



THE EYE SHIELD

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ALL CHANGE, PLEASE!

By Liam Callaghan

Part 1 of 3

By the time *Knightmare* came to a conclusion in 1994, it was barely recognisable from the first series seven years earlier. Perhaps I exaggerate, but between 1987 and 1994, the series had changed dramatically. Of course, this is to be expected - after all, no TV shows last that long without undergoing any change at all. However, the changes that took place during *Knightmare's* eight-year run were quite enormous when added up. Individually, some of these changes were big, some were small, some improved the show, others detracted from it. Here, then, is a map of how the series changed.

Series 2 (1988):

It's easy to dismiss series 2 as not being particularly different to series 1 - for one thing, most of the same rooms were retained, but mainly, it is human nature to only notice changes when they are for the worse. And in a rare moment of absolutism, *every* change in series 2 was an improvement.

The trouble with series 1 was that it was a bit samey - every dungeoneer faced the exact same challenges and characters. Series 2 changed that by introducing a whole new set of chambers in the Dungeon that, when mixed with the old ones, added an element of variety to the series overall.

The most obvious examples of this are in level one, with new rooms like the Wheel of Fortune, and my personal favourite, the Fire Cave. Then, more significantly, there was the addition of Igneous. All right, so series 1 *did* have two wall monsters, Olgarth and Granitas, but they guarded the same chamber, and even Treguard was unable to tell them apart. Both of

those wall monsters remained in the second series, but the addition of Igneous in a different clue room made for some more obvious diversity. Likewise, instead of having an audience with every dungeoneer - as she had in the first series - Lilith only met half the teams in series 2, alternating with Mildread, a wonderful new addition to the Dungeon whose tenure was all too brief.

Which brings me on to the subject of characters. Series 2 introduced plenty of them, and even after they had all vanished, they would still live on in their replacements, most notably Gretel (replaced by Mellisandre in the next series), Mildread (replaced by Mrs Grimwold) and Olaf (who remained in series 3 and was sort of replaced by Fatilla in series 4). Of all the series 2 newbies, Mildread is easily my favourite - the character of the wicked witch fits in beautifully with the format of knights questing for glory in a medieval setting.

And on the subject of quests, it was here in series 2 that we first got the formal identification of quest objects. You could argue that Danny and/or Richard in series 1 quested for the Chalice, but nothing was stated officially on the matter. With series 2, the wall monsters would typically announce the object of the quest after the final riddle had been answered. And with the quest object identified, then came the task of retrieving it - which would be done piece-wise. One piece of the object would be found in level two, and the other two in level three, except in the case of Mark, who had to retrieve the *four* letters of the spell FREE. In any event, this added to the magic of Nightmare, by giving the quests a real purpose, and having the object of it in pieces to be recovered individually kept it in focus.

Series 3 (1989):

"It's completely different."

"There's no change at all."

Both of these statements are true, and yet both are also false. What do I mean by this? Well, it's simple really. There were plenty of changes for series 3, but when you look at them closely, it was almost entirely visual.

Fundamentally, there was no real change to the game-play itself. The only significant difference was that Treguard no longer offered any hindrance to quests - while he still wasn't a formal "goodie" in that sense,

gone were those moments where he would actively hinder a quest, as he famously did with Julian's team in the previous series.

The only other alteration to the game-play was the addition of the "step" clues for Merlin's chamber. This helped to tie in level one with level two, in the same way that the piece-wise retrieval of the quest objects tied levels two and three together, creating a whole quest across three levels that were all connected - and that can only be a good thing.

Visually, there were a lot of changes, however. The first, and most obvious, was in Treguard's apparel. Instead of the servile forester look, he actually looks like he's properly in charge - the lord of the manor so to speak. This is a good look for Treguard, and one that would remain for the rest of the show's run.

The computer graphics are evolving, too - the dice chamber at the start of each quest illustrates that, as do the dwarf tunnels, the memorable minecart ride, the Vale of Vanburn, and - most significantly - the wall monsters. Gone are the face masks of Olgarth/Granitas and Igneous. Instead we have computer-generated wall monsters in the form of Golgarach and Brangwen. The latter is particularly interesting, as it confirms that these beings do actually have different genders, although I must confess I was never a fan of the female wall monster.

That aside, the other big change in series 3 is the casting. Apart from Hugo Myatt, only John Woodnutt and Tom Karol remained from the previous series. So in this series came a plethora of new characters, many of them direct replacements for their series 2 counterparts - most obviously Folly's replacement, Motley, who - with a break in series 7 - would remain in the show until its end. Similarly, series 3 introduced Hordriss the Confuser, in his most menacing form, actively opposing Leo's quest, and looking like he might have done the same with Simon had he not walked off the edge of a cliff.

Other memorable characters in series 3 included Mellisandre, the replacement maid played by Zoe Loftin (who also doubled as the Oracle of Confusion, the same as Audrey Jenkinson - who played Gretel - had in series 2), and Velda, the first of the "warrior women", played by Natasha Pope, who also played Morghanna, the first female arch-nemesis. It's a great shame Natasha Pope didn't stay with the series for longer, as she added a whole

new dimension to the show that can't be disregarded. Gundrada, Gwendoline, Romahna and Stiletta all evolved from Velda; likewise, Malice, Aesandre and Maldame were all cut from the same cloth as Morghanna. Ah, well...

And of course, let us not forget that series 3 marks the debut of one of the most famous and recurring threats to dungeoneers, that of goblins! Introduced in this series, those diminutive nasties would continue to menace teams until the bitter end, claiming victims on more than one occasion.

Series 3 has been called the high point of Knightmare overall, and I am inclined to agree. The format of the game-play had been tweaked to perfection, and there were plenty of memorable rooms and characters. However, it's not all downhill from here...

Series 4 (1990):

No doubt about the changes to this series! But with a change in director (Jimmy McKinney takes the reins here after Sally Freeman handled series 1-3), changes were inevitable. Most of these are just visual changes, but there is some change to the game-play.

The changes are evident from the opening bars of the title theme. Same tune, but it's got a different arrangement; a more full-on orchestral sound, as opposed to the '80s synth of the first three series. Let me say here that this change is for the better. While I accept and agree that the original theme music is the more nostalgic and it's the one I think of instinctively when I think of Knightmare, speaking as a musician, I consider the series 4-5 version of the theme to be the finest.

The changes are equally apparent before the first dungeoneer even appears, when Treguard introduces his new assistant, Pickle. It's unlikely that Pickle has ever been compared to the Queen of England before, but the analogy holds up. Like the royal family, opinion is split as to whether an assistant to Treguard is really needed (as he got on just fine without one in the first three series), but like Elizabeth II, Pickle does the job very well indeed.

It also becomes Pickle's responsibility at the start of each episode to update us on the latest quest. No more summarising the previous episode in a rhyme - now we simply get the names of the dungeoneer and advisors, what level they're in, a list of the items and spells they are carrying, and how long

they have been on the quest.

Speaking of the teams, when the first team arrive, we see the advisors' seating area has had a makeover - not a major change, but still worth mentioning. The screen is now mounted on the wall, rather than inside a chest.

As for the Dungeon itself, well, there's changes aplenty. Firstly, the teams start off in the Place of Choice - basically the Spindizzy from the start of level two in the last series, with just two exit points, marked by a different quest object. Whichever door the team choose, they are whisked away into the same chamber, in which a "neutral" character, most frequently Hordriss, makes a bargain with them. Fortunately, every team had the good grace to accept the pact, the promise of future aid on their quest being sufficient incentive, but I do wonder how the characters would have reacted if a dungeoneer had ever declined. Of course it would have spelled instant doom for the quest, because it would have robbed them of useful magic in level three, but still . . .

Of course, from that bargain came the biggest change to the format, and one that lasted for the remainder of the series - the eye shield. A controversial item, to be sure. It was interesting the first few times, but by the end of the series, with the sequences in the forest and the castle staircase being shown time and time again, it had become very samey.

And speaking of samey, that's another definite change for the worse in this series. Apart from the question of which character they would make a bargain with, the teams all seemed to face the same set of obstacles again. Gone was the variety of series 2-3. Once again the teams would all interact with the same characters.

Which brings me on to cast changes. Most memorably, Michael Cule played the roles of Fatilla, basically a replacement for Olaf, and Brother Mace, a portly and jovial monk who would return in series 5. Samantha Perkins, however, was basically a straight replacement for Natasha Pope. To her credit, Gundrada fitted into the castle scenario much better than Velda ever would have, and Malice had a degree of moral ambiguity that was missing from Morghanna. The only problem with that ambiguity was that Malice was either completely good or completely evil. There was never the same uncertainty that was evident in the most famous character of moral

ambiguity, Hordriss. All things considered, I'd have preferred it if they'd kept Natasha Pope.

As for the Dungeon itself, the most obvious change was undoubtedly the use of exterior shots - footage shot around castle ruins across the country. I can see why this was done, to chime in with the medieval feel of the series, and in itself it is not a bad thing. Mind you, despite the retention of the wellway to get from level one to level two, the staircase down to level three is a bit dull.

Not all of the Dungeon in series 4 looked like castle chambers, however. There were two very significant rooms introduced here that could have fitted into the previous series very nicely. One was the Block and Tackle, which didn't last beyond this series, probably because it was deemed "too tough" - being responsible as it was for half the deaths in this series. The other, descended from the Hall of Spears no doubt, was the infamous and dreaded Corridor of Blades, which remained in the show until the very end of the series, and rightly so! It is, after all, the most memorable chamber in the whole Dungeon!

Despite the enormous visual changes made to this series, it's worth pointing out that the game-play was largely unchanged from the previous series. After all, a door monster posing riddles isn't really that different from a wall monster posing riddles. And certainly Oakley was a great addition to this new format. If you don't count the bargain made in level one to be redeemed in level three, there were only two real changes. One was the lack of "steps" to get to Merlin - indeed, there was no task to complete before he appeared. And speaking of his appearance, what a different look he had! He was almost unrecognisable from the Merlin of series 1-3, and didn't seem to fit in with the new format. He was a shadow of his former self, and how come such a powerful wizard could be imprisoned so easily in the stocks? It's no small wonder this was his last series.

The other change to the game-play was in the quest object - in the previous series, teams would have to find pieces of it on their travels, but now it's just sitting there in a room at the end of the quest - all they have to do is pick it up and that's it, job done. Actually, the producers missed a trick here - the penultimate room of the Dungeon was a final door monster. If they had swapped those two chambers around, they could have had the

object being found, and then a return to the castle by virtue of answering Dooreen's riddles.

Overall, then? This fourth series unquestionably boasts more changes than any other series. Some of them were good, some of them were bad, and on the whole Nightmare was still in its golden age. But all good things must come to an end...

REMEMBER THIS?

Series 3. Level 1.

THE DUNGEON VALLEY

Watching dungeoneers stumble oh-so-slowly through the Vale of Vanburn is the one part of Nightmare that I have - occasionally - fast-forwarded. Yes, it's true, much to my shame! Admittedly this has almost always been whilst watching Scott's team, whose attempt at this challenge could not have been any worse without actually dying here, but I don't find the whole experience of watching dungeoneers shuffling along the valley as rewarding as series 3 purists do, I tend to think.

Yes, there are undoubtedly some nice moments of tension here, with the lurking danger of the quicksand (ever present in our minds after seeing Gavin, the first dungeoneer of the series, sink to his doom) coupled with the approaching goblins/ogre/behemoth, not to mention the horribly winding path and the sudden change of camera shot, making things very tough for the teams, and keeping us on the edge of our seats. I do have this slight feeling, however, that when you've seen one trip through the valley, you've seen them all (apart from Chris's visit during the final episode of the series, when something unexpected and slightly interesting happened to make sure we didn't drop off through lack of excitement) but this challenge undoubtedly fits well into series 3, in terms of the atmosphere it created as

well as its level of difficulty.

In the wider context of the show, of course, the Vale of Vanburn is very important, as it was the first part of another magical land (the Kingdom of the Elves) that came to reside within or overlap with the world of Knightmare (a concept later referred to as coming within Dungeon Dimensions) and so it paved the way for such concepts as the Greenwood, Wolfenden, Winteria and Grimdale. To what extent this was or wasn't a good development is entirely up to the individual Knightmare fan to decide, of course, but it does go to show that the seeds of many ideas that shaped Knightmare's later years were sewn during series 3, which perhaps was the series that managed to find the best balance between the concept of the old Knightmare Dungeon, and the idea that Knightmare was also an ever expanding magical land.

ADVENTURE TIME

By Andy Marshall, Ricky Temple & Louise Brockhouse

The team guided Amy over to the stump. Upon it lay a bunch of grapes, a dagger, a scroll, a spyglass, a horn with a label tied to it which read *Horn of a Red Speckled Elbermung*, a blue emerald ring which had the initial *D* inscribed on it, and a candle in a candle holder.

"What on Earth is an Elbermung?" said Amy.

"Sounds like a musical instrument," said one of the advisors. "It DOES say it's a horn..."

After Amy had placed the grapes in the knapsack, the team decided to open the scroll first. Amy unravelled it and it read: "One to Trade and One to Symbolize."

"What could that mean?" the middle advisor said in bemusement.

"Hardly the clearest clue scroll we've found so far," the male advisor murmured.

"Remember team, this is level three," reminded Treguard. "The hints and clues will become much more opaque now."

The advisors immediately discounted the dagger as a possibility and, after much discussion, finally settled on taking the Elbermung Horn and the blue ring.

"Okay, Amy..." the lead advisor said, taking a deep breath before she continued, "suppose you'd better pick up the spyglass and see just what delights Miss Sinstar has for us in this level."

"Oh joy," Amy said sarcastically as she picked up the spyglass and held it up to the eye shield. "I just can't wait..."

There was a brief shimmer of yellow - almost golden - light that spread across the surface of the spyglass just before the clear images started to be shown within the shallow depths. The scenery was very similar to that which surrounded Amy now - barren trees circling two humanoid forms that seemed to be in a heated debate. One was keeping as still as possible with head hung low, a look of fear upon its face, while the feminine humanoid's hands were waving almost erratically.

"But shhhe gained aid, Missstress...."

"I do not care if she had Smirkenorff at her side. You still allowed her to pass into level three."

