

Warrior's Ruination

Through his veins flowed the blood of the Dark Vanguard, boiling and proud. As steel is wrought in fire, so had he been molded to the crux of war and destruction. Before the grey twilight of the last winter had he bathed in the blood of his ancestors, and it had been that thick ichor which had so bled into his very fibers, imbuing him with the fiery rage of a thousand suns. By his hands had fallen the Citadel of Endless Skulls, and at the end of his sword had the life of that keep's foul tyrant been stolen. Many craniums had known the cleave of his gore-iron blade, and many hearts had known the tear of his fingers. Deep Knight was he named—painted by the scars of endless torment; the fierce lust for destruction in his heart matched only by the ringing of his battle cry. There he stood, Deep Knight of the umbral plane, his great helm of blackened steel masking the fires of his eyes. The horns upon his helm glimmered—they were ivory aspects of the eternal pools of death from whence he'd been birthed. And upon his muscular neck: a tie, dyed in the most horrendous shades of orange and teal. A tie, the likes of which made even the grandest of daemons pause in momentary confusion. Beneath that noose of orange polyester lay the garb of a true warrior: a white button up shirt, wrinkled and poorly ironed; lint-lined pants accentuated by dull brown shoes. Truly, the garb of the champion of the seven hells of Nargarthia. In his hand was held a novelty mug reading “Worlds 2nd greatest Dark Vanguardian”¹ In front of brave Deep Knight stood a man in his thirties, his shirt baby blue, and his tie a nauseating magenta.

“So, uh, buddy, chief, buckaroo...champ,” the man said. “Imma need that stock report by aroooooound four. Can you do that?”

¹ First place of course going to Leroy the Destructor. Congratulations on your raid of the six temples of endless pain, Leroy! We're all very proud of you. Please call this number for your reward: (303)-641-6996

“I could probably make that work.”

“Well, uh, ‘probably’ doesn’t make the dream boat sail, buddy.”

“Yes,” Deep Knight said, his voice metallic with hidden rage. “I’ll get that to you.”

“Good looks, Deep Knight! You the man! You the man!” The man in the blue shirt walked away backwards, doing finger guns at the eldritch demon slayer. Inside his hellish helm, Deep Knight’s thoughts rang like hissing embers. *Fuck that guy*, hissed the embers. Deep Knight’s boss, Ryan walked out of sight leaving Deep Knight alone once more. Sighing the way only a seasonally depressed office worker from hell could sigh, Deep Knight turned back to the coffee pot. Inside the glass pot boiled a sea of regret and poor career choices, and upon its bulbous surface, Deep Knight could see the ghostly reflections of past mistakes. A brash, foolish member of the Dark Vanguard moved across the surface, handed his sword to another and began a speech on “Better dental,” and “More modern working environment” and “Women love an accountant.” Great crackenings of magmatic memory ruptured into his helm as he watched the reveries. *Five years. Five urethra-splitting years of endless bul-*

“There’s my boo!”

Dear Christ all-dino-fucking-mighty. Turning away from the coffee pot, Deep Knight allowed the ghosts to vanish. Into the break room strode a woman in a skirt that was way too tight, and a blouse that was way too cream colored to be pleasant to look at. Her hair, a conglomerate of blonde and brunette strands recalled the many tentacles of the demon Gorthamu, who, upon the fabled night of Samaithan² many years past, Deep Knight had slain with naught but his bare fists and a fully automatic assault sword.

² Author’s Note: Usually falls on a Tuesday. Mark those calendars, Vanguardians! And remember: there is no God, love is a lie, and hell is filled with spiders.

“Heeeeeeyyyy,” Deep Knight said, hiding his disgust and depression. “How’s it going..... you.”

“C’mon,” said the woman. “I told you to call me by my pet name.”

“I really don’t think that’s office appro-“

“CALL ME,” the woman said, her teeth clenched. “BY MY PET NAME.” Deep Knight glanced over at his coworker Matt, who was busy waiting for the microwave on the other side of the breakroom. Matt, a lean middle-aged fellow who always kept to himself, was the single person Deep Knight respected in the entire building. Matt was a strong man. The kind of man who’d have his comrade’s back in a fight against Vrocklings. Worms of doubt and contemplation tussled in the arena of Deep Knight’s grey matter. *If I call her by the name, Matt’s gonna hear it.*

“Yaknow, Cindy,” Deep Knight said. “Isn’t it more meaningful if we use the pet names outside of work? I me-“

“Call me by the pet name, or I tell your mom about the butter incident.”

