and return to the kor city above. Instead of meeting its gaze, he looked away, leaning over the twisting wooden guardrail to watch the brakeguards leave Riverroot Village. A cohort of a dozen figures moved across the forest floor, barely visible in their brown and green patchwork clothing. They vanished in a few moments on their way northward, leaving him on the outlook to be kept company by his anger and the leader of Riverroot Clan.

“Give them time, Obuun,” Nezzan said.

“Why should I give them anything?” Obuun swatted irritably at a moth fluttering around his long ears. “I should be down there with them, fighting surrakar. The surrakar took my parents from me, and now the brakeguards are taking my chance to fight back.”



Surrakar Marauder | Art by: Kev Walker

“Obuun, I know you think that avenging your parents will heal the link with your ancestors. It may well, but you don’t know the Guum Wilds like the brakeguards do, and nobody can be spared to be your wet nurse out there. If you die with no connection to your ancestors, your soul will be lost. If you live, the Wilds will take something from you besides your life. They always do.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Obuun snapped. The Wilds had already taken both of his parents. What else could they take? “It’s worth the risk to prove myself,” said Obuun. Nezzan gave him a condescending shake of the head.

“You do not understand the risks. You have much left to learn after being with the kor so long, and the brakeguards can see that.”

“So they think of me as a kor because I lived with them? That’s not fair.” Obuun turned to Nezzan, searching the shorter Mul Daya’s face. They were old by an elf’s accounting, the lines on their forehead and in the corners of their eyes like the veins of a brittle fallen leaf.

“I cannot know another’s mind, and neither can any other Mul Daya,” Nezzan said. Obuun opened his mouth, but Nezzan cut him off with a raised hand. “There are a few things I do know, Obuun. I know that your uncle Dykaar loves the kor because they provided him—and you—with safety. I know that the kor are skilled at replacing our ways with theirs in anybody they get a hold on. I know that Mul Daya are slow to trust.”

“That’s why I should be with them. They would know they can trust me if they’d give me a chance to prove it.” Obuun brushed past Nezzan. They didn’t understand. Nobody in Riverroot could know the urgent pain of being an outsider in their own lands, nor how elven patience could chafe.

His things were ready in his parents’ old home, which was dusty and overtaken by vines. Nezzan wanted Obuun to work on the house, tucked under a high branch of the great tree that housed all the elves of Riverroot Village. Obuun had no intention of staying in a house full of memories and crawling growth in a village where nobody trusted him. Not when the Wilds were overgrown with chances to win back what he had lost.

The armor that Uncle Dykaar had bought for Obuun hung from a vine in the corner of the front room of the old house, its angular kor design out of place among the twisting tendrils of green. Coming here was, in its way, a betrayal. Dykaar had given him everything, but Obuun couldn’t stand to be severed from his ancestors for a moment longer. He had taken the armor and the wicked hooked spear to the surface world, leaving his only living family behind on the Skyclave.

Still, escaping the overwhelming magic of the Skyclave and closing the gap of a full league of open air hadn’t healed the wounded spiritual connection, and the fear that it would never heal had burrowed deep inside Obuun like a beetle grub boring into the root of a tree. He shook it off as he put on his armor, the triangular sections of kor patterns light and familiar where they rested against his shoulders. Obuun grabbed a coil of rope, his spear, and his climbing belt and slipped out the cracked back door. The hinges moaned in protest, but the sounds of the forest were loud enough that no one would hear. A flock of purple and black birds cackled on the roofs of the village, insects buzzed and fed on glowing algae in the bog that sprawled behind the village, and children shrieked somewhere below. Nobody would notice one elf gliding down a rope from platform to platform, avoiding the ladders and lifts that led to the ground.

The earth was soft, Obuun’s steel boots making no sound in the fallen leaves that slowly rotted into rich earth. He had come down in the only clear area beneath the village, where ash was layered with fresh wet leaves to keep the cremation fires from spreading through the underbrush. The soot of generations of dead bruised the Riverroot tree’s bark, and though Obuun couldn’t connect with his ancestors, he felt the ache in his soul. First his father, and then his mother, had disappeared years ago, never burned here to release their spirits to the village above.

