

Joel S. Ogunberry

# **BOONGAR THE BARBARIAN**

A “Grand Odyssey” story

By Joel S. Ogunberry

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## Prologue:

Litan couldn't let his work go to waste. Too many experiments and too many sacrifices had been made for lower minds to ruin his life's achievement. He had to preserve it no matter the cost.

Litan clutched the skull close to his bloodied robe, moving carefully as to not upset his injury any further. His journey through the vast forest was a sad one, but one Litan had to make nonetheless. One hand clutched a staff just in case he needed to fend off the predators, and Litan took a glance behind him to see if he was still being pursued. There were no signs of the persons who had stabbed him, but Litan could still smell their hatred and bloodlust being blown his way.

Soon enough Litan encountered a great beast hurrying from his left, likely drawn to him by the scent of his blood. It was a long-legged mammal with brown fur and a long snout. Its eyes were dead-set on the wizard, and it snarled, revealing long teeth.

"Be damned, creature!" Litan snarled, then raised his staff. Light enveloped the top of it and a bolt of energy zapped the scirka. The beast railed as it made a high-pitched whimper. It lay on the ground writhing in pain, and Litan hurried off before the scirka's death throws attracted more hungry jaws.

But in his haste Litan felt the sting from his wound and fell from it. He cursed and stood himself with his staff, and when Litan checked his feet and saw splashed with his blood, he knew he didn't have much time. The ritual had to be now.

Then as Litan looked around, salvation came. The wizard regarded a cluster of conifer trees with interest, and hurried over there. He saw a large feline, and then a pack of deer, all of which Litan scared away with the light from his staff.

*Blasted fools, Litan thought. They'll regret this. Mark my words!*

Litan finally found his way with the trees, stopping and supporting himself with the staff. He lifted the skull, taking one last marvel at his work. It was inhuman, like he was. Litan was a ferran, a being with the blood of both humans and animal. He had the ears of a bat, large eyes and a wide mouth. His skin was a light shade of green with fine hairs, and his fingers were long and gnarled.

The skull, however, was that of a large ram. Litan had replaced the horns with dark crystals in their shape, and three blue gems ran down its head. Beneath each eye was a sigil, and Litan touched one of it and recited an undecipherable phrase.

"I see his blood trail over here!" a voice said.

Litan quickly conjured his spell, summoning a dark wispy matter within the skull.

“This way!”

The voices were closer now, and Litan cursed under his breath and frantically dug a hole with his bare hands. He ignored the debris that cut his fingers until he made a good size hole, and quickly placed the smoking skull inside it.

There were many footsteps crashing through the bushes, that of men and women, humans just like Litan with varying animal attributes. They had machetes, axes, knives and three of them had rifles. All individuals cornered the wizard, who stood atop the freshly dug patch of earth. Litan pointed his staff at them, switching between them as if trying to figure out who would be the one to kill him.

“You disgusting little shit!” a reptilian man said, welding an axe.

“Murderer!” a woman with rabbit’s feature snarled, leveling her gun at the wizard. “Do you have any idea how many people you killed?”

Litan said, “Street urchins and thieves—I did you all a service ridding them.”

“You killed two children!” another man said, his knife bloody from when he had stabbed the wizard. “They were homeless and hungry! And you took their lives!”

“The hell with all of you!” said Litan. “What are a few worthless lives for the greater advancement of magic! I could teach all of you, but you choose to kill me—the only one who can give you the power to defeat the humans!”

The rabbit woman said, “You’re the devil!” She deliberately shot Litan in the stomach to induce a slow death.

Litan yelled and fell on his back. Everyone else swarmed the downed wizard, stabbing and hacking him as they each satiated their rage. When they ceased Litan was covered in blood and he stopped moving.

“Rot in hell you son-of-a-bitch,” the reptilian said.

“What should we do about the body?” a man asked.

The rabbit woman shouldered her weapon and said, “Leave him for the animals. They’ll dispose of his remains.”

