

At the edge of the world, or at least what we would consider the world, stands a great and mighty tower. Though, unlike the towers that you or I have seen, this one is not made of stone or steel but rather of brilliant white wax that drips and melts from the heat of the tremendous flame at its tip. A candle would be a better word for it but tower captures its size and purpose much better though, perhaps, it wouldn't be unwise to say that it was both. This tower candle is known as Last Light as that is what it is though it was not always such. Beyond this light lies darkness where even the light of stars fears to tread. This darkness is the land of Nightmares where every foul beast is born and where dreams may die.

I said that Last Light was not always known as such and that is mostly true. In some sense it was always thought to be as it was the Last Light of Home, the last bastion closest to home when eleven more tower candles stood vigil over us and ours. Not much is known about what happened to them and even their names are rarely said for fear of bringing bad luck upon one's head. For most it is enough to know that once, in a time not long ago enough, the Nightmares waged a war and tore down all the tower candles but one. But I get the feeling that you are not so easily assuaged and rightly curious you should be as the story of Last Light and the Nightmare War is one that I would very much like to tell you. So take a seat and decant yourself something sweet and let us begin not quite at the start.

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Our story begins in the sleepy little town of Herebedragons which, despite its name, was perhaps the safest town in all the lands. The people here were strong and clever and made crafts with their hands that were loved by all. From delicious cakes to sturdy sheds and beautiful toys. Oh the toys they made. The toymakers would imbue their creations with all manner of dreams as dreamsmithing was as common then as tinkering now and few people didn't know how to weave a dream of warmth into their clothes or a dream of joy into their favourite thing. A favourite, though you might consider such a thing foolish now, was of little wooden horses that dreamt of rolling fields and which would gallop along cabinets and floors. But I'm afraid that is a tangent, the first of many I daresay I will go off on. Sometimes out of necessity to help you, dear reader, understand. Other times because the joy of speaking takes me and it delights me to share such wonderful things before we reach the dark business that awaits us at the end of this tale. For dark business there is indeed and the sooner we reach it, the sooner it will reach you. But where was I? Oh yes, in the town of Herebedragons, which was named as such because they used to carve great dragons out of wood to scare off monsters and draw in tourists. Though, of course, being such sweet and rooted folk, none had a notion as to what a dragon looked like and so these carvings took great liberties with some having as many as twenty-three legs and a great number of wings. While others still had no wings or legs at all and looked more like snakes or had, in the case of one very confused sculptor, four wheels and a canvas cover.

But it is here that our story begins as another ends. In the cosy bedroom of a young girl who had just heard her one thousandth story and though she hadn't understood many of the words, she appreciated the warm and soothing tones of her grandfather's reading. Kissing his granddaughter on the head, he smiled, his great grey beard rising with the lines of his mouth

and he stood, whacking his head off of the beam. He rubbed his head as he emerged from the bedroom, ducking beneath the door and stretching out properly in the hall. He wore a fuzzy brown woollen jumper and yellow breeches and stood nearly seven feet tall with shoulders as wide as two of you. His name was Eddard though most called him Teddy as he was gentle and kind and never without a smile and tonight was no different. He retired to the living room, sat in his favourite armchair with a warm cup of hot chocolate and put on his small round glasses so that he might read his own bedtime story, a tale of knights and of battles in ages past.

Teddy often read stories of knights and quests and battles to protect one and one's own and as such his dreams were of a certain disposition. That night he dreamt of riding into battle atop a mighty wooden steed like the ones I told you of earlier. He was going to face down a dragon which he was now fairly certain were reptilian and had no more than six legs. Normally his dreams were standard, easy to follow, and comforting. Heroic dreams that he could pluck from his head and imbue into the little tin soldiers he made so that young boys and girls could play with. But tonight, something rather disconcerting happened. As he breached the hill, the fanfare didn't play. His army of chess piece soldiers were nowhere to be seen and instead of a shining lance he had instead his chisel. The dragon, for that's what he thought it, lay barely visible in wait at the bottom of the hill in the dark woods. Its hissing voice called out from the dark between the trees, "come oh cowardly knight pretender. Let me feast, feed world ender." Teddy took a deep breath and steeled himself. He needed this dream for his toys to work correctly and if there was one thing Teddy would not do it was disappoint a child.