As Obuun slipped through the brush, passing trees dwarfed by the Riverroot tree’s massive size, he wondered whether his connection had been wounded too many times and would never heal. He’d once broken his left wrist twice, the new bone snapped like green wood barely a month after the kor healer had laid on hands. It would never be quite right, still crooked over a decade on. It reminded Obuun of its weakness every so often, paining him when the weather changed, just as Riverroot Village reminded him of what he had lost. But it was better to be here and free than to be comfortable up in the Skyclave. At least the brakeguards who had rejected him were honest in their coldness. The kor would smile to an outsider’s face and stab them in the back when they didn’t adapt.

Obuun had conformed like the massive lichens that hugged the trees, flattening himself out and dressing in kor clothes, painting his face with kor symbols. He had done it just this morning, forgetting that it was no longer necessary. The air was humid beneath the canopy, and the paint was soft against his warm skin, so he scrubbed it away with the back of his hand. He wiped his hand on his leather leggings as he walked, wondering at the ease with which he moved through the Guum Wilds. The kor and Uncle Dykaar had both called the Wilds impassible, open only to trained brakeguards like Ayya, Obuun’s mother.

He wondered if she had felt like this moving through the wild, free and alone. Unseen and unjudged by elven eyes but watched from all angles by Zendikar's fauna. The air was full of the scents of decay, new growth, and something acrid. He was close to the surrakar lair. Obuun slipped behind a tree to mount an ambush. He'd bring proof of a surrakar kill back to the tree, and the brakeguards would have to let him come on the next expedition. They couldn't afford to leave behind someone capable of helping.

Footsteps, soft and cautious. Obuun held his breath, straining his ears as something passed his hiding place on two legs. He peered around the tree, saw a sickly green surrakar shambling through the trees. It was the height of an average Mul Daya, but heavier, with a dewlap hanging down from its chin and a long tail that dragged on the ground. In one clawed hand, it held an elven spear that looked like it had spent the last twenty years at the bottom of a swamp.

Obuun took his spear in an iron grip, light and dark alternating before his eyes as he darted through the trees after the surrakar. The sickly smell of the cave brushed over him like a beaded curtain, damp darkness enclosing him. He stalked the surrakar, slowing his pace on instinct while he waited for his eyes to adjust. Uncle Dykaar's lessons may not have helped Obuun fit into Riverroot Village, but they could help him prove himself now.

The surrakar must have heard the scuff of Obuun's heavy boots, for it turned as his spear whistled through the air, raising its weapon. Steel clashed against steel, throwing up sparks that lit the dim tunnel. The surrakar was stronger than he expected, almost knocking Obuun over with only a one-handed grip on its spear. Obuun's own hands were shaky, and he knew he had to kill the surrakar or escape before it killed him. Before he could decide which, it made a grating croak, taking a swing at Obuun's head and forcing him to duck. Fear gripped him by the guts, and he took off running to regroup.

The weight of the surrakar brought him to the ground after a few steps, almost bashing his head against a wall. He fumbled at his belt for his knife and stabbed wildly over his shoulder, but the knife slipped from his hand and clattered into the darkness. Cold metal touched the back of Obuun's neck, and he froze, too afraid to move. The surrakar's bare, scaly foot jabbed into his ribs, turning him over. Its spear point dragged across his throat, leaving a hot line of pain in its wake.

Obuun reached over his head, pushing off the wall. The slick surface of his armor slid easily across the ground, sending him between the surrakar's legs. He grabbed its tail, spines and serrations digging into his palms, and it was all he could do to hold on. The surrakar's muscular tail whipped Obuun into the wall, knocking him almost senseless before he crashed to the floor on his side. The surrakar raised its spear to strike, but the butt clattered against the wall of the narrow passage, giving Obuun's head a moment to clear. He stood and bolted again, crashing dizzily against walls lit by softly glowing lichen.

Within moments, Obuun was lost. The sounds of scales against stone, of growls, of butchery came from everywhere. Any direction he walked in would lead to a death beyond death, lost to both his ancestors and the living, and the thought made his stomach swim with nausea. When Obuun saw a small black gap in the stone and hard-packed earth, he scrambled inside to hide. Roots brushed the back of his neck, and a familiar voice echoed through off stone, soft as ripples of cool water running down his spine. *Let her in.*

The shiver returned him to his senses, his breath calming and his heartbeat slowing. Obuun was turned around, but the stale air felt almost familiar. Was he beneath the Riverroot Tree?