The mob walked away from the corpse, out of the trees and back to their community. However, minutes later, the black smog from the skull seeped from the soil, caressing the body of Litan. It enveloped him in the substance and slowly pulled him into the earth.

*Fools. Do you think this is over? I will rise again. And you all better be prepared.*

## Chapter One

They came on horses. Animals decorated from the chest and rump with the bones of the many men their riders had slayed. Red dust kicked up around the group of mercenaries in the wake of their steeds' charge, as if to conceal themselves and their intentions. But everyone knew about the Red Jackals. Wherever they appeared, death would surely follow.

It was a truth that most people within the land of Uktos knew too well. And this small village, just a hundred meters beyond the approach of the mercenaries, was already preparing for what could be their end.

The Ekandel tribe, a people of brown skin who adorned themselves with trinkets of wood, stone, and plant weavings around their privates, scurried frantically from their stone huts in a last-ditch attempt to organize some semblance of a defense. The women clutched their children close and ran in the other direction, passing a domed temple constructed from beige bricks. The men, who had armed themselves with spears, stone knives and bows, gathered at the front of their settlement consisting of no more than thirty homes.

They were surrounded by a small plain with a few loosely scattered trees. It was a perfect place for hunting the abundant grazing herbivores, but regrettably, for the bounty of game it brought the tribe, it also left them wide in the open.

Leading the Ekandel men was their chief, Bohagi. As the leader of the tribe, he wore a headband decorated with red beads and silver wires. In one hand he held a special sword of red stone that his forefathers once wielded, and a bronze shield in the other. As the chief, he was allowed to grow his black beard, which he braided into four parts. At his sides were forty-five men of his tribe. Half of them held shields before the other, while the ones behind them readied their bows.

Bohagi spared a brief glance at the women and children, who were already becoming shrinking dots in the distance. Bohagi thought about his son, the sons of his tribe, and what awaited them outside of the safety of the community. *Boongar*, he thought, *may the forefathers guide and keep you safe.*

“Chief!” said one of Bohagi’s top fighter, Stuguk. “They are close now!”

Bohagi rid his mind of grief, and faced his adversaries. Now was not the time for crying. Now, as the man who led his people, it was time for war.

Bohagi said, “Bowmen!” The archers lifted their bows, and pulled back on the strings. The Rock Jackals were just fifty meters away. “Fire!”

Fingers relaxed and released, and stone-tipped arrows flew through the air. The Red Jackals, men wearing dark-brown, segmented armor over their brown garbs, began to twist, holler and fall along with their horses as arrows found both the flesh of man and animal. Some of the Jackals retaliated with gunfire from crude looking rifles. The tribesmen’s wooden shields did little to stop the attack as hot lead ripped through their defenses and found their flesh.

Around Bohagi his men were falling, screaming in agony if not silenced in death by the bloody holes in their bodies. And now Bohagi knew he had to draw upon the power of his ancestors. The chief relaxed, raised his swords and tensed his body. He quickly chanted a few arcane words, and the sword glowed with nerve tingling light. “My forefathers!” he said. “Lend me your strength!”

Bohagi slapped his sword into the ground, and a massive shockwave erupted from the earth. The blast knocked five horses clean off the ground. The Rack Jackals were momentarily stunned by the awesome sight, and also the animals falling into their ranks like mountains of meat.

Seizing the opportunity, Stuguk, his black hair braided and dangling on his back, raised his ornate spear and said, “Charge!”

The last men of Ekandel ran into the ranks of the Red Jackals with ear-splitting battle cries. The mercenaries quickly recovered however, and drew their steel swords. It was a bloody mess, a very brilliant one. Stone and steel ripped open flesh, staining the weapon of each of combatant and the soil their feet continuously plowed into. Limbs were severed, throats slashed, skulls busted, and guts split upon the ground.

