

Half Moon

By Benjamin Randall

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*To Beverly Randall,
Who has always believed in me,
and who has always kept me on track.*

Recollections

I am sworn to obey the knighthood; my every action to serve a goal. My every thought of how I may best serve the cause. I believe in my oath, just as I still believe in the code and values of the cause, and these I serve just as fervently now, if not more so, than the day which I devoted my life to something greater than myself. I sacrificed everything to serve; I gave up my family, my friends, and my entire life at a very young age. I gave up everything that I had to join the ranks of an elite military group; to gain the privilege to fight for what I thought was right. I have never regretted my choice. But now... slowly I feel as though everything is changing.

I find my thoughts wandering when they have no right to. Even now as I write I feel my pulse quicken as a tide of memories threaten to wash away my concentration on my words. I have told no one of this weakness, fearing not for my own name, rank or honour, but for hers. I have known her since the day I left my family to seek admission into the knights. After I had proven myself to be worthy I was taken to chapel to complete my trials, a mere formality but one that marked my official initiation into the order. It was there that I first met her.

It is customary for a high priestess or priest to perform the ritual that brings new members into the order. It is also customary for a young mage who had yet to choose a path for their magic to bear witness to the feat. For there is no better way to portray the differences between holy magic and the magic of one's self than to see each used in contrast.

For my ritual the mage that stood attendance was somewhat... younger than was normal, she was around my age, having gained the honour to watch the ritual early because of the promise that she showed for the arts. Afterwards as she was leading me to my quarters she murmured several words to me, questions about whom I was and where I was from. But I remember little of this short exchange. However there is one word that I have always remembered but never really known why until recently. That one word was her name; spoken like a cool breeze on a warm summer night. Brooke...

Earlier today the elders presented me with a mission; tomorrow I will depart the keep in the company of a mage, we are keeping the group small to help avoid detection. Our mission is to locate and repossess a jewel that has been in the locked away in the keep of an enemy lord for many years. The identity of the mage has been kept from me; either because the elder's hadn't yet made a choice or for whatever reason they felt it necessary to withhold that

information. Needless to say I have been ordered to keep the mission in closest confidence; this is why I won't place the location of the target in writing on this page. Also as result I can no more ask around for the identity of the mage than I can disclose my target. I can only wait for the morrow and hope my companion is not her. Or do I wish that she is picked? I no longer know.

I long for simpler times.

~ A tattered page from an ancient journal, the author's name has long since worn away

Shadows

Silence reigned on the hilltop overlooking the mountain fortress. Fires contained within brackets set in the fortress walls provided illumination that flickered off of the dull armour of the sentinels. The sentinels themselves marched wearily, comfortable and bored in their routine watch. The fortress was old, its battlements harsh and unforgiving against the backdrop of the dark mountain sky. Sitting at the base of these lofty towers sat a large block of stone and wood that made up the central complex of the fortress. Around the base of the fortress was a small town, huddling against the inside of the curtain walls. Surrounding this were smoothed granite walls, very old and long polished by the heavy rains the mountains were known for. At the bottom of the wall a thin trail, a hunter's path barely visible in the gloom, led to the gate. On top of a nearby hill lay a still figure, his shadowed eyes intently watching the structure.

Gabriel's own breathing sounded harsh to his ears as he waited. He was lying just below the peak of a hill that was overlooking the valley; he'd been waiting for some time now. Waiting and watching, getting to know the routine of the guards. A slight frown crossed his lips as he watched the shadowed figures marching patrol along the walls, with the tricks the moonlight played on his eyes and the distance it was hard to recognize those shapes as human. Intently watching the walls he failed to notice as a shadow crept up to him and then knelt at his side, crouched well below the peak of the hill.

"I'm ready when you are," she murmured and then grinned as he started in surprise, his hand darting to the blade at his side, "Nervous hmmm?"

Gabriel only shook his head. He pulled his hand away from the hilt and then spoke; even while speaking quietly his voice, a light bass, still sounded regal and noble, "I'm as ready as I'll ever be Milady... are you sure you can get us out?"

Brooke grinned again and then pulled a medallion from a pouch hanging at her side, "The elders have granted me the use of this for the mission. So long as we are close together I can use this for one jump. Milady? Since when have you called me that?" She asked, and frowned as Gabriel shrugged.

Set in the center of the medallion was a large red jewel, as Gabriel stared intently at the gem he noticed that from its depths there was a faint pulsating glow. Surrounding the central jewel was a circle of fine gold, covered with intricate script of a language unknown to him. His eyes still fastened onto the gem he asked, "The elders explained this to me before we left, but they didn't seem to know very much about the device themselves. Why can we not use the medallion to get both in and out?"

"The medallion," Brooke explained patiently, teasingly, "is an ancient artifact that we no longer have the knowledge to create; once used it will create a one way portal to a specific point that its controller has in mind. However this portal only lasts a few seconds, explaining why we must be close together for us both to enter the portal, otherwise one of us, most likely you, would be left behind, and then need to get out by themselves. You with me so far?"

Gabriel nodded, struggling to keep the smile from his face as he basked in the gentle music of her voice. He couldn't, he wouldn't, let his personal feelings show through. She must never guess; that would cause complications he didn't want to deal with.

"The medallion also has a unique ability, one that we have failed to duplicate onto anything else; it provides its own energy. As you can guess creating such a portal takes a great amount of energy, a problem that the creators of the device solved in an ingenious, if slow, way. After its own energy has been drained the medallion will gather energy from its surroundings. In this way it will slowly compile energy for later use. It restores its power in this way instead of pulling its energy directly from the mage wielding it; an action which would kill most mages. Once the gem can make a jump, the gem in the center will glow, as it is now," She smiled sadly at the medallion as if it were her personal creation, one that had turned out well but didn't quite do what she wanted, "Its main drawback is it cannot recharge quickly after a use, in fact it takes it around a week to gather up enough energy for another jump, hence we can only use it for one jump. We can use that jump to either get in or get out."

Hearing faint challenges from the guards on the wall and responses from down the valley, both Gabriel and Brooke flattened themselves against the hilltop. Slowly raising his head Gabriel looked down to the road at the bottom of the valley leading up to the fortress. There Gabriel saw a large caravan of shadowed wagons slowly making their way up to the

wall. The guards, having already noticed the caravan, were satisfied with the leading driver's answer to their challenge and so were preparing to open the gate. Gabriel slowly smiled.

"Let's use it to get out... I can get us in."

Brooke grinned, "Shall we get started then?"

Gabriel turned his gaze once more to the fortress and a grim smile marred his features.

"Let's," Gabriel gestured to the trail at the edge of the wall, "The only way to make it there in time is to follow that trail."

Brooke met his eyes and nodded as they began to move.

Silently they departed the hilltop; the guards never noticed the two shadows disappearing into the darkness.

Sentries

“Gods blast the wind,” muttered the guard, as he shuffled along the wall top making his nightly rounds. The cold was piercing. The wind this night seemed to find every gap in his armour, reaching through to brush its icy lips across his skin. He marched hurriedly along his route, trying to lose himself to the physical exertion. It didn’t seem to be working. Seeking another distraction he idly looked out at the approaching caravan before he returned his attention to the icy wall. The other guards had the approaching group well in hand; he had no excuse to get off the wall and out of the wind. His thoughts drifted as he tried to distance himself from the cold.

His son would be asleep by now, he thought with a faint smile, or he should be. Knowing Coran he would more likely be playing hide and seek in his family’s quarters in the fortress. Well trying to play anyways. Leonora, his wife, would most likely be laughing as she repeatedly returned him to his bed. Turning a corner of the wall he started moving towards a blazing brazier. The moment she turned her back on him he would be gone once more, at least until he grew too tired to play.

As the brazier drew closer he noticed a figure standing behind the flames, the shadows obscuring its face. Hurrying up to the brazier he narrowed his eyes, trying to see through the gloom surrounding the figure.

The figure briefly looked up at him as he approached, quickly returning its attention to the fire.

“Cold night eh Gawain?” said the figure in a moderately toned masculine voice that he recognized.

“Aye Aaron, that it is,” he replied breathing a faint sigh of relief as he identified the man. Silently each of them stared into the fire. Gawain watched the flames for a moment, and then idly looked to the sky. His eyes widened and he gasped as he stared out over the edge of the wall.

“Look out there,” he exclaimed, raising a hand to point the way in which he was looking.

