

UNEXPECTED EMPLOYMENT

It had been a rather unremarkable day for Seagoon, all things considered. A good friend of his had hired him to entertain at his young niece's birthday party, and Seagoon was only too happy for both the employment and the chance to entertain others. He had done it before, but pulling off some of his more famous party tricks for such happy, smiling children never got tiresome for him. He walked along the city streets, making his way back to the train station, humming a merry tune as the sky began to fill with stars. It was a cold winter's night, and the big blue dragon pulled his coat closer to him as he walked, hoping that spring was not far away; he didn't like either the extreme heat of summer or the extreme cold of winter. He preferred the in-between seasons.

In this part of the world, it was often said that it was possible to experience all four seasons in just one day, but even Seagoon had to admit that he was surprised when a heavy fog bank began to roll in, the mist swirling as if guided by an unfelt breeze. Before he knew it the fog was upon him, blotting out all the stars in the sky. It was so thick that Seagoon could not see anything around him; when he raised his paw to guide himself as he walked, he could barely see it. He never thought he would have to take the old saying literally, but had he had a knife on him he was sure he could have cut through the thick cloud blanket. It also occurred to him just how quiet it was. He couldn't hear any of the sounds from the city; no pedestrians, no passing traffic, nothing. He couldn't even see any signs of illumination from street lights. All he could see was the fog, which itself was taking a soft purple glow. He also thought he could feel a subtle tightening sensation around his neck, which he attributed to holding his coat too close. It was also starting to get unseasonably warm, to the point where he even felt he had to take his coat off.

As he did so, the mist began to dissipate almost as quickly as it had arrived, and Seagoon's eyes widened in shock when he saw that he was no longer in the middle of the street. Instead, he now found himself in a long, dark hall, illuminated only by a soft purple haze. The floor was made of large flagstones, only made out of slick black vinyl rather than stone. Thick black pillars were spread out evenly across the cavernous space, supporting a ceiling that was too high for Seagoon to see, shrouded in inky blackness. There were no windows anywhere, and no doors either. No matter which way Seagoon looked, there was no obvious exit from this chamber. He saw the only stand-out feature in the chamber when he looked behind him, and saw a large raised dais, seated on which was a massive throne of obsidian.

"Hello?!" Seagoon called out nervously. All he heard in reply was his own voice, echoed and seeming to raise in volume until it reached deafening levels. By the time it finally subsided, Seagoon's ears were ringing, and it took several moments for the ringing to finally stop. When it had, he found himself in total silence. Aside from his feet moving along the vinyl floor, there was not a sound to be heard. Shaking himself, the dragon tried to pinch himself. It hurt so much he knew that he wasn't dreaming.

“Okay...” he muttered, voicing his thoughts into the silent void around him, “whatever’s happened to me, I’m not sticking around to find out what’s coming next. I’m gonna make my own door out of here!” He knew just how to do it, using one of his own party tricks. Dragons were capable of some degree of what others would call magic, though to a dragon such abilities were as natural as breathing (even though it had taken him a while to realise that).

However, when he tried to alter his body mass, he found himself unable to do so. He strained to use his abilities, but found that all he got in return were sore muscles and an encroaching headache. He couldn’t even use his abilities to fly, his small wings flapping uselessly. He absent-mindedly raised an arm to his neck in puzzlement, and to his surprise he found his fingertips touching a large collar, wrapped snugly around his neck, made out of rubber as black as ebony. It certainly hadn’t been there, and however it was doing it Seagoon was sure that it was what was stopping him using his powers. He found no obvious clasp on it, and trying to dig his fingers under it to pull it off only seemed to cause it to tighten, as if it had a will of its own. He was just about to have another attempt, when a deep, grand voice echoed out of the darkness all around him.

“Stay your hand, Seagoon,” it commanded. “I would rather you have all of your faculties intact so that you may listen to what I have to say.”

Seagoon spun around on the spot, his thick tail waving behind him, and when he saw the speaker he gasped out loud. For standing before him was a tall figure, wearing a long, circular black cloak with silver lines on it that entirely hid his body shape. His head was covered by a black helmet shaped like a wolf’s head, with silver metallic strips running down the face and around the muzzle. There were no other details on the mask other than the visor, which was so dark that no eyes could be clearly made out. From the back of his head sprouted a number of long grey dreadlocks that looked like they were made of the smoothest silk. The figure didn’t react to Seagoon’s shock, but stood there completely calm, his cloak seeming to blend into the blackness around him.

