

Chronicle of Bolas: Things Unseen

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From set *Core 2019*

27. 06. 2018

Naiva had grown up under the rule of Dragonlord Atarka. Her entire life she had watched her grandmother, Yasova, once known as Dragonclaw of the Temur clan, dutifully deliver meat to the gathering place at Ayagor so Atarka could feast. “To keep the people alive, we will feed the dragon,” Grandmother said every year when a few of the elder hunters grumbled about losing the old ways. Yet every year, fewer recalled the days before the fall of the khans, and thus fewer complained, and of course to the young ones like Naiva, the rule of Atarka was all they had ever known.

So when she stood trapped in a ring of boulders with Grandmother and Baishya on one side and on the other a handsome young wanderer who had brought a dragon’s wrath down on them, she knew what Grandmother would do. The once-mighty Yasova Dragonclaw would give way to the Ojutai dragon broodling that loomed above them, demanding to kill the renegade warrior.

It shouldn’t be this way! As she sucked in a harsh breath, she wished she had fire as dragons had fire so she could scald the great beast and turn it to ash. She wished she could strike even if it meant her own death. Wasn’t it better to fight than to give way again and again until your soul was crushed and you denied your own name?

The dragon opened its maw as a warning to drive the rest of them back. Cold radiated from deep within its massive body, ready to freeze any creature that stood in its path.

Grandmother caught Naiva’s eye. Here it came: she would give the hand gesture to retreat; she would leave the stranger to meet his destiny, in death.

Keeping her hand hidden from the aven on the rock, Grandmother gestured *Kill*.

As the dragon reared back its head to strike at Tae Jin, Baishya stretched out her arms toward the earth, a warm greenish light gathering in her hands and flowing into the soil. The dragon’s stinging breath blasted toward Tae Jin. Impossibly, a boulder rolled sideways into the path of its breath. A thick crust made of the dragon’s icy breath crackled around the rock, solidifying before it reached Tae Jin.

An arrow flashed overhead to cut through one of the wings of the aven. As the aven staggered, croaking in pain, Naiva threw her spear. The obsidian point cut through the aven’s handsome garment and straight into its feathered breast. Grandmother cast her own spear, and the weapon struck the aven’s head for the death blow.

The dragon roared, neck whipping from side to side as it raged. Tae Jin dodged between the boulders. A second stream of its icy breath blasted into the open ground where he’d just been standing.



Icefall Regent | Art by: David Gaillet

Naiva leaped sideways to push Grandmother into a narrow gap between two boulders. Blades of grass froze and shattered at her heels. The backs of her legs went numb, but her felted trousers gave her some protection. Looking back, she saw Baishya on her knees, doubled over, exhausted and almost fainting from the effort of moving the rock. Fec shot a useless arrow toward the dragon that bounced off its scaly hide, but it didn't even look his way. It snaked its head down to smack into the boulder Baishya had moved and which she was now sheltered behind. Naiva plucked her skinning knife from its sheath and raced back to her twin, reaching her just as the dragon used a massive claw to shove the boulder aside as if it were the merest pebble.

Its body looming above them filled all of her vision. She clasped Baishya to her. At least they would die as they had been born: together.

A rumbling howl split the air. The Ojutai broodling reared back, twisting around as a red dragon crowned with antlers—the very same broodling who had been following them—swooped out of the sky and slammed into it. The two beasts went tumbling over the grass, grappling and clawing. The weight of their battle shook the ground. Fire met ice in a flurry of embers and glittering snowflakes.

Naiva heaved Baishya to her feet. “Can you walk?”

Baishya nodded, too breathless to speak. She leaned on Naiva, trembling, face pale.

“I didn't know you could do that!” Naiva exclaimed.

“I didn't either,” Baishya whispered.

Grandmother appeared. “Retreat to the trees. Tae Jin!”

They raced toward the line of trees as the dragons rolled farther away. Naiva was grateful for the tall grass now since it hid them. The roars and screeches of the battling dragons covered the noise of their footsteps and their passage through the rustling grass. She had so many questions but no time to ask. With Baishya still leaning heavily on her, she stumbled in under the trees. Baishya let go and dropped to the ground, leaning against a trunk as she worked to catch her breath.

By the pool, the hunters who'd stayed behind to fish had already thrown on their packs and made ready to move, having heard the commotion.

A sentry crouched up in a tree called down: "It's flying off."

Naiva halted to look back. The Ojutai dragon slipped out of the claws of the Atarka broodling and broke for the sky, but the broodling leaped up and caught one of its back legs with a powerful swipe of a foreclaw, dragging the other dragon back down to earth. She felt the impact of their conjoined bodies through the soles of her boots. Their shrieks and howls thundered, and yet the titanic nature of the battle invigorated her. What would it be like to have so much power surging through you? Was that what magic felt like for Baishya? Yet the power had drained her sister too, and her very life was endangered just because she possessed the shaman's gift.

Naiva left her to hurry over to where the others waited in a tight group. The hunters stared at the young man, at the blood on his tunic and the shining tattoo on his exposed shoulder.

Fec said, "We must turn back. Ojutai's broodling won't dare follow us deep into Dragonlord Atarka's territory."

"Their battle is not yet over," said Grandmother.

"Either way, we are exposed and vulnerable now that dragons are stalking us."