Sure that stillness was death, Obuun eventually crept out of his hiding place. He prayed to the ancestors that his now clear eyes would be able to catch a hint of how to get out of the surrakar caves,

though he had little hope. He had lived in the Skyclave for too long, its magic eroding his connection to his own history, and his senses were little help. There was no breath of fresh air, and the roots that lined the walls were so thick and so sprawling that he couldn't tell which direction was which. *Let her in.* Perhaps that musical elven voice could guide him home, if he could find it again.

The floor was uneven, and Obuun tripped often, the toe hooks of his boots catching on stone or hard earth. Once, he fell hard on his belly, the hedrons of his armor slamming into jagged rock. A surrakar snarled in the gloom, but Obuun couldn't move, all the air knocked out of his lungs. He flopped like a landed mudfish, struggling for purchase on slick stones to drag himself to his feet and run as hard as he could. Unshod footsteps and a terrifyingly familiar croak followed his flight, echoing through the tunnels and filling his head until his heart pounded loud enough to drown it all out. Again, he stumbled, and this time, he found himself tumbling down an incline. Stones caught at his limbs, punched his midsection until his ribs felt like a bundle of old dry twigs.

Obuun came to rest somewhere soft and wet. Or maybe it was he who was soft and wet, a raw bundle of tenderized meat. He was too bruised and breathless to care whether the surrakar that sought his blood heard him catching his breath, and too tired to try to escape. He waited for a killing blow to come, but when he could breathe again, he was alone and in blessed silence. He rested for a time, drifting in and out of consciousness before the voice pierced the haze of exhaustion. *Let her in.* It sounded like his mother, the tone soft as if telling a bedtime story, but the words themselves were too low to hear.

The laugh that snuck up on Obuun hurt his ribs. His mother's idea of a bedtime story would horrify most mothers. There were usually basilisks or wurms involved, and they had sometimes given Obuun nightmares, sending him running to sleep in his parents' bed. That comfort seemed further away than it ever had before. The loneliness of the Skyclave and of Riverroot couldn't compare to how alone he was now. He was painfully aware of the comfort he could have had if the link had been intact. He would have had something to lean on, something to give him strength as he checked his many bruises.

He had to rely on sheer stubbornness to drive him to his feet. Obuun found himself in a murky space, barely lit by the faint greenish glow of lichen growing above. It was enough to see that the chamber was huge, trailing roots hanging down from the ceiling. He had a childish urge to reach up and touch the roots, run his fingers through them like hair. He shoved it down. He had more important things to worry about.

Though it had saved his life, his armor was too loud, and the sound of the surrakar's tread echoed from the slope above. He took off the kor armor, taking care not to rattle it when he abandoned it to move deeper into the cavern. Something caught at his ankles, soft, dry clatters sounding whenever Obuun shifted his feet, and he froze. Bones. The place was filled with bones. A shiver as cold as the dry air high above Bala Ged swirled over him, and something deep within his chest responded. Here, with so much earth and sky between him and the overwhelming power of the Skyclave, he could at last sense the spirits of Riverroot Clan.

Giddy relief warred with horror, was subsumed by it. Dozens of dead over the decades, rotting cloth and leather crumbling under Obuun's boots, vibrations like silent bells calling him. One shivering note sang louder than the rest, tugging. His head spun, and he didn't know if it was from his many falls or some ancestral magic. Before he could decide, something struck his side with a wave of fiery pain, and he fell to his knees with a hideous crackle of snapping bone. His hand landed on a jagged fragment, and the dim nightmare landscape of the surrakar caves vanished.

Swallowed by memory, Obuun's vision was obscured by a watery image of his mother. Light brown skin slashed with darker scars on the backs of her deft hands. Long ears studded with silver and framed by coily hair dyed scarlet and growing in black at the roots. Smiles and laughter always underlined

by the expectant silence of a brakeguard, of a patient hunter who could vanish into the Guum Wilds without a trace, but who always came back.

