

## The Art of Darkness

~~June~~ 29th *Doom*, 2008

*That do-gooding, muffin-baking Foster Guardian, Mrs Purejoie gave me some of the paper money that passes for currency here. What happened to good old gold bullion?*

*'What is this - tribute?' I said.*

*'No, dear, just for you to buy a few things you might want,' she said in her sickeningly syrupy voice, as if she actually cared about me.*

*'What - like mercenaries?' I said, 'Or maybe a flaming catapult, or a Castle? Come on - I need a lot more than this paltry sum!'*

*'Well,' she said, 'there's a nice Lego castle in the local toyshop, you could get that.'*

*Oh please! A toy castle? Who does she think I am? Still, to be fair she is prompt with her payments of weekly tribute, pitiful though they are. And there is something I want to get with the money as it happens.*

By now, Dirk was beginning to get the hang of 'shopping' though he hadn't yet mastered all the little human rituals associated with the process.

For instance, he'd learned you couldn't just walk in, help yourself and then walk out with a comment like 'The Dark Lord thanks you for your tribute – be grateful that he has chosen not to destroy you all at this time.' That had almost got him arrested the last time he'd gone to buy a book on the way home from school. The shopkeeper had rung the police but it was only because the 'boys in blue' were so overworked that they couldn't send out a 'copper' for at least an hour, so she'd let Dirk go.

Apparently, the shopkeeper was there only as a favour to the book store owner. She had to pick up her car after an 'M.O.T' (whatever that was) and then pick up some children from somewhere – she'd seemed terribly 'stressed', something Dirk noticed a lot of humans seemed to be most of the time, so she'd just let the whole thing pass, though he'd had to pay for the copy of 'How to Stage a Military Coup' in the end.

Dirk remembered thinking about what odd names humans used for their enforcement agents – at first Dirk had thought some of them were perhaps steam-driven automata made out of copper or that some of them really were boys. He'd considered joining the Police on that basis – a great way to get power after all, but had had to abandon his plans after he realized that they didn't really employ boys. It was just another example of their continuous and confusing use of slang and nicknames.

He'd also learned that you had to have enough money with you and that you often had to 'queue' which drove him almost insane with rage, and that if you were too loud and rude, they might refuse to serve you, which was even more frustrating especially if you'd queued for long. He was not used to waiting his turn.

Today, Dirk had decided it was time to make a certain change, so after school he made a trip to a large shop called 'The DIY Home Store'. Basically it was a vast warehouse, a bit like some of the supply dumps he used to build for his Orcish armies back home. But instead of scimitars and shields, rations and Goblin Grog, this one was full of tools, and wood, and screws and ladders and fittings and all sorts of extraordinary stuff. If only he'd had a chain of these stores near his Iron Tower back home – they were perfect for building war machines, barracks, and forts and so on, and all of it without magic. Remarkable!

He located the 'Help Desk' where a spotty young man, dressed in the uniform of a DIY 'worker drone' as he liked to call them, was filling in some kind of form. Dirk generally hated the uniforms of the big stores and corporations – they looked weak, cheap and tacky. Why not add some black or blood red capes or skull helmets and bone breastplates for evil's sake? Anything but dull pastel colours, a silly hat and a name tag. Dirk walked up to the desk. Dully he noted the shop drone's vacuous name tag that read, 'James – I'm here to help'.

'Bah, that tag should say 'I need help' more like,' thought Dirk to himself. Or how would Christopher say it? 'Duh! Yeah, I know you're here to help - it's a help desk, innit,' Dirk was rather proud that he'd been able to replicate some of the language his companions at school would use. Practising this type of thing was all part of trying to fit in... for now, anyway, until his plans of world domination came to fruition, of course. Then he wouldn't have to bother with 'fitting in' anymore. Oh no, that'd be everyone else's problem. They'd have to fit in with him! Mwah, hah, hah!

He was startled back to reality by the realization he'd laughed out loud.