There were more than over a hundred of the Red Jackals, but thanks to Bohagi’s strength amplified by his ancestors, he was able to level the playing field—until Bohagi spotted him. The man who made the Red Jackals infamous, the man who orchestrated the action of the mercenaries, plunged a massive claymore into the chest of a tribesman. Muktatan lifted the tribesman of the ground. Blood ran profusely from the dying man like a faucet. Muktatan stood

at six feet, five inches tall. He wore similar clothing like the rest of the mercenaries, but besides his formidable height, what distinguished Moktatan from the others was the jewel bracelets he wore, made from silver and bone.

Moktatan swung his sword, and the corpse flew like a piece of meat. Stuguk yanked his spear from out of a dying mercenary's gut and ran to the side of his leader. "My chief!" he said.

Surrounded by death, Moktatan locked his dark eyes with Bohagi's. Then he said in a bellowing voice, "All of you...go find the women and children! Leave these rats to me!"

On command, the surviving mercenaries detached themselves from the battle and found their horses. They quickly left the bloodied scene, leaving only Moktatan against Bohagi, Stuguk and seven other tribesmen.

Moktatan smiled as the men quickly surrounded him with their spears. Then he said, "Chief. You are bold to stand before me with so little men. It seems your tribe did not hear of my exploits."

Bohagi said, "I know of you, Moktatan, and I do not fear you."

Moktatan chuckled and said, "You speak bravely, but you're too confident in the strength of your ancestors."

Bohagi took his glance from the jewels on Moktatan's arms and said, "And you cling to the fear of those who you have killed for power, Moktatan."

"Well then," said Moktatan, and his claymore began to glow. He raised his sword, and said, "Shall we see, chief, which one of us is stronger?"

Stuguk gave his leader a worried look, but not to his surprise, Bohagi's stature remained unshakable. *I wonder if your son will inherit your strength, Bohagi?* Stuguk thought.

Bohagi lifted his sword, and charged. He and Moktatan swung their weapons, and the impact sent a shockwave that knocked back the onlookers.

Stuguk's mind was momentarily stunned, but the man quickly got back up before the others. He turned to see his chief. Bohagi and Moktatan retracted their weapons, and with another roar, they began their duel

Boongar, at ten years old and four feet tall, wasn't yet a man in his tribe. However, his father made sure he knew how to use a weapon. And by his father's teachings, Boongar's grasp

on his dagger was so great that his hands began to hurt as he ran alongside his mother and the rest of the tribe.

Petunsa, Bohagi's wife, held her son's hand as she and the other women and children navigated the land. Not too long ago had she heard the sound of her husband's mighty sword, and hoped she could hear it again to reassure her he was still alive. However, the longer they ran, the more that hope became questionable.

The tribe itself was located on a savanna surrounded by loosely scattered hills. Majority of the wildlife constituted of herbivores; gazelles, buffaloes, horses and small plant-eating dinosaurs.

The tribe ran past herds of these animals that quickly made way for the humans to pass.

"Where are we going, Petunsa?" a woman said.

"To the waterfall!" said Petunsa. "We must make sure the children escape!"

They made their way down a slope cluttered with broad-leaved trees, and as they did, the rumbling sound got louder.

A woman took a glance behind her, and the horror that met her eyes caused them to fly wide open. She picked up speed and frantically shouted to the other women, "The Jackals! The Jackals are behind us!"

The remnants of the Rock Jackals diminished the distance between them and the women within seconds. But at the same time, Petunsa spotted their destination just over a hundred meters ahead. The river ran in a slope at a moderate pace. At its edge animals hung their head in its body and drank.

As they neared it, Petunsa said, "Quick, my sisters! Cast your children into the river! Do not let the Jackals have them! Those who survive will carry on our bloodline!"

They neared the river, chasing away the animals. One by one the women brought their children before them, trying to comfort the young ones as they both cried profusely.

Standing before his mother, Boongar, like her, had tears streaming from his eyes. She knelt and cradled his head dearly, speaking softly as she said, "Boongar, son of Ekandel. Always remember your father. You must carry on his greatness. You must carry on our people's legacy." She wiped Boongar's eyes. "You are the chief's son. Royalty flows in your blood...Never forget that..."