The feminine form was wrapped up in heavy furs, including a hood that shielded her face from view even though the voice could certainly be

recognised.

"I am beginning to see why Lord Fear makes very little progress here with stagehands like you at his side. I am very nearly surprised he has survived at all."

Sinstar turned away from the scaled female humanoid form and looked upwards towards the brief clearing of the skies, a smile touching her lips as she appeared to have calmed down. A wolf's howl sounded in the distance but not very far; the sound was soon joined by another, and then a third.

"But there is no matter. I shall deal with the girl by nature's means now, and should even that fail, my own flesh and blood has been dispatched to guard the way to the Sea of Blue Fire."

A faint chuckle left her lips as she reached into a pocket along the waves of the fur cloak and retrieved a bloodied item that Amy and the team would recognise as her torn t-shirt.

"You at least had some use, and the dungeoneer has been kept well entertained as our process of draining Sidriss reaches its peak. The Dark Trilogy need but a little time more. I wonder if 'Headriss' will be much of a challenge after this...."

The way the word *Headriss* had been spoken indicated that Sinstar had not accidentally mispronounced his name, but was in some way a verbal slur against the aged wizard. The howls grew keener and louder as they grew closer, while Sinstar suddenly appeared to be turning towards Amy.

"I see you are unable to learn your lesson, dungeoneer, nor your place. Well, let's see how being kibble and bits suits you."

As the words were spoken the clearing suddenly broke into almost chaos, as four wolves burst through the low branches and seemed to be about to attack Sinstar, before they grew still as her cool gaze fell on them. Three

backed away while the one that appeared to be the alpha of the pack, with large fangs and oddly yellow tinted eyes, moved to her side and inhaled the scent of the blooded cloth. The wolves seemed to have taken up the whole screen for the three guides and probably even more so for Amy. The wolves appeared larger than normal, the white fur had faint and faded rings of dusky grey around their necks, and their broad and muscular forms hinted at speed and strength that would outmatch Amy one-to-one, let alone with the unequal odds that were about to be sent her way.

"Find the source of this scent, Vangal Ulf, and make sure it gets no further into the passageways."

The alpha moved closer and - to the team's shock - he spoke.

"The dungeoneer shall trouble you no more, Sinstar." A gravelly, male voice tumbled out in an awkward cadence, sounding strange coming from the canine form it resided within.

Then, as he drew alongside Sinstar, the alpha male's form changed, becoming less canine and more humanoid until eventually he had fully transformed into human shape. He stood up and the team saw that he was a human dressed in simple clothing but also wearing a White Wolfskin hood and cloak. His complexion was pale and his eyes an icy blue, both denoting him as a Winterian. He took the bloodied cloth from Sinstar and smiled coldly. Then, casting the rag to the ground, he pulled his Wolfskin cloak tight around him and the team saw the eyes begin to glow, as his form changed back into that of the alpha male wolf.

He dipped his head down to the cloth and pulled the item of fabric up from the ground, exposing his fearsome fangs to their tips. The cloth got shaken roughly and whatever liquid blood was left was sprayed onto the pale coats and his snout. He then tossed it to his pack. The wolves gave a thrilled yelp at the prospect of a hunt and a meal at the end of it, while Sinstar turned her attention to Amy once more.

"Three times the charm," she said in a silky but decidedly sadistic tone of voice.

Treguard did not move at all. He had watched the spyglass scene play out silently for once, and he could feel the sudden fear in the team taint the room, while Amy's briefly found courage seemed to have faded. Sinstar's image and that of the lizard female faded from view to a black screen. Sinstar had appeared either unwilling or unable to harm the girl from such a distance, but there was no idea how far the two were apart. Seconds later, a loud wolf howl filled the frozen land.

Treguard now understood why Sinstar had not tried to harm Amy - she did not feel any need to. What perhaps none of them may have noticed - with their attention drawn to Sinstar and the wolves - was the figure in the distance, hiding amongst the trees in heavy leather trousers and woollen dark vest, a brief blaze of sunlight blond hair tied back into a plait, which had been observing the two in the clearing before seemingly fading from sight into the trees. Somewhere the memory lodged within Treguard's mind, but the urgency of the matter at hand pressed that knowledge into a corner.

"That 'gentleman' Sinstar was just conversing with was, as you no doubt heard, called Vangal Ulf. He was a notorious Winterian criminal who committed his monstrous crimes while in the form of a wolf. Now it seems he's found employment in the services of Sinstar. I advise Amy not to dally where she stands, but to move with great haste."

Amy dropped the spyglass and almost as soon as it hit the frozen ground, she heard snarling behind her. Although distant, it was quickly getting closer.

"Warning, team... it seems Sinstar's guard beasts have indeed picked up Amy's scent, and even now are tracking her. Make haste, or your quest will surely end."

The advisors quickly told Amy to start moving, and as she did so there was

an unmistakable sound of a wolf's howl.

"Dragon's blood!" Treguard gasped. "Sinstar does choose her guards well. That is undoubtedly Vangal Ulf and his pack of White Wolves. The White Wolves are one of the most vicious species of wolves in the entire realm, and the top predator in Winteria. They're pack animals, expert killing machines and can rend the flesh from their prey in minutes. Once they have sunk their sharp teeth into something, they can hang on until death."

Amy could hear this blood-chilling description all too well and her pace quickened, as did her pulse and breathing rate. Her feet hit the frozen ground with shorter and shorter gaps between. However, as fast as she ran she could tell that the White Wolves were still gaining on her. She could hear their panting and snarling getting closer and closer.

Her base flight or fight instincts, having long since kicked in, now dictated her every action, and even though she was effectively blindfolded by the Helmet of Justice, she turned her head to look and see how close the Wolves were to her. This proved to be a bad mistake. Now completely disorientated she stumbled and fell, landing in a heap, her legs tangled in the strap of the knapsack. She reached down and frantically tried to disentangle herself, but almost as soon as she did there was a snarling to her left and she could feel the warm breath on her body, reeking of stale, raw meat.

Despite herself, Amy began to whimper softly and tears ran down her face as the White Wolves circled around her.

"Heeeehehehe... End of your run, dungeoneer," sniggered the sneering, snarling voice of Vangal Ulf, as he paced nearer to her. "You gave me and my pack a fair hunt, but it all ends *now*."

Amy held her breath and waited for the wolves to tear her to pieces, just hoping it would be a quick end. Vangal Ulf sneered and paced around her some more. Amy whimpered and the wolves bayed and moved in for the kill, but suddenly one of them let out a howl of pain and thrashed about, bounding

around and crashing into the others, causing chaos in the pack.

"What's wrong with you?" Vangal snarled, then he saw the reason why. Sticking out of the wolf's left hind thigh was a metal crossbow bolt.

"Who did that?" Vangal growled.

"I did, Vangal Ulf," came a response in a voice, which - even though Amy knew it was coming from someone who had just saved her life - actually made her blood run cold and the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

"Guys...." she said softly, "I don't know if I like the sound of this person..."

"Just be thankful you can't see him like we can," one of the advisors said. "It's the bloody Grim Reaper!"

"And that's to say nothing of his eyes," the youngest one added.

"What about them?" Amy asked.

"One's emerald green, the other's ice blue... and they are the eyes of a killer."

"Your advisors are good judges of character, Amy," Treguard intoned, "for your 'saviour' is in fact one of this realm's worst killers. He's called Leytan, but is often known as 'The Ice Killer' and, like Lady Mercury and Midnight, he's a member of the group of renegades who have been seemingly stalking your path throughout your quest."

Amy then heard Vangal Ulf growl again, but it wasn't as confident a growl as it had been before. "You..." he seethed.

"You are not welcome here, Vangal Ulf. My blood kin exiled you from South Winteria for your crimes, a mercy I do not think you deserved. If it had been my choice, I'd have had you hung, drawn and quartered."

Vangal growled. "Fine talk coming from a killer like you, *Half-Breed*."

Amy then heard a metallic twang and another yelp from the wolves. "A killer I may be, Vangal Ulf... but I'm not a bloodthirsty brute like you. Now you and your pack have to the count of eleven to leave South Winteria, or I'll start culling you. One... two..."

Vangal and his pack tried to stare Leytan down but he simply kept counting, and then the battle of wills ended suddenly as Vangal's pack took to their heels and fled, leaving just him.

"Cowards!" Vangal snarled. "You'll pay for this one day, *Half-Breed*."

Again there was a click of a crossbow and a snarl from Vangal.

"The next one won't miss," the voice of Leytan said in a very deadly tone.

Vangal gnashed his jaws before he turned on his heels and fled. The wolves gone, Leytan turned his attention to Amy.

"Now then... as for you," he said approaching her. "First... give me your hand and let me help you up, little miss."

Amy, noticing his voice had softened somewhat, tentatively let him take her hand and help her up. Leytan looked her over. "You know who I am, I take it, Miss Amy?"

"Y-yes... how do you know who I am, Leytan?" she asked, trying to be polite.

Leytan laughed softly. "I believe it was you who helped my Lady to find me."

Amy nodded, realising he meant Lady Mercury.

"For that you have my thanks. But I should tell you, the Powers That Be are

not really welcome here in South Winteria any more than the Opposition is. My blood kin, the Crown Princess, prefers to stay out of such matters. However, I see you carry one of her symbols... so she may let you pass. Just be polite and pay the proper respect due when you meet her. Now, Miss Amy... I bid you adieu and good luck in this the final leg of your quest."

This said, Leytan bowed and before Amy could respond, he had turned and disappeared back into the hazy white that was the land of Winteria, which lay sprawled out in front of her.

Amy took a few moments to recover from the ordeal she had just endured - not only the chase and brush with death by Vangal Ulf and his vicious pack of White Wolves, but also her brief but blood-chilling encounter with Leytan, which had left her nerves seriously jangled. She didn't move until her pulse had calmed down, the adrenalin had stopped flowing through her veins and her breathing and heart rate had returned to normal.

Once she felt calm again she set off into South Winteria. As she walked, the surroundings became more and more barren until she was surrounded by nothing but snow, ice and frost. After a little while, she spoke.

"Guys... I know it's kind of stating the obvious... but it's freezing cold here."

"Not surprising, Amy," the male advisor said. "The whole area looks like the Antarctic. It wouldn't be a shock if you were to encounter Captain Oats or Ernest Shackleton at any moment."

Almost as soon as he had said this a figure blundered into sight, wildly swinging what was unquestionably an old-fashioned blunderbuss from side to side.

"Confound and blast it all!" the figure raged. "Where the devil is that blessed creature? I know it went this way... Huh! Who the blazes are you? Some confounded observer from the lodge? I bally well told you lot, thank you for the offer but I don't need some wet-behind-the-ears rookie slowing

down the hunt!"

Amy was unsure what exactly was going on. "Er, guys?"

"Amy, don't do anything. You've come across some kind of rambling buffoon with a gun!" the lead advisor instructed.

Treguard chuckled and shook his head. "This gentleman is Sir Winchester Holmyard, a member of a distinguished family whose name carries considerable weight in the hunting community, and it would seem he is on a hunt at the behest of one of the realm's many hunting lodges."

"Amy, you'd better tell the benighted fool who you are," the lead advisor suggested.

"My apologies for startling you, Sir," Amy said politely. "I can assure you I'm not with any hunting lodge. I'm merely a dungeoneer on a quest - my name's Amy."

Sir Winchester, who was dressed in a ridiculously bulky fur coat, lowered his blunderbuss and squinted at Amy. "Bless me, it is a dashed female dungeoneer. You're a rare species to find in this level, my lady. Not many dungeoneers of your gender make it this far, or so I'm told."

Amy wasn't quite sure how to respond to this. "Thank you, Sir Winchester," she settled on, deciding that in truth his comment was a compliment about her ability to make it this far.

"Ah, you know who I am? Well, of course you do!" he said before Amy could reply. "After all, who doesn't know the name of the Holmyard family? We're the first family of Big Game Hunting, don't you know!"

Amy nodded, not wishing to offend a man with a gun.

"Yes," Sir Winchester continued, "I come from a long, illustrious line of

hunters... why, my great-great grandfather Sir Cuthbert Montague Holmyard was famous for catching sixteen White Tigers in one day's hunt on the Ulmabango River, and my great-great-great grandfather Captain Malvo Horatio Cosby-Smyth Holmyard once tracked and captured a vicious Gabbajuju Terror Bird for two months and a day, surviving on just a flask of water and a packet of mints, and the stories I could tell you about my Great Uncle Viscount Morris Hubert Drexler Holmyard and his legendary hunts for the Two Killer Niffleswitcher Cats of Grallmell Quay..."

"So are you on a hunt right now?" Amy quickly asked, wishing to avoid hearing about the man's full family tree.

"Huh? Oh, appserlutly young lady, I jolly well am on a hunt. I've been commissioned by the hunting lodge in Bruin - it's run by an old friend of mine, George Bingham Rawler - splendid chap. Well, Bing said to me, he said, 'Winchester, old boy, you know what would go well on the old lodge's mantelpiece? The Horn of a Red Speckled Elbermung."

This caused the advisors to share a knowing look.

"Well, those cunning little devils reside only in this godforsaken place, far away from civilised men, a well-stocked wine cellar and finely laid cheeseboard," Sir Winchester continued. "So here I am with my trusty old blunderbuss and some piffling ENTRAP spell that the lodge gave me, but as my old father used to say, 'Never trust magic to do a job when you can just blast it'. Only I can't seem to find the blessed creature! I thought I'd found its trail but I think the little blighter might have given me the ruddy run around!"

"Amy," the lead advisor said, "tell him you have a Red Speckled Elbermung Horn you'd be willing to trade if he'd like."

"Sir Winchester," Amy said conversationally, "I believe I've found a Red Speckled Elbermung Horn and I'd be willing to trade with you."

Sir Winchester looked at her. "Let me see, young lady."

Amy offered him the horn. Sir Winchester took a monocle from his coat pocket, placed it to his eye and peered at the horn, studying it closely.

"Well, I'll be jiggered! It is indeed a Red Speckled Elbermung Horn... and it's in a real bang up state!" He replaced the monocle. "And you say you'd be willing to trade it with me?"

Amy nodded.