A brutal kick smashed Obuun to the ground, shattering the vision, and his mother's bone fragment disappeared into the clutter. He groped for it, his hand falling instead on familiar leather and steel. Obuun brought his mother's short sword up just in time to stop the surrakar from lopping his head off. The muscles of his arms screamed as he used all of his strength to shove the creature away with the familiar leaf-shaped blade. He could feel his mother's presence in his hands as surely as if it were her fingers he held.

Instead of lunging again, the surrakar circled him in the shadows, bones crunching under its feet. Every crack and crumble made Obuun's stomach ache. He shoved himself to his feet, clutching his mother's sword with one hand and his wounded side with the other. The flow of blood wasn't as bad as he expected, but the pain came in a thudding rhythm that matched the beat of his heart and the clear bell tones of the spirits that swirled around him. The chill, dank air was searing hot against Obuun's skin. When he stalked toward the surrakar, it moved away, warily raising its spear.

Obuun couldn't waste time playing games with the beast. He leapt at it, slapping its spear away with the flat of his blade, but even without a weapon, its reach was greater than his. Obuun had to leap away, avoiding the creature's vicious claws. It grabbed Obuun's arm and wrenched his blade away with a stab of agony in his injured side. The world tilted, and he fell, dragging the surrakar down with him. Bones cracked and snapped beneath them, almost enough to drown out a groan of stone and earth.

The surrakar froze, giving Obuun the chance to stab it, but his sword lodged in its tough scales instead of flesh. It rolled off of him, tearing the hilt from Obuun's hand. The stone below them shuddered, but he managed to keep his balance when he scrambled to his feet, held upright by some unseen force. Beneath him, the ground continued to shift and moan as if alive.

After a moment of disorientation, Obuun realized that a slab of stone was rising up beneath his feet, responding to his need. Power streamed through him, a spring welling up from deep within Zendikar, tingling as brightly as a thousand pinpricks before calming to a dull buzz. If he could just make the earth spit out the Mul Daya bones, he could bring them back to the village and have not just the admiration of the clan, but his parents' remains. The wounded connection to his ancestors would be healed.

Obuun clenched his jaw, impatient to break open this terrible place and let the sun shine upon the bones of his clan. The platform kept rising, stone breaking and earth cracking apart above his head. The surrakar screamed in terror, flattened against the floor of stone and bone, unable to understand what was happening. Despite everything, guilt pierced Obuun. It was only an animal, a scavenger unfortunate enough to live near meat that fought back, that craved vengeance.

A hideous snap ripped Obuun's thoughts away from the surrakar, and he looked up to see one of the Riverroot Tree's roots crushed up against the ceiling of the cavern by the advancing stone. They had cracked, pale flesh visible beneath thick dark skin. The taste of coming victory turned sour in Obuun's mouth; to bring back the bones would be to uproot the tree, and without the tree, there was no Riverroot Clan. Living elves would die in the catastrophe, homes would be destroyed, lives ruined. But he was unarmed, alone with a surrakar bent on making him a meal.

Obuun's heart raced as he cast his eyes around the chamber for an escape. All he could do was back away from the surrakar as far as he dared and rappel down the growing cliff. Rope in hand, he squeezed his eyes shut to tear himself away from Zendikar's lifeblood. The earth shuddered to a stop so violently that Obuun nearly fell. The surrakar skittered toward him on all fours, and a terrified cry tore itself from his throat. His hand found the sword in the surrakar's side as its teeth closed upon his shoulder.

Pain speared his flesh with a dozen blazing points of fire. The surrakar worried at his shoulder, not letting go until he gathered every last scrap of strength and jammed his sword in deeper. It howled, stumbling away, as the dark blur of the world grew streaks of glowing green studded with spasms of pain. Nausea rose up inside Obuun so strong that when he fell to the chamber floor below, the cold, hard stone was a relief, quelling the hot bile that rose in his throat. Bone shards showered down over him, and, exhausted and sick, he was devoured by darkness cut through by venomous emerald slashes.

The lines of green slowly resolved into vines, leaves, branches. The air was damp but fresh and cool, braided with the scent of foliage and flowers. Somewhere, a gnarlid howled, silencing the birdsong above for a few long moments.

