

## Chapter 15 – Armageddon

Snow had fallen for the last three days and nights, and the houses, trees, and streets were gently blanketed in a muffling coat of white. The few tracks that led into Vogel's estate were already filling up with snow as the guards by the gates scanned the street. They did not shiver in the cold. They were past the grip of temperatures, except for the most extreme, nor did they feel fatigue the way a normal human would. They paced their rounds with disregard for the cold and snow, concerned only with the glow of sunrise that could be faintly discerned through the dense cloud layer to the east.

Yet when two men walked down from the manor to the main gate, the guards being relieved merely glanced at them with disdain, and headed up the slope to the sheltering manor.

“Would it kill them to be grateful?” one of the replacement guards muttered. “They needed hug me like a brother, but you'd think they'd at least not look at us like the filth beneath a privy.” The other merely grunted as they took their places. The first was about to say something more, when a white lump behind the other suddenly rose up, two arms stretched out, grabbed the guard by the head and twisted with a sudden ‘crack!’ While this happened, the first felt something wrap tightly around his throat and pull him sharply backwards. He dropped his gun, all things forgotten in the instinctual urge to free his windpipe from the crushing force upon it. His hands scrabbled at his throat, while the thudding of his heart, loud in his ears, became overpowered by a rushing sound like a million grains of sand through a prodigious hourglass...

Campion lowered the body to the ground. He nodded at Wat, who was already pulling the other's guard's body off behind the wall, out of sight from the street. Campion searched the body, and found a heavy key attached to the belt. He pulled it free, and handed it through the gate to Eldritch, who had just silently appeared there. Eldritch handed him a heavy crossbow and bundle of bolts, and was gone. Campion quickly pulled the corpse aside as well, tugged off its heavy coat, and covered it with snow. He and Wat then removed their white cloaks, to reveal coats and boots that matched the look of the guards that they had just removed.

Dressed in their disguise, Campion and Wat circled along the inside of the wall. A week of careful scouting had taught them the places where Vogel's guards stood, and the ritual of changing from vampire watchers to human men just before dawn. It was with no pleasure that they struck down their own kind, but they had learned that it would be hours before these guards would be relieved. With them gone, their actions could go unnoticed in the pre-dawn light.

Wat handed Campion the second coat, took the crossbow and vanished into a copse as they approached the second station. The guards stood on a small tower, back from the wall a bit. Campion could feel his heart race as he approached; here was the greatest chance of total failure. He stomped his way down the trail to the tower. He could hear voices above, wondering why someone approached, but they were not concerned, merely curious. He kept his eyes down, as if more concerned about his footing, until he got to the base of the tower. He stomped the snow from his boots, took a deep breath, prayed that the overcast was too dark for them to see his face until it was too late, and climbed upward.

The guards faced him as he arrived at the top, looking uncertain. They held their rifles lowered, but were ready to bring them up at the slightest hint of danger. Champion held out the coat.

“A spare coat?” he said. “The night is cold.”

“Good thinking,” one guard said, setting down his rifle to take it.

“Not two?” the second grumbled. “You could have...” A sharp whir which ended in a wet ‘thunk!’ cut short his words, as a crossbow bolt sprouted from his chest. The other guard stared in disbelief at the wound, and did not see Champion’s knife lunge into his throat. Champion pressed the coat against the man to catch the blood, and released the blade to grab the rifle as it fell from the other man’s hands. The two men collapsed, and Champion tipped their bleeding bodies from the tower into the snow below. Quickly he retreated down the steps, and found Wat already covering the bodies.

“Well done,” Wat said.

“Well shot,” Champion replied. “Now to do this three more times, and we will own the grounds, for a while, anyway.”

A short time later, a mournful call of a dove came from within the estate, and Eldritch reappeared at the gate. He unlocked the lock, and swung the heavy ironwork open. Then he turned and struck a small light, which was shuttered, so it shone only up the street, away from the manor.

About this time two figures emerged from the gate. Wat wore the white coat used to sneak up on the guards, but Champion still wore the blood-stained coat of a guard.

“Any trouble?” Eldritch asked. Champion shook his head.

“None that we could not handle,” he said. “The final guard was more cautious than the others. I had to wrestle him to keep him from firing his gun, but only until Wat could reload. Far better than a day spent in the sewers, for example.” Eldritch grimaced.