"Dragons are always stalking us. I must consider the circumstances that brought us here. The vision of the windfolk. This young man's mission." She cast a look back toward the edge of the trees where Baishya sat cross-legged on the ground, back to them, both hands pressed into the dirt. "Give me silence to consider."

Tae Jin stood in repose, waiting for the elder to address him.

Naiva sidled up beside him.

"You almost died," she said in an undertone. Her own pulse was still racing as a hammering in her ears. "How can you be so calm?"

He turned his dark gaze on her. "I will die one way or the other, whether now or later. Discipline teaches us to accept what cannot be escaped."

"You would be dead if not for my grandmother's healing."

"That is true. I have heard of the healing powers of your people, and I am thankful for her skill. But healing magic is known to all of the tribes." He paused, then said almost shyly, "The rock saved me. I have not seen such a display of earth magic before. May I know your name?"

"That wasn't me. That was my twin, Baishya." Even among the tribe, people often mistook Naiva and her sister for each other. They'd played tricks with it when they were younger, pretending to be the other one. Yet under his scrutiny, it annoyed her that he thought she was someone else, someone whose power and skill he admired.

But then he smiled. "Ah. You are the one who threw the spear with such accuracy and brought down the aven. May I know your name?"

Heat burned in her cheeks, but she did not look away. She wanted him to acknowledge her, not just her twin. "I'm called Naiva."

"Enough!" Grandmother thumped the butt of her spear on the dirt. "When a vision offered by the windfolk intersects with a wanderer bringing knowledge from the Jeskai, I cannot refuse such portents. We will go on to Ugin's grave."

Naiva thought Fec would argue, but he merely bowed his head in acquiescence, as did the other hunters. The First Mother had spoken, so it was settled.

By now the dragons had vanished from sight, although now and again a faint thunder marked the direction of their battle. The party moved at a brisk pace, keeping under the leafy cover. Should Atarka's broodling prove victorious and come to check on them, they still had the excuse that they were hunting, but they ignored all signs of game: a trampled area where a herd of wild krushok had come to drink; a broken mammoth tusk; saiga droppings. As always, the hunters walked without speaking; Mattak, Oiyan, Darka, Rakhan, Sorya, and Fec were Grandmother's most dependable companions, disciplined and skilled.

Naiva fell into step beside Tae Jin. She wanted to ask him about himself, but it seemed so awkward to blurt out personal questions. Instead, hunting for a better opening, she recalled the most puzzling aspect of the story he'd been telling.

"How can there be other worlds, as the old wise-woman in the story claims?"

"The planes, do you mean? I asked my master the same question. He did not know."

She looked back and saw Grandmother coming up behind them, closing the gap with her confident stride.

"Grandmother, do you believe there are other worlds?"

Grandmother gave her a thoughtful look. "Has your sister said nothing to you about planes? I thought she told you everything."

Naiva's chest grew tight. "You've talked about such matters with Baishya and never with me?" she asked indignantly.

"There is a great deal of secret knowledge a shaman must know that other people never learn." Without waiting for Naiva to reply, she turned to Tae Jin. "You did not finish Ugin's story. We have quite a distance to walk, and no dragons in sight for the moment. Tell me more about Ugin. And about Bolas."

As she spoke the name *Bolas*, her mouth settled into a grim line. She gave him an expectant look.

The young man nodded obediently. By the pressure of his lips and the tightening of his eyes, Naiva could tell he was re-ordering his thoughts, retreating from the ordinary conversation he'd just had with her into his rote memorization of an ancient story.



Student of Ojutai | Art by: Jason A. Engle

They walked in silence beneath the whispering trees.

Finally, he began to speak.

I didn't want to leave, but I had to follow. Something momentous had happened. It made me think of standing in a dry stream bed in a desert when a cloudburst darkens the distant hills. The floodwaters are coming even if you can't see them yet.

Over the years of our wandering, Nicol and I had crossed much of the continent as we hunted and explored. The expanding realm of our brother Arcades dwelt far away from the mountain of our birth. I had to retrace our path, and yet the strangest and most challenging part was flying alone. There was no Nicol beside me to talk to, to hunt with, to nap beside during long drowsy afternoons when the sun heated the itch off our scales. Solitude is all very well as a discipline for enlightenment, but even in an Arcades' settlement, I had meditated in the company of the wise elder Te Ju Ki. Throughout all those days and weeks of silence I was still able to hear the sound of another living creature's breathing alongside mine.

Not now. Now I trembled each night, hearing only my own mutters, my scuffling as I scratched a hollow for myself to sleep, the whisper of my heart's beating, the passage of air in and out of my lungs. But slowly as I flew and hunted my way back across the wide, wild land, I began to hear how all things breathe. Even plants breathe. Enfolded by the respiration of the world, no life is ever alone; each of us is embedded in a vast web, one entity among myriad myriads.

Sometimes the denseness of this living web comforted me. Sometimes the sheer weight of living things crowded about me like an incessant thunder that never ceases. At those times, life's jangling and roaring troubled my spirit. Sometimes its clamor humbled me, for among these teeming multitudes, I was but a single creature whose existence could be rubbed out and forgotten in an instant. A sapling oak may be crushed by the steps of passing aurochs, and no one would be the wiser. A hatchling chick may fall from the nest and be lost in the grass as if it had never existed. Not that a dragon is so insignificant

as an oak or a sparrow, or so I thought, not understanding then that even the smallest, briefest life has its place. That even a dragon's name may be swallowed by the passage of time and vanish into the abyss of oblivion.

