

Boom.

The rumble of thunder across the midnight Nightmare sky came more than ten seconds after the distant flash of lightning. Even so, one could tell the epicentre of the storm was on its way. Blanketing clouds obscured the moon so much that everything outside his hut was barely discernable. Black on black: a thick, impenetrable darkness.

And Robin didn't like it.

It was the thunder that had awoken him – an annoyance in itself, since he had been in a deeper slumber than he had in a long time – but, now he sat up in the familiar settings, everything seemed, at the very least, normal.

So why he felt so uneasy was a mystery.

“My candle.”

The Woodman rolled over and groped around for a flint. From his left came a cross between a yawn and a grunt of annoyance.

“What's going on?”

“Oh. Sorry, sorry, Karolina. I'm just going to light my candle; I need to find my...”

“Who's Karolina?”

“Sorry. Mary.”

“Only joking; I *am* Karolina. Who's Mary?”

Another ominous crash of thunder came from above, this time accompanied by the flash of lightning. It might start to rain soon. Robin, who had managed to cut his thumb on the broken flint he found, jumped a little, praying that his hut's roof would hold it off this time.

“Hold on, I'm just going to...”

He struck the flint against the rough stone he kept for such a purpose and lit the candle he kept on the crate next to his rough bundle of rags. It threw everything into blessed relief, and faded colour – his wooden interiors, his gear in the corner, the crate and candle itself and book he still hadn't started reading, and the map of the realms still tacked to his wall. He chanced a look at the girl and took in her mop of blonde curls and disgruntled expression.

“Do what you like. It's *your* hut. I'm going back to sleep.”

Robin wasn't going to sleep. He stayed where he was, feeling jumpy.

And then when the human figure appeared out of nowhere he nearly screamed.

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Had he not been so taken aback by its sudden presence, he probably would have. As it was, he stayed exactly where he was, frozen stiff as if this were some predator whose eyesight was based on movement. It was, however, definitely human, though indistinct, as if sketched by an artist with one hand. The flickering candlelight did little to dispel this – or the terror Robin felt. Not for the first time, he wished he hadn't left his weaponry so far away.

All this happened in three very long, very slow seconds, before the figure opened its mouth.

“Robin.”

The Woodsman squeaked. He hadn't intended to, but it was all he found himself able to muster.

“Robin, can you hear me?”

Another squeak. Robin cleared his throat, as quietly as possible, trying not to tear his eyes away from where he supposed the shadowy figure's face would be.

“Robin! Answer me!”

“Yes...” Robin croaked, forcing the word out with Herculean effort.

“Do not be afraid. I have contacted you like this before and you seemed more at ease with me then.”

“A lot has happened recently,” whispered Robin, almost to himself.

“Ah, but that must not affect your memory,” boomed the apparition. “Perhaps some more light will help to, if you will excuse the pun, illuminate the situation.”

Another flash of lightning – although one that lasted longer. Much longer. For a full ten seconds, Robin took in the old man, the grey beard, and the tattered remnants of what must have once been royal refinements.

“Emperor... Faloban?”

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“In life I *was*,” said the Emperor mournfully. “But my life was taken from me before I could see either son prevail. Your task, as I recall, was to find and help Sumehree.”

“I did find him.”

“But your alliance did not last long. Soon afterwards, you died.”

“So did you,” Robin answered with a weak attempt at a smile. “And yet you're here in my hut.”

“Just *your* hut? There seems to be somebody else in...”

“Just my hut.”

There was a pause.

“Oh,” ejaculated Faloban. “Right. Well, yes, I am here, although I am not quite. Neither am I *there*. I am neither here nor there, if you catch my drift.”

“Not in the remotest.”

“It matters not,” continued the ghost with a shake of his head. “I have questions for you. And a task, if you are willing.”

Answering questions. I can do that.

“What do you want to know?”

“Where is my kingdom?”

“Sorry?”

“Where,” repeated Faloban with more force, “is my *kingdom*? I was once ruler and overseer of that which you call Level One. Under whose aegis is it now?”

