

Eldritch Beginnings

A Dr. Eldritch Novel

Chapter 1 - Hunting

In an ancient midnight forest, a slight breeze pushed ribbons of clouds across the glowing moon. The trees shifted sleepily, rustling gently in the cool night. A tiny, unseen creature scampered across the ground, leaving the rustle of leaves in its wake. For a time the woods sat in comfortable darkness, and just as an obscuring cloud slid across the moon, something moved. Barely seen, hardly more than a ripple of shadow within shadow, a black shape slipped between two pools of darkness. The gentle sounds of the night woods faded, as if the quiet glade held its breath, striving to see who had broken the arboreal solitude.

For a moment, the gauzy clouds thinned, and pale moonlight shone upon a man, motionless at the edge of the trees, but only briefly. As softly as a silken scarf sliding to the floor, he sank to his knees, and once again vanished into the shadows. Crouched in the dark, he scanned his surroundings with practiced eyes and ears for any sign of his quarry.

The solitary figure knelt by a bare patch of earth in the dark forest, silently. Moonlight filtered through the gauzy cloud layer, like a wandering wisp of silk before a dim lamp, throwing the figure into even deeper darkness. Motionless, he faded into the rippled shadows of the midnight woods, until the faintest of sounds brought him to his feet.

He strained to hear another sound, but the black forest was again silent. But this time, it was a quiet of tense waiting. There was something else in the woods, and it knew he was there. The dark did not reveal the tiny smile that played across his lips, nor his hand finding the handle of the blade at his belt. He slowly pivoted, starting the disciplined movements that allowed silent footsteps in the woods, when another soft noise came. From a different direction.

Like a ghost he slid back under the sheltering shadows of the trees, still listening. He held his breath, hoping to catch another of the tiny sounds that could reveal the nature of his stalkers. Heart thudding in his chest, almost drowning out another noise, this time to his left. There was not merely another being in the trees; he was outnumbered.

Shifting his weight ever so slowly, he stepped deeper into the shadow. Rocking from one foot to the other, he moved away from the noises. And then he saw something move.

Across the small clearing the trees cut the moonlight into a jagged jumble of opalescent light and inky shadows. The motion was the smallest change of black to deep gray and back, but it was the unmistakable effect of another figure moving stealthily toward him through the dark.

Sacrificing absolute quiet, he moved faster. Even the gentle footsteps of a dexterous woodsman sounded loud in the midnight silence, but he took a step, and another. The next step was as smoothly executed, but brought a crackle of some twig as it snapped beneath his boot, and it instantly brought sound and movement across the clearing.

Abandoning stealth, he turned and fled. His footsteps thudded quickly as he strode through the night, dodging branches and uneven terrain as best he could in the dark. Behind him he could hear sounds of pursuit; several beings tracked him now. His pace quickened yet again.

Through the trees ahead flickered a dim light, like a faint beacon of hope across a dark sea of danger. His pace quickened to an awkward trot, heading toward the light. The footsteps behind him now were louder, but still almost drowned out by his thudding heart and ragged gasps for air. Were they closer? Did he hear a chuckle, as if his pursuers enjoyed the fear that clutched at him?

He broke from the covering layer of trees just as the silver moon slid from behind its gossamer mask, allowing him to make a lumbering run across the clearing to the tiny fire that was the source of the light. No other people were there, but he dashed to the source of illumination, and turned to face his pursuers.

It was not long before they appeared. Three dark figures moved from the shadows like wraiths from a crypt. Where he had gasped for breath, they seemed hardly winded by the chase. They approached, and he could see their faces in the moonlight; wild and leering. It may have been a trick of the light that made their eyes appear to have a faint glow, or perhaps that was merely the effect of a terrorized imagination as the three moved closer to their prey.

“What’s wrong, don’t like the look of us?” one said, grinning. “Don’t worry, you’re safe now by your fire.” The other two chuckled at that, evilly. The lone figure picked up a bottle from beside the rocks that ringed the fire, and raised it above his head.

“Offer us a drink?” One asked. “Aye, we are thirsty.” They moved closer, like lions closing in on a helpless antelope, eagerly.

“You’ll like this then,” the lone figure said, and hurled the bottle downward, directly onto the rocks at his feet. The bottle shattered, the noise ripping through the forest. Thick liquid sprayed across the firepit, and erupted into flame. A fireball lifted from the ground, and the figures all blinked in the sudden light.

With a shout, men rushed from the trees, with swords and axes in their hands. The three hunters whirled, and snarled at the sight. Before they could move, one was overwhelmed by his attackers, and they fell in a pile of thrashing arms and legs. The other two hesitated, looking for an opening to flee, but the man across the fire snatched up an axe hidden behind the rocks. A spot of the liquid clung to the blade, and the flame whooshed as he leapt forward, bringing the axe in a sweeping arc that thudded deep into the shoulder of his adversary.

The figure screeched, writhing away from the blade. It was pulled free, and swung again, this time catching him across the neck, lifting his head away from his body. Blood, looking black even in the firelight, sprayed from the torso as his body fell to the dirt. The axeman turned to find another opponent, but the third attacker was already brought to the ground by the swords of the others. One glanced up at him as his victim twisted on the ground like a dying reptile.

