

## Chapter 12 – The Campaign Begins

As William prepared to leave that night, Eldritch paced uneasily. William had tried a number of conversational forays, but to no avail. Eldritch either ignored his friend, or snapped back with surly answers. Finally he relented, and settled in a chair.

“I do wish you’d come with us,” William said, for the tenth time. Eldritch once again shook his head.

“I am truly sorry,” he said. “But I have chosen a different path. You are my friend and I would do anything else you would ask of me, but I swore to never again go hunting for those who walk the night.”

“That seems odd,” William said. “Considering we have spent so many nights watching for the Lechen to cross our path. If you were not hunting, what were you doing?” Eldritch squirmed, and leapt to his feet to resume pacing about in the tiny flat.

“It was wrong of me,” he said. “I know I seem to be speaking untruths, for how could I refuse to hunt, and yet be hunting? I am torn, William. As I told you last night, I longed for a life away from the danger, yet find that life unsatisfying. I vowed to leave my past behind, but it has found me and I cannot find the strength to push it away. It is like there are two of me within my mind, and I do not know how to satisfy them both, nor if it is even possible.” William watched his friend’s tormented pacing, and relented.

“Worry not,” William said. “You do have a life here. As generous as you have been, I do not. I admit my heart still craves vengeance, for those who have fallen, but mostly for my own disfigurement. Nonetheless, I should not push you beyond where you are willing to go. You have been a great friend to me, and I should like to be the same for you.”

“You are indeed,” Eldritch said. “I cannot fault you for that. Today Camille and I spoke of marriage. The part of me that craves a life of safety says to propose to her, but the other part cannot abide the thought of bringing her into the life.”

“So that is it,” William said. “It is not so much about your vow, but about Camille. If you go tonight, you choose the life of the adventurer over the role of husband.”

“It is not so simple,” Eldritch said, slamming back into the chair. William shrugged.

“If you say so,” he said. “Eldritch, I am truly sorry. My chance for a long and happy life has gone, never to return. Your chance stands upon the threshold, and I would not take you from that for anything. I would you choose to find your happiness, and I will take share your joy in life, if I may, to make up for the lack of it in mine.” Eldritch stood, and gave his friend a firm embrace.

“You are a great friend, indeed,” Eldritch said. “Now go, before my will crumbles and I join you.” William left, and Eldritch returned to his restless pacing. He snatched up a book and sat. Opening the volume, he tried to read the text, but found himself wandering. After the third time he read the same page, he set the book down. Opening a chest, he withdrew his silver sword, and slung it to his back. He armed himself with an impressive array of weaponry, finishing by thrusting a brace of knives into his belt, and wrapping his heavy cloak over it all. He pulled the hood over his head, and headed out into the night.

The streets by the estate appeared empty. The cold wind blew the last few leaves down the street, scuttling like dry crabs across the chilly stones. The streetlights put out what light they could, be in the cold, they seemed only tiny pools of illumination in a sea of darkness. The contrast gave a feeble glow to the face of the estate’s gates, but only shadowy blackness within, so when the lock clicked and the gates creaked open, it seemed to be untouched by human hand. Several figures moved through the opening, and the tall, metal gates closed again, firmly in place. At the end of the street that led to the gates, the figures split into two groups, heading opposite directions. As they passed, a owl hooted mournfully, but if they noticed they gave no sign. While one group headed off with the look of intent purpose, the other group sauntered casually down the empty street, as if the cold and dark meant nothing to them.

The moved through the streets, scanning the doorways and alleys as if looking for something to amuse themselves with. If they were aware of the shadows that followed them through the darkness, they gave no sign.

At an intersection of two streets, they strode across the center, as no traffic was to be seen. If anyone else had been traveling the streets, they would be hard put to see the men, as the lamps near that intersection were all dark. Still, they made no sign of concern, until a heavy crossbow quarrel shot from the darkness, and embedded itself deep in the chest of one of the party.

He gave a strangled scream, and clawed at the heavy bolt protruding from his chest. He gripped it, but collapsed to the ground and began to wither and decay. The others were not watching him, however, as a number of men had rushed them in the dark, and attacked. The struggle was fierce. The attackers carried heavy blades, which sliced the air with wicked intensity. The four men that were surrounded turned to face their attackers, drawing long knives. They clashed, quickly, as if those attacking had every confidence in victory.

It would not be easily won. Although they slashed at the others, the daggers were quick and deflected most blows. Small nicks and cuts did not bleed, and those in the middle seemed not to tire from the parry and slash. Several minutes of fierce fighting had brought down only one of the men, and some of the attackers had met with the blades of their foes. The largest of the Lechen rushed at his paled-haired attacker, knocking his sword away and rolling with him across the rough stone street. The smaller man pulled a dagger of his own, but his foe gripped his wrist like a vice, and pushed his own blade toward the pinned man’s chest. Champion resisted as much as he could, but the knife neared his heart...

