

Westcrest

Episode #20: Nothing So Crude as Vampires

Marcus Tel-Ur needs a distraction. But he's here alone—or so he thinks, because he doesn't know that Jeremy is watching him from above.

"Drop your weapon, wretch," says the Queen, who is called Carmine.

Marcus scowls and says: "Where's the boy?"

"Drop your weapon at *once*, insolent child!" She says. She is grotesque, a gluttonous parody of monarchy. Every now and then her little pink tongue flickers out across her ruby lips. Marcus shudders. "The purity of your blood *must* be tested!"

"Oh, you don't want *my* blood," says Marcus with absolute surety. He's thinking about the future, where people are grown in green tanks. "What are you, anyway... vampires?"

Queen Carmine seems to find this hilarious, throwing her head back and guffaws. Her multiple chins wobble. "Vampires?" She says "We're nothing so crude as *vampires*."

One of the guards shifts forward; they're getting edgy. Marcus expects to feel a blade in his gut at any moment. The Queen has stopped laughing and regards Marcus intently. At first, he thinks that something is wrong as her face scrunches into an expression of intense concentration, then he realises that one of her pale white hands is fishing in the space where her voluminous thighs meet the edge of the throne.

He ducks, but for once he is too slow. That probably has something to do with the remnants of Wormwood's poison lingering in his system. A metal ball whizzes past his cheek, splitting it open. Blood sprays in an arc and the ball hits the ground. It makes a whirring sound and stands up on stalk-like legs, tottering out of reach.

"There," says the Queen as a white-coated retainer steps out of the shadows and collects the ball carefully into his gloved hands.

"Neat trick," says Marcus. He can feel blood spilling down the side of his face and knows that he has to think fast. "Where's the boy?" He asks again.

In response, glass shatters above their heads.

Marcus responds immediately by throwing his weight against the guard closest to him. He fires his shotgun towards another who collapses backwards. The shells barely dent the armour of the guards, but he hopes that the shock of the impact will at least keep them down.

He fires again, ducking behind a stone pillar. Jeremy is calling down to him from above.

Ignoring the boy for the moment, Marcus strides through the shadows towards the man in the white coat. "Give it to me," he snarls. The retainer shakes his head, clearly more afraid of his Queen than he is of Marcus.

Marcus topples the man and rips the metal ball from his coat. Blades cut into his palm as Marcus closes his fist around it.

He strides into the centre of the hall. In any normal palace he would have been overwhelmed by guards now, but Marcus senses that time has taken its toll on the Crimson Court. He points the shotgun at Carmine.

"You may well kill me, foreigner," says Queen Carmine with a sickly smile. "But the next of my blood will succeed me, as I succeeded my mother. The Crimson Court will always remain pure,"

As she's talking, Marcus drops the shotgun to the floor and fishes in his pocket for the silver pocket watch. He places his thumb against the second switch from the left. A noise that's almost too high-pitched to hear surrounds him. Keeping his eyes on the Queen he starts backwards, one step at a time.

"Jeremy?" He calls out, in the hope that the boy is still there.

"I'm here," he calls back.

The high-pitched sound is louder now, and if Marcus concentrates enough he can see the edges of his vision have started to warp. The Queen narrows her eyes at Marcus, while one of the guards begins to stir.

Marcus chances a glance upwards to make sure that he's directly beneath the broken pane of glass. Then he tells Jeremy to jump. His entire body feels as though it's vibrating now, but the switch on the watch still isn't fully depressed.

One of the guards begins to rise and Marcus barely has time to hope that Jeremy doesn't hesitate. Even as the guard draws his sword and starts forward, Jeremy crashes down on top of Marcus.

For a moment Jeremy sees everything come apart, an infinitude of glowing threads cascading around them. The Queen is saying something, but no sounds can be heard coming out of her mouth. The Crimson Court speeds away from them, replaced by a rapidly approaching sea of grass.

Jeremy hits the ground and rolls. The sky above is blue. He sits up and realises that he's back on the island. Marcus is sitting behind him, cradling the silver pocket watch in one hand and the still-whirring mechanical sphere in the other. Sarra runs across the grass towards them, the Westcrest mansion looming behind her.

"Idiot," she says to Jeremy and punches him in the arm.

"She means: *welcome home*," says Marcus with a grin.