

Ronkerz's voice roared out, vibrating the stone under Victor's feet. "Which Big One shall we choose to face this disciple of death, Rumble Town? I'll give you a choice! Will it be Zara Bloodmoon, daughter of Rex Hangar and wielder of the Midnight Scythe, or will it be Gorruk the Crusher, Wrecker of Bones, and Ravager of the Lich King?" If the crowd made any noise while Ronkerz spoke, Victor couldn't hear them, but as soon as he finished, the onlookers broke into two distinct chants. Some rhythmically yelled, "*Zara, Zara, Zara,*" while others contended with, "*Gorruk, Gorruk, Gorruk!*"

Victor watched Arona while the denizens of Rumble Town shouted for their favorite champions. She stood still, her twisted black staff planted in the ground before her, while cold-looking blue mist seeped out of the dirt and blasted stone, forming a hazy cloud that rose to her knees. Something moved in the cloud of vaporous air, and Victor thought he saw a faintly luminescent form lurking within it. Was she already summoning her minions? Was Ronkerz going to allow that? It seemed so, for, as Victor glanced up to him, the great simian lord of the dungeon seemed to be basking in the roars of the crowd, enjoying their contest.

Before long, it became clear that the Gorruk supporters would win. Slowly but surely, more and more people stopped chanting for Zara, and the cries for Gorruk grew louder and louder. After a handful of minutes, Ronkerz stepped to the edge of his high cave and held his arms wide, silencing the crowd. "Rumble Town, you have chosen! Gorruk the Crusher, take the field!"

One of the shadowy, hulking figures behind Ronkerz stepped forward and leaped off the ledge, falling to the ground with a tremendous impact that Victor felt through the stone, jarring the bones in his ankles and knees. When Gorruk stood tall, Victor winced—he was an imposing figure. The Big One was a reptilian creature that towered over Arona, easily more than ten feet tall. He wore red leather straps for armor but carried a massive metal-spiked shield and a hammer that looked fit for pounding boulders into dust. He arched his back, angled his alligator maw toward the sky, and roared.

To her credit, Arona didn't flinch, and rather than quail before his display of brute power, she flung out her hand, scattering a dozen tiny bones in a semi-circle behind the Big One. Ronkerz made it clear he knew things were kicking off by shouting, "*Fight!*" Gorruk dashed forward, his spiked shield leading the way. Victor thought it was about to be over before it started, but Arona's spectral companion rose from the mist, placing itself in the giant's path. Victor's eyes widened at the sight of the specter.

The ghostly, semi-ethereal, semi-solid being was skeletally gaunt, clothed in ragged, luminescent chain mail, wearing a horned helm, and wielding nothing but dagger-like claws on its hands. Still, it was huge, fast, and apparently quite strong. It rose from the mist looming over Arona and was more than a match for Gorruk's rushing form as it wrapped the claws of its right hand around the edge of his shield and stepped to the side, pulling the giant with it, forcing him to stumble as he windmilled his hammer for balance.

"Take him, Shol-pan!" Arona cried. Again, the specter wailed, and he leaped after Gorruk, raking his long claws in a savage, wild frenzy, tearing long, blood grooves in the giant's flesh, ripping the straps of his armor to shreds and sending bright red blood spraying in arcs with each lightning-fast, hacking gash. Gorruk screamed his fury and pain, but Victor felt something was off. The dozens of cuts were deep and bloody, but Gorruk's scream didn't have even a hint of desperation in it. In fact, Victor recognized a kindred battle lust in that sound, and he knew Gorruk was just getting warmed up.

As the gashes mounted and Gorruk was driven further and further from Arona, the Death Caster began to surge with deep, cold Energy, preparing another spell. As she lifted her staff, Gorruk roared and whirled, lashing out with his spiked shield. Victor thought the specter, Shol-pan, would evade the blow, or perhaps ignore it, being less than solid flesh, but the shield struck true and, with a splash of blue-white ectoplasmic flesh, Arona's champion was thrown to the side, crumpled and deformed, tumbling over the charred stones of the arena.