Boongar nodded with snot running from his nose. "Yes...mother..."

Petunsa embraced her son. She got up and took his arm. "Come now..."

The mothers tied the bundle of straws they carried to their sons and daughters. They led them into the water, where the tug of the current was already taking hold. Boongar held his mother's hand, taking one last look at her before she let go of him and the waters swept him away.

Boongar began crying again, as did the children floating around him. They struggled against the waters as it churned them off balance, dipping them in it every once in a while, as if to punish them for entering its territory. Boongar fought to keep his head above the water as it carried him.

Boongar glanced around him at the terrified little souls. Already, a few of them were gone out of sight. Swallowed by the vast wetness.

Boongar panicked...until he remembered the voice of his father and grandfather echoing in his mind; *Courage in the face of danger is the ultimate weapon of any warrior. If there exist no chance to overcome an obstacle, courage will grant us at least one flicker of light to traverse the darkness. And one flicker, no matter how dark it may be, is enough to produce hope.*

Boongar closed his mouth to end his cowardly whimpers. He dreamt of being king, and if ever he was to accomplish that, fear must be killed at all cost.

"Everyone!" Boongar said. "Keep your head above the water! You have to! We have to if we want to live!"

Everyone, upon hearing Boongar, mustered a small amount of resolve to continue their struggle to rise above the waves. And by the time the river had reached the mouth of the waterfall, seven of the twenty-three children had already perished.

"Hold on!" said Boongar. "And hold your breath!"

And Boongar felt the sudden pull of the earth as he plummeted through the column of roaring water. Hundreds of thousand gallons of water consumed the you boy. Boongar was flipped and spun as he hit the bottom of the waterfall. He could only hear the gurgle of the river in his ears, the flow of liquid against his skin. And all of that was before Boongar blacked out.

Gishky took her position in tree, her usual spot each time she came to this part of the woods. It was somewhere along the highway, running through a busy city and a one-hundred acres of woodland

surrounding it. From this position, she could see the distant buildings the humans made. Their great accomplishments, built on the backs of many of her dead kind.

But within the city she looked at, she knew that riches abound. She'd been there, once. A beautiful place if her memory served her right, despite the hands that created it. And within all those memories a nasty one came that soured her expression. A bad encounter with a few humans she couldn't shake, and it made her hesitant to interact with them again.

But another hindering factor, a major one, was her appearance. Gishky was a ferran, of a specific breed known as goblins. She had green skin covered in fire hairs, a pig's snout and long sharp ears. Her father was a ferran who had lion's blood, so Gishky inherited his tail and shaggy black hair. Ferrans were often mistaken for man-eating monsters unless they opened their mouth and spoke human tongue or wore clothes. And even then, the very sight of them still made humans nervous. So ferrans tended to keep away.

Gishky sighed. She had plans for herself, but sadly her longing leaned in the direction of humanity's society. She would find a clear path to what she wanted, but for now she had to content herself with finding a living within her confines. Gishky climbed down the tree gracefully, landing on the ground. She wore a craggy grey tunic with tethered hems, along with her underwear and a backpack strung around her. On her Gishky's right arm was a brace in which she placed her knife, and tied to her thigh were smoke-bombs in case she needed to make a quick getaway.

Gishky's residence was the Hochinti Woods, a place where the trees grew loosely or in thickets. Bountiful in plant produce, which also meant grazers and predators were abundant as well. Gishky's eyes often took a glance around her, on the lookout for anything stalking her. She had a good mental map of the area from experience, and knew certain monsters roamed these uninhabited parts, however Gishky managed to make her journey without incident, only occasionally encountering lone yikreeks, cayotes and wild cats she scared off with shouts and rocks.

She passed many different trees and bushes bearing fruits and nuts, which was her real reason for coming out to this section of the forest, however there were also plants to be avoided. Napper-vines, red with pointed hairs, stuck to flesh and were very irritating, and some plants, unlucky enough one may be to encounter them, had a mind of their own, and loathed both ferrans and humans alike. But Gishky soon reached a familiar path and she felt a weight lifted off her back. It was a bare one commonly taken by the residents, and to her right it led to the small community in which Gishky lived.

