

Chapter 5 – The Minstrel

A day of travel brought Eldritch back to the road that the gang had followed only a short time before. Instead of heading back to the town from whence they had come, he turned right, choosing the way he had not traveled before. They way led to a winding track over some low mountains. He followed it, falling into a stride that consumed mile after mile. He walked the rest of the day without seeing another person. That night, he found a secluded place off the road, and cast about until he located a spot well concealed under low-hanging trees. As he lay in the dark, listening to the soft sounds of the night-time forest, thoughts of regret crossed his mind. A man alone in the woods was vulnerable while he slept, without others to stand guard. He resolved to rig some manner of warning device to signal him if anyone, or anything, approached him in the dark. He thought about how such a device might be made, until fatigue won out and he drifted off to sleep.

He awoke the next morning, as rain dripped through the boughs above him. His shelter was mostly dry, but as he poked his head from under the branches, he could see that the rain had been falling long enough to soak the surrounding area.

“Well, at least I wasn’t eaten in my sleep,” Eldritch said to himself. “So being rained upon won’t be so bad.”

He ate the last of his bread and dried meat as he walked. It took him the rest of the morning to reach the pass where the road crossed the highest ridge of the mountains, and he looked beyond to a wide, sweeping valley. At the base of the foothills, smoke rose from a number of spots. A town, he thought. With any luck, a bed, or at least a space on a floor beside a fire. As long it was under a roof, it was better than being outdoors.

The road wandered down the mountainside, and Eldritch became quite annoyed with its meandering ways as he trudged downward. Wet, chilled, and becoming hungrier by the hour, he contemplated striking off directly toward the town. Coming over a rise and seeing the settlement appear to be quite close, but the road headed off at a different angle, he decided to take the direct route. Almost an hour of walking through dripping underbrush brought him to the edge of a deep ravine, and Eldritch realized why the road took the route it did. The rocky edges dropped nearly vertically. On a good day, he might have tried climbing down it, but in the wet, it was almost certain suicide. He imagined himself lying at the base of the rocky face, far away from the road, injured, and easy prey for any roaming beast. The irony of such a fate when he left the gang to avoid an early death was not lost on him. So he turned around, and slogged his way back to the ambling road down the mountain, cursing under his breath how his impatience had cost him even more time.

Darkness was falling as he approached the village at the base of the mountain. It was not a huge outpost, but large enough to have an inn with stables for travelers crossing the mountains. Gratefully he pulled open the door and entered, shaking off the rain from his soaked cloak and hat. There was a cluster of men around the fire, and a few eyes turned to him as he entered, but they quickly turned back to the man who sat facing the group. On his lap was a wooden instrument, and his fingers flew across the strings that crossed it. He sang in a resonant tenor a

song of young lovers found, and tragically parted. The music filled the room, and combined with the warmth and smells of food, the rough, rustic room seem better than the richest mansion.

Eldritch asked for food and drink from the old woman who seemed own the place. He pressed a coin into her hand, worth almost half again the worth of what he ordered, but her nod and purposeful return to the kitchen area indicated that it had served its purpose. The prompt return of a tankard of ale, bread and a bowl brimming with a thick, hearty stew made his extravagance well worth it. He took a seat as close to the fire as he could get and set to eating.

The food was simple but was well seasoned by his fatigue and rumbling stomach. He savored the meal as steam rose from his damp clothing. The singer finished his song with a refrain about the young lovers being joined together in death, and as the echoes of the final chord faded, those listening applauded vigorously.

“You are kind,” the troubadour said. “If I had but one more pint, perhaps I could tell a story.” His mug was quickly refilled, and he drained a third of it before beginning his tale. As Eldritch and the other men ate and drank, the musician told an eerie tale of a greedy man who sought to steal a cursed treasure under the light of a full moon. He achieved his goal, but was bitten by a werewolf as he carried his spoils home. Weak and injured, he stumbled to his home, where his family bound his wounds and nursed him back to health. For a month they celebrated their new-found wealth, until the next full moon. Then he changed into a beast, and slew his entire family. Upon waking the next day, he found them all torn to shreds, and realized that he was responsible. He put the remaining treasure into a sack and tied it to himself. He then swam out into the deepest part of a nearby lake, where the weight of the gold exhausted him, and he sank to the bottom, never to be seen again. Those who lived by the lake still reported that on nights with a full moon, dismal howls could be heard as the specter of the wolf mourned the loss of his family.

