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**T**he forest lay still. Thick, dense, rich, dark gray fog sat heavily, enveloping everything. Masked completely were the massive elms and pines that comprised the lush landscape surrounding a lone dirt trail that wound its way through the length of the forest.

All was still on this silent night.

The mighty sword Hildebrand began to glow wildly with the lush color of the scarlet rose, pleading outward from within the confines of its rawhide sheath and casting dark red shadows of lukewarm light upon the inner surfaces of the tent.

As if in mockery of the sword's ominous calling, its owner offered a distant snore, followed by a muffled yawn. His eyes continued their restless search behind a thick veil of darkness, and his thoughts remained distantly removed in the surreal.

There was a continued pause, and then the sword Hildebrand's blood red luminescence glared brighter, this time emitting a piercing, high pitched whine as emphasis.

This disturbed Vestan a tremendous deal.

This was something new, and it brought with it none of the warm reassurance that he was so desiring of to the young paladin's blood-leached face.

Vestan watched as the sword's glow diffused slightly, then vanished entirely. He remained frozen, his face still motionless, this time staring emptily into the freshly settling darkness of the tent. He had been able to withstand the glowing; Arthur had mentioned the fact that it might happen, and that made it somewhat familiar.

But swords shouldn't be whining, and there was something about the fact that Vestan was wide awake and sharing a tent with a rogue knight who he really didn't know all that well and a sword that was both glowing and screaming that made him stand back from his situation and reevaluate it.

And arrive at a slightly different conclusion than the one he had previously reached when he decided to skip town and join Sir Arthur McReady, Church Knight, on his adventures.

It wasn't a comfortable picture.

On top of that, it was silent.

It was silent, that was certain, but not the kind of silence that made you comfortable and encouraged you to huddle up deep within the covers and think of pleasant things, much as he had done back home, even though he really wasn't satisfied with his life there and yearned oh-so-badly for something like this to crop up. He wasn't satisfied, but there was a certain security for him in the fact that there would always be a bed for him to retire to; there would always be a place for him to cast aside his troubles and dream of things he probably wouldn't ever see or do but that would be so good. And *could* be good, at least as long as he was warm and sleeping and dreaming.

It was silent, but it wasn't like that.

That kind of silence was good. That was a good feeling. Comforting.

That was quiet.

This was not.

This was silent.

Silent, perhaps, but not quiet.

Quiet implied that things were still, things were at peace. Things were resting, calm. You know, *quiet*.

Things were good.

Silent, however, was different.

Silence implied that things were out, things were about, things were happening, and those things were trying to avoid making noise.

They were trying to avoid making noise intentionally, because the entire purpose of their existence was to disrupt yours. Simply stated, they were doing things that you wouldn't feel comfortable knowing about, so they went to great lengths to mask the fact that they were around.

But they *were* around, mind you, and that was a key role in the difference between "silence" and "quiet."

Things were there, and they were making plans. Plans that Vestan surmised didn't revolve around his personal best interests.

Vestan didn't know exactly what was going on, and he really didn't care much to think about it too deeply. Whatever they were, whoever they were, wherever they were, they were there, and they were trying to make it seem as though they weren't.

And that was all that he needed to make him feel very uncomfortable.

Right now, as he shifted slightly under the massive pile of scrappy lambskin covers that provided a flimsy emulation of warmth on this freezing autumn night, it was silent. Not quiet. Things were silent; things were about.

And Vestan knew it.

He could sense it; feel it.

He could hear the pounding silence, the beating silence, the pulse of the night as it breathed in and released its drifting wafts of coolness about the leafless branches. He could hear the sounds of his heart beating away just a bit faster than it should be, his ears picking up the roaring that sounded quite loud when you thought about it but then faded to the far away background when something else entered into range.

And tonight, there were plenty of things to shatter the roaring.