Victor winced, but as he turned back to Arona, the air temperature dropped by a dozen degrees. She held her arms wide, a strained, rictus grin on her face, as a whirlwind of ghostly, ethereal blades exploded into existence, streaking toward Gorruk. The blades howled as they sliced the air, and the temperature continued to plummet as they seemed to suck the very life out of the arena, riming everything with a frigid layer of hoarfrost as they traversed the space. Gorruk had barely turned from his struggle with Shol-pan when the whirlwind struck.

He lifted his shield, roared, and then bright lances of Energy exploded from the spiked surface like a starburst. Where the beams of light shone, the blades disintegrated, and the frost melted. The temperature in the arena immediately began to recover as half of Arona's spectral blade storm was destroyed on impact. Still, the other half, the straggling, sputtering remnant of the whirlwind, washed over Gorruk and added to the many bleeding gashes on his hulking, green-scaled body. Even so, as his blood pooled on the stones, he stood resolute and straight when the spell faded.

Victor looked at Arona, trying to gauge her strength, but, to his surprise, she'd faded from view in a new bank of ghostly fog. Gorruk strode toward it, but then, with an explosion of grave-scented Energy, like moist soil and fresh decay, the bones Arona had strewn out earlier sprang into the air. They rapidly multiplied and grew until a small army of skeletal minions surrounded the cloud of blue-tinted fog. Each of the skeletons' skulls, in all their variety, held bright, ghostly blue lights in their eye sockets, and they turned, in unison, to focus on Gorruk. The way they moved in perfect synchrony made Victor shudder as a chill ran down his spine.

Gorruk didn't wait for the skeletal monsters to act; he charged on a streak of light like a sunbeam toward the one furthest to the left and smashed it to bits with a cacophonous impact of his shield. The skeletal warrior's bones flew with a clatter, but the other skeletons leaped into action, jumping, charging, and sliding over the ground to engage Gorruk from every side. Some wielded claws, but others held gleaming weapons—hammers, axes, spears, and swords. Considering how quickly Gorruk had killed the first one, Victor thought they must not be very tough, but he was surprised to see them pushing the giant, reptilian man back.

Gorruk fought with an impressive fury; he smashed his hammer in wide arcs, and it wrought destruction on any bones it touched—shattering ribs, smashing skulls, crushing shoulders, hips, and spines. The skeletons didn't die passively; they stabbed and hacked at Gorruk, carving more and more bloody rents in his scaly hide. Meanwhile, Arona didn't stand idly by. Victor didn't know what she was doing, but she floated around the melee, planting white, coldly pulsating rods into the stone as though it were clay.

Several times, Gorruk saw what she was doing and tried to intervene, charging toward her, but each time, one of her skeletal minions interceded on her behalf, taking the charge and sacrificing its life. Victor swore he saw Gorruk destroy dozens of the skeletons, yet they kept coming, and that's when he realized they weren't staying dead. No matter how badly Gorruk shattered them, the constructs slowly reformed, their bones pulling together on threads of pale-blue Energy.

He could see the Big One growing frustrated. His grunts grew more ragged and hoarse, his swings wilder and more reckless, and his blazing sunlight blasts more frequent. However, even the skeletons destroyed by that bright power didn't stay dead, and Victor felt a grin growing on his lips—Arona was going to wear him down. That's when he saw Arona's spectral champion, Shol-pan, rise from where he'd been thrown and dive into the fray, knocking aside some of his smaller allies in his eagerness to lay into Gorruk with his ten-inch spectral claws.

Arona stabbed a seventh white rod into the stone, and then she rose up, carried by her spectral mist, to look down upon the melee at the center of her formation. She clapped her hands, shouted a word that felt strange to Victor's ears, and fired a beam of strangely pulsating Energy into the nearest rod. The device absorbed the torrent of Energy and then flared with white, sickly light that made Victor's eyes water and his stomach feel queasy. The light shot forth from one rod to the next, creating a sort of luminescent netting over Gorruk and the undead minions fighting within the formation.

