

Gambler's Hunt

“Today is the day, Guys,” Gambler boomed as she kicked the door in to the communal room with her apprentice, Arthur, in tow. The pair had been out confirming their designs for infiltrating a local casino to reach the vampire elder living inside. The State of Nevada had become thick with them in the last year and the region desperately needed new, powerful packs to level the field. If Gambler was right, this could be the hunt that moved her to the next level.

Gambler was carrying several dry cleaner bags with Arthur carrying several more. The communal room was thick with heavy incense and the smell of curry. In the middle of the room, three of her pack in their human forms were grooming three others in their wolf forms. The ones being groomed were sitting in large tubs, having a thick conditioner combed into their fur.

“Thank God,” Victor sighed as he began to stand from his tub. “If I have to endure one more day of this, I’m going to crack.” Victor was Gambler’s second and mate, as was common.

“I’m not done, Victor,” Penny said as she pressed on the shoulders of the big wolf as he tried to rise from the tub. Penny was the newest and youngest member alongside Arthur.

“Yeah, but I am,” Victor grumbled.

“Let the child finish, Vic,” Barbara said as she scratched absently at her muzzle. She was Gambler’s Third and seemed fairly content in being groomed.

“I am sick to death of smelling like a high end Indian restaurant,” Victor said.

“It was that or low end Polish,” Gambler said as she handed her dry cleaning to Arthur. She leaned in and kissed Victor’s nose. “And you hate cabbage, as I recall.”

Victor grumbled some more and allowed Penny to work the conditioner into his fur.

Gambler and her pack weren’t really so fastidious about their coats as to demand such exhaustive work, but instead were planning for a hunt. Vampire Elders were elders because they were as powerful as they were wary. They wouldn’t simply lean on their guards and security systems, but also their personal senses. Highly alert beings could literally smell a werewolf from a hundred yards away, so for the last week, Gambler had insisted that everyone be groomed daily, subsist on curry and burn incense at all hours. The combination of smells would be enough to alter their natural scent and prevent it from giving them away to the wrong person at the wrong time.

Once the pack had finished and shifted back to their human forms, they gathered around a cheap folding table to examine a crudely drawn map. It depicted a casino and adjoining hotel, as well as some floor plans.

“Our target is Ella Van Dyne, the owner of the Tri-star hotel and casino. She’s a fully matured vampire on the cusp of becoming an elder, so this is a big time hunt. We swing this and I’ll be silver by sunrise.” Gambler said, a hint of excitement in her voice. “This is also going to serve at Arthur’s graduation to journeyman, so I expect you to pull your weight.”

“I won’t let you down, Master,” Arthur said, his voice filled with determination. Arthur would be Gambler’s second apprentice in a year’s time. He wasn’t her find, having been sent from out east by an Elder who heard she’d just graduated her last apprentice. Taking on apprentices so rapidly wasn’t unheard of, but it certainly was unusual. With times being as they were, however, it wasn’t unexpected.

“The hunts plan is the same, but let’s go over it again to be safe,” Gambler said.

“Because some of us have bad memories,” Victor added with a sniff.

“Don’t bully the children, Vic,” Barbara said. “We were all young once.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“We’ll be splitting into two teams,” Gambler began again, “Victor, Barbara, Xochi, Klein, and I will be Assault, with Arthur, Jim, and Penny being Scout.” Gambler pointed at one of the drawings on the table. “Arthur, if you would?”

“While scouting, we were able to pin down covert access to the cash room via the kitchen; so my team will sneak in and hit the place.” Arthur pointed at a spot on the map. “The combination of pride and the chance to get humans they can eat and kill should stop them from involving any human LEOs. I expect their own security will show up first and after we drop a few of them, Ella’s children should join in.”

“Were you able to confirm how many she had on site?” Victor asked.

“Two, and if we’re lucky, they’ll show up one at a time.”

“And if not, we’ll be ready,” Jim added, placing his hand on Arthur’s. Gambler hadn’t given Jim to Arthur yet, but she suspected the pair was already bonded enough to make the transition easy.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Penny said as she drove a closed fist into her open palm with a satisfying smack. Penny didn’t look it, but she had the personality of an enforcer. If Arthur could properly channel her aggression, she’ll make a fantastic Third.

“It’s like looking back in time,” Barbara said, wiping a non-existent tear from her eye.

“Back on task, Wolves,” Gambler said, her voice kind yet firm.

“Yes, Packmaster,” The group said in unison.

“Now, Ella is in the penthouse. She has a special elevator that leads from the casino’s second floor directly there. There are also two sets of stairs leading there from opposite sides of the building. The elevator is the biggest issue, but I expect that both of the children will use it once Arthur’s team gets rowdy enough. I’ll sneak on the elevator and take it up while the rest of assault splits up and takes the stairs. We’ll trap her in her floor

and have a nice meal.”

