

Boathouse Blues

By A.C. Hall

The fog settled heavy on the surface of the River Styx. The wails of the damned reverberated off the walls of the pit, reaching all the way up to the riverbank. Charon the Ferryman stood impatiently by the water. His long, bony fingers tightened around the wooden pole he used to guide his craft and he let out a long sigh.

“Today you imbeciles!” Charon barked.

The crashing of items was the final straw, and he whirled on his heel and turned to face his boathouse. He stalked towards it, ready to turn his ferryman pole into a weapon. The double doors swung open and his servants appeared, his boat hoisted above their heads.

The lead servant was a pinkish demon. Due to a pigment disorder, he'd been born looking more like a pig than a fearsome hellion. He stood just over two feet tall and had just one wing where most demons had two. He walked backwards, directing the rest of Charon's servants as they carried the boat towards the river. He was called Oinker, but had no idea if that had been his original name or not.

“You know I don't like to be kept waiting,” Charon snapped as they passed.

“You promised us the day off, master,” Oinker said.

Charon kicked him, sending him tumbling towards the water's edge. Oinker dug his claws into the ground and held on for dear life. He'd seen men go into the dark waters of the River Styx before. It was a grim fate and one he wasn't interested in experiencing.

“Watch your tone with me abomination,” Charon said. “You work when I say you work.”

Charon glared at Oinker for another moment, his black eyes full of hate. His gaunt skin was so thin it was almost see through, and his eyes were set deep back into the sockets, giving him a very skeletal look all his own. He pulled up his heavy hood and his face disappeared in the long shadows it cast.

One of the living skeletons carrying the boat muttered angrily under his breath. Oinker looked over quickly and shook his head. He knew it was his friend Bones sticking up from him, but as his eyes shot from one skeleton to the other he couldn't discern which was Bones. This was a reoccurring issue throughout their unlikely friendship, and one that caused Bones to feel underappreciated.

Oinker only knew the names of three of the six skeletons. Bones had worked for the Ferryman the longest, and a hundred years of service together had brought he and Oinker quite close. Then there was Ribs, who sometimes told stories of his life as a human when he was in a rare good mood, and lastly came Skullzor, a boastful skeleton who spent most nights trying to convince them that he'd been a powerful warlock who ruled huge kingdoms in the 1400's on Earth.

When they were away from Charon and talking, Oinker knew the three instantly, but when silent and gathered together they all looked identical.

The skeletons dropped the boat into the water, with two remaining to hold it still for Charon. Oinker led the other four back to the boathouse to get the second boat.

"This is unfair," one of the skeletons grumbled.

"Tell me about it," Oinker said. "We haven't had a day off in eight years."

"Beats guard duty in the pit," one skeleton offered.

Oinker shook his head.

"Charon sent me down there once," Oinker said. "They get five days off a year and sleep in beds."

"We sleep in the mud!" Bones said.

"Somebody should say something to Charon. We work hard, it's time he showed us some appreciation," one skeleton said.

All four skeletons looked at Oinker. His wing flapped as he shook his head.

"Oh no, they still tell stories about the last demon that stood up to the Ferryman," Oinker said. "Legend says Charon turned him into a toilet and banished him to a truckstop on Earth!"

"What's a truckstop?" one of the skeletons asked.

Oinker sometimes forgot that some of the skeletons died long before there were motor vehicles.

“It doesn’t matter, let’s get this boat out there before we get in more trouble,” Oinker said.

They carried the second boat to the water where an unhappy Ferryman was waiting. He was already in his boat, a sleek and neatly kept craft built and cared for by Oinker and the skeletons, while his seven servants piled into a rundown, splintered boat that defied the odds every time it made it across the river without sinking.

One unlucky skeleton had the task of taking the rope from the servants craft and tying it to the obscured rung on the bottom of Charon’s craft. Oinker didn’t know why the River Styx didn’t affect skeletons the same way it did people with flesh, but he still didn’t envy anyone having to plunge into those dark waters.

When the rope was secure, the skeletons settled into their positions and started to row. Their spines ached before they were even halfway across, the unholy waters making the journey across infinitely more difficult than it would be in regular water. Charon stood tall in his boat, symbolically plunging his ferryman’s pole into the water from time to time. The River Styx was actually hundreds of feet deep, but Charon thought the pole made him look majestic. Truth was, without his servants pulling him along in their own boat, he’d float aimlessly down the River Styx for all of eternity.

