

BADGE OF THE ULTIMATE STAR JAM FIGHTER

CHAPTER 2: THE GAME COMES HOME

Markaius stared at the soda fridge, its colourful contents sitting there in silent mockery of his goals. He looked around and tried to listen for the music and sounds of the arcade game in case it had been moved, but all he heard was the sounds of dozens of people shopping for groceries and chatting; the store devoid of any arcade game. "Where is it? What's going on?" he wailed.

His confused yelling had attracted attention from all within the store, including its owner Mr. Ottey, who came over. "What's de problem?" the ratel asked with his thick Jamaican accent.

"Where's the game? Why isn't it here?" cried the youngster.

"You de only one who play it," said Mr. Ottey with a shrug. "So me take it out and put fridge in there."

This was the worst thing that could have happened; the game and any chance at those badges had been snatched from his paws. "Nooooooo! Put it back!" pleaded Markaius. He drooped as he saw his parents hurrying over.

"What's going on?" asked Lawry.

"Mr D. threw away *Star Jam Fighters*!" said Markaius.

"Oh, good grief!" sighed Doris. "Like I keep telling you, it's. Just. A. Game."

Mr. Ottey ignored her. "How much money you have?"

Markaius pulled four quarters from his pocket, quarters that had once promised adventure and fun, but now just looked pathetic in his paw. "A dollar..."

"Me sell it to you! One dollar!"

"Durnot, are you *sure*?" asked Markaius's father.

"Yeah, yeah! The dump take it, me pay a lot of money! Me sell it, me don' pay nothin'!"

"But... a dollar? I would charge a lot more than that, Durnot," said his mother.

"Den who buy it? Mark de only one who play it!" He turned to Markaius. "One dollar!"

Mark handed over his four quarters to Mr. Ottey, and the ratel hurried to the door of the storage area. "Hey! Don' trow out de game!" he called into the storage room. "Me sell it!"

"Lemme guess! That pup who plays it every week?" came a voice from the back.

"Yeah, him!"

"Tell Jayrod he owes me 20 bucks!"

"Guess I'll bring my truck round to the back," said Markaius's dad.

Markaius's father backed his truck up to the large bay doors at the back of the store and the family got out. Markaius's tail became a blur as the bay door opened and Mr. Ottey and a few workers brought the old cabinet out on a dolly. The workers gently tipped the cabinet over and slid it into the truck box. "I hope you know how lucky you are," Lawry told him.

One of the workers laughed. "Come on, Lawry, Look at him! If your kid was wagging his tail any harder, he'd throw his back out!"

Mr. Ottey gave Markaius a key. "Now you can get at de coin box."

"I can't believe you sold it for one measly dollar..." said Markaius's mom.

Durnot held up the quarters with a laugh. "Dis one dollar cherry on eighty dollar sundae!"

Markaius couldn't keep his tail still as the precious game was slid into the truck and strapped down. The game was his now, all his! He could play it whenever he wanted, for as long as he wanted. At long last, his parents wouldn't call him away from the game! He could earn his badges at last!

Once the cabinet was secured in the truck box, Markaius got in the back of the truck cab. His tail whacked against the cab back painfully, but he couldn't stop it wagging short of physically holding it in his paws.

"We're going to make a quick stop to the hardware store," said Lawry. "Just something I gotta pick up."

"But the milk will be spoiled by the time we get home!" protested Markaius's mom.

"Doris, the milk won't even be warm. It's only a couple of minutes."

Once they got to the hardware store, Lawry told Doris and Markaius to just sit tight while he bought something. Soon, he emerged from the store with a small plastic container and a padlock. "Markaius, this is a plug lockout. It goes over a plug to keep an electric device from being plugged in. I know you're excited to have the game, but if your chores or marks start slipping, I am putting this over the plug until things improve. Do you understand?"

Markaius's tail stilled. "Yes, Dad."

"Good. It's not that I don't want you playing this game. I just don't want it taking over your life." He smiled and ruffled his son between the ears.