With a muffled oath the other guard pulled his attention from the fire and looked out over the edge of the wall, expecting to find a threat. Stepping forwards he placed his hands on the walls crenulations and leaned forwards, searching for the source of Gawain’s shock. His face

tightened as he searched, his eyes darting from side to side.

In the darkness at the foot of the wall a pair of shadows froze and shrank farther into the shadows.

Aaron took a breath and carefully scanned the trees on the surrounding hills. Slowly his gaze worked its way closer to the wall, carefully scanning every bush, every shadow.

At the foot of the wall Gabriel's hand inched towards the bow in its case on his back; he knew that he could not get it strung and limbered in time, but still he moved. Gradually his hand moved closer, slowly, ever so slowly, approaching the curved wood. Only his training had held back the shock when the guard had suddenly appeared at the wall overhead and kept him from freezing up. The guard that was going to look down soon, and when he did look down he would see them. Then he would sound the alarm and this mission would fall apart.

Aaron jerked as he felt a hand tap his shoulder. Turning he regarded Gawain with angry, but cautious eyes; it was said that demons came out on cold nights like this, demons which could drive a man to insanity. If Gawain were seeing things...

"What did you see," Aaron asked in a carefully reserved tone, watching his companion sharply, "I see no cause for alarm."

Gabriel relaxed slightly as he watched the man pull away from the wall. With a jerk of his head he directed Brooke to follow him down the wall, towards the gate. With a final glance to the top of the wall she complied.

"That's because you weren't looking in the right direction," Gawain said bluntly, he was never one to mince words. With a gesture he once more pointed over the walls top. Aaron turned and allowed his gaze to follow that outstretched arm. His eyes widened.

"You were so busy searching for intruders before you didn't notice what

was right in front of you” Gawain continued, slowly lowering his arm, “It’s not like we’ve ever seen anything or anyone on watch before.”

But Aaron wasn’t paying him any mind; instead all his attention was on the moon glowing up in the sky. The half crescent was hued a pale, sickly red. Running through Aaron’s mind was an old ditty he had learned in his childhood.

“A moon white as snow, is fine as you should know,” Recited Gawain from behind Aaron’s back, “The moon as blue as the sea, is a wolf moon from me to thee. With a moon as yellow as harvests field, to you I am sealed. But when the moon shines red, all hope is fled.”

With a nervous glance at each other, the two men crossed themselves against evil. Their hands passing over their chests in unison; left to right, belly to chin. After a moment’s hesitation Aaron quickly strode along the wall, continuing to walk his route. After another moment had passed, Gawain left the fire and strode along the wall in the opposite direction. In the distance the wind whistled through the trees. It almost seemed to be laughing.

The Caravan

Brooke froze as Gabriel stopped moving. After a moment's hesitation she looked past her silent companion, peering over his shoulder, her gaze trying to pierce the night's gloom. The darkness seemed to be made even deeper by the walls shadow, created as it was from the faint light of the moon. A stray gust of wind rolled along the walls edge and Brooke shivered at the chill that it brought with it. Almost without thought she wove a quick spell around herself and her companion, shielding them from the wind's icy touch; Gabriel shifted as he felt the chill recede but otherwise he did not react. Pulling her gaze from the surrounding darkness she glanced at Gabriel's back and allowed herself a faint, sad smile.

When the elders had informed her that she was going to receive an assignment in a few days with one knight as a companion her first thoughts had been of elation and a small level of shock. It was a great measure of trust the knighthood was placing on her; on her! A half trained mage! Her immediate second thoughts had been on who her companion could be. She smiled ruefully and shook her head, she was still unsure of whether or not she had hoped Gabriel would be her companion. She could tell he had certain... feelings for her, feelings that she thought that she may return. But... what if she were wrong? She valued Gabriel's friendship too much to risk changing anything on a guess. He had always been... distant from everything and everyone. He was a very private individual... but it always seemed as though he were so sad. The last thing she wanted to do was further distance him from herself. She sighed, the sound barely audible above the faint whispers of the wind, as she returned her attention to the task at hand. One thing she did know was she trusted Gabriel with her life, she could think of no better companion. She would keep him alive whatever the cost.

Ahead of her Gabriel began to move again. Slowly she rose, a shadow at his back... she had a mission.

Cautiously Gabriel edged forwards, taking care to remain in the shadows. He was incredibly aware of Brooke at his back, her trusting him to get them inside. He would not let her down.

Up ahead the gate grew nearer. Already guards were starting to emerge from the relative warmth of the gatehouse as they moved to intercept the oncoming caravan. With them they carried lanterns which created a pool of light that slowly grew. The guards spread out as the caravan approached creating a wall across the trail but parting to let each wagon through after it had been inspected. Gabriel paused and then settled down onto his haunches as he drew within a few meters of the puddle of light. He heard faint rustling behind him as Brooke copied his stance. Up ahead there was a brief commotion as the officer in charge of the gate pushed past his men to stand in front of the approaching wagons.

“You’re late today,” The officer said gruffly to the driver of the closest wagon, “We’ve been expecting you for hours.”

“A wagon lost a wheel earlier and the delay cost us a little time,” the driver proclaimed in a rich voice, a performers voice, “But as it were it turned out for the best. The wagon train ahead of us was caught in a rock slide, a slide that surely would have caught us as well had we not needed to pause. We lost much more time trying to clear the road for the wagons to get through; as well we managed to gather together a few survivors.” With a flourish the man gestured behind him to a small band of people on the edge of the light; they were slowly moving up the row of wagons, their fatigue showing in their movement.

Gabriel smiled as he watched the ragtag band grow closer; they would provide perfect cover. When the guards were expecting to see survivors of a land slide... well, two more shouldn’t tip them off. Glancing quickly at the sky Gabriel mouthed a quick prayer for luck and then pulled Brooke to her feet. He moved swiftly, a ghost skimming across the ground, leaving the sheltering shadows of the wall and drifting along a path parallel to the line of wagons disappearing into the darkness. Brooke followed just behind, silently gliding through the darkness, trusting in his judgment, just as he trusted in the light from the fires to blind any guards to the night.

Reaching the end of caravan Gabriel paused. Behind him Brooke drew to a stop as well. Gabriel stooped to the ground and ran his gauntleted hand through the earth at his feet. Rising again he looked at the wad of crumbling dry dirt he held in his palm. He frowned at it for a moment and then turned to Brooke. She stood silently, watching him

with her dark eyes, she gave him a half smile, a hesitant smile, and unconsciously he felt a small smile sweep across his lips as well. He almost froze as he watched her, entranced by the way she stood, by the way her heavy cloak rustled faintly with the icy wind. Staring into her eyes, he saw something there he didn't expect. It looked almost like... no he was mistaken, it had to be trust. They had a job to do.

Brooke smiled as Gabriel looked at her, and her smile deepened as she saw a faint smile grace his face. Such a hard face he had; he almost seemed to be carved from stone. On first glance he seemed to be heartless, incapable of feeling. But there was something more that was always just below the surface, warmth in him she had seen in no other person. As she watched, Gabriel's face seemed to flicker as emotions swept across his normally calm features. Her eyes widened as something crossed his face, could that really have been...

The snap of a whip from the passing caravan broke the silence, shattering the moment and drawing the pair back to reality.

Without hesitation Gabriel crushed the wad of dirt in his hand and scattered the earth in the air, allowing the wind to catch it up and blow it past Brooke. The passage of the dirt left dirty streaks across her clothing. When she glared at him indignantly he put a finger to his lips and knelt to pick up some more earth.

"We have just been through a rock slide Milady," He explained, his eyes focused on his hands, "Do you expect them to believe that we walked through it untouched?"

She nodded and let him continue the process, streaking dirt down her clothing. He finished quickly and then hesitated and gestured for her to do the same to him. She frowned faintly, why had he hesitated? She mentally shrugged and knelt to the ground, pulling up a handful of the chilled earth. Pressing it between her fingers some fell to the ground below. Moving closer to him she dragged the dirt across his clothing and armour, marking him as a survivor of the rock slide.

After a few moments she nodded and backed away. Together they made

their way to the end of the line of wagons, joining into the procession heading up to the gates.

“Make it look good,” he murmured, not sure if he meant the words more for himself or Brooke.