A figure bounded from the shadows, and the pale light reflected along the tapered strip of silver as it whirled above his head. The spinning path brought it sharply across the neck of the Lechen

sitting on Champion, and his head jerked to the side, as his arms went limp. Champion pushed the falling body to the street as he scrambled to stand. He looked to his benefactor, as Eldritch finished removing the head of his target. He could not see, but could hear, the crackle of desiccating flesh at his feet. Champion wasted no time, but snatched up his sword and thrust it through the back of another of the Lechen. One the tide had turned, the men made short work of the remaining foe, and soon only they stood in the street.

“Anyone hurt?” Champion asked. A couple had slight cuts to show for their battle, and they were set to bandaging themselves. The others were given to removing the bodies of their adversaries to a nearby alley to decay out of the way, and Champion turned to Eldritch.

“I did not expect to see you here,” he said. Eldritch shrugged.

“I grew bored of my reading,” he said. “Fortunate for you I decided to come.”

“Indeed,” Champion said. “I have never been so pleased to see you. Will you join our campaign?”

“It seems I have,” Eldritch said. “What would you have me to?”

Once the tasks were done, the gang moved to a position on the other side of the way, in the direction that the other group had gone. Not knowing how long they would be gone, or if other forays would be made from the estate, William remained in his watch post on top of a nearby building to give warning if other groups came out. They did not wait long. Only a short time passed before they heard the sound of running feet, coming from the direction that the second group had gone. The hunters watched, and saw the Lechens hurrying down the street. Eagerly, the hunters tensed to strike, but as they neared, Eldritch saw that the largest of their prey carried a body thrust over his shoulder as he ran. Long hair draped from the body’s head, and Eldritch caught a glimpse of its face as the runner passed through the illumination of a streetlight....

“Camille!” Eldritch hissed, unable to stop himself. He lunged out toward the group, and scarcely before he took his third step, two of the runners raised pistols at his direction...

Boom! The shots echoed loudly in the quiet streets. Eldritch heard one bullet whir over his head as he dove to the ground, but he felt a blow like a kick to the shoulder as he dropped. The impact spun him, and his face smacked hard into the stones as he landed. He heard shouts as the other men attacked, and one of the Lechen fell to a crossbow bolt. The men fell back when the Lechen raised other firearms. Eldritch was quickly on his feet, ignoring the burning pain of his shoulder and bloody face. Forced to let the others pass, he joined the gang as they followed the runners toward the gate.

“They must stop to unlock the gate,” Eldritch said as they raced along. “We can rush them then.”

“And let them shoot us down?” Champion said.

“They have Camille!” Eldritch replied. “If they take her into that place...” He sprinted forward, only to veer off as a carbine raised in his direction.

The runners did indeed return to the estate, but they did not have to stop. As they neared the gate, it opened, and Eldritch led the sprint to get through before it closed behind them. He saw a row of torches, and then another, and quickly skidded to a halt. Inside the gate was not the empty, dark expanse of before, but rows of men, or Lechen, he could not tell, holding torches and a variety of weapons. The hunters stopped, as close to the gates as they dared, in the face of so many rifles.

The one carrying Camille set her down, beside a tall, gaunt figure at the center of the group. The torches gave him a demonic look at the pale lights flickered around him. He wrapped a long arm around Camille and held her hard to his chest. One hand gripped across her mouth, muffling her cries. Still, Eldritch could see her eyes, and it tore at his heart to see the terror in them.

“Vogel!” he spat, and the tall figure laughed a dry, evil laugh.

“None other,” Vogel said. “I am honored that you know me.”

“Release her,” Eldritch said, stepping forward. The muzzles of the row of rifles swung toward him, and he stopped.

“It seems you are not the one to give orders, here,” Vogel said, his deep voice a noxious purr.

“The constables will have heard the shots,” Eldritch said. “They will be here. You will have to explain why you hold her captive.”

“Foolish lad,” Vogel said. “You do not understand the way of civilization. The good citizens huddle in their beds, hoping that if they do not look, all disturbances in the night will go away. The constables, if they did indeed come here right now, will not trouble me. I am a wealthy landholder, and you an armed ruffian that stalks the night. If anyone saw the inside of a cell tonight, it would be you lot.”

“Let her go,” Eldritch said. “Or I swear that I will see your corpse turn to dust at my feet.”

“So brave,” Vogel laughed. “Yet so foolish. Do you not see my legions here? That you still live is only because I have not said the word to end your life, and all of your friends. I am the one who has the power in London, not you.”

“We found you,” Eldritch said. “We know who you are and what you’ve done.”

“Of course,” Vogel said. “But at what price? You would have done better to have lost my trail anywhere in the wilderness. But you kept following, and for what? I see but a handful of you. Do you think you can vanquish all of my followers now?”

“You cannot live here,” Eldritch said. “The cities are no place for the likes of you!”

