

“Knight of Justice”

by T.D. Smith

Tony Surname sat on the large, yellow bus in the window seat of the 6th row back from the driver on the left-hand side, if one were looking down the aisle away from the front. He always sat here. It was his assigned seat. Tony was a child who was well behaved (enough) to have earned the privilege of sitting beside his best friend, neighbor-down-the-street, and fellow Kindergartener, (though she was in a different class than him) Noel. They sat side by side both on the way to and on the ride home from school each day in that exact seat that had their names written in green highlighter on an index card that was scotch taped to the thin metal above the window next to this seat.

Today, rather than his usual routine, the bus driver had hurried off the bus, practically dancing about. He had to use the bathroom rather profusely and had stepped off and run into the school, waved his I.D. card, and disappeared inside. He was racing to find and use the restroom quickly, before his fellow bus drivers in queue in front of him got the signal from the principal that all students were onboard and were cleared to leave the school parking lot.

It was on such a random, unusual occasion that some of the children on the bus, noticing that there was a sudden lack of an adult authority figure, decided to take the opportunity to act up.

Tony was watching those children who, while few, were particularly loud and active in their rambunctiousness. One such boy, a tall, skinny 7th grader, who towered over the other children on the bus that were mostly in the lower primary grades, was the loudest and most boisterous of all. Tony observed the boy with scrutiny, watching as his red rattail waved and twisted in the air as he rose, rushed from seat to seat, and spat his venomous words at various unsuspecting children.

Tony could not yet hear what the boy was saying, but he knew it was no good. He would lean in close to each child and speak something awful in a near whisper, staring at them with his scrunched up, snake-like eyes and pointed nose, and his tongue (which, did Tony’s eyes fail him, was it forked?) that twisted inside the cage of his yellowed, crooked teeth. The child would immediately cry in response to his villainy, and laughing, hardly able to contain his teeth in his rapidly expanding smile, the older boy would jump up and spring over to the next victim, eager to spread his gospel of evil and malcontent.

The bully was moving, seat-hopping. Tony knew he was up to no good, not only because of the reactions of his victims, but also because of the mere fact that this boy was moving about and leaving his assigned seat. The nerve! Seat after seat he preyed upon and left, and child after child cried, upset and wailing, in his wake. The bully was slowly inching his way toward Tony and Noel. Tony glanced down at his large, hard, plastic lunchbox and looked with wonder for the hundredth time that day at the characters on the food-holding container.

Knightman, vigilante hero of the town, self-declared champion on justice, sweated inside his shining suit of armor. The feathered crimson plume atop his helmet fluttered in the breeze, and his caged mask was propped open, so he could clearly see the men approaching him. The villains were swarming all about him, wearing their dark colored spandex jumpsuits and ninja masks, an oh so stereotypical look for antagonists.

Knightman held up the metal cuff on his right hand and blocked a blow from the opponent closest to him who now swung a blow at the knight's face. With his left hand he hooked the maligned man, then brought down his right across the back of his head, toppling him. Knightman spun, sparred, blocked, and knocked through the ninja-esque henchman, picking them off one-by-one, making his way slowly but surely to his arch nemesis behind the small crowd of fighters.

The mysterious villain, who had emerged from nowhere and began terrorizing the small city, went by the name Squid Pro Quo. He had fashioned himself extra appendages; long, sprawling, twisting, and bionic, his electromechanical prosthetic arms augmented his strength, movement, and flexibility. Crawling on 8 of these false, clawed arms and manipulating and destroying with the 2 remaining tentacled ones, along with his natural arms, Squid Pro Quo had captured the Mayor.

Following a long, drawn out, dramatic sequence of events, Knightman had taken down many of the villain's accomplices, gained tips, discovered clues, and finally traced him here to this Cliffside on the edge of town overlooking the desert. Finishing off the last of the minions with his fisticuffed hands, Knightman stood to face his target. He drew his spotless, sparkling short sword and angled it at him.

There he stood, over 8 feet tall, extra arms wriggling and writhing all about, his face painted bright red and teeth sharpened to points. His glaring, glowing yellow eyes' gaze pierced through most men's hearts, causing them to wriggle with terror. Not so for Knightman! To Squid Pro Quo's left was his main, loyal henchman Ad Hoc, wearing shorts and a simple, yellow smiley face mask, with the rest of his body covered in purple paint, ready to defend his master.