“Jesus. Okay, Knightrider.”

Opening the microwave, Matt grabbed what he’d been heating up, and slammed the device shut again, then, turning to leave the break room, Matt muttered, “Jesus Christ” just loud enough for Deep Knight to hear. *Goddamn it.*

“Hell yeah I’m the Kightrider. And I got a feeling I’m getting something DEEP to KNIGHT.” Cindy made exaggerated thrusting motions with her pelvis as she spoke. “Get it?”

“I- Yes.”

“Yeah. I’m talking about sex.”

“Yeah, no, I-I-I caught on to that.”

“Like the sex we’re gonna have tonight.”

“Why are you still talking about this?”

“What’s up, love-birds?” Craig, a thirty-something asshole with blonde hair walked into the room. On a raid seven years ago, Deep Knight had fought a particularly annoying Nether-Demon for a chest of jewels. The creature, long toothed and decorated in syringes had challenged Deep Knight to a “Civil battle of riddles” for the jewels. In return, Deep Knight had civilly, and politely, turned both the Nether-Demon’s feet sideways and shoved them both so far up the creature’s ass that they’d popped out of its eye sockets. Deep Knight frequently fantasized about that moment. Often in his fantasies, Craig took the place of the Nether-Demon.

“Hey, Craig,” said Cindy. “Howsit goin?”

“Goin about as good as it can when you use blue cheese instead of shampoo for financial reasons tied to an uncomfortable addiction to gambling. And how bout you, Deepy-boi?”

“Go fuck yourself with a tire iron.” Deep Knight said.

“Come again?”

“I said,” repeated Deep Knight. “That tie you’re wearing is really inspired.”

“Hell yeah it is. My mom bought it for me last year for mother’s day. Yeeeeeaaah, it’s a total chick magnet. So, what you two crazy kids doing?” *Craig*, thought Deep Knight, *I was drinking blood mead from the cochleae of dead fire drakes when you were still in diapers, you needle-dicked fuck. Don’t ever call me a damn kid.*

“Oh you know us,” said Cindy. “Just talking about getting that Vanguard DEE-AHK.” Saying this, Cindy lifted both hands in a “raise the roof” motion and made a loud “whoop-whoop” noise. “I’m talking about dick, by the way, Craig. VANGUARD dick.” *Please stop talking.* “It glows. Like purple. It’s WILD.”

“For the love of Christ, you people.” Matt, who’d just reentered the room, said, before tossing an apple core into the trash and walking back out.

“That’s cool,” Craig said. “You’ll have to show me how to do the glowing thing sometime. Catch you two around.”

The sound of bones against steel leaked out from Deep Knight’s helmet, his entire body quivering with rage. *The only thing I’m gonna show you is the wrong side of this fist.*

“What’s the wrong side of a fist?” Cindy asked.

“What the hell?”

“What?”

“How did you hear that?”

How DID she hear that? Such a question traced fires of incomprehensibility across the lobes locked within Deep Knight’s tired head. Beyond the gateways of Gia had he sailed to fight the gibbering monstrosities of the eldritch abyss. Stolen had he, from their sable books of chaos, the many secrets of the universe. He’d wrestled the elden giants for insights too lofty for mortal kind. From the belly of the darkest seas had he pulled sunken chests filled with decrepit scrolls of forbidden truths! Yet, here was a woman who just straight up read his damn thoughts, and it confused the blue hell out of him.

“How did I hear what?” Cindy asked.

“Never mind. Listen, I better get back to my desk and slam my head in a drawer in vain pursuit of any kind of physical feeling.”

“Mmmm. Imma give you all sorts of physical feelings tonight.” Cindy had not, despite Deep Knight telling her several times, retained the knowledge that he could feel absolutely nothing, as his entire nervous system had squirted out the back of his head like the succulent

juices of a pimple, when, several years prior, a rather aggressive Grothmogh had smacked him on the nose with the force of a thousand typhoons. “Maybe we can even use the cheeseboard.”

Deep Knight, the scourge of a thousand moons, seeker of the Seventh Throne, and slayer of the Whipped Devil, had once been a proud vestige of destruction and blood shed, and now, in all his pathetic glory, he spent every other night paddle-spanking an insane woman with a hand-crafted cheese board bought in Vermont.

