

## Level 5

Level 1's idyllic forest. Birds were singing cheerfully in the trees, animals were making their way around gathering food, random woodsmen were scouting around its edges for whatever purpose they could think of to justify their lives. The only thing of anomalous value on this particular day was a small, scared, dark half-elf called Saié, speeding her way through the trees, screaming out of the top of her lungs.

Saié would have made it out of the woods unhurt that day, had she seen the large tree she was heading towards. In her absolute terror, she looked back over her shoulder, and only saw the tree when it was too late. She leapt to the left to avoid it, and one of her small feet got caught in its sprawling roots. Saié lunged forwards, and her foot slipped out of her boot. Through inertia, she was thrown five feet through the air, and landed on her front, throwing up leaves and soil, and ripping her patchy skirt.

It took the semi-drow a few seconds to come to her senses, and while she was doing so, the huge dark shadow that had been chasing her stood for a while, watching.

"Surely you'd been expecting this?" the Dark One quipped. The minute his voice escaped his mouth, the forest stopped looking like Level 1, and more like Hell on a bad day. Any birds that were singing cheerfully had obviously thought better of it, and as Saié looked up at the Dark One, she realised that everything around her was dark, even though it was the middle of the day. All other shadows had been dispelled, however; with no sun in her vision, the only shadow was the Dark One, and he was the worst of all.

"Undoubtedly you know that strong fighters are not welcome in this Dungeon any more, and that you would regrettably have to be destroyed?"

Saié rolled over, breathing heavily. One of her legs was cut, and blood was beginning to trickle down onto the muddy ground. Every inch of her face showed a mixture of fear, revulsion, and total anger. The Dark One seemed as if he were about to laugh. Maybe it was this, however, that gave Saié the righteous energy to push herself off the forest floor and stand, rather unsteadily, shaking from head to toe.

"You'll never get away with this," snarled Saié.

"Just watch me," the Dark One sneered. "Oh, but you won't be around to see it, will you?" And without a moment's hesitation, in his hand materialised a long, thin, and totally black sword. Saié jumped back, eyeing the sword carefully.

"Oh, don't make me fight you," the Dark One said. "Just give it all up now and I'll make it quick."

Saié's right hand flew to her belt and extracted a short, fat dirk from its scabbard. A well-used one, by the look of it; scratches had hewn themselves down its side, and the motif on its hilt was almost imperceptible. Shaking with fear and anger, she pointed it directly at the Dark One's chest.

"Fine," said the Dark One. "You want to play. Well, come and get me."

Saié screamed a war-cry and, with amazing agility for someone with an injured leg, leapt forwards, the point of her blade aiming directly towards her foe's heart. Within a split-second, the Dark One had sent his own blade in an upwards arc, knocking the dirk out of Saié's hand in one swoop. She reeled backwards, and landed, once again, onto the muddy ground, this time with a sickening crack as one of her ribs broke.

Unable to restrain herself, she cried out in pain.

"Finished yet?" mused the Dark One. Saié only scowled.

"No," she managed to say, and withdrew a dart from a small pouch, hanging at her side. She knew of its venomous properties well, and so did the Dark One, judging by the look on his mysterious face. "Take this!" she yelled, and threw it directly at him.

The Dark One did not flinch, or make a sound, or even move. He simply waited for the dart to hit him. When it connected with his chest, dark purple-black lightning zoomed out of it, slamming into Saié and causing her to shriek.

“That’s what happens why you try to resist!” the Dark One screamed at the terrified girl. “You don’t even know the full length of my power!” His left hand plucked the poisoned dart out of his chest and lobbed it at Saié as his dark lightning continued to ravage every inch of her being.

Suddenly, the lightning stopped. Saié had a fleeting sensation of relief, but just as she made to stand up, to make an attempt at running, her own poison dart lodged itself in her stomach. Again, she screamed, although the horror of realisation made it fifty times worse. She had been struck by a venomous projectile. She had about three hours to live.

“Had enough yet?” yelled the Dark One. “No? Well, let me finish you off.” He lunged for her, and his blade struck the place where she had been lying half a second before. Poison or no poison, Saié reasoned, she was getting out of here alive. Having pushed herself upwards, she had set off full-pelt through the trees, towards a black shape in the distance which could only be a portal. Perhaps at surprise in her doing something so tenacious, or stupid, but the Dark One hadn’t expected this. He had expected a kill. Immediately he sent his crackling dark lightning out of his fingertips at the retreating girl. It lapped at her heels and sent slashes down her back, but Saié barely noticed that she was being zapped to death. All that was in her mind was getting to the portal.

It all came down to luck. Luck, and split-second timing. Just as the Dark One caught up with her, Saié was a metre away from the black void. He sent a ball of pure energy at her back, just as she summoned the last of her will and dived forwards, blacking out as she did so. Both energy and elf reached the portal at the same time.

There was a huge and powerful explosion.

Three minutes later, and the portal had vanished. So had five or so trees in the surrounding area. Saié was nowhere to be seen, but the looming, mysterious figure of the Dark One was still in the clearing, his manic, evil laugh echoing around the destroyed area, as he looked down at an empty, ripped skirt, the charred remains of a belt, a spilled pouch of poisoned darts, and assorted other rags. A victim had been claimed.

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Unaware of any disturbance which may have been plaguing the first level of his Dungeon, Treguard of Dunshelm sat on his old throne, polishing Wyrmslayer with an old cloth and liberal amounts of special cleaning lotion Merlin had lent him. At least, Merlin had said it was cleaning lotion. Wyrmslayer was beginning to turn green, and had started emitting strange sparks. Treguard, however, had turned his attention to something else, and hadn’t noticed.

His small assistant was dragging a huge, brown sack across the floor.

“What are you doing?” he said quietly.

Frégo looked grateful for being asked a question as he stood up, panting slightly, and ceasing at once to continue with taking the sack in his direction. Indeed, for a moment it looked as if he would never walk again.

“Grandos needs lots of fresh vegetables,” he told the Dungeonmaster. “This is a sack of them. It’s his between-meal snack time.”

“Where did you get those?” persisted Treguard. “It had better not be from Drassil; we had enough trouble re-earning your life savings last time...”

“Oh, no,” replied Frégo, “I’ve been growing these in the grounds, there’s a particularly fertile patch of ground out th...”

POW.

The dungeon portal sprang into life, and a huge, blackish-purple explosion emitted from it. Treguard let out a vehement yell, and Frégo jumped backwards with a shriek, as the small, dark, lifeless figure of Saié was ejected from the portal and landed with a thump on the floor of the antechamber.

Both Treguard and Frégo coughed apoplectically as the acrid smoke filled up the room.

“Quick, Frégo, open the windows,” Treguard commanded. “Dragonsblood...”

As Frégo opened his third window, he looked round to find Treguard crouching over the limp Saié. He was clearly in deep concentration.