'Hey, not a bad evil super-villain's laugh, despite the lisp,' said the shop assistant, looking up from his work. 'What can I do for you, kid?'

Dirk hesitated for a moment. But by now he was used to suppressing his anger when he was patronized, or not addressed correctly. So he simply got on with it. He glanced at a large sign hanging from the ceiling that read 'At DIY Home Stores We Promise the Best Possible Service to All Our Customers.'

He turned to James the shop assistant and said, 'I require a large can of black gloss paint, and a small can of water-soluble red paint, preferably as close to the colour of blood as possible. You may use your own blood as a colour comparison tool if you wish, so that you may provide the best possible match, and therefore the Best Possible Service.'

The shop assistant stared at him uncomfortably. Then he laughed. 'Hah, I thought you were serious there for a moment, kid! Use my own blood, riiight – very funny!' Then he said curtly, 'Over there, third aisle from the left, you'll find the paint there.'

‘I am always serious, but thank you all the same,’ said Dirk, attempting to be polite, ‘Bring them to me immediately and I may show mercy...’ Dirk caught himself at the last minute. Hastily he added, ‘Err, I mean, I would appreciate it greatly.’

‘Oh come on, it’s just over there, dude, and I’m busy, you can manage, right, bright kid like you?’ said the assistant, in a non-assistance kind of way.

Dirk felt a world-shattering, city-devastating, population-decimating rage coming over him. He closed his eyes and tried to control himself. He wasn’t going to get what he wanted with invasions, massacres, torture, violence, threats or any of his other methods like kidnapping the assistant’s girlfriend or something. He’d have to try a different tack.

He pointed at the sign. ‘Best possible Service,’ said Dirk loudly.

‘Yeah, but you’re just a kid.’ said the assistant without even looking up from his form filling.

‘BEST POSSIBLE SERVICE,’ said Dirk at the top of his voice.

The assistant did look up this time, but only to say, ‘Over there, dude!’ jerking his thumb in the direction of the paint.

Dirk’s eyes narrowed with angry determination. He wasn’t going to give up! He started saying, ‘Best possible service, best possible service’ over and over again. The shop assistant looked up, irritated but didn’t move. After a few seconds, he began to twitch restlessly, as if he wanted to clap his hands over his ears and cry out ‘Please, God, no more please, no more!’ Dirk increased the volume and the assistant began to look around like a frightened rabbit caught in the headlights. This was like old times thought Dirk to himself happily!

Then the assistant cracked. It was just too much to take.

‘OK, OK, just shut up, I’m going, I’m going!’

He returned shortly with the paint. ‘There you go, OK?’ he said, ‘Hope you’ve got the money.’

‘Of course I have,’ said Dirk rather sniffily, as he examined the paint. It did seem black enough, and the red paint – called an irritatingly trite ‘Crimson Skies’ – was indeed quite blood like. Though why they couldn’t just call it ‘Blood Red’ was beyond him. Surely everyone would rush out and buy cans of ‘Blood Red’ paint in droves? Or paint called ‘Black Death’ or something instead of ‘Classic’ or ‘Imperial Black’ though Imperial Black wasn’t that bad, actually. Anyway, he had the right paint so he said,

‘Though you tried to thwart me at first, you have done well. I am pleased,’ and he nodded regally, before walking off in the direction of the checkout with his cans of paint. The assistant just stared after him with a bemused expression on his face.

Without thinking, Dirk walked right to the front of the queue at the checkout, and put his cans of paint in front of the cashier.

‘I wish to purchase these items, Madam. Luckily for you, I am in a mood to pay rather than just seize them as my rightful tribute,’ he said imperiously. He managed this with such commanding tones that the cashier said ‘Of course, sir,’ and began to ring it up.

‘Hold on! He just pushed in!’ said the woman next to Dirk, technically the one who was actually at the front of queue. She was holding a large kitchen sink.

