

TALES OF THE DARK FOREST



KNYGHTMARE!

STEVE BARLOW & STEVE SKIDMORE

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KNYCHITMARE!

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3

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The Legend of the Dark Forest

According to legend, the Dark Forest was not always dark. Long ago, the Kings of the Forest ruled a rich and fertile land from their high throne in the great City of Dun Indewood. Their prosperous and peaceful realm was defended by brave and honourable Knights, and you couldn't throw a rock without hitting a beautiful maiden, a sturdy forester or a rosy, apple-cheeked farmer. (Of course, none of the contented citizens of Dun Indewood would ever dream of throwing rocks about anyway; and if they did, one of the Knights, who were not only brave and honourable but just and kindly, too, would ask them very politely not to do it again.)

It was a Golden Age.

But over the years, the Knights and Lords of the City grew greedy, idle and dishonest, and fell to quarrelling among themselves. The line of the Kings died out.

The power of Dun Indewood declined. Contact with the other cities and towns that lay in the vast wilderness of the Dark Forest became rare, and then was lost altogether when the Forest roads became too dangerous to travel.

The creatures of the Forest became wild and dangerous until only a few hardy souls dared to brave its perils. The citizens of Dun Indewood continued to argue among themselves and cheat each other, turning their backs on everything that happened outside the City walls.

With no one to tame it, the Forest became home to truly dreadful things. Beasts with the understanding of men, and men with the ferocity of beasts, roamed the dark paths. The trees themselves became malevolent and watchful. And the Forest grew...

Well, that's the legend, anyway.

Of course, these days, nobody believes a word of it...

Ye Mappe of
Ye Darke
Foreste
(as it hath thus
far been
discoverede...)

Mount Inside

Here be Trolls

Castle

Wideawake

(formerly the Sleeping Castle)