The world is wide, so I did not expect to catch up to my twin, much less run across him by happenstance as I tried to follow the route we had taken to get here. Because that route had ambled and meandered over so many years, while I must fly straight and fast in pursuit, I hoped only to discover him once I reached our birth mountain, for I was certain he was headed there.

Thus, one day a rumbling noise startled me as I glided through a rugged patch of hills. Sad little outposts of humanity huddled behind log palisades. Fur-clad farmers labored with digging sticks and bronze-bladed machetes to clear ground for crops. A howl of laughter echoed down a long valley patched with rectilinear fields, framed by drystone walls to keep livestock away from growing grain. But low stone walls could not keep away the depredations of marauding dragons intent on amusing themselves with destruction.

Although I had not seen them for years I recognized Vaevictis Asmadi and his siblings at once by their fierce red crests and their aggressive behavior. At first, I thought they were burning longhouses and thatched-roof granaries for cheap pleasure, but the destruction visited upon the hapless settlements was tangential to their main purpose. They were chasing a dragon. Their quarry dove and dipped into any crevice and valley offered by the rolling hills as he fled, trying to escape them.

Of course, I knew his shape and coloring at once.

"Nicol!" I cried.

If he heard me, he gave no sign, merely disappeared over the rise of a hill and down behind the treeline. But my shout drew their attention to me.

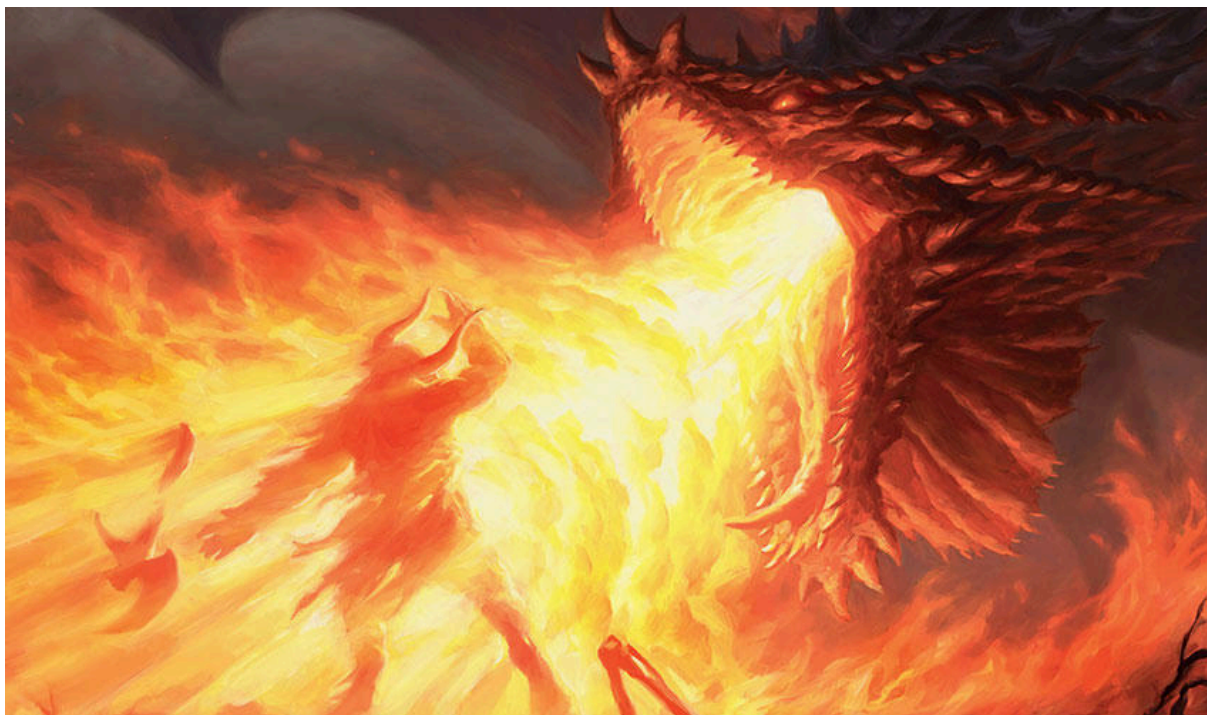
With a roar, the biggest one, Vaevictis himself, came hurtling toward me. His outspread wings blotted out half the sky. His claws dripped with the blood of torn livestock.

I could not outrace him. In that instant of realization I froze. An updraft curled under my wings, keeping me hovering aloft, otherwise I would have crashed to the ground as my vision hazed and my fire dwindled. Death frightened me after all; I had failed Te Ju Ki. The shame of my failure was a rock in my heart, a leaden lump dragging me to the dirt.

Yet Nicol needed me.

Whatever happened to me, I could not allow him to die.

So, I reached into my tiny arsenal of magical tricks and spun a pair of transparent, feather-light globes out of the nexus of colors and into the air. With a huff, I blew them in the direction of Vaevictis. The shining orbs startled him so deeply that he tumbled, tail over head, trying to come to a halt. Frantically he called for his siblings, who were heedlessly burning up and down the valley as humans screamed and ran.