Together they slowly moved up the line of wagons; to all outward appearances they were just another pair of weary travelers heading for the relative warmth and safety of the fort. Despite his outward calm Gabriel was worried. There was so much could go wrong... but at the moment this was the best plan that he had. His hand hidden by his cloak he grasped the dagger he wore hidden at his hip; if anything were to go wrong, he'd make sure Brooke at least made it out alive.

“By my blood...” he murmured sealing his vow as they neared the puddle of light that surrounded the gate. The look that Brooke gave him made him wonder if she had heard his words, but in the end it didn't matter. He would do what he must. No matter the cost. With a deep breath Gabriel stepped into the light, with Brooke a heartbeat behind.

Up ahead the guards stood talking amongst themselves, only vaguely watching the caravan as it filed past them. They barely looked at Gabriel or Brooke as they stumbled through the gate, following close behind a wagon. They were just another pair of survivors, nothing more.

Brooke grinned once she was sure that they were well past the guards. In front of her Gabriel seemed to visibly loosen up as well. That had seemed so easy, she thought, it almost felt wrong.

As they passed through the gates they found themselves walking up a broad avenue. The buildings lining either side of the avenue were dark; unsurprising at this hour. The wagons of the caravan who had already passed through the gate were slowly moving to an open area behind the inn. One by one the drivers jumped off their wagons and then joined the survivors heading into the relative warmth of the inn.

Gabriel gave a brief smile, hidden by the deep folds of his hood. He stepped out from between the wagons and made his way to the edge of the road. This was working better than he had expected. His smile grew as he slipped off of the road swiftly blending into the shadows. Brooke followed with a quick furtive glance behind. In a nearby alley Gabriel settled on to his haunches, wrapped his cloak around himself, and waved Brooke down beside himself. It was time to wait.

Pathways

The road leading through the center of the village was silent when Gabriel once again rose to his feet. The activity around the gate had died down as the guards returned to the gatehouses or the forlorn solitude of their routine patrols.

“Let’s go,” he murmured to Brooke, and then turned to step out of the shadows and onto the empty street.

She looked at him, nodded and stepped out of the shadows into the faint moonlight bathing the street, her heels making no sound on the cold cobbles. Together they walked up the road surrounded by the silence of night; silence only disturbed by the click of Gabriel’s armour on stone. They were almost inside. Beneath her hood Brooke smiled faintly, the smile little more than a twist of her lips, as she saw what Gabriel was doing. Where better to hide than in plain sight?

Aaron yawned as he walked up the broad lane. He was heading home now that his watch was done. He walked slowly, barely keeping his steps in line, as he staggered along with his eyes clouded with fatigue. Stifling another yawn he stumbled and then sighed; that midnight shift was going to be the death of him he thought. He’d had to work that shift the last several weeks; ever since the commander had told him that he had an insolent tongue. Looking blurrily around, he stumbled, barely keeping his footing on the cold stone.

“Blood,” he muttered, “I’ve got to get reassigned.”

Off in the distance a wolf’s howl pierced through the night, startling him out of his thoughts. With an anxious gasp he looked searchingly around, checking each end of the street. No, nothing unusual there; just a pair of folks walking towards the fortress up ahead. Cautiously he paused and glanced up at the moon and the chilling promise it gave. A red moon. Death walked the land tonight. With a shiver he continued his trek. At least there was not much farther to go he thought. Home was just around the bend, and then some much needed sleep.

A thought came into his mind and he frowned. What were people doing out at this hour? Other guards should either be just starting their shifts on the walls or they should already be back in their own homes.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts he took a second look at the pair walking up ahead. A man and a woman he figured, although he could be wrong, this moonlight and the distance could deceive the eye. Both seemed to be dressed in dark clothing, although it was hard to tell in the faint light. An odd occurrence, he thought, should it be reported?

He stared for a moment more, and then shook his head. No. It must just be a pair of civilians, they walked as if they belonged. If they were intruders they should be hiding, likely sneaking, but there they were walking down the center of the street in broad moonlight. No he wouldn't report this; he didn't need more shifts given to him because he raised a false alarm. The commander already hated him. No reason to give him more reason to by having him ousted from bed in the middle of the night.

Besides nothing ever happened around here, not in the entire time he'd been with the watch. With a shrug Aaron turned off of the main stretch, switching to a smaller side lane running parallel to the main street. Up ahead he could see his home.

Entry

Idiots, thought Gabriel as he let himself and Brooke into a small gate piercing the side of the keep. And lazy idiots at that. There should have been some kind of guard here, especially if the gate wasn't even locked.

Beside him Brooke whispered, "That's convenient the gate was open, and I sense nothing; there are no spells here."

Gabriel grinned ruefully, changing his assessment of the situation. It could be seen as a small blessing, he thought, he should be glad that this fortress was not on high alert. After all never curse your enemy's incompetence.

The interior of the fortress was sparsely lit by flickering torches set into wall brackets. Gabriel looked up at a torch on a nearby wall and watched as it flickered and then spluttered out sending another section of the windowless hallway into darkness. The lights flickered off of the granite walls, shadows dancing amidst the beams of light. The corridor stretched on both the left and right of the gate, the ends of the hallway lost in the shadows of the eternal night.

Glancing in both directions and seeing nothing distinctive, Gabriel shrugged and turned to Brooke.

"The elders were unable to provide a map. They could tell me that the jewel should be in a small room near the treasury, and that the treasury should be near the great hall," he said softly; although his voice seemed deadened by the darkness there was no need to announce themselves to any who may be listening.

Brooke nodded; she had been told the same thing. She peered into the darkness at either end of the corridor nervously. Her eyes were wide as she nervously shifted from foot to foot. After a brief hesitation Gabriel placed his hand on her shoulder, she started at his touch, almost shying away before she turned her attention to him.

"What's wrong?" He asked hesitantly, "Are you going to be alright?"

"I'm fine. I just..." She hesitating and glanced around again, "there is something here that feels wrong."

“Wrong?”

“I don’t know. Just wrong. I sense something.”

“Will it interfere with us?” he asked, starting to grow worried. He knew mages could sense things that others could not. If she thought something was wrong, there very likely was.

“I... don’t know,” she said slowly.

He frowned and then said, “Let me know if the feeling changes Milady, until then don’t let it distract you. I need you at your best.”

Slowly he turned away from her and set off down the hall to their left; he pulled his blade from its sheathe as he went. Left seemed as good a way as any.

Brooke hesitated for a moment before following him down the hall; there had been something in Gabriel’s voice when he told her not to worry. She found herself thinking of right before they joined the caravan heading towards the gate. Did he feel for her as she felt for him? She sighed and the faint sound was quickly lost in the darkness. Even if he did care would it matter? Probably not. She would never mention it; she could never be sure he would return the feeling and she didn’t want to be disappointed.

“Stop it,” she murmured to herself, and then started. She had not meant to speak aloud. Carefully she studied Gabriel’s back but he gave no sign that he had heard her words. Not that it would have meant anything to him if he had she thought to herself. With a grimace she forced her thoughts back to the task at hand. When wandering around a potentially hostile fortress it may be best if she paid attention.

Her eyes widened abruptly as a thought occurred to her. Had she closed the gate after she had entered? She must’ve. Or Gabriel must’ve. They wouldn’t make that mistake. An open gate could be seen by the guards as a sure sign there were intruders in the keep. They could sound an alarm which could cause... complications.

They must’ve closed it, she decided as she pushed the matter from her mind. She walked on, following close behind Gabriel as he moved farther

into the fortress.

Gawain smiled faintly as he stumbled up the main road towards the fortress. The peculiar colour of the moon and the unease it had caused him was already lost in his fatigued mind. He yawned as he reached the small gate set into the wall. Pulling a ring of keys from his belt he struggled to sort through them in the moonlight. Finally finding the key he sought he turned to the gate and frowned. Odd, he thought, the gate was already open. Confused he stood unmoving for a moment. This gate was almost always locked and certainly never left open. He frowned; this would have to be reported to the commander of the watch. If the other sentries were getting so careless as to leave the gates breaching the fortress open then they should be disciplined. He stepped through the open gate and closed and locked it behind himself.

Briskly he started towards the commanders chambers but then stopped as another thought entered his mind. How much would the commander appreciate being woken at this early hour in the morning? Not too much he would assume. After a brief contemplation he started walking again, this time taking a turn that would lead him to his family's quarters. The news about the gate could wait until tomorrow. He had no desire to instigate the commander's wrath, especially after seeing Aaron's punishment for his perceived transgressions. No he didn't want that. This issue could wait until the morrow.