The sound of the wind breathing lightly against the outside of the tent, billowing it in just a little, making slight scratching sounds as fallen leaves were silently lifted from their resting places about the forest floor and whisked across the air in paths with destinations unknown but that momentarily brushed across his.

He could hear the twigs as they snapped under the foot of an animal.

The beat of wings as a nearby owl took to the sky.

The far off call of a distant wolf.

And then, on top of all this, there was the sword.

Arthur had briefly talked of its "powers" when prodded by the young paladin, but he had always seemed to want not to dread on it for too long at a time. Something about it- it being "Hildebrand" as far as Vestan could discern from the knight's scattered murmurs and comments- having the ability to sense danger.

No. It was evil.

Evil was the word Arthur McReady had used.

Which was exactly what made Vestan the slightest bit uncomfortable, nervous, as he stared at the sword intently as the wind blew and the animals went about their routines in the vast wooded space around them and the paladin concluded with more and more confidence again and again that this was definitely not where he belonged right now but exactly where he belonged right now.

The sword was glowing faintly now, seemingly emitting a redness that pulsed outward and then subsided almost in the way a tide would come in and then retreat back to the distant depths of the great ocean.

It had been doing that nearly all night. It had started a few moments after McReady had stopped responding to Vestan's line of nervous banter intended to keep him awake; it was perfectly ironic, and just that tiny little bit ominous, that the sword would stop behaving just as soon as its owner had fallen asleep and out of its grasp.

And Vestan was all alone with it.

He closed his eyes and thought back to the few moments that were now long gone in which Arthur had offered his new traveler a few words of advice before nodding off into his serenity; Vestan's insecurity.

"Listen," he seemed to recall. "Sometimes the sword can get a little carried away. It likes to do that; to get you nervous like that. Don't pay it any mind. It craves attention, but it stops when it knows it's not going to get any."

Vestan had nodded complacently as though he were quite used to such a phenomenon and now realized that he had allowed his attention to wander perhaps a bit too much. Hadn't that seemed just the slightest bit odd? How could he have let that slip by? It struck him as amazing at how he simply hadn't cared enough about what Arthur had said to devote his mind to the knight's words.

*"Uh huh. Yeah. Okay. Sure; whatever you say. Yes, I'm listening."*

And now he was paying for it with anxiety, so he couldn't even say he had been acting selfishly.

"But if it does do anything that seems odd- anything- you let me know right away. Quirky as it is, Hildebrand can be quite useful when it comes to detecting the presence of evil. It's got a sense of humor, but it can also be dead serious."

Vestan reeled back slightly. Had that indeed been said?

He wasn't sure, but it created a thick uneasiness in the pit of his stomach anyway. Why was he here? He supposed he had never thought that "here" would be a frozen tent buried deep within some forgotten but eerily unnerving forest; a sword that "craved attention;" an aging knight intent on returning home at the beckoning of some "innermost calling;" a bout of insomnia when he wanted nothing more than to

simply fall asleep and let everything that was bothering him evaporate until the morning where it wouldn't matter much anyway and everything would be all right, or at least close to it. Closer than it was now. *Much* closer.

The fool he had been.

Hildebrand jumped back to life, its shrill pitch nearly shattering the paladin's eardrums with a mixture of surprise and volume.

And it was only beginning.

Arthur McReady's left eye opened slowly upon hearing the sword's cry, and his gaping retina retaliated against the sudden swirl of glittering butterflies that were seemingly dancing between him and the darkness beyond. His right eye darted open in reaction, and he immediately widened the both of them in an attempt to be rid of his sleepiness.

All that was revealed to him was a thick vertigo of darkness, accented by the darting lights, then the gradual hue of ruddy shadow as his eyes warmed to the luminous sword's message. He fumbled around the tent until his right hand grasped the warm covering in which the sword lay beckoning.

"Vestan," he whispered as he shook the still figure beside him. "Vestan, wake up."

The paladin nearly exploded with relief. "I've been awake all night!"

