

Chapter 3 – Vogel’s Henchmen

Days spent waking in late morning or sometimes afternoon, watching the slow, groggy progress of men recovering from the previous night’s excesses. Quietly, the camp is packed, usually a simple matter of each man gathering his belongings, and a few of the least hung-over loading the common gear onto the cart. Days of travel, most of it walking, always late in the day, often into the night. Sometimes there were villages and small towns, where the locals would watch the hunters warily, unsure of their intent. When their purpose was explained, a few would scoff, but most would nod knowingly. Often food would be given to the men; simple, peasant fare, but always gratefully received. Ale, or mead, or even on the rare occasion, wine would be included, which was always enthusiastically received. Nights were spent carousing, except when there was game to be found. Then the hunting was done.

Many nights went by with no success. Whether the creatures that roamed the night had word that hunters were in the area, or whether simple fate guided their paths, no encounter would happen. On certain nights, the hunters found their prey, and they chased it, shot it, stabbed it, and bludgeoned it until it died. Then they returned to their camp, or pub, or inn, wherever they would spend the night, and drink. That is what they did.

On such a night, Eldritch was on the outside end of a sweeping line moving through the woods. They were on their way back, empty-handed. His eyes still cast back and forth as he walked, even though the chances of seeing anything worth pursuit was low. As he swung to the far outside, he spied the silhouette of something round. Too round and even to be part of the undergrowth. He whistled, a quick chirp of a night bird, and the call repeated down the line. The other men moved toward him, and a few quick gestures guided them to split into groups, and cautiously approach the unknown object from different sides.

They did not have to be too close to see what it was. The round object was a wheel, still attached to its cart, which was tipped almost completely over. Broken pottery scattered around the ground. As Eldritch looked for the source of it, he saw the body of a man lying almost obscured by ferns and shrubs. Dark splotches covered the front of his doublet. In the dim light it was difficult to say what they were from, except for the deep gashes across the man’s throat.

“Tell Merrick,” Eldritch said to two of the younger hunters. “He’ll want to see this.” The two trotted off, and Eldritch started the others lighting torches and searching the area for more debris. Not long after, the entire gang arrived, following Merrick and Viktor.

“What have you found?” Merrick asked.

“A merchant, or a few. It appears they were attacked while encamped here. Something isn’t right,” Eldritch said.

“I daresay,” Viktor grunted. “This man’s throat is torn out.” Eldritch shook his head.

“No, there’s only three bodies, but four carts. And they had many horses, more than enough to pull four carts. Three men wouldn’t be enough, there must have been more. Where are they?”

“Run off,” Merrick said. “They were attacked.”

“Perhaps,” Eldritch said. “But would they not return to bury their dead?” Merrick looked thoughtful, and moved to inspect the bodies. Turning over the third, he grimaced. The man’s tunic had been cut open, and into his chest carved two arcing lines, meeting in the middle.

“Vogel,” Viktor said, and Merrick nodded. The younger hunters looked quizzically at him, and pointed to the lines.

“It’s meant to be a bird,” he said. “He finds it amusing. If this was not his doing, he directed those who did this.”

“But why would he leave such an obvious mark?” Campion asked. “Even if he does not fear the law, it tells us that he is in this area.”

“He taunts us,” Merrick said. “He wants us to know he was here. He is saying he has no fear of the law, nor of us. I hope it will be his undoing.”

“Gather what you can,” Viktor said to the crowd. “These unfortunates will need their wares no longer. It’s a pity they didn’t leave us any horses, we could use another pair.”

Days took on a more purposeful air. The hunters still slept late, slowly gathered their camp and moved out upon the road, but they no longer drifted, following rumors of beasts or blood-sucking creatures of the night. They searched. Every farmer, peasant, or traveler they passed was quizzed whether they had seen strangers passing by, perhaps with a cart loaded with goods, but always traveling at night.