“Is that...?” Frégo’s mouth fell open as he scrambled down to get a closer look. “That can’t be... isn’t she the one who was trying to kill...”

“This is the Dark Elf, Saié, yes,” sad Treguard. “She appears to be nearly dead, but there is a pulse. She remains alive. Quickly, Frégo, I need you to go and fetch a long table, and the cleanest cloths you can find. We will need to tend to her as soon as possible.”

“She’s not our friend,” Frégo retorted darkly. “Why should we help her?”

“Just do it, Frégo,” commanded Treguard, and the halfling scampered off, past his forgotten sack of vegetables for dragons.

Treguard stood up sharply, and waved a hand towards the Magic Mirror on the wall. A picture of a solitary Woodsman, sitting in a tree reading a book, faded into view.

“Robin?” called Treguard, and the Woodsman looked round. His face sprang into a smile.

“You called, Dungeonmaster?”

“A neutral member of the Dungeon folk has been attacked,” said Treguard hurriedly.

“I need you to go and alert Merlin as soon as possible. Find anyone you can who will sell you the strongest healing potion available. This person has been poisoned. I wouldn’t give two gold coins for her chances of survival unless we act now. Hurry!”

“I’m on it,” Robin replied, and leaped up. He snatched up his sword, swept his hat on, and donned his ragged brown cloak as he nimbly leapt off the tree and out of the magic mirror’s sight. It went blank after a couple of seconds.

Treguard sighed deeply, and bent down to pick up Saié. Her blood splattered onto the floor as the Saxon Knight turned to see Frégo hurrying towards him with various coloured sheets draped over his shoulders, heaving a long, wooden table towards the Dungeonmaster.

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Two hours later. The naked form of Saié was lying prostrate on a large sheet of white cotton, draped over a table, making it look like a makeshift surgical theatre. Although she was wearing no clothes, various strips of roughly torn material were strategically tied around her bleeding areas, which – to be fair – covered most of her body.

Treguard was confused. Surely a sword’s blow would have caused some of this, but wounds all over the body? And then there was the fact that there were so many open

cuts. Multiple blows couldn't be achieved at once, not even if Saié had put up no resistance to three thousand foes. Yet – from the marks on her skin at least – it was clear that she had sustained intense injury simultaneously. It was mystifying.

“Treguard, the poison's spreading,” Frégo wheedled, snapping the Dungeonmaster out of his reverie. “The wound here's gone green and she's getting paler, look...”  
“She is still breathing, Frégo,” Treguard affirmed, holding a hand over her mouth.  
“And there is still a chance, and with chance, we have hope, and with hope, we have...”

The dungeon portal burst into life once again. In strode the tall, thin figure of Merlin, followed by a nervous-looking Robin. A second later, Ingard the Apothecary entered the room, carrying a small, blue bottle.

“And not a moment too soon,” said Treguard. “What took you so long?”

“Well, I had to wake Merlin up,” replied Robin.

“Understood,” answered Treguard, as Merlin looked rather flustered. “And you've brought Ingard with you, have you?”

Ingard thrust out the bottle in his hand. “Here,” he said. “This is the best thing I have. It's definitely a healing potion, I did test it.”

“And this is all you have, is it?” asked Treguard, frowning at the potion. “It's not much... but let's try. Frégo, open Saié's mouth, will you?”

Frégo obediently levered the elf's mouth open with his left hand, and Treguard uncorked the bottle and poured the contents down her throat. Five pairs of eyes watched as a few seconds passed, then the gathering drew its collective breath as a small flicker passed over her previously lifeless face, and some colour started to creep back into her cheeks.

A minute passed in silence before Treguard said anything.

“Right, well, she appears to have been reprieved. Thank you, Ingard. Merlin, please stay here; I want your magical aid. Frégo, keep watch over Saié.”

Ingard bowed, and retreated into the dungeon portal, while Merlin and Frégo immediately engaged each other in conversation. Treguard turned to Robin.

“Robin, kindly go and call anyone in the Dungeon who will assent to come to a meeting. Better make it neutral ground... that glade in the second level should do.”

“Any reason?”

“Just go,” said Treguard. “I'm sensing something in the Dungeon that is unnatural... and it's not Funkus' socks.” Robin scampered off, and Treguard sighed. He had a tendency to sigh a lot. After a moment's musing, he turned back to the remaining guests.

Things were relatively quiet over the next two days, compared to the amount of action that had been seen. Although Saié had not actually awoken from her coma, she was almost definitely improving under Frégo's care, and Merlin, on his third attempt at divination, had announced that she had no poison left in her bloodstream to Treguard, who was clearing up the mess caused by his first two attempts. At the end of the second day, Treguard asked Merlin to whisk the pair of them to the glade in Level 2, while they left Frégo behind to look after Saié. Needless to say, three hours later, a dazed and blackened Treguard, and a Merlin who had aged five more years for no seemingly acceptable reason, arrived at said glade to find the oddest assortment of people in attendance.

He had not, of course, expected Gabriel to come; the new Leader of the Opposition would be a bit too much to ask, and extremely dangerous. As his emissary was a fighter for the Powers That Be, Treguard hardly expected any denizens of the deepest

Level 3 to have attended. However, Robin appeared to have collected Ingard, Drassil, a strange-looking Oriental man of whom Treguard did not know the name, a dangerous-looking Wild Elf whom Treguard vaguely recognised, Jeremy, a messy punk in dragonhide boots and a long red cloak with spiky hair, the newly-instated Librarian Rhollgar, and King Tharadus, who was playing draughts with a haughty-looking youngster who could only be Prince Isárion.

“All present and correct,” Robin beamed at Treguard, dashing over to him. “You know Jeremy, Drassil and Ingard, of course... you gave Rhollgar the library, if I’m not mistaken? That one,” he continued, jabbing a thumb at the elf, “is called Isilme, she doesn’t say much; I wouldn’t provoke her. The guy in the red cloak told me his name was Pyron, he’s a pyromancer apparently... and the Chinese one says he’s a trader, new to these parts. Tharadus only consented to come if I promised he’d be protected, so I’m watching out for him, and Isárion asked if he could bring some games. I had to play him at Combat Chess to get him to come along; I’ve still got the bruises...”

“Thank you, Robin,” muttered Treguard, sweeping him aside, “excuse me, people!” The chattering crowd took no notice, so Treguard bellowed it again. Again, nothing happened. He sighed and turned back to Robin and Merlin.

“Oh, let me deal with this,” stuttered the white-bearded one, “spellcasting... Q... U... I... E... T!”

Silence, even though people’s mouths continued to move.

Treguard looked stunned at Merlin’s success to cast a spell, and then cleared his throat to speak, which – perhaps rather surprisingly – he found he could do.