Decisions

Brooke walked on through the halls with growing apprehension. Something was wrong, she was sure of it, but was it worth mentioning to Gabriel? If it was no threat to their mission then there would be no reason to worry him, in which case she should keep her worries to herself. However there was always the chance that it could affect their assignment. In which case he ought to know. A few steps ahead Gabriel moved on cautiously through the darkness, checking every side passage and doorway, his bared blade in his hand. Undecided she walked on for a few more steps and then with a firm nod of her head she opened her mouth to speak.

“Gabriel that feeling has not gone—” she was cut off as Gabriel vanished with a clatter of metal on metal. Drawing the dagger at her side she hurried to where she had last seen him. One moment he had been walking up ahead, walking through the intersection of four hallways, and the next there had been a torrent of sound and he was gone. It was almost as though Gabriel had been hit with a battering ram. Reaching the intersection she carefully looked down each of the conjoining passages. There was only darkness as far as she could see; the torches had gone out in the halls. Her eyes widened. Where had he gone?

Shaking off her shock she slipped a hand to her side and she unsheathed her dagger. Looking at the blade, pitifully small blade when compared to Gabriel’s sword, she grimaced. It wasn’t much but at least it was better than nothing. At a loss she looked down the hallway that Gabriel had disappeared into. Taking a half step forwards she paused as something rattled against her boot. She glanced down; it was a sword. On a hunch she looked closely at the cross guard. In the dim light provided by the few flickering torches in the hall behind her it was hard to see. She knelt down for a closer look and several distinguishing marks on the hilt jumped out at her. She sighed. She knew this blade; it belonged to Gabriel.

After a moment’s hesitation she fumbled with the cloak covering her back then ripped off a strip of the worn fabric. Tying a quick knot in it she fashioned a sort of sling. She then looped it over her shoulder and thrust the blade through the loop. Experimentally she moved around a bit, trying to shake the sword out of its makeshift sheathe. The blade stayed in place.

She nodded with satisfaction; Gabriel would need the blade when she found him. Brooke looked around, at a loss over a direction to take. He could have vanished down either one of the perpendicular passages. Making a choice she slid around the corner and cautiously moved down the hall. Hopefully the hallway would lead to Gabriel. She grimaced; this was turning into a mess.

In the Night

Aaron grumbled at the cold as he struggled to sort through his keys with frozen fingers. His hands trembled from the cold as he held the keys up to the light of the moon. His vision was blurred from exhaustion making it difficult to discern one shape from another.

The darkness stirred several meters away from him. An eye gleamed in the meagre light. A pair of lips curled into a sneer baring sharp white fangs. Unnoticed it melted back into the shadows.

Aaron froze as he once more saw the unnerving colour of the moon. He shivered and then went back to his search, casting a wary glance at the moon every few seconds. After several moments passed he found the key for his house on the ring. Hurriedly he fought with the lock, fumbling to get the key into place. Already he was thinking of the warmth of his bed. And sleep, he thought with a smile, finally some rest. With a final twist of the key, the door swung inward. Inside was his small haven, it was empty, as it always was while he was on duty. He lived alone.

Glancing back up at the moon Aaron murmured, "All hope is fled. Ha! Just a poem to scare children."

Behind him something laughed. The sound grew louder as he swung around, one hand on the blade at his side.

There was nothing there.

The sound began to fade away as Aaron desperately searched the dark street, there had to be someone there. A bead of sweat formed on his brow and began to run down the side of his face. Slowly he shifted his weight onto the other leg and loosened his grip on his sword's hilt. Nothing there. The bead of perspiration fell to the ground below.

"I need some sleep," the man growled, turning to head inside.

He froze, staring into his house. His eyes grew wider and he fumbled with his sword. It slid from its sheath with a dry rasp. Stepping quickly he began to back out onto the street, holding the blade between him and the doorway to his house.

There was a roar and a shadowed form launched itself through the doorway towards him. It bashed aside Aaron's defence and as his arms

fell he was dragged into the house.

“Sometimes, poems are based off of truth,” spoke a harsh gravelly voice from the doorway. A second creature moved to close the door after the first had passed through the entryway. The first creature chuckled and then broke into full out laughter as it dropped Aaron’s limp body to the floor. The door slammed amidst the laughter.

Silence reigned once more.

Brooke peeked cautiously around another corner. Nothing there. Just another empty hallway with still no sign of Gabriel. It was as though he had just vanished. And that left her alone, all alone, in this old fortress. Old fortress full of potentially hostile combatants.

In the back of her head she felt a small surge of panic but she quelled it ruthlessly.

“No time for that,” she murmured “Have to find Gabriel. Then find that jewel and get out of here.” She nodded to herself briskly, it sounded like a plan. From the depths of her mind came another thought. But she shook her head, trying to drive it away.

“Of course he’s alive,” she whispered, “He must be.”

She turned the corner and entered the hallway. Her tread quickened when she saw a double door up ahead. One of the doors was closed but the other stood partially ajar. Reaching the doorway she carefully peered into the room beyond. Her lips curled up into a smile. By the wavering light of the few burning torches she could see enough of the room to know that she was headed in the right direction.

Before her was a long room; its walls were draped with dark tapestries and its floor lined with tables. The tapestries shifted from a faint breeze blowing in through the windows lining the ceiling of the room. However beyond the subtle fluttering of the old cloth there was no motion. She was still alone.

At last, she thought, the great hall. And it’s even empty. Now if only she could find Gabriel. With a quick backwards glance she crept into the room. The flickering light from the torches glinted off the polished

dagger in her hand so she tucked it away.

For the moment she pushed away her worries for Gabriel. She couldn't help him right now, not without knowing where he was. She could only hope that they crossed paths. For now she would focus on finding the gem. It would be what he would want.

At least she seemed to be getting close to the treasury now.

Struggles

Gabriel struggled vainly in the grasp of the creature that had grabbed and carried, well half carried and half dragged, him down the hall. He bashed at the monster but it wouldn't loosen its grip. The creature was strong, stronger than anything he had ever encountered. The creature, for lack of better description, laughed at him and his struggling. The laugh painfully grated at his sanity.

"You cannot escape."

Gabriel growled at it. That had been the first time the creature had spoken and he knew that it was right. He could not match this creature's strength. He had been carried away from Brooke; he couldn't protect her now even if she needed it. Slowly he stopped struggling. The creature laughed again sensing defeat in its victim. The hallways swept by as the creature continued towards its destination, wherever that was. Gabriel felt the creature's grip on him loosen and he felt a flash of hope. It now carried him as though he were a doll, certainly not concerned if it hurt him but also not really paying him any attention.

Abruptly he began to struggle again and immediately the creature's grasp tightened again. Gabriel began to flail harder with one arm and his legs, no longer trying to free himself just trying to distract the creature. With the other arm he began to reach down towards the dagger at his side, hoping that the small movement wouldn't be noticed.

The creature snarled and continued to tighten its grip. Gabriel's ribs cracked and he grunted in pain but still he continued to struggle. He just needed a couple of moments more. Gabriel's hand was almost in reach. He grasped at the hilt but the creature shifted its grasp on him, the motion rocked his arm away from the dagger. Stubbornly he tried again. The way the creature held him made it difficult to get his hand near the dagger.

With a final stretch Gabriel's hand touched the hilt of the blade. As he pulled it free he bared his teeth and he stopped moving. He focused solely on keeping the dagger in his hand for several moments. It was a constant struggle to keep it in his grasp as the creature surged forwards. With every one of the creature's steps he was jarringly shaken. The creature grunted, apparently satisfied that he had stopped his struggling. Slowly it loosened its grip once more.

Now was his chance. Gabriel bared his teeth and drove the dagger into the darkness with as much force as he could muster. The creature shrieked; its inhuman cry echoed down the neighboring hallways and Gabriel winced. So much for silence. With a growl he drove the dagger deeper into the creature. It screamed again and threw Gabriel down the hall. He hit a wall with a crash and sank to the ground. The dagger landed with a clatter on the stone floor nearby. The iron tang of blood filled his mouth. Gasping for breath he grabbed the dagger and then he propped himself up on one arm. Quickly taking stock of his situation he grabbed onto a stone protruding from the wall and he used it to pull himself to his feet.

