

Brokenbrow

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From set *Kaldheim*

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Above the Feltmark, the sun hung like a silver coin, washing out the green fields into a slow roll of undulating gray—a featureless canvas, ready to be splashed red.

There would be a battle today. Not a grand clash of armies, nothing that would make it into the sagas. Just a skirmish, really. On one side, a pack of Skelle raiders, bedecked in grisly trophies, steel thorns jutting from black armor, cruel blades hooking and curving like ugly grins. On the other side—significantly fewer, but there nonetheless—were the Tuskeri. Scarcely a war party, in truth. No more than a dozen, less than half the warriors that stalked toward them across the open plains, and yet they swaggered forward with all the confidence of roosters. There would be a battle today, and judging from what Njala saw, it would be a brief one. But it would be a battle nonetheless, so she and Alajn, shepherd and reaper, had come to watch, and to judge.

“There,” said Alajn. Gesturing with one long and thin finger at the Tuskeri farthest out in front. “That’s their new leader. Arni Brokenbrow, they call him. Great warrior, great gambler, great drinker by all accounts.”



Arni Brokenbrow | Art by: Dmitry Burmak

Njala squinted. He was smaller than most of the warriors behind him, and not as broad-shouldered either. About the only thing that set him apart, other than his bright red hair, was the strange shard

of bone which protruded from one side of his forehead like a single horn, narrow and pointed where it met his skull and tapering out into a jagged base at the end. “Leader? Of all of them?”

“All of them.”

“What is he doing here, then?”

Alajn shrugged. “My guess? He was bored.”

Njala frowned. To her, a Valkyrie, no mortal seemed to last longer than a sunny afternoon, but the daring and reckless souls of the Tuskeri clan flickered out quicker than most. If anything, their leaders’ mad gambits for valor tended to end them even faster than the rank and file, and Brokenbrow appeared to be no exception. It looked like he would be joining his predecessors at the table in Starnheim soon.

With almost painful slowness, the two groups drew closer to one another, Skelle spreading out into a crescent shape so wide as to nearly encircle the Tuskeri. From the rear of both sides came a few curious arrows, most landing on shields, with a few burying themselves here and there into the grass. It had almost arrived: the moment the true selves of each warrior would be revealed. Would they turn and flee, to be cut down by their enemies—or by Alajn, if they got far enough—or would they stand, and fight, and die a glorious death that Njala could reward them for?

With an easy motion, Arni slipped his sword from its scabbard and spun it once, testing the weight. Then he grinned. In fact, he seemed to be grinning right at her.

Njala froze. It was impossible, just a coincidence. Even the wisest of mortals couldn’t see a Valkyrie unless she wished to be seen. And yet she couldn’t help but feel as if he were trying to tell her something. As if he were saying, *watch this*.

At the last moment, when both groups were no more than ten strides from each other, the Tuskeri broke into a sudden charge, straight at the middle of the Skelle line. At the very front was Arni Brokenbrow, sword held high in front of him, bellowing a war cry that sounded more joyous than wrathful.

“Well then,” said Alajn, raising one pitch-colored eyebrow. “He certainly has that Tuskeri bravado.”

Njala exhaled. The moment with Brokenbrow, if there had been such a moment, had passed. “It seems as though your duties won’t need fulfilling today, Sister,” said the Valkyrie, allowing herself a small smile.

“We’ll see,” said the reaper. “There’s time yet for a bit of cowardice to strike.”

The Tuskeri charge had caught their foes off guard. The Skelle hurriedly tried to set a line of spears, and as Njala watched, the new leader of the Tuskeri leaped into the air—over the spear tips, over the swinging axes, even over the raised shields—and brought his sword down, straight through the helmet of a wild-looking man in the front row. A breath later, the lines collided with the deafening crash of steel on steel: blades clanging off one another, shields driven together with brutal force, armor shuddering with impact.

Njala’s smile faltered. In a moment, it was clear that the Skelle couldn’t hold the line; they had spread themselves too thin trying to encircle their enemy. The Tuskeri punched straight through, cleaving the main body of the raiders in half. It didn’t take long after that. Soon the Skelle were broken, fleeing across the open plains. Wordlessly, Alajn slipped away to do her dark work. Njala only watched in dumb amazement as Arni, in the aftermath, planted his rear on a pile of dead warriors nearly as tall as he was, laughing like a man at his wedding.

“Well, well, Sister,” said Alajn, appearing again by Njala’s side with a smirk. “It seems *your* duties are the ones that won’t need fulfilling today.”

In the endless hall of Starnheim, heroes of every age, from every clan, from peoples throughout the ten realms of Kaldheim, feasted and drank for all time. The table couldn't be contained by earthly geometry: it was precisely as long as it needed to be to accommodate the glorious, the valorous, the beings of all race and creed that had earned their seat. And yet, despite knowing this, Njala couldn't help but feel that one spot along the endless, peerless structure seemed emptier than it should have.