Knightman lowered his visor and stepped forward to take a swing. Ad Hoc lunged forward at the hero to protect the giant artificial squid man, but just before he reached him, a squirming mechanical tentacle picked him up by the heel and held him up high over the Cliffside, and dangled him there precariously, taunting Knightman, who, although he was a villain, feared for Ad Hoc's safety. (Villains, too, are citizens, after all!)

What new villainy was this from Squid Pro Quo?

Knightman put on the brakes, screeching his pristine, silvery spurs into the dirt and coming to a halt.

Squid Pro Quo rose to his maximum height as the servos in his perfunctory limbs whizzed and buzzed, expanding. Keeping the poor man dangling in the same place, immobilized by the electric serpent's grip, the other arms lowered their controller's torso in a lean toward the armor-clad hero. He cackled vilely. The sound made the hero shiver slightly, whether in his armor or down in his soul, he could not quite tell. He narrowed his gaze and frowned as he pointed his sword at his behemoth nemesis.

The bully hopped from seat to seat swiftly, uttering his curse and wreaking havoc upon the weaker, smaller children such that the entire bus was abuzz in a growing uproar of whining screeches. Tony glanced over to his side at Noel. She seemed oblivious to the situation, completely enamored by whatever infantile thoughts were occupying her mind. Tony knew that the bully was making his way towards them and would soon be there. While momentarily oblivious, Noel was not impervious and would inevitably be subjected to this malevolent young man's misdeed shortly.

Tony craned his neck, lurching slightly forward in his seat and further witnessed this villain's antics.

The tall, redheaded, pointy-nosed boy leaned into a young Asian girl's face from over the seat dividing them.

"Hey little girl," Tony heard him sneer, "Do you love your mommy and daddy?"

"Well, yes..." replied the unsuspecting girl.

"Do you ever want to see them again?"

"Yeah..."

The villain contorted his face into an evil, murderous grimace and leaned as close as he could to the girl's face, until he was eye-level with her, and muttered his venomous words in a whispering growl.

"I'm gonna *kill* you!"

The girl, innocent, unsuspecting, and naïve, believed this awful false promise, and immediately erupted, like her peers, into hysterical tears.

Laughing, the boy leapt up and moved on to the next, a young white boy, and elicited the same response.

Tony watched all of this, right up to the point when the boy came to sit in the seat directly in front of himself and Nicole. Tony squinted disapprovingly at him all the while and grimacing, sat ready for the big, ugly, bully when his head came tottering over the seat and leered at them. In the meantime, he shot one final glance at his lunchbox.

"HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!" Squid Pro Quo screeched.

"Unhand that citizen! What tyrannous new behavior is this, holding your own henchman hostage, Squiddie?" Knightman demanded.

"Oh, Knightman," Squid Pro Quo retorted, "you dunce, you finally found me, but you still haven't uncovered the plot. You don't know how deep the rabbit hole goes!"

With one fell motion, the mechanical squid moved a long, metallic arm, the claw of which hooked and pulled the yellow mask off his henchman, Ad Hoc.

Knightman gasped.

"The mayor! He was Ad Hoc this whole time?"

"That's right! The very inner machinations of your pitiful town's laughable government were compromised from the beginning! My men infiltrated the town and corroded the already putrid rottenness and made it even worse, deathly even! Mwa-ha-ha-ha!!!"

Knightman was infuriated. He had heard enough. Swinging up his sword, holding the weapon aloft, Knightman warned his foe.

“Enough of this! It’s over, Squiddie! You’re beaten. Unhand the Mayor!”

Another vile cackle from the artificial cephalopod.

“It’s quid pro quo, Knightman! It’s quid pro quo!”

Squid Pro Quo reached down the side of the cliff with another clawed mechanical tentacle and produced a young woman, bound and gagged, who had been adhered to the cliff face, out of view.

Knightman clenched his teeth.

“GLEENDA!”

“That’s right, Knightman! I’ll release the Mayor, but in exchange, I’m taking your little girlfriend!”

With that, and laughing evilly all the while, Squid Pro Quo flung the terrified mayor off the cliff.

Acting quickly, Knightman pressed a hidden button that electrified his blade, a modification his friend, Professor Zane E. Science had made for him prior to this confrontation. He ran then fell to his knees and slid across the sandy ground, right under and between the villain’s legs.

Squid Pro Quo launched several of his false arms at Knightman, their claws snapping to catch him, but each one missed him. The final tentacle Knightman struck with his electrified sword, immobilizing it. The armored hero grabbed the claw, ran and leapt off the cliff with it.