Just tell her no. Tell her to leave you alone. You can do this. Remember the battle of a million centipedes? How you strapped incendiaries and paint to a goat and wiped out an entire legion of Necropoles’ army? Remember how bad ass that was? Where’s that warrior spirit? You can do this. Just look her in the eyes and say no.

“Sure thing.” Deep Knight said.

No, no, NO. What are you doing?

“That’s what I like to hear, boo.” Kissing him on the helmet (even through its metal, Deep Knight could feel its toxic burn), Cindy turned and walked out of the room. Sighing, Deep Knight turned back to the coffee pot. The pool seemed less warm, much like office jobs seem less glorious after a month of having them. The grog at home camp had never grown chill, always had it simmered hot, provoked by endless fires fueled by the bones of Icarus. Like icy asps of charnel daymares the grog had stung and sunk into the belly like a blood-maggot infested meteor. How glorious it had been.

The door to the break room exploded open in a way that screamed “Urgent, but not child labor level urgent.” In barged a skinny twenty-something boy with red hair and more freckles than there were crabs in the Hell of Upside-Down Sinners (all of which Deep Knight had long

ago consumed in the course of three weeks of unbroken crab eating³). This whelp of a human, accurately named Liam, dashed around the room to where Deep Knight stood. With one retching motion, the boy spit something into Deep Knight's still empty coffee mug.

"Oh thank god," Liam said. "I was worried I wasn't going to make it."

"Wha-?" Deep Knight stammered, looking down into his mug, now filled with a bright orange liquid. "Make it the fuck where, Liam?"

"Anywhere! I couldn't just spit it out on the floor! And Debbie would be PISSED if I spewed in one of the cans again. The Fanta by the way? Yeah, like sooooooper stale, bro. Would not recommend."

"Wha-?"

"You good there, bro?"

"Y-"

"Bro? Brogeta? Broku? Brohan?⁴ Brovedor? Brokodepolidroptoplis? Bro-enjamin Franklin? Broseph? Broses? Bro-occoli?"

Liam, you scrawny spit fuck, I'm going to deglove you limb by limb and feed you to the sable worm of a thousand hook-teeth, then I'm gonna pick up whatever shit comes out of the worm, build a life-size replica of you out of it, and bring your soul into it so that maybe you'd be able to understand just how much of a putrid little shit you are.

"Please," Deep Knight said, resting his helmet in his palm. "Please just leave me alone."

"Sure thing Brosepolis, Broject, Br-"

³ Author's Note: Yee-haw

⁴ Author's Note: Very high-brow reference to *Dragon Ball* characters Vegeta, Goku, and Gohan respectively

Whatever foul stupidity came from the whelp's mouth next was unknown to Deep Knight. Walking out from the room, he dropped his mug in the trashcan by the door. Some things were better left unwashed.

Deep Knight met Matt in the doorway. The two locked eyes. Matt, unable to see anything through Deep Knight helm, was completely unaware of this. Matt was a good man. Strong looking. Walked with a proud gate. Deep Knight respected that.

“Hey, Matt. Really nice tie there, ma-”

“Are you going to move?”

“Huh? Oh. Oh, no, I'll probably still stay in the same place until I find something for a better price. Still trying to save up for a better car, y'know?” Deep Knight punctuated his reply with a laugh, which he cut short abruptly, remembering how unsettling his laugh was.

“No...I mean...From the doorway.”

“From the what?”

“The doorway. You-you're blocking the doorway. I'm trying to get into the break room.”

“Oh, oh right. Yeah, sorry about that. Slim doorways, and all that.”

Matt stared at Deep Knight. There was a flicker of something in his eyes. Deep Knight thought for a second that it was the flame of budding friendship. But it was just the reflection from the fridge light as someone opened it.

“You're still standing in my way.”

“Oh, sorry! Let me just slide out of the way then. There we go! Can't let anything stand in our way, know what I'm saying, brother?”

“Excuse me.”

“No, no. Excuse me...brother.” In his tribe, ‘Brother’ had been the highest term of respect one could carry.

“Don’t call me that.”

“No, it’s like, like in a warrior way. You know?”

“My brother died three months ago in a car crash, you son of a bitch.”

With that, Matt walked into the breakroom.