“Do not remind me,” he said. “I never thought rats would get that big.”

The jingle of tack and clop of hooves upon the cobbles interrupted them, and they looked up to see two carts approaching. Meeker drove the lead cart, and another driver Eldritch recognized from the warehouse drove the other. William and Alain rode on one, their legs hanging off the end of the cart. Eldritch grabbed the lantern as the carts drove through the gate. He and the others hopped onto the carts as they passed, and rode their way up to the manor. The men quickly unloaded the payload; a set of kegs with long fuses running from them. When the last were unloaded, Eldritch turned to Meeker.

“Go now,” he said. “We’ll put these in their places.”

“We would do more,” Meeker said, but Eldritch shook his head firmly.

“No, you have done more than enough. We could not have done this without your help, but we will soon draw much attention to this place. I would not have you be seen here. The rifles by the gate are yours to take, you should be able to sell them for more than what our kegs cost you.”

“I would have done what you asked, even without that,” Meeker said, and Eldritch clapped him on the shoulder.

“I know,” he said. Meeker nodded, and he and the other man drove down the hill. As Campion, Wat, Alain and Eldritch shouldered the kegs, they could hear the faint sound of the gates clanging shut. William took a post by the front door, rifle gripped in his good hand, and resting across the other. The other men moved to the large main doors of the manor. Eldritch looked to Campion.

“This is it,” Campion said. “You know where to place them. Silence anyone you find. At any commotion, light your kegs and flee.” The others nodded, and they pushed the heavy doors open.

Once inside, they scattered different directions, each seeking out a room to locate their incendiary devices. Eldritch went to the right, setting one keg down underneath the spiral staircase. He opened a small case of matches, and struck one. The tiny flame flared up, and licked at the end of the fuse. It sputtered into life, eagerly burning its way down the line toward the keg. Quickly, Eldritch scooped up his second keg and trotted down the hall. He found a door that was unlocked, and opened it. Glancing in determined it was some small sitting-room, and apparently empty. He slipped through the door, and pulled it almost closed behind him. He set the keg in the center of the room, and unrolled the fuse across the floor. He knelt by the end, and reached into his pocket for the matches. Not there. He checked his coat. Nothing. He looked about; no fireplace nor candles in the room. He was about to leave, when something dropped from the ceiling onto the keg.

Eldritch’s dagger was out, thrusting toward the tiny form before he caught himself. Standing on the keg was a small monkey. His large, dark eyes blinked up at Eldritch from under a conical aubergine hat with a round brim that curled up at the edge. The monkey hopped to the floor and scampered to the end of the fuse. A small device appeared in his hand, but from where it had come, Eldritch could not tell. The monkey clicked the item a few times, and a tiny flame popped from the end. The fuse sputtered and caught, and began burning a dark line across the wood floor.

The monkey approached Eldritch and stood, looking into his eyes. With a wild shake of his head, he gave a wide, simian grin.

“Eeep!” the monkey said, and bounded across to the window. Hopping up onto the sill, he quickly opened the latch on a small pane, and darted through it. Eldritch caught a glimpse of him as he scurried away across the snow and disappeared.

“How very odd,” Eldritch muttered, and hurried to the door. It would not do to be in the room when the flame found the powder in the keg.

Back in the hall, he was pleased to see his companions emerging from where they had placed their kegs. He was about to say that they must hurry, when a movement to his right caught his eye. He turned, and in a doorway stood a guard. The man was not looking at him, but at the keg under the stair, and the fuse that burned dangerously close to it. The man looked at Eldritch, spun around, and vanished beyond the door. Eldritch sprinted after, with a glance over at his friends. What he saw sent a chill down his back; from the door surrounding them erupted dozens of men, Lechen, probably. Campion, Wat and Alain tried to run for the door, but were quickly cut off. Eldritch hesitated....

“Go!” Campion cried. “Get Vogel!” Eldritch dashed after the man. Behind him he could hear gunshots, and he hoped William would have the sense to merely fire from outside, and not enter.

As he raced from room to room, he saw why the man had fled; a narrow stair led downward into darkness. This must be where the Lechen slept. Eldritch thudded down the stairs, drawing his sword as he went. He could hear the man’s feet ahead of him, if he could just catch up....