When he finished, signaled by draining his mug, the gathered men nodded their approval.

“Serves him right for stealing,” one said.

“Aye, but his family need not have suffered,” said another. “It’s a pity that they did not realize he would become a werewolf too.”

“It’s only a story,” chimed in a third.

“I’ve heard of the lake where the ghost of a werewolf howls,” said another. “It must be true.”

“Oh, pshaw,” sniffed a well-dressed man, who sat slightly apart from the group. His clothes revealed he was wealthier than those who sat around the fire, but they bore the marks of travel upon them. “They’re merely stories to frighten children. Werewolves aren’t real.”

A laugh cut through the chatter, and the room fell quiet. All eyes were on Eldritch, who still smirked.

“You think I jest?” the well-dressed man said stiffly. Eldritch shook his head.

“Not at all,” he said. “I’m sure you believe you are right.”

“Yet you think I am not?”

“I know that is the case. I’ve seen the torn bodies of their victims. Heard their howls upon the midnight wind. I’ve looked into the eyes of the beast, and thrust a killing blade into a werewolf’s heart. I know they are all too real.”

“Indeed?” sneered the other man. “And what proof do you offer for this?”

“None,” Eldritch said. “I cannot prove to you they exist, I only speak of what I know.”

“Convenient,” the man scoffed. “You may fool these men, but I know better.”

“Naturally,” Eldritch said. “I hope you live a long, fruitful life and never have cause to believe. Yet if by chance you find yourself in a lonely wilderness one night, with a full moon in the sky, fleeing from the howls that are getting closer and closer, until you see a shaggy monster with glowing eyes bearing down upon you, your last thought as the jaws close on your throat will be ‘Why, that fellow in the inn was right, after all.’” The other men laughed, and the well-dressed man huffed and turned away. One of the group shifted so he sat across from Eldritch. He was older than the others, and his clothes were rugged and worn. He had the look of one who had spent many days in harsh weather. He held up a bottle, and Eldritch pushed his empty mug to him. The man filled the mug and slid it back to Eldritch.

“Call me Jacks, young man,” Jacks said, offering his hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you.” Eldritch met the firm grip and shook the other man’s hand.

“He would not think so.”

“Pay him no mind,” the man said, gesturing with his head toward the sulking man. “He has not crossed the wilds before. He only knows what those in the city believe.”

“And what do you believe?” Eldritch asked.

“Not all stories are true,” Jacks said. “But not all stories are false, neither. There are things that walk the night that learned me will swear cannot exist. I believe my own eyes, and the word of those who have seen such things, rather than those who have never set foot outside a city.”

“Very wise, Jacks,” Eldritch nodded. “I could tell you tales that would frighten you until next week.” Jacks chuckled.

“Could be,” he said. “But I’m more interested in your strength than in your stories. I’m wagonmaster for three merchants that carry trade up and down these mountains. Any man who has put a blade into a werewolf would be useful guarding goods against brigands and other

dangers in the dark. I'm always in need of strong arms and stable souls, if you're interested. The pay is as good as any other caravan, and you're sure to gather new tales to tell."

"Very kind of you," Eldritch said. "But those days are behind me now. I'm seeking a new life that does not involve fighting for my life."

"Pity," Jacks said. "Think it over. We leave at first light, if you change your mind."

"Much thanks for the drink," Eldritch said. "But do not wait for me in the morning."

The minstrel struck up another tune, a lilting melody without words that echoed in the room. Eldritch nursed his drink as he listened. When that song was done, the minstrel sang of an epic battle where great armies fought over the love of a single woman. As he sang, more and more of the company around the fire pushed away from the tables and went up the narrow stairs to the sleeping rooms above. After a few more songs, only Eldritch and the minstrel remained.

"It is customary for the last of my audience to buy me a drink," the minstrel said. Eldritch laughed, and signaled the serving woman to bring them more. She grumbled a little at being up so late, but when Eldritch offered to buy an entire jug if she could provide a pallet for him to sleep on by the fire, and paid for it with another coin that generously covered the cost, she happily provided.