“I’ll make this brief,” Treguard blurted, as some of the members of the circle squinted at him menacingly. Isilme was fingering a blade, Isárion looked furious and Pyron just looked dumbfounded. “This isn’t even the sort of set-up I’d have liked to have had. However, something has happened to the Dungeon, since the phaseshift was complete. Some sort of glitch has occurred. A young half-drow named Saié, who some of you will know, has been mercilessly attacked, and a bit of research done by Merlin has revealed something rather shocking, am I not right, Merlin?”

Merlin opened his mouth to explain, but found that he had accidentally silenced himself, so he merely nodded.

“I know there is some sort of threat, and...” Treguard broke off, because the young Chinaman was waving at him, and pointing at his mouth. Clearly, he had something to say.

Treguard fixed Merlin with a quizzical stare. The wizard looked confused for a moment, then merely pointed at the Chinaman, who suddenly found his voice again.

“I new to area.”

“You don’t say,” replied Treguard.

“I see bad things happening in Forest. You pay me gold, and I tell you them.”

“And what is your name?”

“I Mister Ah... Mok.”

“Well,” Treguard replied, “I’m afraid I am the Dungeon Master, and you will have to obey me, whatever I say, otherwise it’s breaking the rules. You chose to come here, I am chairing this, so kindly respect my wishes and tell me everything you know.”

Ah Mok declined, but Merlin had a bright idea at that time and pointed at Drassil, who was looking at Ah Mok with an expression of deep scepticism. Upon reclaiming his voice, Drassil stepped towards the trader.

“Hullo there, wayfarer,” he intoned. “I’m sure you’ll bump into me around the marketplace. I’m Drassil... deal with Drassil, avoid the hassle, that sort of thing. I’m

sure I could sell you some nice things, maybe even trade with another trader... but this isn't the time or the place for that. Besides, I'm... I'm not even sure you have anything to trade that is worth anything," he finished disdainfully.

"You! You bad man!" squawked Ah Mok. "I have information! I tell Dungeonmaster I have information! You not listening?"

"Ah, but... how can you prove you have information?" retorted Drassil, who looked as if he was rather enjoying himself. "You may as well be faking it all... you probably don't know anything whatsoever."

"You...!" Ah Mok was bristling with rage. "I know all about Dark One! I know he dead, I know he indestructible! I know he have no weakness... I know he kill all those who powerful!"

"I know you've just told us all we need to know," grinned Drassil. "And now I'm off to peddle that rumour. Good day to you all." And he walked out of the clearing, leaving Ah Mok fuming, and Treguard more than a little worried.

"It's clear that Ah Mok isn't going to tell us any more," Treguard stated, waving a disparaging arm at him, "but he has told us enough. This Dark One he mentions sounds very dangerous. Despite all and differing allegiances, we must present a united front. If you spot this Dark One, please alert either myself, Merlin or a competent fighter immediately. Do you all get that?"

Everyone nodded apart from Ah Mok.

"Please alert all members of the Opposition, and all those who are not here... we need to spread this message. We don't want a full-scale war, even while the Dungeon is closed to Dungeoneers. Clear?"

Nods.

"Good. Everyone back to their places, then. We all have things to be getting back to."

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Another few days passed before anything else happened. Jeremy, scared, announced that he was planning to travel back to his own dimension, and presented Treguard with a bouquet of violets for 'being such a dear host'. Although Treguard found Jeremy rather annoying at times, he had to admit that he liked the violets. He had, however, had no contact with any other Dungeon denizens, except Frégo.

About a week after Saié was attacked, however, something very odd happened. Frégo had just finished planting the violets in a large pot, and had gone off to sleep underneath a bundle of rags in his room... for it was a very cold night, and he needed all the insulation he could get. The sounds of heavy rain echoed through Knightmare Castle as Treguard continued to sit in the antechamber, watching the fire burn lower and lower, and before long was quietly dozing in his throne.

His dreams were shattered by a huge and almighty crack as lightning leapt across the sky, followed almost immediately by a loud and piercing scream. Snapping open his eyes, he found himself in near-total darkness. He grabbed Wyrmslayer, and pointed it straight at the fireplace. A purple flame shot from its end and ignited the remainders of the logs nestling in it, and a limited heat and light greeted the antechamber. Wildly, Treguard looked around to see who had screamed, and jumped back, cursing, as he saw that Saié was sitting bolt upright, her mouth hanging open, her eyes bulging. She looked utterly mad, and very, very frightened.

"Tr... Tr... you're the dungeon master," she stammered at last, still sounding scared.

"Yes, I am," replied Treguard, and without preamble, he launched into the story of how she had materialised in the dungeon chamber with a fatal wound, and how quick-

thinking Dungeon denizens had managed to pull her back from the brink of extermination. He also quickly apologised for the fact that she was covered in bandages and wrapped in a white sheet.

“So...” Saié started, and then paused. It took a few minutes for her to get to grips with the reality of the situation. She had gone straight from jumping forwards, slashes across her whole body, and feeling a ball of death slamming into her back, to utter blackness for a split-second, to lying on a table in a castle, safe but being nursed back to health by a known enemy. In many ways, it was understandable to identify with her in not being able to fully comprehend anything.

“So,” she started again, and paused for a few seconds. “Even though I was always trying to embed my blade in an ally of yours, you decided to keep me alive?”

“You burst through my dungeon portal in a fountain of blood,” replied Treguard.

“What was I meant to do? Throw you back? You’re alive, and be thankful for it.” He turned, and shouted up the stairs. “FRÉGO! GET DOWN HERE, AND BRING A PILLOW!”

Another crack of lightning sounded, and temporarily cast the antechamber into very bright light. Both Treguard and Saié jumped, but the elf groaned in pain afterwards and clutched her side. When Treguard advised her not to move, she merely scowled at him. Deciding that the time for more action had come, he asked her exactly what had happened.

“I can’t quite remember,” Saié managed. I was fighting this big, dark... *thing*... it was scary, he was really powerful... he used this lightning and I tried to get him with my weapon and my... hey...” She looked around. “Where’s my weapon?!”

“Where were you fighting him?” Treguard pressed.

“In Level One, I think... I was running away from him a lot... where *is* my weapon?”

Treguard turned to the Magic Mirror and waved a hand at it. After a few bursts of static, an image of torrential rain surrounding a ramshackle hut, which appeared to be built in a tree, came into view. Treguard pushed his open palm forwards, and the view zoomed through the hut’s open door to reveal rather squalid surroundings. On the wall, a well-polished sword with a golden hilt hung, and a green hat with brown trimmings was placed on top of it. The rest of Robin’s clothes were on the floor, and covered in huge, brown sheets were the figures of Robin, and a girl who appeared to be a bard of some kind. Treguard did not recognise her.

“Robin!” Treguard called. “Robin! Do you hear me?”

Robin stirred, and after a few more calls from Treguard, he sat up, revealing himself to be bare-chested.