Then in the days before the new moon, a sudden influx of travelers swept them along to follow. The farmers and craftsmen for leagues around were gathering in a small town to sell or barter their wares. The hunters followed, and as the crowds grew, they asked the locals and the arrivals if they had seen such a crew. None had, until they spoke with a charcoal burner guiding a donkey loaded high with sacks of charcoal. Eldritch had been roaming through the brightly colored stalls, within range of Merrick and Viktor. He hurried over to listen to the conversation when they stopped.

“Aye, I saw such a thing,” he said, when queried. “A handful of men, wearing dark clothes, guiding a cart with two horses, and two more followed behind. Pale they were, and I hid before they saw me.”

“Why did you hide?” Viktor asked, casually, but his focus on the man was intense.

“Even in the night, I could see the cart was piled high with goods. But from under it all stuck a man’s hand, which did not move, even when it brushed through the leaves beside the track.”

“Perhaps you mistook a harmless tool in the dark,” Merrick said. “They might have just been honest tradesmen on their way here.” The man shook his head.

“No, was not so. For they rode *away* from here, not toward.” Merrick and Viktor keep their composure, but those around could feel their tension.

“Very well, good man,” Merrick rumbled. “Can you say what direction they were headed?” The charcoal burner pointed out the way from which he had come, and went on to explain the nuances of the road to take and which trails to avoid. Finally the men hurried away to rejoin the rest of the gang.

“Can we not stay a day here?” Wat grumbled as the hunters prepared to depart. Viktor shook his head.

“No, we must find them,” he said. “They may lead us to Vogel.”

“Who is this Vogel?” Wat asked, and the others around grew quiet, watching to see what Viktor would do. The big man seemed unconcerned, however.

“He’s an Old One,” he said, looping a rope over the load on the cart. “One of the few left. Very clever. Merrick would hate to die before he sees Vogel turn to dust.” He put a heavy foot on the cart and pulled the rope tight.

“Tell us about the Old Ones,” one of the hunters asked. Viktor shook his head.

“Later,” he said. “Now we go. Hurry, or we leave you.”

Merrick pushed the pace of the group faster than Eldritch could remember. Once past the town, the slope rose, climbing into a series of hills and ridges. While most times they traveled were cheerful, if slightly hung over, this trip was serious. Each man was told to watch for signs of the group they pursued. With all of the travel to the market over the last few days, the road was deeply rutted with fresh tracks, making identification impossible. Still, they cast their eyes around the sides of the roads, looking for any sign of carts leaving the way. As they got farther from town, the men were instructed to walk parallel to the road, watching for tracks or other signs.

The sun was fast approaching the horizon, when a cry went up. The gang gathered at the spot, a dozen yards from the road. Eldritch shouldered his way through the crowd, and saw the body of a deer sprawled on the ground.

“Is that all?” someone grumbled. Eldritch pointed.

“It’s drained of blood,” he said. “Why would they do that?”

“Why indeed,” Viktor said from behind them. Eldritch turned to see the crowd open up to allow Viktor and Merrick to make their way through.

“Curious,” Merrick said. “They took men from the merchant camp, yet they drink from a deer?”

“Perhaps they are saving the men for later,” Campion suggested.

“Or for a darker purpose,” Merrick said. “This may not just be a raiding party, bent on taking plunder to boost their coffers. They may be recruiting.” A wave of murmurs passed through the group, as each man thought about that fate.

“Let us hope that is not their purpose,” Merrick said. “But pity will not stay any hand when we find them. Come, it grows dark. We should make camp for the night.”

“We can yet travel in the dark,” Viktor said. Merrick shook his head.

“I would not have us miss them in the night,” he stated. “They will move tonight, on the morrow we will rise early and follow them. With any luck, we will find them before the setting sun. Anyone who craves venison may eat tonight, but I’ll not touch it.”

Although the gang had not tarried at the market, it had supplied them with ample provisions. A few hours later, after a meal better than most they had shared on the road, the men lounged about the fire, enjoying the comfort of not being on a forced march through dark woods.

“Viktor, now will you tell us now of the Old Ones?” Wat asked, and others around made their assent. Viktor did not even bother to hide his eagerness.