“Give them time, Obuun,” a voice said. Obuun turned, anger rising up, to tell Nezzan to keep their advice to himself.

It was his mother who stood behind him, now solid as the trees that surrounded them. She pulled her patchwork face mask down, bunching it beneath her chin, her mouth curving into a smile. Her red hair was hidden by a skullcap, her shoulders broadened by rope armor Obuun remembered watching her repair by lamplight when she was alive. Before he had been taken from all he’d known and forced to live among the kor, cut off from her, from the ancestors.

“I’ve waited so long,” he whispered.

“I know you have.”

“They don’t trust me,” Obuun’s voice broke, shattering against his anger, chipping away the armor that hid fear and hurt. He wished he could stuff it all back in, hide it, but it was a stinging wound that he could feel pulling his face into a grimace. “I have to prove myself, Mother. I have to show them I belong here, but I’ve failed. I almost uprooted the tree. I couldn’t kill a single surrakar.”

“Do you have to prove something to them, or to you?” his mother asked. Obuun didn’t speak. He didn’t know the answer. “Recklessness is not how Mul Daya prove themselves. Patience is. Every Mul Daya has a purpose, and this is not yours. Let Riverroot into your heart, and she will let you into hers.”

Obuun glanced up at the massive branches spreading overhead. Riverroot had become a site of pain, a symbol of all the worst things that had happened in his life. The loss of his parents, the loss of Mul Daya ways. The slow decay of his childhood home. Realization dawned on Obuun as slow as a creeping root. He hated it here. He’d been angry and disappointed from the moment he arrived.

“I don’t know how to stop feeling this,” he said.

His mother didn’t answer. Obuun looked down from the canopy to see that she was gone. She left an emptiness behind, a hole in Zendikar and Riverroot Clan that could never be filled. The forest pressed in on him, branches and vines weaving together, begging him to submit to it. Obuun didn’t know how he could allow Riverroot in when it would only deepen the sucking wound inside his chest. He wanted to trust his mother’s spirit, to follow her guidance as he had as a child, but the leaves blotted out the sun, plunging him into darkness and terror.

Something skittered across Obuun’s skin, and he sat bolt upright, scattering bone chips everywhere. Little green sparks skipped over him, drawing vines that lingered in his vision, and lit the cave around Obuun. The motes dulled the pain of his many wounds, bathing him like cool, clean water. Like the sap of a tree, the nectar of a flower, sweeter than anything he had ever experienced.

Obuun closed his eyes, letting it fill him up. He could see the Riverroot tree behind his lids, smell the fresh air and feel the warmth of the sun, sense the moon crouched behind the horizon. The lace of leylines and the hedrons that channeled them might have been touching his skin, he sensed them so

keenly. The tendrils of the Riverroot tree had buried themselves inside him, and he was drawn to her like iron filings were drawn to a magnet.

The relief of finding this connection drained out of Obuun in an instant, replaced by an aching emptiness. His father wasn't here, and he had lost the bone that had opened his mind to the ancestors. The shimmering bell tones of elven spirits had stilled, silenced by fresh grief. Obuun opened his eyes. The space was lit with the soft green of a new leaf. The great pillar had toppled, smashing through a cave wall. When Obuun climbed its uneven surface, he found a subterranean lake beyond the shattered wall, its still water glowing with algae. His disgust with the dank places faded; there was beauty here that he had not recognized. Connections he had not seen, tying even the most dangerous places to the home he had once loved.

I know that the kor are skilled at replacing our ways with theirs in anybody they get a hold on. Obuun had been changed in ways he had yet to understand, and might never understand. But, like Nezzan, he was sure of a few things. He knew that the land had seen fit to give him the gift of his life. He knew he could not waste that gift. He knew that the Riverroot tree would guide him if he let her.

The tree's roots reached deep to find this underground lake, to take up water and grow to her massive height, but they also grew wide, humping out of the shimmering bog that stretched out to the east of the Riverroot tree. This lake had to be connected to it somehow, its algae flowing in from above to slowly fade without the sun to teach it how. He had to search for the exit, but first, he had to take off his boots. They were too loud and kept tripping him.