“Did you say something, Helen?” he asked the girl, who continued to be asleep.

“It’s me, Robin,” said Treguard, and the Woodsman jumped.

“Treguard! If only I could see you! Yes, what do you want?”

“I need you to go to the Level 1 Forest immediately,” said Treguard, “and find the weapons of...”

“Are you out of your mind, Dungeonmaster?” yelled Robin. “Do you know what time it is? It’s... well, it’s some time at night, anyway! And it’s raining? You hear that? That’s thunder, that is! I am not going out in this weather, no way. Call me for an assignment at a more reasonable hour, will you?”

“Robin,” thundered Treguard, “listen to me...”

“If I could force a communications blackout, I would,” muttered Robin, “but I can’t even see you. It’s awfully unnerving having a disembodied voice floating around. For all I know you might be watching me all the time and...” He paused. “You haven’t been, have you?”

“No,” Treguard replied.

“Good,” said Robin, and blushed. “Anyway, it’s cold and it’s wet and it’s dangerous. I have no wish to go out in the thunderstorm, at midnight, go out into another Level to find a weapon, when I already own a perfectly good weapon as it is, and I’d probably get attacked by that Dark One anyway. Plus, I couldn’t go immediately. I’m not wearing anything. Now go away.”

“You’re touchy,” Treguard growled, and threw out a hand at the view screen, which shifted to another view of pouring rain... only this time, the rain appeared to be falling in a castle courtyard. Saié looked on, fascinated.

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Since the departure of Funkus and Farnham from his hallowed halls, King Tharadus, ruler and overseer of Level 1 and Lord of all he surveyed, was, frankly, bored. He was so bored, he had allowed himself to go to that meeting a couple of days back – not that he had actually had any contact with any sort of Dark One since then – and no contact had come to him afterwards. It was almost as if there was no threat to the Dungeon whatsoever.

Tharadus lay in his bed, some regal pyjamas draped around his thin frame, and was just beginning to ponder if there was actually still a threat to the Dungeon, and if Treguard had managed to clear this all up and just hadn’t bothered to tell him, when a strange, loud, klaxon-like sound came wailing from the direction of his courtyard. Not having any timepieces to hand, Tharadus didn’t know the time, but he knew from base instinct that it must have been past midnight. Leaping out of bed, he pulled on the nearest dressing-gown, jammed on his crown, and raced out of the master bedroom, tying a cord around his body as he did so.

His bare feet flapped against the wet courtyard with slaps as Tharadus ran towards some large, familiar stone steps. He shivered as his feet came into contact with the cold and the water, and yelled in pain as a particularly sharp rock made its presence felt, but kept going. By the time he had reached the top of the stone steps, both his pyjamas and dressing-gown were soaked through, and he was wishing his crown made a better water-repellent. Having a big hole in it, it didn’t make for a very good hat. He reached a large, pink crystal ball, with an exclamation mark flashing out of it, and came to a stop, panting heavily. Swearing under his breath that this had better be something important, the king pointed a finger at the crystal ball, and muttered, *‘expone!’*

The wailing stopped, and the pinkness in the crystal ball unclouded, to reveal an impatient Treguard staring out of it, his features oddly distorted.

“You might want to speed up a bit next time,” spat the knight. “Three minutes!”

“Look, Dungeonmaster,” retorted Tharadus, yelling with a loud voice to drown out the howl of the storm around him, “it’s a big castle. And now I’m cold, and wet. Now tell me what’s up. Do you know what time it is?”

“No,” rebuked Treguard.

“Well... neither do I,” yelled Tharadus. “Just tell me what this is about... ouch,” he finished, as a particularly heavy raindrop hit him in the eye.

“I need you to get your men to go out into the...”

“They’ve both left, Treguard. I have no henchmen left. The way I’m going, I’d be lucky to get help from a cat next season, or something.”

“Well, go yourself to find the...”



“You’re crazy, Dungeonmaster!” bellowed Tharadus. “Haven’t *you* got servants to do your own work? I’m not going to stand here arguing, while the rain lashes at every facet of my being, while you stand in your castle and order me about!”

“Okay... okay...” replied Treguard. “I’ll send a servant. Just... ready your antechamber for a visitor. I won’t send them out into the depths of Level 1 and expect them to get back to Nightmare Castle. You’ll be ready to accommodate someone for the night, I suppose?”

“There’s not much of a night left,” shouted Tharadus, “but okay. The password for tonight is face.” And he pointed once again at the crystal ball. The Magic Mirror immediately went blank.

“You’re not sending me, are you?” hissed Saié at the pacing Treguard (she couldn’t help noticing he paced a lot).

“Since when were you a servant?” replied Treguard. “No, I have a very good idea of who to send...”

Frégo burst into the antechamber, carrying a couple of pillows. He opened his mouth to say something, but then he saw that Saié was awake and sitting up, and all that escaped was a yelp as he jumped back. The pillows cascaded onto the floor.

Then he noticed that Treguard was looking at him, and smiling.

That never meant anything good.

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Idyllic though the forests of Level 1 always were, at midnight Frégo couldn’t have been in a more foreboding place if he had tried. Not that he was willing to try, or even considered being willing to try. Willing to be dry was mostly on the Hobbit’s mind, although sleep and food were also on his most wanted list at the moment.

At least under the canopy of trees it was somewhat drier than traipsing across the plains of Level 1, which Frégo had just spent the best part of an hour doing. Not that he felt any relief from being in a huge, dark forest, in a torrential downpour, in the middle of the night, but at least the trees made sure the raindrops took slightly longer than usual to hit him.

Saié’s battleground was not difficult to find. There were rather sickening stains of blood on many of the trees, and leaves had been scattered everywhere. What’s more, Saié’s weapon was also easy to locate, as it glinted silver in what little moonlight there was. Bending over, Frégo could make out something in Elvish on its flat, but its blade was decidedly sharp. Without a moment’s hesitation, Frégo opened a small, canopy bag, tossed Saié’s dirk and its scabbard into it, and drew the bag shut, hitching it over his shoulder.

“How are you getting on?”

Frégo’s heart stopped for about ten seconds. When he had recovered from his fright, he realised that he had recognised the voice.

“Go to bed, Treguard,” Frégo said to the air. His master’s voice was not something he heard for the rest of the night, so he assumed that Treguard had taken his advice.

Shivering, he pressed on through the forest, determined to find Tharadus’ castle before he could be attacked by anything.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t what he achieved.

The castle was in sight when the Dark One attacked; in fact, Frégo was no more than two hundred metres away from it. He was out of the woods, and trudging across one of Level 1's muddy plains. Had he looked around, he would have seen Nightmare Castle on the hill in the distance, but getting to Castle Tharadus was the only thing on his mind. That, and food, and warmth, and shelter. He was so cold, he didn't notice the huge shadow creeping up on him until it was a mite too late.