"Pray tithee and hirrah foul wurm for I am thy doom," he bellowed nonsensically as he charged down the hill, finding himself amidst the woods before the cry had fully left his lips as the landscapes of dreams are strange and shifting things. He paused, looking for some sign of the dragon but there was none. Merely a dark and frightening wood more twisted and black than any he had ever seen.

"Dragon?" He called out and I should mention here that it is best not to expect great conversation from someone dreaming. They are, after all, sound asleep and the mind is busy on other things leaving logic and conversational skills by the wayside but I digress.

"You dream of war and nothing more and yet you cannot wield a blade," the response echoed through the wood, whispered and hissed and bellowed all at once.

"What mean thee foul wurm?"

"You advance with shining lance to stab at heart of beasts," something slithered among the trees.

"Yet not their flesh or meat you eat, cowardly knight pretender."

Teddy lowered his chisel and scratched his head. He had had this dream a hundred times but this was completely new. He would have to make note in the morning and see what he'd done wrong.

"Fair well dragon," he called into the woods and pinched himself, a tried and true method he used for waking on time from bad or even good dreams. But nothing happened. He still stood firmly rooted in that darkened woods though now the barren branches bore leaves of brilliant fire. He stood in the heat of them and watched as the stars above were extinguished by something great and terrible rising above the horizon. Dragon, so far as the worst he could imagine, spread its wings and the night went black. A voice spoke out from everywhere and

nowhere all at once.

“Dad?”

Teddy woke with a start to find his daughter crouching by his elbow, her hand on his arm and his glasses on his chest. Her normally flowing ginger hair was held up tight in rollers and bobbles. Her bright eyes still dulled by sleep and her usual warm smile overruled by concern. She had never, not once in her entire life, woken before her father. Even on mornings where she needed to rise at ridiculous times, he was awake before her.

“Time must be catching you up,” she said her warm smile returning as he blinked the sleep from his eyes.

“Aye, that it must dear, that it must,” he replied and set about the start of the day. His daughter, the dear Cara, having always been second to rise, never knew how to work the kettle and waited patiently, admiring the novelty of the scenario. As her gargantuan father busied himself with the preparation of breakfast and the whistling of some old tune, she took the time to check over their letters from the day before.

“Dear Mr Bear,” she read and her father’s ears pricked up at the mention of his name. “Your order of Knightly Tales For Young Girls issue four hundred and seven is going to be delayed as the author has had severe hand cramp for the past week and despite our best efforts, remains crab-clawed and as such can barely pen her own name.”

“Bah,” he responded with a wave. “Who needs that tosh anyway? I’ve got all the best stories up here,” he said tapping the side of his fuzzy grey head.

“Lillian seems to like them,” Cara remarked as she gratefully took the cup of tea being offered.

“Aye but then again, she’s not even three and barely knows her glaive from her guisarme. So, good fodder for bedtimes they might be but good stories they are not.”

“Oh really? Then what pray tell is a good knightly tale?” She said, snatching one of the slices of toast from the plate before it even touched the table.

“Hmm, there are so many. Ser Lotrain and the dream siege, that’s a good one. Ser Freya and the quest for the forgotten word. The Courageous Company, the first battle of King’s Valley,” he had started to list on his fingers so Cara conceded. She knew the stories well enough as he had told her them often enough that she could recite them from memory, something he fully expected her to do for Lillian in his absence. Though both hoped that would not be for quite some time yet as the grey was still fresh and he had vigor to spare. And so the two sat, talking until the ringing of a bell shattered their peace. Teddy got to his feet quickly and grabbed his apron, the shop was unopen and that would not do. With a quick kiss on Cara’s head he rushed out and down through the garden full of flowers that dreamt of sun and across the street to his sun yellow store where rows of tin soldiers stood at attention in the window. A group of young boys and girls stood with their noses pressed against the glass and they leapt with excitement as they saw Teddy fiddling with his keys.

After the children had been rounded up and ushered off to school and Teddy had been once again reprimanded for letting them play before their lessons, Teddy started work on his newest toys. The shelves were mostly empty as dreamsmiths make everything by hand unlike the tinkers of Howl or Lunderville. Each toy was finely made from wood or tin and imbued with a dream all of its own. But today, as he finished the coat of paint on his latest knight, Teddy felt

strange. The dream he conjured forth and had forgotten about until now, as dreams fade like morning mist unless you know how to catch them, was foul and dark. As he plucked it from his head he saw blackened veins in the normally unblemished twisting blue-white vapour that dreams normally show. Curious, he grabbed a jar from his vast workbench and popped the dream inside, sealing it tight lest it get out and ruin all his hard work.