However, she looked down the other direction, wondering with a solemn silence. Eventually Gishky tore her eyes from the set of dark trees and continued home. It was mid-afternoon, and the sunshine had risen to the top of the trees, casting mosaic and matted shade. Gishky's mind still wondered on the path behind her, as she'd heard many stories about what dwelled in that section, the no-zone. She'd heard that monsters lived there along with fiendish folks. Even spirits that devoured misbehaving children, or the boogey men known for sodomizing the lost. But Gishky had to rest today, she had work to do tomorrow.

The path eventually split into three others that wound around the trees, creating a crossroads. Gishky took the one to her left, where she soon came upon a brick house of the side of the road. The yard had bare earth, and the domed house had a roof built over another section where a man could be seen tending to various equipment in what seemed like a workshop. He was a grazzleta ferran, a breed with yellowish-brown skin, a horse's head and dark spines going down their backs.

Gishky was familiar with the man, and waved at him and said, "I see you're busy, Donkek."

The man looked up from his work. Donkek smiled with huge teeth and said, "Ah, Gishky! I see you're coming from the farm—looking good as well."

Gishky said, "I got a good batch time. I'll start baking tomorrow."

Donkek said, "Do you want to stop by for something to eat before you reach home? I have roasted rabbit inside."

"Don't bother," she said. "I have some food at home I need to cook before it spoils."

Gishky felt the lecherous eyes weight of his Donkek's eyes on her like a large rock, not to mention she heard he had a horse's cock, which with her just being five feet tall and one hundred pounds, she wasn't interested in being ripped open.

Gishky passed another residence of feathered ferrans and went up a road of flat stones, which was a dead end to a shack made of thick wood and a roof coated in a special wax that prevented water from being absorbed. The building was fairly large, and right next to it was a latrine leading directly into the human sewer system. Gishky stopped in her yard, looking around the perimeter bordered by barbed wire around posts. She sniffed the air, and swept her eyes across. Satisfied no one was waiting to ambush her, Gishky opened the lock on her door and entered her house.

Gishky did her best to make her abode as comfortable as possible. She divided half the room with a large curtain, with the front being used for storage of her food and cooking and back her sleeping place and her personal belongings. There were paper charms hanging on the walls, along with maps and

a black and white photograph of some old forest. From the ceiling hung a disc-like lantern in bronze frame shaped like flowers, and a large oven sat in the corner of the room next to the window.

Gishky went to a cupboard where she stored her goods; the berries, nuts and fruits she got. She would start baking early tomorrow, to carry out the goods by noon to be sold to merchants in the market. A ferran market of course, however a few humans did pass through looking for food and other materials.

Gishky started the fire under the stove and went outside to catch some water. But as she stepped out of her house, Gishky saw a sudden presence and froze. “Huh?”

Two strangers were in her yard. One held a bucket under the pipe while another manned the knob. They resembled squat humanoids covered in blue fur, except the chest and face which was bare. They had dark eyes and pink noses, and two bulb-antennae stood atop their heads.

“Electites?” Gishky said. The creatures were ferran, though of a lower brow. But Gishky didn’t care for the species of the intruders. They still violated her privacy. “Hey!”

The electites flinched and snapped their heads in her direction. The one holding the bucket said, “People!” The other one hissed.

Gishky snarled and ran at them. The one with the bucket dropped it, and the two electites hurried to the back of the yard. Gishky gave chase until they ducked beneath a dugout under the fence. Gishky threw her bucket at them. “Fuck!”

Gishky calmed down, and examined the hole. It seemed fresh, as the soil around it was still loose. Chances are they might have been watching her house, then waited until she left. But why would they have wanted water? There plenty of water bodies throughout the forest. But it was a debacle Gishky didn’t entertain for long, however. She kicked the dirt back into place and returned to her duties.