The creature fared little better. The moonlight from a nearby arrow slit showed the extent of its injury. Dark liquid poured from the wound in its side and dripped to the ground below. It touched the injury with a hand armoured with darkness and growled. Its eyes glittered angrily from the depths of the shadows which surrounded it. Its footfalls were heavy as it began to move towards Gabriel.

Rising fully to his feet Gabriel reached down to his leg and pulled a second dagger from its sheath. Spitting out a mouthful of blood he set his stance. Gabriel stood holding a dagger in each hand; the flat of the left dagger's blade resting on his wrist and the right blade pointing towards the monster. One last time he cursed the loss of his sword before the creature began to surge towards him. The eyes stared out at him; they had not once blinked. Its piecing gaze full of hatred for the gnat that had struck back. This time it didn't want to carry him off as it had been doing before. This time it wanted him dead. It snarled as it charged.

Gabriel stood still. He intended to hold his ground against the seemingly unstoppable rush. His grip tightened on the blades as he smiled.

Gawain's hand shook from exhaustion as he pushed his key into the lock before him. The lone torch down the hall barely provided enough light for him to find the keyhole. Normally more torches remained lit at this time of night but tonight there was only the one. Between that, the gate and the moon he'd had enough odd occurrences to last the year. He shook his head and pushed the thoughts away; there would be time enough to worry about such things in the morning.

The key faintly clicked in the lock and with a wearied sigh he pushed the

door. As the door swung open he hoped that, for once, the door would not squeak and with the sound awaken his wife and son. This late watch of his was the least fair for them, he thought, his mind drifting. With this watch he couldn't be around for them as much as he liked. Entering the dim room beyond the entry he kicked off his boots and shut the door.

His family quarters in the fortress were sparse, the main room could be called "meagrely furnished" at best and the remaining two small rooms were little better. The only light in the main room was that from a dim candle, left lit by his wife to welcome him home. He froze, an odd realization striking him. The house was silent. Where was Coran? Where was his son? Could he possibly have been quiet enough to not wake him?

Gawain stood still for a moment, just listening for sounds from the other rooms, and then he smiled. It actually looked like his son had remained asleep. It seemed like such a small thing but Gawain brightened a little. Coran had stayed asleep. If this began to happen more frequently it would make life easier. Much easier.

He smiled as he worked, quickly and quietly removing his light armour. Afterwards he grabbed the small loaf of bread that had been left out for him in the kitchen. He ate the coarse loaf quickly and then blew out the candle. There wasn't much of the night left, but what did remain he intended to spend sleeping. Yawning he entered the bedroom that him and his wife shared with their young son.

At the doorway he froze, horrified by the visage before him. With an oath he rushed into the room, unable to believe his eyes.

They were gone. Both of them, Leonora and Coran, were gone.

Frantically he backed out of the room and he looked into the other room in his family quarters. No one there. Feeling lost he wandered back into the bedroom.

"Calm down," He told himself, "Nothing is wrong. They just... went for a walk," He paused and then murmured, "In the middle of the night." Something was wrong. Very wrong. And he didn't know what to do. He stood still in the room for a short time, worry slowly gnawing at his mind, and then a thought occurred to him. He paled.

"All hope is fled," he stated softly, shivered and then turned to leave the

room as he realized where he had to go. He needed to tell the commander. They could organize search parties or something and he'd know how. Yes, the commander would know what to do.

Gawain stopped and frowned, staring at the entry to the quarters. The front door was open. He could see light from the torches in the hall flickering on the solid wood of the door, but he was sure that he'd closed that. Something to his left laughed and sent him diving towards the sword he had left near the door, but it was already too late. Darkness moved to block his path, obscuring the light from the door. The darkness surged towards him and something hit him. Hard. The ground rushed up to meet him. Barely conscious he felt himself lifted from the ground and carried out the door and down the hall. Darkness closed in around him and he sank out of awareness.

Discoveries

Brooke frowned as she poked around the vacant great hall. That unsettling feeling had grown stronger. There also something else. The atmosphere of the fortress seemed wrong. However she couldn't name what seemed wrong with it. The atmosphere just seemed wrong. If she were to guess she might say it felt... out of place? But how could that make sense.

The clang of metal on metal broke through her thoughts. The sound seemed to be emanating from a small door connecting to the great hall. Slowly she crept up to the entry and checked around the corner. From the location of the room she suspected it was a just a guards post, but it never hurt to check. It was. Even so her eyes widened a bit and her frown deepened as she peered around the corner.

The room was vacant. A small kettle rattled against the lip of a brazier set into the middle of the room as the water inside boiled over the fire. Surrounding the brazier was a ragtag assortment of battered old chairs arranged in a vague circle around the fire. A weapons rack covered the back wall of the room; the rack itself was empty but several weapons lay strewn across the floor. The weapon's blades gleamed in the light of the brazier. All the torches in the room were dark, but through the gloom Brooke could still see smoke rising from the nearest of them. They were recently put out.

Brooke cautiously stepped into the room, that bad feeling growing as she looked around. Where were the guards? Even at this late hour there should be at least some guards out. The state of the room only served to reinforce that thought. The weapons lying on the floor were a sure sign that something was wrong, and the water boiling over the fire proved that there had been someone here recently. Moving a little closer to the kettle she took off the lid. It was almost full; it hadn't been left unattended for long enough to have boiled down. The lid slid back onto the kettle.

Where were the guards?

"There's something odd going on here," she murmured, seeking to break the eerie silence. Her words were swallowed by the surrounding darkness. With a shudder she turned to leave the room, but light reflecting from a blob of something on the floor caught her eye. Brooke knelt down slowly; she already suspected what the blob was.

Blood. It was a small puddle of semisolid blood.

Slowly Brooke stood. What was going on here?

Once more she began to move towards the door. She had a mission to fulfill and there appeared to be nothing here to help her complete it. But Brooke froze as she heard voices from beyond the door, deep guttural voices. Cautiously she moved up to the door and peeked around the corner. She could see nothing through the darkness. The voices seemed to be coming from within the hall but she was unsure of anything beyond that.

Brooke murmured a quick spell to bolster her night vision and then closed her eyes as she felt the magic sap her strength. Opening her eyes again she looked into the great hall; now she could see clearly through the gloom. Her eyes widened as she located the source of the noise. Two creatures stood at the far end of the hall.

One of them was staring in her direction.

Beads of perspiration dripped down Gabriel's face as he struggled to hold his ground against the creature. The initial clash between them had been thunderous; Gabriel had barely managed to keep his footing during the first few seconds as the creature had tried crush him using sheer force. Only luck had saved him then. At just the right time he had slipped on the blood coating the stone and lost his footing just for a second. The creature's eyes had gleamed with feral satisfaction as it moved in for the kill as Gabriel struggled to regain his footing. Just as it sought to strike he had slipped again on a small puddle of blood; as result the creature's blow had only glanced off his armor, leaving him bruised but otherwise whole. However surviving the first onslaught had been the easy part it seemed.

The creature was fast, faster than any opponent he'd ever fought. It was all he could do to avoid its hands, at least he assumed the appendages were hands. It used no weapons beyond its hands, but it needed nothing else. His armor was heavily dented from the few times the creature had slipped past his defenses. Moreover his weapons had less effect on the creature's hands then they did on the rest of its body. They must be armoured differently. As they fought the creature's eyes never left

his own. The glowing red orbs were disconcerting but he did his best to ignore them.

Now the creature paced a few steps in front of him, just outside of his reach. It stared at him menacingly as it considered its next move. Darkness drifted off of the creature like smoke, quickly fading into the darkness. Gabriel stood nearby the small arrow slit hoping that the light provided by that small opening would give him a chance.

“Come at me beast,” he said, his voice a low growl, “Come finish your work.”

The creature stopped pacing and tilted its head, considering Gabriel. Abruptly it threw back its head and let loose a feral cry. Baring his teeth Gabriel roared right back and he threw himself towards the monster, hoping to take it by surprise.

It worked. The creature flinched back at his charge. Finally something worked. Smiling grimly Gabriel began his work. Ducking under the creature’s frantic defenses Gabriel surged forwards, driving his weapons deep into the darkness that he assumed was the creature’s midriff. There was a sickening crunch as the blades punched through a tough shell and sank into a softer surface. Immediately he jumped backwards raising the blades defensively before him, ready to fend off the creature’s retaliation. It never came.