“I get why they might not call, but what about human in the area?” Klein asked. “No way at least one of them isn’t gonna try to call the cops. Also, didn’t we find out that the Sheriff is a Vamp? What if he comes?”

“The Sheriff is a sibling of Ella’s but they have sort of a ‘Cain and Abel’ relationship,” Arthur said. “So even if they’re called by casino patrons they’ll drag their feet.”

“Couple that with the fact that Sheriffs don’t go out for just anything. So if a human patron calls them, I expect the worse we’ll get is one or two immature.” Gambler added.

“I still wish we could get her during the early day,” Klein muttered.

“You’ll be okay once the Packmaster takes over, Klein,” Xochi said as she scratched his back vigorously.

“We checked, Buddy,” Arthur said. “But she’s only above ground at dusk, and we never managed to find her bedroom.”

“Don’t baby him,” Victor said.

“If everyone is clear,” Gambler cut in again, “Arthur, Jim, Penny, follow me.” Gambler waved for the three to follow her towards an open space in the room. “The rest of you, get dressed. We are going in quiet, so I had your throw aways dry cleaned.” Victor and the others began to strip down and go through the dry cleaning bags. Gambler then turned her attention to Arthur, Jim, and Penny. The three had lined up almost instinctively, with Arthur in the middle. Releasing wolves was bittersweet and no different from what Gambler imagined sending a child to college felt like. Not that she knew that for sure. She’d been turned before she had a chance to have children, so that door was shut. Her pack and her apprentices were just as good, and any lingering regrets she had only surface when she released a member. “Make a circle and join hands,” She said as she guided them into position. “Arthur, clear your mind and think only of Jim and Penny. Feel them in your heart and soul. See them as your spear and armor. Pledge your self to serving them as their leader. Loving them as their parent. Protecting them as their master.”

Arthur was already a loose teether in Gambler’s mind. Releasing it was a simple matter. She felt his mind pushing to overcome both Jim and Penny’s wills and felt them as they submitted willingly. She let her control be contested and pushed away, until finally, she could no longer feel anything besides Arthur when she looked at the trio. “Well done, Apprentice,” She said softly. “Give it a few and get dressed.”

“Of course, Master,” Arthur said as Jim and Penny hugged him tightly. “Thank you.”

“Lady Van Dyne, we got an issue in the cash room,” Ben said in a mocking voice the moment the elevator started its decent.

“She can probably still hear you, you know,” Jason said as he rolled back his sleeves.

“What’s it even matter? She can feel my contempt.” Ben gestured aggressively to his head.

“You gotta view it right. She lets us go because we can eat thieves. You do like food,

right?”

“Yeah.”

“And if any of the staff see something they shouldn’t...” Jason trailed off and shrugged as a sly smile crept on to his face.

“Well, Boss lady is pretty explicit about what the staff shouldn’t see. And this is a violent robbery after all.”

“See? It’s just a matter of point of view,” Jason said as he clapped a hand on his sibling’s shoulder. “When you get older, you’ll get to make your kids jump hoops too. So enjoy the little things.”

The elevator opened with a sharp ding and the pair of vampires exited at a swift pace. Shouts, grunts, and the echos of bodies being thrown around reverberated through the nearby walls, letting the pair know that their intruders were still in the nearby cash room. Jason reached the door first, finding it closed as two guards attempted to pull it open. He shoved them aside and grabbed the handle.

The moment the door moved, it was blown open by the airborne body of a security guard, spinning Jason to the side and then throwing him backwards as the body slammed into him. Ben could scarcely react before a blur of red, white, and pink was on him in a rain of sharp blows. He stumbled under the siege before he could finally see through it, his hand lashing out to snatch his attacker by their slim neck.

At the end of his grip was a small woman, her face a mask of rage and excitement. She was dressing in a short pink skirt and white halter. The red was both her hair and blood, the origin of which was suspect. How such a small woman could move so fast was confusing, but it wouldn’t matter soon. Ben squeezed her neck, as knocking her out would keep her a viable meal.

“Ben!” Jason shrieked. Ben looked past his catch to see Jason being dragged into the cash room. “Wolves!”

Even as the words left Jason’s mouth, the edge of Ben’s vision blurred as his captive shifted from a small woman to a small werewolf. She’d planted a bare foot on his chest in her human form, which was of little consequence, but now that foot was punctuated by five sharp claws that shredded his chest like buckshot tissue paper. The pain was intense, and he lost his grip on the violently squirming werewolf. As she dropped to the ground she spun, her teeth tearing into his arm and leg as she fell. If the scratches on his chest were intense, the bites were blinding as his arm and leg stopped responding to his commands, but didn’t stop issuing their horrific pain. He found himself falling towards his attacker as she touched the ground, knees bent, body coiled to strike. She then lunged upward, and he felt her jaws slam shut on his neck.