"Of course, it would be just between us, our little secret, what," Sir Winchester said. "After all, it wouldn't be good for my family name if it was found I'd failed to actually bag the beast myself - there's generations of the Holmyard name on the line, you understand."

"Of course, Sir Winchester, you have my word that I will never tell anyone of our little bargain," Amy assured him.

"Excellent - what a spiffin' good sport you are, Amy. Now, what would you like in return for that horn? I'm afraid I don't have anything of much monetary value... I could perhaps give you my patronage to get into any hunting lodge of your choice in the realm - the backing of my family name would guarantee you membership."

"No thank you, Sir Winchester, though I'm honoured by the offer..." Amy said. "But I would trade you this horn for the ENTRAP spell you mentioned before, as I'm sure it could be of use to me in my quest."

Sir Winchester beamed. "Help yourself, my dear young lady - like I said, I've no real use for the blessed thing; never held with all this fancy magic use in hunting."

Sir Winchester delved into his pocket and produced a small scroll. "Here you go, my dear."

Amy took the small scroll and handed over the horn.

"Many thanks to you, young Amy," Sir Winchester said. "Now I must bid you good day and good luck in your quest."

This said, he bent down, took Amy's hand and kissed it before walking off, talking to himself about what a fine, upstanding young lady she was.

Amy giggled to herself - she thought Sir Winchester was a nice man... a little bit of a stuffed-shirt nit, but a nice one. "Well, guys, what do I do now?"

The advisors discussed whether they should read the scroll now or wait.

"Remember, team, unless told otherwise you can obtain a spell simply by reading the scroll upon which it is written," Treguard counselled them.

"Amy, open the scroll up," the lead advisor said.

Amy did as instructed, and almost instantaneously she felt a warm, tingly sensation in her body as the magic entered her being. The advisors wrote the spell down.

"Okay, Amy you can leave the scroll," the male advisor said.

Amy placed it on the ground by her feet and pressed onwards, deeper into Winteria. She found an elf portal and went through it. As she was doing so, she felt an odd sensation as if someone was helping her to dress. When she emerged and the team caught sight of her, she got her answer as to what she had just felt.

"Amy, you seem to have acquired a cloak from somewhere!" the lead advisor exclaimed in surprise.

Treguard laughed slightly. "Surely, team, you did not think that even in this

most inhospitable of environments, the Powers That Be did not still retain some small measure of control through which we could at least offer a small amount of aid to Amy? That cloak should protect her from the worst of Winteria's harsh climate. It would be unwise to dawdle, however..."

The mysterious appearance of the cloak explained, the advisors turned their attention to scanning Amy's surroundings for anything of use. They saw one orange, which they guided her to and she picked up and placed in her knapsack. They were about to move off when they heard a trumpet sound and horses approaching, but before they could react, another sound rang out - the sound of a bell chiming.

"Warning, team, temporal disruption is imminent... Oh, temporal disruption is complete," Treguard said, seeing that the advisors were already frozen. "We really do need to invest in a more accurate early warning system..."

PUZZLE PAGE

Lego Nightmare III

There have always been two great passions in my life - Nightmare is one, and Lego is the other. My extensive Lego collection dates from 1979 to the present day, and I have used a few carefully selected pieces and minifigures to recreate some scenes from Nightmare, thus combining my two passions! Unfortunately, the pictures were taken with a disposable camera of doubtful quality and are very blurry, but I'm sure you'll get the basic idea!

Which dungeoneer has just entered Wolfenden to find a locked chest in which Elita is imprisoned?

- a) Chris IV
- b) Chris III
- c) Chris II

d) Chris I



Answer: a)

EASTERN PROMISE

By Rosey Collins

Part 1 of 3

In a tavern not far from the port of Basra, a crowd had gathered around a single table. Only one man sat alone, his back to the scene, waiting for the barmaid to tear herself away from the storyteller and refill his tankard.

He looked up as, suddenly, a woman pulled out a chair and sat down opposite him. With a facetious look, she asked him, "You don't wish to listen to the tales of Sinbad the Sailor?"

The man snorted. "Sinbad is nothing but a gloater."

"He has quite a reputation, I hear," said the woman. "Who are you, then?"

"My name is Nemanor," he said. "First mate aboard the *Atabia*."

The woman raised her eyebrows. "A fishing vessel?"

"People have to eat," he said shortly. "Who are you?"

"I am no one. You know, you are right about Sinbad. He is a fine adventurer, but a very vain storyteller."

Again, Nemanor snorted. "Half the men in this place could fight sea serpents and rocs and karkadanns and all the monsters of the world, if they had so fine a vessel as his. We cannot all have Sinbad's good fortune."

"How true." The woman leaned forward and put her chin in her hand. "So, you would like to be -?"

She was cut off as the wooden wall behind her suddenly shattered. A monstrous beak crashed into the tavern, and lunged for the woman as an eagle might lunge at the belly of a rodent. Nemanor leapt up in surprise and alarm. The woman shrieked, and leapt onto the table.

"Oh no, not now!" she cried, drawing a curved dagger from the belt at

her waist.

"That won't help you against those things," said Nemanor, drawing his sword. "Get out of here!"

"Why?" She turned on him angrily. "You think a girl can't handle a few - ahh!"

She leapt off the table as the giant beak advanced further into the inn, stabbing her in the small of the back. There followed a huge black face and feathered body. The animal was stooping, snapping at the woman. When it rose to its full height, it shattered the roof. Nemanor looked up, and saw that three more giant birds were circling overhead.

"What are these things?" said Nemanor, backing away as the huge black bird advanced upon him.

The woman clicked her tongue in reproach. "What do you think they are?"

"I... I think they're rocs!" Nemanor wanted to look behind him, but he had to keep his eyes on the roc. "What's that wretched Sinbad doing? He's supposed to have faced these things before."

The woman laughed. "Surely you're not going to rely on Sinbad."

Nemanor swiped at the great roc with his sword as it lunged either side of him, snapping at the woman.

"They're after *you*?" said Nemanor.

"Clearly."

"Why?"

"No time," said the woman. "Kill it! I must go."

Nemanor glanced sideways, only to see that she had vanished. He barely had time to wonder about this before the roc lunged at him again. Nemanor ducked underneath it, wrapped himself around its ankle and began to climb up its leg. The roc turned round and round, pecking at itself in confusion, brushing aside tables and chairs and walls as it went.

Finally Nemanor reached the top of the leg, and plunged his sword into the bird's flesh. The roc let out a deafening squawk, and then began to peck at itself more furiously. Nemanor pulled his sword out of the creature's belly and, as the head lunged forward once again, aimed at a huge black eye. The creature let out an agonised squawk, and then fell to the ground. Nemanor leapt from its leg just in time to avoid being crushed by

the roc's great weight.

Looking around him, he saw scattered tables and chairs, and one remaining wall. Several yards away, Sinbad was single-handedly fighting two rocs, while another still circled overhead. Scowling, Nemanor turned and made for the docks.

CLASSIC QUEST

Series 5

Quest: The Cup.

Dungeoneer: Catherine Croucher.

Advisors: Rayleen, Alison and Fay.

Home town: Liphook, Hampshire.

Team score: 3½ out of 10.

Catherine's somewhat unremarkable team kicked off series 5 for us, and helped to introduce us to a whole new style of Nightmare gameplay... and that's all they did do, really!

Level One: Smirkenorff makes his first appearance as he takes Catherine on a lengthy flight, after which she finds herself in the Wolfglade. At the charcoal burner's camp, Brother Mace is playing cards with Sylvester Hands. After some coaxing, Mace informs Catherine that she is on the path towards the village of Wolfenden, and tasks her with delivering a bag of gold to a merchant by the name of Julius Scaramonger. Exiting through the portal in the hovel, Catherine arrives in the bustling market village and is immediately approached by Julius. After trying to get her to sell him the quest equipment, Julius accepts the bag of gold and gives Catherine a spyglass in return, before directing her down the street towards the Gateway Inn.

Once inside the inn, Pickle suggests that Catherine tries using the spyglass,

and Treguard suggests that this might be achieved by holding it in front of the eye shield - a significant moment in Nightmare history indeed! We then see Lord Fear for the first time, although he doesn't reveal any useful information on this occasion - it really is just a brief introduction to a very significant character: *"That 'gentleman' we just encountered at long range is Lord Fear."* - **Treguard**. Back in the greenwood Gwendoline makes her first appearance, as she asks the team a quick tree-related question and then gives them the password for level one - Saracen.

The first appearance of a blocker is quick to follow, and the password gets rid of it pretty quickly. Catherine then arrives in the Descender, and after a lot of coaxing she asks it to move, although an instruction far less specific than later teams will need ("Can you move, please?") is all that's required to entice the device to descend to level two. This level one, then, has not really been a challenge for the team, but more a chance for us to get used to the new style of the show, and meet most of the new characters and settings.

Level Two: Catherine ascends a brick staircase, emerging into a room where Hordriss is waiting for her. After a brief conversation (which mainly serves to inform us that he is now a wizard rather than a warlock) Hordriss charges Catherine with finding a sphinx bone for him, and rewards her with a mysterious box containing a so-called "weapon" to use against Opposition forces. In the very next chamber, Skarkill makes his first appearance (along with Grippa and Rhark, of course) and the box is opened, unleashing Pixel. Skarkill and the two goblins quickly run off as they are mercilessly bitten by the grouchy pixie, then Catherine has to placate her with a few pleasantries.

Pixel offers to stick around in case her services are required again, so Catherine continues to carry her inside the box. The first ever causeway follows, and Pixel proves herself useful once again by revealing the key to crossing it safely - don't be offensive. Despite this clear clue, however, the team's directing skills just aren't up to the task, and Catherine is soon plummeting to her doom. (This is the first time of two in this series that a dungeoneer falls off a causeway whilst carrying Pixel, who obviously was never all that bothered by the experience, thanks to her wings.)

Summary: This was very much a coast through level one to introduce us to the new series (and with it the concepts of the Powers That Be, the Opposition, the village of Wolfenden and spyglasses) that didn't ask too much of the girls, and then as soon as they were required to wake up a bit, they quickly stumbled.

DRAGON CLAW

By Ricky Temple

The news of Rio and Zyssa's assassination had spread like wildfire throughout not only the Powers That Be, but throughout the ranks of the Opposition and the criminal underworld. One person who was particularly hard hit was the warrior-thief Stiletta, whose last contact with Zyssa had been less than friendly. She was now sitting on the edge of the bed in her room at a small inn, looking sadly down at her feet. Her eyes were moist with tears. There was a gentle knock at the door, which then gently and slowly opened. Stiletta looked up.

It was her lover, Drago Lestrade. He didn't speak; he just looked at her, his face betraying his own raw emotions about the situation. Stiletta got up from the bed and walked over to him. She stood looking at him, then suddenly her hands clenched into fists and she lashed out, slapping him hard across the face.

"Stiletta, what the...?" Drago said in shock at her attack.

"WAS THAT YOU AND THE OTHERS?!" she yelled at him.

"Was what me and..."

"DID YOU KILL THEM?" Stiletta yelled, her voice almost a hysterical scream. "DID I CAUSE THEIR DEATHS?!"

She was now visibly shaking. Drago grabbed her arms and held her still.

"Stiletta!" he said firmly, looking her in the eyes. "WE did NOT kill them; YOU did NOT cause their deaths. Leytan and some of the others went there to talk to them - even offer to turn ourselves in to prove our innocence in this hijacking - but by the time they got there, both of them had already been killed."

Stiletta looked deep into his eyes. Her breathing was irregular and her body was still shaking. Then her head dropped and she slumped against Drago, her body now drained of all energy.

"I'm sorry, my little dragon," she said softly.

"It's okay, my beautiful thief," Drago said. "I know you were fond of Zyssa."

Stiletta began sobbing. "I had a fight with her," she said. "The last time we'll ever see each other... and we had a fight!"

Drago nuzzled and stroked her hair. "Stiletta," he said after a while.

"Yes, Drago?"

"We're still going to need your help. We've got to find the real hijackers and it's a safe bet that when we find them, we'll more than likely have found Rio and Zyssa's killers."

Stiletta composed herself and nodded. "I'll do all I can, Drago - both for your sake and for Rio and Zyssa's... it's their funeral tomorrow."

"I'll leave you to grieve," Drago said and turned to leave, but Stiletta

grabbed his arm.

"Stay with me, Drago... please," she said softly.

Drago turned and looked at her. Stiletta kissed him.

"Please, my little dragon - I can't be alone tonight."

Drago nodded and kissed her back.

Early the next morning, Stiletta slid slowly out from both Drago's arms and the bed, got dressed and set off to the town to attend the funeral. It was midday when she arrived and the funeral was just starting. She stayed towards the back and was one of the last to leave, but before she left she made sure to pass by Zyssa's coffin. As she did so, she gently stroked her hand over it.

"I'm so sorry, Zyssa," she said quietly.

As she left, she caught a glimpse of another figure. Her face was mostly cloaked by a hood, but the green of her uniform showing through from under her disguise - as well as the pain and loss Stiletta saw in the figure's eyes as she caught sight of them for one fleeting moment - told her who it was.

What neither Stiletta nor Gloriana saw was what happened after the funeral. The two coffins were loaded onto the horse-drawn hearse to be taken (ostensibly) to the cemetery. However, once out of sight the hearse turned off down a side road and instead headed to a small seaport. Upon arrival, the coffins were offloaded and taken onto a waiting ship, *The Manco*, which then set sail.

Among the crew of the ship were some people whose uniforms designated them as Dungeon Rangers, and as the ship left port one of the Rangers went to the Captain's cabin and knocked on the door.

"Enter," came the response.

The Ranger opened the door. Inside the cabin, along with the Captain, were Chief Dungeon Ranger Calwain and the Powers That Be Agent and half-witch Ariel Martinez.

The Ranger saluted them both. "They're aboard, sir."

"Good... thank you, Ranger Malk," Calwain said, and got up from the desk.

Ariel rose from the couch and followed Calwain and the Captain out. They went down to the cabin below, where the two coffins had been placed, along with some Dungeon Rangers on guard. The guards saluted Calwain as he, Ariel and the Captain entered.

"Okay," Calwain said to the guards, "open them up and let's get them out of there."