The creature snarled as it put its shadowed limbs to its midriff, trying to stop the flow of blood from leaving its body. After looking down at the injury the creature once more fastened its gaze to Gabriel’s and with a menacing growl it took a step towards him. However moving appeared to be too much of an effort for it and it staggered, falling down onto what Gabriel assumed was one of its knees. The look that the creature shot at the human was full of hatred.

With a glint in his eye Gabriel cautiously moved closer to finish his work. As he advanced the creature fell to its side, propped up from the floor on one arm. Slowly the creature began to sink to the cold stone as its strength deserted it. Its chest rose as it took in a great breath then a dreadful keening filled the air. The sound reverberated down the halls, shaking dust loose from the ceilings.

With a curse Gabriel took one last step towards the creature, knelt down,

and drove his daggers once more into the beast. Mercifully the sound was cut off. Gabriel stayed on his knees, panting, as the light faded from the red eyes. With a sigh he brushed a hand across his forehead then pushed himself to his feet. A distant cry made him freeze.

Another howl from inside the fortress took up where the previous had left off. It echoed eerily through the halls towards him. A moment later it was joined by another cry, and then yet another. Gabriel cursed as more creatures took up the cry from all around. Worse, they seemed to be moving closer. Carefully cleaning the blood from the blades, there was no knowing what the blood could do to the blades after prolonged contact with the metal, and sheathing the daggers Gabriel took off down the hall. He hoped that he was heading in at least remotely the right direction. The mission awaited; he now had to find Brooke and then the gem and escape the fortress.

“Let her be safe,” he breathed, “She has to be safe.”

Brooke crouched against a wall near the entry to the guard’s room, watching as one of the creatures slowly moved down the hall. It must not have seen her. If it had she thought it would be advancing on her much quicker than it was. That mattered little though, she would still be found soon enough. Already the creature was nearing the door. Once it reached the entry to the room she would be seen. Frantically Brooke was searching her memory for a spell that would help her get out of this mess, preferably alive.

“A spell,” she whispered, seeking comfort in her own words, trying to convince herself that she still had a chance, “to distract or fight them.”

The second creature prowled on the other side of the hall. Keeping abreast of its companion they slowly moved up the hall. They were looking for something, that much was obvious, but the question was what? Abruptly a thought occurred to her. They were looking for something. Looking. What if they couldn’t see her?

She smiled a grim yet relieved smile as she calmed herself and began to search her memory for a certain spell. A spell to make the visible hidden. Murmuring quickly she drew upon the reserves of power which dwelled deep inside of herself. Finishing her incantation she almost gasped as

she felt the power rush out of her, moving to do her bidding. Although she had experienced the feeling of sudden fatigue many times before the sensation was always jarring. It was much akin to being doused in cold water.

Slowly Brooke moved closer to the wall and knelt down. This spell would conceal her wherever she stood, but it did work best if she was as still as possible. Slowly she eased herself down into a comfortable position and leaned her head back against the wall.

She didn't have to wait long.

A deep rumbling sound, almost like a low pitched growl filled the small room moments before the creature became visible. The volume of the rumble increased as it passed by the doorway, pausing to glance into the seemingly empty room. Seconds turned into minutes for Brooke as the creature surveyed the room. Slowly, ever so slowly, the creature began to turn away, moving on past the room.

Then it stopped.

Brooke's breath caught in her throat as the creature's great head swung back towards the empty room. Something had caught its attention. Brooke tensed; the words of a defensive spell on her lips. If it attacked she wasn't sure how she could protect herself against it, but she sure was going to try.

The room grew dark as the creature took a step through the doorway. Raising its voice the creature called across the room. The second creature immediately left off its search and headed across the room.

Uh oh, Brooke thought, that's not good.

Moments later the second creature stopped in the doorway creating a wall of shadow across the entryway. There was no way out, she couldn't possibly sneak past unnoticed. They paused and after a few more words spoken in their garbled tongue the pair advanced further into the small room. They edged in slowly, carefully looking around and scrutinizing every corner.

Brooke watched nervously as they moved closer. How did they know she was there? Her spell should have rendered her completely invisible to them. Yet they had sensed her somehow? That feeling of wrongness that

she had noticed earlier in the evening was slowly growing worse.

The creatures were only a few steps away now; Brooke took a deep breath and then focused her thoughts on a different spell, one that was not exactly defensive but one that would, hopefully, encase the creatures in illusionary flames. The flames would cause them no harm but hopefully it may shock them enough to give her time to escape. She had to take them by surprise. Taking another, smaller, breath she formed the first word on her tongue. Beyond their searching the creatures still displayed no visible sign that they knew where she was.

A piercing cry from the distance broke her concentration, causing the spell to slip away. Luckily there was no need for it. At the sound the pair fluidly broke off their search and turned towards the sound. Lifting their heads they echoed the fading cry and rushed from the room.

Brooke stayed still until her pounding heart slowed. Eventually when it had she cautiously looked out into the hall.

They were gone.

Brooke murmured a quick prayer of thanks as she departed the small room. Carefully she made her way to the head of the hall and with a furtive glance around she vanished into the dark doorway beyond the throne. She still didn't know if this was the way to the treasury but anywhere was better than here. At least that uncomfortable feeling had faded, she mused, and maybe things were looking up.

Perspective

Gabriel's steps were heavy as he ran down the hall. Fatigue weighed heavily on him as he sought an escape from the howls that followed him down the corridor. So far he had seen no clues as to which direction he should be headed. No clues to where in the castle he was either. Looking to the side at another intersection of hallways Gabriel was greeted by another expanse of darkness. How was this place so large? The tunnels were seemingly endless. Silently Gabriel cursed the creature and his luck. Couldn't it have dropped him off right next to the treasury?

Another cry pierced the air and Gabriel cursed again. That call had come from up ahead. Further shrieks from behind spurred him forwards. At the next intersection he could turn but until then he had to go forwards. Until then he was rushing towards yet another creature. Up ahead it seemed as though he could make out the red eyes of the creature as it rushed towards him. Gabriel blinked and the eyes were gone. Was it really close enough for him to see or were his own eyes playing tricks on him?

Ahead and off to the side a small side passage emerged from the darkness. Without hesitation Gabriel slid around the corner and then continued his mad rush down the smaller corridor. This passageway was different. The torches were placed closer together and narrow arrow slits were more frequently set in the wall. As it seemed to be with much of the castle, only a few of the torches remained lit. In spite of the meager light coming from those few torches and the arrow slits the passage walls quickly faded to darkness. After a few paces Gabriel came to a sudden halt as a wooden door emerged from the darkness at the end of the hall. Feeling some small hope Gabriel smiled; maybe this was the elusive treasury. Even if it wasn't it could at least be a place to hide and catch his breath.

Gabriel checked to make sure the hallway behind him was still clear, it was, before approaching the door to try the knob. The knob made a faint clicking as it turned but otherwise it resisted his efforts. It must be locked or stuck. Gabriel glanced back as another creature's cry echoed down the hall. No going back now, they sounded too close.

"I wish Brooke were here," he murmured, "Maybe she could magic it open or something."

But she's not, he thought as he stared at the lock. Well... no time for subtlety.

Raising an armoured foot Gabriel slammed it into the door. There was a resounding crunch but the door remained sealed. Gabriel pursed his lips and then tried again, throwing all of his weight into the kick. Once more there was a crunching sound as he made contact with the door, this time the door shook in its frame.

Behind him the cries intensified as the sound from Gabriel's blow echoed down the hallway. Gabriel glanced nervously backwards and then tried again, this time shifting his blow to the area underneath the door handle. This time the door did more than move. With a great shuddering bang the door crashed open.

Gabriel dashed back towards the nearest torch and after tearing it from the wall he rushed back to enter the room. As the door swung as shut as it would go behind him Gabriel surveyed the room and sighed in relief. It wasn't the treasury but it was the next best thing, or maybe even better considering the circumstances. He'd found some kind of large armoury. Surrounding him were racks of well-kept weapons; more weapons than there should have been for a keep this size. Especially in a keep that so obviously didn't fear attack. Scattered amidst the racks of weapons were small pedestals, or in some cases alcoves, holding various pieces of special weaponry. For some of those weapons set aside he could immediately see why they were kept separate. Many of the weapons were set with jewels or inlaid with precious metals. However others looked no different than the regular weapons they were set apart from, these he could only assume were enhanced through magic.

His eyes narrowed as he took in his surroundings. There was more to this keep it than had first appeared.