“What is this place?!” Seagoon barked, backing away from the figure. “Who are you?!”

“I am the Dark Knight,” replied the figure with an unnervingly calm tone, “and I bid you welcome to my citadel.” He advanced on Seagoon, and now the dragon could see green mist emerging from beneath the cloak. Though the cloak moved as if the figure had legs, no footsteps could be heard; he seemed to be gliding on the mist. “I apologise for the inhibitor, but I know what your kind are capable of, and I would rather you not crush my domain in your attempts to leave. I have brought you here because I have a proposal for you which you may find interesting.”

“Well, you’re not making a good first impression, matey!” Seagoon rebuked, still backing away until his back hit the wall behind him. “I dunno how you’ve done it, but this is kidnapping, this is! I’m getting out of here!” He sounded braver than he felt, and something of that must have been clear in his voice, as the Dark Knight only seemed to scoff as he stopped before him, the dreadlocks snaking about as if they had a life of their own.

“Where would you go?” the creature asked him simply. “Look behind you.”

Seagoon did so, and found himself facing a sunset that dazzled him. When his eyes had readjusted, he saw an incredible sight stretching before him where previously there had only been a wall. He now saw that the chamber he was in was at the top of a vast ziggurat, well over a hundred floors high, coloured a peculiar shade of ebony that didn’t seem to reflect the light. Stretching from the base of the tower he saw an entire city, each building made of seemingly plain granite rocks. Some of the buildings had flat roofs, others had vaulted roofs of black tile, still others ended in crenelated bastions or curved tower tops. All of the buildings were joined together by long colonnaded walks or galleries with many an open courtyard, plaza, or garden with strange, exotic plants unlike anything he had ever seen or read about on Earth.

Beyond the immense walls of the citadel, Seagoon could see miles of dense forest stretching away towards a set of craggy peaks in the distance. The burning sun was now setting, casting a fiery orange glow around the area which seemed to be absorbed by the obsidian monolith he was standing in.

“You are in my domain now, Seagoon,” the Dark Knight stated. “You are a long way from home, and even if you were permitted to leave right this instant the farthest you could get were the borders of my realm.” There was a certain aloofness to his tone that Seagoon was now starting to get annoyed by, in spite of the feelings of defeat beginning to wash over him. “Now perhaps you understand the position you are in, will you concede to listen to my proposal?”

Seagoon didn’t answer immediately, but instead began to weigh up his options. It was obvious the inhibitor was not coming off any time soon, and this Dark Knight character had already displayed a lot of power by being able to transport him here. If he really was in another dimension, as seemed to be implied, and the Dark Knight really had total control over it, then there was no telling what he could do to Seagoon while he was defenceless. In the end, he heaved a deep sigh, and turned to face his apparent captor, looking very glum.

“Alright, you’ve made your point,” he said. “What do you want from me then?”

“You are an entertainer by trade, are you not?” asked the Dark Knight.

“I am,” replied Seagoon, his eyes widening as he realised just how much the figure knew about him, including his name.

“Then I would have you become a master of ceremonies,” rumbled the Dark Knight, speaking in powerful, commanding tones. He glided over to the balcony and spread his cloak before him. Seagoon had to admit that he couldn’t help but find the way the cloak moved stunning; it looked extremely heavy, but its wearer made it seem as light as a feather.

“This is a realm of games and challenges for my delight,” the Dark Knight purred. “I want you to serve as the host and commentator for the games. Offer encouragement to promising contestants, and insult to a losing player’s injury. Do so with wit and flair, offering a voice of moral support and admonishment. Serve as a point of contact for the contestants, and lead them through the diverse entertainments created for my pleasure. I may also have need of your skills in the games themselves, whether as an aid to the players or a challenge for them to overcome.” He slowly lowered his cloaked arms and turned towards Seagoon, the gaze behind the visor unseen but giving every impression of being penetrating. “Work well, and you will be rewarded appropriately. You will be able to keep all of your home comforts, and gain much, much more than you can imagine. Work poorly, or refuse, however...” At this a set of black rubber tentacles rose out of the floor and whipped about, surrounding Seagoon, quivering like snakes poised to attack. They remained there for half a minute before suddenly retreating into the floor from whence they came. “Let me just say that I can provide accommodation that is much more degrading.”