The guards got some crowbars and set to work on the coffins, prying the lids open. As they were doing this, Ariel produced a bag of herbs from her robes. The first lid to crack open was the one on Rio's coffin. Immediately, Ariel knelt down beside the coffin and helped the guards remove the splintered remains of the lid. She then pressed the bag of herbs to Rio's face. After a few moments, he spluttered and coughed and tried to sit up.

"Take it easy, Rio," Ariel said. "The effects of the death freeze will wear off soon."

Just then, the lid on Zyssa's coffin was broken open. Ariel immediately went over to it and administered the herbs to her as well. Rio lay still as he felt the feeling in his body return and his vision - which had been a mass of blurred colours - focused once more. He saw Calwain and the Captain. He sat up and groggily saluted Calwain, who returned the salute. Rio then turned to the Captain.

"Requesting permission to come aboard, sir."

The Captain smiled and nodded. "Permission granted, Ranger Bolt."

"Thank you, sir." Rio got out of the coffin and stretched.

"Any ill effects, Bolt?" Calwain asked.

"No, sir... just a little woozy still."

Calwain nodded in approval. "Well, once you and Ranger Silverdale are fully recovered, I'll brief you in Captain Therbeck's cabin."

As Calwain left, Rio turned his attention to Zyssa, who was now fully conscious again and was starting to try and sit up. He took her hands and helped her out of the coffin.

"Rio," she said in a dazed voice, "I feel drunk. Did I have too much to drink last night?"

Rio laughed. "No, Zyssa - just the effects of the drug wearing off."

"Drug?" Zyssa said, shaking her head. Then she noticed the coffins. "Who are they for?"

"Well, they were for us," Rio said, mildly amused by Zyssa's confusion.

"Huh?" Zyssa said in shock. "Us?"

"Yes, Zyssa... remember the plan to fake our deaths and the arrows tipped with the death freeze?"

"Typical Zyssa Silverdale, forgetting your own funeral!" Ariel said with a laugh.

"Ariel?" Zyssa turned and saw her friend.

"Hello, Zyssa," Ariel said with smile. "Welcome back from beyond."

Zyssa shook her head and closed her eyes. "You and me were in the hut, Rio... and then... the arrows... we were both shot!" She looked at Rio. "But... we knew it was coming."

Rio nodded, and Zyssa concentrated hard as her mind cleared.

"Because... because it was all set up to throw the Opposition off so we could carry out this mission!" she said with a smile.

Rio nodded. "Good girl! Give it a few more moments and your memory should be back fully."

Zyssa nodded, then tilted her head to one side. "Rio..." she said. "Were we alone in the hut? Because I have a memory of at least two other people there with us."

Rio nodded. "Yes, me too... just before I blacked out I'd swear there were people moving around in the hut."

"Well, it can't have been the militiamen," Ariel said. "You were already under by the time they arrived."

Rio shrugged his shoulders. "Well, whoever it was, they were fooled just like the militiamen."

Ariel nodded, but Zyssa was still pondering this fact.

A little while later, the three of them were in the Captain's cabin being briefed by Calwain. "While you two were under the effects of the death freeze, some new information came to light."

Calwain reached into the drawer of the desk and brought out a letter. He handed it to Rio to look at. Rio saw it was topped with the royal symbol of the House of Shar; he proceeded to read it.

Operations in the border area were successful. The Crown Princess has now given orders to proceed with the rest of the moves and will be there to supervise them herself while she attends the trade convention.

Rio handed the scroll back to Calwain. "Seems like some pretty damning evidence, sir," he said.

Calwain nodded. "And what's more, Ranger Bolt, our spy's reported that this trade convention the Crown Princess is attending is taking place in the port of Massak, which is very close to the border with Powers That Be territory... and also one of the few settlements in the area of South Winteria over which the Dragon Claw was last spotted. Therefore, based on all this new evidence, the decision has been made to take the Crown Princess Deanery's Shar in to Powers That Be custody under Protocol 7 while she is within easy reach."

Rio and Zyssa exchanged worried glances; they knew this wasn't the first time that Protocol 7 had been enacted but it still made them nervous. Protocol 7 was a Powers That Be law which required the approval of Treguard himself to enact, allowing any of his forces to take into custody anyone believed to pose either an immediate or potentially serious threat without any solid evidence, and to hold them indefinitely. It also removed from them the protection usually afforded prisoners of war or political prisoners... in fact a person detained under Protocol 7 effectively ceased to exist.

"I'm assuming we have a plan, sir," Ariel said sombrely. "I doubt Madame Shar would come quietly under normal circumstances, let alone when she realises she's being disappeared into the Protocol 7 prison system."

Calwain nodded. "Quite so, Agent Martinez. Captain Therbeck here is going

to dock in the port at Massak, and it will be up to you three to ensure that the Crown Princess *graces us with her presence* for the trip back."

Captain Jax "Armada" Therbeck was - for someone of his rank - a young man, at just twenty-seven years of age. However, he had made quite a reputation for himself as a Powers That Be aligned mariner and privateer in his relatively brief career, including the time he had managed to sail The Manco, undetected, into an Opposition port, then destroyed a good proportion of an Opposition Armada fleet, and escaped with his ship totally unscathed. This is what had led to his nickname.

Rio, Zyssa and Ariel nodded in greeting to him. He was a strapping young man with a roguish charm and good looks which were only enhanced by the fact his right eye was covered by an eye-patch. Running down his right cheek was a long scar, clearly the result of a sword duel. All this - along with his sandy brown hair and one brown eye - added up to a handsome, roguish man who, unsurprisingly, had as much of a reputation for his success with women as he did in his career as a privateer; so much so that not only the unspoken-for Ariel but even Zyssa couldn't help but give him a flirty little smile as they nodded in greeting. Rio, seeing this, gave Zyssa a subtle, quizzical look.

Zyssa just smiled and shrugged slightly. "If I may, sir," she said to Calwain.

"Yes, Ranger Silverdale?"

"I think I may have an idea for how we could get Crown Princess Deanery's Shar aboard this ship... with your permission to implement it?"

Calwain nodded. "Granted, Ranger Silverdale... unless either Agent Martinez or Ranger Bolt has any suggestions?"

Both Ariel and Rio shook their heads.

"Well then, I will leave it to you to organise your plan of action. If any of you require me, I shall be in my cabin." Calwain stood up from the desk. Rio,

Zyssa, Ariel and Therbeck saluted him as he left.

"Well, Zyssa, I suppose that means you're now in charge of this operation," Ariel teased Zyssa.

Zyssa smirked. "And don't either of you forget it!" she retorted, and then turned to Therbeck. "How long until we dock in Massak, Captain Therbeck?"

"We should arrive in the early hours of tomorrow morning, Ranger Silverdale - about nine hours from now," Therbeck informed her.

Zyssa nodded. "And have preparations been made for Her Highness's transport back?"

"Yes, Ranger Silverdale, her cabin has been appropriately fitted."

"Thank you, Captain Therbeck, and please..." Zyssa said, before adding with a smile, "just call me Zyssa."

Therbeck returned her smile. "Okay... Zyssa."

Rio rolled his eyes. "So... Zyssa," he said, laying a hand on her shoulder in a not too subtle gesture, causing Ariel to smirk in amusement at Rio's display of jealousy, "you say you have a plan?"

"Yes," Zyssa said, and looked at Ariel. "Ariel, can you use your magic to make a person look different?"

Ariel nodded.

"Can you make me look like someone in particular?" Zyssa asked.

"As long as you can describe to me what this other person looks like, Zyssa."

Zyssa smiled weakly, and nodded. "Down to the length of her fingernails."

"Who is this person?" Rio asked, confused. "And how will it help us ensnare the Crown Princess?"

Zyssa turned and looked at him, then at Ariel and lastly at Captain Therbeck. "Captain Therbeck... can I trust you to keep a very sensitive secret?"

Therbeck smiled and nodded. "Of course, Zyssa - whatever you say in this cabin stays in here, and you three can just call me Jax."

Zyssa nodded. "Thank you, Jax. Will you two give me the same promise?"

"Of course, Zyssa," Ariel smiled.

"You really need to ask me that, Zyssa?" Rio said, with a raised eyebrow and a wry smile.

"Thank you... all of you," Zyssa said. She closed her eyes for a few moments and took a deep breath, seemingly steeling herself for what she was about to say. "The person I want you to make me look like, Ariel, is called *Gloriana Bernadette*. She's a former *Green Warden* who's now gone rogue and has in the past, according to all known intelligence, worked for *Fire & Ice* in a number of ways, including as emissary to *Deanery's Shar*." She looked at her three companions before she continued. "And she's also my cousin."

"That's who you meant when you were talking in your sleep back in *Glameldal*," Rio said with a sympathetic smile.

Zyssa nodded and looked at all three of them. "If any of you want to disown me as a friend, I'll fully understand and bear you no ill will."

Ariel looked at her, open-mouthed. "Zyssa Silverdale," she said firmly, "why would I disown you just because a relative of yours made a bad choice?"

"I'm not even going to dignify such a silly question with an answer," Rio said.

"It'd be a scurvy poor excuse for a person who'd disown someone simply because of what their kin did of their own volition," said the Captain.

Zyssa smiled. "Thank you," she said softly. "Sorry, but I suddenly feel very sleepy."

"Actually, so do I," Rio confessed.

Ariel nodded. "That's a side-effect of the herbs I used to revive you both. Go on, you two - go to your cabins and to your beds. There's nothing you can do until we arrive in Massak, but I can work on preparing the spell to use on Zyssa to change her appearance."

Rio nodded. He took Zyssa's arms and led her out of the cabin.

"That Zyssa is a very intelligent and very attractive young girl," Therbeck said, staring after her.

Ariel turned and raised an eyebrow. "Yes, she is... and she's also VERY spoken for, or didn't you see it?"

"See what, Miss Martinez?"

Ariel laughed. "Her lover's somewhat jealous laying of a hand on her shoulder."

"You mean...?"

Ariel nodded. "But keep it to yourself, Captain. I'm only telling you so that you don't stray into dangerous waters."

The Manco continued on its way, and into South Winterian territorial waters.

As it did so, elsewhere a meeting between a group of shadowy individuals was underway.

The Chairman of the meeting spoke first. "The reports in regards to Operation Dragon Snow will now be heard, first from the operative in charge of the Winterian side of the operation."

The Winterian operative began to speak. "Phase one of the Winterian side of operations has been completed - Agents 9, 20 and 78 delivered the cargo to the designated area, while Agent 7 has made sure that the Powers That Be received the desired information."

The Chairman nodded. "Now the report from the Dunshelm-Wolfenden sphere of operations."

The requested report was delivered. "In preparation for phase two, Agents 11 and 88 have found and are observing the renegades known as Fire & Ice."

The Chairman smiled and nodded again. "This is all very pleasing news, gentlemen, and I'm delighted to say our client is also very pleased and has agreed that once the final stages of the operation have been completed, the requested payment for our services - exclusive rights to all trade routes in both East and South Winteria - will be granted, and the Wolfenden Trinity will have taken another step towards our ultimate goal."

Some time after a pale, weak sun had started to rise in the bleak, frosty Winterian sky, The Manco slipped into the harbour in the small port of Massak. Almost as soon as the docking process had been completed and The Manco was securely moored, three figures disembarked and disappeared into the town.

"Okay, I think this should be fine," Rio said once he, Zyssa and Ariel had found a secluded place from which to put Zyssa's plan into action.

"I'm ready, Ariel," Zyssa said.

Ariel stepped forward. "Now, Zyssa, I need you to visualise Gloriana and keep her face and physical appearance in your mind as I cast this spell."

Zyssa nodded and closed her eyes. Ariel also closed her eyes and took a few deep, calming breaths. She then opened her eyes again; Rio noticed that the amber tinge of her pupils was now much more evident... in fact it was almost glowing. She then began speaking in Latin as she cast the spell. Rio turned his attention to Zyssa and watched as the spell began to take effect. Her image began to shimmer and distort, slightly at first but it soon got more and more obvious until she appeared to be little more than a human shaped blur of colours. Ariel finished casting the spell and the blur began to fade away. Rio found himself looking at a young lady who was, so it seemed, a stranger to him.

"Has it worked?" Even her voice seemed slightly different, but Rio could tell it was Zyssa speaking.

Zyssa was now slightly taller than she had been before. Her physique was also more noticeably defined, her normally brown, curly hair was now long and blond in colour, her eyes were now fully green and her face had changed. While it was still not exquisitely beautiful, retaining much of the plain beauty of Zyssa's own face, it was now a bit more striking.

Rio nodded. "Yes, it's worked, Zyssa," he smirked, "and if I may say it looks like beauty runs in your family."

Zyssa mockingly frowned and stuck her tongue out.

"Right, I suggest we give it a few hours before we contact the Crown Princess - we'll let her and the rest of the town wake up first," Ariel said.

The other two nodded in agreement.

"Let's just hope the Winterians haven't discovered that the Powers That

Be have broken their spyglass frequency and changed it," Rio said.

Deanery's Shar had always despised trade conferences - they were, in her opinion, the most dreary type of government. She had no intention of changing her position on a number of issues that, she just knew, were going to be once more raised, by some of her advisors who thought her policies unrealistic, local officials looking to better their lot, and petty bureaucrats concerned more with politics than with principals. In her room at a local high-class inn, she was currently preparing herself for what she knew would be a long and fraught day of discussions. There was a knock on her door.

"Enter!" she called out.

The door opened and one of her handmaids entered. She curtsayed to her mistress.

Deanery's nodded in greeting. "Yes, Marilees, what is it?"

"Sorry to disturb you, Your Highness, but your coach and personal guard will be ready in the next half-hour."

"Thank you, Marilees," Deanery's said. "I'll be down shortly."

Marilees curtsayed again and left. Deanery's resumed making her final physical and mental preparations for the day ahead. Just as she was all but ready to go, she became aware of a faint buzzing emanating from one of the dresser drawers. She went over to the dresser and opened the drawer, revealing a golden leaf-covered spyglass. She retrieved it and activated it.

"Yes. Who wishes to contact me?" she said elegantly.

As she watched, the image of a young blond woman appeared in the reflective surface. Deanery's slightly raised an eyebrow - she recognised the lady. She was an associate of her brother, Leytan, and had often acted as a go-between and emissary for them both.