“Well then,” he said, settling in with a mug in one hand and a flask in the other. “Our lives were not always such as this. Yes, we walked long miles and slept where we could find shelter, or under the trees when we could not. But we were not poor, not scraping for the rind of meat. We ate our fill, and tossed the bone yet with meat upon it to the dogs. For back then there were many Old Ones, and they were a blessing and a curse.

“Nobody knows how old they were, but I would not argue if one said a thousand years. I know not where they came from, and I do not care. They were just the Old Ones, and they were proud of that. Proud, yes, but smart. Very clever. You could pass right by one and never know. Many were rich, and they kept the ways of the wealthy. They met with kings and powerful merchants. They were guests of the richest families. Maybe they kept their secret, even from them.

“Back then, it was not unheard of for a member of the royal family to live to a very old age, yet look young and spry. One day he would be gone, and the family would say he died. A big funeral, and mourning. However, one who traveled to another land might report of a distant king who now hosted his ‘cousin,’ from abroad. Such was their way. Ancient families lead by a patriarch would pass the wealth to such a cousin, who miraculously appeared when the old patriarch was no longer seen. By keeping their secrets, they could walk among men and not be hunted.

“But how did they feed?” one of the younger hunters asked. Viktor waved his mug at him unsteadily.

“When one has wealth, the blood of the living can be found,” he said. “I daresay, a few loyal servants, probably ones turned by the masters, would find their food. Cities were growing huge, thousands of people in one place! How many beggars line their streets? It would be no trick for a few to disappear now and then, and no one would know, or care.

“Except us. We cared, because where the beggars disappeared, we would find the Old Ones. We would hunt them, not as we do now, chasing through the forest. No, we watched from the shadows, following their servants, until we knew which homes held the blood drinkers. Then we would wait for the right night, the right time. Just as the sun rose, we would burst in, chase the servants screaming through the house, and find the master. We would slay him where all could watch, and see him turn to rotting flesh and moldering ash. We spared all those who were human. The corrupted ones followed their master.

“And then we celebrated! With the master gone, the estates were ours to claim. We would revel in a mansion until the food and drink were gone. We would gather up what wealth we could carry, and live like kings on that for months. It was a glorious time.

“Then the Old Ones were gone. Most of them dead, some fled to the New World. Others merely hid in swamps or distant mountains. They still spawned new ones, but without the wealth and power they had before, they could only roam as gangs. In the cities they could be found too easily. So they left the cities, and returned to their wild ways. Only a few Old Ones remain, and Vogel is one of them.”

“It seems wrong to celebrate our enemy, but those we hunt today are nothing like the Old Ones. They were cunning and powerful, and we gained much honor and wealth from them.” He raised his mug, and those listening followed his gesture. “To the Old Ones, may they find our blades sharp, and we find their wealth great!” He drained his mug, almost sadly, and the others drank as well.

“Enough talk!” Viktor said, wiping the last of his toast from his lips. “Where is the music? Let us celebrate tonight, for tomorrow we may die!”

The next morning was thick and damp with fog. Moisture clung to every exposed surface, and the camp was even quieter than usual as the men rose and struck camp. Eldritch shivered and pulled his cloak tighter around him. Briefly he considered trying to sleep more, but the activity, and the chill weather, would not let him. Rising, stumbled to where the younger hunters loaded the cart. Normally he would merely direct their work, but activity would help warm him, so he put his hands to work loading. The process did not take long, the hunters by necessity traveled lightly, so the work did little to stave off the chilly morning.

“I would give much for a warm fire,” William said from deep within his hood. “Or a roof above our heads.”

“Aye,” Eldritch said. “Viktor’s claim that a roof is but another link in the chain that shackles ordinary folk to their simple lives always sounds better when one is warm and dry. On days such as these, I wouldn’t mind a bit of shackling.” The two sat by the feeble remains of last night’s fire, gleaning what warmth they could, until the camp was ready to travel.

“Be alert as we travel,” Merrick instructed the crew. “If I am correct, we are not far behind our quarry. We may see signs of their passing, or even come upon them. Watch for any sign of them, or anything that is not usual. We must not let them evade us.”