"Is this drink-buying an ancient tradition?" Eldritch asked as he poured for the minstrel.

"Oh, no," the other man said. "It just started tonight. But it goes well so far."

"Cheers," Eldritch said, raising his mug, and the other man tapped the rim of his mug against it. "Have you a name, wandering singer, or shall I give you one?"

"Lloyd," the minstrel said. "And your name, my benefactor?"

"Call me Eldritch," Eldritch said.

"Interesting," Lloyd said. "Did your parents hang that moniker on you, or is that merely what you are called?"

"If you must know, it is my surname," Eldritch said. "I come from a long line of Eldritches."

"Appropriate for one who has slain werewolves," Lloyd said. "Or was that merely bravado for the locals?"

"It is true enough," Eldritch said. "Although I've killed far more vampires than lycanthropes."

"Ah, well met, then," Lloyd said. "I sense you have many stories to tell. I would hear them all."

“That may take longer than one bottle,” Eldritch said. “I am accustomed to being awake far into the night, but I have not the strength for it tonight.”

“Fair enough,” Lloyd said. “Whither do you travel from here?” Eldritch thought for a moment, then shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I really don’t know where I am, nor where I’m going. I’m leaving my past behind and seeking my future, but I haven’t thought out how I will find it.” Lloyd laughed.

“You’re no different than most,” he said. “But few are able to put that into words. I ask because I roam the roads through these little countries, singing songs and telling tales for what food or coins I can get. I thought I might follow you so I might have a chance to hear your tales.”

“Perhaps I should follow you,” Eldritch said. “You may at least have a sense of where we are.”

“Now you have me curious,” Lloyd said. “How can you not know where you are? Were you kidnapped and brought here against your will and only recently escaped? Or did you awake one day, not knowing where you were?”

“Neither,” Eldritch said. “Until this morning, I traveled with a band of vampire hunters. Our leaders guided our travels. We cared not what country we were in, and most of our time is spent far from cities. After years of this, supplemented with generous supplies of ale, all little villages appear the same. I’m sure I’ve been in many different countries, but I cannot tell you what they were.” Lloyd shook his head in amazement.

“But money, languages, how did you manage?”

“For money, we rarely had much. Usually we sold or traded goods we had... found. If we had coins, most people are happy to take gold or silver, regardless of where it came from. As we traveled, we picked up hunters from different places, so almost everywhere, at least one of us spoke the local language. One learns to bargain without knowing the words. Most of the locals we tried to talk to were the young women, and then only until we were doing things where words were not needed.”

“Amazing,” Lloyd said. “I’ve been going about this all wrong. So why did you leave this band?” Eldritch’s eyes narrowed.

“I lost my taste for the life,” Eldritch said. “That is not a story I’ll tell tonight.”

“So are you indeed a troubadour?” Eldritch asked. “I thought that trade vanished long ago.”

“Not completely,” Lloyd said. “There will always be those who sing for their keep, but there are few now that do it. In the cities they play in the pubs or on the streets, if they cannot play with the symphonies in the fancy concert halls. I tried that, once, but I lost my taste for the life.”

“Fair enough,” Eldritch said. “At least you know what you will do tomorrow.”

“Ah, but you do, too,” Lloyd said. “You’ll be telling me stories of a vampire killer, and searching for your fortune. These are both very important.”

“Well, put, minstrel,” Eldritch said. “Here, let us polish off the last of this jug. Normally I could drink two more of these between now and morning, but I was up with the dawn, and I am ready for the luxury of a pallet by a fire, under a roof tonight.”

The next day saw the beginning of the travels of the two together. Eldritch’s spirits lifted, as did the heavy cloud layer that had followed him the day before. The miles passed by quickly as the two swapped tales. Each time one told a story more incredible than the other’s, and so it progressed, although both swore that all of the tales were completely true.

Lloyd turned out to be a virtually bottomless well of knowledge about the lands they traveled, telling the histories, customs, and stories of the people where they went. While Eldritch realized he had been many of the same places, but he had no inkling of the details that Lloyd produced, at prodigious volume, no less.