By all rights, Brokenbrow should have died earlier that day. As a Valkyrie of Starnheim, she had a nose for such things. But, with some embarrassment, Njala realized that she didn't know much else about him. Here, at least, such things were easily remedied.

She found Hormgart deep into his cups—not a difficult task, when the cups were as bottomless as one might desire. Of the dwarven skalds that had won their place at the table, Njala had always had a soft spot for him. His storytelling always had a grandfatherly ring to it, rather than the boasting theatrics of the others. With the back of one arm, Hormgart wiped at his mustache, gone gray countless centuries ago, and belched. “Njala! What an unexpected honor it is, this—this honor.”

“Hormgart. I was hoping you might be able to tell me about someone. A mortal.”

“You know, it's not as if we all know each other.”

“He's the new leader of the Tuskeri. Arni, Arni Brokenbrow. Surely you must have heard something.”

Through the haze of drink, she could see his stone-colored eyes glinting in the firelight. “Ah. Brokenbrow. Well, now that you mention it—yes, I suppose I've heard a tale or two.”

Farther down the table, a song had broken out. Ranks of warriors swayed in time, humming an old tune about a Beskir battle-maiden and the mob of suitors she had turned into a war party. The battle-maiden in question led the song herself, conducting with fingers outstretched. Hormgart didn't seem to notice. His knobby, weathered hands settled on his knees, as if bracing himself. Njala saw the dozens of little adjustments he made—the straightening of his back, the tilting of his head, the clearing of his throat. Hormgart had a story to tell. “You know, he wasn't always called Brokenbrow.”

“Oh?”

“He was called Goatleaper, once,” said Hormgart, tapping his nose. “Until one fateful day “

One fateful day, deep in the Tusk mountains, word spread of a scourge of murderous trolls, terrorizing villages all along the Red Ridge. Now, the Tuskeri, being who they were, couldn't have been more pleased at the news. Trolls meant danger, and danger meant a chance at daring, and daring meant an opportunity to make your name. Of all the Tuskeri warriors saddling up to hunt trolls—for there were many indeed—it happened to be a small band, led by none other than Arni Goatleaper, who began their search on the very slope in which the trolls had made their den.

In the high crags of the Tusk mountains, flanked on all sides by jutting spears of red stone, Njala and Alajn watched the man known as Arni Brokenbrow court death once again. This time, it wasn't the cold steel of a Skelle raiding party that might deliver it; it was a dragon.

“A hellkite,” said Alajn, “technically.”

“Fine,” said Njala. A hellkite, then.

Terminology aside: it was massive, all tooth and claw and barbed spine, with four curving horns and a tail that whipped through the air in terrible scything arcs. Arni and his band of Tuskeri had it surrounded, but it wasn't doing them much good. Any time one of them darted in with a spear or an axe, a slash of that fearsome tail made them reconsider. Just outside the loose circle of warriors, seemingly oblivious to the thrashing, snarling beast, Arni Brokenbrow fiddled with a length of rope.

"What's he doing?" said Njala, biting her lip. "He'll never die a worthy death just, just *tying knots*."

Down in the crags, one man stepped forward, bellowing bravely, and swung a heavy two-handed sword into the flank of the beast. It bounced off the scaled hide as if he had swung with all his might into a rock. The hellkite curled its serpentine head around and fixed him with a pair of coal-red eyes, and the man dropped his sword and ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Don't you have duties to attend to?" muttered Njala to her sister.

Alajn watched the man belly-dive to the floor of the canyon to avoid a lash of the beast's tail. "In this case, I would say that was less an act of cowardice than of common sense."

Arni tugged at the series of knots one more time and, satisfied, stood up. Now, Njala could see that he had tied a loop into the rope; slowly at first, he began to spin it around his head. With an expert toss, he flung the lasso straight into the path of the hellkite's head, where it snagged on one of the horns and pulled taut. Instinctively, the creature jerked back—taking Arni with it.

Njala gasped as the Tuskeri leader was slung through the air, directly toward one of the natural spires ringing the valley floor. But just before he slammed into it, Arni seemed to twist in the air. Instead of hitting the red stone spine-first, he landed on it with both boots, his body compressing like a spring. To Njala, it almost seemed like he had meant to do that.

The hellkite seemed to understand what had just happened even less than the Valkyrie—with an air-splitting shriek, it thrashed backwards. In the split second before it pulled him from the rock, Njala saw it again: that grin, from before. *Watch this.*

This time, the beast jerked straight away, rearing back and yanking Arni straight toward it. When he landed just behind the creature's head, coiled rope in hand, he took only a moment to steady himself, as if he were on the back of a rocking ship rather than a raging monster. It pitched and turned, but with the rope held tight and his weight dropped low, Arni couldn't be shaken off.