"Holy shit! Yes, *chica!*" Victor growled, pounding his fist into his palm as the net of sickly, ethereal Energy began to contract, passing harmlessly through the undead monsters in the ring but pressing down against Gorruk's scales with sizzling, hissing burns that brought wild, enraged screams from the reptilian's throat. As the bands of deathly Energy tightened, burning into the Big One and driving him to his knees, Arona's mist began to fade, and she slowly lowered to the stone ground.

Victor could tell she was exhausted, and it seemed she was trying to conserve some of her waning Energy because she waved her hand, and her skeletal minions collapsed in heaps of bone that crumbled to dust, leaving behind only the tiny, singular enchanted bones from which they'd sprung. During the battle, Victor had thought the minions were simply exceptionally resilient, reforming and rejoining the fight over and over, but he now realized that Arona had used her own Energy to rebuild or heal them each time. She sagged against her staff, watching as Shol-pan, too, faded away into wisps of blue smoke.

Gorruk thrashed and writhed, and Victor could see the bands of Energy cutting into him deeper and deeper, driving him down, apparently helpless to resist. Arona held up her left hand and slowly, with great effort, began to clench it into a fist. Gorruk screamed in rage and pain, and just when Victor thought the fight was over, that he was done for, the scream shifted in tenor from pain and frustration to bone-deep rage.

Suddenly, Victor felt a pull on his Core, like he stood in the presence of something massive, something profoundly powerful. Then, just as he steadied himself and focused on Gorruk, the source of that enormous surge of Energy, he saw the reptilian man begin to change. His body swelled grotesquely, rippling as bones expanded and shifted beneath his flesh. The bloody cuts, gashes, and stab wounds spread wide, ripping and joining in long, gory furrows that rapidly filled in with glistening, iridescent green scales.

As the Big One's body expanded, Arona's trap formation fought to hold him down, to cut into him, but the Energy waves pouring out of Gorruk negated their deathly Energy, and, one by one, the sickly white metallic rods *pinged* out of the rocky ground, tumbling away to clang and clatter on the arena walls. Arona fell to her knees, her pale arms shakily catching her from falling onto her face.

Victor felt the dryness in his mouth and realized he'd been holding it open. He licked his lips. "Come on, Arona! Get up!" As if she'd heard him, the Death Caster struggled to her feet, stumbling back from the still writhing, still expanding, still *roaring* Gorrुक. Victor shifted his gaze to watch the gigantic reptilian form taking shape at the center of the arena.

Victor had likened the Big One's snout to that of an alligator earlier, but now he was cursing the thought—Gorrुक was, indeed, transforming into something gigantic and crocodilian. His scales were nothing like those of an Earth-based alligator or crocodile, though; they gleamed and shimmered like metal. Worse, he'd sprouted a massive, twenty-foot tale, the tip of which ended in a knobby bone-like protrusion adorned with razor-sharp spines.

As the monster thrashed back and forth, shaking off the last vestiges of his former body and armor, he whirled to aim one of his crocodilian eyes at Arona. The giant monstrosity heaved and huffed, puffing great billowing breaths out through his enormous nostrils as the eye narrowed in a hungry, almost lecherous stare. Each of Gorrुक's four legs was as big as Arona's entire body, and they all ended in great, black, scimitar-like claws. As the monster slowly began to circle his prey, for Victor couldn't see the depleted Death Caster as anything less, Ronkerz's voice boomed out, echoing off the canyon walls.

"Arona! You may yield! Gorrुक's restraint is limited with his bloodline running wild!"

Arona, holding her staff between herself and the gigantic reptile, took a shaky step back and looked up at Ronkerz's shelf, then to her right, locking eyes with Victor. What he saw in those depthless black pools didn't look like resignation or even fear. Determination was plainly written on her face, and Victor sucked in his breath when he realized she wouldn't be giving up. He almost shouted for her to concede, but something in him wouldn't let his lips form those words. Instead, he took a deep breath and bellowed, "*Kill* that fucker!"

Arona gave him a brief nod, and then, just as before, Victor felt the temperature in the arena begin to dip as faintly luminescent, blue-tinged mist began to rise from the ground. Arona raised her staff high and took a deep breath. Victor could feel her gathering Energy; the potential of her spell pulled at him, almost like the weighty nature of Gorrुक's transformation. He leaned forward in anticipation, waiting to see what she would do, but the great reptile wasn't willing to be patient—with a swish of its enormous tail for impetus, Gorrुक launched himself forward and closed his great jaws over Arona with a thunderous *snap*.