McReady shot a silencing glare in Vestan's direction, and then nodded at the glowing sword in explanation.

"Yeah, I know. It's been doing that off and on."

There was a loud snap from just beyond the tent's thin skin, followed by more artificial silence.

The young paladin's eyes widened considerably, and he began nervously to rummage through his belongings in search of his weapon.

McReady leaned down to the flap of the tent and peered out into the pitch black forest in which their camp had been struck. A trickle of frigid air wafted up through the opening, tingeing everything inside and overtaking the little bit of warmth they had managed to sustain. McReady lowered the flap helplessly.

"Pitch black, can't see a thing."

"That's comforting," Vestan began to lose control of his measured breathing. The anxious paladin stopped his search and took a deep breath; his moistening palms were beginning to tingle in the sub-freezing temperature. He vented a forced chuckle as the image of his trigger finger freezing over swept across his numbed mind. The irony did not lend value to the situation. He massaged his forehead in an attempt to relax himself.

"I'm going out," McReady stated, breaking the sudden silence. "Something's out there; it would be to our advantage to find out what it is."

"Probably just a nocturne," Vestan countered. "Not even; more likely a small rodent or bird. Nothing to worry about. I'd just go back to sleep and let it sort itself out. Deal with it in the morning if we need to."

"I've been at this a lot longer than you have, my dainty, darling dilettante, and I can tell you that something's not right." This didn't comfort Vestan in the least. "Not to scare you or anything. The flip side is that after all these years I've become really good at dealing with this sort of thing. I'm still around, right?" McReady pulled a pair of needle studded iron spurs from one of his saddlebags and locked them into his leather boots. "Tell you the truth, I kind of enjoy it. But I *do* hope we're not dealing with a marauder."

That was not what Vestan needed to hear, and it was but only the next in a progression of things he didn't need to hear, which helped to make it all the worse. "You *had* to use that word, didn't you? You couldn't have said 'thief' or 'bandit.' You had to choose the only one that has that nice little sting to it. The only one that gives me serious pause."

"Well, unpause yourself my piddling paladin pal. We may be in for a little action, even if it's only a bear that we're dealing with, so strap it on and suck it up." The knight leaned backward until his spine rippled inward, crackling tiredly as it did so. He returned his attention to the paladin. "I'm getting too old for this. Ha! How's that for a cliché? Feel like I'm heading for a heart attack, or something. But the most important thing to do now is relax. Let me handle this. If I need your assistance, I'll be sure to let you know."

Vestan nodded silently, unable to produce a meaningful audible response.

McReady uttered an unintelligible, "Of course, that would mean hell had frozen over and I guess nothing you could do would make much of a difference anyway, right?" as he turned his back to the young paladin, who had indeed heard something but didn't care to seek clarification, and surveyed the rest of the tent. After a second's worth of contemplation, McReady grabbed the small dagger that was begging to accompany him, and slipped it into his belt. "Any last requests?"

“Be careful.” Vestan’s face was perhaps a bit more ashen than its warm blooded roots should have allowed. “I’m not in the mood to have to save your skin tonight.” His attempt at sarcasm sounded ridiculous even before his mouth closed off the sentence.

There was barely an audible whisper as McReady slid the glowing sword Hildebrand from its snug leather sheath. “Take this,” the knight grinned maliciously and then tossed a second, fire-blackened dagger into Vestan’s corner of the tent. “If you need to use it, go for the head. If you miss, go for the exit.”

Vestan snatched up the weapon and nervously inched himself back to the rear of the tent as Arthur McReady silently slipped out into the darkness. Hildebrand’s glow flickered into extinction to avoid trumpeting its location.

Vestan’s eyes held its last glimmer for a few fading seconds, and then all was dark again.