“What in the world are you?” He asked himself more than it as dreams cannot speak. Had he been a true dreamsmith, he might’ve known then what it was but Teddy was more a toymaker with some ken of dreamsmithing than the other way around and so he could not tell what the black veins meant except that they were something queer and foul. He would have to ask someone but the only true dreamsmith was out visiting distant Lunderville for new and exotic experiences like eel-pie and seeing a real queen or two. It would have to wait, he decided, so he placed the jar carefully in the little safe behind his counter and focused instead on tidying and daydreaming.

And so it went, for many days. Teddy would read to his granddaughter. Sometimes alone, sometimes with Cara providing the voices his own was far too deep to portray. He would read one of his stories and fall asleep in his bedchair and awake sometimes early, sometimes late but never on time. The jar in the safe was joined by another. And another. And another. Until the unthinkable happened.

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Teddy finished up the bedtime story and saw that Lillian was sound asleep gripping her favourite bear. A bear knight in soft woollen armour. The door clicked gently shut and Teddy stretched as he did every night but this night he stopped midstretch, just before the satisfying part, and he listened. Lillian breathed in, gentle and quiet as a mouse, then let out a tiny whimper as she exhaled. Teddy clutched a hand to his chest and listened again to see if he was right. Again she whimpered. She was frightened. Quietly as he could, he opened the door to the small and cosy room with all its pastel tones and toys. He moved quietly over to the bed, which considering his prodigious size was not very quiet at all, and he leant over her crib. A single beam of moonlight fell upon her and Teddy smiled full of pride and love at his granddaughter until he noticed something wrong. There was no whimpering. There was no breath.

“Cara!” He yelled, full to bursting with fear and worry.

“Cara!” He grabbed little Lillian from her cot, as gently as he could, and put his ear to her chest. All was silent in the house.

“Car-”

Teddy awoke on his armchair as Cara shook him. His glasses had come loose and his book lay in two halves, ripped to pieces by his own trembling hands.

“It’s alright dad, it’s alright, I’m here,” Cara said, hugging his head and trying to calm her own panicked breathing.

“Where’s Lillian?” He asked, “is she alright?”

Cara leant back but kept a hand on his shoulder.

“She’s upstairs, probably not sleeping anymore with you screaming like that though.”

Teddy paused half rising from his chair, the dream hadn't yet had the chance to flit away like morning mist and so he could see it clearly. Dark and terrible, Lillian dying in her cot was a bad dream. No, that was not quite enough. A bad dream merely suggests something uncomfortable or disconcerting. A bad dream is one in which the princess is in another castle or where one spends the entire dream trying to pick up a silver penny but keeps falling over. No, this was something much worse. Seeing his granddaughter dead in her cot was a Nightmare and that was a very bad sign indeed.

You may not remember this but time was Nightmares were kept out of our lands by the twelve candle towers, of which our noble Last Light is part of, as you may recall. To experience such an upsetting Nightmare in the idyllic town of Herebedragons was a frightful thing that would ruin any right minded person's day and such was the case with Teddy. He was not late to open the shop that day, for that would disappoint the children and that was not allowed. But he did not make anything that day nor the next or the day after. He barely ate and he did not sleep at night. Whenever Cara would turn in and he would finish his story for little Lillian, he would sit aside her bed and watch. Waiting for something that should not be there.