Once they got home, Lawry got a hand truck from the garage and used it to move the game into Markaius's room. Markaius cleared a space for it,

and Lawry wrestled it into place.

"Dinner is in half an hour, so you won't have time to play the game until after." Lawry warned. "You might want to clean it up, though. It's sat in the same place for a long time." He took the lock off the coin box so Markaius could open it whenever he wanted.

"Okay," said Markaius. It did look kind of grungy, so he got some cloths and cleaner, and began to wipe it down. After dinner, he plugged in the game—and stared in horror at the gobbledigook scrolling down the screen. "NO! It's broken!"

Lawry looked into the room and chuckled at the sight. "That's the boot screen. It's like any other computer, it needs to boot up. Just wait a little bit, it will be working normally."

True to Lawry's word, soon the start screen showed. Markaius searched his room and found a quarter, and put it in the coin slot, his tail wagging with excitement.

"ENTER THE FRAY!"

That night, Markaius reached the end of The Infected Nebula and encountered its boss Lord ThunderStar for the first time in his life—and failed *miserably* against him, failing to score a single hit. No matter how many shots he made by the ship, they all failed to connect. He saw that his character stepped out of the ship when he got near a certain asteroid and held out a pistol of some sort, but no button did anything. And inevitably, Lord ThunderStar would unleash a barrage of projectiles that would destroy him if he stayed on the asteroid; he could only shoot them down with the ship's guns—which did nothing against Lord ThunderStar.

He took his quarter out of the coin box and tried again. As always, he breezed through The Port Invasion, Red Star Gauntlet, The Living Asteroids, and the Black Hole Accretion Disc on pure muscle memory—only to fall victim to Lord ThunderStar again.

He gave a growl of frustration after the umpteenth failure, fished out his quarter yet again, and put it in.

"ENTER THE FRAAAA-★" The screen's image collapsed to a point before the screen went black.

"It's one in the morning, son," said Lawry as he let the plug fall to the floor. "Go to bed."

The next morning, Lawry laid down some rules: Markaius could only have one game after school no matter how quickly he lost. He could play three games on Saturday and Sunday *after* he'd finished the day's chores and he'd done at least half his homework on Saturday and the rest of it on Sunday. After his three games, Markaius could go outside and play or read a book or something other than the cabinet. "Like I said, that game is *not* taking over your life."

After breakfast, Markaius went to do his Saturday chores of mowing the lawn and weeding the garden, before going into his room. He quickly finished up his math homework, blazed through his science and social studies assignments and got ready to tackle Lord ThunderStar again. He had only three games to beat him before he had to quit for the day. He tried charging up for a full blast, but every time, the blast would be blocked by circling asteroids. He managed to get the ship fully charged when he got too close to that dumb asteroid, and his character stepped out to be utterly useless again. With a growl, he slapped his paw down, hitting all three buttons. The small astronaut fired off a massive blast that went under the circling asteroids and hit Lord ThunderStar square in the gut, causing the character to flash. Markaius stared in disbelief. He didn't even mind when he heard "YOU HAVE FAILED THE MISSION!" as the barrage slammed into his character. He had lost his third and last game of the day, but he knew how to beat Lord ThunderStar. And that was enough for now.

The Sunday Potluck was pretty good, though Markaius overheard many people comment on his little freakout. The worst was Mrs. Diryk, looking haughtily genteel in her poodle cut and with her primly raised muzzle. Always quick to position herself as a Pillar Of The Community and Bastion Of Morality And Propriety, she asked Doris, "I must wonder how many children your son deprived of the joy of playing that arcade game when he bullied Mr. Ottey into selling it. And for a terrible price, I hear."

Markaius could see the twitch of the eyebrow Doris had when she was was firmly *not* rolling her eyes. "Exactly none," she dismissed. "Which is why it was headed for the *dump*. Which you ought to have known, since I know you complained about its noise at least twice."

