

Victory

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Zurgo, khan of the Mardu, knows how to nurse a grudge. And there's no one he hates more than the Planeswalker Sarkhan Vol, a former Mardu who burned his own clanmates with dragonfire when his spark ignited.

But what lengths will he go to for vengeance?

Zurgo Helmsmasher stood on a rocky outcropping at the edge of a jagged plateau, surveying the assembled multitudes of the Mardu below him on the plain. Spread out among them were the corpses of many warriors. Some were Mardu, but the great majority were Temur. To the left of the army lay endless windswept scrubland, the home territory of his people. To the right lay the beginnings of the Temur foothills, where the Temur force he had just defeated had come from.

While he surveyed his army, his army watched him as well. They looked at him with triumph, and weariness, and expectation.

"We are Mardu!" he shouted.



Mardu Ascendancy | Art by Jason Chan

“MARDU!” they returned, and they cheered as one for several seconds. He drank in their unified exaltation until the roar quieted.

“Surrak has tested our borders,” he shouted, “and we have shown him that they are strong. Perhaps he thought that we were sitting idle at Wingthrone. He is wrong! We are Mardu, and we rule these plains!” Zurgo stomped his great foot and the multitudes cheered again.

As they cheered, a low cracking sound came from the rock below him. He looked down and saw that a jagged line had appeared beneath his feet. The cracking sound continued. Zurgo took two steps backward, and a moment later the forward part of the outcropping broke off and fell to the ground below with a great thump.

As the cheer died down, a shrill voice coming from down on the plain reached Zurgo’s ears. Warriors near to its source were turning to face it with worried, confused faces. Zurgo turned to Varuk, an old but clever orc standing nearby who served as Zurgo’s closest advisor, and asked, “What is that?”

Varuk swiveled his ears forward. “It is a goblin, my khan. He is angry.”

Zurgo sniffed. “Bring him here.”

Varuk gave him a quick but nervous look. “Your will, my khan.” He looked at a nearby human guard and snapped his fingers, and she took off running toward the disturbance. By the time she returned to Zurgo with the goblin, the plain was silent once again, and the army watched as Zurgo peered down at the little ball of fuzz.



Goblin token | Art by Kev Walker

Zurgo opened his mouth to speak, but the goblin was too fast. “My sister died to take this rock, and you broke it!” The goblin’s squeaky voice somehow carried across the silent plain as the crowd began to shift uncomfortably.

Zurgo stood as tall as he could. “We were victorious over the Temur because we fought as one mind, one body, one clan. Death in battle is a great glory if it serves the clan! Your sister’s brave sacrifice saved many Mardu lives!”

Varuk raised his weapon and shouted a cheer. In answer, the multitude raised its weapons to the sky and matched it. Their unified voice washed over the plateau, and dissipated.

“Then you broke it!” The goblin looked down at where the section now lay at the foot of the plateau, then returned its defiant gaze to him. “It was a good rock!” The pathetic goblin stared up at Zurgo as its squeaky voice rang out across the silent plain. The warriors closest to Zurgo were edging forward, and their faces were cold and angry as they began to mutter among themselves.

Rage welled in Zurgo’s heart. “You think I do not command what is best for the Mardu?”

“My sister died for nothing!” it squeaked.

Zurgo raised his left foot as high as he could, then stomped on the goblin, dropping all his weight onto it. It flattened nearly to the ground with a satisfying crunch.

Zurgo returned his attention to his multitudes. “I have no need for this rock, or any other! We move, we take, we eat! We are Mardu, and we have shown Surrak our might!” The army roared one more time, although this time it was not quite as loud.

Zurgo turned away from the crowd, and the dull roar of conversation began below him. As the army’s attention dispersed, Varuk approached Zurgo with a slightly lowered head and indicated the crushed goblin’s corpse. “I am not certain it was wise to kill the goblin.”



Mardu Warshrieker | Art by Yefim Kligerman

“It threatened my authority, and without unity we are nothing.”

Something flashed in Varuk’s eyes. “Is this more important than your position? His family will resent you.”

A warrior wearing a messenger’s banner cut her way through the crowd around Zurgo, and stopped breathlessly in front of him. “I know why,” she panted, “they attacked us. A Temur scout saw one of us in the forests, beyond our borders.”



War-Name Aspirant | Art by David Gaillet

Zurgo snapped to face her. “What?”

