

Vengeance

A story of
Dominick Wytchburner
by
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demand to see the Duke!” shouted a voice from the Baliff’s holding cell in the darkest hour of the night in the town of Rosterdam.

The man who was known as Grant Herbmeister made his demands again and again in the holding cell. He was alone in this place for due to unusual circumstances the Sheriff had released the usual motley crue of drunkards, pickpockets and minor offenders on merely a promise they’d abstain from criminal ways for the time being in exchange for release, anything so they would not have to be in the same building as this man. Never had the Sheriff given such an indulgence to any malefactor but never he be so convinced their repentance.

The Bailiff and his men stayed in the jail, grim and silent. They had all known Grant all his life but now would nary speak to him, nor each other. They wore coats tight and collars over their noses despite the summer's heat made stench and sweat worse with rain heavy and recent. On strictest orders they were there to prevent his escape and to wait for the man the Holy Church would send on most urgent business.

At last the commotion from the town alerted them the Church's Emissary would arrive. Few had easy sleep this night in Rosterdam and the lights were lit in town as only otherwise had been lit in festival.

"Make way for the agent of the Holy Church!" a young boy, Rolf, who was Stodman the Baker's son said as he ran ahead and around the holy procession and led them to the Baliff's. From the Holy church were several guards with archaic armor and swords and flintlock rifles, two priests, and a man in black robes. The man was the true visitor, a man from high office in the Church, but not a Bishop or some other official, no he was of an order few dared mention.

The procession arrived at the house of the town watch and there was much noise heard in the hallway outside the town jail. It was the town minister arguing as much he dared with the Church's emissary;

"I know this is a serious matter, but I did not expect them to send a member of the-"

“NONE are to expect Mein order!” his nervous question cut short quickly.

“But, Herr -”

“Dominick.”

“Herr Dominick, please, I mean Bitte - this is a right and Godly town. We have none here who follow the Devil’s way. This is the only incident of anything beyond the natural I have ever heard of.”

“Be at peace, Minister, for I was only trying to lighten the mood with a joke, ja? Oh, well, it is good for me I am not one to entertain others then, but to serve the Holy Church in mein specialized way. I assure I have come only for this incident and unless something presents itself I plan to make haste to Karlsburg (replace?) which does have reports of Lycathropy. This shall be merely a detour and please tell the Burgonmeister that I thank his wife and his household for their hospitality.

A knock at the door and shout from the Sherrif and the two men opened the door and were quickly relieved of their posts. The man held for no specified crime was alone in the room and heard not the words of the arguing outside, only that a calm voice had quieted even the loud Sheriff’s voice. And a single man entered the room to be with him.

At first he appeared as a Doctor, wearing the breath mask during a plague visit, the bird like mask to hold cloves and herbs. It was of modern make with round solid glass inserts to protect the eyes but give clearer vision than the older ones that had cloth worn with stone or leather with many small holes. He took it off as soon as the door closed, showing a face more like a soldier than a doctor or a priest. Rough, square jawed, some scars of long healed wounds and piercing eyes, a dominating stare.

He had expected an official then a member of the Church, but this man appeared more like a soldier. Prussian, of noble birth and one of those proud families that kept their Knightly traditions from old days and rode headfirst into battle or hunted wild game on their lands, sometimes to merely feed themselves in these changing modern times. Still he commanded a respect that the more modern wastrels of decadent noble houses simply given posts only had through fear of authority or envy of money. Yet he was dressed almost as a priest. Rough, dark clothes for travel, a tricorne hat that doubled as a slouch hat for riding in the rain and sun alone. A silver crucifix that had seen much abuse and re-polishing. A well used scimitar and musket at his side. A solid hard wood crucifix, well decorated with scratches in its ironwood material and carved metal inset on its sides. And the collar of a priest, but red...!

“Grant Herbmeister, be at peace. May we first begin with a simple prayer for your soul?”

It would have been unspeakably rude even for this unusual situation to decline so he prayed with the man. He noticed that his visitor had carried a square, flat object under his arm, wrapped in cloth. He had put this to the side of the chair before he sat down to pray.