It wasn't just Njala watching as Arni slipped his blade from its scabbard and held it up, glinting like a mirror in the sunlight: all the Tuskeri gaped, wide-eyed, as their leader drove the blade between the creature's horns. A moment later, its mammoth body crashed to the valley floor.

"Unbelievable," whispered Njala. "He actually—he actually—"

"It seems that your favorite human lives to fight another day," said Alajn, finishing the thought for her, but Njala could barely hear her. She was thinking, instead, of the story Hormgart had told her—Arni's naming story.

After a long and arduous climb, Arni and his band of brave warriors paused to catch their breath. It was then that they heard the telltale sounds of trolls—bones snapping, animals growling, and that grumbling, rumbling language of theirs—spilling out from a nearby cave. Creeping closer, Arni found far more than just a couple stone-eaters. There seemed to be a whole reeking warren of the creatures. Arni and his warriors were outnumbered, that was certain. But if they left now to round up more sword-hands, someone else might stumble across this cave and steal their glory before they could return.

Now, Arni was a mighty warrior, that much was true. But he was more than simply strong: he was cunning, too. After a few whispered words and a blessing or two from the cleric they had brought along for the climb, Arni stepped out from behind the rock.

“Aye,” he said to the surprised faces and gaping tusked mouths staring at his sudden arrival. “You’re the lot that’ve been raiding up and down the ridge. Now, I’ve got a whole army of berserkers out there, ready to tear your heads off, but I figured I’d give you a chance to settle this a different way. A headbutting contest,” he proposed, grinning. “Loser packs up and leaves these mountains forever.”

Without a doubt, Tover Giants-Blood was the biggest human Njala had ever seen. He stood a full head and a half over the other Kannah warriors that emerged from the treeline. His bare chest, tattoos dancing with each steaming breath, was twice as broad as any other present. Even the massive pines of the Aldergard seemed somehow diminished when he passed under them. Arni was rarely the largest person in the room, but in front of Giants-Blood, he seemed little more than a boy.

“This is it,” said Njala, from where she watched off to the side, flapping her wings now and then to get a better look. “This *must* be. An honor duel with *that*? Brokenbrow’s death has finally—*finally*—found him.” And what a glorious death it would be! Njala could hardly wait to congratulate him on a valorous life, to show him the endless halls in which he would spend eternity drinking, feasting, and fighting. She had already waited so damn long.

Alajn, though, didn’t seem convinced. She only tilted her head, a small smile on her face.

“*What?*” said Njala.

“Well,” said the reaper, “it’s not like the last eight times turned out the way you thought they might. It’s starting to sound like wishful thinking, is all.”

Njala scowled and turned back to the assembled warriors. They had formed a circle now, twelve paces across—Kannah and Tuskeri both, closing in the two men. From his back, Giants-Blood unslung an axe. It was a weapon for ogres, for trolls, with a double-bladed head of solid iron, but he seemed to heft it easily enough. “Brokenbrow!” he bellowed, in a voice that shook the snow from nearby branches. “I’ll give you one last chance to repent. Grovel before me and my ancestors, beg our forgiveness for desecrating the resting place of my family, and you can leave this circle alive.”

But Arni only scratched at his red beard, grinning. “Where’s the fun in that, Tover? Though being honest, all this seems like a lot of trouble. Surely you’ve gotten lost and pissed somewhere you shouldn’t have before.”

Giants-Blood’s lips curled back at that, revealing teeth like stone slabs. “Draw your blade, little man.”

Obligingly, Arni pulled his sword from his scabbard. Against this opponent, it seemed little more than a dagger—but still glinted, bright and sharp, in the weak Bloodsky sun.

There was no cautious circling, no testing of one another’s form. With an ursine roar, Giants-Blood charged forward, swinging the axe in an arc nearly as broad as the circle itself. Arni ducked beneath it and moved to close the gap between them, but Giants-Blood had that monstrous axehead crashing toward him again in a heartbeat. Arni jumped back, dancing along the edge of the circle, and Njala pumped her fist in happy triumph. “Fight bravely! Yes!” she whispered, mostly to herself. “Be courageous and heroic and actually *die* this time!”

Again, the big man swung, and again, Arni tried to dart forward before Giants-Blood could recover. This time, though, he caught a boot to the stomach and tumbled backwards, into the knees of the

warriors surrounding them. Njala couldn't help but wince at the impact. A moment later, Arni was back on his feet.

