

Chapter 2 – The Werewolf

Despite the late-night revelry, the men woke mid-morning and blearily broke camp. The night's haul was meager, enough to supply drink and food when no game could be caught, but not enough to finance nights at an inn or other accommodation. So they packed their belongings into knapsacks and satchels, loaded what would fit onto the company's only cart, and headed off to find the meandering track that served as primary road for the remote area.

Midday found them in a tiny village, scarcely more than a few dozen homes haphazardly circling a common space. Near the center was a public house, and the travelers dropped their gear outside and sent junior members of their lot in to fetch what could be had for their offerings.

The villagers watched the company warily from narrow windows, but a few curious children who had escaped their parents' watchful eyes approached as a cautious, but giggling band, unable to resist the fascination of strangers from beyond the village. William gestured them to come nearer, and handed them small pieces of dried exotic fruits. The children were unsure at first, until the bravest popped the dark bit of sticky fruit in his mouth. At first he chewed dubiously, but as the flavor found him, his eyes lit up, and he held out his hand for more. This was enough for the others, and they clamored for tastes, until William held up his hands to signal that it was all gone. Instead, he told them of the previous night's adventures, and his audience listened in rapt attention. When he described slaying the last guard within the cave, one of the older boys leapt up and dashed off to a distant building.

William was being begged for another story when the boy returned, following a burly, shirtless man. He carried a smith's hammer, not as much in a threatening way, but more as one who was interrupted mid-task, and was too distracted to relieve himself of his tools before hurrying off. The hulking, bald smith approached William, and the cluster of children scattered, only to regroup a few feet away like a pack of crows more curious than cautious.

"You have killed those who hunt in the woods?" the smithy asked, his thick accent making William pause to ensure he understood the question.

"Yes, last night," he said. "Eleven of them. I can tell you the story, if you like..."

"No. We have need for you," the man said. "We can pay." This got the attention of the others of the band who had been lounging nearby, watching William's storytelling and subsequent arrival of the smith with amusement.

"I'm sure our leaders will be pleased to speak with you," William said. "Come, let me introduce you." He brought the smith to where Merrick and Viktor stood, and briefly explained the conversation so far. The smith looked uncertainly at Viktor's wild hair and rough features, but Merrick's poise and steady gaze seemed to meet his approval.

"We have little," he began. "But our fields and our animals provide enough each year. Lately, we have found our animals torn and eaten. There are tracks like a wolf, but this is no wolf. We

have seen the beast and chased it, but the dogs do not come back. It is a wolf that comes with the moon, and not in between.” Merrick and Viktor exchanged a knowing glance at those words.

“Did the beast come last night?” Merrick asked. The smith nodded.

“A cow was taken. The beast ate much of it. I can show you,” he said. Merrick shook his head.

“No need. We are well equipped to handle beasts such as this. What can you offer us, if we kill the beast for you?”

“We have money,” the smith said.

“I have no doubt,” Merrick said. “But we are more in need of food that can go with us on our travels.”

“And it wouldn’t hurt if you have some daughters,” Viktor said, drawing a laugh from the watching crowd. Merrick gave his companion a venomous look, but otherwise ignored the remark.

“We have had many nights of late in the woods,” Merrick said. “A night in the public house for all my men would go far in payment for our deed.” The smith nodded, and the three men went inside the establishment to continue negotiations.

Most of the group had clustered near the cart to listen in on the smith's appeal, and now they chatted happily about their good fortune.

"Wouldn't mind a night indoors," one said. "If we don't spend all of it running hither and yon trying to find the damned beast."

"Finding is not the problem," Eldritch said. "Finding it without getting eaten is the tricky part."

"Oh, please share your wisdom," Campion muttered, a little too loudly. "If I remember correctly, last time we cornered such a beast, you were nowhere to be found." Eldritch narrowed his eyes, but his voice remained calm.

"Merrick picked me to be among the convoy's guard," he said. "If I had been among the hunters, I could have found and killed the beast, as well. They pose a danger to animals and the unaware, but not to one properly prepared."

"You think so? I've seen one take down five grown men."

"But were they properly armed, and knew the ways of their prey? I could kill a werewolf single-handedly with the proper weaponry."

"Oh, I'm sure you could kill a werewolf on your own," Champion sneered. "Let it chase you up a tree, then boast to it about how clever you are until it dies from sheer boredom." This brought a round of laughter from the gathered crowd, and a flush to Eldritch's cheeks.

"Pay him no mind," William said softly, but his friend ignored him.

"At least I could kill one instead of watching five companions die." The circle went quiet, and all eyes were on Champion. His face went tight.