Teddy sat on the little reading chair, the pastel pink wooden legs bowing slightly under his weight but the chair had dreams of being a great oak tree and so would never break. The room was silent and dark except for Lillian's gentle kitten-like snoring and Teddy felt the ever present call of sleep at the back of his eyes. A week had passed like this, or maybe it was more, he wasn't quite certain right now. To distract himself from the need for sleep, he played a story of a great battle in his mind as he often did when left with little to do. Swords clashed against shields in his mind as legions of pawns took the valley of G3 from the clutches of Vitigrant's forces. A wonderful piece of strategy from the interim Black King Juliet Bargeborn. Nothing changed but for some reason that caught his attention. Lillian's snoring was exactly the same but a cold sweat was on his brow. He stared at a shape at the foot of her cot, a shape that had been there all night. With all logic he knew that it was his jacket lying across the back of her book cubby. He shook his head and wiped his face. Lack of sleep was getting the better of him, he figured and decided instead to think about the day before. A mental stock check of his comings and goings to see what dreams he still had for use in the workshop and to work out how much longer he could go without creating something. But this proved to be too boring and so instead he took himself home in his mind with the intention of remembering what he had for dinner or if he had had dinner at all. He hung up his coat on the coat rack and took off his... He eyed the shape at the end of the bed suspiciously. Had he forgotten to hang up his coat and instead brought it into Lillian's room? No, that didn't sound right. He rubbed his face and felt his hand wet with cold sweat. His breathing grew fast and shallow as fear took hold. Had he left his coat downstairs or at the foot of the bed, he couldn't remember. He glared at the shape, unwilling to move, unwilling to wake Lillian and frighten her for nothing. He watched, glancing at his darling granddaughter and saw it, just for a second; a furrow of the brow.

Teddy sprung forward silently, his slippers foot planting on the ground as he struck out with his mallet. The shape that was not meant to be there moved as quick as night but it was not fast enough, Teddy's rubber headed mallet struck it as it fled and suddenly it was given form. A pitiful

creature no larger than a cat with wet white fur and dirt on its paws. Tears streamed from its lifeless eyes as it turned suddenly to face him and took on the form of dear little Lillian.

"How dare you wretch!" Teddy hissed with anger and hate but still quiet enough to not wake the real Lillian. The thing leapt, trying with all its power to get past him and confuse itself with her but Teddy was quick and struck again. Black smoke and fractured images burst forth from its head where Teddy had struck. The Nightmare stood and swayed where it stood.

"Foolish old man," it whisper-hissed and suddenly the room was different. Teddy was sat in his chair being gently awoken by Cara who came with a mug of tea.

"Hey dad, I thought you might want this after such a rough night," she said warmly and Teddy smiled in response.

"Did you do it like I like?" He asked, his fingers gripping the mallet behind his back.

"Of course, milk and six sugars, just like you like it," she replied. The mallet caught her in the side of the head, weaker than it should've been but enough to burst what remained of the Nightmare's already cracked head. The tea disappeared and everything was as it should be. The coat was downstairs again, Lillian was asleep, and Teddy had protected her.

When the first light of morning slipped through the curtains, Teddy finally stretched himself out, bumping his head on the low beam as he always did. The gentle sound of the village coming to life banished all thought of the night before for surely, he thought, it must have been a dream and he may never have been dissuaded of that notion had something charcoal black and full of hate not crushed beneath his slipper.

"Oh no," he whispered to himself and as quietly as he could, he scooped up every last grain of the coal black thing into an old paint pot and hurried down to his workshop.

"It weren't a dream," he muttered to himself as he went.

He lay the paint pot and the black stained mallet on the worktop and went looking for a book he had never needed. An old black book with iron clasps that spoke of Nightmares but it was nowhere to be found. Cursing himself for lending it to the old Dreamsmith and never asking for it back, he returned to the worktop and started to pace. At around nine, Cara poked her head in to say good morning and to let Lillian wish her grandfather a good day. Slipping her mother's grasp, she came running in to get a goodbye hug but stopped suddenly as Teddy shouted.

"No! Don't come in here!"

At such a tender young age, with no concept of anything beyond the here and now, Lillian stopped and started to cry. As far as she was concerned and would be for many days, grampa was angry with her. Teddy wiped his hands on his paint towel and came rushing over.

"I'm sorry little one, there's just a lot of... wet paint around and I don't want you to ruin your nice new shoes that your mother bought you, I'm sorry." He lifted her and held her close. Behind her back, Cara mouthed *what in the world?*

*I'll explain later*, he mouthed back and kissed Lillian's head.

"I'm sorry my dear but I'll tell you what," he said, poking her nose. "Tonight I'll be sure to bring in some of your favourite sweets as an apology for shouting."

She smiled but there was still hurt behind it and while he let her go and waved to them as they went, Teddy wanted nothing more than to hold her and explain everything.

"Ah but she's a little girl, younger than the patches on my jumper! She shouldn't even know what a Nightmare is nevermind have to fear them lurking in the shadows." He said to himself as he

wiped away the tears and glared at the remains of the Nightmare. To him, it was little more than coal ash. Darker and more dangerous but no use on its own.