Again and again, those terrible swings failed to cleave Arni in half, but he couldn't seem to do much other than dodge and duck and roll. It wasn't just Giants-Blood's long arms that made the man hard to close with, it was the way those broad and murderous strokes never seemed to cease. Any ordinary warrior would have been wheezing and panting by now, but obviously Tover Giants-Blood was no ordinary warrior.

He stepped in for another swing, and Arni braced himself to dodge. Suddenly, Tover brought up the haft of the axe in a sharp jab, cracking into Arni's jaw and sending him flying.

"A feint," said Alajn. "That big one's not the mindless brute he appears to be."

Njala didn't respond. Her eyes were fixed on Arni, who spat blood into the snow as he picked himself up off the ground. He wasn't smiling anymore. There was a focused look to his face now, a seriousness the Valkyrie had never seen before. A strange feeling began to bubble and swirl in Njala's stomach. Was she worried?

As Giants-Blood swung again—this attack no less brutal and quick than his countless others—Arni didn't dodge, duck, or roll: he stepped into the swing, toward his enemy, inside the path of the axe-head, and chopped down at the wooden haft with his sword. There was a splintering *crack*, and the circle momentarily parted as men and women leaped out of the way of the freed axehead. It buried itself in the trunk of one of the towering pines surrounding them.

Arni, too, was sent reeling by the force of the blow. For a moment, Giants-Blood seemed stunned. He stared at the broken haft in his hand, now no better than a walking stick. But as Brokenbrow picked himself off the ground for the third time that day, the Kannah warrior lunged forward. Before Arni could bring up his sword, Giants-Blood cinched him tight in a bear hug, pinning his arms to his side and lifting him off the ground.

Arni thrashed and squirmed. He kicked, struggled, and swore, but all the wily speed and daring he'd shown earlier was useless now. He had been caught, like a rabbit in a snare.

The crowd of warriors, which had been whooping and shouting moments before, went quiet. All Njala could hear was the small, muffled gasps Arni made as Giants-Blood squeezed tighter and tighter, the sinews on his massive arms bulging with effort. The sword dropped from the Tuskeri leader's hand, landing soundlessly in the slurry of snow and dirt underneath them.

"Njala," said Alajn, putting a hand on her shoulder. Her voice was surprisingly tender. "Perhaps—perhaps you shouldn't see this."

"No," said Njala, shaking her head. "I have to be here. At the end."

A few more moments, a few more labored breaths, and it would be over. She could finally escort Arni to Starnheim: she could, at last, bring him to the eternal reward he deserved. Wasn't that what she wanted? It was her duty. It was her honor. And yet, Njala found that she didn't want Arni to be crushed to death by this bear of a man. She wanted him to find some way out of this mess, as he always seemed to. She wanted him to *win*. She didn't want the legend of Arni Brokenbrow to pass into history just yet. In fact, she wouldn't allow it.

Njala spread her wings and moved toward the circle, but before she could get any closer, Alajn stepped in front of her. "Njala, it's an honor duel."

"But—"

“And even if it wasn’t, we are Valkyries. It is not our place to intercede in the affairs of mortals. You know this.”

It was true, all of it, only Njala didn’t care. She was trying to think of some point, some argument that would move her sister out of the way, when she saw it, over Alajn’s shoulder. Arni was grinning. A grin she had seen so many times before.

Watch this.

Giants-Blood had lifted him fully into the air, now, all the better to leverage that monstrous strength of his. For the first time in the fight, the two saw eye to eye. Arni drew his head back, back, back, and suddenly Njala remembered how Hormgart’s story had ended—how Arni Brokenbrow had gotten his name.

Hours passed, the sun sank low over the red peaks of the Tusk mountains, and still, Arni and the troll continued. Both were tired, bloodied, dizzy from the constant impacts—but Arni was still grinning as he stepped forward for yet another headbutt. The troll, on the other hand, looked like he could scarcely believe what was happening. The human was actually keeping up. With a troll! In a headbutting contest! He was ashamed, but more than that, he was frightened. What if this small, grinning man actually beat him? In that moment of fear and uncertainty, the troll decided to do something not unfamiliar to troll-kind: he decided to cheat.

It was time. Both Arni and the troll set their feet and craned their heads back for a savage blow. But just as Arni swung forward, the troll angled his tusks up, toward the Tuskeri’s brow. It was, of course, a terrible mistake. There were many as strong, or stronger, than Arni Goatleaper, and many as cunning, or more cunning. But few who matched his strength or his cunning could also match the thickness of his skull.



Arni Slays the Troll | Art by: Simon Dominic

There was a sound like striking lightning, a crack that reverberated throughout the cave. When it passed, the troll lay flat on his back, one of his tusks snapped off at the root. Above him, victorious and bloody, troll-bone embedded in his forehead, was Arni Goatleaper—only his name was Goatleaper no longer.