"Yes, Miss Gloriana? To what do I owe this communication?"

The person whom Deanery's took to be the rogue Green Warden Gloriana Bernadette smiled and bowed her head slightly.

"Your Highness, I am contacting you on behalf of your half-brother, Leytan. I need to meet with you on a matter most urgent at the earliest time that would be convenient to you."

Deanery's sighed. On one hand this was a further annoyance to her, but on the other it was a distraction from the much more mundane annoyance of the trade conference. "Very well, Gloriana, I will meet you after the convention, just outside town. I assume you will have protection with you, or will I need to bring my own guards?"

"Oh yes, Your Majesty, there are more of my fellow Fire & Ice here."

Deanery's raised an eyebrow at this. "Oh? Do I take it, then, that you are now a fulltime member of my brother's organisation? The last time we spoke, you told me you were still merely an associate."

"Oh... well, yes, Your Highness, I am now a fully fledged member of Fire & Ice. I shall be waiting for you at the agreed location." This said, Gloriana quickly terminated the communication.

Deanery's turned this unexpected conversation over in her head. Something was nagging at her slightly, but another knock at her door - followed by the soft voice of Marilees - diverted her attention.

"Your Highness, your transport and guards are now ready. Also, a message has come from the local mayor. He would be honoured if you would grant him an audience after the trade convention to discuss some local issues."

Zyssa inhaled deeply. "Dragon's blood," she said, passing the spyglass back to

Ariel, "I nearly gave the game away there!"

"What happened?" Rio asked.

"Turns out *Gloriana* isn't actually a fully fledged Fire & Ice member like I thought, and I nearly put my foot in it there by acting like she was, but I think I managed to blag my way through it, and with any luck Her Royal Highness will be there at the meeting point as planned."

"Let's just hope so," Ariel said.

"We'll also need to think up a convincing tale to tell her to get her to walk into our trap," Rio said.

"I've already got an idea for that," Ariel said with a smile.

Over the next few hours, while Rio, *Zyssa* and Ariel made their final preparations, *Deanery's* had to endure long, tedious sessions of listening to the representatives of the South Winterian merchant profession telling her how her anti-Opposition policies were harming local trade, and how she needed to accept the reality of the situation and open up trade lines with the *Great Mire*, close the border with *Dunshelm* and expel its traders, who were undermining and undercutting the local Winterian traders. All of this, she knew, was either completely untrue or exaggerated. There was also the annual approach by a group who called themselves *Hilderbrand Trade and Export* wanting to open up trade routes through South Winteria. However, something about this group made her uneasy so this, along with the other requests, always led to her curt but polite refusal.

Once this boring ritual had been dispensed with, the traders, merchants, bureaucrats and pro-Opposition advisors had been put in their place and *Deanery's* had listened to the mayor describe some of the local difficulties (which she assured him she would do what she could to sort out), *Deanery's* sent her guards back to the inn and set off for her meeting with - or so she believed - *Gloriana*.

Zyssa, still in the form of *Gloriana*, along with Rio, who was masquerading as the driver, and Ariel, who was concealed within a horse-drawn coach, was currently waiting just outside town. Zyssa pulled her cloak tighter around herself. She was practising the story Ariel had come up with to feed to Deanery's, and hoping the Crown Princess was going to turn up and that her slip-up earlier hadn't caused her to become suspicious, and possibly to have even contacted *Fire & Ice* herself. Just as these worrying thoughts were passing through her mind, she saw - to her relief - the approaching figure of Deanery's Shar.

Deanery's was dressed in a long, flowing fur robe with a fur-lined hood under which one of her tiaras was just visible. Zyssa curtsayed to her as she drew near. Deanery's nodded in greeting.

"Good day to you, Miss *Gloriana*, I trust you are well," Deanery's said.

"Yes thank you, Your Majesty."

"So Miss *Gloriana*, what is it you need to speak with me about? Does my blood kin need my aid in some matter?"

"No, Your Highness, he has acquired some information that he thinks you should have access to. It concerns a possible Powers That Be garrison being stationed on your southernmost border."

Deanery's scowled at this news. "If that is so then Treguard will be receiving a very strong diplomatic rebuke, and getting a reminder of the Treaty of Cormont that our emissaries negotiated... specifically of its clause regarding a demilitarised zone around my kingdom's borders with Dunshelm. Do you have the proof with you, Miss *Gloriana*?"

"No, Your Highness, it is with your brother. He thought it best to keep it with him. I am to take you to him and he will hand it to you personally." Zyssa indicated towards the waiting carriage.

Deanery's nodded and elegantly walked over to the carriage. Zyssa opened the door for her and Deanery's stepped up on to the footstep, dipped her head and entered the carriage. Zyssa made to follow her, but as she started to step into the carriage she seemed to lose her footing, and fell off the footstep before landing on her knees in the snow.

"You should always be careful when entering a carriage, Miss Gloriana," Deanery's said with a slight smile. "Never try to step up into the carriage unless you are a hundred percent sure of your balance on the footstep. Here, let me help you up. You know, Miss Gloriana, I hope you've not picked up any bad drinking habits from my brother and his companions."

'Gloriana' laughed slightly. She took her hand and held it very tightly. "Thank you for the advice... Your Majesty."

At that moment, Deanery's realised that it was no longer Gloriana crouched in front of her. The spell had worn off. Before Deanery's could react, Zyssa slapped a golden coloured manacle on the wrist of the hand she was holding.

"I arrest you in the name of the Powers That Be, Deanery's Shar," Zyssa said matter-of-factly.

Deanery's looked hard at her with a sarcastically sweet smile. "Is that so, child? Clearly you don't know much about Winterians."

Her other hand came up; it was surrounded by a glowing blue aura. "I am sorry, child, but I don't like the idea of being locked up."

However, as she laid her hand on Zyssa's shoulder, she felt someone brushing past her as they jumped out of the carriage. Ariel landed gracefully beside Zyssa and quickly snapped the other manacle on the Princess's wrist. Immediately, the spell was blocked and her Winterian powers drained; it was a major shock to her system, akin to slamming into a solid stone wall. She gasped loudly, her eyes went glassy and then rolled up

into her head, and she slumped forward, unconscious. Ariel and Zyssa caught her.

"Is she okay?" Zyssa asked worriedly, not having expected such an extreme reaction.

Ariel took her pulse. "Yes, she's just unconscious,"

The two then quickly got Deanery's into the coach. The carriage tore through the town, as quickly as possible without appearing suspicious. It arrived at the harbour and the still unconscious Deanery's was offloaded, using a blanket to cover her figure, and The Manco set sail.

Deanery's was placed in a cabin, under guard. It was here - some hours later - that she came to. Groggily, she looked around. "Who dares to treat the Crown Princess of Winteria in such a manner?" she weakly demanded.

One of the guards left the room, leaving just the smiling Ariel Martinez to guard her. "Welcome back, Miss Shar. You are now a guest of the Powers That Be."

Deanery's looked at her. "Is that how you Powers That Be members address someone of royal blood?" she asked.

"Your royal blood, or any claim to it, Miss Shar," a voice said, as the door opened and Calwain came in, "is now irrelevant. You are no longer the Crown Princess or ruler of South Winteria. You are a prisoner of the Powers That Be."

Deanery's smirked. "To take away all of me that is royal, you would have to drain me of all my blood... from the first to the last drop."

Deanery's noticed that her original clothes had been removed, and replaced by clothes resembling those of a lowly merchant. She looked coldly at Calwain. "Who undressed me? If, while I was unconscious, one of your male

Rangers took advantage of me..."

"Don't worry, Miss Shar," Ariel said. "Myself and Zyssa undressed you. Your honour was not encroached upon."

"We'll be docking in the next few hours. There you will be offloaded and taken to your temporary new quarters in the dungeon under Dunshelm Castle, where you will stay until Sir Treguard decides what to do with you. Do you understand?" said Calwain.

Deanery's ignored him and lay back down on the bed. "I will, from now on, speak only to Sir Treguard," Deanery's said flatly.

Calwain shrugged and walked out. The return journey passed uneventfully, and the ship docked back in Powers That Be territory as the hour of midnight struck. Deanery's was offloaded without any resistance or protest, even when she was forced to wear a hood over her head. She calmly and elegantly - as if showing contempt and defiance to her captors - walked down the gang plank and into the waiting coach, which took her to Dunshelm. As she was escorted down to the dungeon, Rio, Ariel and Zyssa were congratulating themselves on the successful completion of the first part of this operation.

"Now we just need to get Fire & Ice into custody," Ariel said.

"Well, current intelligence says they've set up camp in the woods just outside the neutral zone," Calwain said to the three.

"I suggest we go in at first light and take them by surprise," Rio said. "Because otherwise there's always the danger they will get wind of the fact we're after them, and simply disperse into their numerous hideouts and safe houses."

Ariel and Zyssa agreed.

"I'll arrange for you to have back-up," Calwain said, and set off to arrange this.

However, all had not gone as smoothly as they thought. From a distance, the arrival of Deanery's Shar and the discussion about Fire & Ice had been observed and heard.

"Oh gosh!" a worried Stiletta said, as she emerged from where she had been hiding. Even though she was suspended from Powers That Be duty, she had still been carrying out her duties for Fire & Ice.

She hurried to her horse, which was hidden nearby, and rode for all she was worth. "I've got to get there before Rio and Zyssa!"

Stiletta now scowled as she thought about how she had shed tears of grief for them. "Those two... they faked their deaths! And now they've arrested Leytan's sister. And I damned well shed tears for them!"

Stiletta rode all night and was just approaching the area where she knew her fellow Fire & Ice members had made camp as the sun was rising in the sky. However, what neither Stiletta nor any other member of Fire & Ice knew was that a third party was already observing the gang's camp.

Meanwhile, unaware of any of this, the members of Fire & Ice were going about their own business. Leytan and Vyrrian Wren were busy cooking their breakfast, Lady Mercury was in one of the tents reading some old magic books, and most of the other members present were still asleep... all except for the group's second-in-command, the former Powers That Be member and shape-shifter, Midnight. She was wandering around the camp, apparently looking for something or someone.

"You lost something, Miss Midnight?" Wren asked her, as he and Leytan kept an eye on a simmering pot of stew.

"Not as such. I'm just wondering where..." Midnight said, her voice suddenly

trailing off as her nose wrinkled. "What on Earth are you two cooking? It smells... odd."

"It's a stew," Wren said noncommittally.

"What kind of stew?" Midnight pressed.

"A stew made from whatever meat, veg and other foodstuff that we had left," Leytan said. "You weren't wandering around just to quiz us about today's grub, were you Midnight?"

"No, I wanted to know if either of you two knew where Jan-Jan was."

"She should be passing by here again soon," Wren said.

"Pardon?" Midnight said, confused.

"She's on guard duty," Leytan explained.

"Guard duty?!" Midnight said, open-mouthed. "You two put her on guard duty? She gets distracted simply by a raindrop falling from a leaf, and you put her on guard duty!"

"She is getting better," Wren protested.

"See for yourself, because here she comes," Leytan said.

Midnight turned and looked in the direction Leytan was pointing. She broke into a smile and had to stifle a laugh. Jan-Jan was 'marching' like a real guard; she was carrying a long stick, which had been carved at one end to have a very sharp point, and had one of the gang's cooking pots on her head as a helmet.

"Aww, she looks so cute!" Midnight gushed.

"Cute?" Wren said, and turned to look at Jan-Jan. "We are looking at the same thing, aren't we Midnight?"

Midnight was just about to cuff Wren around the head when Jan-Jan suddenly crouched down, bristling like a wildcat.

"What is it, Jan-Jan?" Midnight asked.

"Horsey-horse coming, Ma-Ma."

The three listened hard.

"She's right," Midnight said, "and whoever it is, they're coming at a gallop."

"Get under cover!" Leytan said, taking command.

Wren grabbed the stew pot and took it with him, while Midnight scooped up Jan-Jan and Leytan doused the fire. They all got out of sight, then waited and watched. Eventually a horse trotted into the small clearing and the rider was instantly recognisable.

"STILET-LET!" Jan-Jan cried gleefully, and bounded out from the bush she and Midnight were hiding behind. The rest followed her out.

"Stiletta, you look like you've been dragged through a moat!" Midnight said. "Whatever is the matter?"

Stiletta - tired, worn out and cold - shook her head, dismounted from her horse and tried to speak. At first, due to the lack of sleep and the effects of the cold on her body, her words were garbled. She concentrated hard and she finally managed to say coherently, "They're coming for you... they're coming for you all... right now!"

"Who are?" Leytan demanded.

"Rio and Zyssa and a whole group of Rangers!"

"Stiletta! Rio Bolt and Zyssa Silverdale are both dead! Me and Leytan saw their bodies," Wren said in disbelief.

Stiletta shook her head frantically. "No, no, it was a sham! The whole wretched thing - the assassination, the funeral... everything! They faked their deaths! And Leytan... they've got your sister - they've arrested Deanery's Shar! I saw them bringing her to Dunshelm in chains, and now they're coming to arrest all of you!"

Leytan's face went very hard and cold.

"Well, if they come here they'll find us not as easy a catch as they may think!" a voice said from behind the group. Lady Constance Isabel Mercury had joined them.

"Midnight, you get Stiletta a blanket so she can warm up," Leytan said, shepherding the shivering Stiletta over to Midnight. "Isabel, wake the others up. When they come we'll put on a show of strength, and hopefully that will allow us to negotiate with them. I'd rather this not turn into any kind of conflict, but if it does... we only wound; no fatalities."

They all set about rousing their comrades, unaware that the whole time they were being watched. Before too long, all the members of Fire & Ice and their associates who were present in the camp had been roused. As well as Leytan, Wren, Midnight, Jan-Jan, Lady Mercury and Stiletta, also present were Drago Lestrade, Temperance Warfield (an Opposition defector), Gloriana Bernadette and the seven-foot Amazon warrior Amazona. They had all just managed to arrange themselves in the best way possible to show off their united strength to the full, except for a now refreshed and warm Stiletta who, after being persuaded to do so by Drago, was hidden away so as to keep her from being revealed as a Fire & Ice double agent, and Midnight, who was hiding with Jan-Jan to keep her out of harm's way.