She took a step back. “They surrounded him. He called himself ‘Sarkhan.’ The Temur were insulted that he claimed rule over them and they demanded that he surrender...”

She stood there, saying nothing. Zurgo snorted. “And?”

“He...they say he turned into a dragon. And breathed fire on them, took off, and flew farther into Temur territory.”

Vol. It could only be Vol. Zurgo’s eyes narrowed.

“They assumed it was the new khan of the Mardu, and so they attacked, while their enemy’s leader was elsewhere. Except you weren’t. And you can’t turn into a dragon.” She looked down for a moment, then back up with questioning eyes. “Right?”

“You are dismissed,” Zurgo bellowed.

As she scurried away, Varuk approached closely, head bowed. “You should not chase him.”

Zurgo looked down at him. “He has threatened this clan enough. He must die.”

Varuk tilted his head to one side, a bit bolder now. “You forget how long I have been at your side. I remember when you were just a wing leader. I was there when Vol deserted, and expected to be welcomed with open arms when he returned. I was there when you sent him into battle against the Sultai. I was there when he turned into a great flying beast of flame and roasted your army with his breath. I know what he can do, and he is too much for you.”

“He called himself Sarkhan, and that is why Surrak attacked us. Do you think the next khan who hears this name will laugh and slap her thigh when she hears this claim? No. This will not be the last time we are attacked because of his treachery.”

“After a defeat of this size, Surrak must leave us alone for some time. Our horses do not do well in the mountains. And Vol is moving away from us.”

“He is a traitor and a threat, and I will see him dead.”

Varuk turned his head to face the army, which was now a good deal of the way into pitching camp. “How will you convince the rest of them to go? They do not share your history.”

Zurgo sneered. “Tonight, we celebrate. Tomorrow, we prepare. The next day, we punish Surrak for his impudence. Tell the rest of them.”

Varuk nodded, and disappeared into the raucous crowd.

Zurgo’s horde spent the night in celebration. Zurgo himself remained in his tent, allowing them their triumph. He was livid with Vol, and any warrior who saw him in this state would assume that he was angry at one of the Mardu instead. Only a veteran few of his warriors still desired revenge on Vol, and so Surrak’s head would have to be enough to lead his army into the mountains. He could say now that he was angry with Surrak, but that would not work until the glory of the victory had faded, so he remained alone.

The next day, the Mardu prepared to move. Zurgo’s warriors scoured the corpses of the fallen for supplies and made great piles of their bodies. Shamans created great chasms underneath the piles and closed them again once the mass graves were full. Scouts probed the edges of the wooded foothills adjacent to the plains. And the three top wing leaders of his army attended Zurgo in his tent.

“Tomorrow, we move into the mountains,” he said to them. “We will punish Surrak for his impudence.”

“The Temur fare best in their mountains,” Varuk said. “This path is dangerous.”

“We have scouts,” Zurgo said. “We will be prepared when the enemy strikes.”

“They do not know Temur lands,” said a female orc named Rufaz, her eyes wide with confusion. “We will be blind in comparison to our enemies.”

Zurgo glared at her. “You should have more confidence in our warriors.”

“We have already punished Surrak enough,” said a male human named Batar, his lowered black eyebrows and mustached sneer thick with disdain. “Risking so much to punish him more is foolish.”

Zurgo’s face twisted. “I am the khan of the Mardu. You will do as I say.”

Varuk nodded, and then Rufaz nodded. After a few moments, Batar nodded too and they all left. By the time he rejoined the army, all three of them had begun to prepare his horde for the next day’s travel.

The next morning, Zurgo’s army packed its tents, mounted its horses and riding-beasts, and began to move. He sent scouts ahead to probe the forest for the Temur.

“I also heard reports of a Mardu deserter,” he said to the scouts. “If you find him, do not chase him but tell me.” They nodded and dispersed into the woods.



Wooded Foothills | Art by Jonas De Ro

Zurgo traveled in the center of the horde, his riding-beast towering over the horses of the army around him. It struggled a little in the hills, although not as much as the horses.

His first wave of scouts returned with vague but disquieting news. The Temur were nearby, it was certain, but none had actually been seen. The scouts had only found broken branches, snapped twigs, fresh footprints that the Mardu had not made.

Surrak was sure to know where they were.