"Shall we have a wager then? The first one to find the beast claims first right to slay it. If he cannot, the other has his chance."

"If you agree to not use the aid of the group, this is just a kill for us," Eldritch said. Champion nodded.

"Certainly. I suggest we each enlist a second, who will neither aid nor interfere, but witness the victory, or carry your body back when you fail."

"When you fail, you mean," Eldritch said, with a cheerful grin calculated to aggravate his adversary. "The winner inherits the possessions of the loser, unless the loser survives. Then he shall merely admit he is a pompous blowhard." To his surprise, Champion laughed.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure than hearing you say that," he said. "Agreed." He extended his hand, and Eldritch gave it a quick shake. The group around them buzzed with excited chatter, and an eruption of wagering. Eldritch turned to William.

"Will you be my second?" he asked. The other man gulped.

"Are you quite sure you can slay a werewolf on your own?" he asked. "They are nothing to be trifled with."

"Perhaps you should become a cobbler," Eldritch said thoughtfully. "I'm sure they lead quite interesting lives. I'm not exactly certain what they do, but it always seems to involve tapping at shoes with little hammers. Fascinating."

"Very well," William said. "But don't count on me to feel sorry for you if you're killed. And I'm saying now that this is a bad idea."

"That's the spirit," Eldritch said, clapping his friend on the shoulder. "Boost my confidence. Always good to inspire the person who is about to become the only one standing between you and a ravenous beast. Fear not, I have a plan that has little chance of failing. We will need to gather a few items."

Wagering continued through the afternoon, and Merrick even offered half of the coins offered by the village as reward if either one could bring down the werewolf single-handedly. William helped his friend gather an iron cooking pot, a pouch of gunpowder, and a handful of fabric

scraps, but Eldritch was close-mouthed about their role and purpose for his plan. Once gathered, he sent William off to inquire about the location of the prior night's attack, and disappeared himself with his materials until the sun approached the horizon. The gang, and much of the village, had gathered in the town square to watch the two hunters set off.

Campion wore a heavy leather coat, studded with thick metal knobs. He carried a shotgun and had a brace of pistols at his waist. On his back was a large sword. His second was one of the older members of the group; a burly, thick-muscled man, missing much of a finger on one hand. He carried pistols and an axe as well. William, returned early from his information-gathering mission, wore a borrowed heavy coat, supposedly lucky against the bites of lycanthropes. He carried only a short sword, which seemed to cause some muttering among the crowd, and more money changed hands. Campion and his second fiddled with their gear, repeatedly checking and rechecking as they waited. The sun was halfway below the horizon when Eldritch sauntered up, wearing only a dark cloak over his normal clothing. A sword hung at his belt, but he carried none of the other equipment gathered earlier in the day.

"Nice night for it," he said cheerily. Campion glared.

"Where have you been?" William asked. "I was afraid they'd expect me to go after the thing myself."

"Don't be silly," Eldritch said. "Pass up the chance to have Campion admit he's a blowhard? No, fierce, ravening beasts couldn't keep me from this. Which is what we're facing, after all. Which way is the carcass?"

"Just west of here, up that hill," William said.

"Most excellent," Eldritch said, and turned to face the other team.

"Ready, Campion?" The other man snapped an angry nod.

"I have been for a while, Master Eldritch."

"Very well, then. May the best man win," Eldritch said. "Try not to die, will you?" Campion only glared, and strode off to the north.

"This way, William," Eldritch said, striking out to the east, with his friend at his heels. He strode briskly toward the edge of the forest, but once inside the trees, turned southerly, following the edge of the woods.

"I said the carcass is west," William protested. Eldritch merely grunted.

"Why didn't we just head this way first?" William asked, trying to keep pace. Eldritch gave a careless wave.

"Didn't want them knowing which way we're actually going," he said. "You might want to save your breath. We've got some ground to cover before it gets dark. The moon is already rising." He waved an arm behind him, and William glanced back. Indeed, the pale top of the moon was sliding up behind the distant mountains, glowing in the remains of the sunset light.

Holding the pace soon brought them to the carcass of the young cow. It was badly torn, with large bitemarks all over the hide. A bloody semi-circle spread out away from the body. William looked away before he got too good a look at the entrails draped from the open abdomen.

"Such a waste," William said. "A pity they couldn't use the meat."

"Indeed. I've never heard of someone becoming a werewolf from merely eating the flesh of one of its victims, but I wouldn't want to take the chance either. Fortunately, this helps up immensely."

"It does?" William asked, uncertainly. "You're not putting... those in your sack, are you?"