Art by: Chris Rahn

Of course, I sped after Nicol, although I chanced one glance over my shoulder just before the valley dropped out of sight. Spun on the wind, the globes wafted up against the dread dragon's gleaming scales and gently popped.

His startled bellow of fear shattered the air.

Then I flew behind a hill and could no longer see him. Relief shuddered through me. I had survived after all.

Out of nowhere a large body brushed up against mine. My claws came out as I readied myself to swipe at the attacker.

"That was a fine trick to play!" chortled Nicol.

It took me a moment to recover my voice, stuck as it was like a bone in my throat.

"Where did you come from?" I rasped out.

"I saw you. Did you think I'd abandon you to be torn apart by our cousins? They're hateful creatures who haven't one brain to rub between the four of them. I hope that snarling bag of hot wind chokes on his rage." He laughed softly as we flew on.

After a long time, once my heart had ceased its galloping measure, I laughed too, thinking of how ridiculous Vaevictis had looked as the shimmering globes harmlessly dissolved against the heat of his impervious scales.

"What were those globes?" Nicol asked that night. We had halted to rest on a stony hilltop overlooking a forested plain.

"They are a magic that Te Ju Ki has been teaching me." I paused, trying to think of a way to explain what she had been teaching me about planes and worlds, but he merely snorted and talked over me.

"Oh. That old human creature. Aren't you done with her yet?"

“Why would I be done with her?”

“She’s human.”

“She’s lived longer than we have. I think.”

“No human, however old, can ever be as wise as the youngest dragon, for we are born with the greatest dignity, intelligence, and power of all creatures.” He leaned closer, his eyes gleaming with a disquieting light whose like I had never before seen in him. His tone teased me. “I learned something special. Do you want to know what it is?”

I refused to say yes because I really did not care for his prideful, taunting manner.

“Don’t you want to know?” he demanded with a huff of flame directed at a blameless tree whose upper branches promptly caught fire and burned like one of the torches used to light human settlements at night.

“I don’t think I like the way you talk about humans. Some of them are foolish, it’s true, and some are angry or greedy or selfish, but others are intelligent, wise, caring creatures. Although I grant you they are small and weak as individuals. Easily broken.”

“Yes, indeed, they are easily broken,” he said with a rumble of derisive laughter.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You shall see. And I will reveal to you my special learning regardless, because we are twins and we should share everything. Do you know the great ocean whose waves break upon the land?” He leaned closer with a smug quirk of his fierce snout. “There are other lands that lie beyond it, and even more creatures who live in those other lands.”

“Yes, I know.”

A flash of ire lit in his eyes that I hadn’t been amazed by his revelation.

I had my pride, too. Maybe I hadn’t been following around Arcades all this time, as he had, studying behavior and customs and laws and weapons, but everything that existed intrigued me. Thus, when I was not meditating and studying magic with Te Ju Ki, I observed all the details of life around the central town and the nearby settlements that had fallen under its sway, including two seaside ports.



Hinterland Harbor | Art by: Daniel Ljunggren

So, I said, “Some have built boats with sails for wings and have crossed the waters and returned to tell the tale. The idea of sails for wings is quite ingenious, don’t you think?”

“I am sure dragons have taught them everything they know, since there are dragons on those other lands too. Although I am sure those dragons are not really like us and our siblings. We are the first, after all, and thus the most powerful.”

“How do you know we are first? We’ve never seen those other lands and those other dragons. They might have fallen from our progenitor’s wings before we did.”

“No, absolutely not.”

By which I understood him to mean: he didn’t want to consider that might be true.

Sometimes it just wasn’t worth arguing with Nicol. Anyway, I was sleepy.

The next day as we flew in fine weather and great spirits side by side with each other, I did not want to disturb our amity. Perhaps if I had delved more deeply, I would have had warning of what was to come.

Even fast as we flew, intent on our goal, it took us days and days to retrace our journey. Our first hint that we had indeed reached our destination came in the presence of boulders cut with the rake of claws in a double-curved quarter circle. These were set within dragon-sight of each other at the edge of a wide plain on which grazed tumultuous herds of bison, antelope, water buffalo, horses, and red deer.

“These are markers too big for humans to have made,” I said.

“I’m hungry,” he answered.

Working together, we easily killed four plump specimens and sent the rest speeding away. We had barely settled down to tear into our still-warm feast when a dragon’s roar shattered our peaceful idyll. Palladia-Mors dove out of the sky, and we leaped back as she landed with a ground-shaking thump.

“I thought you two were gone for good! This is my hunting territory now. All of it.”

Nicol watched her warily while I attempted to calm her. "We are just passing through on our way to the birth mountain."

"You don't want to go there," she said as she clawed the four corpses out of our reach.

"Why not?"

"Too much trouble. Those humans have gotten above themselves and think they are dragon hunters." She sniffed carefully around the dead animals, blood smearing her muzzle, then gulped down an antelope with a crunch of teeth and a convulsive swallow. Swinging her gaze back to us, she growled with a rumble that shook my horns. She had a gift for puffing herself up to seem twice as large and ten times as fierce as she already was. I had to struggle not to back away from her, but I knew better than to give any sign of fear in front of a violent predator. "I'll kill their leaders when I feel like it, but not now. Now I'm going to eat this delicious banquet you've so conveniently hunted for me."

