

The Call

Nik Davidson

From set *Dragons of Tarkir*

On another Tarkir, with a different destiny, the man called Surrak was khan of his clan. Savage, swift, and attuned with nature, he ruled the Temur by example.

Times have changed, however—time itself has changed—and Surrak never lived that life. Now he is the Hunt Caller of the Atarka clan, who hunt to feed their dragonlord. If Surrak knew of this other fate, his original destiny as khan, he might prefer that life.

But then again, he might not.

Birds burst from the pines, scattering snow to the steep slopes below, as the hours of long silence are broken by the sound of the horn. The hunting horn. The call to the most sacred of tasks.

The mountains are vast, trackless, and pristine. A dragon's gaze stretches far, but none can see every slope, every cave, every hollow. Deep in the mountains is a place of peace. A human or ainok can escape for days, weeks; a clever one, maybe even a year. But the quiet has a price. The empty mountains are yet ruled, and when the horn sounds, you answer.



Mountain | Art by Titus Lunter

Four ainok rise from their hidden camp. They do not serve Atarka, but these are her lands. Their peace is her peace. They bundle up as best they can, and shuffle off in the direction of the sound. It is the better

of the two options. Neither the mother nor the father is much of a hunter. The eldest daughter is fit, the younger son scrawny. There is no debate, no discussion. The horn sounds, and they walk. Some of them will last the week.

The great sledge rumbles over the snowdrifts, pulled by fur-covered men and women that look not that dissimilar from the beasts heaped atop it. Nobody speaks. There are noises, noises of effort and exertion, noises of nervousness and frustration, but no words. There will be time for words later, once the hunt is done.

Surrak stood atop the sledge and relished the small pain of the icy air in his lungs. They had been on the trail of a mountain krushok for almost a day now and, by the size of the tracks, it was enormous. An offering like that could keep the dragonlord satisfied for almost a week. Once a krushok reached this size, they no longer bred, they no longer traveled with their herds. A perfect quarry. Along the way, they had taken a dozen elk, three saberclaws, a handful of yeti, and a hermit who refused the call. Surrak was particularly pleased with the saberclaws. Atarka seemed to enjoy them, and by thinning out the area's predators, that left more game animals for the hunt.

Out in the wild places, Surrak felt completely at home. There was a fierce joy to this—he could put from his mind the reason that he hunted and focus everything on the instincts that would lead to a successful conclusion. Every bit of movement caught his eye, every sound turned his head. He had never come this way before, but he knew this place. The power deep within the land resonated with him, gave him strength, drove him onward. There was no time for anything else.



Surrak, the Hunt Caller | Art by Wesley Burt

The tracks were fresh as the sledge moved through the treeline and across a mountain spring. The beast stopped for water here, and its tracks in the stream bed had not yet washed away. They were close now. Surrak gestured to his scouts, sending two of them off parallel to the tracks, while he dismounted

from the sledge and breathed in the scent of his quarry. Close. Very close. Energy from the land welled up on him, and he could feel it tingling in his fists. He carried no weapon. He had never needed one.

Just as he was about to start his chase, a shadow passed over the sledge. His eyes searched the skies and saw the silhouette of a dragon, flying lazily above. One of Atarka's brood, by its size and mass. Something seemed off in the way it flew, and he hissed to his scouts and hunters to hold still. They hunkered down into the snow, and to a dragon above, they must have seemed to disappear entirely. But there was no hiding the sledge. The dragon circled again, and now Surrak saw what had caught his eye to begin with: its wingbeats were uneven and its flight unsteady. He was silent and still for several moments.

"What do you see?" Surrak's second broke the stillness. He was an enormous man, and he kept his voice low.

"It's one of Atarka's brood, but it's circling us. It's seen the sledge, and it's thinking about it. It should know better, but it's thinking about it." Surrak let out a long, slow breath, which turned to frost in the air. "Look at the wingbeats. That's not a healthy dragon. Injured, perhaps. Maybe sick. Either way, it's thinking about coming for us."

"And what do we do if that happens?"

Surrak took another few breaths.

"This meat is for Atarka. We bring her the meat, or we become the meal. That's not so complicated, is it?"

His second shook his head. The wingbeats grew more distant, and then the dragon faded from sight. Surrak whistled a command and, as one, the hunters rose from the snow. The pursuit began.

