

HIS FIRST GAME

Twilight was descending upon the vast, shadow-enshrouded citadel of the Dark Knight. As he sat on his great ebony throne, in the midst of his vast great hall at the very top of his tower, the ruler of this realm of games and challenges found himself content. Recent business acquisitions had been carried out, with great benefit to himself, and all in the realm was being maintained as it should be. There had been some unfortunate incidents; one or two contestants had gotten too aggressive and had to be put down, while others who had failed to play in the spirit of sportsmanship had been suitably punished. Their metamorphoses were now complete, and they now made excellent additions to the hive of worker robots that existed only to attend to his every whim. The new Snatchers were proving very effective, with much more obedience than relying on thugs from the outside world to bring him new contestants. He let the walls recede, leaving only the great pillars to hold up the ceiling as the fading sun seeped into the great chamber, mingling with the purple haze that normally was the only source of illumination in his great hall.

Beside his enormous throne was an ebony curule, an ornate stool, which was currently empty. The Dark Knight peered at it through the dark visor on his wolf-like helmet, his long ebony cloak rustling and draped over the throne. A sense of longing filled the Dark Knight, longing for the being who sat in this honoured place to rule beside him. He knew that his eternal companion would feel that longing within him, and doubtless would respond. He was truly a faithful companion, one who desired nothing more than to be by his master, serve him loyally and help him to spread his rule. Sure enough, almost the very instant he had thought it, a column of green mist erupted at the foot of the dais.

As the mist receded, the form of his Dark Squire emerged, his cloaked arm lowering slowly. He was truly blessed to wear the form-covering cloak and helm of the Dark Knight's house, the black silk that seemed to swallow light itself lined with silver. With a rumble of satisfaction, the Dark Knight saw that his squire had changed the appearance of his helmet, as instead of the wolf's helm of the Knight himself, the Squire's helm was that of a dragon, with horns and frills. The satin dreadlocks that they shared draped down his back and over his shoulders, while on the helmet strips of silver metal ran down the head and along the snout. Unlike the Knight's helmet, the strips on the Squire's helmet were crooked around the snout, giving the appearance of gleaming teeth.

With a rumble of pleasure, the Dark Knight rose from this throne and descended the steps of the dais, the cloak seeming to flow like water as no noise was made with each step. Instantly, the Dark Squire knelt on one knee, in total adoration and subservience of his lord and master. It pleased the Dark Knight greatly to see his Squire so formal.

“Good evening, my Squire,” he rumbled, stopping just before the Dark Squire. He stroked the top of the helmeted head with a cloakpaw, bringing great pleasure to the Squire.

“Good evening, my lord,” the Squire replied, his voice bearing the same deep baritone of his lord and progenitor. “You summoned me?”

“I did, my Squire,” the Dark Knight purred, motioning for his most loyal servant to rise to his feet. “I am greatly pleased that the energies of our realm have restored you to your beautiful true form.”

“They have, my lord,” purred the Dark Squire, pleased with his master’s approval. “Ever since you brought me here, the Citadel has given me renewed strength. Now I exist to be by your side for all-time. Nothing remains of my previous self.” With the strength of the Citadel now flowing within him, he now had the strength to sustain himself indefinitely, rather than having to remain within the body of a foolish mortal. At long last he could be by his master’s side perpetually.

The Dark Knight purred his approval, stroking the cheek of his squire’s helmet. “Excellent, my squire,” he rumbled. He gestured for the Squire to turn to the western wall, where the sun was now sinking below a series of jagged peaks beyond a vast forest. The Dark Knight stood behind him, their cloaks rustling against each other, as he draped his arms over his Squire’s chest, resting his wolfish helmet on the shoulder. “Do you feel your power within you now? Can you feel every corner of our realm speaking to you, filling you with its energy?”

The Squire rumbled as he leaned backwards into his master’s loving embrace, taking a moment to meditate and allow his mind to stretch out to every corner of the realm. Down below, in some of the grand bedchambers within the tower, he could sense the contestants who were honoured above all others, those who had survived and shown true sportsmanship and thus had been granted the highest places of honour it was possible to bestow on them. Further down below, he could see and feel the various games created for the pleasure of his master, all awaiting contestants to challenge them and all with pitfalls awaiting the unfortunate losers. He knew every floor layout, knew the rule of every game, and all of the forfeits for failure.

Outside, he could feel the expansive courtyards, buildings and gardens of the Citadel, all with their own games and forfeits. He could feel the night-blooming plants and Kasvane guardians that shone with unnatural light and rhythm. His mind stretched to the forests, swamps, oceans and mountains surrounding the Citadel, all the way to the borders, every type of terrain conceivable for challenges and games. He stretched out to the great dome that formed the border of the realm, where all the less worthy contestants were stored in great skin-tight

bubbles of vinyl, secure and alive until their turn to play a game came. His mind searched into the tunnels far below the Citadel, beneath the underground chambers and prisons, to the hive where the cybernetic ant creatures that comprised much of the Dark Knight's guard resided. Each was a contestant who was particularly unworthy, judged to lack true sportsmanship and thus had been stripped of everything that made them a unique identity. They now only served the hive and its master, the chance for redemption having long passed them by.