Their days were filled with walking, and their nights were spent in pubs, taverns, and sometimes the lonely huts of farmers far away from other habitation. Lloyd sang, played his harp, and told stories. Eldritch initially tried to correct Lloyd when he embellished the stories he had taught him, but eventually gave up. He would admit that the additions made the stories better, despite not being strictly true.

The time together allowed Eldritch to learn a few interesting things about his traveling companion. Not only did he have a prodigious memory for songs and stories, able to repeat them back word for word, but he had a deep knowledge of the plants in the area. He would point out a tine, limp clump of leaves and flowers and give the name, note any mention of it in legend, myths, or stories, tell its medicinal uses, if any, and note that it was blooming late this year. Lloyd also had an amazing talent at wooing women. Eldritch, with his good looks and mysterious air, was successful on his own, but he could not compare to the way young women flocked to Lloyd. The minstrel wasn’t particularly tall, his looks were mostly average, but his smile and resonant voice always gained attention. When asked about it, he shrugged it off, saying that women loved a man with talents.

The two had been travelling together for several weeks, and found themselves camped near a marsh on a heavily overcast day that threatened to be a dark and chilly night. They had hoped to press on, perhaps to find a village or even a farm to spend the night, but Eldritch pointed out that traveling through the wetlands in the moonless dark was risky at best. Having the water force them to stop for the night was slightly mitigated by the marsh providing a fish for dinner, but used to late nights in taverns, the two had little to do to while away the time after eating before they could fall asleep. They sat close to their small fire for warmth, passing a skin of ale. Lloyd looked over at his companion.

“You have told me some amazing stories,” he said. “But not the one that explains why you have devoted your life to the pursuit of the creatures of the night. Is it a dark secret? Your family slain by vampires, and you are sworn to avenge them all?” Eldritch laughed.

“I am a little afraid to tell you,” he said. “For what I will say may turn into your tale of vengeance after telling. It is neither dark, nor secret, but also not terribly dramatic. My father was a playwright and performer on the stage. He loved an audience, and the audience loved him back, sometimes in ways that shamed my mother. Despite his weakness for bedding fans of the arts, he was a good man. He loved his wife, came home almost every night, and raised his children to have lives better than his.”

“I don’t know,” Lloyd said. “It sounds as if his life was quite good.”

“It was,” Eldritch said. “But his one regret was that while he achieved a degree of fame, he never reached the wealth he hoped for. His income rose and fell, depending on the success of his plays. There were no bad years, but some months were quite lean for us. He never could save much when time were good. It was rare, but sometimes we were reduced to eating what we could beg or steal. I think that worried at him more than he would admit.

“I would have liked to join him on the stage, but it was the one thing he was adamant about. No child of his would follow in his path. My brothers and I were sent to school, when he could afford it. The others were apprenticed away, but I could not decide what I would do. My father pushed me into study, but I could not see myself surrounded by dusty books and ledgers all my life. I longed for excitement. If I could not be on the stage, I thought to go upon the sea.

“Until one night, as I walked home, I saw three men chasing another man through the streets. I hid, thinking them thieves, but they drove a wooden stake into the other man’s chest, and he shriveled and turned to dust as I watched. Well, I would have nothing but to follow the men to where they drank, and listened to their stories of slaying vampires and other beasts, and I decided that night. I returned home one final time to gather a few possessions and leave a note, telling my father that I had found my calling, and he would be relieved that it was not upon the stage.”

“I do not think he hoped you would be a hunter.” Lloyd asked. “Was he angry?”

“I don’t know,” Eldritch said. “I never saw them again.”

“That’s terrible!” Lloyd said. “You should go back to them, and...” Lloyd sat up, listening.

“Do you hear that?” he asked. Eldritch listened, and could hear a faint sound like chimes.

“Bells?” he asked. Lloyd waved his hands excitedly.

“Yes! And I believe I heard a woman singing. I think,” he said.

“Well, if anyone could find a woman in this wilderness, it would be you,” Eldritch said. Lloyd scrambled to his feet.

“Good lady!” he called. “Show yourself!” They listened, but only the faint sound of bells and an eerie, wordless song came floating across the water.

“Look!” Lloyd said, pointing into the dark. Eldritch did, and could see a small light moving about in the distance.