As they got further out on the water, the fog thickened. Charon’s boat disappeared behind them and they were all alone. This was Oinker’s favorite part of the journey across the River Styx. He’d stand at the head of the boat and pretend to be a captain, out adventuring with his three friends and three other guys.

All too soon the fantasy was over. They arrived at the far bank of the river. People littered the shore, lying about in various states of decay and unrest. When they saw the boat, all but the longest tenured of them got up and started rushing forward.

Charon had no interest in these lost souls. People who arrived in the Underworld without the coin to pay for the crossing were less than trash to him. They were a nuisance, and that was certainly the way Oinker thought of them too. While he felt bad that they had to spend eternity sitting on a muddy riverbank, they made his job much more difficult than it would have been other wise.

“Okay people, back up, you know the drill,” Oinker said as he hopped off the boat onto the shore.

Some of the dirtiest among them, a sign they’d been on the riverbank a long time, immediately obeyed, but others came forward.

“Take me across!” one old man yelled.

One of the skeletons stepped up and punched the old man, knocking him back.

“Behave in an orderly fashion and we won’t get violent,” Oinker said.

He took no joy in hurting these people, but sometimes that was the job.

“I won’t be left behind again!” a woman wailed.

She surged forward, as did several others. The skeletons greeted them with stiff jabs and one keenly performed roundhouse kick. Oinker watched, unaware that a portly gentleman was approaching him from behind. The man punted Oinker like a football, sending him up into the air above the angry mob of lost souls.

Oinker concentrated and flapped his wing as hard and fast as he could. The only time he ever envied his demon brethren was when he saw them flying. No matter how hard he tried, his single wing could never work well enough to make him fly.

Just as usual, his wing fluttered fast, but accomplished nothing. He crashed to the ground and was immediately met with a downpour of kicks and punches. Sitting on a riverbank for eternity tended to give people a lot of time to build up anger, and they unleashed it upon Oinker. He tried to keep his wing wrapped around his body and his hands covering his face, but the beating grew in severity and he found himself ready to burst into desperate sobs.

Just when he thought he could take no more, a skeleton came charging into the crowd. He threw vicious uppercuts, devastating right crosses, and even a few haymakers as he fought off the lost souls stomping down Oinker. A second skeleton appeared and offered his hand. Oinker took it and was pulled to his feet.

“Thanks Bones, I thought I was a goner,” Oinker said.

The skeleton battling the crowd stopped throwing punches and turned around. His jaw fell slack and he shook his skull back and forth slowly.

“I’m Bones,” he said sadly.

“Oh, sorry Bones,” Oinker said.

He hated when that happened. The two skeletons escorted him back to the landing spot. The crowd was under control here and once he was certain there'd be no more violence, Charon stepped ashore.

"Who among you has the coin to pay for passage into the Underworld?" he asked dramatically.

A confused looking young man stepped forward, a gold coin in his hand.

"I guess that's what this is for," the man said.

A middle aged man in a business suit charged forward, shoulder blocking the young man out of the way.

"I've got one too!" the business man said.

Oinker punched the business man in the stomach, doubling him over.

"Wait your turn," Oinker said.

He didn't normally get his hands dirty, but businessmen were usually rude and impatient, things he got enough of from his boss.

Charon escorted the young man back to his boat, and Oinker motioned for the skeletons to fall back to their own craft. Once the skeletons were ready, Oinker joined them in the boat and they rowed away. They moved into the fog, but nearby could hear Charon giving his tired old "welcome to the Underworld" speech to the young man.

"Ow!" one of the skeletons yelled out.

Oinker recognized his voice and he moved to the skeleton.

"What's wrong Ribs?"

Ribs pointed to his back. His spine had a small crack in it.

"Somebody stepped on him back there," Skullzor explained.

Oinker frowned as he looked at the crack. It would heal, but not for a few days.

"Can you row?" Oinker asked.

Ribs shook his head.

"It hurts so bad," he explained.

Oinker's wing flapped slowly as he thought. A few moments later he turned to face the other skeletons.

"Take us back a few feet so I can talk to Charon."

They did as they were told and soon their boat emerged from the fog beside Charon's.

"We've got a problem here, master," Oinker said.

Charon shook with rage as he turned to see his servants alongside him.

"You dare speak to me when I'm with a client?!" he roared.

"Boss, I..." Oinker began.

Charon pulled his ferryman's pole from the water and swung it haphazardly at Oinker. It just missed his head, and several of the skeletons had to duck to avoid being hit.

"BEGONE!"