"Yes, my lord," the Dark Squire purred, ecstatic at feeling the boundless energies of the realm coursing through his body. "I can feel your glorious realm singing to me, speaking of its untold wonders and blessings. It is truly magnificent."

The muzzle of the Dark Knight's helm turned to touch the cheek of his squire's helmet. "It is all yours, my squire, now and forever more. All of those in storage are yours to play with." He decided that now would be a good time to come to the point of his summoning, for there was one thing he knew his squire desired very much, and now he would grant that wish. With a flourish, he took the Squire's cloaked paw and pointed towards a set of stone steps that had appeared, descending down from the throne room. "Follow me."

He guided his companion down the steps and through a large archway. Through a series of dark corridors and down more staircases they went, until they reached a vast chamber with a raised metal platform, atop which was a grid of metal pathways and below which was a pit of swirling green mist. The Squire's helmet turned this way and that, taking in the sights before him.

"This is your ultimate challenge..." the Squire breathed. "I have desired to play this game with worthy opponents since you gave me life."

"And tonight you shall," said the Dark Knight, pointing towards the stairs leading up to his starting position. At this, the Squire was overcome with a torrent of excitement that he could scarcely contain. He hardly dared to believe that his master had bestowed this honour upon him. He fell to his knees in utter adulation, his head bowed low in pure subservience.

"My deepest thanks to you, my lord," he breathed. "I am hardly worthy of this honour."

The Dark Knight placed a cloaked paw on top of the Squire's helm, the Squire's dreadlocks writhing like snakes to wrap themselves delicately around the cloaked paw. "Make me proud, my squire," he rumbled. As the Squire rose to his feet, the Dark Knight ascended a staircase behind him to sit in the darkened box that overlooked the grid. Rumbling with pleasure, the

Dark Squire ascended to his starting platform, at grid position G4. The green mist that emerged from the bottom of his cloak slowly mingling with the mist below the series of metal gantries that criss-crossed before him.

He knew the rules of this game. Both he and the players could only move one space per turn, the players always moving first. Both he and the players had to alternate between moving sideways and forward each turn, the only exception being that he, unlike the players, was allowed to move backwards as well after moving sideways. Seconds later, some of the cybernetic drone guards marched up to the three starting positions at the opposite end of the grid. They were carrying a vixen, a male gecko, and a male goat, all of whom were naked save for the black latex bindings that held them to their captors. As soon as they were placed on the starting positions these bindings were removed, leaving nothing to hide their shame. The guards left, and suddenly the lights in the chamber went out, leaving the Dark Squire incapable of seeing anything through his visor. The lack of sight did not bother him, for he instinctively knew the layout of the grid, though something obfuscated his senses, preventing him from pinpointing where the contestants were. This he had no qualms with; it was in the rules and was done in the name of good sportsmanship.

To win at the game, the contestants had to cross the grid and reach one of the exit positions on either the far left, centre, or far right of the grid, at positions G1, G4 or G7, the rows of the grid being lettered in his mind and the columns being numbered. After a moment of silence, with smoke curling around his unmoving, imposing body, the deep, booming voice of his master called out “BEGIN!” With that, the Squire rumbled, and bellowed out the word that he had longed to say, in a deep, snarling voice:

“MOVE!”

With that, the game had begun. The contestants got two free moves at the start, so he called again, barely able to hear the shuffling of their feet over the gantries. Once the shuffling was silent, he considered what his first move would be. Deciding to keep the players guessing as to which side he would be watching, he decided to move straight ahead to F4, his cloak gliding smoothly behind him as he walked.

The contestants got two turns after his move, so he bellowed “MOVE!” twice more, the single utterance filling him with an unbridled, carnal lust, the thrill of the game consuming him. He heard a soft whimper coming from one of the challengers, and the fear that he felt emanating from this terrified degenerate was exquisite. As he glided noiselessly to F3, he felt the thrill escalating, for he knew that soon the players would lose their advantages, now only able to move once before the Squire could move again. He called “MOVE!” once more.

As he did so, he could now see three lights shining brightly from below some of the grated platforms on the grid; positions B1, B2 and B7, to be specific. He knew that these were the positions that his opponents were last located. Now it was a matter of figuring out the path they were taking and moving to intercept them. His only move was to walk down to E3, feeling euphoric as he heard another soft whimper from one of the players. After two more moves, he realised that one player was working their way up the right side of the grid, while he was moving into the line of the other two going up the left-hand side. He was sure that he was moving to intercept at least one of them as his latest move took him to grid position D2.

Sure enough, in his visor he could now see the shape of one of the contestants forming before him. She trembled before him in abject terror and whispered, “Oh God, no...”

Ecstatic at his success, the Dark Squire raised his cloakarms as he approached the unfortunate victim, plumes of green mist instantly spraying out of his arms. His arms seemed to embrace the cowering vixen as the mist consumed her, starting to do its dreadful work of breaking down her body atom by atom. The vixen’s arms were forced to her sides, forcing her exposed chest to arch towards him, breasts pushing between the fabric that hung so beautifully from the Squire’s arms. She screamed in horror as her body became completely destroyed, mingling with the column of green mist that had engulfed her.

