

Chapter 13 – Vengeance Brewing

William fussed about Eldritch after they returned to the flat. They peeled off his blood-soaked garments and found that the bullet had scored across his flesh, rather than punctured his shoulder, so the wound was messy, but not deep. They cleaned and bandaged it as best they could, and William tried to wash the blood from Eldritch's face. This caused too many jumps from pain, so William finally handed the cloth to his friend and let him do it. Wiping the laceration was indeed painful, but this also proved to be a more bloody than serious injury.

“With the way it's swelling,” William said, “It may be broken. You're lucky what you struck did not find your eye, or you would be in even worse shape. You will have a few new scars to boast about.” Eldritch did not answer, but continued to clean his injury.

“I'm sorry to have brought you to this,” William said. “I know there is nothing that I can say to ease your loss, but I am sorry to have been the one who brought your past to your door. I would not blame you for hating me.” William sat upon the bed, and kicked at the chest.

“I have caused you nothing but grief,” he said. “Perhaps it's best if I leave.”

“No,” Eldritch said. “Would you deprive me of my last friend?” Eldritch tied the bandage and turned to face the other man.

“I do not know if I can sleep. My body is hurt, but my soul hurts more. To have you go because you feel guilty would only leave me alone. I would not choose that. Instead stay, and on the morrow we will plan our revenge.”

“How?” William said. “Vogel is surrounded by Lechen, or men as yet unturned, but they seem willing to fight for him. You heard what he said, how are we to fight that?”

“Tonight I don't know,” Eldritch said. “And perhaps I will not tomorrow. But we will devise a plan for his destruction, and he will die by our hands. Of this one thing I have no doubt.”

There was little sleep for them that night, but eventually weariness won out, and they slept until late the next day. During the night the pain in Eldritch's body only grew, and he awoke with the side of his face greatly swollen and sore. William was dispatched to the apothecary, and returned with various tinctures, which were mixed into a poultice. Eldritch packed the mixture under the bandages and left them as best he could.

William ventured out again, and returned with news that they were to meet with Champion and the other men. When the appointed hour came, they made their way to the tavern, and found only three of the team waiting.

“Where are the others?” Eldritch asked. “Do they watch Vogel's manor?”

“No,” Champion said. “They left.”

“Left?” William said. “Gone? Not to return?”

“Well put,” Champion said. “As difficult as it is, you’ve grasped the concept quite clearly.”

“Leave him be,” Eldritch said. “It is not his fault.” Champion started to reply, but paused. He looked at Eldritch thoughtfully.

“My apologies, William,” he said, finally. “Since I took command, we have been driven as much by a desire to see vengeance done as our search for plunder. Each blow to us has made it less likely that we will succeed. I had hoped we all would share the fire to see this to the end, but none of us are sworn to die for our fallen comrades. The others left because they would rather seek a life elsewhere than almost certain death. I should not blame them for that.”

“Indeed not,” Eldritch said. “But I care not for plunder now. My sole thought is to see Vogel dead. Well, more dead than he already is.”

“Agreed,” William said. “I have thought of this all day, and have no better idea how it may be accomplished. We all saw how many men he commands.”

“Aye, no frontal assault will succeed,” Champion said. “It might be the stuff of legends, but I have no desire to suicide deliberately. We must devise a way to strike at him without being seen, or in a manner where we can weaken his forces and withdraw.”

“That was our plan before,” William said. “Yet it did little good. Which makes me wonder; why did he not merely strike us down? We are all that stand in his way to a long tenure here, he could surely killed us all last night.”

“I can speak to that,” Eldritch said. “He toys with us. Our torment is his pleasure; right now he is gloating at how he has broken our spirits. He finds the greatest victory not in slaying his adversaries, but in making them suffer. What worse fate than to see our prey laugh at our weakness? To watch him kill the innocent, and be helpless...” Eldritch trailed off, and put his face in his hands. The other men sat in silence, each thinking dark thoughts about the events of the night before. Eldritch straightened and lowered his hands, and the others saw that he did not weep, but had a look of fierce determination.

“He does not wish us to quit and leave him be. He *wants* us to attack, so he may crush us slowly. He has been anticipating our moves ever since Merrick’s day. We must not merely allow him to predict our assaults and set traps for us to spring, we must turn the tables on him. We must anticipate *his* moves, and out maneuver him.” He looked around the table at the other faces, showing doubt and hope.

What then,” he said, “Would Vogel least expect us to do?”

A week later, the few men left had gathered again. Champion had wanted to attack again quickly, but Eldritch and William successfully argued that Vogel might indeed be anticipating exactly that. Eldritch had spoken for even more time, to help his shoulder heal, but they compromised

upon a week. They gathered far from Vogel's estate, but now headed in that direction pushing a straw-laden cart up the street, with the distinctive odor of pitch coming from it.