One second, she'd been about to work her magic, her staff held high. The next, only half her body remained to bleed out onto the blacked stone of the arena floor. It happened so quickly that she never cried out. She'd been looking at Gorrुक, so Victor never saw her face, never got a chance to see if fear entered her steely gaze. He'd never know if she'd been surprised or embarrassed. He hoped not. He hoped she was too focused on her magic, too full of adrenaline and anger to see Gorrुक coming. He hoped she died with that bravery in her heart and that she'd carry it with her to the Spirit Plane.

The ground shook as Ronkerz leaped down and hooked one of his massive arms around Gorrुक's thick, scaly neck. At first, Victor thought he was congratulating him, but when he saw him squeeze, he wondered if he was angry. Would he punish the giant reptile? Would he kill him? As he squeezed Gorrुक's thick neck, holding him steady, Victor saw him snake his other arm into that toothy maw and slowly extract the bloody, saliva-covered other half of Arona's body. "Too much good equipment here for you to digest, champion."

The arena broke into an uproar of cheering as Arona's upper half landed on the stone with a wet *squelch*. Her bloody, slime-covered face happened to be staring directly at Victor. Those depthless pools had glazed over. Her pretty, pale face had deep tooth grooves ripped from brow to chin, and her tongue protruded from her carefully stained black lips. Victor felt heat rising in his chest, saw his vision tinting red, and, before he realized he was doing it, he started stalking toward the corpse.

"Halt, boy!" Ronkerz roared, and once again, Victor felt the weight of the veil walker's aura pushing him back. Victor ignored him, his eyes locked on Arona's defiled corpse. One after the other, he continued to take steps. It felt like walking up a mountain through burning, oxygenless air with ten-thousand-pound chains hooked to his ankles. Still, he progressed—vessels bursting in his eyes, blood flowing from his nose and ears, and veins standing out like rivers of blood on his engorged muscles.

Ronkerz scowled, and the arena grew hushed. He took two strides to Victor and reached up with one of his enormous hands to grasp his neck, halting his forward movement. The grip felt like a band of steel, and it reminded Victor of his time as a slave in the Greatbone Mine, further fueling his rage. He opened his pathways, letting his Core unload into them, ready to cast Volcanic Fury and go for broke, but then, as suddenly as a switch being thrown, he felt the pressure of a tremendous will *pushing* his Energy back into his Core.

His mind cleared, the red in his vision faded, and Victor realized that his hands were wrapped around Ronkerz's wrist, straining to pull his grasping fingers away from his neck. Lifedrinker lay at his feet. When had he dropped her? Ronkerz must have seen the clarity enter his eyes because he nodded, then slowly relaxed his grip on Victor's throat. "That eager to do battle, eh, boy? Well, you'll get your chance, but not against me. Not yet, anyway." He glanced down at Arona's mutilated corpse. "Angry at her rough treatment? I'm not terribly pleased, either. Take heart—I'll give her a good resting place."

Once again, Ronkerz *moved*—faster and more adroitly than Victor's eyes could properly track. He tried, though, and thought he saw some blurs of motion here and there, but still, almost without any trace, Ronkerz, Arona's body, and the gigantic, crocodilian champion were gone. Victor stood alone in the arena. He stooped to pick up Lifedrinker and, with her resting on one shoulder, slowly turned, soaking in the attention of the onlookers.

He sent some Energy into the runes on his armor, reactivating it, cladding himself in heavy red-black metal, scales, and leather. Lifting Lifedrinker high, he screamed—nothing articulate, no words, just a primal, bloodthirsty cry for battle, chaos, and blood. His outburst was fueled by fear and rage, but when the crowd roared their enthusiasm, the glory in his Core surged, and a mad grin twisted Victor's lips as he deeply inhaled, soaking up their enthusiasm. They wanted to see him fight, and he would give them something to remember.