Nicol looked ready to lunge at her and fight, but with a lash of my tail, I got his attention and lured him aside.

"The two of us can take her together," he said. "We're bigger now, almost as big as she is."

"Maybe, but is it worth the chance she'll injure or kill one of us? I thought we were going to the birth mountain."

He blinked once and then a second time, more slowly, and for an instant, I thought his eyes turned in lazy circles that spun my thoughts around and around. Maybe it was time to confront one of our siblings directly I shook myself free of the irritating distraction, clawing a gouge into the soil with impatience. Nothing fruitful would be served by clashing with the other dragons. The world was wide enough that we could easily live in harmony, even if it meant staying out of the way of those who guarded their territory with jealous fervor.

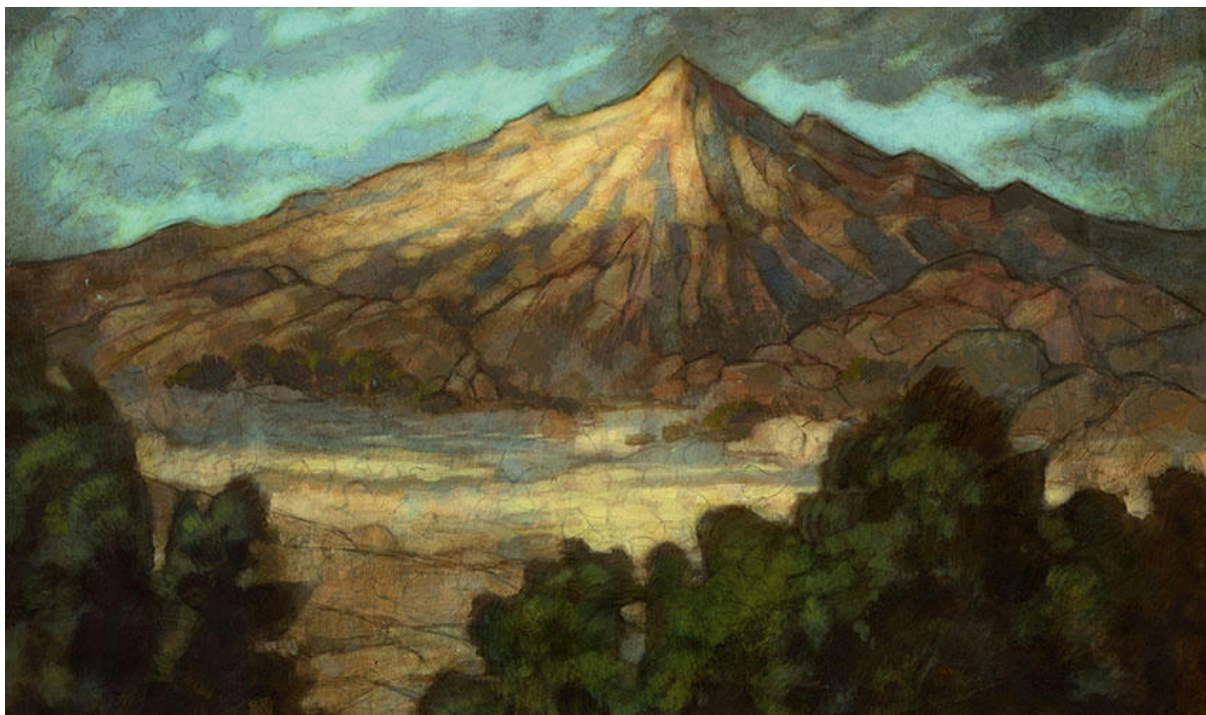
"What did she mean by dragon hunters?" I asked. "Why is she avoiding the birth mountain?"

"We'll soon find out."

We flew on, getting hungrier because Palladia-Mors abandoned the three plump carcasses to follow us. There was absolutely no point in hunting as long as she stayed close enough to grab any new catch away from us as soon as we brought it down.

But when the mountain appeared in the distance with its long smooth slopes and symmetrical shape, she turned back.

Nicol kept an eye on her as she retreated, but I could not keep my gaze off the mountain. A thrill of sentiment agitated me. We had no parents as humans measured family. We had only a progenitor, unseen, never spoken to, from whose wing beats we had fallen like chaff shaken out of a sheaf of wheat. The mountain was just the unforeseen place where we had woken, a chance, a coincidence. Nevertheless, the peak called to me as if it had a voice made of invisible threads that drew me ever closer to its secret, molten heart.



Mountain | Art by: Rebecca Guay

The mountain had not changed, or so I thought as we drew closer. But the landscape around it had changed. In the time of our falling birth, a dense forest had stretched out in every direction around the mountain, cut here and there with random clearings made by an eruption of stony ground or the fall of a giant tree. Of course, the harsh memory of our sister's death in one such clearing remained as fresh as the hot blood of the beasts we'd killed earlier, whose meat had been stolen from us by our living sister.

But now. Now, what a change met our astonished eyes! The forest was hacked through with crude roadways linking fortified settlements, each cluster of buildings ringed with a high palisade. Outside the walls, huts crowded up against the palisade like so many beggars reaching out their hands toward a bowl heaped with food. Inside the walls stood longhouses of a grander construction, each ringed by a fence decorated with strips of elaborately woven textiles and strings of small brass bells. With every gust of wind the air chimed.