Down, down, down, he fell, until reaching out, he caught the Mayor midair. The tentacle reached the ground, but the duo did not impact forcefully, for like a spring it had reached its maximum elasticity and presently recoiled, flinging the screaming, purple painted Mayor into the air and back up the cliff side. He landed with a thud at his master’s feet on the top of the cliff, kicking up a small dust cloud. Squid Pro Quo roared in outrage.

Just before the tentacle had recoiled, Knightman casually stepped off onto the canyon floor below. Tucked away down the cliff was his own piece of mechanical equipment: his signature catapult mobile. Climbing into the cup at the end of the wooden contraption’s long arm, Knightman pulled a rope that sent him, too, careening back up the side of the cliff to face the baddies once more.

An enraged Squid Pro Quo picked up the young woman and threw her down the cliff, to spite his enemy. Knightman caught her in his arms on his way down, and together, they continued upward until Knightman’s feet landed gracefully on the clifftop soil once more and he set his darling down, unharmed.

“Hey little girl,” snarled the bully, “do you ever want to see your mommy and daddy again?”

“Yes?”

*Leaning in again over the seat, diabolically “I’m gonna **kill** you.”*

Noel lost it, convulsing in a fury of tears and pants.

Tony sat firmly, scowling at the boy. The bully readied to move but noticed Tony's disapproving stare. He turned and faced him.

"What are you looking at?" the bully demanded.

Tony gave a cool shrug.

"Nothing much."

Taken aback and at a sudden, if momentary loss for words, the bully's mouth hung open for two full seconds in disbelief, before snapping back shut. He quickly rewound and reset his script and set about trying to unleash this calculated hate on Tony.

"Do you love your mommy and daddy little boy."

An exasperated sigh, then "yeah."

"Do you ever want to see them again?"

"Yes."

"I'm gonna *kill* you."

Not a single trace of a reaction came from Tony. The bully was immediately dismayed. Stoney faced an unperturbed both on his face and behind it in his neural synapses, Tony sat there firmly, staring down evil at its face, utterly undaunted.

Instead, a different chemical reaction triggered synapses to fire in the young elementary student's brain. He thought of the characters in the painted scene on his lunchbox again, and thought.

"What would Knightman do?"

Immediately, unquestionably, he knew.

All of this happened in a flash, a fraction of a second, before Tony acted.

Swinging forth his hand that clutched the lunchbox with its lustrous depiction of his hero, Tony swung the lunchbox high and struck true, swiftly and forcefully and with all his might, directly into the bully's face.

BOP!!!

Knightman landed a blow across Squid Pro Quo's face with the flat, blunt end of his sword that sent the modified man toppling onto the dusty ground. Previously, he had ducked and dodged blow after blow, knocking out and cutting each sprawling tentacle down as it came at him furiously. Then, when a claw had planted in the soil in front of him, he had leapt onto its connected arm and sprinted up along his length til he neared the top, when he jumped, bringing the blade across his chest and behind his back, ready to swing the blow that delivered his adversary to the ground.

Down for the count, Squid Pro Quo was defeated. Peace could once again return to the until recently quiet and tranquil town. Knight man raised one eyebrow and gave his signature grin. Glenda joined him, and he put one arm around her waist.

Turning, they saw the disheveled Mayor, who had shoddily sped off and tried to wash the paint off in a nearby river (and been not completely successful in doing so) before calling the police, shambling up to them, several officers in tow. They ran up and bound Squid Pro Quo and put him in a police van. Sirens blared and lights flashed, and the authorities bore the supervillain away to an institution for the criminally insane.

Apprehensive of the maniacal mayor, Knightman shot the man a critical glare. Seeing this, the mayor nudged the chief of police.

“Get Knightman and his woman, too, before they get away! They orchestrated this whole thing! They were in league with the Squid this whole time!”

But Knightman had already anticipated his lie. He and Glenda turned and fled, and the shining hero gave a shrill whistle. His beloved horse, Steed, came galloping as fast as horseshoes could bear him, and Knightman and Glenda mounted him and rode quickly on the surefooted beast down the cliff into the canyon. Jumping into the Catapult Mobile, Knightman and Glenda rode away into the sunset, their vehicle pulled by Steed and two other armored, medieval-jousting-tournament-looking stallions. They rode ever onward toward the sunset, continuing toward the horizon, outrunning the police, who finally did not catch them. They won that day and lived to fight as heroes for the next one. They were outlaws, yes, framed for crimes they did not commit, chastised for the heinous acts of villainy which they had struggled so intensely to undo, yet they were okay with this. Such were their roles in the rocky relationship with their beloved city. They were the heroes in exactly the way everyone needed them to be. It was a difficult life and any normal man and woman would have become disillusioned with it long ago. Knightman and Glenda, on the contrary strode onward boldly and hopefully; perhaps one day they would have their cake and eat it, too.

