

## Chapter 7 - Camille

A young man with a pocket full of gold coins will always find friendly faces and a willingness to sell him almost anything he desires, even if it may be of questionable morality or legality. After years of uncomfortable travel by foot through rugged wilderness, sleeping on the ground in the rain, Eldritch thoroughly enjoyed the luxuries now open to him. It spoke well for both the economies of the areas he traveled and his self-control that when he arrived in London, his financial solvency was still intact.

After years of travel in remote areas, he was amazed at how large the city was. Even though he preferred not to deal with many of the city's inhabitants, he was impressed at the throngs of people that lived, worked, shopped, and begged in the city streets. Prices were much higher than where he had been, so he was surprised at the price quoted for a flat he found near the center of town. Instead, he sought and located a roomier, but less posh, flat near to the city docks. He calculated that he could live for months on his remaining coins, but a life of leisure was not truly in his plans. So he began casting about for work.

The findings were dismal. The banks and accounting houses refused to even speak with him, as he had neither education nor references. Shops and tradesmen all claimed to have all the employees they needed, or said he was not suited to the work. He had told himself that he would not turn to crime or politics, and was unwilling to take employment as a mere laborer. However, after weeks of looking, he resolved to take the next offer he was given, no matter what it might be.

To this end, he found himself at the docks, watching the ships come and the bustle of workers around them. He had been rebuffed from several inquiries, and was about to seek elsewhere, when he saw a young woman walking through the crowd. Women were not unheard of along the docks, although most frequented the area at night, and were in a specific, ancient line of business. During the day, however, most of the dock was populated by men alone. Eldritch hopped off the piling where he sat and followed her through the crowded waterfront. Eyes turned to follow her as she went, but it was obvious that she was not unfamiliar, for many greeting her and she responded in kind. She entered a large warehouse-looking establishment, where carts bearing crates and barrels moved in and out. Eldritch followed.

Inside, he saw the young woman speaking to an older man. He was tall and wide, looking like a laborer who had risen to the rank of foreman from hard work. He wore respectable, if worn, clothes, protected by a heavy workman's apron. The woman handed him a small basket, gave him a peck on the cheek, and turned to go. Her path took her past Eldritch, and she glanced at him. When their eyes met, she cast her eyes down, but Eldritch would swear she had a slight smile upon her face.

"You!" the large man rumbled, at him, pulling Eldritch's attention quickly away from the young woman. "What are you doing here?"

"I am looking for work," Eldritch said. "And chanced upon your establishment. To whom would I speak to inquire?"

“That would be me,” the man said. “What do you know of drayage?”

“Ah,” Eldritch said. “I am good at picking things up and putting them down other places.”

“If you think that is all we do here, then you are in the wrong place,” the man scowled.

“Not at all,” Eldritch said. “Forgive me, but I’ve been looking for work for months now, without success. Those in the professions have turned me away, even though I can work hard, but they scorn those who do not have their education.”

“Aye, that’s the truth,” the foreman said. “Stuffy lot, all of them.”

“And the tradesmen and merchants have all brought on lads from abroad. It seems I am not the only one to come to the city to find my fortune.”

“Where are you from?” the foreman asked, suspiciously.

“I am from London,” Eldritch said. “But I have been travelling the past few years.”

“Good,” the other man said. “I prefer to work with the English.”

“So I appeal to you,” Eldritch said. “I learn quickly, will do as instructed, and will give an honest day’s work. Have you anything that I might do? Anything at all?” The other man grinned, but with an edge to it.

“You’re in luck,” he said. “I have a task that you might do, which is well suited for one who can work hard, but knows nothing of the carter’s trade. Come with me.” The foreman led Eldritch outside to the cobble-stone area between the warehouse and the dock. He grabbed a wide, flat-scooped shovel from beside the huge doors, and thrust it into Eldritch’s hands.

“Carts come through here all day,” he said. “You will clear what the horses leave behind, from here through the warehouse, and in the street beyond. If you keep it clear, perhaps you will be worthy of a promotion.” The foreman turned to go, and Eldritch cleared his throat. The foreman paused.

“Where do I put the... leavings?” Eldritch asked. “And may I ask your name?”

“Meeker,” the man said. “I own this business, so you may call me Sir, if you like. And it all goes in the river. Where else?”

“Very good,” Eldritch said. “I’ll just be out here, then.”

“Too right,” Meeker said. “And don’t be thinking of sneaking off before sundown. You won’t get paid until then, and I’ll be watching.” Eldritch said nothing, and the large man turned away. As he returned to the warehouse, Eldritch looked about in the area specified as his responsibility.

The amount of droppings scattered about was not quite comparable to the Aegean stables, but keeping up on it seemed undoubtedly Herculean. Still, he had vowed to take what was offered, and if he was in the area, there was a chance to see the young woman again. He scraped his shovel along the rocky surface, and hefted a load of manure.

“It’s a pity there isn’t an abbey near by,” he said. “They might have a use for this.”

The other laborers started packing away their things as the sun approached the horizon. Eldritch had not cleared the area, but it was far better than it had been a few hours before. His hands ached; not blistered yet, but Eldritch made a mental note to bring a pair of work gloves for the next day’s labor. As the sun set, Meeker appeared in the doorway, and nodded appraisingly.