"I still think it best that I go," Campion said. "I am uninjured. You have probably grown soft from your months sleeping in a bed."

"No," Eldritch said. "It is a fool's errand, but I would not want anyone else to have the satisfaction. And you were never good at moving quietly. Most cows are stealthier than you."

Campion glared, but there was a smile behind his look. He held out his hand, and Eldritch shook it firmly.

"Then godspeed to you," Campion said. "There was a time I thought you merely an arrogant fool, but I know you are not that. You are brave and honorable."

"You can tell me all this when I return," Eldritch said. "I have no intention of dying in there."

He said his farewells to the other two men, and slipped away in the night. While they navigated the cart toward the estate, Eldritch made his way around to the back of the grounds, with frequent checks to ensure that he was not being followed. He found an alley near the wall that circled the estate, and settled in to wait.

He had been concerned that he might not hear the commotion, but those fears were quickly put to rest when the shouting started. Vogel must have had guards posted, for Eldritch could hear them raise their voices. He heard the noise, and quickly scaled the wall, using the near-by building for support. At the top of the wall, he could see through the trees the cart, its load of pitch-soaked hay burning like a meteor as the cart rocked down the slope into the gate. The heavy metal sprang open, and the cart spun and rolled, spewing its flaming payload into the air. Voices shouted, and somewhere a bell rang, and Eldritch flowed from shadow to shadow up to the back side of the manor.

He crouched in some shrubbery before the final distance to the outside wall. Out of habit, he marked locations of the doors and windows. In particular he marked a balcony in the center of the back, and the thought crossed his mind that it would do as an escape route. Of course, he reflected, if things went wrong, his chance of escape was near zero. Little good an escape route plan would do him then.

Across the estate, the others viewed the burning cart with satisfaction. They had merely hoped it would break through the gates and burn; having it spray burning straw about in such a blaze was a gratifying bonus. Below them, men ran about, trying to put out the flames.

"Do you see him yet?" William asked. Campion hunched by a chimney on the roof, a rifle in his hands, trained on the scene below.

“Not yet,” Campion said. “I doubt he will make an appearance. Still, we may be lucky. The cart has provided quite a show.” Indeed, there was a great deal of consternation on the grounds below.

“That would be the first time in a great while,” William said. “I hope Eldritch fares better.” He looked across the estate to where he imagined Eldritch would be. If all was indeed going well, his friend would be inside the manor, looking for a place to conceal himself. As he looked, he saw a tiny flicker of movement above the trees. Holding his hand to shield his eyes from the fire below, he looked again. It was not his imagination, there was definitely something flying about, circling above where Eldritch should be...

With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he looked up. The moonlight gave adequate light to reveal the small, flying bodies that circled above the buildings. Not just any buildings, but the one on which he stood, and the other across the way, where their companions hid.

“Campion,” he said, as steadily as he could. “Look into the sky, do you see anything?” Campion glanced upward, as if unwilling to take his eyes away from the scene below in case Vogel should appear after all, but he quickly looked again.

“Blast!” he swore softly, and met William’s gaze. “You know what that means.”

“They know we’re here,” William said. “And they know where Eldritch is, too.”

Campion cupped his hands to his mouth and hooted like an anxious owl. A similar call came back from where their companions hid in the dark. Quickly Campion gathered up the rifle and his coat and he hurried to catch up to William, who was making the fastest time he could to get away.

“What of Eldritch?” William asked, as they made their way down from the building’s roof. “We should warn him.”

“How?” Campion asked. “We have no way to signal him. We could fire our guns, but he would only assume we had fired at Vogel. Unless you have some knowledge that I do not, we must trust that he can find his way out again.”

“But they must know he’s there!” William said. “He relied on surprise. I fear for his life.”

“As do I,” Campion said, as they made their way onto the street. “Right now, we best fear for ours.” The hurried away, expecting at each moment to be set upon by Vogel’s henchmen, but no attack came. This only made William’s fears increase. For if Vogel knew exactly where they were and what they were doing, then he must feel he could strike at any time, and that meant no rest for the hunters.

They circled around and met up with the others at a pre-determined rendezvous point. They explained what they saw, and the other two nodded in agreement about what it meant, for them and for Eldritch.

“What now?” William asked.

“Until we can shake those things, we are at Vogel’s mercy,” Champion said. “Our best bet is to keep moving until dawn. They may be able to track us, but we do not have to let their job be easy.”

“And what of Eldritch?” William wondered aloud. “I hope he fares better than I fear he will.”