The Ragged Mountain

Jenny Greenteeth's Pool

The
Forest
River

Rose's
Cottage

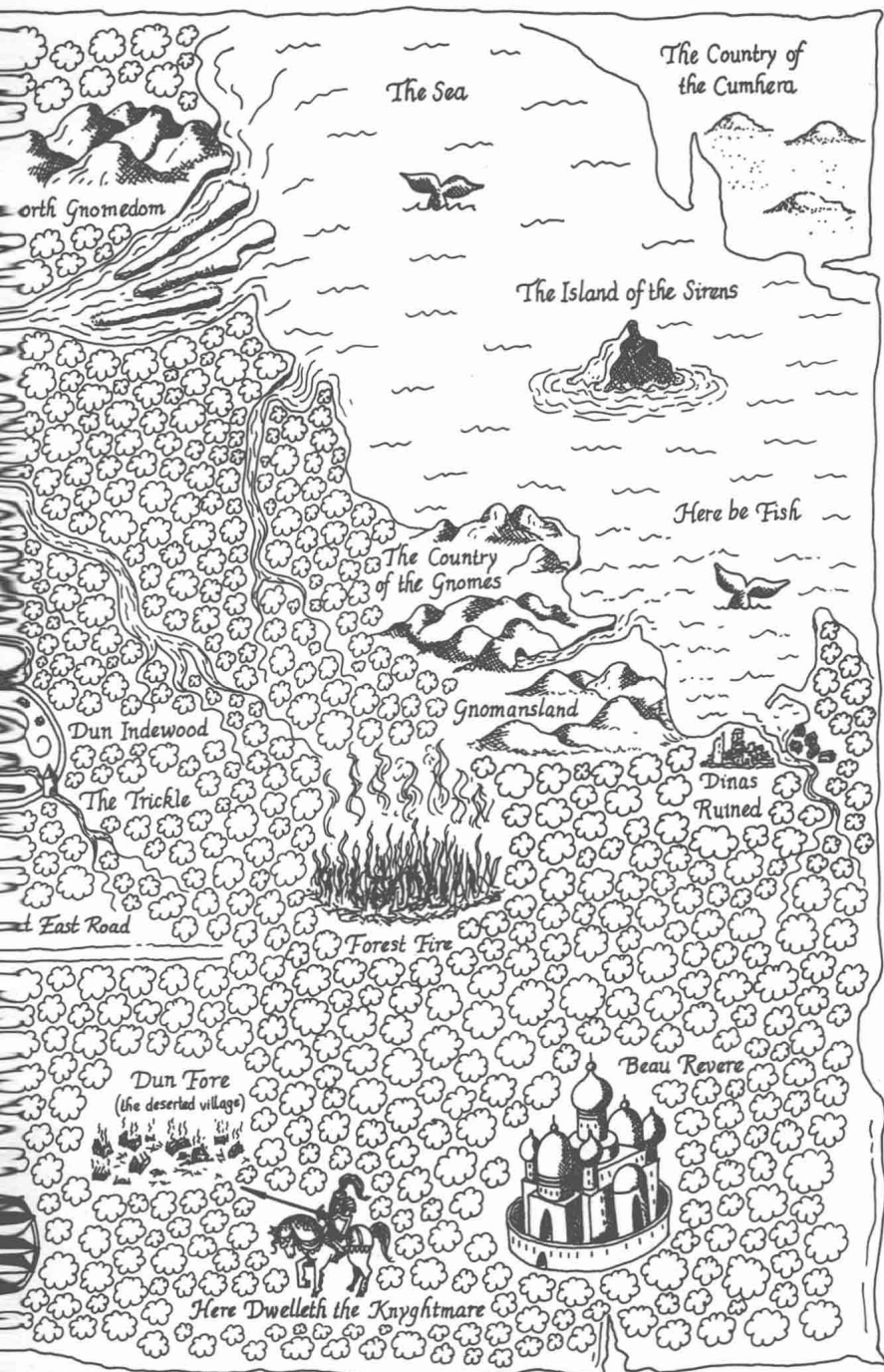
Grandmama's
House

Great West

Dragons of the
Darke Foreste

Here be Dragons

Hills and Pinewoods



The Sea

The Country of
the Cumhera

North Gnomedom

The Island of the Sirens

Here be Fish

The Country
of the Gnomes

Gnomansland

Dun Indewood

The Trickle

East Road

Forest Fire

Dinas
Ruined

Dun Fore
(the deserted village)

Beau Revere

Here Dwelleth the Knyghtmare

CHAPTER ONE



How the Story Began and our Heroes came
to a Sticky End.

“**D**id you hear that?”

Without waiting for a reply, Will threw off the cloak that had covered him as he slept and rose into a crouch. Ears straining for any sounds of danger, he looked around.

Night lay heavily over the Dark Forest. There was no wind: not a ripple disturbed the lake beside which Will and Rose had made their camp. The light of the new moon barely penetrated the thick canopy of leaves overhead; only in the water was it reflected as a glimmering bar of silver across the dull, smooth surface. The campfire had burnt down to embers, which cast a faint red glow across the clearing.



On the other side of the fire, Rose's sleeping roll lay crumpled and empty. Turning his back on it, Will reached down with his left hand to loosen the bindings of his sword. Gripping the hilt, he began to inch the blade from its sheath. Wrapping his cloak round his left arm as a makeshift shield, he peered intently into the shadows between the trees.

There was movement to his left, a whisper of cloth, and a girl of his own age appeared at his side. Rose's piercing blue eyes narrowed as she peered into the darkness of the Forest, crossbow at the ready. "Did you hear a noise?"

"Yes," said Will.

"So did I." Gazing intently into the surrounding darkness, Rose jerked her head. "It came from over there."

Will said carefully, "Then I think we may be in trouble."

"Why?"

Will pointed his sword towards the opposite side of the clearing. "Because the noise I heard came from over *there*."

"You mean we're surrounded?"

"It looks that way," said Will. "The question is, what by?"

"By what!" The new voice – loud, harsh and disgruntled – came from a dusty bag lying at Will's feet. "'What by?' is ungrammatical."

Will gritted his teeth. "This isn't the time for a language lesson."