The Ferryman continued pummeling their boat with the pole.

"Row!" Oinker yelled. "Get us out of here!"

Ribs tried to row but the pain was too much and he fell over. Oinker leapt into his spot and worked the oar, finding it far more difficult than he remembered. Soon they were back ahead in the fog, but Oinker felt no peace and had no fantasies this time. The Ferryman was not pleased.

When they reached the riverbank they all worked in silence, knowing that Charon's wrath was going to be terrible. Charon brought the young man ashore, continuing his well rehearsed speech about life in the Underworld. The Ferryman glared at his servants as he led the young man away. It would take him an hour to deliver the young man to the pit.

"Get some rest, Ribs," Oinker said. "We'll get the boats put away."

After the strenuous task of returning the boats to the boathouse, Oinker, Bones and Skullzor went to check on Ribs. He was lying in the mud behind the boathouse.

"If you want, I can cast a simple mending spell that would have you fixed in no time," Skullzor said.

No one ever paid any attention to his boasts about magical power.

"How bad does it hurt?" Bones asked. "I've never cracked my spine before."

"It hurts bad, Bones," Ribs said, clearly annoyed by the question. "I just need some rest."

"IMBECILES!"

They all froze, recognizing the roar of their master.

“Let me teach you the price for such disrespect!” Charon yelled.

Oinker led his three skeleton friends around the boathouse. Charon had one of the other skeletons pinned to the ground with his ferryman’s pole. He waited until he was sure everyone was watching, then pulled a large stone out from under his heavy robe.

“No!” Ribs screamed.

Charon thrust the stone downwards, crushing the skull of the skeleton. Ribs started to rush forward but Oinker caught him and held him in place.

“What are you thinking? He’ll kill you too!” Oinker whispered.

The Ferryman smiled as he looked at the lifeless skeleton, then turned to face his remaining servants.

“If any of you ever dares speak to me in front of a client again, I’ll have a stone for each of you.”

He turned and walked towards the River Styx.

“Now bring the boats back out, we’re heading back across.”

Oinker reluctantly stepped away from his three friends.

“We’re short handed, master, and Ribs is injured,” Oinker said.

“There’s a paying customer over there and I intend to bring him across,” Charon said.

“But boss...”

Charon turned and charged forward. Oinker tried to run away but the Ferryman grabbed him by his wing.

“You insolent whelp, you dare question my commands?” Charon shouted. “Perhaps it should’ve been you I crushed with that stone!”

Oinker flapped the wing, trying to break free of Charon’s grip. The Ferryman flung his lead servant into the side of the boathouse, sending him bouncing off into the mud.

“If the boats aren’t in the water in ten minutes, you useless curs will learn the true depths of my anger,” Charon warned.

One of the skeletons came over and helped Oinker up. Oinker wasn’t sure if it was Bones or Skullzor, so he just nodded his thanks. Charon moved down to the water’s edge and as soon as he was out of earshot the skeletons started grumbling.

“I should’ve used my fire spell to ignite his robe,” Skullzor said.

“We can’t keep letting him get away with this,” Bones said.

Two of the other skeletons voiced their agreement. Oinker turned to see how Ribs was, but there was no sign of him.

“Where’s Ribs?” Oinker asked.

No one knew where he’d gone, so Oinker, Bones and Skullzor set out to find him. They walked past the boathouse where the path turned into a tunnel. The tunnel went on for a while before opening up to a panoramic view of the Underworld. A small suspended stone path led further on, but Oinker’s gaze was always drawn to the steep drop below. If one was to fall off the path, an endless sea of lava awaited them a thousand feet below.

Ribs was sitting on the edge of the path, quietly weeping.

“Why are you crying?” Oinker asked.

Ribs wiped at his skull, then turned towards them.

“That skeleton, the one that Charon just killed, he was my brother.”

Saying it out loud brought a fresh round of sobs. Oinker looked at Bones and Skullzor.

“Brother?” he asked.

Skullzor and Bones each shrugged, and Oinker turned his attention back to Ribs.

“I didn’t know he was your brother,” Oinker said. “I’m sorry to say, I never even knew his name.”

“It was Frank.”

“Frank?” Bones asked.

Ribs nodded.

“He hadn’t been dead long, he still used his human name,” Ribs said.

“I’ve been dead for over six hundred years and I still use my human name,” Skullzor said.

Oinker gave him a dirty look, then returned his attention to Ribs.

“Frank was the only family I had, and now he’s gone forever.”

As Ribs started to cry again, Bones cracked his knuckles.