The gang headed out, moving cautiously but briskly through the woods. The fog drifted through the trees like exploring tentacles of some vaporous beast, leaving more damp upon clothes of the walking men. Eldritch scanned the dark forest ahead, thinking that an army could be concealed in the dense fog ahead and they would not see it until they walked directly into it. This thought did little to boost his morale. He rested one hand on the pommel of his sword as they walked, just in case.

Despite his gloomy suspicions, they encountered no army, nor even the hoped-for small party of brigands. They traveled all morning, and in the mid-afternoon a cry went up from one end of the line. The men quickly gathered at the source of the sound, and found a small stone structure built low to the ground, covered with dense growth so as to be almost entirely concealed. Looking more like a pile of boulders than a structure, lichen grew across much of the exposed face, and it bore no ornamentation or marking to indicate it was not built by nature. One had to look closely to see the outline of a door, but once seen, the intentional aspect of the structure was obvious.

“Odd that it’s so far out here in the wilderness,” William said.

“Indeed,” Eldritch agreed. “Unless there is some town nearby that we have yet to see. Or perhaps this is here for some dark purpose.” Merrick and Viktor put their heads together and were speaking quietly. Campion moved to join them, and Eldritch also moved in to the conversation.

“I do not believe this is a coincidence,” Merrick was saying. “The tracks lead this way, even if they are not visible up to the door.”

“Aye,” Viktor said. “But the cart did not stay here. We may do better to follow it.”

“If we split our group,” Campion said, “Some could remain here to search what lies behind that door, and the others could continue on, following the cart tracks to where they may lead.”

“Yes,” Merrick said. “But my guess is that they unloaded the contents of the cart, save what they would sell at their next destination. This site is too remote to be their primary nest. I think it a storehouse for their stolen goods, saving those items that may be sold at leisure. If any of them chose to stay here, there will be few, and easily struck down.”

Some concerns had been rolling about in the back of Eldritch's mind, and he was about to speak, when Campion voiced his thoughts.

"What if they expect us?" he said. "Perhaps they are aware of our presence already?" Viktor and Merrick chuckled.

"You give them too much credit," Merrick said. "We have been trailing them by a day or so. They would not have lead us here so directly if they knew we were behind them. Worry not."

Eldritch was about to make a snide comment to belittle Campion's fears, in hopes of showing Merrick and Viktor that he shared their confidence and undermining Campion's position, but Campion's worried face plucked at his own fears. Should he speak his doubts? Surely Merrick and Viktor knew what they were doing. Eldritch resolved to speak with Campion later, but not in front of the other men.

That resolution would have to wait, however, as Campion was given a handful of men and sent in pursuit of the cart. The rest remained at the site. Close inspection of the door revealed it had no outer handle, and was firmly secured from the inside.

"They must leave one of their number inside at all times," Eldritch said. "And only open from within upon a known signal." Merrick nodded.

"It is unlikely we could force our way in," he said. "We shall lay in wait. When they open the door next, we will be ready for them." The gang moved off a short distance, and guards were set by the building. The rest settled in for waiting. This was not the first time they had hoped to ambush an enemy, and they waited with the quiet patience of woodland hunters lurking by a game trail. Absent was the normal rowdiness of their evening revelry. Instead they sat, checking their weapons and sharpening their blades, or played cards, or even slept, but with weapons at hand, ready for instant use. And so they passed the remaining daylight hours. As the sun approached the horizon, bread, dried meat and ale were handed around. The men ate, quietly, but a tension grew in the camp. Not a tension born of fear, but of excited expectation, like that of a racehorse approaching the starting gate.

As darkness fell, the men took their places, weapons ready. They positioned themselves in two circles, surrounding the door. Three of the larger men had been assigned the position closest to the entrance. They had a section of log, with one end narrowed to a vertical edge, and branches trimmed to be convenient gripping length. Their role was to thrust the heavy section of tree trunk into the open door, if possible with the narrow end jammed between the door and the door jamb, preventing it from closing. Again, they waited.