“Well done, Eldritch,” he said. The other nodded, sliding his hood back to reveal a handsome, albeit wild-looking young man. His eyes were pools of darkness in the night, yet he had an air of one who saw more than he would tell.

“I could say the same, William,” Eldritch said. “Let’s see what Viktor’s caught.” They skirted the remains of the burning pitch to where an older, heavier man knelt beside the captive. Two younger men, scarcely more than boys, tried to contain the wiggling man. The older nodded at the two as they approached.

“You make good bait,” he said. “Now let’s find out what he knows.” He looked down at the man on the ground.

“I’m told that somewhere near here is a cave filled with treasure,” he said, almost pleasantly. “You should tell me where it is.”

“I’ll kill you!” the man snarled back. Viktor chuckled.

“Sure, go ahead,” he said. “Let’s see if this helps you.” He drew a long dagger. The man on the ground glared at the blade, and tried to spit at Viktor.

“Where is the cave?” Viktor asked, and thrust the blade into the man’s thigh. An unearthly howl ripped through the night.

“You should tell me now,” Viktor said as the howl faded into gasping pain, but the man shook his head.

“Very well,” Viktor said, turning the blade. The pinned man buckled, almost throwing the younger men off him, but they held on resolutely. Eldritch grabbed the older man’s arm.

“Enough,” he said. “you’ll kill him.”

“No loss,” Viktor said, but Eldritch pulled the blade from the helpless man’s leg.

“Tell him what he asks, and we’ll release you,” he said. His companions began to protest, but he waved them off. The man on the ground glared at him.

“You lie,” he said. “You’ll kill me anyway.” Eldritch shrugged.

“He’s too clever for us,” he said. “He must realize we already know where it is.” The prisoner’s eyes flickered to the side, away from the fire.

“Oh, that way, is it?” Eldritch said, and Viktor rumbled a deep laugh. The man bared his teeth in a hissing snarl, but Viktor was already getting to his feet. He grabbed the man by the hair and lifted him like a child.

“Bind him,” he said, and one of the two youths with a few, practiced moves, looped rope around the smaller man’s wrists and pulled tight. Lighting torches from the fire, the group moved up the hill in the direction the man had inadvertently revealed.

With torches, and a few key bits of guidance prodded from the captive by knifepoint, the group quickly found themselves near the entrance to the cave. Set into the hill, the rock above jutted out like a heavy simian brow. The opening was a jagged slash in the hillside, looking like merely a depression into the rock beneath an overhang. The group eyed it appraisingly.

“Do you think it’s empty?” William asked in hushed tones. Viktor shrugged.

“If Merrick has done his work, yes,” he said. “If not, we will have a glorious ending. Tie him here.” He gestured to a stout trunk, and the prisoner was unceremoniously bound to it.

“Here’s something to think about,” Viktor said, producing a small pouch from a pocket. A tug untied the string, and he dumped a spray of tiny, vibrant beads onto the forest floor at the feet of the tied man. He hissed viciously, but his eyes stayed fixed on the tiny spots of color.

The group approached the entrance. Even in the torchlight, one of the youths had a decidedly pale cast and anxious look, but he tried to keep the tremble in his sword from being seen by his companions.

“Who goes first?” Viktor said. “Or must I do it?”

“It’s my night to be the hare,” Eldritch said. “I’ll go.” The pale youth looked decidedly relieved at these words. Viktor left the younger ones to watch, and he and William followed Eldritch into the cave.

The cave floor dropped steeply down, part of why the entrance was difficult to see at distance. After clambering down over the rocky drop, and a brief scramble bent almost double, the tunnel opened up, allowing the men to stand. Viktor silently handed Eldritch a pistol, who tucked it in his belt and moved deeper into the cave. After a dozen yards, he could see the tunnel widened out into a chamber of unknown size. Shifting the torch, he rested his hand on the butt of the pistol, and stepped forward, into the cavern. He paused, briefly, eyes scanning the murky reaches, raised a foot to step forward, and lunged backwards instead. As he cleared the entrance, someone landed on the cave floor just in front of him, screeching in frustration. Eldritch allowed his momentum to carry him backward as he drew the pistol. The figure before him whirled, ready to leap again, and Eldritch shot him full in the chest.

The man collapsed, writhing on the floor like a demon possessed. Eldritch approached cautiously, unslinging his axe. The figure on the ground arched his back, raising himself so he

was supported only on heels and occiput, howling pain into the reverberating blackness. Eldritch raised his axe; it fell and the body collapsed to the ground. As the echoes of his death cries faded, Eldritch looked about the murky chamber for any signs of other guardians. Seeing none, he gave a quick, three-note whistle, and moments later Viktor and William stood beside him.

“Well done, lad,” Viktor said. “but you’ve learned from the best. Looks like he’s an Old One.” He nudged the body with his foot, and the withering flesh split, revealing pale bones beneath. The corpse’s skin had already pulled tight around the bones as the flesh beneath turned to gritty dust. As the men watched, the bones sloughed off a surface layer, leaving them mottled and moldering, like the remains of a mummy.