The krushok must have caught the smell on the wind. *They don't get old without being clever*, Surrak thought, and the krushok had done everything it could to throw the hunters off of its trail. It crossed a river, then crossed back. But the ainok could track its scent in the dark, if they needed to. It stayed to rocky terrain in order to leave less obvious tracks, but there was no hiding its passage from the hunters' keen eyes. Finally, it used its size and speed to try to outpace them, but Surrak's scouts had already reached it. With spears and slings, they harried it, driving it back, turning its course back toward the hunters' ambush. When the krushok burst into the clearing, the hunters let loose a volley of spears and hooks. It was trapped.

It let out a bellow that shook the stones, and the hunters, moving as one, began to rein it in with hooks and ropes. Hunters crept forward with long-bladed spears, looking to deliver the mortal blow. The beast bucked and strained, but the hunters were strong and skilled. It let out a low sound, and its head sagged as it showed its exhaustion. The ropes went taut, and the spear-bearers lunged in.



Feral Krushok | Art by Kev Walker

But the beast had been hiding its strength, just as the hunters had. With a burst of might, it leapt up, snapping ropes, and swinging its great horn. Two of the spear-bearers were swatted aside, bones snapping, bodies flung against trees and stone. With a mighty kick, it crushed several of the hunters holding the ropes and hooks. Surrak's second grabbed one of the fallen hunters' spears and charged in with a shout. With a powerful thrust, he drove the spear upwards under the beast's great jaw. It shuddered, stumbled, and knelt down—defeated—blood pooling red against white, steam rising from the snow.

There was little celebration among the hunters. A quick check on the fallen to see whether they were wounded or dead. There was an unspoken calculus at work here. With this kill in hand, they needed to load the sledge and turn around. Those that could walk, would walk. Those that could pull, would pull. But there was only one way to ride back to Atarka on the sledge, and nobody volunteered for it.

The sledge was pulled up as close to the enormous corpse as the hunters could manage, and planks were cut from the surrounding pines, so that the enormous krushok could be hoisted atop it. Surrak let his second direct the effort while he watched the clouds—they were starting to pool around the nearby peaks. A storm was coming. Not a dragon tempest, but the regular kind that brought wind, snow, cold, and death to anyone caught in it. The clouds darkened as he watched, and if the winds prevailed....

A shape burst from the clouds, dropping into a thunderous dive.

"Get clear of the sledge! NOW!" Surrak shouted a warning, but it was too late, as the dragon dropped down from the skies, a meteor of wings, scales, and antlers. It crashed to the earth, smashing a crater into the snow and ice, and it slid twenty yards down the slope after it hit. It scored the trees and the hunting party with a gout of flame, and blinding smoke wreathed its form. Surrak squinted through the flames to see it. He saw its eyes and he saw a feral madness in them. It stomped over to the krushok, and took a gluttonous bite while the surviving hunters scattered into the treeline.



Herdchaser Dragon | Art by Seb McKinnon

The dragon was stout, thirty feet in length, with a rack of jagged antlers that marked it as one of Atarka's brood. But her dragons were intelligent, and they knew that the Hunt was not to be interfered with. For one of her brood to attack, it had to be mad or desperate.

"Everyone get back. I'm going to secure the sledge." Surrak wrapped his bearskin tight around his shoulders and slowly walked through the smoke. He growled guttural syllables and punctuated the sound by scraping and striking a stone against a scale that he wore against his coat for that purpose. No human had the capacity to speak draconic, but Surrak had managed to improvise a close approximation of several of those impossible sounds. "*I am the Hunt Caller*," he tried to say.

The dragon did not react, save to glare at him as it chewed its stolen meal.

Surrak continued. "*You are stealing Atarka's meat. Stop now.*"

Again, nothing. If the dragon understood him, it gave no sign. He sighed.

"Fine, we'll do this the other way."

Surrak crouched down, growled, and bared his teeth. There was no man nor beast that could have possibly misunderstood this. The dragon gulped down a mawful of meat, and returned the glare.

The dragon roared and snapped at him, but it was posturing. Surrak circled, crouched low, palms down toward the ground. This was a good place. Lots of energy to be drawn. An old place. The magic started to well up in him, and his blood felt hot. The dragon let loose a burst of flame, but Surrak dashed forward, ducking most of it. He was burnt, but didn't feel it. The dragon wheeled around on him, bringing a thick, clawed arm down toward his face. But before it could land, he planted his back fist and threw a punch.