When they finished the visitor spoke again, "Grant Herbmeister, do you have any idea why I am here, what my mission is?"

"Considerin you look like no Bishop but the Minister Donal spake to you a bit afraid you be of the Inquisition. Why you are here I know not. I demand to see Burgoenmaster Kauffmeister." The man held without charge replied

"Know this, Holy man and forgive any disrespect, but my family has a right to speak to the Burgonmeister if we feel we be held unjustly. We and most of the common families demanded some rights a few generations ago, when the plague had taken most of the people and his great-grandfather asked us to stay on his land and keep working for him as peasants. We did and we have some rights in this town. Reasonable taxes. Respect as long as we show it. The right to travel and do our business as long as we be lawful and productive. And protection from unfair law. Oh, if we'd been fighting and drinking and did real damage and called on him we'd only get more lashes and fines, but if some rich

person wants to accuse us as a robber coz his daughter looked at us with hungry eyes even if we never looked at her we can call on him and demand no unjust punishment. Even if somehow we are accused of bein' in truck with the Evil One we can still ask him to intervene, and I'd be the last one anyone thought would be in with him. I demand to see the Burgonmeister lest the King himself who be a Protestant have issue with the Holy Church.

The Inquisitor Dominick nodded, "I am here on your behalf on the direct request of Burgoenmaster Kauffmeister himself. When your request was brought to his attention he rode at all haste to the office of the Holy Church in MeinHelm. He brought several weight of gold and confessed he had ... been forgetful of the full tithes he'd owed the last few years. Furthermore he considered your misfortune some punishment of the Lord on his realm, thus he is at our office praying and houses that ordinarily entertain him on visiting the provincial capital are quite disappointed. He made it clear that he was unable to keep his word to you and upon counseling the Holy Church decided I would visit. Again, I am on your behalf, standing in for your local Lord."

"Have I been accused of Witchcraft?" the man asked.

"Nein. No charges have yet been filed of any nature. I furthermore doubt any will be. If you have practiced the black

arts then you should confess to me now, but none have denounced you as such.”

“Then why am I held here? Why was I arrested at all?”

“A moment, bitte...” the Inquisitor said. “Where are my manners?”

He pulled out some food from his sack. Fresh bread, a wedge of cheese, some sausage, wine. “Your local Burgeonmeister, he insisted on the generosity of his household. Here, I shall eat some too, lest you think I am to poison you or drug you to make it easier to put you on a torture machine, all the things said about my order.”

“Thank, you Inquisitor... I am not hungry. Strange, but I should be beyond hunger at this point, all I have been though.”

“You may call me Dominick in this room. And I shall have some more but if you change your mind have some of course.”

“Why am I held then here?”

The Inquisitor looked long and hard at him. Grant wondered how he could stare back. The inquisition was feared far more than any bandit, any tyrant in all the lands he knew. An accusation of being a witch or warlock or werewolf could get one tortured until confession, then face a torturous execution by burning. Even the nobility feared them. Supposedly they were losing their power and to his memory not one person had been burnt publicly in nearly a lifetime, but only a noble in the big cities with a good barrister could defy them. A peasant like him would have no chance if accused...

Still he sat there dispassionately. And he noticed the bundle with the inquisitor besides his bag, the square flat package wrapped in cloth...

"Is that some tool of the Inquisition? A rack is hard to carry around I guess, and the Burgeonmeister's family never really liked torturin people, they just hung 'em if they got out of line."

"It is indeed a tool of the inquisition. But a borrowed one, a simple item otherwise."

"Such as pliers, a hammer...?"

"Yes, but I visited your Burgeonmeister, not the Barber or Smithy. I fear I shall have to use it tonight, and though you may indeed find it distressing I ask you out of basic decency to not try to destroy it. I borrowed it from the Burgoeonmeister's household. He no doubt expected me to use his Knight's weapons, the new Cannon he bought the other year, but I only needed this. His wife's Christian faith is sore tested for it is from her possessions and she will be distressed if it is destroyed."

"Why am I here?" he asked the Inquisitor again.

"I had meant to ask you that. Why do you think you were arrested?"

"I did no wrong!" he proclaimed.