The mist retreated back into the Dark Squire, feeding him this vixen’s essence, her atoms, her very soul. The sheer euphoria of this catch, coupled with the rejuvenating effect of the feast, revitalised him and filled him with renewed vigour for the game. With a flourish of his cloak, he stepped onto the now-empty grid space and bellowed “MOVE!” once more, the game quickly resuming. There was no letting up the pace of the game; it was important to keep the contestants on their toes.

With the moves that followed, however, he sensed with great frustration that he would not catch and devour the other two players. They had managed to out-manoeuvre him, and sure enough eventually there was a flash of sparks from position G7, showing that one of the contestants had escaped. The Dark Squire snarled; he could not believe that he had let one escape. His master would surely be disappointed by this. Worse still, after he took a moment to look at the positions of the lights, he calculated that it would only take one more move for the second player to escape. As frustrating as it was to lose his prey, he knew that the rules of the game had to be followed, and that a game must be seen through to the end. With that, he made his move to G5, knowing that the last player was before him but unable to do anything about it.

“MOVE!”

Rather than the sparks he expected, however, nothing happened for a moment, save for a soft whimper. As position G6 lit up, he saw the outline of the goat, and a timid voice reached him:

“I don’t want to play anymore...”

The goat was kneeling on the space in a foetal position, trembling and weeping. The Dark Squire was about to bellow his command again, but something stopped him. In his mind he sensed that this one had played well for many, many years, he had grown weary, and in spite of his sheer terror he was willing to offer himself to the Squire, just to put an end to his misery. In spite of his confusion at this turn of events, the Squire sensed that the Dark Knight was giving his blessing to grant this unfortunate soul the peace it sought.

He stepped forward to the goat, raising his cloakarms. Rather than release the mist straightaway, however, he stooped down to help this weary contestant to his feet, and slowly wrapped his arms around him, embracing this worthy player like a brother. In spite of his sheer terror, his eyes never leaving the Squire’s visor, the goat respectfully sank into the embrace, his own arms wrapping around the Squire. After a moment’s silence, the Squire released his green mist, devouring the goat, though he was sure he heard the weary player whisper “Thank you,” even as his body was destroyed to feed the dark apprentice.

The euphoria of the feeding only lasted a moment, as the Squire lowered his cloakarms, contemplating the events that had just transpired. There was an oddly bittersweet quality to this first game; he had devoured two, but one he had only caught after the player willingly sacrificed themselves, and one player had still escaped. He was being moved back into storage now, but it left the Dark Squire feeling strangely hollow, unsure of how to deal with the conflicting emotions brought about by the last contestant’s end. Moments later, as the lights in the chamber returned, the Dark Knight stepped onto the grid and stood beside his squire, sharing the feelings he was very familiar with from countless occasions such as this, and placing a cloaked paw upon his beloved companion’s shoulder.

“Sometimes players are just on the verge of average,” he rumbled, “never good enough to truly win and never bad enough to fully lose. It doesn’t happen often, but sometimes these unfortunates will offer themselves to us.” He slowly lifted the Dark Squire’s lowered helm, so that their visors peered into each other. “We must be merciful in these cases, as their torpor is bad for the realm.”

The Dark Squire felt comforted by the touch of his master’s silken paws, and he purred softly as he listened intently to the Dark Knight’s words.

“I think I understand, my wise and merciful lord,” said the Squire. “After surviving for so long, there was no shame in him offering himself to us. He was a worthy contestant until the very end.”

“It is our duty, my squire,” the Dark Knight nodded. He pulled the Squire into a tight embrace, wrapping his cloakarms around the neck and rubbing the cheeks of their helmets together. In spite of the events of the game, he was still proud of his Squire for following the rules and being of true sportsmanship to the very end. Despite the unorthodox way the Squire had first being brought into existence, the Dark Knight knew that he was more than worthy of wearing the cloak and helm.

The Squire returned the embrace, his snake-like dreadlocks coiling and entwining around the Dark Knight’s own. “I understand, my lord,” he purred, knowing that the burden of responsibility for the realm’s well-being belonged as much to him as it did to his master. It was responsibility he embraced, and he was passionate about serving his lord and spreading his rule. In the comfort of that silken embrace, his earlier doubts and conflicts seemed to melt away as the thrill he had felt at his first game returned. “I wonder what will become of the one who escaped.”

The Dark Knight rumbled with passion as he felt his Squire’s feelings of warmth return. “We shall have to see,” he said. “He is new and I expect we shall see him many times.”

“Perhaps,” chuckled the Dark Squire. “As one player’s nightmare ends, it begins anew for another. The excitement of this thought is intoxicating, my lord.”

“Yes,” the Dark Knight purred. “Never-ending fear and darkness, and we are the masters of it!”

“We are, my lord!” the Dark Squire called, passion and excitement gripping him as firmly as his master’s embrace. “Our reign over the terror and the shadows shall be everlasting!”

The embrace of the two lords of darkness tightened, their cloaked paws exploring every inch of their silken bodies, as the mist softly whirled beneath the gantries of this most exhilarating of all games.

THE END