Obuun set out barefoot, the stone rough and cold beneath his bare soles. He listened as he walked, but the sound of water began to drown out any sign of surrakar. He paused often to watch for danger, knowing the surrakar was still hunting him. Ahead, the waterfall glowed brightly, the splashing foam filled with luminescent algae that flowed in from above. It lit smooth, worn-down stone that would be difficult to climb without his toe hooks, but Obuun still had his gear. He could make it, with care and patience, as long as he didn't use a hammer and pitons. The sound would surely alert the surrakar to his presence.

Though the rock was slippery, there were plenty of cracks to hold his chocks as Obuun slowly made his way up the steadily flowing waterfall. The scent of acidic water and moss flowed down with it, giving Obuun a slender thread of hope, even as scrabbling sounds below seeded fear in his gut. The surrakar was close behind. His shoulders ached, especially the one that had taken the venomous bite, and the exhaustion of running and fighting for his life weighed him down. He slipped more than once, saved by his chocks but with his heart still in his throat. By the time he reached the top, he was well above the height where a fall would kill him.

The crack through which the water flowed was wide and shallow, only a tiny gap of air between water and stone. He sank low in the steady flow, holding onto a root that hung down from the ceiling to keep from being pushed back down into the caves. A splash followed him, and he pressed back against the stone wall as the pursuing surrakar rose up from the shimmering waterfall. It scanned the mouth of the cave, his mother's sword still embedded in its side. Obuun's heart jammed itself into the back of his throat, and he almost leapt out of his hiding place to try to grab the weapon before he remembered his mother's words. *Patience.*

Obuun waited until the surrakar finished its search and turned away to climb back down the waterfall. He held his breath as he crept up behind the surrakar in silence, palms itching to grab the hilt of his mother's sword. He reached for the sword hilt, praying to the ancestors to steady his hand. All he had to do was wrench it out. All he had to do was take it, and he would have this one thing of his mother's.

Obuun moved more slowly than expected through the water, but so did the surrakar. It couldn't turn fast enough, and the decades-old leather of the hilt held, giving him a good grip. He kicked the creature as hard as he could. Scales sliced the bottom of his foot, and his shoulder protested as the surrakar lost its balance, tottered, and fell with a splash. All the air rushed out of Obuun's lungs in a great burst, and he clutched the weapon to his chest, shuddering.

When he regained his breath, Obuun peered over the edge of the waterfall, the bright glow of algae clearly outlining a dark shape in the water below. He watched, waited, to make sure the surrakar couldn't follow him back to Riverroot Village. The shadow remained still. His nervous heartbeat slowed, and his jaw unclenched. Obuun hadn't realized how badly his teeth hurt until that exact moment. He shook himself and turned back to the gap that opened up to the swamp.

Obuun had to push past hanging roots and vines to emerge into the open air, where night had fallen. The moon hovered above, casting a pale silver light that mirrored the glow of the algae below. To his back, Obuun could feel the Riverroot tree, his home, watching and waiting. Exhausted, wanting nothing more than to return to his parents' dilapidated old house, he began the long trudge home.



Obuun, Mul Daya Ancestor | Art by: Chris Rallis

Days later, after his long rest and many grueling days of work, smoke rose from the forest floor, filling the branches and walkways of Riverroot Village. Its scent battled with the acrid odor of scarlet dye. The tips of Obuun's ears were still pink from tinting his hair like his parents once had, his hands red where they were not blistered by hauling rock. His discovery of the bone cavern and the back entrance to the surrakar caves had led the entire village to action down below, working to close the passage

from the main cave system to the bone cavern. The bones had been carried back to the village and that cavern sealed, too.

The pyres were the final step for Riverroot Village, releasing the dead and decorating their keepsake bones to be put away in chests or displayed on mantels. Many elves didn't get to keep the bones they wished for, but any bone was better than the painfully tiny shards left of Obuun's mother. The fall had rendered them so small that little of her remained. Many of the bones were worse off, little more than dust, and whispers filled Riverroot Village that they were from long before the surrakar inhabited the caves.

As wisps of spirit filtered past, Obuun fingered the freshly wrapped hilt of the sword that he had found deep below the Riverroot Tree. His mother's face resolved in the smoke, only to be blown away and reform, smiling, again and again.