Three hours later, the Mardu army entered a valley that zigzagged up the mountain. A sudden chill fell over them and it began to snow. It was an unnatural, driving, insistent snow that coated the ground in minutes, even though they were far below the elevation where one would expect snow. His horde's mounts, horses and beasts alike, struggled to slog through the piled powder. A few scouts returned from forays into the forest with little to no information. One of them caught a glance of a Temur shaman doing what looked like some kind of weather magic, but this was hardly a revelation to anyone.

Batar rode up next to Zurgo, his horse shifting uncomfortably in the snow. "My khan, we must turn back. This is absurd. We are riding into a trap."

Zurgo considered him for a moment. "A threat to the unity of this clan hides in these mountains. Would you not see it stamped out?"

Batar sneered. "The snow threatens our unity."

Zurgo sat up in his saddle and glared at Batar with all of his might. "A little snow should not threaten a Mardu warrior, Batar Throatlasher."

Batar huffed and rode away from Zurgo. After only fifteen feet Zurgo could not see him anymore.

A scout ran up to him, her whole body covered with a fine layer of snow. "There are Temur nearby. They were massing at the top of a hill, above us. Perhaps a hundred of them."

Zurgo's breath clouded in the unnatural cold. "Tell the others to prepare for—"

The sounds of battle surrounded them. The clash of steel on steel, shouts of triumph and death, the great wet sounds of slain riding-beasts came from both behind him and in front of him in the near distance. He couldn't see far enough in the snow to know what was going on.

He dismounted and ran forward. Perhaps two hundred feet ahead of where he had been, fifteen furl-clad Temur stood surrounded by many Mardu corpses and more Mardu warriors. The Mardu closed in, and soon all of the Mardu had been slain, and then all was quiet. The snowfall stopped.

"What happened?" Zurgo bellowed.

Sounds of running came from behind Zurgo. He turned and saw a scout approaching him. "Two breaches," she said, panting. "This one here and another one five hundred feet back. Fifty Temur arranged in a column broke into our line, killed fifty-six, and disappeared back into the woods. We were not prepared to chase them. They left eleven corpses behind."

Zurgo turned back to the scene in front of him. "And what happened here?"

"The same," said a female orc who stood nearby with two bright red cuts across her face. She surveyed what was now a clearing full of corpses in the center of the Mardu marching line. "I'd say about fifty dead Mardu, and I only see eight Temur."

"You...and you," he said, pointing to each of them. "Show me where they came from. The rest of you, clean this up."

Both the scout and the orc led him to the edge of the valley, where each path led up a steep slope. Each was steeper than any Mardu horse could climb and only wide enough for perhaps five warriors across. The Temur had hit him twice in the dead center of his army with a small enough force to fit through that passage, and they had disappeared back into the woods like water. He squinted and held his hand above his eyes, but could not see any farther up either path.

When he returned to his lines, a scout was waiting for him. "What would you have us do?"

"Collect them," he said. "Mass the army here and I will address them."

The scout scurried away.

Nearby, three young warriors sat in the snow, talking.

"They came out of the woods, out of nowhere," one young man said, "and then were gone as quickly."

"My brother sprouted four arrows and died in front of me, and I could not reach his killer!" cried a second young man.

"This could happen five more times, and it would work just as well," said a young woman next to him. "We do not know this terrain."

Zurgo pushed his way through the crowd and swaggered up to them. They stopped talking, and stood.

"Tell me," Zurgo said. "Was this your first battle?"

All three looked up to him and nodded.

"And did you each kill an enemy?"

They nodded again and stood, their faces now expectant.

“You,” Zurgo bellowed, pointing at one of them. “How did you slay your foe?” Silence began to spread around them.

“I removed her head,” he said, “with one clean cut.”

“Headtaker,” Zurgo decreed.

He turned to the next, who trembled with wide eyes. “And you?”

They stood taller now. “I put three arrows in her chest,” she said.

“Heartpiercer,” Zurgo turned to the last.

“We had lost our weapons, and were wrestling,” he said. “I crushed his throat with my bare hands.”

“Neckwringer!” Zurgo bellowed.

The three of them bowed, each glowing. By then, much of the army had massed around him, and many warriors were filling in around the edges of what he could see.

Zurgo raised his sword to the sky. “To the warriors of the Mardu, and their victory!”

The horde cheered on command, but not as loudly as Zurgo had hoped.