The gang didn't have long to wait before they heard the sound of approaching horses. The sound of the horses stopped and then after a while, the sound of a group of people moving stealthily through the undergrowth became audible.

Lady Mercury chuckled. "Our guests are coming."

Leytan smiled, then yelled out, "We know you're there, Rangers Bolt and Silverdale... save the attempt at stealth. You two and your backup just come into the clearing slowly, with no weapons drawn!"

The group of twelve Rangers - not including Rio, Zyssa and Ariel - stopped dead in their tracks at this.

Ariel looked at Rio in shock. "How did they know we were coming?"

Zyssa, unseen by anyone else, scowled and muttered under her breath, "That treacherous bitch!"

"What should we do, sir?" one of the other Rangers asked Rio.

Rio took a deep breath and weighed up the options. "We've no alternative but to do as they say."

"Why can't we just rush them?" an eager junior Ranger said.

"Because we're dealing with the most dangerous group - aside from the Opposition - in this entire realm, and any confrontation is liable to end badly whatever happens!" Zyssa snapped brusquely, rounding on the young Ranger.

"Come on," Rio said. He started to walk towards the clearing; the others followed him.

"Damn!" he muttered, when he saw what was waiting for them on the other side. He had hoped they would only be dealing with Leytan, Wren and Lady

Mercury.

Zyssa also faltered in her step slightly when she emerged into the clearing. However, what caused her to falter was less the odds they were facing and more the accusing, angry stare that Gloriana was giving her for some reason.

Rio refused to be intimidated, however. Standing to his full height, he said clearly, "Leytan, I arrest you and your fellow mercenaries in the name of the Powers That Be. Why don't you just do this the easy way and come along with us quietly?"

Leytan smirked. "Welcome back from the grave. I've got to say, Rio, you and Miss Zyssa look to be in better health than when myself, Wren..." he looked at Zyssa, "and Gloriana saw you, apparently bleeding to death on the floor of Rio's hut."

Zyssa's eyes went wide and she looked at Gloriana, who was still staring a hole through her. Gloriana was almost shaking because her emotions were so strong.

Rio narrowed his eyes. "So that was you we heard moving around in the hut before the death freeze took effect."

"Oh, how cute... the little tin soldier can put two and two together and come up with four," Lady Mercury cooed at Rio in a patronising tone.

"Hush, Isabel. Yes, that was us, Rio. We'd actually come to talk to you two and even offer to turn ourselves in to prove we were innocent of that hijacking... which, by the way, I assume you've come to arrest us for now..." Leytan's face and eyes suddenly went icy cold, and took on a very deadly look. "And why you've arrested my sister."

Rio looked hard at him. "Yes," he said simply.

As this was going on, the shadowy figures observing both groups were

making plans of their own. Ariel, sensing that tensions were getting dangerously high, made a step forward.

"Miss," Wren said warningly, "don't come too close. Our little sniper - Temperance Warfield - is back there in one of those trees with her longbow good and ready."

Ariel stopped in her tracks. "My name is Ariel Martinez, Mr Wren, and I merely wish to offer an alternative solution to this standoff."

"Go ahead, Miss Martinez, we're listening," Midnight called out from her hiding spot, also sensing the danger this situation was posing.

"Just tell us where you hid the Dragon Claw and we'll leave... and you can rest assured that the Crown Princess will also be released."

"A nice little compromise," Lady Mercury snorted. "Except for the one simple fact that all your idiotic Powers That Be Brains can't seem to comprehend. We DIDN'T take it and we DON'T know where it is!"

"Then who took it?" Zyssa said sceptically.

However, before anyone could respond, there was the unmistakable whistle of an arrow zooming through the air. It skimmed over Lady Mercury's head and into the tree.

"Treacherous Powers That Be Scum!" Temperance yelled out, the arrow having just missed her "We meet you under the flag of reason and discussion, and you fire on us!"

She immediately let fly at one of the young Rangers with an arrow of her own, but - honouring Leytan's wishes - she aimed for the Ranger's leg. The young Ranger cried out in pain as the arrow struck him. One of his comrades took aim with his crossbow, and sent a volley towards Fire & Ice

"Back to the trees!" Leytan yelled, and he, Wren, Lady Mercury and Drago all bolted for cover.

The moment he was under cover, Leytan drew his repeater crossbow and sent two bolts slicing through the air towards the Rangers.

"Scatter and return fire!" Rio yelled, and he dived left with Ariel and some of the Rangers, while Zyssa and the rest went right.

The Rio-Ariel group found themselves in the firing line of both Drago's crossbow and Wren's throwing knives, while Zyssa and the Rangers with her were caught in the crosshairs of Leytan's repeater and Gloriana's longbow, while Temperance - from her high perch - had full view of both groups and would bombard them with arrows from above. Anyone brave enough to try and make a break across the clearing would have to get by Lady Mercury's magic, as she cast a spell and two phantom swords appeared, hovering over the clearing. However, due to the confusion, neither side noticed that occasionally some apparently rogue arrows would fly into the battle, seemingly attacking each side in turn.

As Zyssa and her Rangers were returning fire, she noticed someone skulking in the undergrowth just off to the side, away from where Leytan was. She scowled - she knew who it was.

"Cover me!" she said to the other Rangers, and quickly dashed out from her hiding place. She sprinted towards where the figure was crouched. She could hear the ominous humming sound of one of the phantom swords approaching, but she knew she would get to her goal before it reached her. Just as she got to the spot, she sprang forward.

"Oof!" Stiletta gasped, as Zyssa's shoulder struck her in the abdomen.

"WHAT DID I SAY TO YOU?" Zyssa yelled furiously. "WHAT DID I SAY TO YOU, YOU TREACHEROUS BITCH!"

"GET OFF ME!" Stiletta snapped back, and kicked Zyssa hard in the chest to get some distance between them so she could stand up.

But Zyssa was so angry that she didn't feel the kick as much as she normally would have, and she immediately got right back in Stiletta's face. This time she slapped her hard across the face with the back of her hand. Stiletta yelled in pain and anger, and struck Zyssa with a balled-up fist to the stomach. Zyssa dropped to her knees, winded, but using her hand-to-hand combat training, she managed to scoop Stiletta's legs out from under her and cause her to fall into a heap. Before Stiletta could recover, Zyssa was on her again, trying to throttle her.

Midnight, meanwhile, was crouched down behind an old fallen tree, clutching Jan-Jan to her. Jan-Jan was trembling.

"Ma-Ma, make it stop!" she yelled out in fright.

"I can't, Jan-Jan," Midnight said, trying to sound as calm as she could, and stroking Jan-Jan's hair. "Just close your eyes, little one, and think good thoughts. It'll all be over soon." She added mentally to herself, "One way or the other."

Rio was desperately trying to think of a stratagem that could bring this battle to an end, as he and his fellow Rangers returned fire from Drago and Wren while trying to dodge Temperance's deliveries of potential death from above. He'd seen Zyssa's mad dash and headlong dive into the bushes on the far side of the clearing, but he had no idea what she had been playing at. He also knew that he and his fellow Rangers couldn't hold out much longer; they weren't trained for this type of fight. They were trained for battlefield combat, not this guerrilla warfare that was Fire & Ice's specialty.

The shadowy figures looked on in delight as the mayhem continued. Zyssa and Stiletta were still fighting each other in the bushes, but now Stiletta had got the upper hand and - using her height advantage - had muscled Zyssa off her and was trying to pin her to the ground

"And to think I cried for you when I thought you were dead!" she yelled at Zyssa. "You heartless wench! Did you not even for one moment stop and think of the effect faking your death would have on the people who care about you?"

"Oh, I'm touched, Stiletta," Zyssa retorted. "Were they crocodile tears... or were they tears of guilt?"

"YOU HARPY! They were tears of grief for a friend!" Stiletta screamed, and slapped Zyssa across the face. "And what about Gloriana? Your own cousin! She found what she thought was your lifeless body! Do you know what that did to her? How upset she was? It was like her soul had been torn from her body!"

"Don't you dare bring my family into this!" Zyssa yelled.

She grabbed Stiletta's face and clawed at it. Stiletta shrieked in pain as Zyssa's sharp nails drew blood. But just then Zyssa felt someone else grab her by the shoulders, and before she knew it she had been wrenched off Stiletta and hoisted high into the air.

It was Amazona, the giantess. She held Zyssa over her head, almost eight feet from the ground. Stiletta scampered away.

"You're good at cat-fighting, but let's see how you deal with a real warrior!" Amazona said to Zyssa.

The giantess let her fall to the ground. Zyssa landed in a crumpled heap, all the wind knocked from her body. She rolled out of the way of Amazona's boot as it came crashing down, aiming for her head. However, she couldn't dodge the Amazon's massive hand as it clamped around her throat and lifted her off the ground. Zyssa's legs kicked as if trying to walk on air, and she struggled to breathe as Amazona held her by her throat alone. Amazona then effortlessly threw Zyssa as if she were a ragdoll.

She landed almost two feet away. This time she couldn't avoid Amazona's boot as it kicked her in the side. Zyssa gasped as the air again rushed out of her body, her lungs feeling like they were on fire. Amazona picked Zyssa up, holding her arms to her sides in a vicelike grip.

"You're tougher than I thought," said Amazona. "I would have expected you to be unconscious or possibly even dead after that beating."

"Why don't you just finish me?" Zyssa said, trying to sound defiant even though her voice was incredibly pained.

Amazona smiled broadly and laughed. "You think me a barbarian? There is no honour to be had from killing so worthy a foe when she cannot defend herself."

Amazona let Zyssa drop, though not from as great a height this time. "Go back to your friends... maybe we will meet again someday and resume this little scuffle, but until then, farewell Zyssa Silverdale... you have my respect."

This said, Amazona turned and walked back into the woods, leaving the battered Zyssa to ponder what on Earth had just happened. Meanwhile, the fire fight was getting more and more intense.

"Squire!" Wren called out to Leytan. "We're gonna have to think of something fast, or the only way we'll be leaving here is in a pine box!"

"I know, I know!" Leytan yelled back.

Midnight was still trying to comfort the terrified Jan-Jan.

"Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop!" the little urchin cried out in sheer terror, tears running down her face.

Midnight nuzzled her and made some soothing noises. "It's okay, Jan-Jan... Mother is here and she won't let anyone harm you."

This was one of the rare times Midnight actually referred to herself as Jan-Jan's mother. Just then a crossbow bolt embedded itself in the log just short of where the two were. Midnight looked at it and her eyes flashed - it looked like one of Leytan's.

"LEYTAN! WATCH WHERE YOU'RE AIMING!" she yelled.

Jan-Jan peered at the bolt. "Not Ley-Ley's," she said quietly.

"What?" Midnight said in disbelief.

"Not Ley-Ley's bolt - wrong kind of metal. Ley-Ley's have nickel in them, that bolt have no nickel."

Midnight looked hard at the bolt. It did look like one of Leytan's... but as she looked more closely at it, she realised Jan-Jan was right. And what was more, it wasn't a Powers That Be one either. She pulled it out from the log and sniffed it.

"There's a scent on this," she said. "And it's not one I know. Something is wrong. Come on, Jan-Jan - we're going hunting."

Midnight then closed her eyes. The blue jewel that she always wore around her neck began to glow and soon her human form had changed into that of a black panther. Midnight took another sniff of the mystery bolt and its scent, let Jan-Jan climb up onto her back, and then took off into the woods, tracking the scent. She came upon a man dressed in black robes, crouching behind some bushes on a slight incline that allowed him to see both groups fighting. He was armed with a repeater crossbow, like Leytan's.

Midnight growled softly as she quickly put two and two together and figured out what was going on. She crouched down and gently shook herself to

indicate to Jan-Jan to get off her back. Jan-Jan slid down and crouched beside Midnight. Midnight indicated with her head towards some creeper vines that were growing from one of the nearby trees. Jan-Jan grinned and nodded. She bounded over to the vines and pulled them down, then brought them back to Midnight. Midnight got into a pouncing position.

Jan-Jan slipped out quietly behind the man and crept up on him. When she was close enough, she yelled out at the top of her voice "PEEK-A-BOO!"

The man jumped and Jan-Jan giggled wildly.

"You little brat!" the man yelled.

"He-he-he-he-he-he, catch Jan-Jan if you can-can!" Jan-Jan said gleefully, and ran back into the bushes.

Furious, the man ran after her. He had barely burst through the bush before he was knocked backwards by a black flash as Midnight pounced, knocking the man onto his back, and out cold. Jan-Jan quickly got the creeper vines and proceeded to tie the unconscious man up. Once the vines were securely tied, Midnight took the man's cloak in her mouth and began to drag him back to the clearing. Jan-Jan picked up his crossbow and followed her.

The fire fight was getting so intense now that Leytan was getting to the point that he was seriously about to tell the rest of the gang to take to their heels and run. Just as he made up his mind that this was the only course of action open to them, and was about to give the instruction to the rest of the group, he felt a tug on his cloak. He turned and saw the beaming face of Jan-Jan looking up at him.

"Looky-looky what Jan-Jan and Ma-Ma caught, Ley-Ley!" she said cheerfully.

Leytan looked over to see Midnight - still in panther form - dragging the

unconscious man into the gang's area of the wood.

"What in the underworld is going on? Who this guy?" he asked, confused.

Midnight let go of the cloak and began to change back into human form. "The real enemy of you, me, Wren, the rest of us, and all those Rangers out there. He was firing into us with that crossbow."

Jan-Jan showed Leytan the crossbow. "It look like yours, Ley-Ley, and fire bolts that also look like yours, but Jan-Jan no fooled."

"No," Midnight agreed, "but only because you're you, Jan-Jan. Anyone else would think they were Leytan's, and I bet there are others out there too, firing arrows that look like the ones the Rangers are firing at us. Someone wants us all fighting each other."

Leytan looked at the crossbow, then at the tied-up figure, then at Midnight. He smiled and nodded, put his fingers to his lips, and gave two sharp whistles. That was the signal for Fire & Ice to start withdrawing and regrouping. Midnight took Jan-Jan's hand and they both hurried off into the forest, just as Lady Mercury and Wren arrived.

"Why are you signalling the retreat?" Lady Mercury demanded. "They can't get through my magic and they can't hold out much longer!"