‘Yeah,’ shouted a large man in paint-stained overalls further down the line. ‘Get to the freakin’ back of the queue, ya cheeky monkey!’

‘Careful,’ said another, ‘what if he’s one of those knife wielding, glue sniffing hoodies and stabs us or something.’

Dirk lifted his head arrogantly. He certainly wasn’t some petty, glue sniffing thug – why would he do anything that might destroy his supreme intellect, eh? Only the dumbest of orcs in his worst, most unreliable legions behaved like that, though sometimes they could be useful as cannon fodder on the front line. Nor would he be seen dead in a hoodie anyway. Well, not the sort of hoodies on sale in this forsaken land. Maybe one of those Arch Necromancer’s hooded capes perhaps, or that worn by the Vampire Lords of Sunless Keep. And as if he’d do a mere stabbing! How cheap, and pointless. Hah! Little did they know how dangerous he *really* was. No, they needn’t fear him for petty criminality - rather they should be more concerned that he might conquer and enslave them all. Fear that, humans!

‘Bah!’ he said proudly, as he snatched up his cans of paint, and walked haughtily to the back of the queue, ‘I am no hoodie, you fools!’ As he passed the large man in overalls, he added ‘And you, sir, should not use such foul language in front of children. Or at all for that matter. Good day.’

The man’s jaw dropped, ‘Well, err, um, yeah,’ he spluttered and then fell into a rather apologetic silence, which pleased Dirk.

Things fell back into normality – Dirk queued in frustration, paid and left with his paint. He caught one of those large Chariots of Combustion the humans called a bus back home, and then had to plan how to get into his room without the paint being spotted by his Guardians, the Doctor and the Priestess – or Vicar rather.

He decided on straightforward stealth. He opened the door as quietly as possible. No-one to be seen. Silently as one of those ninja assassins from those absurd but entertaining kung fu films (he would set up a ninja training school as soon as he got back to his real home in the Iron Tower of Despair), Dirk successfully crept up the stairs and into his room without being noticed. There he stashed the paint before returning downstairs for supper and another evening of ‘let’s pretend I’m a normal human child in a normal home’. Maybe he’d get the chance to crush the Doctor at chess again, though Dr Jack didn’t seem to want to play much anymore. Didn’t like to lose no doubt, thought Dirk, grinning to himself.

After an uneventful evening, and an episode of My Family (why couldn't he have ended up in a house like that – he'd have had them under his control in a week!), Dirk retired early to bed. He noticed a set of Dark Slayer/Darth Vader pyjamas on his bed, which was nice. 'Thank you, Mrs Purejoie,' thought Dirk. He put them on and then sat up waiting, and reading his book (How to Stage a Military Coup was proving to be most interesting). When everyone was asleep he got to work. In the early hours of the morning he finished, without spilling a drop. A perfect job. He went to sleep, happy and content for the first time in ages. And it worked – he didn't get the nightmare, the yellow eyes in the whiteness dream.

The next day he was woken in the usual way:

'Good morning, Dirk. Up you get, sweetheart!' said Mrs Purejoie, as she did every morning.

'Mornings are never 'good', Purejoie, and don't call me sweetheart,' replied Dirk as he did every morning.

'Call... me... Hilary...' she said, as she did every morning, but this time she said the words on autopilot. She was staring at the walls, gaping in horrified astonishment.

'What... what have you done?! I.. it's so....' With that she turned round and shouted for Jack. He rushed in, looking worried, and pulled up short in amazement.

'What's happened to the walls...' he sputtered.

The walls and ceiling had been re-painted as black as night, and regularly spaced all over with bright red palm prints, as if someone had imprinted their blood drenched hands all over the place.

'Rather fetching, don't you think, Doctor?' said Dirk innocuously. 'I'm thinking of replacing the carpet next.'

Dr Jack and Mrs Purejoie stood there for a moment, dumbfounded. Mrs Purejoie snatched at Dirk's hands and inspected them. Traces of red paint were still on the palms of his hands. Dirk had tried to wash them clean the night before, but he'd always had trouble cleaning red stuff off his hands.