“No!” came a shout from nearby, and Batar stepped out of the crowd. His face was red, his muscles were tight, and his eyes were angry. “These young warriors were right. You led us into this forest to punish Surrak, you say. But you do not know where he is. And this is bad ground. And this is unnatural snow. And yet we continue. You must have other reasons. And you have not spoken of them to us. And now many of us have died.

“I challenge you for the right to lead this clan.”

All motion stopped. All eyes came to rest on the two of them.

Zurgo took his measure. The man was angry and stupid in his rage. Were he thinking about the good of the clan around him, he would not have done this. Zurgo had no choice now but to kill him.

“Fine.” Zurgo shrugged and drew his sword. The little man was defiant, a shield in each hand. Three great bone dragon claws were lashed to each shield. His weapons were impressive to the eye, but for a little human they would be heavy and slow.

“Come show us,” Zurgo said, “how great a warrior you are.”



Bloodsoaked Champion | Art by Aaron Miller

Batar sneered. With his heavy weapons, he must have wished Zurgo would come to him. But Zurgo would not. Batar could not wait, lest he look weak.

The man loped forward, holding both shields at his sides. Zurgo waited for him. When he got close, he thrust at Zurgo with his right shield. But Zurgo dodged left, putting himself nearly behind the man. He cut for Batar's neck with the sword in his left hand, but Batar raised the hand that had just thrust for Zurgo's chest with surprising speed. Zurgo's sword impacted on the man's forearm armor, denting it but doing no real damage.

Then the other shield came hurtling toward Zurgo from under Batar's raised right arm, one claw pointed at his face and the other at his groin. Zurgo spun away from the attack fast enough that it impacted only the armor on his leg and shoulder, tearing a few plates out of each.

He kept moving further behind Batar, putting the man's awkwardly raised right shield further out of position. As he moved, he cocked his right arm for a punch. Batar kept spinning to match him, guarding his face with his right shield. But the instant he let his guard drop, Zurgo's fist slammed into his chin.

Batar slumped to the ground, groaning.

Zurgo grasped Batar by the neck and lifted him off the ground. Batar struggled some, dangling like a child's doll as he gasped for air. Zurgo ran his sword straight through Batar's chest, threw the limp form to the ground, and stomped his great foot on the man's head. Bright red gore splattered in the white snow around them.

He turned slowly, surveying all around him. "See what happens to those who challenge the khan of the Mardu!"

Varuk rode into the clearing. “It will not happen again,” he said.

“I will kill anyone who dares!” Zurgo roared, thrusting his blood-soaked blade to the sky.

“No,” Varuk said, dismounting. “Because there is nothing more to challenge.” His eyes were hard and cold, and he stood straighter than ever before. In defiance, not submission.

Zurgo’s eyes narrowed. “I am right here,” he bellowed.

Varuk motioned with one arm toward what remained of the horde.

“Look at them, Zurgo.” His voice echoed throughout the valley. “They once served you. Now they only fear you. And that means that you are not truly their khan.”