At the moment, Eldritch felt he was doing quite well, despite Williams dire premonitions. He had approached and scaled the manor with more ease than he had hoped, injured shoulder notwithstanding. He found the wing of the manor empty, and had hidden himself in a plain room that appeared to be unused. He tucked himself between an oversized hutch and an empty bookcase, and was invisible to all but the more dedicated of searchers, if there were any. So he waited, as the cries outside died down, and the long hours of the night passed. Aside from having to shift now and then, to shake circulation back into his legs and feet, he waited with the patience of a hunter used to long hours waiting in ambush.

The windows were all covered with heavy curtains to block the light, as was the way of the Lechen, but he could still see a glow coming from behind the fabric. When he felt the sun was surely above the horizon, he ventured forth, moving stealthily from the room toward the center of the manor.

The halls were quiet as he passed. This was as he expected; those of Vogel’s thrall would avoid the upper floors in the day. With any luck, they all slept now, waiting for the night to come again so they could venture forth. No, he thought, that would be too much to expect. He drew his sword, feeling comfort from the way the handle rested snugly in his hand. He would meet someone, he thought, and he wanted to be ready.

He found where the great stair descended into the lower level. His eyes fell upon the doors across from the stair, and his thoughts from last night crossed his mind. He put his hand on the doorknob and gently turned; it was unlocked. He glanced into an empty room, so he slid through the open door and pushed it softly closed again. He was in a wide salon, and he could see where the doors opened onto the balcony he had noted from outside. Shaking his head at the futility of what he was doing, he set to making some changes to the order of the room.

Only a few minutes later, he slipped from the salon back into the hall. The stair spiraled down to an even gloomier lower floor. He stepped his way down, almost silently, into the hall below. From here, things became more difficult. Vogel was most likely underground. Whether this manor had a crypt, or wine cellar, or had been specially modified for Vogel’s own tastes, Eldritch had no idea. Now it was a race against time, to find Vogel before he was spotted by some guard or servant. Two doors led from this hall, one on either end. Taking a guess, he moved to one and gently swung the door open.

Rather, that was his intent. As the door moved, it was suddenly pulled open from the other side, and Eldritch jumped back. On the other side stood the tall figure of his adversary, flanked by a

half-dozen guards, who held rifles trained on Eldritch. Vogel strode casually into the room as Eldritch retreated, his sword still held in front of him.

“A room with two doors, and you chose mine,” Vogel said. “How fortuitous!”

“You knew I was here,” Eldritch said.

“Naturally,” Vogel waved his hand. “Did you think to find me as I slept, and drive that blade through my heart? Or remove my head from my shoulders? Not a bad plan, but not thought through. Do you really think you could accomplish that goal without drawing attention? Or are you so careless with your life that you accept your death for mine as a worthy trade?”

“If that is what I must do,” Eldritch said. Vogel approached, just beyond the reach of Eldritch’s blade.

“Come closer,” Eldritch said, the tip of his sword barely flicking back and forth, as if impatient for the taste of vengeance. “My task will take but a moment, and I will end your suffering.”

“Oh, that is good!” Vogel said. “Your only concern is for me.” He spread his arms and spoke to the men with rifles trained on Eldritch. “Let no one fire until I give the word. Kill this pup before his time and I shall be greatly displeased.”

“Why not send them away?” Eldritch asked. “And we can have it out, man to... thing. Or do you fear me?”

“Fear? No,” Vogel said. “But I have not lived for centuries by taking foolish risks. You are too young to understand. Perhaps if you had been a little wiser, you might have lived until you could understand the difference between wise self-preservation and fear.”

“I am not afraid,” Eldritch said. “I am here, after all.”

“Yes, about that,” Vogel said. “You were warned. Now you will pay.” Eldritch spat at the vampire’s feet.

“There is nothing you can do to me that is worse than what you have done already,” Eldritch said. “You have slain both my beloved and the man who was my hero, torn to death by your beasts.”

“Yes, I remember you!” Vogel said. “You killed one of my pets. On that score, then, we are even.” Eldritch’s sword leapt forward, to an inch in front of Vogel’s throat. The rifles around him jumped, but Vogel spread his arms, and the men beside him held, and did not fire.

“But you spoke of another,” Vogel said. “She is the one you truly care about. The one whose memory drives you to be here today, to strike me down in punishment not for the thousands of lives I have sucked from the bodies of the living, but for that one. Is this not so?”

“She did you no harm, and you killed her,” Eldritch said. “Does it matter whether I kill you for a thousand crimes or for one?”

“Not to you, apparently. But would you see her again? Hear her voice? Sheathe your sword, and you can.” Eldritch’s eyes widened for the briefest of moments, and his blade wavered, but held its fix on the vampire’s throat. His composure quickly steeled again.