Markaius felt relieved that, though his mother had not been pleased with the purchase, she would at least defend him.

That evening, he made a breakthrough—he finally saw *Level Six: The Dorogrim Anomaly*. Unfortunately, one of the blue buttons stopped working partway through the level, leaving him unable to fire his basic weapon unless he used the other blue button. He banged on it several times, but to no avail, and constantly forgetting to use the other led to the inevitable "YOU HAVE FAILED THE MISSION!" When he started from the first level again, he discovered this was no mere level quirk; the button simply wasn't doing what it was supposed to. He sighed, unplugged the game, going downstairs. "Dad? Could you call Mr. Gruffy? I think something on my game is broken for real."

"What's not working, son?"

"One of the buttons is broken. It won't do anything." Lawry went with his son to watch him play, and Markaius tapped the button over and over again to no avail as he tried to play.

"Okay, I see what you mean," said his dad. "I'll go call Mr. Gruffy first thing Monday morning."

The next morning, Lawry called Willow Clearing Computers & Electronics, the shop Mr. Gruffy owned, and left a voice on the answering machine. "Hello, Mr. Gruffy, this is Lawry Alsaten calling. We recently bought the arcade game that sat in the Highwood Gas and Grocery for ages, and one of the buttons quit working. If you could come around sometime and have a look at it, that would be wonderful. Thank you, bye!"

Markaius couldn't help but wag his tail as his dad made the call. After breakfast, Markaius, his older sister Anja, Jaykan, and his mom headed off to the town schools. Markaius and Jaykan parked their bikes in the racks at J. Patience Elementary school and the four dogs embraced before Doris and Anja continued to J. B. Jacques High School where Doris was an English teacher and Anja was in 9th grade.

News of his buying the arcade cabinet had spread all over the school; much of the local community had been shopping for groceries that day, so of course all their kids had heard him. Several of his friends thought it was really cool he owned an arcade game of his own. Unfortunately, he also had to deal with Anna Dyrk, the eldest daughter of Mrs. Dyrk and who was—annoyingly—in the same grade and almost all his same classes.

"So, I heard you bought a whole arcade," she said, making sure everyone in the hall could hear.

"Just one game!" he corrected her.

"Hey, everyone! Markaius just bought a whole arcade and he's keeping it all to himself because he's *mean!*" she hollered throughout the hall.

"I only bought the freakin' game at Highwood!" he yelled after her.

"Oi! Dude!" called someone behind him. "'Eard yer bought th' game from th' grocery store! Totally tubular, dude!"

Markaius turned with a smile of relief—the surfer slang (picked up from an old cartoon) muddled by a full-bore Northern English accent could only belong to his best friend Russ Gruffy, who was making the shaka sign.

"Yeah, Mr. Ottey was going to throw it out. I freaked when I went to the game and found just a pop fridge there."

"Bro, I know! We 'eard yer on th' other side o' th' store! Musta been a total bummer!"

"Ugh!" Anna groaned as she dramatically rolled her eyes as hard as she could. "Will you drop your surfer crap? It makes you sound so *stupid!*"

"Anna, dudette! Sorry, didn't notice yer were there! Totally bogus o' me! Howzit?" Russ said, grinning.

Anna's hackles were up at once. "Don't. Call. Me. '*Dudette!*' How many times do I have to tell you that!?"

"Like me uncle says, yer don't need t' repeat yerself, dudette. I ignored yer th' first time!"

"GAAAAH!" snarled Anna before storming away.

The warning bell for class rang and Russ jerked his head towards the far end of the hall. "I gotta book. 'Ang loose, bro! See yer at lunch?"

"Yeah, at lunch!" called back Markaius before heading to class.

In class, he did his best to ignore Anna and just focus on his schoolwork. It wasn't easy; Anna reiterated her claim to both their Social Studies and Science teachers, and Markaius was getting increasingly irritated every time he had to set the record straight.