Robin thought for a while.

“Well, it’s not really a kingdom unless you could call a forest and a couple of fields a kingdom, but there’s a castle and he’s in charge of the castle, so I suppose technically he’s king, I mean he’s called king, so yeah...”

“WHO?” bellowed Faloban.

“Oh yes, should’ve said. Tharadus. King Tharadus. He’s not that bad a guy, actually. Got some dodgy servants, though. There was this cat...”

“Tharadus...” replied the ghost in a low voice. “Not a name I am familiar with. Where are my sons?”

“Sumehree and Meksis, right? Aren’t they with you?”

“No. They have not passed into this world with me. They must be living still. I would have assumed you would be in the employ of at least one of them.”

Robin wondered for a moment whether this was meant as an affront. He had never felt any particular animosity towards Faloban in life, but (as his memory reminded him) that was a long time ago. And he had been rather stand-offish back then, like... well... like an emperor.

“Nobody’s *in charge*, sir. Unless you count Treguard.”

“Treguard is there?”

“Oh yes. I mean, he wasn’t there. Something to do with Dickundom, whatever that is. But he’s been there for a while now. Dunshelm is a castle too, although I wouldn’t call him a king either. He’s more of a...”

“...dungeonmaster.”

“...dungeonmaster,” finished Robin a fraction after Faloban. “Yes, what you said.”

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There was a long, heavy pause in which the ghost looked like he was thinking. The rain had started by this point, heavy thuds rustling through the trees and echoing through Robin’s small hut.

“And there’s no Sumehree?”

“No Sumehree.”

“And there’s no Meksis?”

“Not to my knowledge, no.”

“Then the path ahead is clear.”

It is?

“It is?”

“Yes,” said the Emperor testily. “I am unable to rest – truly rest – until the tasks I set myself in life are complete. If what you say is true, then under this Tharadus and with Treguard *in situ*, Level One is safe...”

Robin considered mentioning the Dark One, but this may not have been the best of moves at this point.

“...and I am satisfied with that. But I cannot go without knowing the fate of my sons and the status of the task I set for them. Robin, you must go and find them. It is very important. Only then will I know if the magic object I secreted is secure. In the wrong hands, it could be... a problem.”

Robin blanched. He had, frankly, had his fill of magic objects – he couldn’t forget, for example, that the last time Faloban had entrusted him with one, he had been stabbed in the back by Lord Wraith, and lay dead on the floor for at least a year before a careless dungeoneer picked the amulet up and brought him back.

“You... you don’t want me to do that, Faloban.”

“Yes, Robin. I do. You are trustworthy, and if memory serves me correctly, you are strong. You know Sumehree on sight. You are probably aware of Meksis.”

“He wears that stupid waistcoat and pointless blue sash.”

“*Gilded* waistcoat and *royal* blue sash, yes.”

“Look, sir, I want to help you; really, I do. I’m probably just not the right person for this. There might be some record of them in the library in Wolfenden. Maybe talk to Carboniferous; he’d be able to help you...”

“No, Robin,” said the Emperor, extending a hand and pointing a finger. “You.”

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The rain had eased off a little when Robin’s eyes opened. It was still wet outside, but a shaft of early morning sunlight was making its way through the clouds and illuminating everything in the hut. Catching his breath, the Woodsman cast his eye across all he saw: his beloved hut, safe and warm and, for now at least, ghost-free. Under his pile, the pretty blonde slept on, her breaths calm and peaceful, unperturbed by everything that had transpired overnight.

Or had it? The candle hadn’t been lit. The flint was on the crate, rather than the floor. Robin’s thumb appeared unblemished and not like something that had been bleeding. Scrambling up,

pulling on his clothes, lacing up his boots, hitching his crossbow and quiver over his back and sheathing his sword, the Woodsman stood there in his doorway, looking out at the light rain coming down through the cool air.

I suppose it can't hurt to look.

And off he went.