“Clever,” he said. “But what matter to you if your men shoot me down with blade drawn or sheathed? I am not prey to your tricks any more.”

“This is no lie,” Vogel said, spreading his hands as if to show he had no concealed card or weapon. “Your life is forfeit, that much is given. But you may choose whether you look upon her face one last time before you go. What would you give to hear her speak your name? All I ask is your blade within its sheath.” Eldritch hesitated, his hand flexing on the hilt of his sword, the tip wavering. Then he swung the blade up and over his shoulder, where it found the mouth of the sheath and slid into the scabbard.

“Ah, you’ll play my game,” Vogel said, with a mocking smile. “Excellent. Camille! Come out and greet our guest.” At his words, the far door opened, and regardless of the danger of turning his back to the vampire, Eldritch spun, and saw Camille standing in the door.

She wore a dark red dress of rich satin, with panels of rose in the bodice. The neckline scooped low, but cream-colored lace modestly covered her décolletage. Her hair was up, exposing her slim, pale neck, which was banded with a dark red ribbon. Eldritch stared, his mouth working as if to cry her name, but no sound came out. She approached, and he looked into her eyes, made more striking green by the red she wore. She smiled, and raised a gloved hand to his cheek, and gently stroked it.

“Welcome, Eldritch,” she said, and the sound of her voice sent electric tingles racing all the way to his feet, weakening his knees and breaking out a sweat upon his brow. “I am glad you chose to see me again.”

“Camille,” he said, finally, grabbing her hand. “I thought you dead! Come with me! I can take you from this place!” She laughed, and the beauty the sound sent a stab of sadness deep into Eldritch’s heart.

“No!” she said. “Why would I want you?” Stunned, Eldritch watched as she pulled her hand away. “I have found a new love here, one who will keep me forever. Could you do the same?”

She swept around him, and moved beside Vogel, resting her head upon his shoulder. The vampire laughed, deep and cruel.

“You should see your face!” he said. “As if your heart was breaking yet again. But perhaps it is.” He raised a hand to stroke Camille’s hair, and turned her head so the nearly-healed scar of his teeth upon her neck was visible.

“She was too delectable to allow to die,” he said. “It is so much better to make her mine.”

Eldritch felt as if his heart exploded in his chest, and he gave a savage cry, where no words could speak the pain. He lunged, arm shooting forward, and a tiny silver blade slipping from his sleeve into his hand...

In the fraction of a second before the tip stuck his eye, Vogel dodged, and the metal edge sliced across it instead of driving deep. Vile fluid spurted from his face, and he roared in anger and pain. Knocking Eldritch’s riposte away, he grabbed the man by the throat and heaved him across the room. Eldritch slammed onto the floor, and slid into the marble balustrade at the base of the stair. His head struck it hard, sending him into a blur and ringing in the ears. He rolled, trying to scramble to his feet...

“What are you waiting for?” Vogel yelled. “Kill him!” Eldritch half fell, half dove behind the marble post, as bullets sent marble chips flying. He scrambled up the stair, trying to use the balusters to protect him as more bullets whirred by. Halfway up he felt a slamming blow to his back, which knocked him almost flat. A quick glance showed that Vogel’s henchmen were now approaching, so he redoubled his efforts. He managed to use the curve of the stair to cover his escape to reach the top, and sprinted across the hall to the salon. Feet pounded behind him, and before another fusillade of shots could send bullets his way, he pulled open the doors, and sunlight streamed in.

His pursuers reflexively pulled back, giving Eldritch time to cross the salon to the balcony. A few brave Lechen leaned around the corner, and as Eldritch swung over the edge to the drape that hung to the ground below, they fired again. One bullet splintered the rail, sending wooden shrapnel into Eldritch’s side. A final shot stuck his arm, smacking it away from the rail, and Eldritch swung momentarily unsupported above the fall... His other hand found the drape and steadied himself, giving himself just enough grip to slid to the ground. He landed heavily, and every injured point upon his body shrieked at the impact. He staggered, but the threat was too great to stop. He half-ran, half-stumbled toward the wall where he had entered, listening for the sound of pursuit. Even though he heard none, he pressed on, finding the hand-holds he had noted, and dragged his weight over the wall, leaving bloody smears. He dropped heavily into the alley. The roaring in his ears that started when he struck his head was louder now, and the day seemed dark, despite the sun. Still he knew he must not stop, and he pushed himself to stand, supported by the wall, and followed it into the street. Surprised faces met him, but he gave them no mind, until the roaring darkness thrust itself hard upon him. Gentle hands caught him as he fell, and his last view was of a ring of strangers’ faces looking down upon him as they might look upon the face of the dead.