As he passed a narrow opening, a hand caught him by the throat, and his momentum spun him into the side room and sent him skidding across the floor. He quickly rolled to his feet, sword ready.

“And here I thought I’d never see you again.” The hair on Eldritch’s neck stood up as he heard the voice that spoke the words. It was at once familiar, but also strange, as if another person spoke with Camille’s voice. Even in the dim light, he could see Camille stood in the doorway, wearing a rich gown of deep green. Even so poorly lit, the fabric shimmered slightly, giving her an unearthly sheen. She stepped toward him, and dropped her head coyly.

“What, no kind words for me?” she asked. “Have you forgotten your Camille so quickly?”

“You are not her,” Eldritch said. “You profane her memory by speaking her name.” Camille laughed, with a wicked edge to it.

“So righteous!” she said. “Are you afraid your life is not so pure?” She stepped closer and Eldritch’s sword pointed directly at her heart. Above them, came a thudding ‘boom!’, and a quick series of explosions followed that shook the floor hard enough for them to reach out to steady their balance. The walls twisted and cracked, dropping chunks of plaster around them. Camille looked up.

“Your handiwork, I have no doubt,” she said. “I knew my love was a man of genius. I am your Camille, you know. Do you fear me now that I am stronger than you? Immortal? And forever young? You could join me, and we will be in love forever.”

“No!” Eldritch said. “I would rather die than become such vermin.”

“If that is your choice,” she said, and lunged, clawing at his face. Eldritch staggered back, and slipped to one side. Camille whirled, skirt swirling about her legs, and she lunged again. Eldritch slashed, and a section of her bodice drooped, exposing her shoulder. Camille glanced down, seeing her fair skin so displayed.

“Oh, you’re...,” she began, but her words were cut off as Eldritch lunged, slamming into her with such force that his blade went all the way through her. His weight carried them both hard against the wall, as Camille gave an unearthly wail. Eldritch pulled back, but his sword was stuck deep into the wood frame of the door. Camille clawed at him again, but weakly. Eldritch stepped through the door, and she struggled to free herself from the blade.

“Don’t!” she wailed. “Don’t leave meeeeeeee!” Her voice echoed after him as Eldritch turned and headed down the dark corridor. Her screams once again set his skin to crawling, and his heart ached at what he had been forced to do. But no time could be spared for grieving.

He crossed the stone-lined cellar, and found what he was looking for; stairs led downward into darkness. Grabbing a torch from a sconce, he stepped downward, more carefully this time. As he hoped, he found a passage that opened to a foul pipe, tall enough to walk through. He listened. Sounds of an inferno roared above, muffled through the levels of stone. Was that a voice ahead, swearing in anger? He hoped so. He eased forward, coming to an intersection. His eye fell on a metal ring, dangling from the wall. He listened again, he could hear the flames, and the sound of things falling. Must be walls collapsing, he thought. Better be out of here before it all comes down...

He stepped around the corner, raising his torch and gazing triumphantly down the tunnel. It was empty. To be specific, it had no other person, living or undead in it. All he could see was a stretch of tunnel with a long pool of wetness covering most of the floor, and terminating in a heavy metal grate that covered the far end. Despite the heat of his exertion, a cold chill once again found Eldritch, and he stepped forward down the tunnel. He dared not look to the side or behind him, but kept his eyes forward. He stepped again, and again, avoiding the liquid that covered the floor...

The slightest sound from behind him made him spin around. Before he could see his assailant, a hand gripped his throat and lifted him from the floor. His body slammed against the side of the tunnel. He kicked out, but could not get enough force to resist.

“I could snap your neck and feel you die in my hand,” Vogel snarled. He glared at Eldritch in the flickering torch light, but one eye was merely mass of scars. Eldritch tried to speak, a wheezing garble of sound. Vogel eased his grip, and Eldritch rasped in air as best he could.

“I... know the... way out,” he gasped. Vogel lowered him.

“You must be the clever one,” he said. “Who figured out how to eliminate my spies. You must have something worth bargaining with.”

“Let me live, and I will tell you,” Eldritch said.

“Tell me and I’ll let you die quickly,” Vogel sneered.

“I’d rather take my chances with the fire,” Eldritch said. Vogel contemplated this, and a cruel smile crossed his face. He lowered Eldritch so his feet were once more on the stone floor.