“It’s not far, we could go visit,” Lloyd said.

“I’m not sure that’s wise,” Eldritch said. “We don’t know what sort of woman keeps herself in a swamp.”

“Bah! This is no swamp!” Lloyd said. “Once we cross this bit, there will be solid ground on the other side. Here, I’ll show you.” Lloyd snatched up a burning branch from the fire and stepped away. Eldritch could hear him splashing through the water.

“Wait, you fool,” he shouted. “I’m coming.” He paused long enough to gather up his sword, just in case, and light a branch of his own from the fire as well. Cautiously he followed Lloyd’s bobbing light into the marsh. The water quickly rose above his knees, filing his boots and sparking his temper. He pressed on, trying to catch up to his friend’s torch, which was sputtering and faint. Eldritch squelched through the muck, working to pull one leg free. When he looked up, he could no longer see Lloyd’s torch, nor the distant lights.

“Lloyd?” he called.

“Eldritch?” he heard, faintly, as if Lloyd was a great way off.

“Can you see my torch?” Eldritch asked, waving his guttering branch above his head.

“No! Where are you? Wait! I see a light!”

Eldritch lowered the branch to try to get it to build more flame, but the feeble fire shrank and went out.

“Blast!” he muttered, and looked about. He could see no sign of their campfire, nor of any other lights. He called again, but no answer came. Cursing, he turned around until he felt he must be facing the way from which they’d come, and carefully stepped his way through the blackness.

After what seemed at least twice the distance he had come, the water had only gotten deeper. Again he reversed direction, and tried to find his way back. This time he found a shallower area, with rose until he was only up to his ankles. This proved fruitful, as his next step was onto muddy ground. He scrambled up, and found himself on dry ground. Carefully he cast about, hoping to find the remains of their campfire burned down to coals, but after only a dozen feet, the ground dropped off quickly back into the water. Prodding the ground ahead with the remains of his burned stick, he found he was on a dry patch, only a few yards on a side, not back at the beginning.

Sighing, he removed his boots by feel and shook and squeezed as much mud and water as he could from them. Putting his boots back on, he settled in, wrapping his cloak about himself, and tried to sleep so the least amount of his body touched the ground. As he dozed, he heard a splashing in the water, and quickly turned to see the source. As he stared into the darkness, a small figure hopped from the marsh, landing on the muddy ground beside him. It was a bird, but none like he had seen before. It stood a cubit tall, with odd wings, more like flippers than limbs for flight. It was mostly black, except for a pale, pointed beak and white that went down its chest to its knobby feet. It shook itself, sending tiny droplets of muck flying, then waddled over to Eldritch. It looked up at him as if trying to figure out what he was, and cocked its little head to the side. Its flipper wings lifted outward, and flapped thoughtfully, as if the movement helped the bird think.

“Awk!” it said finally, and settled itself down next to him. Eldritch watched it for a time, to see if it would do anything else, but it seemed content to merely stand next to him and stare out into the darkness. Eldritch shrugged, and hunkered next to his odd companion. So he spent the night; cold, damp, and plotting what he would say to Lloyd in the morning for leading him into this fix.

Dawn found them still huddled side by side on the tiny patch of dry land. Eldritch shivered in the chill air, but the bird seemed unconcerned by the cold. He stood, wings out, and shook himself again, stretching his head upward. He settled back down with an air of satisfaction, and waddled to the edge of the island. The bird leaned over, and dove with surprising grace into the marsh. Eldritch had a fleeting glimpse of a sleek, dark body jetting through the water, and his visitor was gone.

His hope for being able to sight their camp were dashed by the morning light; all around him stretched the swampy surface of the water, broken by thick clumps of marsh plants and moss-choked trees. He tried calling for Lloyd, then for anybody who could hear him, but no answer came. His foul mood became even darker as he tried to determine which way to go. No footprints were visible, as his travel had been through the wetlands, and the trees effectively blocked all signs of landmarks that might have given a sense of direction. He thought back to the night before, and was fairly certain that the marsh had been to the south of their camp. Based on the sunrise, which was marked only by an area of cloud that wasn't quite as dark as the rest, he guessed which way was north, and struck out to find either their camp or the road.