"Don't tell me a decaying corpse doesn't turn your stomach, but the wholesome offal of livestock puts you green?" Eldritch grinned.

"They at least have the decency to turn to dust," William said. "They're not nearly so... wet."

"There, all done," Eldritch said, hefting the now-weighty sack. "We walk again!"

The moon had risen above the mountains by the time they stopped again. This time they were on a hill by a sparse strand of tall trees. The iron pot sat at the base of one tree by some fallen logs. A dead sheep, rigid but not bloody, as William noted thankfully, lay nearby. Eldritch opened the sack and emptied the contents into a depression between the two fallen logs, and William could tell that their placement was not a coincidence.

"What then, is your plan?" he asked, as Eldritch tossed the sack aside. "I must confess I have no inkling of how you intend to succeed. The remains are to draw the beast, correct?"

"Exactly right," Eldritch said. "But I wasn't sure if day-old carrion would appeal, so we have this for some help." He picked up the sheep, and drew a dagger. William looked away, trying not to hear the splashing sounds. When he looked back, the sheep lay between the logs as well, and a fresh coating of blood covered the lot.

"How did you come by that sheep?" he asked. "Surely it didn't conveniently expire today of its own accord?"

"I'm sure the owner would willingly surrender it to help rid the area of the menace," Eldritch said. "But don't ask annoying questions. You asked about how I was to succeed, and it's with this." He picked up the iron pot, which apparently was stuffed with cloth scraps. William shrugged, and Eldritch lifted a hastily stitched narrow tube of fabric that stuck into the pot at the very edge.

"Would you guess if I told you this was filled with powder?" he said. William nodded, uncertainly.

"You've made a petard," he said, and Eldritch grinned triumphantly. "So your plan is to attach it to the werewolf and blow it up. Very clever. Or are you to talk the beast into strapping it on itself?"

"If I could do that, I'd merely convince it to throw itself from a cliff," Eldritch said. "No, the pot goes here." He tucked it into a pre-dug pit at the base of one tree, pointing over the carrion pile.

"I thought of this plan months ago, but I haven't had the opportunity to try it. The tricky bit was figuring out how to fire it off without having to be standing right next to a ferocious, and probably hungry, werewolf. That's where the fire comes in." He gestured to a pile of wood and kindling carefully stacked to the side of the tree, with a protective layer of rocks stacked on the side.

"Ingenious," William said. "If it works. How do you know the beast will even come this way? It could be across the valley, walking right up to Campion's waiting sword."

"Mayhaps," Eldritch said. "But did you notice last night how the winds shifted after dark? No? That is why you shall never be leader, and it is my destiny."

"Because I don't notice the wind?" William said.

"No, because you aren't as clever. Now listen. I believe the winds will do the same, here. They will blow down this hill, across the valley, thusly. The scent of our freshly-blooded carrion will draw the beast like honey does the bear. Hungry, it approaches." He mimed the lumbering gait of a werewolf approaching the meat.

"It sees its dinner, and finds it difficult to reach from the side, courtesy of these cleverly-placed logs, and comes around from the open end. As it stands here, sinking its fangs into the prey, I release the cord supporting the fuse of my petard, which drops into the fire. Before the creature has any inkling of mortal danger, the fuse ignites, burns into the pot, and sets off the charge."

"How do you know it won't just destroy the trunk of the tree, dropping you into the waiting jaws of the wolf?" William asked. Eldritch stopped, and cocked his head.

"I don't know. Not for certain, anyway," he admitted. "But the pot is much like a small cannon, and cannons fire their shot forward. I suppose we'll find out, won't we?"

"Indeed," William said, looking none too pleased. "Please tell me that your petard is filled with silver. Otherwise I fear we may merely make the beast very angry."

"As much as I could find," Eldritch said. "Which will be a bit of a surprise for Harold, but once again, it is for a good cause. With any luck, I can return it to him in full, and only a little worse for wear." William shook his head.

"You amaze me," he began, but cut off abruptly as a long, wolvis howl drifted up the wind toward them.

"You may continue that thought later," Eldritch said. "I suggest you find a comfortable spot in that tree. I took the liberty of tying a rope so you may climb it more easily, and you should be above any claws or fangs, if it comes to that." William wasted no time in finding a perch in the designated tree, as Eldritch quickly got the fire blazing, and clambered up a rope into the tree above the trap. And they waited.

After over an hour, and a few additional distant howls, Eldritch was debating whether to make another venture down the tree to replenish the fire, when he caught a flicker of movement heading upward on the moonlit hillside. He pulled the cloak around him a little tighter, and held as still as he could, wedged against the trunk of the tree. He glanced over at the tree where William hid, and could make out the outline of his friend, but was relieved to see that William was also still, and watching.