The bully was completely stunned, and a red mark was ripe across his face where the lunchbox and with it the Knight of Justice had struck him. He sat there, ruffled and shocked, his mouth hanging wide.

Everyone on the bus was silent suddenly.

Then, just as suddenly, the bus erupted into applause.

Everyone, regardless of whom, cheered, some simply taking kidlike delight at the seemingly random chaos unfolding, but each student the bully had wronged with his malicious words that afternoon cheered louder and with true bliss. They were enamored by the sudden act of defiance and bravery on the part of Tony Surname. Someone had finally had the wherewithal and gumption to stand up to and put a stop to his shenanigans.

“Alright, kids, that’s enough!” shouted the bus driver, finally returned from his quick trip to the restroom, during which so much had unfolded. “Everyone sit down in your assigned seats and hushup! We’re going!”

Their bus was first in the queue now, others having already pulled out. Several other buses lined up behind them were honking.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the bus drama was over. The tall redheaded boy retreated, incredibly humbled and contrite when contrasted to his prior boisterous posture. He quietly took a place near the back of the bus where all the bigger kids sat, blending into their ranks and for all intents and purposes and to Tony's awareness, disappeared.

Tony sat contemplating it. He had surprised himself by his act today. That bully had had it coming and was saying nasty things to his fellow students and his best friend. It was wrong, and he didn't like it. He knew he was going to do something, whether it was telling an adult, or scream at the bully. He did not know he had it in him to strike him like that, though. In this particular situation, this action had proven to be the most effective one. It took his opponent by surprise in exactly the right way, startling the coward, and immediately pacifying him. Doing the right thing and standing up for everyone wasn't what surprised Tony about it. The fact that it had been so reflexive, so automatic was what troubled him.

Did he do the right thing?

Yes, Tony thought, in this situation it had worked out. However, such was not always the answer to every problem, and it would not do to generalize this to other, less appropriate contexts. After all, Knightman himself didn't always defeat villains through fighting and violence. No, he wielded his mind and his heart together, using logic to solve mysteries and the warmth of his heart to help and be merciful when and where he could. If he did this, as long as he acted like Knightman, Tony knew he would turn out just fine.

Already the bully was scheming. How could he get revenge? He was concocting a plan, if ill-thought out and silly.

The next day the school principal would pull Tony into his office and interrogate him about the nature of his actions on the bus. Tony would tell the administrator just what happened, what the bully had done and said (a part of the story said redhead was happy to conveniently leave out!) and then ask the man to interpret his events in light of that information. Further, he would inform the principal that the bully was lucky he had been sitting rather than standing, for had his posture been slightly different, Tony surely would have aimed his blow lower, and hit his more delicate nether regions!

That would be tomorrow.

Today, Tony thought no more of it. It left his mind and did not re-enter to trouble his young brain again, like so many of life's cares depart so quickly from the mind of a child, as if vapors, and he did not even remember the incident as noteworthy to his parents once he arrived home. Both today *and* tomorrow any thought about the incident floated right out of his ears away from his brain and dissipated into the atmosphere. To him, it was no big deal, what Tony had done. It needed to be done and justice had to be served. Tony was better off living and enjoying living and when the call came, fighting evil as reflexively as he had.

One thought that *did* enter his brain, however, was that anyone could be a hero at any time, they had only to be courageous, care for others, and be committed enough to what was right to be willing to stand up for it and others. He knew this, and realized others needed to know.

As he thought this, Tony leaned his head against the glass of the bus window. Pulling up to a stoplight that gradually flashed from yellow the red, the bus came to a squeaking halt. Glancing down and over at the vehicle next to them, Tony's eyes flashed and he jumped a little in his seat. He would recognize that vehicle anywhere.

It was a little wooden cart with a long arm that had a catapult bucket at its end. Three horses wearing shining, plated coverings drew it. Inside, a beautiful woman with long, golden locks looked at him from a porthole on the vehicle's side. A man sitting next to the woman with one eyebrow raised and a grin looked at from out that same hole, and from inside the visor of his metal helm. The traffic light turned green and in the instant prior to dashing off, continuing their journey on toward the horizon, Knightman winked at Tony. Then, both crafts were off, speeding away hastily to their destinations.

Tony turned back and sat against the seat, smiling. Then he turned and spoke with Noel some, enjoying the rest of their ride home together.

His heart was full.

The End.