The hours passed. The thin moon rose, and drifted across the sky. Patient and practiced, yet most of the hunters started to shift and stretch to stave off the lethargy that set in. Others became even more tense, as minute after minute ticked by, and nothing happened. Eldritch and William sat near each other, close enough to whisper, but the two remained near motionless the entire time. Eldritch's eyes constantly scanned the dark, watching not only the heavy stone door, but a wide field around it. William faced the opposite direction, in case any enemy thought to ambush

them from behind. The two sat in comfortable silence, each trusting the other to protect him from assault from the opposite direction. Like statues they sat, and waited.

Hours after midnight, a slight scrape of stone upon stone was heard. Instantly, the shifting and fidgeting stopped. All eyes were upon the building. Hands gripped weapons. Breathing nearly stopped. Slowly, the stone door opened, the stone grinding upon the threshold, sounding loud in the midnight darkness. The door stopped. All was quiet. Then four figures burst from the open door, and sprinted away at top speed, howling.

Like hounds after a hare, the hunters rose as one in pursuit. The fugitives passed near where Eldritch and William waited, and Eldritch's blade sliced the air near them, but failed to connect. They were up and running, cursing the stiffness in their legs from sitting so long.

'Hold back!' Viktor's roaring voice could be heard over the scurry of racing feet, but the hunters, eager for their prey after hours of waiting, paid no heed. Soon the entire band was in hot pursuit of the fleeing creatures, led by Eldritch and William. The dark figures darted through the trees, still wailing, cloaks waving behind them like dark pennants in the wind.

Onward they raced. Cold from being seated so long and carrying weapons, the hunters struggled to catch up to the runners. Eldritch, out in front, saw one of the fleeing creatures dart behind a thick stand of trees, then re-emerge from the other side, but something in his mind told him that something wasn't right. The runner had been accelerating, as if moving from a stand still. Eldritch slowed, and with sword ready, circled the trees as he arrived. At first he saw nothing of concern, and was about to resume the chase, when he saw at the base of the trees a shadow of slightly different tone, and too smooth and regular to be merely a tree stump.

Eldritch thrust the tip of his sword hard into the anomaly. He was instantly rewarded by a yowling hiss, and the shadow turned into a man, writhing at the blade thrust through his shoulder. The vampire struggled to his feet, reaching for Eldritch, but the young hunter was ready for him. Stepping quickly back, his sword withdrew from his victim, and the blade whirred in a quick arc, meeting the throat of his victim with a solid 'thunk!' Flesh curled away from the silver sword, and the vampire's head separated from his body. The corpse fell, already starting to decay, and Eldritch looked around. The last of his comrades were streaming past, still in pursuit of the others.

'No, stop!' he cried. 'We are being lured away! Go back!' If any heard, they gave him no heed. The racing footsteps faded into the night, and Eldritch was alone with the remains of the vampire.

'Blast,' he muttered. Which way had they come? With the commotion, he had not tracked where they had been running, and now without landmarks, he could not be sure the route back to the building. He closed his eyes and listened. He could hear the crashing of the hunters still pursuing the prey, but it came from a different angle than when he had last seen them. Were they turning? Taking a chance that they were navigating a large circle, he turned toward where their origin should be. Did he hear combat? Now worried, he sprinted toward the faint sounds, hoping that he was not correct in his fears.

When he arrived back at the site, he found the worst to be true. On the ground were the bodies of several of the gang. Viktor was still standing, but his back was to the building, and blood matted his hair and smeared across his face. Two huge beasts, like rabid dogs nearly the size of horses, snapped and lunged at him. Viktor held them at bay with his sword, which he held with both hands to keep it steady. Eldritch shouted, and sprinted at the melee, despite his fatigue, but as he approached, one of the beasts lunged under the waving sword, and latched its teeth into Viktor’s arm. Eldritch could hear the crunch, and Viktor cried out in pain and rage. He tried to reverse his blade to stab the hound, but the other leapt, landing on the man from the side and the three slid to the ground in a tangle of limbs and teeth. Viktor struggled, but the beasts were too much for him, and blood spew from Viktor’s throat. Eldritch ran full-force into the fray, thrusting his blade deep into one of the huge creatures. The monster roared and twisted, knocking Eldritch back, and to the ground. The creature turned to him, and advanced, the sword still thrust through it. Eldritch scrambled backward, hoping to get to his feet, but the beast was upon him. As the jaws snapped at his face, Eldritch drew a pistol and fired it point-blank into the slaving maw. The head snapped back, and the monster’s body spasmed. Eldritch rolled to the side, and the thing fell to the ground, convulsing. He dared to grab at his sword before the blade was snapped by the creature’s erratic twisting, and managed to pull it free. Turning to the other, he saw it was too late. The giant hound still shook and tore at Viktor’s body, but where before he had struggled, he now flopped without resistance. The thing raised its blood-smeared jaws and gazed at Eldritch malevolently. Eldritch raised his blade for another lunge, when a sharp whistle cut through the scene.