Much to his delight, about the only thing that had pleased him so far this day, after only a hundred yards of careful stepping through the sodden terrain, he found the road that had been their way the night before. A lucky guess turned him to his left, which brought him to their campsite only a little way down the road. Their fire had indeed burned away to ash, but what little of their gear they had left behind was still there, untouched.

Thank goodness for small favors, Eldritch thought, as he hastily stuffed their belongings into his knapsack. He hesitated for a moment, trying to decide whether to leave Lloyd's harp there to be recovered later, or risk carrying it and perhaps soaking it with an unlucky misstep in the marsh. Expediency won out over caution, and he slid the instrument into the leather wrap Lloyd kept it

in, and tied it to the top of his knapsack with a bit of cord. He was about to step back into the marsh, when it occurred to him that even in the daylight, he could repeat the process of getting lost.

Looking about for landmarks to guide him proved fruitless; the low overcast clouds gave no features on the horizon for reference. He did see a tree standing alone, taller than the others, which gave him an idea. Quickly taking up the wood they had gathered for their fire the night before, he piled it at the base of the tree. Striking a flame to the kindling beneath, fire licked the wood and it slowly spread. The damp wood required a few minutes of coaxing, but the fire eventually took, and flames started creeping up the tree's bark. Eldritch took a burning stick and lit the end of one branch. The leaves sizzled, but burned, and a smoky plume rose nearly straight up in the still air.

Eldritch stepped into the marsh, trying to retrace their steps from the night before. Every so often he would look back, and was pleased to see that his burning tree was yielding a pillar of smoke that was quite visible. Satisfied that he would be able to find his way back, he pressed on, searching for any sign of his friend.

Almost an hour later, all improvement in mood from his successful landmark idea (which was still burning vigorously) was gone, replaced by angry thoughts and a long lecture for Lloyd when he was found. Eldritch was contemplating just how he would castigate the other man if he had spent the night comfortably in the company of a woman, when he spied something colorful floating in the water ahead. Thinking that it was Lloyd's tunic floating loose upon the water, he splashed ahead, but stopped short when he realized what he saw. It was indeed Lloyd's tunic, but it was worn by what appeared to be a withered, ancient corpse.

As his mind whirled with possible causes for his friend's demise, Eldritch's sword was out and in his hand without thinking. He turned, scanning the wetlands for any sign of threat, but all he could see was the marsh plants, trees, and the distant smoky plume. Satisfied that he was alone with his friend's remains, he pulled the body to a rise where he could lay him on the ground.

"Poor Lloyd," Eldritch said. "You look you've been dead and buried for a month, how could this be? You cannot be a vampire, I've seen you walk in the daytime. Did something in the swamp do this to you in the night?" Lloyd's sodden corpse gave no answers. Eldritch sadly checked the unfortunate man's clothes, and found his dagger and pouch of coins still in place.

"You were not robbed, not of your possessions, anyway" Eldritch said. "Forgive me for taking what you had, but you have no use for them anymore." Eldritch looked about, trying to decide what to do for his friend's remains. Burial was impractical, he had no shovel, and even if he had, digging in this area would only make a water-filled hole. The easiest thing to do would be to leave the body in the water. Eldritch made his decision, and knelt to pick up the remains.

"There are two good things in this," Eldritch said. "You are far lighter in this state than you might have been, and you have avoided my rant at your foolishness. I hope you're grateful."

Picking his way carefully, Eldritch carried Lloyd back toward the drifting smoke, until he was once again on solid ground. He had to travel a bit away from the water up higher ground to find a suitable place, but he eventually found what he was looking for. Setting the body of his friend in a slight depression on the ground, he began to gather rocks. Such was the landscape that he spent the better part of the day gathering suitable stones to make a cairn to cover the corpse, but he did so. Once finished, he stood by the improvised grave.

“Once again I say goodbye to someone,” Eldritch said. “I hope your end was swift, and you did not suffer. I wish I could have saved you from this fate. I will miss you, as will a legion of young women. Farewell, my friend. I go now, and may I never see this sad place again.”

Eldritch picked up his knapsack, with Lloyd’s harp carefully tied to the top, and headed off to find the road and the next destination that he would find.