Although the leaves rustled slightly in the breeze, Eldritch heard the footsteps of the approaching figure. It moved assuredly up the hill, apparently not aware of the two men hidden above. As Eldritch watched, he could see more definition; it was indeed the beast. The werewolf walked on two legs, but with a hunkering stance that spoke of its lupine influence. Even at a distance, Eldritch saw the gleam of its exposed fangs and the reflected glow of the fire in its eyes. Its nose lifted as it sniffed the air. It stopped, and Eldritch said a silent prayer that the carrion and smoke masked any scent of the two men that watched from above. Apparently unaware of them, the werewolf tossed its head, and loped uphill toward the aromatic meat.

Eldritch waited the long moments while the beast circled the tree suspiciously. Its focus was on the meat-filled pit, with only a few glances around the area of firelight. It approached, sniffing. Eldritch's heart thumped, and he hoped the lycanthrope couldn't hear it. Cautiously, it peered over the logs at the carrion. It sniffed at the iron pot, and Eldritch was suddenly afraid that it would knock the pot over or otherwise misalign the device. Fortunately, the compelling scent of the cow's remains drew its attention again, and it tried to lower its head to reach. It licked at the offal, but the awkward pose seemed uncomfortable for it. It rose, and moved around to the end of the logs. Eldritch held his breath as the beast moved into line with the improvised cannon. The beast moved forward, rested its front claws onto the logs, and lowered its head to take a big bite of the carcass. It pulled, tearing a chunk free. The beast raised its head, gulping at the meat to swallow it virtually whole.

Eldritch released the cord, dropping the fuse directly into the fire. The werewolf started at the sound of the cord falling, but its unwillingness to surrender its meal became its downfall. The fuse landed in the fire, bursting instantly into flame. It sent a smoky trail rushing along into the iron pot, which erupted with an echoing "boom!" Smoke, burning cloth, and a deadly barrage of silver sprayed the lycanthrope, who flew backward, spewing blood from dozens of wounds.

Eldritch tossed his rope down from where he perched and slid down it to the ground. He drew his sword from his belt and approached the beast. Its body lay sprawled awkwardly, twitching erratically. As Eldritch approached, the beast's head turned to face him. He couldn't tell whether the creature knew he was there or not, but he looked into its eyes. They were dark brown with gold flecks that caught the firelight, almost hypnotic. Its eyes were a look of such misery that Eldritch could bear it no longer. As the suffering beast struggled against the pain, he raised his sword, and drove it deep into its chest. The heavy jaws snapped, flinging tiny drops of crimson in a wild spray, and the body quivered, and fell limp. The final breath rattled from deep within its lungs, and life escaped the creature.

Eldritch withdrew the fatal sword, and regarded the beast with satisfaction. He raised his arms, and howled into the night in celebration.

"I am the champion!" he yelled into the night, and howled again. He turned when he heard his friend scrambling down from his tree.

"Did you ever see such a thing?" he asked as William approached. "One shot, and nothing more..." He stopped, as William ignored him and stared fixedly at the beast on the ground. Eldritch followed his gaze, and saw the form of the werewolf shifting. The heavy, canine features were remolding themselves into a more human form. The thick, matted hair that had covered the body was thinning. He couldn't say exactly whether it was evaporating, or being drawn back into the body, but the effect was like a covering layer melting away, revealing the olive skin of the human underneath. As the hair vanished, the bloody wounds torn into the stomach and chest showed more and more clearly, but this was not what held William's attention. As the transformation completed, before them lay the naked corpse of a young, dark-skinned woman.

"Oh, god," William said, swaying slightly. Eldritch said nothing, but removed his cloak, and gently draped it over her. He paused to softly close her staring eyes, and laid the hood over her face.

"Eldritch," William said, "You killed..."

"A werewolf," Eldritch said, harshly. "You saw it. There was no mistake."

"No," William agreed. "But I've never seen one that was a girl. What will the others say?"

"I care not," Eldritch said. He thrust his sword back into his belt, and knelt beside the corpse. Carefully he raised her up, still covered by his cloak, so he could carry her in his arms. He started off down the hill, back toward the village.

"What about the gear?" William called after him, but got no reply. He looked up at the ropes tied to the trees, and sighed.

The night's revelry was noisily underway inside the pub. Loud arguments still raged over whether Campion or Eldritch would be successful, and whether one or both would die in the attempt. The few villagers that braved the group's company were alternately enthralled and repelled at the gruesome stories told of past adventures, even at those which were deemed too far-fetched to be believed. The hunters only gave each other knowing looks, and drank deeply; they knew the truth of what they told, and that was enough.