His body went limp, but he could still feel everything. The wounds on his chest, arm, and leg were still very real, but nothing would move as he asked. The woman, holding his neck firmly in her jaws, dragged him into the cash room and dropped him next to Jason, allowing him to look into his older brother’s eyes.

“Well done, Pen,” A male voice came as he heard the door to the cash room close again.

“He never saw it coming,” A female voice replied, thick with smugness.

“I wish we had more time,” Another male voice said as Ben felt his shoes being pulled off.

“I know, but I want to get up to join the others if possible,” The first male voice said.

Ben watched Jason’s face twist into a rictus of pain and horror as the sound of tearing flesh and fabric filled his ears.

Ben tried to scream as he felt teeth sink into his leg, but he couldn’t. He could only feel.

Gambler was relaxed and ready. Victor and the others had made their way to the penthouse floor via their respective stairwells with minimal issue and were waiting for the mental order to strike. She tensed as the elevator chimed and rocked to a stop. As the door opened, Gambler stepped cautiously off into the space of Ella Van Dyne’s office. The space was massive, and Gambler suspected it made up the entire floor. It was sparsely decorated, with only a pair of couches, a coffee table and a loaded drink cart of note beside the large desk at the far side of the room. The back wall was nothing but windows offering a breathtaking view of the rocky landscape and town.

Standing in the middle of the wall of glass was Gambler’s prey. Ella Van Dyne was tall, slim, and delicately, albeit visibly, muscled. She was a young-looking woman, but her eyes carried a distinct arrogance that commonly older vampires had. Ella was close to an elder and killing her now would save a lot of people, a lot a grief.

“I expected more of you. Did my idiot children kill the rest of your pack?” Ella said as she looked Gambler up and down. They were almost thirty yards apart, so the look was as deliberate a barb as her words.

“No,” Gambler said, taking on a casual affect. “I just like to start these things solo. Measure the wind in your sails.”

“Ah. How Noble.” Ella walked to her desk and open a drawer. “I expect you studied me well before attempting this hunt?”

“You don’t stay in the game long if you don’t.”

“Good. That’s good.” Ella made a show of pulling a pair of oddly designed knives from her desk. They looked like spirals and glinted with a silvery sheen. “Then you know that I am not yet an elder?”

Something was wrong. Powerful vampires were cocky, but this was more than cockiness. This was confidence. “That is what I learned.”

Ella nodded approvingly. “Most excellent,” She said as she became a stream of living darkness. In the blink of an eye she solidified in front of Gambler, thrusting one of the knives forward, her expression amused.

The maneuver almost caught Gambler off guard, but she slipped the thrust and threw a counter punch into Ella’s ribs. Her fist struck darkness as the vampire dodged out of range. Her speed was far greater than Gambler had been led to expect. While her packmaster form was fast and powerful, it was also large and easier to hit. She’d have to

stick with her human form for now.

Gambler, Victor's voice echoed in her mind, *The doors are reinforced. It'll take me a minute. I'm sorry.*

The doors are slowing us down. It was Barbara now. *Hold on.*

Her expression must have given her away, as Ella chuckled. "Something wrong, Packmaster?" The vampire snarled as she rapidly began to string together lunges and kicks.

Gambler leaned into her defense, dodging what she could and blocking what was left. The knives' silver would do nothing to her human form, but a direct hit would punch a hole in her, regardless. Ella's speed and constant shifting into darkness make her attacks difficult to predict, but Gambler only needed a small opening to bring her power to bear.

One of Ella's lunges hung in the air a split second too long, having been fast enough to tear the werewolf's cheek open. Gambler was able to snake her hand around Ella's wrist and land a solid back-fist with her other hand. The blow snapped Ella's head back just long enough for Gambler to land another blow to her stomach, lifting her off the ground before Gambler swung her up, over and down, smashing her into the floor.

Ella recovered instantly, rolling up on herself and, using Gambler's grip as a hinge point, slammed both her heels into the larger woman's jaw. The werewolf lost her grip and stumbled backwards, only barely avoiding the Vampire's follow up sweep with both legs.

The scream of metal and the boom of heavy doors signaled a change in the fight as Victor, Klein, Barbara, and Xochi burst in from their respective sides. The four were shifted into their wolf forms and their eyes with fury.

"Tired of measuring the wind, Puppy?" Ella shouted.

"She's an Elder!" Gambler shouted.

"You animals are like the fucking sunrise. Frustrating in both your predictability and your inevitability. I would use both to finish the job your mad brethren began." Ella wrapped her arms around herself and her body was enveloped in a darkness that tensed before exploding outward, bathing everything in a blinding blackness.

