

## Chapter 4 - Departure

William stood guard in the early morning. He watched as the sky to the east turned pearly, then red, and finally warmed to the stark light of dawn. The camp slept, the only sound the soft breathing of those who rested and the answering rustle of trees in the slight breeze. With still an hour left on his watch, William expected to see no one stirring, so was surprised when Eldritch, fully dressed and ready for travel, approached the camp.

“Did you sleep outside the perimeter?” William asked in hushed voice. “It’s not like you to take such chances.”

“I did not sleep,” Eldritch said. “My thoughts would not let me. I must get food.” As William watched, Eldritch went to the cart, and found the supplies of bread and meat. Wrapping them carefully in a square of cloth, he thrust them into his knapsack, and returned to his friend.

“Here is where we part ways,” Eldritch said. “Tell the others I have gone.”

“What?” William said. “Surely you’re not leaving?”

“I am,” Eldritch said. “I’ve thought much upon it. Tell Merrick I blame him not for Viktor’s death.” Eldritch turned and started walking away from the camp. William followed.

“You’re upset, anyone could understand. But to leave now will not bring Viktor back. Your place is here! Do you not see that?” Eldritch kept walking. William hesitated, torn between his friend and his obligation to watch the camp for intruders.

“Will you not tell me why?” he asked. Eldritch stopped.

“I would think it obvious,” he said.

“No, it is not,” William said. “You have seen death before, many times. How often have we joked about how our own lives will be ended by a vampire’s fangs or a werewolf’s claws? How is today different?”

“Believe me, those things are true, but today is different,” Eldritch said. “The events of last night have shown me my life in a new way. Watching Viktor die made me think. How many old hunters have you known?”

“A few. Viktor, Merrick. There were others, when we first joined the gang.”

“True,” Eldritch said. “But neither Viktor nor Merrick have reached their fortieth year. They look like old men because of the hardship of our lives. We sleep on the ground. When we eat hard bread and dried meat we consider ourselves well fed. Others of our own age that live in the towns and villages we see, even those who live hard lives of labor, they look younger than us.”

“You’re leaving because you lack a bed and soft food?” William asked. “That seems unlike you.”

“Not that,” Eldritch said, shaking his head. “Last night I realized that there are no old vampire hunters in our midst. To choose this life is to choose an early death. We grow old before our time, if we live long enough to do that. Most die before the first lines of age cross their face.”

“Aye, that is true,” William said. “But not us! We will live long, and one day retire on the wealth we find, to sit by the fire and tell stories to wide-eyed wenches of our adventures.”

“So I believed. But I know it to be not true. Viktor died as he wished to die; fighting against the evil that we see, that so many people deny exists. But what has he left? What of his life will remain when the last of those alive today meet their fate?”

“The ones that follow will tell his story,” William said. “Merrick tells tales of those he fought beside.”

“Yes, Merrick tells those stories,” Eldritch said. “But when he is gone? Do we tell the tales we heard from other hunters before him? No, their names and stories vanish. We hunt, we fight, we die, and all that is left is a moldering corpse in some forgotten grave in the wilderness.”

“But we champion the cause of good,” William said. “We fight where others do not, seeking out the minions of darkness and slaying those we find. Is that not a legacy?”

“It is, but of what worth? I cannot calculate the lives we have saved because of the evil ones we have destroyed, but those innocents will never know of our work. We pride ourselves on what we endure. We have sacrificed lives of comfort for the cause. But we live off the spoils of those we kill, like common mercenaries or brigands. I could stay and perhaps one day lead this band, but for what? To meet my end in combat, have my story told for a few years, and then vanish into obscurity like all those who went before us.”

“You are angry and hurt,” William said. “Stay for a few days, see if you feel differently. We can carry on Viktor’s traditions in his honor, tell his story every night until all know it like the childhood tales they knew from birth.”

“No, I cannot,” Eldritch said. “I will miss you, you are a good friend. I will fondly remember our time together. I do not regret the joy we found in our efforts, nor in the revelry we joined. I no longer want that. I feel my destiny is for greater things. Perhaps I will find a home, and a living that does not involve lurking in the dark, hunting for creatures of the night. I just know that this is no longer for me.” William sighed, despondent.

“It will not be same without you,” he said. “Campion will be next in line after Merrick, with none to challenge him.”

“Perhaps that is for the best,” Eldritch said. “He will make a good leader. Tell him I said so.”

“You’ve always ridiculed his guidance,” William said. “Do you really think him fit?”

“Indeed,” Eldritch said. “As my rival, I hoped to undermine his confidence, so he may make errors and strengthen my position. I compete with him no more. His arrogance was annoying, but no more so than mine.” Eldritch clapped William on the shoulder.

“Be sure to annoy him for me, now and then,” he said. William laughed.

“That’s the Eldritch I know,” he said. “Are you sure you must leave?”

“I am. Farewell, William. I hope our paths may cross again.” He gave his friend a quick embrace, and then turned, heading down through the thick woods. William watched as long as he could see his friend, and even after he was no longer visible, he stared at the deep woods thoughtfully.