Towards the back of the room the racks of weapons turned into stands of armour. Gabriel spared this section no more than a glance, even if it seemed ineffective against these creatures his armour was fine. Besides, he had no way of knowing whether any of that armour would serve him any better than his own. But the weapons...

The weapons filling the racks ranged anywhere from stilettoes to lances and bearded axes. Gabriel however had eyes only for a single section of

weapons amidst the racks. Off to Gabriel's left several rows of assorted blades glinted in the semidarkness. He swiftly approached the rack and after a furtive glance at the door he glanced down at what it held. There were blades of every shape and size, some of which only barely fit the description of a sword. Reaching down he removed a plain steel sword, its blade etched with faint lines, from the rack and hefted it in his gauntleted hand. It felt serviceable but the weighting felt wrong to him. He placed it back on the rack and picked out another weapon. Once more the worn steel felt... wrong in his grip. With a grimace he put it back; today the weapon had to feel right. He had no time to relearn a new weapon. He needed to find one that felt as though its weight and balance were at least similar to his own lost sword.

A feral cry echoed through the doorway into the room and Gabriel started. The motion nearly caused him to drop the blade that he was examining, this one a notched sword breaker. That cry had seemed close; perhaps just down the hall. Gabriel replaced the weapon on the rack and hurriedly reached for another.

Behind him he heard the door creak and he turned. There was a great crash as his arm caught on the corner of the rack but Gabriel ignored it as he spun to face the door.

There was nothing there. The doorway remained empty. The rack wobbled behind him; weapons clattered as they struck the cold stone floor. Gabriel held his gaze on the entry uncertainly for a moment before returning his attention to the now upset weapons rack. Instead of it lying flat on the floor with its contents scattered across the floor the rack remained half upright. Perhaps a small bit of luck. As Gabriel leaned over to straighten the rack he saw the reason it had not fallen. The rack was propped up against a small shadowed table which stood behind the stand of blades; a table he had not noticed before. Righting the rack he curiously surveyed the table.

The table was simple, unmarked and adorned only with a deep purple cloth. Atop the cloth rested a weapon Gabriel had heard of but never seen before. It was a halfmoon blade. If the table itself was simple; the weapon resting on it was not.

The blade itself consisted of a single piece of curved and inlaid steel; the two tips of the blade were joined together with an ornately carved haft

of wood. All together they formed a halfmoon. An uncommon weapon but not unheard of; many considered the type of weapon unorthodox because it required two hands to wield. Still he had trained with mock versions of the weapon despite his mentor's scorn of the blade. One never knew what training could prove useful.

On a hunch Gabriel picked up the weapon. Immediately his lips twisted. This one felt... right. He couldn't quite explain it. Although he'd never held a real halfmoon, only the practice ones he'd used in his training, it felt at home in his hand. Gabriel brushed the fingers of one hand against the wood of the haft, holding it outstretched and aloft before him.

The door creaked behind him and he spun around to see one of the creatures lunging for him. In the split second before it struck he noticed that this creature looked a bit different. It appeared ghostly, insubstantial. On instinct he spun the weapon upwards, slashing towards the creature's arm. The creature slid out of his reach and then stepped back forwards as he was still recovering from his swing. With a feral roar it smashed its fist into his chest. His breath caught as he waited for the explosion of pain... but nothing happened. No pain set in, no blood rushed forth, as the creature withdrew its arm. Then the creature faded. One moment it was there and then it was gone. Shocked, Gabriel stood still for a moment as he tried to sort through what had happened.

As he stood another creature looked around the edge of the door. This one looked more substantial; it appeared more like the others he had faced that night. Upon seeing him it swept forward, following the same path as the ghostly creature had. He swung the halfmoon towards the creature but this time he put less force behind the halfmoon as he swung the blade. At his swing the creature once more pulled back, once the blade had passed it began to surge forwards. This time he was ready. Gabriel reversed his swing and instead slashed upwards towards the creature's outstretched arm. It shrieked as the halfmoon cut deep. He stepped back and spun the halfmoon around as the creature took another step towards him and this time the blade bit into where its throat should be. With a final gurgling cry it fell to the floor. The glow from its eyes slowly dimmed.

Gabriel remained stationary, blood slowly dripping from the blade, as

he stared down at the creature's corpse. What had happened? While holding this blade could he see the future? Long minutes passed before he stirred himself to motion. The halfmoon would do for a weapon, he thought, and this... ability was worth investigating. Well worth his time. Satisfied he glanced around the room once more before moving to the door. After checking down the hallway outside he set out into the dark passages once more.

Whatever had happened back there he still had a mission to do. He had to find Brooke.

The Treasury

After entering the doorway behind the head table at the end of the great hall Brooke had found a short hallway lined with doors. When she had tested a couple doors she had found them locked. Not dissuaded Brooke had pulled a lock pick from a pouch at her side and set about opening the doors. The first couple had turned out to be nothing more than storage rooms but the middle door on the left side of the hall had turned out to be something different.

She now stood examining it. Because of the dim light cast by a wavering torch she had originally assumed the door to be like the others, made of solid and unadorned wood. However this door was polished and ironbound. Whatever was behind it was definitely more important. Brooke set to work on the lock and within minutes the door swung open. The room inside glittered even with the gloom. Stacks of gold and other valuables were piled around the edges of the room. One corner held gold bars, another held stacks of gold coins while a third corner held chests of precious gems.

“How did a keep this size get so much?” She murmured to herself.

Something was not right about this keep.

Then something in the center of the room caught her eye. It was a purple gemstone, a faceted sphere of amethyst. And from its center it seemed to emit pure white light. The gem’s glow dimmed and a moment later pulsed again; once more the light shone forth.

That was it. That was the gem they’d been sent to find.

“Gabriel where are you?” She murmured her eyes fastened to the gem, “We can go...”

Gabriel ducked into a doorway as a pair of ghostly creatures ran across the hallway intersection in front of him. Out of sight he listened as the real creatures passed by him. Blood pounded in his ears as he cautiously stuck his head out to check the hall. Now it was empty. Once more he thanked whoever or whatever luck had guided him to the halfmoon. He’d now had it for less than an hour and already it had saved his life several times. The forewarning that the weapon provided was invaluable. Why

had the weapon been hidden away in a storage room? Why wasn't it in use?

Maybe that was a question for another time, he thought as he slid around another corner. He was now running down the hallway the creatures had just left. Each time he passed a door or hallway he quickly glanced into the entry. Nothing looked too promising so he continued on his present course. Halfway down the hall he came across another hallway, at the end was a double door. The door was slightly ajar.

Was that the door he'd been looking for?

He felt hope flare as ran towards the door. This seemed... right. Upon reaching the door he carefully looked inside. The room was devoid of life. From the light of a single torch burning on the far wall he could make out what appeared to be a large room. Tapestries lined the walls and tables and benches cover the floor of the room. Off to one side of the room was a small doorway and a dark entry marked another hallway at the other end of the room. Gabriel breathed a sigh of relief.

Finally, he thought, this is the great hall. I'm close. I have to be.

He brushed through the door and ran into the room, barely sparing a glance for the doorway off to the side, a guardroom he guessed, as he rushed to the back of the room. He was so close. If the treasury was back here, and he figured it should be, then he could find the gem, find Brooke and they could be on their way.

As he neared the far door he heard something screech behind him. He looked back to see one of the creatures advancing into the great hall. A few steps from the door it stopped and screeched again. Its gleaming eyes narrowed as it stared at him.

It was waiting, he realized as his breath caught in his throat, waiting for more to show up. He'd had enough trouble trying to beat one at a time, but if several came at him at once... even with the halfmoon he'd be overwhelmed. He had to find Brooke, find the gem, and then they had to get out of there. He could only hope that the gem was back there and that there was another way out.

Time was running out. And they were coming.

Brooke froze as she heard a screeching call echo down the hallway. She sidled to the door and peeked around the edge. The hallway was empty for now, but who knew what was out there in the darkness. She had to move. She turned back to the gem. Unprotected as it was it seemed to beckon to her. There were no enchantments there that she could see and there was nothing holding the gem in place. It seemed to be waiting for her. It seemed to be begging for rescue.

“Gabriel where are you?” she breathed.

Something clattered in the hallway outside and Brooke stepped closer to the wall by the door. She knelt down and cast the same spell she had used earlier to hide from the creatures. It should work again. She held as still as she could while watching the door.