So indignant was she that she failed to notice the bound figure at her feet, but Wren did notice.

"Who's that, chief?" he asked Leytan.

"The real enemy, Wren," Leytan said, and told them what Midnight had found.

"So someone thinks it's funny to use us as pawns, do they!" Lady Mercury fumed.

"Looks like it," Leytan agreed, "and I'll wager it's the same lot who framed us for the hijacking of this Dragon Claw."

"What are we going to do about it?" Wren asked.

"Well, we're going to leave him here where the Rangers can find him. Let them deal with it. You and me though, Wren... we're going to Dunshelm and getting my sister out of its dungeons, and then the three of us will have a little talk with Treguard."

Wren grinned. "Sounds delightful."

Leytan turned to Lady Mercury again. "Any chance your magic can make it look like we're still here for a bit longer in order to give us time to flee?"

Lady Mercury smiled. "A simple task, my love."

She muttered some incantations and some phantom arrows started firing from where the gang had originally been. Before they left, the three positioned the captive with the incriminating crossbow and bolt somewhere that Rio and the others would be sure to find him. They then hurried away.

After a while, Rio realised that there were no longer any arrows being fired at him or his fellow Rangers. He carefully peeped out from his hiding place and after satisfying himself it was safe, he signalled for the rest of his group to follow him. Carefully, they approached where Fire & Ice had been.

"Have they surrendered?" a voice asked from behind him. It was Zyssa, still looking beaten up from her encounter with Amazona.

"I don't know," Rio said. "They've just stopped firing."

"I advise caution," Ariel said. "This could be a trap."

"Zyssa, Ariel, you come with me. The rest of you, stay here," Rio ordered, and slowly the three pushed into the bushes.

"Who's this?" Zyssa said in shock at the sight of the bound man.

Rio went over to him and checked his pulse while Ariel, having noticed the crossbow and its bolts, examined them.

"Whoever he is, he's alive," said Rio.

"And dangerous," Ariel said.

"What do you mean, Ariel?" Zyssa said, confused.

"These are the same bolts that were being fired at us," she said. "Someone else was taking a hand in that fight. And if they were firing at us, pretending to be Fire & Ice..."

"Then they may have been doing the same to Fire & Ice, pretending they were us!" Rio finished. "We've got to report this to Calwain and Treguard! There's some other group at work here, and they've been playing us all for fools!"

REMEMBER HIM?

Series 4/5/6.

PICKLE

Although generally I do prefer Treguard without an assistant and I don't think he ever really needed one, my feelings about Pickle himself (and David Learner's portrayal of him) are nothing but positive. If Treguard had

remained on his own in the Great Hall throughout the show's run, I don't think the quality would have suffered at all (at least not for that particular reason) but given that Pickle *did* turn up at the start of series 4, I think he added a lot to the show, and I think David Learner played the part brilliantly and did as much with the role as it was possible and appropriate to do.

Pickle was always suitably subservient (unlike Majida) yet he wasn't afraid to chip in with helpful and/or funny remarks when he thought it appropriate. Due to the nature of the role, of course, a lot of Pickle's lines were entirely scripted, yet David did a lot of brilliant work (his best work, undoubtedly) ad-libbing, equally as well with Hugo Myatt (Hugo and David have a great dynamic, I always think) as with the advisors. Part of Pickle's basic character was that he unashamedly wanted the teams to do well and would surreptitiously try to help them, as well as trying to put them at their ease and make them laugh, and David always carried out this role brilliantly, often scrunching up with the advisors and becoming almost a member of the team ("*As Pickle is so keen to join your team...*" - **Treguard**) and striking up a great rapport with many advisors over the three series.

I'd imagine that many teams (particularly the younger ones, like Jeremy's) appreciated the fact that there was someone in the antechamber who was so obviously on their side, as Treguard was still very ambiguous when Pickle joined the cast, and he didn't become exactly unambiguous until Majida turned up. I'm sure David Learner himself was just as keen as Pickle was for the teams to do well, which I think is why he was able to maintain the perfect balance between playing the character - always being suitably elvish - and presenting the show; not so much in the sense of presenting it to us at home (although he did that occasionally) but presenting it to the teams, helping them to get into it and guiding them through as best he could. So the big question is, why was he replaced? One of the worst decisions ever!

TOP 35 KIDS' TV VILLAINS (Part Six)

By Ricky Temple

10. Lord Zedd & Rita Repulsa (Mighty Morphin Power Rangers):

The Empress and Lord of all Evil were the two original and (in my opinion) best of the wide and varied Power Rangers rogues gallery. For three full seasons and one small sub-season (Might Morphin Alien Rangers) they were, along with their motley band of henchmen, the main do-badders of the Power Ranger universe.

Rita (portrayed by Carla Perez and Barbara Goodson) was the first of the duo to appear, and was the main villain for the entire run of the first series. She was accidentally released from her Space Dumpster prison, along with her four henchmen (Goldar, Squat, Babboo and Finster, also later joined by Scorpina) by two astronauts after spending ten thousand years imprisoned inside. She then attempted to conquer Earth using her dark magic, her army of Putty Patrol soldiers and a never-ending string of monsters such as King Sphinx, Lokar and Pudgy Pig. But every invasion attempt was thwarted by the team of "teenagers with attitude" known as the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, and their battle vehicles known as Zords.

Her repeated failure to defeat the Power Rangers and conquer Earth eventually drew the ire of her overlord, Lord Zedd (portrayed by Ed Neil and Robert Axelrod) and he arrived at the start of the second series to take control of the takeover himself. He dispensed with Rita, imprisoning her once more in a Space Dumpster and blasting her out into space. He then started his own invasion attempts with his own Putty Soldiers, another string of monsters, and even his own planet-destroying Zord Serpentera. However he, like Rita, was constantly thwarted by the Rangers.

Rita returned at the end of season two and, using a love potion and glamour spell, she won over Lord Zedd. The two - along with Rita's original band of henchmen, now joined by Rita's brother Rito Revoltar and his birdlike Tengu Warriors - became the villains of the third season. At the end of the season, they managed to blow up the Rangers' command centre and destroy

their original powers. Before they could capitalise on this at the start of series four (*Power Rangers: Zeo*) though, they were dislodged from their position as main villains of the Power Ranger universe by the arrival of King Mondo and the Machine Empire. They did appear in the fourth season occasionally, trying to regain their position, but they never again were the main antagonists.

The last time we saw Zedd and Rita was at the end of *Power Rangers in Space*, when the energy wave caused by the death of the Power Rangers' mentor Zordon purified the two of them and turned them into humans. Rita was an original character from the Japanese series, in which she was known as Bandora, but Lord Zedd was a creation of the US series.

9. Mr Eldritch (Dark Season):

This enigmatic, sinister, almost demonic, borderline satanic individual (portrayed by Grant Parsons) was the primary antagonist of the Russell T Davis penned CBBC sci-fi drama *Dark Season*. He served as the arch-enemy for school girl Marcie and her two friends, Thomas and Reet. First appearing in the first three-story arc (which made up the first three episodes of the six-part series) in which he was supposedly the benefactor of the three friends' school, he was apparently generously donating the latest, most high-tech personal computers to the school, enough for each student to have one of their own. However, this was all just part of Eldritch's first plan; the computers were fitted with a special symbiosis program, which made the computer and the user's brain combine and work as one in order to improve the performance.

But Eldritch and his henchman, Dr Osley, had corrupted the program and turned it into a mind control program, and with the help of an already brainwashed student (Olivia) they intended to unleash the full power of the corrupted program on the school (which was merely a test run) and then the rest of the country. Marcie, Reet and Thomas - with the help of the creator of the original program - managed to foil this plan, and Eldritch and Osley were both apparently destroyed when exposed to the creator's "cleansing program" that wiped his corrupted version from all the computers.

However, Eldritch was not destroyed. He reappeared at the end of the penultimate (fifth) episode to be revealed as the real mastermind behind the villainous duo of neo-Nazi archaeologists, Miss Pendragon and Inga, and their plan to unearth and reactivate a World War II supercomputer called Behemoth, and use it to instigate a new order. However, upon his arrival Eldritch dispenses with Pendragon, Inga and their followers, and tries to use Behemoth for his own ends. He is again foiled when Marcie manages to convince the sentient Behemoth to reject him and be independent. However, the strain of resisting Eldritch sends Behemoth into meltdown and it bursts into flames. Miss Pendragon dies in the resulting chaos, but as she is escaping Marcie sees that once again Eldritch has managed to escape from apparent certain destruction.

Sadly, we never got a second series. Mr Eldritch was a very sinister villain for a kids' show, whose motives "to end order and bring chaos", as well as his somewhat supernatural abilities, while never fully explained, seemed to hint at an otherworldly - possibly even satanic - origin. He seemed to have the ability to control people's minds, but only if he knew their name. Again this hinted at a demonic origin, with Marcie at one point saying that to tell someone like Eldritch your name was like letting them have access to your soul. Even his name seems to have been taken from the H P Lovecraft mythos; one of Lovecraft's monsters was called the Eldritch Horror. All in all, Mr Eldritch was definitely one of the darkest, most sinister kids' TV villains ever.

8. The Demon Headmaster (The Demon Headmaster CBBC serials):

This order- and neatness-obsessed megalomaniacal genius with hypnotic powers (portrayed by Terrence Hardiman) is consumed with a single-minded determination to bring order and tidiness to the chaos that is the world. He seeks to eradicate the mess that is "free thought" and create the "perfect world". He was the main antagonist in four separate serials (shown as three series): The Demon Headmaster/The Prime Minister's Brain, The Demon Headmaster Strikes Again, and The Demon Headmaster Takes Over.

The Demon Headmaster's real name and origins - such as where he learned his hypnotic skills, or acquired his obsession with bringing his version of perfection to the world - are never revealed. His title comes from the position he held when the main protagonists - Dinah Glass and her allies in SPLAT, a detective agency formed by pupils of the school who are not under the Headmaster's control - first encountered him. His many plots and grand schemes to bring "order and perfection" to the world included:

The Demon Headmaster: Hypnotising the children of the school he had "taken over" to make them the perfect students so they can then win a University Challenge-style TV gameshow and he can use the prize acceptance ceremony to hypnotise everyone watching the show.

The Prime Minister's Brain: Creating an addictive computer game called Octopus Dare that only the most intelligent children can win. He plans to use the winners, under the impression they are playing a harder version of the game, to hack into the computer system of 10 Downing Street in order to hypnotise the Prime Minister of the UK.

The Demon Headmaster Strikes Again: Messing with evolution itself, having created an evolution acceleration machine with which he intends to create the perfect human using the DNA of a lizard and Dinah. A side-effect is the creation of fast-growing poisonous creepers, which alert Dinah and SPLAT to his presence.

The Demon Headmaster Takes Over: This serial follows on directly from the last one and sees a clone of the Demon Headmaster (who was killed at the end of Strikes Again) accidentally created by the evolution machine, and building a supercomputer called Hyperbrain to take over all the world's computers.

However, for all his cleverness, the Headmaster was almost always undone by the simplest of methods, e.g. sneezing powder or turning his own computers against him. Terrence Hardiman did a great job bringing one of modern children's literature's (the original books were written by Gillian

Cross) greatest and most sinister villains to life.

7. Al Negator (Bucky O'Hare and the Toad Wars):

This reptilian mercenary was a persistent foe for Captain Bucky O'Hare and his crewmates on the Righteous Indignation. Mercenary, spy, saboteur, blackmailer and extortionist were just some of the villainous hats worn by this ruthless and greedy alligator. Al Negator was a member of a race called Sleazasaurs, all of whom were mercenaries and for whom the sole driving motivation was the acquisition of more and more money. Al Negator, though, also seemed to have some kind of personal dislike for Bucky O'Hare and his crew, as when we first meet him he is using photographs of them for target practice.

Al was often to be found in the pay of the Toad Empire. During the series he carried out a number of operations for his toad employers, including getting defence codes for planets they wished to invade, sabotaging Bucky's frigate, and planting false evidence in an attempt to discredit Bucky's gunner Dead-Eye Duck. However, as well as his insatiable greed for money, the other strong driving force that directed Al Negator's actions was a strong sense of self-preservation. As such, he would willingly sell out his employers in return for being allowed to walk away himself.

Al Negator was the most unique villain in the Bucky O'Hare universe, as while all the others were motivated by a desire to conquer and were members of the Toad Empire, Al Negator was motivated purely by profit and - as hinted - possibly some personal dislike of Bucky. This, along with his willingness to sell out his employers in return for his own freedom, actually made him a much more despicable villain than any of the others who ever appeared in the show.

6. Transfer (Around the World with Willy Fog; Willy Fog 2):

The sinister, ruthless and malicious saboteur called Transfer, an anthropomorphic wolf, was the primary antagonist of the animated series *Around the World with Willy Fog*, which was adapted from the Jules Verne classic *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

Transfer was hired by Mr Sullivan, the Head of the Bank of England who was also Fog's main rival in the Reform Club and the man with whom Fog had made his bet, to make sure that Fog and his companions failed in their effort to travel around the world in eighty days. Transfer stalked Fog and his companions throughout the series. He was also a master of disguise, which meant he was even more of a threat to Fog and company as they could encounter him and not even know it. However, the audience could always recognise him due to his left eye, which always glowed eerily whenever he was about to spring one of his traps or enact some evil ploy.

Transfer, unlike a lot of villains of the era, did actually come within a hair's breadth of succeeding in his goal, due to the combination of his own sinister machinations and the unwitting help of the well-intentioned but bumbling Inspector Dix and Constable Bully, two police detectives who had also pursued Fog, mistakenly believing him to be responsible for robbing a bank. However, due to the real bank robber being found and also to Fog and his friends having forgotten to change their watches to take into account the International Date Line, they in fact made it back to the Reform Club with just seconds to spare.

Both Transfer and Mr Sullivan were left defeated, humiliated and crestfallen, with Mr Sullivan even losing his position as Head of the Bank of England for "misappropriation of funds", presumably the money he had used to pay Transfer and to cover his bet with Fog. Ten years later, Transfer would return to further hamper Willy Fog in the first half of the sequel series, when again he was hired by Mr Sullivan to sabotage one of Willy Fog's adventures (this one based on another Jules Verne novel, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.)