“Charon can’t get away with this,” he announced.

“It’s due time he came face to face with my arcane abilities,” Skullzor said.

Oinker looked up at his two friends. He admired their bravery and empathized with what they were feeling, but he wasn't ready to take on The Ferryman.

"We can't attack him," Oinker said. "He's our master."

"A master's supposed to look after his servants, not mistreat them and murder them for no good reason," Bones said.

"So your suggestion is to pay back violence with violence?" Oinker asked.

"He killed my brother, Oinker," Ribs said. "My family."

Hearing it out loud again caused Oinker's blood to boil. His wing started flapping and he nodded.

"Fine, we'll confront him."

Bones pumped his fist in the air.

"Yes!" he shouted.

"Confront, not attack," Oinker said. "I want to make that clear, we're going to tell him how we feel, and explain why he should show us more respect. We're his workers, and this is a negotiation. It's not a battle, okay?"

Their spirits were dashed a little, but the three skeletons muttered their agreement. Oinker led them back to the River Styx. With each step his resolve grew stronger. He replayed his one hundred years serving Charon in his mind and recalled countless instances of abuse and disrespect. What they were doing was long overdue, Oinker decided.

When they returned to the boathouse they informed the other two skeletons about their plan. They quickly agreed to join up, and the six of them headed off to confront their master. As they approached the water's edge, Charon turned to face them.

"It's about time," he said. "Where are the boats?"

Oinker stepped out in front of the five skeletons and crossed his arms.

"We'll bring the boats, but we're going to have a little talk first," Oinker said.

"I think not," Charon said.

"I think so!" Oinker yelled. "You've mistreated us for too long, and what you did today was unacceptable."

The Ferryman couldn't believe what he was hearing. He shook with rage as he stared daggers at his insubordinate servants.

"What I did today was unacceptable?" Charon asked quietly.

“You killed Ribs’ brother!” Oinker yelled. “You can’t just do that sort of thing anymore.”

Charon crossed his arms in front of him.

“Can’t?” he asked.

Oinker swallowed hard before answering.

“Can’t.”

Charon laughed. It was quiet at first, but grew more intense with each passing second. He reached down and picked up his ferryman’s pole, his laughter echoing all around them.

“CAN’T?” he roared.

Charon leapt forward and lashed out with the pole.

“Look out!” Bones yelled.

Bones pulled Oinker back, and he, Ribs, and Skullzor all fell to the ground, barely avoiding being hit by Charon’s strike. The pole struck one of the other two skeletons in the head, shattering his skull. The other skeleton turned to run but Charon brought the pole crashing into his back, breaking several vertebrae.

Oinker and his three friends were all back on their feet now, and one of the skeletons charged forward and grappled Charon. The rest of them spread out, watching as the skeleton tried to shove The Ferryman into the dark waters of the River Styx.

Charon waved the pole wildly, trying to bring it around to hit the skeleton that had a hold of him. Instead it struck a low hanging stalactite. The stalactite cracked and came crashing down, crushing one of the skeletons to death.

“BONES!” Oinker screamed.

He ran towards the decimated skeleton. The skeleton grappling Charon stopped fighting and turned around, a hurt expression on his face.

“That was Ribs!” he yelled. “I’m Bones!”

Oinker looked at Bones.

“Oh, sorry.”

The distraction turned fatal for Bones. Charon reached out and grabbed his skull with both hands, twisting it nastily. A crunching sound announced the death of Bones, and his lifeless skeleton collapsed to the ground.

“BONES!” Oinker screamed.

Skullzor stepped forward and raised his hands.

“Enough of this!” he yelled.

He took a deep breath, keeping his hands pointed towards Charon.

“Infernus Maximus!” Skullzor screamed.

A stream of fire shot from his fingertips. It engulfed Charon, bathing him in unholy flames. The Ferryman spun around and screamed.

“You really are a warlock!” Oinker said.

Charon ran towards the river, but paused before throwing himself in. Instead he tore off his robes and tossed them away. Beneath his menacing robes, Charon was just a dirty old man. He looked like he hadn't bathed in eons and wore nothing but a loincloth that looked as if it had never been washed.

“You will know true torment!” Charon roared as he faced Skullzor.

Skullzor retreated a few steps, but kept his hands raised. Charon ran towards him.

“Shieldus Maximus!” Skullzor yelled.

An invisible barrier appeared in front of them, blocking Charon's charge. The Ferryman raged against it, and tiny cracks started to appear.