Even with the drunken exuberance of the gathering, all eyes quickly noted the door swing open, and Eldritch entered. The crowd went near-quiet, save for the drunken mutterings of those too deep in their cups to cease their chatter for anything.

"What news?" someone cried. "Have you slain the beast?" Eldritch said nothing, but turned and walked outside. The crowd quickly, if unsteadily, followed. Eldritch led them to the cart, where his cloak covered the form underneath it from view. The cheerful crowd gathered, and raised torches to illuminate the body. Eldritch lifted the hood, and the group fell silent. A few turned away, muttering darkly, and as the realization of what Eldritch displayed reached the far edges of the crowd, the eager anticipation evaporated like mist in the morning sun. The smith, one of the few villagers present, nodded.

"A Gypsy. She came here last week, begging. We gave her food, but told her not to stay. Did the beast...?"

"She was the beast," Eldritch snapped. "She will not trouble you again."

"Is good!" the smith beamed. "Come, you drink!" Eldritch shook his head. The smith shrugged, and turned to the pub again. The hunters, slightly subdued, looked at Eldritch, and then at the warm pub, light streaming from the open door. A few muttered "Well done, lad" as they slowly followed the cheerful smith back toward the warmth and beckoning drink. Viktor was the last to leave.

"It's a pity," he said. "But it can't be helped. Come inside, have a drink. It will help ease the matter." Eldritch shook his head.

"Go on without me," he said. "I have not the heart for celebration now."

"As you wish," Viktor shrugged, and returned to the temptations of the pub. Eldritch sat, cross-legged on the cart, and gently lowered the fabric back over the woman's face. William found him thus when he arrived, carrying ropes and the misshapen iron pot. He dropped the gear by the cart, and shook his arms, massaging his hand where the pot handle had dug into it.

"Any sign of Campion?" he asked.

"None yet," Eldritch said. "I did not thank you earlier, but I am grateful for your aid, and for being my second. You are a good friend." William nodded.

"Interesting," he said. Eldritch glanced at him.

“A curious word,” he said. “Some might say ‘You’re welcome,’ or ‘You are a good friend, too.’”

“Sorry,” William said. “I just was thinking that I never heard you say those words before. I find it interesting. Are you going in? It’s not often we have a roof over our heads.”

“Not tonight,” Eldritch said. “My place is here.” William nodded, and headed for the wooden door. At the threshold he paused, and looked back.

“You are welcome,” he said, just able to be heard over the music that spilled from within. “And you are a good friend.” With that, he slipped inside the door, greeted by a enthusiastic cheer.

The moon was high in the sky, and the sounds of revelry had softened, but voices and laughter still could be heard from within the pub. Champion strode into the village square, followed by his second. He almost walked past Eldritch, but caught sight of him as he approached the pub door.

“At least I am not the only one to return empty-handed,” he began, but Eldritch met his gaze, and such was his expression that the words faded. Eldritch lifted the hood once again, and in the pearly moonlight and soft light from the pub, she appeared to merely be sleeping.

“Killed by the beast?” Champion asked.

“No, the wolf herself,” Eldritch said. Carefully he returned the cloth over her once again. Champion hesitated, seemed about to speak.

“Get to your rest,” Eldritch said. “There’s nothing more to be done for her tonight.” Champion nodded, and joined his second, who was already at the door.

The moon continued her journey across the night sky, sinking to the horizon as the stars faded and morning light lifted in the east. The village square was empty as the first light of dawn spread across it, but soon after the villagers appeared. Speaking excitedly in small clusters, the word of the night’s adventure quickly spread. The gathered in the village square, eagerly awaiting the waking of the hunters, to hear first hand the tale. Such was there excitement that none noticed the faint sound at regular interval from above the town.

If anyone else was near where two small tracks crossed the hill, they would see Eldritch, alone, save for the body of the unfortunate woman. He held a shovel, and the sound that the village failed to hear was the thunk! of the shovel blade into the rocky ground. Methodically he dug, tossing scoop after scoop of earth onto the growing pile beside the grave. So engrossed was he in his labor that he didn’t see the approaching figure until his shadow crossed the dirt in front of him. Looking up, Eldritch saw Champion, bearing a shovel, standing beside the grave. For a moment, the two men merely stood, eyeing each other. Then Eldritch stepped to one end of the hole, allowing the other man to reach the other side. Champion swung the shovel, and the hillside gently echoed with the dual strikes of the two shovels in the earth.