Eldritch looked beyond the beast, to a tall, shadowed figure that stood on the rise behind the building. Little detail could be seen, but there was no need to see to know that this was the enemy. The beast snarled at Eldritch, but turned and padded up the slope toward the figure.

‘Damn you!’ Eldritch roared, snatching up an axe from the dead hand of a comrade. He hurled the weapon at the figure, but his aim was not true, and it flew harmlessly by. Sword in hand, Eldritch started toward the retreating beast and his master, but before he could advance on them, from the open door of the stone building poured a host of what appeared to be animated corpses. The walking dead spewed forth, blocking Eldritch’s path, and advanced on him, arms reaching in frightening intensity. Eldritch retreated, his blade flickering out to punish hands that came too near. The man and monster above moved away into the shadows, and rage and frustration burst forth from Eldritch as another angry cry. He lunged savagely at the zombies, nearly splitting one in two with a vicious slash from his sword. He hesitated to pull his sword from the falling corpse, and almost was overrun by the advancing undead. He retreated again, only to hear the sound of approaching footsteps behind him.

Trying to keep the zombies in view, he chanced a look behind him. Across the clearing ran four figures; the vampire prey that had roused the gang. They loped across the area, ignored by the undead that closed on Eldritch. He tried to pursue them, but the horde advancing on him quickly blocked his path. He swung vigorously at the reaching hands, and heard the sounds of more running feet behind him.

The first of the hunters burst into the clearing. Panting for breath, they hardly paused before coming to Eldritch's aid. Together they pressed back the oncoming onslaught of undead, hewing limbs and heads. More of the gang joined them, and the tide turned. Even near exhausted, Eldritch tried to get clear to pursue the vampire prey, but the legions of undead were too great. It took the full remaining strength of the hunters to finally reduce the aggressive undead to inanimate remains. By the time the last of the struggling zombies was stilled, Eldritch knew that the vampires were long gone, and as exhausted as the hunters were, there was no way they could pursue tonight.

Merrick shouted orders, and Eldritch, dazed, did his best to support the leader. Some of the gang lit torches, and the light spilled across a dismal scene. The horde of zombies that now lay as battlefield victims lent a macabre air to the once simple glade. The fallen hunters were gathered up, and when all were accounted for, six of their number were dead. The number were those who had stayed behind with Viktor, and were slain by the beasts or Vogel's henchmen.

A contingent was sent into the building to ensure that all of the enemy had been found. Eldritch volunteered, but Merrick selected Champion to lead the team. They were gone only briefly. After a few minutes, they returned to report that the door led to several underground chambers, but all were now empty, save for several bodies, apparently the unfortunate men from the merchant caravan.

"Clearly this was a deliberate trap," Champion said. Merrick nodded.

"Indeed," he said. "We have paid dearly for my hubris. We have underestimated our enemy, but for the last time. We shall avenge these deaths, if it takes every one of us to our graves." The gathered men nodded their assent.

Fatigued, the gang found a suitable spot a distance away, and settled in for sleep. The grog passed about was raised not in revelry, but in farewell to their fallen comrades. Only William noticed that Eldritch was not among them as the final toasts were said, and all but the guards wrapped themselves in blankets or cloaks and closed their eyes for much-deserved rest.