“Arth-”

It was cold outside, and a sort of sickly permeating dampness hung deep within the air. McReady could barely make out the shapes of the towering trees around him, but recalled from earlier inspection that the brush to the camp’s left was insurmountable. The horses were holed up in a small clearing to the right. He decided to check on them as his first matter of business.

From within the tent, Vestan heard the crunching of the fallen autumn leaves beneath McReady’s feet just as his own hand located the familiar solid oak structure he had been groping for. He drew his dual-shafted crossbow from one of the saddlebags, and groped around for one of the dull lead bolts he had been sure to procure upon their last passing through.

It had been a nice village, small, but adequate. The one thing that seemed to stick stubbornly in Vestan’s mind was the unusually large weapons shop it had. At the time, he had attributed it to the fact that the town was located so near the border. Either that, or perhaps it was because the main shipping route ran its course so nearby, and with it must have come the usual assortment of the curious and morally deficient. He remembered filling his bags with the usual heavy grade bolts that gave heed only to the strongest of armor, and watching as McReady reluctantly allowed the fascinated shopkeeper to gaze longingly at the large broadsword strapped to his back.

“Nice broadsword.”

“Thank you.”

And he recalled how his mother had never seemed to leave the kitchen, her back always turned away, always doing something he couldn’t quite see, always-

He jolted anxiously as his eyes seemed to open from an already-open position. He had been dreaming, a short journey into the realm of unconsciousness that was much closer to reality than he had previously thought.

He rubbed his eyes, pried them open, and shook his head.

But he *had* been sure to stock up on ammunition.

Which was curious since he wasn’t coming across any in his bag.

Impossible; he *must* have stocked up.

Right?

His fingers finally glazed the familiar cold surface he was looking for, and he quickly pulled a single bolt from his sack and spring loaded it as he had done a thousand times before.

Vestan flipped the locking mechanism on the crossbow out of place and leveled the set of cross hairs at the fluttering tent flap, nervously playing out a confrontation within the confines of his imagination; practicing.

The crunching abruptly stopped.

McReady froze in the biting chill and widened his eyes in an attempt to better adjust to the darkness. He was close to where the horses had been tethered the night before, but couldn’t seem to make out the familiar smell or aura of consciousness that one could sense when around living things.

He backed up slightly, turned to the left, and squinted upward. His back brushed up against something above, and he spun around anxiously to see what it was.

McReady was immediately sickened even before he felt the warm trickle of blood soak through his warm cloak. He stared up, directly into the dead horses’ opened eyes, and just looked.

Vestan shrunk farther into the corner of the tent as the crunching footsteps went back into motion, his crossbow quivering uncontrollably in his freezing, nervous hands.

McReady remained frozen, staring blindly in front of him, trying desperately to pinpoint a shadow from within the blackness, coming up with nothing.

The crunching was getting nearer. Vestan loosened his grip on the crossbow as the tent flap was drawn back. "Couldn't find anything? Arth-" Vestan was cut off as the tent collapsed inward. He was crushed into the solid earth as a massive force pounded down upon him.

"Arthur!" he managed to yell frantically moments before he was knocked unconscious by something iron and very solid. The intruder swooped to the floor and grabbed Vestan's crossbow.

Arthur McReady spun around as he heard the scream. He could barely make out the form of the tent as it bulged and collapsed inward violently. There was a dull pang as one of the stakes was ripped from the ground.

In a single, fluid motion, McReady slashed Hildebrand through the air and charged toward the skirmish. The forest clearing jumped to vivid life as the sword gleamed a shimmering shade of azure and poured its luminescence over every leaf and crevice.

A dark figure arose from the mass of burlap that had seconds earlier been the tent, and leveled the crossbow at the charging form of McReady, unleashing a double barrage of Vestan's poison-tipped lead bolts.

McReady deftly hurled his fierce sword at the oncoming projectiles, obliterating them from their paths and sending a shower of hot sparks glittering outward. The attacker threw the heavy crossbow to the ground and turned to his broadsword.