In Math, the class he had just before lunch, Mr. Colchester finally shut Anna up. "Anna, I was there, it was only a single game that nobody played. If you'd put as much effort into your schoolwork as you do spreading rumours, you might actually bring home a report card your parents could stomach." The rest of the class roared with laughter while Anna scowled in humiliation.

Markaius clenched his jaw tight, determined not to join in on the merriment lest he incur her wrath, but he was unable to keep a straight face.

At lunchtime he and Jaykan sat down with Russ Gruffy. "So, 'ave yer played th' game at 'ome yet?" the badger asked.

"He played it so much Dad had to unplug the game and tell him to go to bed," giggled Jaykan. "It was, like, one in the morning."

"Ah, yer must 'ave been *stoked* t' play it."

Markaius smiled sheepishly and nodded. "Oh, I was so excited because *finally* Mom couldn't drag me away from it anymore. I actually made it to the boss of Level Five on the first night, but I couldn't get past him. I guess I kept everyone else up, because, yeah, Dad came to unplug it."

Russ laughed. "I don' blame yer! 'Cause yer mum would sometimes drag yer away by yer ear!"

"How's it going with you?" asked Markaius. "I heard your grandpa was trying to teach you electronics?"

"*Tryin'* ter, but I'm a total kook at it. I try and I try, but I can't get me 'ead around it! An' it's a total bummer, because 'e's wonderin' 'oo's goin' t' take over once' 'e's gone if not me. But bro..." he shrugged helplessly. "I just *can't*"

The three continued chatting as they enjoyed their lunches, then had to split when the bell rang. At least in English class, Markaius didn't have to put up with Anna's claim, as she was still fuming from Mr. Colchester's rebuke, and she wasn't in his gym class.

After school he and Jaykan went to the lunch room to wait for their mother and sister. As their mother always had things to do after work and Anja was in band, the two usually had quite some time to get some homework done.

Jaykan studied his spelling while Markaius did some math homework. His ear twitched backwards as he heard someone come up behind him.

"I bet you think you're so cool," said Anna, sitting down opposite Markaius.

Markaius didn't answer. He glanced up at the math book—which he'd stood up for easier reading—and did the next question.

$$\frac{4}{5} \times \underline{\hspace{1cm}} = \frac{1}{6}?$$

"Hello!"

Markaius's only response was a shrug.

Anna sat across from him and yanked his book down. "Hey! I'm talking to you!"

"And me and Jaykan are trying to do homework," he said, putting his book back up.

"You realize you're not cool just because you have an arcade game!" she said.

Markaus set to his question silently.

$$\frac{4}{5} \times \underline{\hspace{1cm}} = \frac{1}{6}$$

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$$\underline{\hspace{1cm}} = \frac{5}{24}$$

$$\frac{4}{5} \times \frac{5}{24} = 1 \underline{\hspace{1cm}}$$

She yanked his book down again. "HEY! Are you listening to me?!"

"Nope." He firmly set his book back up. "Don't know what your problem is, don't care. Gonna go home, have dinner, play my game, and go to bed. Now get lost. We got homework to do."

$$\frac{4}{5} \times \frac{5}{24} = \frac{1}{6}$$

$$\frac{4 \times 5}{5 \times 24} = \frac{1}{6}$$

$$\frac{4 \times 5}{5 \times 24} = \frac{1}{6}$$

$$\frac{4}{24} = \frac{1}{6}$$

$$\frac{1}{6} = \frac{1}{6}$$

Before he could go to the last question, he heard a tap on the window. He sighed as he saw it was his mom. He packed his books up with a grumble. "Thanks a lot. Usually I can finish my math homework before she gets here."

"I just wanted you to know that just because you have an arcade game, that doesn't make you cool! It makes you totally *lame*!"

"Arf, arf, arf, yap, yap, yap, woof, woof, woof," he shot back as he hoisted his bag onto his shoulder and headed outside.

"Yeah, arf, arf ar, yap, yap, yap, woof, woof, woof," repeated Jaykan as the two left.