Gishky made dinner; a stew of dried rabbit meat and vegetables. After she was finished, Gishky took a bath, went inside and got dressed in just a simple tunic. Usually in the evenings she and the neighbors would have played a game of cards, but today no one had the energy. So, as she sat in her home, Gishky decided there were other ways to spend her time. She pulled the curtains over her sleeping area, and took up one of many books she had on a stump. Gishky wasn’t wearing any underwear, which made it easier to touch her privates. She opened the book and slowly skipped through the pages, looking at the various diagrams of men and women in sexual positions. As she did Gishky slowly rubbed her vagina, massaging her clitoris. Then Gishky rubbed it harder, sticking her fingers inside herself, biting

her lip and making soft moans. Soon the contractions followed, and Gishky let out a long sign and laid there, wallowing in the soothing sensation.

It had been years since Gishky had a mate, and her only source of pleasure was the nude magazine, her imagination and hands. Often in her lonely nights she'd contemplated taking up Donkek's offer, but somehow felt laying with him would have leave a bad taste in her mouth. Alas Gishky decided she would have to do herself for now, until a more attractive male came around.

Gishky went to bed early, waking just before sunrise to start work. She got the oven ready, prepared her utensils and ingredients, and proceeded to ground the berries, cut the fruits and bake the nuts before adding them to the duo. In the end, Gishky baked six cakes eight inches in diameter, with each two being either fruit, nut or berry flavored, scenting the room with a sweet aroma. Gishky placed them in a special suitcase that hung at her side and stepped out of the house, inhaling the cool air. The sun has just risen, lending shadows all over. Along with the cakes, Gishky had her usually combat equipment, but she wasn't going to walk all the way. Gishky went around her house just to make sure no one else was watching. There weren't any more holes dug under the fence, so she departed.

It was a twenty-minute walk until Gishky reached a bus stop—or what the local ferrans had as its equivalent. Two other persons were there with her as well. One being a short insectoid female with a round head and green-tinged body, and the other resembling a baboon. The insectoid breed was known as a prinjika, while the ape-like male was mandruss. Certain breeds of ferran had special traits and very unique biology, as in the case of the mandruss, they were an all-male species who reproduced with selected ape-like creatures, usually humans or grismarks. However, being a goblin, Gishky had the flexibility of being able to sire the young of either ape or reptile so long as they had the base human blood or goblin blood.

They sat under a roof of matted leaves on clay stumps, waiting on their transport to arrive. Soon they saw it coming around the bend, a large cart being drawn by a natured brown bull. They all stood as the driver, a ferran in brown garbs and a wide beak, stopped before them.

“Good morning folks,” he said. “Pay and hop on in.”

He collected payment, which were silver coins, and the passengers all climbed in with their goods. They sat on low benches with their bags and baskets before them, and were carried to the market on a fifteen-minute journey. The man yelled some words and slapped the reigns, making the bull increase its pace.

The trees grew less as the city in the distance got closer. Eventually they left the forest, coming onto a highway of paved streets. They were in human territory now, though not in the heart of it. Soon they saw low lying buildings up the road they went, until they came upon the market area. It was a cluster of blocky enclosures owned and operated by the overseers of the area. In addition, there were many carts scattered through the busy, noisy streets from where the vendors sold when they didn't want to rent the stalls provided. Fruits, meat, cosmetics and even hunting tool were on sale, including a plethora of other things. The cart stopped near an area next to others, and Gishky and the occupants left.

Gishky knew her destination, and casually made her way through the busy bodies towards it. She glimpsed what the others were selling, having been contemplating getting a proper weapon besides her knife. She didn't live in any government occupied territory whether human or ferran, so she didn't see the need for a license as yet, but if she wanted to work and operate in places like this, she would need one eventually.