Unfortunately, like most of the '80s cartoon characters who made a return in the '90s, Transfer suffered from "dumbing down" and was not the crafty individual he had been in the original series, now coming across as more of a bumbler. He had also lost a lot of the sinister malevolence that had been the hallmark of the character.

Neither Transfer nor Mr Sullivan appeared in the second half of the second series, which was based on yet another Jules Verne classic, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Admittedly it would have been hard to fit him into that particular story, but the absence of this character (who had been a constant thorn in Willy Fog's side and who had been the main antagonist for a full series and a half) resulted (at least for me) in the second half of the sequel series feeling somehow incomplete.

KIDS' TV SHOWS I GREW UP WITH

Focus on: *Incredible Games*.

Original Broadcast Run: January 1994 - March 1995.

UK TV Channels: BBC1, BBC2.

This wonderful children's gameshow was fun, amusing, witty, engaging and exciting. Each episode featured three kids travelling up a tower block in a talking lift and completing different physical and/or mental challenges (the incredible games themselves) on different floors. The first series was shown on Sunday mornings on BBC2, and featured David Walliams (of *Little Britain* fame) as the Incredible Lift. As host and gamesmaster, the Lift would introduce the show to us, explain the challenges, and talk to the kids about their lives in a highly amusing way. I have very fond memories of getting up early on Sundays and rushing downstairs to watch this series, along with (purely as a precursor to the main event) a show called *Draw Me*, which challenged kids to complete a fun series of drawing-related tasks.

The team had to earn four hundred credits in order to go through the roof, which would mean that they'd win a prize. There were four main games in the first series, which were occasionally interspersed with simple visual or auditory recognition challenges. The first game involved a blindfolded team

member searching for three large glow-worms; the second involved collecting rubbish on the very messy Planet Susan; the third was the Dark Knight's deadly chess-like combat game; and the fourth involved swimming in a large bowl of alphabet soup to find magnetic letters and create words on the side of a giant fridge. The Dark Knight has always been my favourite challenge - it's a bit like Combat Chess with three knights and one bishop, but it's more like a challenge from the fourth series of Raven called Demon Causeway, which I actually think is as awful as the Dark Knight is brilliant, because its game board is far too small!

The second series of *Incredible Games* saw Gary Parker take over the role of the lift, which was just one of many changes. The team now worked to earn levels instead of credits, and were aiming for only two hundred instead of four hundred. The show was moved from Sunday mornings on BBC2 to Tuesday afternoons on BBC1, and many new games were introduced, including a school quiz with a spectral Victorian teacher, escaping from the Crystal Cave, passing slime-filled radioactive balloons along a wall without being able to see them, and fixing some severely ruptured pipes.

There was also a more epically enthralling endgame introduced, which involved searching for golden prize keys in the penthouse at the top of the tower. The order of the games (except the penthouse game, obviously) was swapped around and not every game featured in every episode, making for more variety than the first series. Two games from the first series were carried over, namely the Dark Knight (hooray!) and the alphabet soup game. This time, numbers were sometimes used instead of letters, meaning that equations rather than words had to be made, which was a lot harder.

The lift had seemingly undergone a complete overhaul, which was presumably why it had a new artificial personality. As SAM (the Systems Analogue Matrix, initially the Cybernetic Analogue Matrix, which of course they had to change because Cybernetic doesn't actually start with an S) Gary Parker added a lot to the show. He interacted and ad-libbed with the teams superbly, perhaps even more competently than David Walliams did, although I can't be sure about that without seeing the first series again. I remember

wishing that a third series would be made, with SAM still at the helm and the Dark Knight still standing guard over his deadly game board, but sadly it never reared its head.

I don't have such clear memories of watching the second series first time around as I do the first series. Possibly there was something we liked better on CITV that clashed with *Incredible Games*, and we missed a few minutes of some episodes, or maybe I just didn't really engage with the stark changes at the time. My abiding memories of watching the second series come from the Christmas holidays of 1996, when the series was repeated. It was on every morning on BBC2. It's always wonderful to get up and watch something good on holiday mornings, I've always found, and *Incredible Games* really made my Yuletide that year! We recorded several episodes, and six have survived to this day - Rosey and I sometimes watch them, and still enjoy them immensely.

This is definitely a show that Challenge TV should buy, if you ask me. Both series, of course - they are noticeably different in style and substance, but they're both brilliant in their own way!

THE AUDIO SERIES IS THE THING

The Knightmare Audio Series is a fan-made series in the style of Knightmare's early years, presented in audio format. It is hosted by Ross "Raven's Eye" Thompson at <http://knightmareaudioseries.webs.com/>

Devised by
ROSS THOMPSON

Developed by
ROSS THOMPSON & JAKE COLLINS

Written by
JAKE COLLINS
ROSS THOMPSON
ROSEY COLLINS
GEMMA DWARWOOD

Produced by
ROSS THOMPSON

Treguard/Merlin/Hondriss/Granitas/Gumboil/McGrew/Hansel
JAKE COLLINS

Folly/Igneous/Mogdred/Giant/Mrs Grimwold
ROSS THOMPSON

Gretel/Morghanna
ROSEY COLLINS

Velda
GEMMA DWARWOOD

Cedric/Olaf
GREG FORD

Lillith
JULIET THOMPSON

Glum the Gargoyle
PHIL THOMPSON

Team members are played by **Becs Houghton-Berry, John Liu, Andy Marshall, Ellie Marshall, Luke Thompson, Jacob Ward** and members of the cast.

THE EYE SHIELD: Tell us about how the idea of the Audio Series came to you, and why you wanted to make it.

ROSS THOMPSON: I had the idea almost a year ago now so it's very hard to remember. I had just done a Nightmare recreation with Jake in my house so I just wondered if it would work well with audio. I can't remember how I actually came up with the idea - it may have been while listening to a Dunshelm Players audio play - and I just thought to myself that this could be done for a series; like on the TV programme but portrayed through audio! I was a little hesitant at first, not sure if it would completely work, but I'm glad that it's had a lot of support.

Tell us your thoughts about the online response to the Audio Series.

If I'm honest, I was a little disappointed about the lack of response from the Nightmare online community, but it's a long time since the programme was on and there are not too many fans around now. However, we've picked up a couple of fans from the Raven Forum and had lots of actors from there joining in, which is great! With a lack of voice variety, all the advisors would sound the same!

Which is your favourite episode so far?

It's very hard to choose a favourite. I'm quite fond of Episodes 4 and 8 as they both have exciting moments in them - I won't say any more! I like every team and every episode for different reasons, so I can't really pick. However, I think the series on the whole has got gradually better over time as we learn from our mistakes and iron out the creases.

Which characters do you think have worked well in the Audio Series?

I don't really want to single out any characters over others - I think the acting's great on the whole and some of the likenesses are uncanny! They all translate rather well to audio, I think.

What limitations do you think we have to put up with that a regular Nightmare series does not, working entirely in audio and with scripted lines for the teams?

The big limitation is that we decide how the teams do, which really removes

any sort of interactivity. The majority of people involved know what's going to happen to all the teams. Of course, it would be incredibly difficult to actually run a Nightmare quest for a team through audio, so we couldn't have it any other way, really. It also removes scope for improvising, both on the teams' and characters' part.

At the halfway point of the series, what are your hopes for the second batch of eight episodes?

We've got some great scripts and ideas lined up for the rest of the series. There'll be more exciting and funny moments, I'm sure. I think we're just going to aim to make the second batch even better than the first!

STARK RAVEN MAD

By Jake Collins

I have often expressed my enduring opinion that Nightmare is very similar in many ways to Raven, the medieval fantasy gameshow that appeared on CBBC from 2002 to 2010. Even though (as my good friend Ross "Raven's Eye" Thompson, the world's foremost authority on Raven, will readily tell you) the two shows are very different in format and style, there are several underlying similarities that I have sometimes drawn attention to... and, as you've probably worked out, I'm going to do it again now.

The most obvious similarity is the medieval fantasy atmosphere, which sadly leaked out of Raven in its later series. Both shows feature contestants from our world being called into a fantasy kingdom by a bearded host-cum-custodian to face a series of challenges and prove themselves worthy to become champions. The similarities between Treguard and Raven are not only physical (actually, the beard is pretty much the only physical similarity, as Hugo Myatt and James McKenzie were and are very different in age and stature) as both hosts started off as impartial (and often nicely ambiguous)

guardians in a medieval world of magic, and evolved over time to become leaders for the force of good in a struggle against evil.

Just as the introduction of Lord Fear and the Opposition into Knightmare forced Treguard into the role of Leader of the Powers That Be, so Raven found himself standing as a force for righteousness against his evil nemesis Nevar (you see what they did there?) who was introduced to series 2 for the final challenge of the week as the Evil Guardian of the Portal. By series 4, Nevar had become the Enemy of All that is Good and True, and everything the warriors did was apparently a direct part of the ongoing struggle against Nevar's evil, just as the dungeoneers from series 5 onwards were ostensibly trying to beat Lord Fear rather than simply conquer the challenges of the Dungeon.

It always strikes me that Nevar's sudden and unexplained rise to power is very similar to Lord Fear's in the way that both evil leaders "adopted" all the evil creatures that were already on the show, and were suddenly in charge of them! Just as Lord Fear took control of the goblins and the assassins, both of which had appeared on Knightmare long before he did, all the cloaked demons on Raven suddenly became Nevar's Demons, even though their tenure on the show predated his! This phenomenon marked a change in format for both shows and this, in my opinion, is where Knightmare has the upper hand - the battle between the Powers That Be and the Opposition never came close to eclipsing the actual quest as the focus of the show, whereas Raven became far too full of pointless back-story (particularly in the three so-called "spin-off" series) which often eclipsed what the warriors were doing as the main focus of the show, and its quality suffered as a result, if you ask me.

There is another parallel that I like to draw between Knightmare and Raven, but it's a rather unpleasant one, I'm sorry to say. Both shows completely lost the plot when their eighth series rolled around, becoming sad imitations of their former brilliant selves, and were then replaced by a new, technologically advanced show that had basically the same format but was not nearly so good in any sense of the word. Knightmare was kicked out of

its timeslot by Virtually Impossible, which was basically the same show with all the things that made it innovative and brilliant removed, and the same thing happened to Raven with the dire Mission 2110, albeit after a run of two further substandard series of its own, unlike Knightmare.

Both Virtually Impossible and Mission 2110 were supposed to be better than their predecessors because they made use of cutting-edge technology and futuristic settings... not that anyone involved with the shows would ever actually admit this, or attempt to market their shiny new material in this way, but that's obviously the basic thinking behind these two futuristic flops! As has been proven again and again, mankind is doomed to repeat its terrible mistakes throughout eternity, as it seems to lack any ability to learn from its history, and this is a prime example of that! Knightmare was replaced with Virtually Impossible, then both shows got cancelled! Sixteen years later, Raven was replaced with Mission 2110, and CBBC took a huge step backwards just because they wanted to show off their stupid high-tech Roboidz - that really is Stark Raven Mad!

For various reasons, Knightmare is the best interpretation of its format, and the same is true of Raven, at least in the early years. Both shows were made from winning formulae that should never have been rewritten, yet they were anyway, and for this reason I think Knightmare and Raven both suffer from weak and disappointing final series. However, I'll do my best to remember both shows for their excellent heydays, because - and this is the most important similarity of all - they were both brilliant!

POETRY CORNER

Naila's team tended to dither and giggle rather too much to stand a real chance of becoming the stuff of legend. They got away with it for a while, but ditherers never prosper on the Trial by Spikes...

From London town came Naila's girls,
And now their quest in verse unfurls.
They met a monk, covert and wise,
Who said Sly Hands was in disguise.
Sly caused poor Marta much chagrin,
The team saw through his mask so thin.
In Warlock town, a silver purse
Ensured the team was none the worse
When Naila had to pass a troll,
And to Grimaldine pay a toll.
He got the horn, so he was thrilled,
The quest to level two then spilled.
A talking book proved quite a friend,
Its spell burned Raptor's prone rear-end.
Then Naila granted Brolly's wish
To learn of cats and dogs and fish.
But then, oh dear, up shot the spikes,
And Naila used up all three strikes!
She backed into a rod of steel,
Time for this quest to end, I feel.

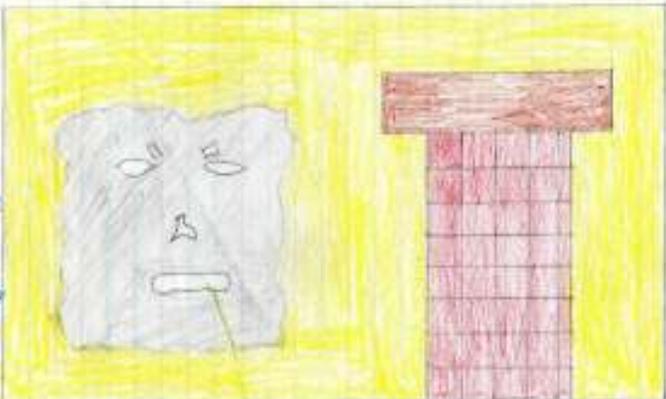
JAKE'S ART DESK

I drew these pictures during lunchtimes at secondary school when I was inside and bored. Yes, I should have taken the opportunity to catch up on some homework, but this was much more fun! These pictures aren't really any good, of course - I've always been rubbish at drawing! But they kept me amused and I'm rather fond of them. They were all done during the academic year 1996/1997, when I was in Year 9.

WHY TRY TO GET BUT NEVER SUCCEEDS WITH A RABBIT

KNIGHTMARE

GRANITAC.



ANSWERS:
A BAT
OR BATS

REPTILE,
SNAKE OR
CROCODILE

A RUNE
OR RUNES.

I AM GRANITAC OF LEGEND. FACE ME OR PERISH. PLEASE ME OR DEPART IN IGNORANCE
MY NAME IS NOT GRANITAC, BUT YOU MUST ME IN GRANITAC!

FROM THE ECLIPSE
AND BLOOD WITH
A RABBIT TO ME
I MAY BE THE
SILENT ECLIPSE
I AM THE
SILENT ECLIPSE