The gates of the settlement were twice the height of a man. They were carved with a stark, violent scene of human hunters stabbing their spears into the prone body of a dying dragon.

But there was worse even than this. The largest longhouse rose at the center, elevated on an artificial mound of earth and ringed by a stone wall that, to my eye, seemed to protect it from the other longhouses. Atop its gate, bound to a massive pillar, leered the skull of a dragon. The pathway leading from the gate to the entrance into the great longhouse ran beneath arches made by a dragon's ribs lashed to poles.

Nicol hissed with a long, low, furious sound. "They have turned our sister into an ornament!"

I was too shocked to speak.

Although we flew high overhead, horns greeted our arrival. Armed people ran to the wall walk. More raced to place huge iron bolts in the belly of bolt throwers that looked like massive, grounded crossbows. Faster than I realized was possible, several of these bolts were launched on a deadly arc toward us. Although Nicol twisted out of their way, my left rear claw was cut by a glancing blow. The scratch

was not much, but some nasty substance had been smeared on the point and its venom scalded my flesh. My bellow of pain shook the heavens. Five drops of my blood fell from the shallow cut, plummeting earthward, each drop as big as a human fist. People pushed and shoved, tearing and hitting as they fought to get beneath the falling blood.

Two people tilted back their heads and were hit square on the face with a splash of my blood. One sank to the ground as in prayer, hands clasped at her chest, and those who had not reached the blood in time prostrated themselves around her. The other howled with glee, arms raised triumphantly as he shook spear and knife toward the sky in defiance, or as thanks for a heavenly portent.

The scuffle had so roiled the crowd that the last three drops splatted on the soil. People dropped to their knees to shove blood-stained dirt into their mouths. It was an appalling scene, but we could not tarry.

“Ugin!” Nicol shouted. “Come. Come!”

A second round of bolts thumped out of the ballistae, headed for us. I flew as fast as ever I could to get out of reach. My claw throbbed with a malicious agony. Numbness crept up my leg.

“I have to land, Nicol.”

“No! Keep flying.”

I didn’t have the strength to argue. Through my haze of pain, I spied more settlements hacked out of the forest. Even the smallest settlement had at least one ballista to guard it. Those who lived inside the palisades bore iron-bladed weapons, while those who lived in the huts outside toiled in rocky fields with stone tools under the lash of cruel overseers. The gates of most of the palisades were adorned with the skulls of bears and giant wolves, while some bore sculptures meant to look like dragons which had been wired together out of human skulls in a ghastly mockery of a dragon’s noble lineaments. In four other settlements, a true dragon’s skull ornamented the chief’s house. Notably, these settlements lay most distant from the first one, like the points of a pentagram. Even in pain, I noticed such details.

At length, Nicol took pity on my wretched state and circled back to the peak of the birth mountain. There, flagging, spent, and weary beyond measure, I landed on the bare rock of the crater’s high rim. If dragons could weep I would have wept.

“Over here.” Nicol led me to the north-facing shadow where last year’s snowpack still lingered.

I stuck my foot into the snow, breaking through its crust into the icy pack beneath. The relief of its biting cold soothed my stinging flesh. I dropped my head to the ground, panting softly as the pain eased.

Nicol perched at the highest point of the crater, surveying the landscape.

“They’ll climb up after us,” he said as if welcoming the confrontation.

“Is this peak not too high to be climbed by frail humans?” It seemed impossible to fly just yet. I wanted to close my eyes and sleep, but I dared not. After so long living amid the order and peace of Arcades’ rule, I could not quite grasp how different this place was.

“They are not as frail as you think them,” said Nicol. “Greed is not frail. Ambition is not frail. Their weapons can kill us because they are clever. Because they work together, as they did when they killed our sister. They will come after us because we are dragons. They want to seize our power for themselves.”

“Then we should go away at once. If that bolt had cut deeper, its poison might have killed me! No wonder Palladia-Mors avoids this terrible place.”

“Oh no, Ugin. You’re not afraid of these people, are you?”

Rather than reply, I licked my wounded foot, sucking out sour-tasting blood and spitting it onto the ground.

He spread his wings as if in challenge to any humans staring up at the mountain from far below our exalted height. “We have come here to avenge our sister, and avenge her we will.”

“I won’t act like Vaevictis and his siblings, slaughtering innocent creatures with indiscriminate lust!”

“You won’t have to kill anyone at all, brother. That I promise you. I have a plan, a very cunning plan, because I have taught myself to do something no one else can do.”

“That’s enough for now, Tae Jin.” Grandmother called a halt as the late afternoon shadows pulled long across the land. Her own face fell into shadow; something he’d said in his story troubled her, Naiva could tell, but she didn’t know how to ask or if Grandmother would reveal her concerns.