'Thank God it's just paint,' she muttered under her breath. Then Mrs Purejoie turned to Dr Jack and said, her voice raised in anger,

'Look what your little foster monster has done! And you want to go for full adoption!'

'My monster! The whole thing was your idea – you're the do-gooding Christian, for Christ's sake!' replied Jack.

'Oh, so it's all my fault is it? Look at...' She pulled up short. Christopher was poking his head around the door, gawping at the walls in wide eyed amazement.

‘Not in front of the children...’ she said. With that she led Dr Jack down the stairs leaving Christopher smiling ruefully at Dirk and shaking his head. They could hear raised voices from downstairs.

‘You’ve gone too far – they sound pretty angry,’ said Christopher nervously. He was obviously rather upset by it all – he didn’t like to hear his parents arguing. ‘You shouldn’t have done it – Mum and Dad spent a lot of time doing this room up, you know.’

‘Just a bit of redecorating - hardly the crime of the century. I’m sure they’ll get over it,’ said Dirk. Sure enough the shouting died down though it was obvious a serious discussion was still underway. Christopher shifted uncomfortably.

‘Anyway,’ said Dirk gesturing at the walls like a King at Court, ‘what do you think of my new colour scheme? I call it ‘Dark Lord’s Delight’, which I think is a much better name than most of these paint names they have, like Soft Velvet, Coral Cream or accursed Crimson Skies, eh!’

Christopher couldn’t help but laugh, his mood changing instantly, as it often did when Dirk made him laugh. ‘Dark Lord’s Delight, ha ha! But it’s a bit depressing don’t you think? I mean, maybe even a bit, well, you know, INSANELY PSYCHO!?’ he said, miming being hanged with his tongue sticking out as if in death and his eyes all askew.

Dirk smiled at that, but he was a trifle disappointed. It was almost as if he wanted to have Christopher’s approval in some way.

‘You don’t like it?’ he asked. ‘Really? What about Sooz, do you think she’ll like it?’

‘Bit much, even for Sooz I would say,’ said Christopher. He looked around the room again. ‘I dunno though, I suppose it is kinda cool. Just maybe not *all* the time though! Not as if you can turn it off and on now is it? Still, you’ve got guts, I’ll give you that! Bet you they won’t let you keep it like that.’

‘Bet you they will,’ said Dirk. ‘I shall command them, and they shall obey!’

‘Yeah, right,’ said Christopher. He paused and gave Dirk a sideways glance. ‘Full adoption Mum said – whaddya think of that?’

Dirk shrugged. ‘Nowhere else to go. I’ve seen worse. Much worse... like the time they bound me in Chains of Holy Fire, deep in the mountain fastnesses of the cold northern wastes. That was bad – this isn’t really.’

Christopher grinned. ‘Sometimes when Dad cooks, that can be bad... but yeah, not so bad as being in chains! But assuming you haven’t blown it with the crazy bloody hand prints, I guess it wouldn’t be so bad having a brother. Even if he is a psycho nutter!’

Dirk thought for a moment. ‘Yeah, it wouldn’t be so bad,’ he said, realizing with some amazement that he actually meant it. They looked at each other for a moment, and smiled. A kind of bond had been forged between them. For Christopher, it was a

bond of friendship like many that he would make in his life, for Dirk it was something oddly new, something he wasn't used to, and it would change his life forever.

As it turned out, Dirk was allowed to keep it, but not quite for the reasons he had supposed. Mrs Purejoie and Dr Jack had taken no action yet, but had called Wings and Randle, the child psychologists, to consult with them first. Naturally, instead of meekly going to sleep as he was supposed to, Dirk had crept silently (like a ninja, of course) to the top of the stairs, and picked up the phone extension there, so he could listen to the discussion between them and his foster parents.