"Oh, we're talking about time now?" said the voice in sneering tones. "Well, as you brought it up, I have something to say about time. The time, by my estimation,



is currently quarter past sleepy-byes, so just exactly why are you two running about screaming the place down in the middle of the night while some of us are trying to get a little rest around here, thank you so much? Would you mind explaining that?"

Rose kicked at the bag, which went, "Ouch!"

"Shut up," she hissed. "Something's out there."

"Something's out there?" The voice rose to a near-hysterical pitch. "Of *course* there's something out there! This is the Dark Forest. We've been traipsing through it for months, ever since we left Dun Indewood with its warm beds and regular meals – wasn't *that* a great idea! You know very well that there's *always* something out there! Now will you please go kill it, or let it kill you? I don't much care which as long as you're *quiet* about it!"

Will stabbed his sword point-first into the ground and tugged at the bag's drawstrings. It opened and he pulled out a magnificent wooden harp, the frame of which was topped with a crowned head. The carved face scowled up at Will. "So now you drag me out of bed," the Harp said wearily. "What is your problem?"

"Our problem," Will answered, "is that we're expecting to be attacked at any minute."

"Well, what am I supposed to do about it? Sing them into a coma?"

Out of the corner of her mouth, Rose said, "It wouldn't be the first time."

"Oh, har-de-har. Suddenly everyone's a comedian."

Will shook his head. "Nobody expects you to fight. But



you can watch and warn us if anything comes.” He leaned the Harp against his pack, facing out across the clearing, then retrieved his sword. Silently, he and Rose moved to the water’s edge so that their flank was protected by the lake while they and the Harp had a clear view in all directions of the grim, gnarled trees that surrounded them.

After a few moments the Harp hissed, “Hey! Are you two watching my back?” Will and Rose, intent on their vigil, made no reply. “I said, are you watching my back?” The Harp’s strings began to rattle. “It’s all very well for you humans,” it whined. “You can turn round on account of having legs. I can only see from side to side, I’m feeling very exposed here... *What was that?*” The Harp’s voice rose in a shriek of dismay. “I saw something! There *is* something behind me! It’s got an axe! A big axe! A big sharp axe! It’s creeping up on me! I can hear it! Do something!”

Rose gasped. “You’re right! There is something terrible behind you.”

The Harp shuddered. “What is it?”

“Me! And if I hear another peep out of you, you’re matchwood!”

Rolling its eyes, the Harp subsided.

For several more tense minutes, Rose and Will scanned the surrounding darkness, every sense straining to catch any sound or movement that would indicate the presence of hidden watchers. At length, Rose removed the bolt from her crossbow and returned it to the quiver at her waist. She gave Will a slightly shamefaced grin. “I suppose we must have been hearing things.”



Will remained watchful. "I don't think so."

"Then it must have been an owl or something."

"What I heard was no owl."

"Oh, please yourself." Rose yawned. "I'll put some more wood on the fire." She picked up the Harp.

"Hey!"

"Only joking." Rose put the Harp down and picked up a dead branch. "This time," she added under her breath.

"Funny lady," the Harp muttered in sour tones. "You crack me up."

"Don't tempt me." Casually, Rose broke the branch across her knee and tossed it on to the fire.

With a whoosh, flames shot up as though the wood had been soaked in oil. With a startled cry, Rose stepped back, Will stared frantically from side to side – and with a terrifying howl that sent leaves tumbling from the trees, their enemies were upon them.

A squadron of dragons swooped overhead, flaming. Will-o-the-wisps swarmed from the trees. Amid the unearthly flickering light and the bursts of dragonfire, the denizens of the Dark Forest hurled themselves upon Rose and Will.

An army of terrible creatures poured out of the shadows. At its head charged a cavalry regiment of spriggans; uncouth, goblin-like creatures clad in skins and wielding stone hammers and axes. They were mounted on aughiskies; enormous demonic horses with flashing hooves and flaming red eyes. Charging with them were packs of ferocious hell-hounds; barguests and padfoots,



baying for blood. Behind them came the infantry; platoons of shrieking goblin-like hobyahs and henkies. Among them strode the giants; one eyed fachans, bounding along on their single legs, and jabbering firbolgs, swinging clubs made from whole trees.