"You assaulted your former wife and her husband viciously and with intent to kill. By sheer luck they escaped with only severe bruising, so savage you were it took a dozen to restrain you..."

The man stood and shouted, nearly knocking the table forward. Dominick still sat without showing the slightest surprise...

“My wife! My best friend! My vengeance!!!” he roared.

There was commotion outside the room, but Dominick looked like he would only be annoyed if someone interrupted them.

“Sit down, Grant, for that is what we are here to discuss.” Dominick said. His voice was level and commanding, his eyes of the fanatic stern and unblinking. The rage of the man was subdued by his stern manner and indeed Grant sat bak down.

“Are you sure no food? This is gut...?” The Inquisitor sat and ate a while, but Grant felt no hunger, no desire to join him in eating. He did converse with the Inquisitor though.

“Your name is Dominick? I think I have heard of you.”

“I am flattered but forgive me, what does a peasant know of an Inquisitor save terrible tales of the past?”

“Not an inquisitor, you. You are renowned as kind of a hero. You’ve killed werewolves who were killing peasants like me,

taking their sheep while the local petty nobles hid in their decaying castles or burnt some old widow now and again when the bodies kept piling up. You've also been behind some nobles downfall, corrupt ones that were monsters to their people and also on the side of the Devil."

"Again I am flattered, but surely that is merely my profession. And I am but a servant of the Lord, you who work the field put food in our mouths, there is no shame but praise in your humble life."

"Well, most of us see the Inquisition as merely tools the nobles use to put down those among them they do not like, or peasants who speak for revolution. A dying breed, the Pope will someday be bribed into closing your office, perhaps by the Jews that are being allowed back in these lands, so they are seen as bribeable tools. And it is rumored that the nobility are turning to the Devil, fearing the bankers who are taking over the lands be they Jew or otherwise, and the Inquisition might burn some old widow with lots of cats practicing folk magick but ignore a stream of women that are taken to some count's castle never to return or children that disappear behind the Synagogue if the local Rabbi is owed enough money by the King.

“My how word gets around...” Dominick sighed. “My office has always dealt with criticism. Let me also remind you I am from a section of the Holy inquisition, not the Inquisition of Spain...”

“But you are different. You truly chase evil things and do not compromise your cause of rightness. I should be honored to meet you, truly, how I could ever meet Dominick Wytchburner...”

“Wytchburner?” Dominick almost choked, “I would prefer Dominick of the Inquisition, but let us just use my name...”

“But let us get back to the matter at hand. You seem to think you have the right to assault and if you can manage, kill two people, can you explain how you justify this to me?”

“My wife and my best friend poisoned me. They did it to take my land and all I had worked for. They buried me alive. They celebrated above my grave. But they buried me not deep enough and I came back for vengeance.”

Dominick nodded, “The town records show you died of a recent outbreak of plague. That is why the doctor insisted he lend me his mask.” - he pointed to the bird like doctor’s mask he had set

aside. "But I fear not the Plague from you or this whole village would be suffering now, as many as it took to hold you down."

"I died, I was poisoned, but I came back and was halted in my vengeance. Is it not my right to slay my wife if she lies in rut with a man other than me?"

"Your wife re-married. She was no longer your wife."

"In Seven Days!?" Grant exclaimed, almost shouting again but Dominick's stare kept him in check.

"Really, Dominick, Seven Days. I mean these modern times... But is there no suspicion?"

The Inquisitor nodded quite amiably at the "Modern Times" remark, the rapid change of times could be upsetting to both clergy and layman and peasant and noble alike.

"Please, tell me your story, I am of the Holy Church - the Inquisition yes - but we are to handle when those in the flock's souls are threatened from within. Tell me and do call me Dominick, Herr Inquisitor is not needed here. Why are you sure

you have right of Vengeance? Why do you think people who knew and loved you murdered you so willingly?

Grant leaned back and told his tale-

I have lived in the bounds of Rotterdam all my life. A simple, hard life. I was a child, I worked, I lived, I was married and loved my wife. Amazing how simple it sounds, I did not feel my lot unfair, nor my life unfulfilled. It was good until I grew deathly ill...