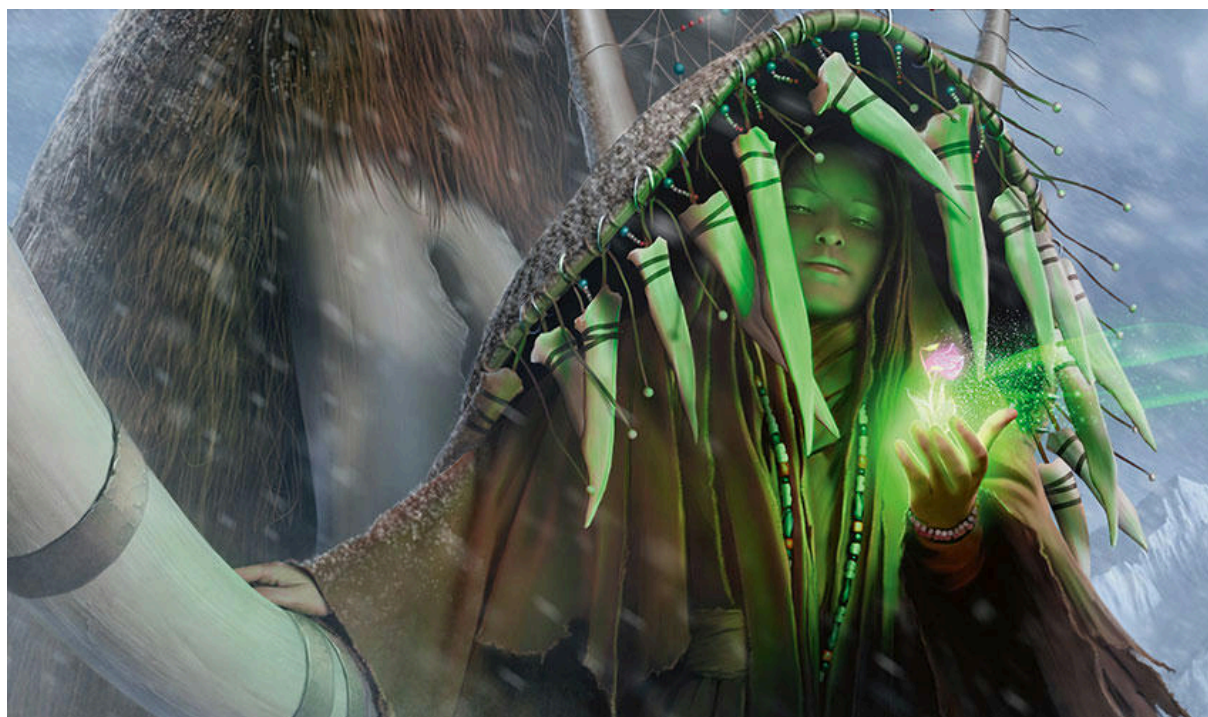
He bowed his head obediently.

They had reached Grandmother’s chosen destination: a jumble of boulders where hunting parties patrolling the borders of Atarka territory often camped. Overhangs in the rocks had been deepened to offer shelter from wind and rain and cover from the gaze of flying creatures. There was even a hearth cunningly crafted into a hollow stone-built chamber disguised amid the other boulders; many small cracks and holes channeled the smoke slowly and invisibly into the air. Beyond the boulders, the river broke over a series of descending shelf-like terraces in a churning foam whose constant chatter also provided a form of concealment.

“We’ll light no fire, lest the dragons find us by its heat and smell,” Grandmother added.

Of course, the lack of a fire was no hardship for hunters. Their gear protected them from the cold, and they carried provisions.

Assigned to sentry duty, Naiva took a strip of dried meat and made her way to the edge of the trees, still brooding over the revelation about worlds. But really it was more about Baishya receiving secret training. Of course whisperers lived in constant danger from Atarka. Of course it made sense that shamans shared their knowledge only with others like themselves. But that sense of being left behind still rankled.



Whisperer of the Wilds | Art by: David Gaillet

She climbed up on one of the outermost rocks, tucking herself against it to become part of the boulder. At least she had this world and its beauty and challenges. The vantage gave her an excellent view to the northwest across a flat expanse of tundra sweeping toward the eastern range of the Qal Sisma. Where the tundra broke against the foothills, a vast chasm split the land. The deep canyon and its shattered rock was too far away to see clearly, drowned by the shadows of encroaching twilight, but a faint blueish haze drifted above the chasm as a person's breath on a cold morning clouds the icy air.

Footfalls scuffed the rock. Tae Jin climbed up beside her and settled into a crouch.

"That's where we are going," Naiva said. "Ugin's grave. A few days' walk away."

"Have you been there before?"

"Yes. Once. When we were twelve."

"We?"

"Hey!" Baishya called softly from below, then scrambled up. The sun caught on her face just as she reached the top, giving her features a glow that Naiva envied. She smiled winningly at Tae Jin, which annoyed Naiva even more because of how simple such exchanges seemed for Baishya while Naiva struggled with her own surging, complicated desires.

"Me and Baishya, I mean, and some other children Grandmother had her eye on."

"What did the wise Yasova have her eye on?" He hadn't looked at either of them, only toward the chasm and the way the light changed above it as the sun set. It almost seemed someone had lit a blue fire far down below, visible as shifting traceries of gleaming mist drifting at the rim of the chasm.

Baishya tapped her on the arm in warning. "That's tribe business, Nai."

Annoyed by the rebuke, still indignant over what Grandmother had mentioned, Naiva went on recklessly. "Atarka hates magic. She fears it. Grandmother thought if she could learn early which children are likely to become whisperers, she could better hide them from Atarka's wrath. She thought maybe if

they slept close to Ugin's grave, the Spirit Dragon's ancestral presence might awaken their magic early. Then she could prepare them to conceal their power from Atarka or to go away into the mountains to hide."