"They're coming! They're coming!" shrieked the Harp unhelpfully. "Save me! Women and plucked-string instruments first! What am I saying? Forget the women!" It stared in wide-eyed terror at the legion of approaching leprechauns, brandishing brass-bound shillelaghs.

The first wave struck. Will ducked to avoid the clutching hands of a nucklavee and slashed at the giant, skinless centaur with his sword. At his back, Rose shot bolt after bolt into the screaming horde with no visible effect. Will dispatched a firbolg, then had to dive out of the way of a gigantic cudgel-wielding Jack-in-irons, the heads of its former victims swaying horribly at its waist.

"Let's lighten up, people! Whatever your beef is, I'm sure if we just sit down and discuss this, we can reach some kind of negotiated settlement. Violence never solved anything – put that axe down! Aaaa...!" The Harp's panic-stricken pleas ended in a horrible sound of crunching, twanging and splintering wood.

Will looked round just in time to see Rose stagger under the attack of a suicide squad of redcaps. A split second later she disappeared beneath a cackling tide of the fearsome creatures, all tearing off their gruesome headgear in unspeakable delight at the prospect of re-dyeing it in human blood. With a howl of rage, Will sprang to her aid,



but a savage blow from a spriggan's axe sent his sword spinning out of his hand. Then he was dragged down by his leering enemies and held as the final horror appeared: the indescribable, shapeless monstrosity that was Boneless, wallowing unspeakably towards him. It reared up and fell clammily forwards to engulf him in its abominable, soul-destroying embrace, as...

Will screamed himself awake.

It was morning. The fire had gone out and a faint mist was rising from the lake to wreath the trees in questing fingers of vapour. On the other side of the fire, Rose was sitting bolt upright, shivering and staring wide-eyed at nothing. Gasping for breath, Will said, "Are you all right?"

Rose gave a shudder and nodded.

"Bad dream?"

Rose drew her knees up to her chest and clasped her arms around them. In a strained voice, she said, "Horrible. You were being eaten alive by goblins."

"Oh?" Will felt strangely miffed that Rose should dream such an inglorious end for him. "I didn't fight them off?"

"There were too many."

"And what were you doing while this was happening?"

"I'd been captured by a dreadful ogre. I couldn't get to you. It was horrible. You were screaming and screaming..."

"Oh, I was, was I?"

"Oh, yes – and the goblins were drooling all down their bibs and stabbing you with their forks and carving lumps off you with their knives and dipping their spoons into—"



“Yes, thank you, you don’t have to draw me a picture.” Will wiped cold sweat from his brow.

“You can draw *me* a picture.” The Harp’s voice was muffled by its bag. “With all the gory details. Does liver come into this? Or entrails? Tell me the whole offal truth!”

Will dragged the Harp from its bag. “The last time I saw *you*,” he told it acidly, “you were being smashed to smithereens by a bunch of giants.”

“Really?” the Harp gulped. “Why?”

“Maybe they were music lovers,” said Rose.

The Harp pouted. “You know, lady, it’s too bad I don’t dream, because I could really enjoy a nice vivid nightmare where you get turned into kebabs. You catch my drift?”

Will rose stiffly to his feet and stretched. “This has been happening a lot lately. Bad dreams, I mean.”

Rose nodded. “Ever since we passed through that wall of mist a couple of days ago. I said at the time there was something uncanny about that.”

Will couldn’t actually remember Rose saying this, but it didn’t seem a good moment to question the accuracy of her memory. “Maybe somebody – or something – is trying to warn us.”

“Warn us about what?”

Will shrugged.

“There doesn’t seem much point in warning us, unless whoever is doing the warning tells us what it’s warning us about,” complained Rose, busying herself with the fire. “But there must be something strange going on. I don’t usually get bad dreams.”

Will dug out a badly dented cooking pot from his pack