Gishky came to a wide street, leading into a thin group of trees where a high, rusted wall stood. From it she could hear faint excited cheers, and a smile came to her face. Eager to set foot in the area, she hurried to the merchant. She found the stall, where a female wearing an apron with porcine features was selling muffins, cakes and bread. She was assisted by two prinjikas who shared the portions while she collected the money. Gishky greeted her, and they did business relatively quickly. Gishky sold her each cake for one hundred fifty galasi each, the common currency across the land. But Gishky took her payment not in bill fold but silver coins, each worth fifty galasi.

Gishky thanked her and left, returning to the street that had her attention just a moment ago. There she made her way to the rusted, metallic walls, where the screams and shouts got louder. Gishky came upon a gate, with a sign above it that read 'Arena of Fangs,' a common name given to a place where monsters were made to do battle.

At the gate were guards wearing chainmail and carrying crude, compact blasters.

"Good morning fellows," Gishky said. "What's the line-up today?"

One of them said, "Yikreeks fighting wolves—the usual. It's on the poster inside."

Gishky smiled. "Sounds fun."

"Any weapons?" the other one said.

Gishky showed them her knife and her pocket bombs. As long as she had no rifles, Gishky could pass. They opened the gate and allowed her inside, and the noise suddenly doubled in volume as she entered a space that went all round the stadium. The section she was in was closed off from the rest of

the stadium by walls, with a single path leading to a row of already occupied seats. Gishky glanced out into the arena, however she couldn't see much of what was going on there.

But Gishky wasn't alone, and others were in line at a table buying their tickets or at one of the vendors getting snacks. Gishky joined the line and bought a ticket, then purchased a bag of dried fruits with her change. She walked into the stand and could now see everyone cheering wildly as the two creatures went at each other. Gishky quickly took a seat and watched.

The two combatants were a wrangler and knuckdent, the former resembling a small, skinny human with sharp teeth and claws while the latter resembled a squat humanoid with copper skin, segmented arms and legs and large fists it was famous for. As the two tried to land a fatal blow on the other, Gishky wondered the origins of these creatures. They were different from monsters or ferrans, because the circumstances of these beings were not natural birth, but the result of soul-fragments from the deceases being shaped and molded by the force of the universe into new beings. They were derlkia.

The wrangler, its steel-blue skin contrasting the soil, was the result of violent mortals dying, and the leftovers of their departed souls being turned into violent beings that devour both human and ferran flesh. The knuckdents were the remains of those who had a strong affinity for combat, having been turned into beasts that spend their time training and fighting. One could say they were literal ghosts, though more attached to the physical plain and their behavior government by a strict set of rules.

They were the perfect specimens to have fight.

The wrangler, quicker than its opponent, dashed around the knuckdent and took swipe and bites before leaping back from the knuckdent's fists. The knuckdent had suffered several bloody marks on its arms as result of this tactic, but the wrangler hadn't gone unscathed, evident by one of its swollen eyes. Gishky didn't like the loathsome natures of wranglers, and decided to bet on the knuckdent.

The wrangler went on all four now, moving more animalistic. The knuckdent couldn't properly land its punches so low, and the wrangler slipped passed its defense and bit just behind its knee. The knuckdent snarled, and the crowd had a sudden burst of hoots. With its mobility now hindered, the knuckdent suffered from the multiple slashes the wrangler now freely laid upon it.

"Come on!" said Gishky. "Hit that little shit already!"

But the knuckdent wasn't about to bite the dust just yet, and was biding time for the wrangler to leave itself open. Just as the man-eater pounced one more, the knuckdent crouched, and rose with an uppercut square in the wrangler's jaw with a loud crack.

The crowd cheered at the wrangler was thrown onto its back. The knuckdent wasn't finished, and ground-and-pound the helpless monster in its head until its skull caved in.

Those cheering for the knuckdent rose and applauded the creature, and it responded by standing atop the wrangler with a fist raised. The wrangler's body, like all derlkia that die, began to deteriorate, flesh and bone, until nothing but a slowly evaporating puddle was left.