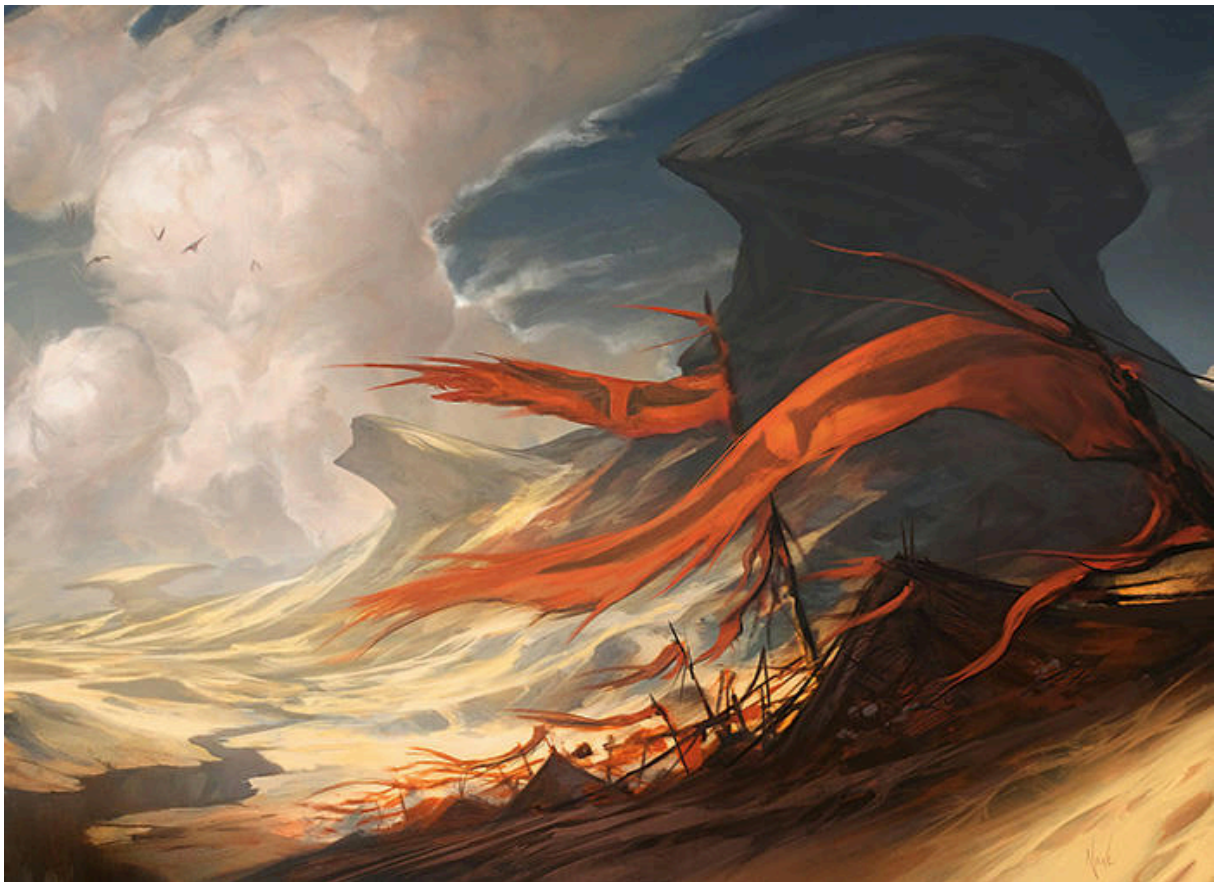
“You challenge my authority!” Zurgo bellowed.

“There is nothing to challenge,” he said. He turned his whole body to face the horde.

“The Mardu have no quarrel with Surrak! Return to our home at Wingthroner with me,” Varuk said, “and we will no longer risk our lives in service of this one foolish orc’s desire for revenge!”

The horde cheered its assent. Zurgo stared at them with wide eyes and a gaping jaw.

Varuk turned to look at Zurgo once again. There was a moment of what might have been remorse, but then there was nothing. Varuk climbed back onto his mount and rode back down the valley through the center of the army. Zurgo stood and watched as his army turned away from him and slowly followed behind Varuk. And then they were only banners in the distance.



Nomad Outpost | Art by Noah Bradley

The clan was gone, and Varuk was right. They were not truly Zurgo's anymore. He only had one thing left to give the Mardu, and that was Vol's head lying motionless in the snow.

He looked down at his sword, which was still covered in Batar's glistening blood. He lopez toward a corpse that had a dry shirt and ripped a piece of it off with his right hand...but stopped just short of wiping his blade clean.

That blood was all he had left. He would not clean it until it had mixed with Vol's.

A nearby fur-clad body with three arrows stuck in it shifted and groaned. He padded over to it and held his dripping sword at the dying human's throat.

"You," he said. "Tell me, when your people last saw the khan of the Mardu, where was he going?"

Her eyes bugged. She feebly pointed a finger further up the mountains. "The Spirit..." she croaked, "Dragon's...tomb," she heaved.

He plunged his sword into the woman's throat and she stopped moving. Zurgo returned to his mount, climbed into the saddle, and rode for the chasm.

Zurgo knew where the dragon's tomb was rumored to be, but it would be a dangerous trip. If Vol could turn into a dragon, though, it made some sense that he would seek it out.

The ground grew increasingly treacherous as he rode in the direction of the chasm where the dragon's body lay. He rode over several steep hills, and into the beginning of the night. Soon after twilight, his mount lurched and heaved, groaned and stopped, and he nearly fell off.

He dismounted. The beast had missed a step and broken a front leg, which now bent in an unnatural direction. Great shards of bone protruded from its skin and shifted slightly as the thing yowled in pain.

Zurgo left it to die and continued alone.