Bah, how he hated having parents – it was a constant reminder that he was just a powerless kid, subject to whatever capricious whimsy the adults might decide upon, dressed up in language like 'it's in your best interests' or 'we only want to do what's best for you,' whilst grounding him for a week, or putting him in detention or forcing him to write out 'I must not make Fragmentation Grenades in Chemistry class' a hundred times or something. At least when he had indulged in the arbitrary exercise of power over others, he didn't pretend it was anything less than power for its own sake, as any self respecting Dark Lord would do. Still, this business of 'putting the child's interest first' could be used to his advantage if he was clever. They were only human after all, so they could be outwitted by his evil genius and superior intellect. But first, you had to find out what they were thinking. He tuned into the conversation.

Dirk learned that according to Wings his paint scheme was 'a manifestation of some inner trauma,' and 'an outlet or an expression of whatever horrific ordeal he'd been through,' and Randle thought that it was also 'a cry for help' and that 'whatever trauma had triggered this Dissociative Personality Disorder it must have been pretty awful,' as they had rarely heard of such a dark display of art. 'Like a 11yr old Edvard Munch – you know, the guy who painted The Scream,' Randle had said. Dirk was intrigued. Edvard Munch? The Scream? He'd have to see this painting.

Wings had gone on – 'He needs love and understanding not punishment at this time.' Mrs Purejoie was almost in tears. 'Oh, the poor boy, the poor dear boy – I feel awful that I lost my temper like that!' And so it went on. In fact, the psychologists recommended they leave the room as it was, and let Dirk use this as a way of getting his pain out, like a kind of art therapy. Over time, he would tire of it, and hopefully repaint it in something more normal, which would be a good sign that he was on his way to a better state of mental health.

Dirk couldn't believe his luck. Carefully he put the phone down.

'Excellent,' he thought, 'the fools were going to let me get away with it!' He'd won his bet with Christopher! He touched the fingers and thumbs of both hands together in front of his chest, threw his head back and laughed.

'Mwah, hah, hah!'

'Dirk, is that you?! Off to bed, right now!' said Dr Jack loudly from downstairs.

Dirk grimaced – by the Nine Hells; he'd laughed out loud again! He really had to be careful with that. He thought quickly on his feet.

'I'm sorry – I had a terrible nightmare. It was awful, awful!' he said. He screwed his face up as if he was crying. Mrs Purejoie rushed up the stairs and gave him a big hug. She took him back to bed, tucked him in and held him in her arms saying 'There, there,' a lot. Dirk was tempted to say 'Where, where?' in reply but he didn't want to blow his cover so he kept quiet and simply faked a sob now and then, pleased with his artful deception. After a while he started to feel sleepy. And warm. And loved. And safe. He hadn't felt that way for a very, very long time. Maybe Purejoie wasn't so bad after all he thought drowsily. With that, he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep, free once more from the yellow eyes of doom.

The next day was a Saturday, and Dirk found out as much as he could about the painting called the Scream. He managed to get a poster of it to put up on the wall of his room, much to Mrs Purejoie's dismay. He wrote about it in his Diary:

~~July 16st, 2007~~ **Gloom 16th,**

*Now I understand what those Orc-brained psycho do-gooders Wings and Randle we're on about. I've found a print of that painting they mentioned, The Scream, so I've scanned it in and attached it to my diary and put one up on my wall. I love it! That's right, worthless scum, scream, scream! For the Dark Lord is coming for you! Mwah, hah, hah!!!!*



*Apparently it was painted by a human called Edvard Munch who is from a land called Norway. Curious name. I wonder what it is that he munches? The still beating hearts of his defeated enemies? I suspect not - they don't seem to do that around here much these days anymore. Probably Hobnobs instead or something.*

*Anyway, apparently this Munch fellow was quoted as saying, 'Sickness, insanity and death were the angels that surrounded my cradle and they have followed me throughout my life.' I can identify with that. The Angel of Death. The Angel of Madness. That's my kind of Angel, baby!*