Death Knight, dazed and hot with awkwardness, returned to his desk: a meager hovel of a cubicle more fit for a dead possum than the mighty conqueror of the Crimson Flame. It was bare mostly, save for the poster of a hanged man, whose neck had stretched to show its inner mechanisms—underneath the hanged man, in puffy pink letters, were the words “Hang in There.” Deep Knight sat down upon his office throne of unrealized dreams, and it squeaked like a rat who was less than pleased with its meal, but still satisfied. The chair, which had not been given to him new, could no longer swivel around as it had been designed to. This truth, more painful than the barbed whips of Gzartvhard, cut into Deep Knight’s psyche, burying itself deeper every time he (in private) attempted to spin around on it. Once, Deep Knight had kept a bright yellow sticky note in his helmet. In glittery blood he’d written several wishes. Among these was “Spin around in swivel chair like the dope-ass world destroyer you are.” Even now, with that sticky note rotting away in his desk drawer, that dream was unrealized. Same with every other wish on it.

“Hey, watsup, buddy?”

Oh dear fuck almighty.

“Hey, Ryan.” Deep Knight said, using his chair’s elden wheels to turn awkwardly towards Ryan. “Wh- what can I do you for?”

“About 50 bucks!” Ryan began laughing. Deep Knight, who’d once laughed proudly with gods upon Other-Olympus, stared blankly back at his boss. His helmet showed no emotion, but the room tone made clear that there were no positive ones present. “Heh. Get it? Cuz you... Hmh... Anyways... This is gonna sound really bad, but while you were talking to Liam I thought that I’d take a look at the report.”

“Okay”

“On, uh, on your computer.”

“O-Okay...”

“Yeah, well, long story short, I deleted the whole thing.”

Fierce rage spilled out from Deep Knight, soaked itself into the earth, and somewhere, far away from where he stood, that rage manifested in the form of a flaming hummingbird, which then stabbed its beak into the prefrontal cortex of a groom in the middle of his vows.⁵

“I- I don’t know what to say. Should I jus-”

“Yeah, no worries,” Ryan laughed. “It was totally my B, home skillet. Just get that report to me by three and we’ll call it even.” With that, Ryan turned to walk away.

You mother fucker.

Ryan turned back around. “What was that about truckers?” he asked.

⁵ Pastor: “And do you, Peter, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Groom: “God yes! I do. I d-”

Bride: “Oh my god!”

Pastor: “Was that a hummingbird?”

Best Man: “Jesus Christ! Peter!”

Attendee 1: “Nooooooooooooo!”

Attendee2: “Someone call an ambulance!”

Bride: “Peter, baby! Baby! Oh God! My life is ruined! Why? Why, God? Just say something, Peter. Please. Just tell me you love me one last time.”

Groom’s Mom: “Does, uh, this mean none of us get cake?”

Grooms’ Dad: “Christ, Deborah. What’s wrong with you? Of course we’re getting cake.”

“Nothing.”

“Oh. Cool then.” He began walking away. “Oh wait! Stupid me, almost forgot! Your monitor may...or may not...be frozen on Pornhub.” Ryan smiled and left.

The world broke apart. The void yawned open. Before Deep Knight swirled a miasma of endless depression. He stood. Silently. He walked. Trudgingly. He opened the door to the bathroom, and, finding a vacant stall, sat down on an ivory throne that smelled like he felt.

What the absolute horse dick, whale tit, moose knuckling fuck is wrong with these people? I mean WHAT THE HELL is this place? I'm this close to just summoning a goddamn wraith goliath to come in an-

“Oi!” said someone in the stall to the right. The voice was recognizably that of David the Scottish janitor. “Ye mind thinkan jus a wee bit less loudly? Some of us ould like ta take a shite wi’out hearin your folkin thought pro-cess.”

Deep Knight the insurmountable, the unbeatable ruination of a thousand realms, took his helmet off, and placed it carefully on the toilet dispenser. It fell anyways, landing into a puddle with an uncomfortably loud and wet thud.

“Hey, woah there, champ.” Said Craig from the left side stall. “Taco Bell?”

Deep Knight the destroyer, his head a pearly white skull surrounded in purple-black flames, brought his knees up to his chest. Balancing himself on the toilet lid with the expert dexterity of a being born to dodge the very word of God, Deep Knight began to rock back and forth. There, curled up in fetal position, rocking himself on a toilet in an office building in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the 2nd greatest former member of the Dark Vanguard cried like a wounded puppy.