McReady lunged from his feet and flew forward, tumbling upon the muscular form and rolling atop the collapsed tent. He brought Hildebrand roaring down through the air, meeting the wrought iron hilt of his enemy's sword midway to the ground, and deadlocked the two in a pressure-tight grip.

The attacker pushed harder, bringing the locked swords closer to the straining form of McReady. A bead of sweat leapt from McReady's horrid grimace as he shoved harder, scraping his sword out from the fray. He dove away, barely evading the second lunge of his opponent's sword, and rolled over the unconscious lump of Vestan in the process.

McReady jumped up to his feet and brandished Hildebrand menacingly, waiting for his enemy to provoke another engagement. His stunned mind was helplessly spinning, trying to process the sudden multitude of information.

The opposing form on top of the tent slowly stood, rising to a full seven feet of what appeared to be pure muscle, and lowered his sword into a two handed ready position. McReady heard a succinct crunch from behind him.

Before he had the chance to react, McReady was grabbed from behind and thrown to the ground. He smashed into the frost-laden earth and pleaded with his aching body, trying desperately to regain control over the frantic situation.

Both attackers were approaching, weapons drawn. Hildebrand's gleaming steel blade burst into a bright yellow beam of heat, and McReady clung to the sword's burning pommel as he was pulled to his feet and driven forward, shattering the frozen air with a vicious battle cry.

The first in line was skewered directly through the chest with the flaming weapon, which turned blindingly red and ignited its victim's lacerated flesh into blue flame. McReady sliced Hildebrand from the collapsing figure and turned on the second attacker, brandishing his fiery weapon menacingly.

From out of his cloak the remaining enemy drew a short dagger, which he hurled at McReady faster than the knight's reflexes could handle. The short blade sliced through the air and embedded itself in McReady's left quadricep, causing him to falter forward and lose grip of Hildebrand. McReady fell to the ground as the pain from his leg burst out into the rest of his body.

The figure confronted McReady's hunched over form and drew the rusted remnants of what appeared to be a sacrificial knife out from his cloak. He knelt down to the rock-hard earth beside the panting McReady.

"*Ildebrando!*" he cursed at McReady's flaming sword, which lay helplessly out of the fallen knight's reach. The crouched enemy spat at McReady. "Death to the *Ildebrando!*"

The enemy fell upon McReady, his blade screaming down toward the knight's chest. McReady hurled out with his fist, meeting his attacker's arm and altering the dagger's route. It missed its target, crashing into the hard earth and pinning the side of McReady's sleeve to the ground.

Arthur tore himself up and grabbed the dagger from his belt, fighting the searing pain that exploded throughout his body. The attacker was momentarily stunned, kneeling on the ground to the knight's right.

McReady drove down with his dagger, slicing through the air with a high pitched scream, and collapsed onto the ground as his target rolled out of range.

The opponent lunged again, his knife angled down toward the knight's heart. McReady spun around and jumped to his feet, throwing a massive kick that landed squarely on his attacker's chest. He fell to the ground as the force of his explosion rebounded on him; his left leg was still up in the air. McReady

watched as his spurred boot slowly made its way down its victim's panting chest, slicing cleanly through the tough muscle of his thick abdominals. The knight's limp leg collapsed after completing its course.

To McReady's awestruck horror the attacker still stood. With an expression of horror more intense than he had ever before seen, his opponent fell upon him.

Arthur McReady's eyes shut themselves tight, fighting to close themselves off from the terrifying situation that was about to occur.

There was a sudden crack, and McReady forced his eyes open to see his attacker frozen silent, a horrific expression of pain embedded deep within his face. A crossbow bolt was sticking obtrusively from the back of his neck.

The last thing Arthur McReady saw before the sheer weight of the collapsing dead body knocked him unconscious was the form of Vestan, crossbow raised and quivering, standing up straight and panting ferociously in the moonlit shadows of the thick autumn air.

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