Epic Confrontation | Art by Wayne Reynolds

One was all it took.

The dragon fell to the earth, neck broken. The hunters that survived re-emerged from their hiding places. They took stock of the damage, but they didn't have long. The winds had picked up, and the snow began to fall. The storm was upon them.

Two days passed, and the storm did not let up in the slightest. Keeping a fire lit was almost impossible, and the trees only provided so much shelter. The sledge was full of food, but it was frozen solid. It would keep for Atarka, but unless they found a way to do something about their immediate predicament, it would never reach her. And if that happened, Surrak knew what would follow. His people would pay the price.

"I'll be back shortly."

His hunters were huddled together for warmth, using the sledge as a windbreak. They gave him quizzical looks, but said nothing. Surrak trudged straight on into the wind, toward where the dragon had fallen. Despite its bulk, he needed to dig the dragon out of the snow before he could get to work. He cut into the creature, digging out chunks of flesh and an organ from the beast's torso. Once he reached the camp, he sliced the organ open and poured a thick, foul liquid on the wood. A few sparks later, and it burst into a roaring flame. Dragonfire. The hunters eyed Surrak suspiciously, but were grateful enough for the warmth. Then he skewered a chunk of meat, and began roasting it.

"Is that...?" Surrak's second stared, disbelieving. "That's not allowed. We have all this meat..."



Atarka Beastbreaker | Art by Johannes Voss

Surrak cut him off. “Allowed? We eat what we kill. I killed it, and I was right to do so. It had lost its reason. It was a beast, and I was stronger. Now *that*,” he said, pointing toward the sledge, “is not allowed. That is *hers*. We’re going to be late getting back to her as it is. We barely have enough to pull the sledge, so we’ll be moving slow. We’re days delayed by the storm. So we’re going to eat our kill, we’re going to regain our strength, and then we’re going to do our job. Understood?”

Surrak’s second opened his mouth to reply, then saw Surrak’s clenched fist and thought better of it.

Surrak had never eaten dragon before. It was delicious.

The ascent to the Ayagor was assisted as the sledge approached. Atarka lounged atop the peak, the largest thing that lived on Tarkir. Despite her massive bulk, Surrak had seen her enraged to action. Nothing that large should move that fast, and yet she could when she needed to. For now, she was content to watch as the enormous sledge of meat was tipped into the bowl of stone before her. She gave a snort, charring the bowl with dragonfire, and then began to eat. Surrak was on hand to deliver the traditional message.

“Great Atarka, dragonlord and protector. This is a gift. Spare us, and there will be more.”



Dragonlord Atarka | Art by Karl Kopinski

Atarka growled her acceptance and her mighty jaws crushed up bone, fur, hide, and meat alike.

Surrak smiled to himself. It had been another successful hunt, and his people would live. He turned and began to walk back down the mountain, when he heard a panicked voice. His second.

“Dragonlord Atarka! Please forgive us! We had no choice.”

Surrak turned back and hissed, “Idiot, stop this at once.”

But his second continued. “Surrak killed one of your brood to defend your offering. He violated the natural order! Please forgive us and limit your vengeance only to him!”

Surrak smiled, and he waited.

Atarka looked up from her meal, obviously annoyed. She growled four words in draconic. “*Take care of it.*”



Atarka's Command | Art by Chris Rahn

Surrak rounded on his second, who had already turned toward him with a knife.

"I will make sure she is fed, Surrak."

Surrak shook his head.

"She wasn't talking to you."

With a burst of speed, Surrak slammed his fist into his second's ribs, cracking several, and sending the knife clattering along the stone. He caught the huge man before he hit the ground and held him close, whispering into his ear. "I don't blame you for trying. But she knows I did nothing wrong. Why are dragons above humans? They're stronger. Simple as that. But the dragon we found was weak. Sick. So what reverence did we owe it? She understands. And now you do."

Surrak tossed the larger man to the ground, and began to walk away. "We leave for the next hunt in two days. It'll be hard for you to keep up with those ribs."

He turned back and smiled.

"But we bring her the meat, or we become the meal. So you'll serve either way."