Someone was coming.

Traps

Gabriel barreled down the hallway; he glanced into each of the open rooms as he went by. None of them seemed to hold anything of interest so he passed them by. A short way down the hall he found it. Finally the treasury. The iron bound door was already open as he ran up to it. He froze when he saw what was inside.

Inside the room he saw the gem and standing next to it was Brooke. She had her back to him and was reaching towards the gem. Before he could say a word she lifted the gem from its pedestal. Upon turning away her eyes locked with his. Her lips parted as though to speak and then she was gone, engulfed in a raging inferno.

“Brooke!” he cried out as he rushed into the room to pull her from the flames. However as he passed through the doorway she vanished. He stood stunned for a moment as he worked through what had happened. Both the fire and Brooke had vanished. From off to his left a voice spoke questioningly.

“Gabriel? There you are! Are you alright?” Brooke shimmered into view as she stepped away from the wall.

“I’m well enough all things considered,” he said as he attempted to control his breathing. He searched her face but could find no hints that anything was wrong. Brooke was alright, he felt relief wash over him. “You?”

“I’m fine, now’s probably not the time to tell you about it. You look like someone died, what happened?”

Gabriel glanced at the door as the screeching picked up again from down the hall, this time it sounded like more than one. It seemed the creatures were gathering out there, but why were they waiting?

“It’s a bit of a story,” he said slowly, “and one I can tell you later.”

“What about when you came in? You looked terrified, what did you see?”

“That...” Gabriel hesitated as he considered what had happened. It must have been a vision given to him by the halfmoon he decided after a moment.

“That what?” Brooke asked, watching him carefully.

“That... that was nothing, I’ll explain later. It’s nothing to worry about. For now let’s get that gem and get out of here.”

“Alright,” she said slowly and then began to walk over to the gem.

“Wait,” he said catching her wrist, “A trap is triggered when you remove the gem.”

“I don’t see anything magical; do you think there’s a physical trigger?”

“It must be. I’m sure it’s there.”

“How could you be sure?”

“Trust me, I’m sure.”

“How could you possibly know that? You just walk into the room and know there’s a trap?”

From the hallway beyond a creature shrieked again. Gabriel looked at Brooke as more creatures continue to take up the call outside the room.

“Is this really the right time Milady? I don’t know what they’re waiting for but I doubt we have time.”

“I guess not, but you’re not getting out of this. I’ll expect an answer later.”

“I’ll have one for you later, for now let’s grab that gem.”

She pursed her lips and looked towards the gem then back towards Gabriel.

“How should we get it do you think? Do you know if this trap triggers immediately or is there a delay?”

“I...” Gabriel closed his eyes as he thought back, “There’s a delay, not a huge one just a couple seconds. Do you have a spell to bring the gem to us?”

“Not exactly, the one I have wouldn’t work down here. There’s not enough movement in the air. You’re sure that we have at least a couple seconds before the trap triggers?”

“Yes, as sure as I can be.”

The cries from outside the room fell silent causing them to share another look. Gabriel moved to the door and looked around the corner. A moment later he turned back.

“I think they’re coming. We have to get that gem and leave.”

“I know what to do,” Brooke said, “The medallion can get us out. As long as there is a delay of a couple seconds before the trap triggers we should be able to get through the medallion’s portal safely.”

“Very well.”

“Take my hand, then you can grab the gem and I’ll activate the portal.”

“Once you use the medallion how long do we have until we jump through the portal?” he asked as he slung the halfmoon on his back.

“It’s almost immediate.”

The cries from the doorway intensified as the creatures entered the hallway outside.

“It’s time, Milady. On two activate the medallion.”

She nodded mutely as he began to count.

“One.”

Gabriel’s fingers slowly wrapped around the gem, he took special care not to jar the stone in any way. A creature stopped in the hallway outside the doorway. It stared into the room towards them and then shrieked. The cry echoed piercingly through the room.

“Two.”

Gabriel pulled the gem free from its pedestal as Brooke activated the medallion. Snarling, the creature lunged into the room behind them. The jewel in the front of the medallion flashed white and then everything went black.

Aftermath

Gabriel felt nothing besides Brooke's warm hand in his own once they entered the portal. There was nothing; no wind on his face nor ground beneath his feet. It was as though he were floating in a great open space. Complete darkness surrounded him; it seemed as though his eyes were closed and he couldn't open them. He opened his mouth to speak but he could make no sound. Brooke squeezed his hand once, then twice, and with a rush he found that he could see again. There was ground beneath him and a breeze lifted his hair. What he saw first were the stars, glistening far up above. Next he saw Brooke standing beside him. They'd made it.

Gabriel carefully placed the jewel in a pouch at his side and then he unslung the halfmoon from his back. The moment his fingers brushed against the cool wood a ghostly fist appeared sticking through his chest. Immediately he spun around. The halfmoon's blade gleamed in the moon light as he swung it in a wide arch. There was a spray of dark liquid and then a creature slumped to the ground its eyes going dark. Panting Gabriel looked around, searching the darkness for more of them. It appeared that they were alone. They were on a hilltop, surrounding them were pine trees. He could hear water to the east. He recognized this place; they had camped here on their way to the castle.

"It must have been pretty close to us in the castle if it came through the portal with us," Brooke murmured thoughtfully as she moved around him to get a better look, "Lucky you turned around when you did."

"Yeah. Lucky."

"That reminds me! I thought you might want this back," Brooke said as she pulled his sword from the makeshift sheathe on her back. She gestured at the halfmoon as she continued, "Although you look like you've done well enough with that one."

"Thank you Milady," he smiled as he took back his sword and returned it to the sheathe at his side. He would have missed that sword; it felt more natural in his hand than any other weapon ever had. Idly he checked the gem in its pouch as he considered their next move. They should probably camp and then start their journey back in the morning.

“Look at that,” Brooke exclaimed breaking through his musings, startled he looked up and followed her gaze to the moon.

The moon was glowing a pale red.

“Odd.”

“Wasn’t there an old children’s rhyme about a red moon?”

“I don’t remember anymore,” Gabriel said with a frown, “However that does seem familiar... I think you’re right.”

“Yeah... I guess I’ll ask around when we get back home, someone will know something.”

“Yeah someone should.”

Together they stood staring at the moon. Eventually Brooke shook herself from her trance and looked at Gabriel.

“So what now?” she murmured.

“I was thinking we should camp here until morning and then head back.”

“That works for me, after that... I think I need a little sleep,” She pursed her lips and looked at Gabriel’s bloodied form, “But first I’ll take a look at some of those injuries.”

Gabriel nodded and Brooke moved over to examine his injuries. Although Gabriel’s armour was scuffed and scraped he himself seemed to have avoided the worst of the damage; most of the blood wasn’t his.

“Most of these aren’t bad,” she murmured, “Your armour took most of the damage, but I’m still going to bind a few of these on your arms.”

He nodded and she set to work, quickly rolling up his tattered sleeved and binding the few injuries underneath.

“What caused these?”

“Those must have happened when the creatures bashed me against the walls.”

“They’re that strong?” she asked looking up from her work.

“Stronger. I hope to never see them again.”

A short time later she finished and they moved apart. Together and yet separate each lay down beneath the stars. Their cloaks were their only blankets they tried to get some rest. Despite it all Brooke smiled as she waited for sleep. Gabriel was alright and they had the gem. She wished she could express how relieved she was, how much worry had been lifted from her shoulders when she had seen him burst into the treasury, but she couldn't. Still. The mission was complete. That was what counted.

A shadow creature entered the dark room. Opposite the door a man stood facing a tall window. One of his hands caressed the hilt of the blade at his side, he seemed tense. The creature hesitated and then reluctantly trudged forwards. Upon nearing the man the creature dropped to one knee.

“Master,” it said in its guttural voice, “Two escaped.”

“I know.”

The creature cringed back as if expecting some reprimand or harsh blow but none came.

“Master what should we do?” asked the creature hesitantly after a moment.

“Continue as planned. Those two don't know anything. Besides, what if they did? It's too late for them stop us now. The others you took?” the man prompted.

“The others are in the pens with the rest of the slaves. Just as you ordered Master.”

“Good. You have done well; I am pleased with your progress.”

“Thank you Master,” responded the creature as it backed from the room.

“Soon my friends. Soon. I'll take what's mine.”

The man's teeth bared as he grinned.

Fin