With a tremendous *wham*, something huge and sharp collided with Frégo's back. He yelled in agony as he was hurled through the air, landing on his front, a tremendous pain across the new gash in his back. He coughed up mud, looked up, and screamed. The huge, shadowy Dark One was above him. In his hand he clutched a sword embellished with glowing runes, and in the space where his face should have been, one could only sense the ghost of a smile. His imposing figure, taller than two Treguards, stood directly in front of the moon, causing his form to be illuminated by a spooky white corona. It was a terrible sight.

"Frégo Tirac," hissed a voice. "You are a halfling of little consequence."

Frégo stuttered, paralysed by terror.

"I seek only those of the highest power, and you are exempt from that honour." The Dark One let out a high, mirthless laugh. "Enjoy your moments of death, halfling... enjoy them. Without his servant, your master will be weakened, and ready for my coming."

Paralysed to the point of ceasing to exist, Frégo lay where he had fallen, realising a few seconds later that there was no Dark One. He had definitely been there, but after imparting a message, he had gone. Why had he not killed Frégo, when he said he would? And Treguard... Treguard was in trouble. That hadn't happened a lot before. Just as all these facts clicked into place, the realisation that the wound in his back would cause him to bleed to death hit him with the speed of a chariot, and with a groan, he submitted himself to his pain and fear, feeling torrents of rain splashing onto his face as the mud grew ever-increasing around him. He slipped into unconsciousness as two muscular arms found him, picked him up, and carried him off into the darkness.

Another flash of fork lightning illuminated Castle Tharadus.

\*

"*Expone!*"

Nothing happened.

"*Expone!*"

There was a slight crackling, and the crystal ball fuzzed for a little bit. Robin held his breath as a view of his own hut swam into sight.

"Oh, damn," breathed the Woodsman. "Sorry, wrong place."

"What?" came a soft voice from the crystal ball.

"Go back to sleep, Helen," said Robin testily. "I'll come back when I..."

"My name's Sophie," said the voice.

Ignoring the tut of indignation that came from the stately form of King Tharadus, and the snort of laughter from the halfling, Robin pressed the crystal ball down a little, and repeated, "*expone!*"

"Ah! Robin. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Treguard was wearing his I-am-superior-to-you face. Although this could be irritating, Tharadus thought to himself that he did have a point. After all, Treguard was in the relative safety of Nightmare Castle with a semi-conscious and weaponless half-elf

for company, while Robin was in the courtyard of a castle in dangerous territory with a king wearing paisley pyjamas and an injured halfling. Yet there was the hint of smugness in Treguard's voice that Tharadus just did not like.

"You do realise Frégo was attacked?" he called loudly.

"King Tharadus? Where are you, Robin?" called the Dungeonmaster.

"I'm in Castle Tharadus," said Robin. "Frégo was attacked, but I got him here just before he ran out of blood." (He hesitated a while to shudder for dramatic effect, which Tharadus found rather convincing.) "I don't know what attacked him, but maybe we can get a clue from the wound on his back. It's a long slash, not like that little stab wound I've got." A frown creased his young face. "Whatever got him didn't kill him, so I'm assuming it wasn't that Dark One."

"Dark One," muttered Saié. Treguard turned towards her for a second, but directed his attention back towards the Magic Mirror soon afterwards.

"I wouldn't rule anything out," interjected Tharadus. "These are dangerous times, and at that council we held, the general feeling was one of unease. We're just lucky that Frégo wasn't wounded too badly, and after dittany, his wound healed quickly."

There was another snort from the far corner of the courtyard. Evidently, Frégo's wound has not affected his sense of humour.

"Right, well, I'll get back to you," said the Dungeonmaster. "Thank you for rescuing my servant, Woodsman. Keep him safe, will you, Tharadus?" He watched Robin give a small, ironic bow and a smirk, and Tharadus nodded his head sagely.

\*

During the following day, things all seemed a little brighter. Reluctant at first to leave Nightmare Castle, what limited information Frégo had gleaned from the Dark One suggested that he was on the move towards Dunshelm. Treguard decamped to Castle Tharadus, which was now serving as a base for the Dungeonmaster, his halfling, the Woodsman and the recovering Saié. Its resident King, thoroughly fed up with the whole thing, had managed to find accommodation for them all in his empty servants' quarters, although Frégo had had to clear out dozens of empty bottles from a spidery room that had once housed Gideon, and Treguard preferred to spend more time muttering to himself in an open courtyard than sit in his room, which had belonged to Funkus, and therefore only just fit for human habitation. Robin had Farnham's room, although he spent many nights absconding out of his window (allegedly, when asked by Treguard why, to continue vigilantism, but that may have not been true). Saié was housed in the only other bedroom designed for royalty, her wounds re-knitting, and after a few days, she took to hobbling around her room, continually talking in Elvish, which Frégo expertly translated as "you don't want to know."

Although Treguard had been worried about his home, there were no reports of Dark One attacks anywhere in Levels 1, 2 and 3. Pyron, who had apparently been in Level 3 recently, reported the whole place had been dark, but that there were no Ones, with the exception of One Ball – a fireball. Due to the resulting 'accident', he had ended up rather hurriedly back in Level 2, which had been free of both Dark forces and fussy goblins who didn't like too much property damage. Drassil hadn't seen anything except money, Ah Mok was too difficult to understand, and the one time Merlin tried to use the communication system, it consisted of him saying two words, before the crystal ball turned orange and refused to work any more. Since then, Merlin had taken to teleporting into the castle to deliver his news, although at one point a flock of flamingos arrived at the same time. For a few weeks, it seemed as if everything was

running smoothly, and the day before Treguard and Frégo left to return to Dunshelm, Tharadus pointed out something untoward.

“Has anyone heard from Isárion?”

“Of course we have,” said Frégo brightly. “He’s the chap with the god complex who likes the games.”

“He said heard *from* him, not heard *of* him, dunderhead,” snapped Saié sullenly.

“I know!” replied the halfling. “I’m just trying to lighten the mood!”

“You know,” interjected Treguard, speaking over the heads of the two smaller creatures, “he hasn’t reported back all week.”

“Maybe he’s bored of us?” said Frégo. Treguard, ignoring him, climbed up to the crystal ball, Tharadus trailing behind him, pointing at the crystal ball and giving the command.

“*Expone!*”

Static.

There was a pause while everyone looked.

“*Expone!*”

A few buzzes of static, and then blackness.

“Robin?”

“I’m already on my way, Treguard,” said the Woodsman, lacing up his boots and sheathing his sword. “If you want to continue training, Saié, practice on, I don’t know...” He chose at random. “...Ingard.” And with that, he jogged up a staircase, vaulted over the castle wall, and was gone, leaving Treguard, Frégo, Saié and Tharadus standing in the castle courtyard.