“Good,” he said. “I like the thought of your flesh searing. Tell me how to get past the gate, and I will let you see if you can make it past the flames.”

“Agreed,” Eldritch said. Vogel released his grip, and Eldritch took a couple cautious steps back up the corridor.

“On the far side of the gate is a release lever,” he said. “It’s a long reach, but grab it and pull. The gate will swing free. Here, let me show you.” Eldritch started toward the vampire, but Vogel held up a warning hand.

“Pathetic,” he said. “You think me such a fool? Do not think you may step through and close it behind you. Step back. If you lie, I will be at your throat again in a second.” Vogel reached through the grate, leaning heavily against the bars as he strained to reach. He shifted, pushing hard against the restraining iron.

“There is nothing!” he shrieked. “You lied!”

“Yes,” Eldritch said. “Surprised?”

“You will die, very slowly,” Vogel said, splashing toward him. Eldritch stepped back to the corner and grabbed the large iron ring.

“Perhaps,” he said, pulling hard on the ring. “But not today.” He jumped back as another heavy grate slammed down, inches from the vampire’s outstretched arms. Vogel yelled in rage, pulling at the metal bars. They rattled and shook, but even his strength was not enough to dislodge it.

“Iron stakes, hammered in between the stones,” Eldritch said. “Took me all day to set these. Vampires aren’t so good with iron, are they?”

“Worm,” Vogel snarled. “These bars will not hold forever. When I break them, I will drive them through your limbs. I will crush your bones, and then tear your soft flesh until you beg for death?” Eldritch cocked his head at the raging vampire.

“How’s the eye?” he said. “It doesn’t look so good.” With a wordless shout, Vogel’s arm shot out at Eldritch, desperate to grab the man, but it was a foot short.

“I know something you don’t know,” Eldritch said. Vogel only glared, and continued to press at the bars. “Your problem is that vampires lose their sense of smell. And taste, too, but smell is the issue here. You might have realized that what you were splashing around in was oil, not

water. And the bars you were grabbing at down at the other end of this cage were coated in tar. You may notice the smears on your clothes.” Vogel stopped worrying at the metal, and glared at Eldritch, but couldn’t help a glance at his hands. They were indeed coated with a dark, oily paste.

“You were supposed to chase me down here,” Eldritch said. “And then I’d drop that gate behind me, then pull the rope to release this one. Camille interrupted me, so I was late. I was afraid you’d escaped, but the explosions most have dropped the gate. Lucky for me, isn’t it? If you’d been chasing me, I’d be stuck in there with you.”

“I have gold,” Vogel said. “Wealth like you’ve never seen. Release me, and it is yours.”

“There was a time I would have taken that,” Eldritch said. “If I could have gotten my reward without being promptly eaten. But that was before Viktor. And Merrick. And now Champion, and all the others. My only regret is that you will only die once. If I could make you suffer as they have suffered, I would. I would kill you a thousand times, and then another thousand for what you did to Camille.” Eldritch waved his torch at the vampire, who shrank back. Vogel retreated down the passageway.

“Do not do this,” he said. “I can give you wealth, power, unending life.”

“You would give me what I want?” Eldritch said.

“Yes!”

“I want Camille back, the way she was before.”

Vogel froze, his expression went cold, hatred streaming from him in palpable rays. With a howl, he flung himself at the gate, and Eldritch thrust the torch full against his chest. The flame latched onto the flammable muck smeared on Vogel’s clothes, and quickly climbed up and around his shoulders. Burning, Vogel grabbed at Eldritch’s wrist, and pulled him hard toward the grate, where smears of burning tar were already spreading. Eldritch snatched his dagger from his belt and thrust it through Vogel’s burning arm. The vampire jerked reflexively, and Eldritch tore himself from his grasp. Carefully he patted out the flames that singed at his hair and clothes, and checked the rest of himself for flames, but nothing was on fire.

Vogel, now a thrashing mass of flame, spread fire wherever he rolled. Eldritch stood and watched, despite the heat that blasted like a furnace up the tunnel, until Vogel fell, twitching. His body shrank and shriveled as it burned, going from charred flesh, to blackened bones, to a gritty pile of smoldering ash at Eldritch’s feet.