“Yet again, you are wrong,” Vogel said. “There was a time when cities became to dangerous. Our ways were known, and hunters had free right to slay us, but times have changed while we played our games in the wilderness. The good citizens of London no longer believe that our type exist. They think we are but monsters from tales told to children. Do you not see how perfect this is? The city is a feast, and our victims will be believed merely those lost to the violence of men. Those who claim they have seen vampires will be laughed at by others. So go ahead, tell the authorities of us! You are the only ones who believe in us, and we have nothing to fear from you.”

“Then let her go,” Eldritch said. “If you have nothing to fear from us, you have no reason to hold her hostage.”

“As you wish,” Vogel said, releasing Camille. She stumbled, but lunged forward, toward Eldritch. She stopped short, as Vogel still gripped her wrist firmly. She strained to pull away, but his hand was as determined as any shackle.

“Eldritch, please!” she gasped, and he took another step forward, but was restrained by firm hands on his shoulders.

“Let her go!” Eldritch raged. “Release her and we will leave you be!” Vogel only smiled.

“You misunderstand my intent,” Vogel said. “She is not a hostage. She is a warning.” The vampire slowly pulled her back to him. She struggled, and struck at her captor, but her blows had no effect on him. He wrapped an arm around her, pinning her arms to her body, and she writhed, helpless in his grasp. He grinned, and his sharp teeth were visible in the flickering torch light.

“Such will be the fate of all who cross me,” Vogel said, lowering his mouth to her neck. Camille screamed as the fangs pierced her throat. Eldritch lunged forward, and only the grip of Champion kept him from hurling himself into a barrage of bullets. He struggled as she cried out again, weaker. She struggled in Vogel’s arms like a kitten against a mastiff, as he drank her life’s blood from where it ran dark across her pale throat. Eldritch sobbed in helpless rage, as Champion pulled him backward down the street.

“Release me!” he shouted, struggling to free himself.

“No!” Champion said. “He will kill you. We need you alive, if we are to seek revenge.” As the party neared the end of the street, Eldritch could see Camille’s limp form sagging in Vogel’s arms, and grief nearly doubled him over. Then Champion dragged him around the corner, and she was lost to view. Eldritch collapsed in a heap, shaking from grief and rage, and the others gathered around. After a time, he sat up, and Champion gently rested a hand on his shoulder.

“Come!” Champion said. “We must away. There is nothing more we can do tonight. William, can you get him safely home?”

“I will go,” Eldritch said. “But there is something that must be done first. Come, William.”

Eldritch led the way to the Meeker’s residence. He wasn’t sure what he would find, but the lights burned inside, so he went up to the door and knocked. Even before an answer came, he could hear the sobbings of Meeker’s wife from within. Then the door flew open, and Meeker filled the frame. His angry look froze, and Eldritch realized that Meeker stared at his face.

“Good lord, Eldritch,” Meeker said. “What has happened to you?” Eldritch raised a hand to his face, and felt the wetness, and shooting pain at his touch. He looked at his hand and saw the drying blood on it.

“You know Camille is taken,” he said, and Meeker closed the door behind him. The sounds of sobbing faded, but continued.

“Yes,” he said. “Armed men came, they knocked me down and took her. What do you know of this?”

“I saw them,” Eldritch said. “I tried to stop them, to rescue her. I failed.” Meeker ran a heavy hand across his face.

“Where is she?” he asked. Eldritch looked at the man, and saw the shaking of his hand, the redness in his eyes. What would be best? To tell of his daughter’s death, or to give him false hope that she might still be alive? He thought to tell Meeker that Camille was no more, and he felt the grief rise within him again, choking his words.

“I know not,” he said. “I was hurt. I could not follow.” Meeker nodded.

“I am in your debt,” he said, and Eldritch felt a wave of guilt wash in with the grief and rage. “I know you, in your past, have skills in fighting. If you can do anything to bring my daughter back...” He choked off into silent grief. Eldritch nodded.

“Anything I can do to return Camille to her home, I would gladly do,” he said.

“I will pay you anything you ask,” Meeker said. “She is more important to me than anything else in this world.”

“No doubt,” Eldritch said. “But I cannot accept your money. In fact, I will not return to your employ. My life now is the pursuit of her captor, and no other purpose will stand before that.”

“Then if there is anything I can do to aid you, just let me know,” Meeker said. “But you are hurt. Come in, and we will bandage your wounds.”

“You are kind,” Eldritch said. “But I would not trouble you further tonight. I will give you news, if I have any glad tidings to share.” Eldritch left, and William followed. He waited until they turned the corner of the street, then looked at his friend.

“Why did you not tell him the truth?” he asked.

“I could not,” Eldritch said. “It seemed cruel to tell him I watched her die, yet could do nothing.”

“But now they have false hopes,” William said. “They will wait, hoping for good word that will never come.”

“Do you think I do not know that?” Eldritch snapped. “Perhaps it would be better to let them suffer all their grief at once, but I could not do it. I couldn’t be the one to tell them Camille is dead.”