“A hundred years, maybe more,” Eldritch said. “He’s going slowly. I wish he’d hurry.”

“Well, hare,” William said, with a slap to Eldritch’s shoulder. “You get to go through his pockets.” Eldritch grimaced, as the other two laughed, and headed deeper into the cave.

An hour later, they had almost completed their search of the cave. Bones and trash covered most of it. Scattered throughout were clothes, in varying degrees of distress, boots, books, and the occasional smashed trunk. The cavern floor resembled a ghoulish traveler’s lost-and-found, the remains of the dead mixed in with the remains of their luggage. As Eldritch checked a knapsack which appeared to be stained with dried blood, William uncovered a tiny portrait in a delicate metal frame. One corner was crushed, and the image was torn, but he could tell it was of a young, pretty woman. He gazed at it thoughtfully.

“Do you ever wonder about the lives of these people?” William asked his companion. Eldritch shook his head.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Why should I? They are of no matter to me,” Eldritch said. William sighed.

“Think of them, though,” he said. “All of these things once belonged to people, who had entire lives. Who is this woman? Was this pictured carried by her father, or brother? Or perhaps a lover, who would gaze at it, thinking fondly of the sound of her voice, or the way her eyes danced, or, the curve of her jaw? Perhaps he thought of the way her mouth looked as she smiled, and it gave him comfort. This is just one, look at all the remains! They tell the stories, if we could hear them, of their owners. They grew up, became adults, fell in love, perhaps married. They probably had a trade, or some business that brought them traveling these woods.”

“And it turned out badly for them,” Eldritch said.

“Indeed,” William said, softly. “But these are their possessions, things they cared about, now just the scattered detritus in a nest, for us to loot.”

“It isn’t as if their owners need them any more,” Eldritch pointed out. “And this lot certainly didn’t care about them. They’ve gone and sold anything of value, that’s for certain. We’ve barely enough to buy ale for the camp with what we’ve found.”

“And all their stories ended here,” William said. “Their treasures now cast-offs for the animals to find.”

“Don’t start thinking on me,” Eldritch said. “If you think, you’ll get maudlin. And I intend to celebrate tonight, not spend it listening to you moan about the lost. Come on, the others won’t wait for us to get back to camp.”

They exited the cave, and found the other men watching their captive, now untied, picking carefully at the ground.

“So, you make sport of him?” William said as they approached. The smaller man scuttled about, delicately lifting each bead from the dirt and dropping it into the pouch.

“Aye,” Viktor said. “But if I did not make sport of them, we might be tempted to plague the decent folk. Hand me your axe.” The smaller man glared and snarled, but continued his meticulous extraction of the beads from the forest floor. Eldritch handed the older man his axe, who raised it as the last few beads were lifted...

“There, done for tonight,” he said, tossing the axe back to Eldritch as the body corrupted into moldering dust. Scooping up his sack of beads, he deftly retied the top, and stuffed it into his belt.

“Now I’m ready for a draught and a wench. Perhaps two. Onward, lads!”

The sounds of the encampment met them long before they entered the firelight. Two men played recorders to the beat of a small drum, but no one was dancing. Instead, they clustered in loud groups, eating, drinking, and laughing.

As they approached, a tall, pale-haired man with a blunderbuss watched them suspiciously, then waved them by. He nodded to Viktor, but ignored the others until they had past him.

“Any luck tonight, Eldritch?” he asked softly. “Or did you waste your time pouncing on shadows?”

“Ah, Campion,” Eldritch said. “This bitterness is why you will never amount to anything. I feel sorry for you.”

“You avoid the question! Another bloodless venture, then.” Eldritch bristled.

“We found four tonight,” he snarled. “Two went by my own hand. Can you say the same?”

“Oh, certainly not,” *Campion* mocked. “Two, indeed? Would your companions tell the same count? No matter, of the seven we met tonight, I sent three along their way. Not that *I* would boast of such things.” *Eldritch* stepped back toward the sneering man, but *William* grabbed his arm and tugged him away from his antagonist. *Eldritch* resisted momentarily, but gave in to the insistent pull and turned back to the fires.

“Why can you not ignore *Campion*?” *William* asked as they carved hunks of meat from that which roasted above a fire. “He is no more skilled than you.”

“You may as well ask why *Viktor* must drain every tankard and bed every wench he can,” *Eldritch* grumbled. “It is my destiny.”

“Just last week you told me your destiny was to take *Merrick*’s role. Has your fate changed?”

“They are one and same, merely two facets to the gem that is my future,” *Eldritch* said, splashing dark ale into a jack. “As long as *Merrick* favors *Campion*, I will continue to poke and pry at his armor. If I can goad him into making a mistake, my path will be that much easier.”

“Perhaps,” *William* nodded. “But he seems more adept at riling your anger than you at his. I think he plays the same game upon you.” *Eldritch* paused, then shrugged.

“As usual, your words are probably worth deep and thoughtful consideration,” he said. “But tonight I will pursue *Viktor*’s role. *Campion* can go stuff it.”