Robin called Treguard two days later. Glad to be back in his throne, Treguard watched as Robin displayed, via the Magic Mirror, what had, at one point, been Isárion’s palace between Levels 2 and 3. Although some of the pillars and walls were intact, a large section of the place looked like it had had a visit from a particularly careless Pyron. Huge swathes were carved into the ground, and perhaps unsurprisingly, there was no sign of the 19-year-old prince. As Robin ended the call, Treguard sat there, running through events in his head, wondering what may have happened to him, an enemy of the Powers That Be perhaps, but a young man nevertheless.

The Dungeon portal crackled into life and Frégo walked in, carrying an assortment of vegetables.

“Just been to see Gra... what’s happened?” he chirped.

“That is the question, Frégo,” replied Treguard.

\*

What had happened was this. Isárion had been polishing his collection of finely crafted playing cards, ‘liberated’ from other collectors over the years, when he heard a disturbance outside. Sweeping over to the window, he was horrified at what he saw: an unidentified human in a cloak, seemingly attempting to batter his front door down. In indignation and rage, he clattered down the stairs to the atrium, and with a wave of his hands, the doors swung open.

Isárion felt his jaw drop open as, rather than a pathetic Dungeoneer or foolish villager, a billow of purple fog rushed through the door, and into his palace stepped a huge, hulking, dark shape. He almost took a step back, before he remembered who he was.

“I am Prince Isárion of Level 2,” he shouted in his most commanding, most authoritative, most derisive voice. “None may pass from here to Level 3 without besting me at one of my games.”

“Prince Isárion,” came the voice of the Dark One. “You are a threat to my impending reign, which is inevitable. Now you will face the consequences!”

“No,” Isárion replied, simply, and without hesitating, he shot a ball of energy directly at the Dark One. It hit him in the chest, and without even moving at all, it seemed to reconstitute itself. Hurling itself back at Isárion, his own offensive magic hit him squarely in the chest. He was thrown backwards, his headdress falling off, revealing a mop of messy, dark red hair.

“Right,” he roared through the pain, “that’s how you play? Fine!”

He leaped up, the Dark One smashing his way towards the stairs on which Isárion stood. With a cross between a battle cry and a yodel, the prince launched himself into the air, flying directly at the massive Dark One. Magically keeping afloat for longer than a standard leap would often carry him, he pushed forwards, repetitively firing bolts of magic at the Dark One, who let out a huge and hideous laugh, and with one blow, swatted Isárion clean out of the air. He hit a wall with a sickening crump, and fell to the floor. Having his fun, the Dark One smashed a couple of his favourite pillars, and the ceiling began to rumble dangerously. He turned back to Isárion, who had managed to struggle upwards, and reared back to deliver a finishing blow.

Isárion screamed at the top of his voice, and summoned all the magic he could.

Hundreds upon hundreds of chess pieces shot from all corners of the room, some from Isarion’s cloak or even conjured from himself, battering the Dark One incessantly.

Razor-sharp cards whistled out of corners and slashed at his huge frame. Giant draughts rained down upon his head. Wargaming figures in their droves cascaded down the stairs to slash at the Dark One with their tiny weapons.

But nothing worked. All this only gave him momentary pause, and he continued to rain crushing punches down, huge cracks appearing in the chessboard floor. Isárion ducked, ran and jumped, but in the end he knew what was coming. Exhausted, and his magic depleted, he used all the energy he had to stand, framed in the doorway of his own palace.

The Dark One turned and considered the young, tired, magical prince, surrounded by shattered fragments of the games he so loved. Without a word, he slowly started to lumber towards his prey with a series of heavy footsteps.

“Come at me, then,” wheezed Isárion. “Come at me. Take what you will. Every inch of me will resist you. Every inch.”

It happened very quickly. Lit up with his own insurmountable glee, the Dark One impaled the prince with one long, sharp talon. As he began to drain the energy into himself, the Dark One laughed, and a crash of thunder echoed throughout the Level.

“Blaine,” whispered the boy, and then vanished entirely. Prince Isárion’s clothes, empty and bloodstained, fluttered to the floor, buried seconds later as the magnificent ceiling came crashing down upon them.

\*

One week after the disappearance of Isárion from the Dungeon dimensions, Treguard rallied the Powers That Be in his antechamber. Although Merlin, Frégo, Robin, Ingard and Tharadus had turned up, Treguard had hoped for more. He had assumed, perhaps blindly, that some of the neutrals would come in answer to his call, but Robin had had significantly more trouble gathering any of them. He hadn’t been able to get close to

any Opposition members this time, and none of the elves could be found. He discovered a 'safe house' in the middle of the forest, which he quite liked, but he hadn't been able to convince Treguard to even visit there. Saié had departed, scared at another conflict, Rhollgar was refusing to leave the library, and nobody had seen Drassil for a while. While Frégo fussed around arranging chairs for everyone, then, Treguard was consulting an ancient map of the Dungeon dimensions to arrange his thoughts, which he was projecting from the Magic Mirror like a bizarre slideshow. "So, we have had sightings of the Dark One here," he said, indicating the forests of Level 1, "here", indicating the plains where Frégo had been attacked, "and here," indicating the exit of Level 2 where Isárior's palace had been. "What we can surmise is that he attacks wantonly, and with no pattern. He preys on the strong or powerful, but he had yet to be seen in Level 3."

"As far as we know," chipped in Frégo.

Treguard was about to fix him with a withering look, but then reflected. He had a point.

"Good point," said Tharadus, saving Treguard from the pain of saying that.

"We may be able to find out," wheezed Merlin. "Let me just try something."

Everyone shrank back a little as the old wizard rolled up his sleeves and cast a hand at the Magic Mirror, which then flicked randomly through images until it settled on a strange image of a troubadour with a quiff proclaiming through song that he was never going to give you up. Merlin shook his head, and tried again, and again, and again, until finally, and after ten minutes of almost constant static and an image of Robin's hut which appeared to contain someone named Louise, a slightly faded, fuzzy image of the deepest depths of Level 3 eased into view. At the view of this, Frégo and Ingard gave an involuntary shudder. Even Tharadus seemed uneasy.

"This is Level 3, Merlin," admitted Treguard, "but what are we supposed to be seeing?"

"Nothing," said Merlin. "That's the point. My magic was supposed to detect the Darkest source in Level 3, and it has brought us here. But I don't see any Dark One here, do you?"

The faintest cry of "Chebugi!" was heard through the Mirror, making everyone jump.

"Well," said Treguard, "we'll have to keep monitoring. Frégo, fetch some food.

Nobody leave the castle unless I say. Unless, King Tharadus, you wish to return to your own castle, which I cannot prevent. We can..."

