

A STRANGE GAME

by Daniel Lovat Clark

I have encountered more than my fair share of archons in my time, but they never stop surprising me with their...oddness. They have strange bodies—or the lack thereof. They have strange names. But they also have bizarre and puzzling requests.

One day an archon calling themself the Shrouded (just “the Shrouded,” not “the Shrouded One” or anything sensible like that) came to my office and manifested at spider-size across my writing desk. The Shrouded wore a face like a white death-mask and a wispy array of cloaks and ribbons surrounded them like a cloud.

“I have heard a story,” they said—no, intoned, “of a demon that dwells on the shores of the Moyigdos Sea. It harms no one, but challenges passersby to a game.”

“That certainly stands at odds with most stories I have heard of the demons of Dis,” I said. “They tend toward the pain-and-murder side of the spectrum of possible interactions.”

“This one is different,” said the Shrouded. “I’m considering recruiting them. I’d like you to find a winning strategy to the game.”

Eager to have a chance to meet a demon face-to-face without anyone dying, I agreed.



Finding the creature was not difficult. It made—it makes—no effort to hide, standing unmoving on the edge of the waves, its sinister game board laid out before it. There was nothing nearby, no cities, no people; even the howling sea-bats so common on that coast gave the region a wide berth. Only the wind- and tide-scorched pillars of stone that stood sentinel along the shore looked down upon the demon—and me, of course.

The wind whipped the tatters of its dark robe, the only movement the creature made as I approached. The robes hid most of its form, but not its nature. *Is it for my benefit?* I wondered as I drew near. Was the robe a form of camouflage, hiding its more repulsive and terrifying features, leaving only its horned mask and taloned hands to frighten passersby?

“Hello,” I said when I was close enough. The creature turned its head to face me, then gestured with one talon to the game board. “I don’t know how to—” I began, and then realized that in fact I did know how to play. It was like remembering a game I’d played as a little spiderling, yet I am certain I had never encountered this game before.



The demon stood silent as I contemplated the board. The playing pieces were twisted columns of Æmber, the board a rough circle of stone cut from the local seashore, its spaces marked with sigils that I can only conclude are part of whatever alphabet is used in Dis. At the time, their meaning was as clear to me as the rules of the game. Now both are faded and fuzzed in my memory.

I sought the perfect opening gambit. A maneuver that would slice through the creature's defenses, that would bring me victory and understanding.

I nudged a piece forward—it slid easily across the board at the gentlest tap of my forelegs—and made my first move. "Where did you learn this game?" Not the first question a demon would expect, I hoped, and one that might draw it out to tell me more of its history. Or at least distract it from playing an optimal counter-strategy.

I'd as well have asked the ocean—I would have received more of an answer. The demon moved its own piece as its only response and left me to study the board, and it, in silence. It had no eyes I could see, no features of any kind aside from that strange mask. No way for me to read what it might be thinking or feeling—if indeed it did either. It simply sat. And watched. And waited.

"I thought the spider in her web was the one who was supposed to stand unmoving in wait!" I joked as I moved another piece. Two moves into the game and my strategy was already evolving: I would lure its pieces out of position by presenting my own as bait, then rapidly strike at my opponent's unprotected rear. (And how did I happen upon this strategy, for a game I had never played before? Why was I so certain it would work? Questions that haunt me now, but did not occur to me then.)

The joke had no more effect than the question. My opponent studied the board with its eyeless gaze, then moved a single piece. Its silence had begun to unnerve me, a silence that seemed to swallow up the quiet murmur of the waves and the thrum of the wind through the standing stones. The silence grew, and my own feeble chitterings became more and more desperate in response. "What do I get if I win?" I asked. *And what do you get if I lose?* some part of me wondered. I began to regret not asking that question before I had made the first move.

My fear was growing, feeding on itself as my admittedly fertile imagination began playing out increasingly macabre scenarios. It would eat me. It would rip my soul from my body. It would tear off five of my legs, weave a web from my own failure and regret, and siphon the fluids from inside my exoskeleton with its hidden mandibles. As I grew more afraid, the creature's talon-fingers tapped on the stone board, snapping my attention back to the game.

Nothing to be afraid of, I reminded myself. The stories told of this creature never included it harming its opponents in any way, and was I not dedicated to seeing the truth behind the stories, the living being behind the monster? How often had I been rejected as a mere spider? Besides: my strategy was foolproof. I was going to win!

I moved another piece, where it would threaten my opponent and force it to respond. It did so, just as I had predicted, and I once again moved a piece to a threatening position. My questions forgotten, I became more and more absorbed in the game. As my strategy unfolded toward its eventual brilliant success, the rest of the world faded away like a memory. Everything relied on the next move—the whole world was the game.

At last, I was poised to strike—and then the creature moved its heart-stone. The key to everything, the one piece I had to take to end the duel, and suddenly the situation slipped beyond my grasp. The pieces I had sacrificed were meaningless, the handicap they left in their wake insurmountable. Within three turns, my opponent had cleared my board all but completely, and with a final resounding clatter it placed me in an inescapable trap.



Shame, humiliation, frustration, disbelief, and exhaustion pounded in my limbs and made my hearing-hairs quiver with each pulse of my heart and each gurgle of my haemolymph. I reached out and knocked my heart-stone sideways, conceding the game. As I did, the stone flickered in the light of the setting sun, and I felt as if all the intensity of my emotion was drained away. All that shame flowed out of me. The humiliation was gone. Instead, I was left numb, an emptiness that would have frightened me if there had been anything left inside me that could feel fear.

The demon lifted my heart-stone in its claws and held it aloft. It pulsed in time with my heart, a dull orange light flaring and quieting, growing stronger as I grew more and more numb. Finally, the demon slipped the playing piece beneath its robe, then turned

and walked slowly into the mirror-bright sea. As it slipped beneath the waves, the final crescent of the sun vanished beyond the horizon, leaving a brilliant silver-orange sunset to light my way home.

I staggered away from that beach and at length made it back to my little nest in my little tree, there to think about what I'd seen and done, and whether I could write it all down. My emotions returned to me, gradually, but for many long days I felt as if the world had lost its color. As if my emotions were swaddled in thick grey wool.

I don't know what that demon wanted from me, or what it got. There are those who say that demons live only to inflict pain and suffering. Was the game nothing but a form of torture? Or was there something else at work, something the demon wanted from me other than my suffering? In any case, it's hard to say that I feel cruelly used. If the demon caused me pain, it took that pain away just as swiftly. I don't regret my defeat in the game, nor do I exult in the thrill of playing it. I don't feel anything about it at all.



It took me days to set ink to paper and finally write down my report of the game. I was regrettably unable to communicate anything meaningful to the Shrouded about how the game is played—that knowledge seemed to have been siphoned away with my emotions.

"My best advice," I wrote, "is to beware of pursuing the first strategy that occurs to you. The demon and the game have a script that they wish you to follow. If the game can be won, and the demon can be defeated, the key must lie in deviating from the script."

I considered telling them what to expect if they lost the game...but I had no opinion on the subject, no emotions to guide my response. I left it out.

Just as the stories about the demon always do.