Klein. Xochi. Intermittent howling. Gambler's thought was a command and Klein loosed a long, throaty howl. The echo of his voice made the room visible to the pack's ears, just in time for Victor to catch one of Ella's knives in his hand. She lept away from his counter swipe, but couldn't quite dodge Barbara's. Gambler's enforcer managed to nick the Elder's side, sending her into a defensive spin.

Klein's howl began to fade, and Xochi joined in, howling the same. Gambler only now chose to shift into her full glory. Packmasters dwarfed common wolves. Even large ones like Victor and Barbara felt small next to an eight foot Packmaster. She'd be faster now, and her claws and teeth would level the playing field. She dashed forward, low to the ground and arms open wide. Even as Ella's spin allowed her to slam a knife home in Barbara's shoulder, Gambler was able to land a marking blow on her legs.

Ella danced away, out of the range of the three large wolves, and made a rush for Klein as he filled his lungs for another howl. Victor moved to intercept, but the group

lost for just a moment as she moved perfectly into the triangular space between her three primary attackers, even as they moved to counter her. That moment of blindness cost Xochi as one of Ella's knives stuck her in her solar plexus, cutting her howl off with a sharp whine.

Gambler unleashed a hard bark, not for the echos, but for the force of it. Her voice found Ella, and the sound allowed Barbara's good arm to find her as well. Victor had lunged blindly, hoping for a lucky bite, and he found one in Ella's arm, deadening it, but catching the Vampire's remaining knife in his chest as a reward. Gambler felt the screaming pain of the silver weapons coursing through her pack mates, even as they both went down, gripping the weapons and holding them in their bodies.

Now disarmed, and with a paralyzed limb, Ella was slowing down. She drew her darkness back into body even as she caught Klein with a violent leaping stomp that cracked his knee. As he went down, he raked his claws across Ella's face. The skin hissed and Ella screamed, clutching her now missing eye.

Gambler and Barbara lept to attack, but Ella was still faster and she again became a stream of darkness, flowing behind Barbara and sinking her hand into her back. Barbara screamed in pain and hit the floor.

"Just you left, Puppy," Ella said with ragged breath.

"We are going to eat you feet first," Gambler roared as she lunged forward.

Ella began to flow again, but this time, Gambler was waiting. Her charge was a feint, and she spun at the last moment to catch Ella with an upward swipe, tearing the Elder Vampire open from hip to shoulder.

Ella staggered backwards, holding the horrific wound in her chest. Gambler's mind was a wall of pain as she was forced to hold her pack together. Her own injuries were minor, but the harm to pack was draining. The Elder had wounded them on purpose. She knew what a Packmaster's true weakness was, and she was exploiting it to the fullest. As it stood, Gambler was half blind from pain, even if she wasn't half as injured.

The ding of the elevator drew both Ella's and Gambler's attention. "Tell me, Dog," Ella said. "Were you also aware of the antagonistic relationship I share with my brother, the Sheriff?"

Ella's words mirrored what she'd said before the fight. Had Ella fabricated that as well? Had Arthur run into an unexpectedly powerful vampire as they ate in the cash room? The Elevator's light flashed, and another ding warned that someone was coming, and whoever it was would determine who walked away from this battle.

The door finally opened and gave up its decisive guests. It was Arthur's team. They were dressed in their ponchos and fresh as a spring morning in their human forms.

"Packmaster Gambler!" Arthur said.

"More fucking dogs?" Ella screamed incredulously as she wrapped her arms around herself again and erupted in darkness.

Gambler had no control over Arthur and hadn't trained him to use echolocation. This sort of thing was out of his league, but she had to try. She howled, filling the room with her voice even as she knew Ella would be going for either her exposed throat or Arthur's

unprepared pack.

The darkness winked out, and Gambler turned. Jim was standing with his arms wide in defense of his mate. Penny was low, her claws ready. Both had shifted to ward off the attack, but Ella was a few feet away. She was kneeling and holding her face with her hands. Her breaths were fast, and she was trembling. A soft litany of 'no' tumbled from her lips. She had overexerted herself. Her curse had kicked in.

"Penny," Arthur said.

Wordlessly, Penny crept over and at the last moment, lunged and bit Ella on the neck. The Elder vampire didn't move. She was already lost in her own mind.

Penny and Jim rushed to check on the others as Arthur walked to Gambler's side, shifting to his packmaster form as he did. He was smaller than Gambler, but still bigger than a common wolf, his strength showing in his size. "Let me help you, Packmaster Gambler."

"Just Gambler is fine now, Journeyman," Gambler said as she dropped to her knees.

Arthur smiled and offered her his hand. "You need to eat."

"The others are more hurt than I am. They can eat first. Besides, they'll need it. I think the Sheriff is coming."

"You might be right," Arthur said, looking out the window across the room at the line of red and blue headed towards the building. "Are you sure we shouldn't just call it a hunt and run?"

"The others need to heal and for that they need to eat. Besides," Gambler said with a chuckle. "I never did know when to walk away."