There was a sudden wailing, klaxon-like sound. Everyone jumped again. Robin's hand was already on his sword hilt. Treguard, however, seemed relaxed, and painted at the Magic Mirror, which immediately went to black.

"This had better be good," he snapped.

Immediately, everyone shielded their eyes at a sudden, merry brightness which came at them. Robin knew immediately that he was looking at the interior of the little house in Level 1 which he'd been unable to penetrate. And in its cheerful conditions, there stood the most unlikely inhabitant one would expect.

"Hello, Treguard! Oh... are there people with you? Yes, there are. Hello, Robin! Oh, and you, Frégo? Hiya!"

"Where have you been?" said six voices at once.

"I've been here," said Kulaemii. "Since that incident with the magic stone, not to mention that little one who's always after me, I've been wanting a bit more protection! So I had this house built! Isn't it pretty?"

"Lovely," said Treguard sardonically. "But pray tell, Kully, why are you contacting me right now? Not to talk about share prices again, I hope? I've told you before,

nobody seems to want to buy elf boots, they just don't fit..."

"Dragon's teeth!" ejaculated the elf-maid. "Boots! I almost forgot!"

"Yes, well, let's not get carried away," sighed the Dungeonmaster. "Why did you start this call? We were busy... or, at least, we were supposed to be," he finished, casting an eye at Robin, Frégo and Ingard, who had started playing a game of cards, and Merlin, who appeared to have fallen asleep.

"I heard something about a dark presence?"

"Yes?"

"And Isárion vanished, is that right?"

"Yes..."

"Do you think the two are connected?"

"Yes."

"Oh..."

"What do you mean, oh?"

"Well, that was it," said Kully, looking despondent.

"That was *it*? You called me up to give me a theory that everyone else has already come up with?! Do you even understand the magnitude of what we may be up against here?" The mirror chimed again. "Hold on, I haven't finished berating you yet."

The screen split into two and a slightly distorted image of Drassil in the marketplace appeared. In the background appeared to be Ah Mok, but Treguard wasn't entirely convinced.

"Hello?"

"This is a spy mirror, so I hope it works, wayfarers," droned Drassil. "There's a slight feeling of unease in the marketplace, and for once that's not connected to Mrs Grimwold baking another fruit pie. What I mean is, everyone's feeling as grey as Mogdred's skin right now. It feels... kind of dark."

The mirror rang again. A third screen appeared, pushing the other two upwards.

"Treguard?" said Rhollgar, seemingly struggling with himself. "Something's gathering outside the Library. It's affecting me... I'm being urged to change form... and I don't like it! It... it hurts!"

*Ring.*

"There's a storm coming around the Level 2 border!" announced Pyron.

*Ring.*

"Master of Dungeons, the animals in the woodland are restless," Isilme crooned in a dreamlike voice. "I am concerned, so I am forced to contact you from a forest pool..."

*Ring.*

"I am unable to pray," complained a monk whom Treguard knew to be called Virtue. "Something is blocking my communion with God."

*Ring.*

"I am in terrible danger!" screamed Saié.

"STOP!" Treguard yelled. All the chattering voices ceased, Merlin jerked awake, and Frégo dropped his cards. Standing in the middle of the antechamber, Treguard hung his head slightly. He could practically feel Frégo, Robin, Merlin, Ingard, Tharadus, Kully, Drassil, Ah Mok, Pyron, Isilme, Saié and Brother Virtue all breathlessly waiting on his next word.

"We need to stop this," he said, slowly, clearly and rationally. "Every one of you, whatever your allegiance, needs to come here. Now."

Steadily, everyone in the Magic Mirror could be seen to think for a while, before they all nodded their heads.

“Right,” said the Dungeonmaster, suddenly businesslike. “Merlin, you can get...”  
*Ring.*

“What? Who...”

“Er, hello? Hello, is this the right number? I’ve seen something in a spy mirror, and I wanted to...”

“Who is this?” demanded Treguard, as the voice, that of a country maid, was not accompanied by a picture.

“My name’s Milly, sir,” said the voice. “I was a flower girl once...”

“You were?” interrupted Robin.

“For, like, a minute.”

“Hey! Didn’t we...?”

“Fascinating as this is, can we get back to the topic at hand?” thundered Treguard, his eyes flashing. “What do you have to say, girl? Make it count. I’m not a patient man these days.”

“Well, sir, there looks to be someone what’s wanting to enter Nightmare Castle, sir.”

“Can’t they just come in by my summoning, like the normal Dungeoneer procedure?”

“No, sir. He’s not a Dungeoneer, sir. I can’t see him proper though my spy mirror, sir, but he’s... he’s... well, he’s...”

“Where?” said everyone at once.

“He’s outside the castle, sir.”

There was a collective gasp, followed by a moment of indecision. Robin, as the fastest, sprinted the length of the antechamber, and thrust his head out of the first window he saw. And there, at the base of the hill on which the castle stood, was a figure, twice as tall and wide as a normal man, a dark shroud encasing him.

\*

Flanked by a nervous-looking Robin and a vacant-looking Merlin, Treguard – in full battle armour – stood halfway down the hill, looking down at the Dark One. It was difficult to tell, Treguard reasoned, if he was looking up – if he had a face at all, of course – but he decided that he wouldn’t be taking a step closer until he had attempted to communicate.

“I am Sir Treguard of Dunshelm,” he shouted pompously. “You have been wantonly attacking all who are powerful and a possible danger. What is your intent, and why have you encroached upon the grounds of Nightmare Castle?”

The Dark One stirred, but made no sound other than a low growl.

“I...” Treguard started, but Merlin suddenly piped up.

“There’s something wrong here, Treguard. I’m trying to use my magic to divine what weaknesses this creature has, and it... ah...”

“What? *What?!?*”

“There’s something small. Something very small, but I may be able to isolate it...”

“Well, do it quickly,” replied the Dungeonmaster, unsheathing Wyrmslayer. “I don’t have all day... well, I do, but that’s not the point.”

Merlin had closed his eyes in concentration. Focusing heavily on the presence of the Dark One below him, he let free his magic, and murmured to himself, “*barbari!*”

A loaf of bread appeared in mid-air and bounced off Treguard’s head.

“Impressive,” snorted Robin.

“Oh no, hang on... *specialis revelio!*”

For a few seconds, there was nothing, and then a most curious noise came from the Dark One, making all three jump. It was a hideous, groaning, creaking noise, like



wrought metal being torn in twain. Sparks of blackness were falling from the form of the Dark One, who looked as if he was becoming cloaked in a cloud of mystic energy. The effect was startling.

“What did you do?” demanded Treguard.

“I cast a spell to reveal his true form,” squeaked Merlin. “His massive dark body was merely a solid illusion... this should be a...”

The smoke cleared. In the Dark One’s place stood a tall, thin boy, clearly no older than a teenager. A mirthless smile played around his lips as he looked up. For a while, none of them spoke.