"Nai! It's not for outsiders to know our secrets."

"So I am given to understand!" she said curtly before turning her attention to Tae Jin, who watched the exchange with cautious interest. "Ugin is dead. There've been no dreams or portents."

"Not until now," broke in Baishya. "The windfolk brought me a vision. And it sounds as if your master had a vision from Ugin too. Is that right?"

He nodded with the greatest seriousness. "That is what my master believes. The tempests that birth dragons have increased in strength since Ugin's death. He believes this means some essence of the Spirit Dragon still endures, and has found the strength to reach out. That's why he sent me—"

Naiva elbowed him to silence. Being close to him was almost overwhelming—his lips, his eyes, the common youthful feelings of interest and desire—but that didn't mean she stopped scanning the sky and the land for threat. The clouds to the west had started to pile up as with an incoming storm.

"There," she said just as a whistle sounded from Mattak, who was on sentry duty.

A strange, disjointed shadow approached through the dusk, headed straight for them. Its flight was weirdly slow and clumsy. They had time to scramble down from the boulder before the shape loomed close, resolving into its true nature: the Atarka broodling was carrying the limp body of the Ojutai dragon in its claws. It skimmed down toward their hiding place and dropped the carcass just beyond the boulders. The impact shuddered through the ground, doubled as the broodling hit hard beside it, and with a fiery blast, set flame burning along the dry grass. Blood dripped from claw marks sunk deep into its flanks from the battle. It was already badly injured, engorged with pain.

"Come out! My cousin tells me truth before she dies. Traitor! Dragon killer!"

Smelling them, it leaped in among the boulders.

Baishya shouted a warning meant to carry back to the other hunters, but they couldn't possibly reach them in time.

"Down!" Tae Jin lunged past her, dodging around the dragon's massive forelegs as they slammed down onto the dirt.

Naiva shoved Baishya hard behind one rock, then dropped and rolled into the cover of the adjacent boulder. The broodling's fire breath scalded the grass on which they'd been standing. Flames licked at Naiva's feet as she flipped her spear around and peered out.

Tae Jin had leaped away from its lashing tail. The trailing slash of one of its rear legs caught him on the shoulder, and he reeled backward.

Its howl fell like a clap of thunder. "I kill you!"

Naiva jumped out into the open and shouted gibberish to draw its gaze. As the dragon hissed in surprise at her sudden appearance, Tae Jin clapped his forearms together. A glimmer of misty-like frost shuddered in his palms. With a hiss of powerful magic, the white sparks elongated to become a long ghostly blade that shimmered, bright yet without physical substance, its glowing hilt held in his hands. He darted under its head and, incredibly, slashed open its scaled belly with a powerful stroke of the insubstantial blade. His quickness in ducking aside saved him from the gush of innards that spilled onto the ground in a slimy, stinking mess.

The creature crashed forward, hissing as its head slapped down onto the earth. Tae Jin spun backward to avoid being crushed, stumbled, and fell hard. Yet the dragon still had life in it. It lurched forward, snapping at him. Both Grandmother and Fec shouted at it, charging in from either side to stab at its neck, trying to draw it off. Baishya called up her magic again, sliding a huge rock sideways until it wedged up against the broodling's shoulder, trapping it. Uninjured, it could have shaken off the burden, but its struggles were weakening.



Herdchaser Dragon | Art by: Seb McKinnon

Naiva thrust the obsidian point of her spear into the dragon's unblinking eye, the sharp stone slicing the hard outer surface and sliding deep through the silvery orb into the soft brain beneath. The beast shuddered and with a last gasp coughed up glowing embers.

She yanked her spear free. The embers faded, settled to earth, and died.

Wind spilled across her face, pouring the hot, honey smell of dragon's blood into her nostrils. To kill a dragon was a crime. Yet she exalted, for she hadn't hesitated. Like a true hunter, she hadn't quailed before the attack. Dragons were more powerful than humans, but they could be killed.

Yet what was the ghostly sword that had torn its belly open? Was Tae Jin dead?

She cautiously walked around the bulk of the corpse with its whiff of sulphur and honey. Tae Jin lay on his back, face slack, eyes closed, but still breathing. Fresh blood was splashed across his tunic. The fabric had been sliced at the right shoulder, a flap hanging down. The ripped cloth exposed the honed musculature and, cut across it, a shining mark like the rake of a twinned dragon claw that had slashed across his shoulder and down his chest. She'd never seen such a mark before, so striking and beautiful.

Kneeling, she touched his face lightly. His eyes opened. Seeing her, he blinked once, and then twice as if making sure she wasn't doubled.

"You are very brave," he said.

She flushed, so pleased by the praise she couldn't answer. But when he smiled, she found her voice after all. "It's dead. We killed it. What was that weapon you used?"

“You’ve lied to us, Tae Jin.”

Grandmother’s harsh voice interrupted as the rest of the party crowded up in a bristling of spears to stare at the dead dragons and the young wanderer.

“You wear the dragon mark of a ghostfire warrior. Shu Yun made a bargain that all the ghostfire warriors would die in exchange for the rest of the Jeskai people being allowed to live. So tell me: how is it that you even exist?”