At first I knew only that I had had the plague. It had never really left, but only one person died every few years in the realm. This was me and a dozen or more other people I heard while I still had any sense. I pray'd to God Almighty I somehow survive it, all the things I'd do to be a better Christian somehow, and I held on for weeks. For people who poisoned me they put up such an act, my wife risking the death herself to clean me and bring me food, my friend and neighbor helping with the harvest though his own wife had taken ill I had heard. But it was longer and longer in between hearing anyone, nothing but the pain and the darkness...

And then the pain went away, and there was only darkness.

That was the first day. I heard much wailing and I lay still and thought that I was merely sick and it was wailing from all the dead. I tried to move, to see, but was too weak to move. I sought merely rest, for the pain had ended and it was as if I could rest forever. I am but a humble farmer, you have to work and work and work to perhaps survive, I would rest but one day and then get up and try to do some work.

The second day it was more quiet and I still could hardly move but I heard some distant weeping. I tried to call out but could not speak, I tried to move but could not move, so I lay to rest another day.

The third day the horror indeed set in for I had been buried alive! I lay not in my bed but in a crude wooden box and I could smell that I was in the ground for I had dug many a ditch. I had recovered from the plague but was thought dead and had been buried. With all my strength I tried to hit at my box, tried to scream and scream, but none heard me. I lay still to gather my strength to try one more time if I could before my air would run out.

It was an eternity to me until the fourth day and again I resumed my calls for help, my banging on my coffin. I knew not how I not choked in that buried box, perhaps I had lain not as deep or was on the edge of a mass grave and somehow there was air coming in, but it felt so solid all around I could not push or kick the sides away. I heard no reply to my screams, but I heard the birds and beasts jump about as if spring but surely it was till fall for it was harvest when I got sick.

On the fifth day I could move but weakly, and surely my life was running out. I had thought of ruining my hands trying to claw through the wood, but now had not the strength. I heard noises of the village - how happy they all seemed so soon after I and many others died so recently. And I heard my wife, Mary, talking with my neighbor and best friend, Dold! I was too tired to be enraged and then fell asleep again.

I was disappointed to wake up on the sixth day. When would this horror end and I know death? It was quiet and I could almost hear the sounds of winter. The winds, the snow blowing, the wolves howling. Feet shuffling in the snow to do whatever chore needed to be done and return to the house to get warm. I tried to pray but fell asleep again.

It was the seventh day that I realized what had been done. I heard sounds of such wondrous celebration! The whole of

Rosterdam wearing wicker masks and costumes, the Minister warning of old pagan days but then putting his own on and dancing with the others. And then they had the wedding of my wife Mary to Dold, the man who was my neighbor and friend all my life!

I knew then that I had been poisoned. Dold had courted Mary first, but her parents chose her for me along with mine for her. I had always worked harder and made more for her, but I am sure now that they both resented it. Doubtless Dold poisoned his wife and Mary poisoned me, then a few days later after pretending to be sad they got married.

I had to break out of my grave at all costs! I had to have my vengeance!

“So you clawed your way out of your grave then? What gave you the strength?” the inquisitor asked.

“Vengeance. I had to have it. Look at my hands? Surely they are a sight? Perhaps I should try to eat, I may starve not able to work. But I used to play



flute at festivals and in the evenings, that was why I could not bring myself to destroy them clawing through the wood."

"That does not satisfy me." Dominick said.

"What do you mean?"

"Look at me, Grant. I am almost a head taller and while not a peasant used to hard labor you can tell I am stronger from my training as a soldier and the duties of my office. Yet if I found myself buried as you did I surely would not break out in time, I admit this."

"What do you mean?" Grant asked again.

"Do not dare try to doge me here." Dominick said with chilling seriousness, "I can tolerate those who are loose with tradition, those that insult my office - even open heretics and blasphemers in these modern times who use the press and changing laws to avoid punishment - those at least we can try to consul and warn the faithful away from. But there is one thing that makes an Inquisitor truly mad, one who withholds the truth.

“What tru-” Grant started to say, Dominick interrupted.

“That the Devil will appear to people in desperate situations. That he will reach out to those souls seeking vengeance. And I can not imagine a more attractive case for his attentions than yours. Did the Devil speak to you?”