“Clever,” said the boy in the Dark One’s voice. “Quite clever, and quite pointless. You see... although my true form may look weak, you have no idea of the power I now command...”

And with that, both his hands glowed and he shot a volley of energy balls towards Treguard and his allies.

They scattered; Merlin shrieked and teleported away a millisecond before a ball could hit him, Robin attempted a heroic dive sideways, but was hit in the face by a ball of dark energy and collapsed, unconscious, and as the remaining dark power battered the castle, its inhabitants exchanged nervous, terrified glances. Treguard, however, continued powering forwards, swinging Wyrmslayer hither and thither, the enchantment places upon its blade dispelling any dark energy bolts it came into contact with, charging towards the boy.

“DUNSHELM!” he cried, leaping into the air and bringing Wyrmslayer down towards the head of the Dark One.

*Clang.* The sword ricocheted off the Dark One’s head and fell backwards. Dragged by the inertia, Treguard found himself slammed into the ground for the first time since this adventure had started.

“Not a good day,” muttered the knight, as the Dark One began to laugh, his pitiless black eyes showing all the malevolence that should not be present in a teenager’s face.

“That usually works, as well...”

And then the Dark One spoke again, in a much deeper voice that carried throughout all the Nightmare realms, and struck fear into Treguard’s palpitating heart.

“I am the Dark One. I have proven undefeatable to the master of these realms. I see your weaknesses. I have taken power from those who do not deserve it. And I defy you. I am your conqueror. Behold my power.”

He raised a hand, and as he did, the land shook. Across Levels 1, 2 and 3, lightning struck the sky and black clouds rolled across that which once was blue. Villagers were fleeing into their houses and barricading the doors, priests were convinced the Apocalypse had come, and trees began to be uprooted in the woods and forests.

Treguard, scrambling upwards, devoid of a weapon since Wyrmslayer had flown to goodness knows where, began to back away – something he had never done before – as the most hideous laughter he had heard since Morgaine had watched his karaoke attempt began to emanate, not just from the Dark One, but from everything he heard around him, as the boy began to grow rapidly in size, and presumably strength, as his fists and feet began to crash through solid ground, gouging marks in the hill, stomping inexorably towards Nightmare Castle, all attempts at humanity abandoned, animalistic sounds coming from his mouth. For a moment, he began to morph back into his Dark shape... and, at that moment, a small dagger glanced off his chest and fell at Treguard’s feet.

Reinforcements had arrived. On the brow of the hill stood every remaining member of the team Treguard had called for. Most of them screaming war cries or abuse at the Dark One, they threw everything they had at his hulking form. Pyron, Ah Mok and Merlin's combined magic zoomed towards him and crashed into his chest. A screaming and vengeful Saié threw daggers and darts at his head at a tremendous rate. Kully and Isilme were shooting bolts and projectiles from antiquated weaponry, which Drassil and Ingard, all enmity forgotten, were sifting through frantically, trying to find anything that worked. Tregurd lifted Saié's poisoned dagger from the ground and slashed at what he assumed to be the Dark One's legs, raining blow upon blow against all he could reach. Yet, still shrouded in a cloud of impenetrable darkness, he could not be harmed. He barely even halted in his advance.

"Has anyone tried hitting him in the back?" someone shouted.

There was a pause.

"Right you are," said a shaking male voice, and launching himself into the air, both his own sword and Wyrmslayer clutched in his hands, came the figure of Robin, bruised and bloody, swinging both blades in a large, defined, forceful arc, connecting as they did with the Dark One's back.

He screamed, as did the Dark One. His own sword had disintegrated almost immediately, but the instant Wyrmslayer had touched the back of the Dark One, Robin had the immediate instinct to let go, as energy beyond anything he had ever endured coursed through the words and electrified his body. Yet he resisted. He kept pushing, not knowing why he had to push to cut through an enemy, only dimly aware that what he was doing would have any sort of effect. His skin ripped... wounds burst open on his body... screams started in his mind... all his clothes exploded off his frame... and he knew he was close to death...

*But what's the point of life if he's going to kill us all anyway?*

And the instant he thought that, he felt the blade move easier. Following through, Wyrmslayer took Robin spinning with it, the dazed Woodsman staggering away and coming to a collapsed halt on the muddy ground. He had cut straight through the Dark One, his realisation that he was willing to die, again, negating the darkest of magical protection. Writhing and screaming, the shapeless form of the Dark One dissipated, heralding the reappearance, for a few seconds, of the teenage boy whose form he had taken on, before there was a huge explosion... and everything went black.

\*

Merlin had made quite a good job of remaking the hill, although Treguard wasn't entirely sure that his insistence that purple ground was his idea carried much weight. At least Knightmare Castle was still in good shape, and from the reports that he'd been hearing throughout the day, it sounded like the rest of the Knightmare realms seemed untouched too. Even Level 3 seemed to be a little brighter, and Frégo had done a good enough job of informing the Wolfenden inhabitants that all dangers had passed... for now. Isáirion's body had never been found, but all the rest had departed to wherever they felt the best place was for them. After all the excitement of the events of the month that had just passed, Knightmare Castle's antechamber did seem rather lonely.

"How's he doing?" asked Treguard from the relative safety of his chair, keeping an eye on the blank Magic Mirror.

“Well, he’s still unconscious,” replied Ingard, spooning a dark green mixture into Robin’s open mouth, “and he’s lost a lot of blood. But there’s not much else we can do for him. The bandages seem to be holding; the rest is up to God.”

“Don’t tell him I said this,” said Treguard, “or I’ll never live it down. But we owe him a lot. Not many people have swung my sword into the back of a demon and lived.”

“I think we can safely say that by ‘not many people’ you mean ‘nobody’,” chipped in Frégo, “so it’s certainly an achievement. It beats being sneezed on by Grandos, in any case.”

Treguard, Merlin, Ingard and Frégo all looked at Robin as he made a small spasm in his sleep. The table that had recently facilitated Saié’s recovery was slightly too small for him, but judging by how tightly they had bound him to it, he wasn’t going to be falling off at any time.

“Right, well, that one wasn’t difficult at all,” said Treguard finally. He began to head for a door, thinking of his bed and how much he would like to be in it. “Call me if there’s anything more threatening, but until then...” And he vanished into the doorway.

“Charming,” responded Frégo. Turning his attention back to Robin, he cast around for something else to say. “Should we get him anything? You know, for when he wakes up?”

“New clothes?” tried Ingard, causing the halfling to crack a smile. “I mean... he should get something... he’s going to be okay, right?”

“I’m sure he will,” grinned Merlin. “Trust me, I’m a wizard.”

And the three of them set to work constructing a splint for Robin’s leg as, outside, a large white cloud shifted, and a ray of sunshine lit up the blue sky, and Level 1’s forest was bathed in the brightness of serenity once more.