"What was going on in there?" asked Doris.

"Just Anna being a pain. She's been telling everyone I bought a whole arcade. I hope nobody believes her, because I kept saying it was just one game." He sighed. "Dunno what her problem is. She was telling me I wasn't cool for having an arcade game."

"Why *did* you want to buy it?" she asked.

He was quiet, wondering if he should tell her about the badges or beating Cousin Kraggan. Finally he said, "I've always wanted to ace it. Just... I really liked the game, is all."

"Speaking of which, I got a call from your dad. Mr. Gruffy will be over for dinner, then he'll see to your game. Oh, and Russ is coming, too; I know you two get along."

"Oh, cool!"

Mr. Bruce Gruffy—Russ's grandfather—was an aging badger with an accent even thicker than his grandson's. "I thought that Durnot threw that thing away," he said as they ate.

"He sold it to Markaius at the last minute," said Lawry. "Said it saved him a bunch of money at the dump."

"E's not wrong. So what' wrong wi' 'it?"

"One of the buttons is broken," said Markaius.

"Not surprised. That game sat in th' store for longer than yer've been alive. I 'ave no idea where Durnot bought it either. Pass th' salt, please."

"Did you know Markaius was playing it at one in the morning?" asked Anja. "Dad had to unplug it and tell him to go to bed."

Markaius mumbled in embarrassment and Mr. Gruffy chuckled.

"Be careful not t' let that game take over yer life" said Mr. Gruffy. "I've seen blokes 'oo've got caught up in gamin'. An' not just gamblin' either. Yer be careful."

After dinner, Markaius took Mr. Gruffy to his room to show him the problematic button.

Mr. Gruffy unplugged the game and put a plug lockout over the plug. "It's not that I think yer stupid enough t' plug it back in while I'm workin' on it. It's just that I made it an 'abit long ago, and I plan t' keep it that way," he said. He took the side off the cabinet, and shone a flashlight in there. "Ah. Loose connection," he said.

Markaius leaned forward. "Can I see?"

The old badger shifted a bit, then said "Come 'ere." Markaius lay down beside him, and the Badger pointed his flashlight at a wire. "Barely 'angin' on there." Once Markaius was out of the way, Mr. Gruffy disconnected the wire,

clipped off the old connector, used a tool to strip some insulation from the wire, added a new connector, and reattached the wire so it was firmly in place.

"There. Should work now." He closed up the cabinet and removed the lockout box, and plugged the cabinet in. A quick playtest showed the button worked once again, and Mr. Gruffy nodded in satisfaction. "Well, that's done," he said. They went outside to talk to Markaius's parents to settle the bill.

Markaius brought out his money box and offered Mr. Gruffy the money within. The badger looked at him with mild pity. "Sorry, pup, this ain't near enough."

Lawry paid the bill instead. "Thanks for dropping by, Mr. Gruffy."

"No problem," said Mr. Gruffy.

Russ looked at the cabinet with a sigh. "Wish I'd played this instead of starin' at it like some 'odad on th' beach."

"You want to play it? You'll have to wrestle me for it!" teased Markaius, knowing Russ was far stronger than he was.

"Take it into the back yard!" ordered Lawry.

The two boys headed out to the back yard, where Russ quickly rolled Markaius into a ball and pinned him. "Okay, okay, you can play!" yelled Markaius.

Russ released Markaius, and the laughing pair headed back into the house where Markaius handed Russ a quarter. Russ struggled with the game. "I'm a bloody kook at this!" groaned the badger as he fell victim to the various enemy ships, never even reaching the first boss.

"Don't feel bad. I've been playing this longer than you've been surfing."

Russ was ready to give it another go, but Mr. Gruffy said it was time to go.

"Let me know when you wanna play it, Russ. I'll be glad to let you have a round."

"Maybe. Just wanted t' try it once, that's all." The two boys bumped fists, and Russ headed out with his grandfather.