“You know,” Seagoon retorted. “I work much better when I’m not forced into a job.”

“I am merely presenting the options available to you,” the Dark Knight replied with just the slightest hint of menace in his tone. “Think of it as a game; the better your performance, the greater the reward. I reward all those who show true sportsmanship handsomely, and you shall be no different.” He raised a cloaked paw up to Seagoon, offering it in handshake. “You have had plenty of time to consider my offer, so I need an answer; do you accept this position?”

Seagoon was about to say no, but he held fast and thought for a moment. This Dark Knight person was clearly extremely powerful, and he had the distinct impression that he would never be allowed to leave this place knowing what he knew. He couldn’t hope to fight his

way out, for without his powers he knew that he was about as much use in a fight as a wet tissue. He was in an impossible situation; he would effectively be a prisoner, regardless of how comfortable the cage was. On the other hand, he didn't see any alternative other than to take the job and perform it to the best of his ability; the least he could do was not give the Dark Knight reason to harm him. So he extended a paw and shook the Knight's cloaked one. The cloak had a very fine texture, like of the finest silk, and was very pleasant to the touch.

"I accept," the dragon said, as their hands parted.

"Excellent," the Dark Knight purred. He nodded behind Seagoon, indicating the approach of two of his guards. They looked like large robots, with metal plates on top of a body covered with skin-tight rubber, the heavy sound of their metal footsteps resounding throughout the chamber. One vaguely resembled a dragon, Seagoon noticed. They came to a halt before Seagoon, tall and imposing figures, their cyan visors peering intently at the Dark Knight, their master.

"Escort our new resident here to his quarters in the tower," the Dark Knight commanded. "See that he is comfortable."

The soldiers made strange sounds consisting of varying bass tones layered over each other, almost sounding like music to Seagoon's ears. One of the drones turned to him and indicated that he was to follow them. They then proceeded towards a door that had appeared on the far side of the chamber, their heavy footfalls seeming to cause the vinyl floor underneath them to ripple like water. Sighing, wondering what he was letting himself in for, the dragon followed them. He turned to look at the Dark Knight one more time, seeing that this spectre was watching him intently, until the closing door blocked him from view.

Once Seagoon was out of sight, the Dark Knight walked up the steps to the dais, and settled back onto his throne, letting his cloak fall where it may. He purred softly to himself, feeling pleased that the dragon had been at least willing to be civil about his new role in the citadel. The truth of course was that the Dark Knight had an ulterior motive for allowing this blundering fool into a position of such honour. The dragon clearly remembered nothing of their first encounter a few months ago, and had he acted the way he had intended that night then Seagoon would likely have just ended up atomised, used to fuel the Dark Knight's own power. Instead, Seagoon had blundered his way into something truly magnificent, even if he was completely unaware of it. His true form had covered his tracks very well indeed.

Unknown to him, Seagoon was the Dark Squire, the loyal and eternal servant and pupil of the Dark Knight himself. The fool of a dragon had swallowed a part of the Dark Knight during that fateful encounter, creating a miraculous new identity, independent yet a part of his

progenitor. He reached his consciousness out towards his squire, who was not powerful enough to sustain his true self indefinitely, and even now lay hidden at the back of Seagoon's mind, awaiting another time when he was powerful enough to take over and rejoin his master once again. Already the squire was ecstatic at the thought of being so close to his beloved lord; now that the host resided on the citadel, it would be so much easier for them to be together.

You and I are of eternity now, he projected through his mind to his beautiful, loyal squire. You will become stronger with time. All will bow to my might one day, and you will bask in that glory with me. You belong to me, my beautiful Dark Squire, and you will stand by my side forever, our bond irreversible and unbreakable.

He could feel the excited sensations of the Dark Squire, unnoticed by Seagoon. The Dark Knight purred softly, visions of the glorious world he planned to create filling his mind. He reclined in his throne, thinking about all the pleasures that he wanted to show his squire, the beautiful darkness that both of them desired and would come into fruition someday.

Rest easy for now, my squire, he thought. We shall see each other soon.