“Run, Oinker! I can't hold this for much longer,” Skullzor said.

“No, we're in this together.”

“We can't beat him. The least you can do is survive,” Skullzor said. “Please, do it for me and Ribs and Bones and those other three skeletons that died.”

Charon retrieved his ferryman's pole and was using it to whack the shield. Huge breaks were appearing with each blow.

“Please!” Skullzor pleaded.

Oinker nodded and started backing away.

“I'll never forget you!” he yelled.

Oinker turned and ran as fast as he could. He heard the shield shatter, then heard Skullzor's anguished screams, but didn't turn around to look. He'd head deeper into the Underworld, find some other master that could use some help and wouldn't mistreat him.

As Oinker reached the suspended path he skidded to a stop. In the distance he saw two elite demon guards marching his way.

“Curses,” Oinker said.

News of the disturbance at the River Styx had already reached the pit. The guards were dispatched to handle any and all disturbances, and there was never anyone left alive once they were done.

Oinker turned around to run back towards the boathouse, but was met with the ferryman's pole right across the face. Charon laughed as he nailed his lead servant, sending the pinkish demon tumbling to the floor.

"This feels good," Charon said. "I should've gotten rid of you and your no good friends ages ago!"

Charon reached down and picked Oinker up. He held him high above his head and marched to the edge of the path. Oinker kicked and flailed, trying anything he could to break free.

"No one defies me!" Charon yelled.

He threw Oinker over the side, sending him plummeting towards the sea of lava a thousand feet below. At first Oinker closed his eyes tight, fully aware he was about to meet his death. But then he heard Charon laughing. The Ferryman's maniacal laughter echoed all around him.

Oinker's eyes shot open.

"He's not getting away with killing my friends!"

He started flapping his wing. It did little good at first, but he flapped it harder and faster. It sent him into a spiral, but didn't slow his fall.

"Come on!" he yelled.

He closed his eyes again, replaying the deaths of his friends in his mind. He channeled all of his rage into his wing, putting everything he had into making it flap. Something felt different, and Oinker slowly opened his eyes. He was no longer falling.

Charon waved at the two elite demon guards.

"Go back to the pit, I took care of things myself," he said.

The guards did as they were told. Charon picked up his ferryman's pole and turned to walk back to the River Styx.

"Not so fast," a familiar voice said behind him.

Charon whirled around to see Oinker hovering in the air. Oinker smiled smugly and crossed his arms.

"That's right, I can fly. And now I'm gonna..."

Charon threw his ferryman's pole as hard as he could. It crashed into Oinker's wing. The wing broke.

"NOOOOOOOO!" Oinker screamed as he plummeted back towards the sea of lava.

This time Charon watched until he saw Oinker splash into the lava. Then he turned and headed back to the boathouse. He muttered under his breath about his ungrateful servants.

"They were useless anyways," he said as he opened the boathouse doors.

He thought about taking the rest of the day off, but the memory of that shiny coin in the business man's hand was just too enticing. Charon pulled out his servant's boat. He hated how it looked, but if he was going to cross on his own he'd need the boat with the oars.

The boat was much heavier than he thought it was, and he ended up having to drag it to the water's edge. Once it was in the water he jumped on board, losing his footing and falling on his face. Splinters poked into him and he cursed as he got into a sitting position and readied the oars.

It took him several minutes to figure out how to get the oars set up properly.

"How hard could this be?" he wondered aloud.

Finally he had them ready, and he began rowing out into the dark water. His old muscles quaked as he tried to manipulate the oars. It felt like rowing through quicksand.

Fifteen minutes later he was drenched in sweat and only halfway across the River Styx. He fell back, fighting to get a deep breath. It was the hardest he'd worked in over a thousand years.

The sound of wood scraping on wood caught his attention. He sat up just as one of the oars slid from the boat. Charon lunged for it, inadvertently kicking the other oar with his foot as he did. That oar started to slide too, and he dove for it, his fingers just missing. A moment later he sat all alone in the boat with no way to propel it.

Charon knew too much about the River Styx to ever jump into it, so swimming for shore was out of the question. This left him with only a single option.

"Help! Somebody help me please!"

His voice died in the thick fog. No matter how loud he screamed his voice never traveled more than a few feet before being swallowed by the fog.

The boat slowly floated away, towards the uncharted corners of the Underworld where The Ferryman would be left to drift alone for all of eternity, or until the madness of it drove him to forfeit his life and dive headlong into the unforgiving waters of the River Styx.

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