Gishky entertained herself with another match between a giant rooster and giant snake, and left the stadium after the bird became the reptile's next meal. Gishky returned to the forest by another cart that dropped her off at the bus stop around 2:30 pm. Gishky returned home, and her paranoia led her to the back of her house. No activity again, and Gishky finally relaxed. She went inside and put away the coins in a case where she had several more. Gishky laid on her bed contemplating her future. She didn't know how she would reach there, but just wanted a life of luxury. But Gishky knew that wasn't going to happen without money.

Gishky lived in a land where people found value in many things that they were willing to pay for, and Gishky wanted to within those fields. One was sex, but she didn't feel physically up to being mounted by a bunch of strange men or women. Then there was food. In some places the commodity of food was a scarcity due to spoiled soil or competition with monsters. Hunters were often employed to deal with this issue, but Gishky wasn't that skilled at killing things bigger than a boar. Then there were the ancient ruins of the first civilization, scattered across the continent, and filled with various and vast treasures. Some of these were even fabled to extend one's longevity, including various special mineral deposits that can also fetch a high price.

But Gishky had no vehicle, no weapons, and no proper registration or money to embark on any of these endeavors.

Still, Gishky wasn't going to give up. At the very least, she could save enough money to buy weapons and a vehicle to go on proper explorations, then she would determine if monster or treasure hunting was more lucrative. With sunlight left to spare, Gishky decided to gather some more ingredients for her next batch of cakes. She got her gear together, however this time she reached into a small box and took out three special items. They were charmtags. Thick rectangular sheets of paper with an arcane sigil on both sides, topped with a wooden clip. They were magical items purposed for rendering monsters and derlkia incapacitated for a few hours, and Gishky felt the urge today to walk with them.

Gishky made her way to the usual place where the fruits and nuts grew. Just as she walking through the trees, Gishky noticed hurried movements around her, and when she looked around, Gishky

saw humanoid figures scurrying through the bushes. The woman took out her knife and a pocketbomb. “Stay back, I’m warning you all!”

Growls and sparks came from the bushes, and three electites from different directions came charging at her. Their fur bristling with electricity. Gishky felt a sudden burst of adrenaline and ran from them. She swore, then quickly spun around and tossed a pocketbomb. It exploded with four times the force of a fire cracker, and the electites suddenly yelped and stopped.

Gishky, seizing the moment, charged at one of them. “You little shit!” She kicked an electite onto its back. But Gishky sustained a shock that made her yelp as well. The electite made a pained whimper, and it and the others suddenly retreated into the bushes. Gishky took out one more pocketbomb and looked around for the next round of attackers. It never came, and once the tingling sensation in her foot was gone, Gishky left the area.

But if almost being electrocuted by the monsters wasn’t enough, Gishky came upon the unbearable fact that she wasn’t the only one seeking the naturally grown produce around these parts, as a heard of snortonks had found the bounty and were already gorging themselves. A snortonk resembled an elephant, though a smaller one with brown skin and black hair on its back. It had a slightly longer neck, with upturned ears and a long tail. They were forest dwellers who traveled in herds of up to thirty plus members, and Gishky, her shoulders slumped in defeat, witnessed the massive beasts devouring any shrub, bush and low-lying tree in their way.

“You’ve got to be shittin’ me,” Gishky said. She couldn’t just throw a pocketbomb into the middle of them less she frightened them into a frenzy and got trampled to death. Gishky rubbed her head. She took a last scowl at the snortonks and walk back the way she came. She reached the path, but just as she was about to head home, Gishky stopped and looked in the other direction, where the Shaded Boscage was. She pursed her lips, unclenching her fists apprehensively. In the years she’d been here she hadn’t once gone in that direction in fear of the tales she heard. But Gishky thought; if she ever did want to explore ancient ruins for treasure or slay massive monsters, this would be a good a place as ever to start.

Gishky took a reassured breath, lifted her breast, then carefully walked to the entrance to the Shaded Boscage. She stopped at the mouth where she saw wooden charms hung on the totems at the entrance and the trees at the front, going on for what looked like nearly three hundred meters across. They were placed there by the same person who Gishky purchased the charmtags from.

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