There was no pause, Grant replied. “I did hear a dark voice and felt an evil presence on that last day, offering me life and power if I would renounce God. I was told that I could live on even after vengeance, if I would but take the blood of others.”

Dominick sat and stared.

“So, there, I was tempted by Satan. Do you want to put me on the rack, then?”

Dominick still stared for a while, then spake. “Not for mere temptation, the evil one tempts all mankind. But, did you take his bargain? Sign your name? Renounce God?”

“No.” Grant said. “I did say I was willing to do anything, but not that. I told him to go back to Hell. Let God himself be my witness, I did not accept the bargain. Do you believe me?”

“I do, but tell me what power you used to escape the grave? Again if I was buried like you had surely I would not survive, I would call for help for a while then make my last prayers. If you took not the Devil’s false power then what power did you find?”

“Hatred”

Dominick nodded. He knew well that dark force.

“I am satisfied that you took no pact with Satan. I commend you for your ordeal was beyond what any should have. Tell me then the rest of what happened, from your eyes.”

Grant continued his tale -

It was a rainy night, it was as if it had rained for days and days. Perhaps that was why I could tear through the wood, why I could

claw upwards through the soil. I clawed with fury, I was beyond pain, only thinking of vengeance, I feared that I would not claw fast enough and I would lose somehow my last breath no matter how strange I had not lost it, that the soil would collapse on me and I not be able to move. If you've been a soldier, perhaps you've seen soldier's graves, nein? Once in a while a soldier gets buried alive and he is rapidly laid in a cheap weak coffin and but three feet down if he is an officer. Often they do rise, say when they were just dead drunk after being wounded, and nearly dig to the surface then. We find lots of hands sticking out of the ground in fields that our nobility used for petty wars between them years back. I am sure you could beat me in a fist fight, surely with a sword or musket, Dominick, but I could dig alongside you till you died of exhaustion I can assure you that.

But at last I saw the dim light of night and it was blinding but I gasped and moaned and pulled myself out of the wet mud that seemed to be trying to suck me back down into my grave. There were few lights but I was in the Churchyard where I had been buried and my home not to far off. I wandered through the town and saw Ert - the town drunk. Pity his wife and child but he was always fun to drink with. I walked over to him to ask him to help. I wanted to rest at his place and ask their secrecy while I recovered. Ert owed me so many pints and quarts I had considered dubious charity.

And what did he repay me with? He screamed in fright. He not only lost his liquor he threw down his mug and ran from me!

Why was he so scared to see his drinking buddy? Unless - ! he be part of it two. I saw some dogs wandering by, I thought they be those of neighbors I knew, they looked similar to them but different, as if their dogs had had puppies that had grown up already. They did not recognize my calls, I had been good with animals... Perhaps I should not confess that to an Inquisitor lest I be seen as a werewolf? Nein? Well I had lost it then, any animal I saw growled at me then ran.

I saw a few others on the way home. Mrs Wharton. The baker Stodman. A young boy I knew not, so busy on my farm. They all ran from me... Had the whole town conspired to murder me? Had I been so hated all my life!?

At last I arrived at my home and could hear the sounds of lovemaking from my room. There was a dog tied in the front yard that looked much like Bowder my loyal dog but did not obey my calls and tried to attack me. I did not kill the cur but hit it senseless. Strangely I felt sad doing that. The door was locked but I still had the strength to kick it down. I ascended the stairs...

I had not been heard entering the home, with the storm and with them rutting in sin to celebrate my murder... I kicked down the door, that took several hard hits for it was more reinforced than even the front door. I'd built both myself, I can kick them down, Nein?

And I called out to Mary and Dold there in sin with each other. They turned in fright to see me! Well they should for they saw the man they murdered! I leapt for them, trying to kill them both. They fought but mostly tried to get away, Mary down the stairs, Dold out the window and grabbing a branch of the tree so he not break a leg on the way down. They ran in fright with me behind, even had a boy with them, a young boy I had not known! Doubtless they had rutted in secret and somehow I had not known a bastard, no I knew Mary be not pregnant, but if Dold was an adulterer perhaps he had other women, he was always a better charmer than a worker...

And then this is where you no doubt know the story, Herr Dominick - I chased them both back into the town square of my beloved Rotterdam and all the townsfolk were awoken by their screams and the commotion. I tried to accuse them, to demand the Sheriff take them in so the local Magistrate, no the Burgeonmeister could decide their fates and administer justice...

But the whole town had indeed turned against me! They beset on me and overcame me. I was then locked in the Sherref's jail to await some fate. I shouted for my right to have the Burgeonmeister hear my plea, but he was either with them or too afraid of a revolt so he sent you.

“What happens now, Herr Dominik?” Grant asked. “Do you force me to admit to witchcraft or a pact with Satan so I can be burned while the townspeople celebrate? I know not what I did to deserve such hatred, but I fear this be the case.”

“You poor lost soul.” Said Dominick, “I am here to save you. To protect you.”

“What else do you need? Surely I can ask justice, that I had been poisoned, that I had right to kill my wife and former friend if I could for their crime against me? Do you suspect me of dark pacts then?”

“Nein. What I am here for is the truth. That is my office in its most simple definition.”

“I have told you...” Grant started to get enraged again but Dominick’s stare and voice held him again.

“Yes, and I believe you have been truthful. Among the most open and truthful of all people I have met, and given your situation not easy to do. However...”

After a pause.

“However, there are ways we can lie, we can deceive, so that we tell the truth fully for we have deceived even ourselves. What I shall do now let me assure you I do to try to save your soul.”

Dominick calmly picked up the square, flat package he had carried in with him, still wrapped in cloth, fine silk like cloth doubtless taken from the Burgeonmeister’s house also.

“Oh? Goin’ to put me on the Rack then? Send in guards and take me to some torture chamber? The Burgeonmeister lied then, I’m just a worthless peasant and if the others want me dead and burn’t as a wytych then he’ll just have you do the deed and pay the church an indulgence to wash his hands of my blood?”

“Sit down, Grant.” Dominick said with his commanding voice and gaze. Grant felt compelled to obey.

“I shall not accuse you of any deviltry. I believe that in no way you willingly entered into any supernatural pact. Nor do I

believe that you willingly lied to me in any way. However, you have lied to yourself.”

Dominick pulled at some pins and the cloth fell from the object from the Surgeonmeister's house he had turned into a device of the Holy Inquisition. It was an ornate mirror, one made with glass and silver to produce a perfect reflection, this in that day still much more expensive than the gilded frame with rubies decorating it. Indeed it would be the lord of the town's wife most expensive possession, one she would be distressed if destroyed so Dominick was careful to keep it out of reach of Grant lest he smash it.

For the first time since he emerged Grant Surgeonmeister beheld his own face;

That of a rotting corpse!!!



“Grant, you died not seven days ago, but seven years. It was the plague for there is no poison that can kill as it does. I spoke with the Doctor and Minister before I visited you and I doubt them not. After years of mourning your wife did marry your best friend who had lost his own wife to the plague. He had visited her to help with chores so she could survive and raise her son, your son. The minister suggested they marry for it would be the proper thing to do.

“Why did you refuse food when you should have been more ravenous than any werewolf I have put down? Why did you notice seasons go by when only days had passed? How did you live in your coffin more than a few hours after you woke? Why did you not recognize dogs nor young children if you had been gone days not years?

Fearful the Mirror would be smashed the Inquisitor kept it in his hands but he walked to the door, still keeping it on Grant so he could see his decaying face. The mirror was quite large enough to do this. Still holding the mirror, Dominick opened the door. There were no guards barring the way.

“You are dead. You knew it not. On my command the law shall not hold you, nor the church. You knew not you were dead and this lead to terror and then to hatred and to sin. “Forgive them they know not what they do”, our savior said as his people

murdered him. You are dead, Grant. Go back to your grave and pray for rest while you wait for judgement. I shall counsel those in town that all loved you to forgive you and pray for your salvation. But you are dead and the grave is your proper place.”

And with a hideous wailing Grant Herbmeister fled from the Sheriff's house down the winding road to the church graveyard and dug his way back into his grave...

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