“Not bad,” he said. “Hang your shovel there. Here’s your pay.” He dropped two small coins into Eldritch’s hand. The younger man looked at them in disbelief.

“It’s so... much,” he said, and hoped the older man wouldn’t take offense to his sarcasm.

“It’s a full day’s pay,” Meeker said, as if he completely missed Eldritch’s surprised tone. “The lad before you left three days ago. It’s usually not so bad. You earned that much.”

“Ah,” Eldritch said. “So if I return, I can earn this much each day?” Meeker nodded.

“Well, it’s more than I’ve earned since I returned to London,” Eldritch said. “So I’ll say I’m grateful. A good evening to you, Mr. Meeker.” His farewell earned him only a brief nod, and as Eldritch left, massaging his aching hands, the foreman watched him go.

The next day, Eldritch arrived with sore muscles but carrying a pair of gloves and a cheerful attitude. He greeted the other workers, introducing himself to anyone who responded at all, and set to work scraping and scooping. He noticed Meeker looking his way a number of times in the morning, but after his initial greeting of the foreman, put his mind to his work and gave no notice of the attention.

While he could never predict where a new deposit would be made, Eldritch did manage to leave the area leading into the warehouse until the time mid-day when the young woman had arrived the day before. He was shoveling that very stretch when, much to his delight, she once again appeared, making her way through the crowds, carrying a basket. He stopped his shoveling and stood to one side as she approached. He gave a slight tip of his hat and a nod, expecting her to pass by, but instead she stopped.

“Were you here yesterday at this time?” she asked. Eldritch nodded.

“I had the fortune to see you as you were leaving,” he said. “Please, call me Eldritch, Miss...?”

“Meeker,” she said. “My father is the one who set you to shoveling this mess. May I offer you a word of advice?”

“Please,” Eldritch said.

“The other men gamble on how long the shoveller will last. My father always bets that he will not return for a third day of it. He often wins.”

“Do you come by each day to bring your father his midday meal?” Eldritch asked.

“I do,” Miss Meeker said. Eldritch leaned forward and dropped his voice to conspiratorial tones.

“Then put your money on me staying for quite some time,” he said. She reddened, but Eldritch was glad to see that she concealed another smile.

“If my father sees you flirting with me, he may find an even worse job for you to do,” she said. “Tomorrow, then?” With a flip of her head, she entered the warehouse. Eldritch continued his shoveling, grinning happily. He maneuvered around so he could view the door and her path outward, and was rewarded by being able to watch her departure. If she saw him looking at her, she gave no sign, but continued on her way, greeting the workmen as she went.

“You’re not the first, you know,” one of the laborers near Eldritch said as he hefted a crate from a bundle lowered onto the dock from a recent arrival. Eldritch looked at the man; Troyer was the name that came to mind.

“Not the first for what?” Eldritch asked.

“To take work here to meet her,” Troyer said. “Sometimes it’s a longshoreman, or a teamster, but Meeker usually gives them your shovel. You’re wasting your time.”

“Really?” Eldritch said. “I happen to be earning a princely sum for this task.” Troyer laughed.

“You know why Meeker pays you each day?” he asked. “So you’ll have less reason to come in tomorrow. I’ve never seen anyone push that shovel for more than two weeks.”

“Perhaps we could work a trade,” Eldritch said. “What is the longest time that anyone bets that I will last in this job?” Troyer shuffled, uncomfortably.

“How do you know of that?” he asked. Eldritch waved it off.

“That is of no matter,” he said. “How long?”

“A few have wagered you’d last beyond two week,” the longshoreman said. “But that’s the most.”

“I propose a trade, then,” Eldritch said. “You tell me as much as you know about Miss Meeker, and I will tell you how to win this wager.” The big man looked about to make sure no one was listening, and leaned closer.

“How?” Troyer asked, curious.

“Offer to bet all takers that four weeks from now one of three things will be true: I will either still be shoveling, Meeker has given me a better job within his establishment, or someone has caused me to not return or be fired. Be sure to specify that any interference will mean you win your bet, and swear that you will not do anything to affect the outcome either.” Troyer thought this over.

“It seems a good plan,” he said. “But how do I know you’ll last four week?”

“Simple,” Eldritch said. “This is the first job I’ve had where I haven’t had to dodge the slavering jaws of beasts trying to kill me. It may be boring, but compared to my past life, this is the easiest work I’ve done.” The other man laughed.

“I would not trade for your life, then,” he said. “But I would make this bargain if I had the way to do so. I have a wife and three children, and have no spare money for such wagers.”

“A fair concern,” Eldritch said. “Perhaps I can help. I have no wife nor children, and some money to spare. If I can trust you, I will give you the money to wager. For your role, you would keep a quarter of what we win from your fellow gamblers.” Troyer thrust out his meaty hand, and shook Eldritch’s hand vigorously.

“Deal,” he said. “Did you really flee beasts trying to kill you?”

“Oh, no,” Eldritch said. “I merely had to dodge in order to kill them before they killed me. And slavering beasts were not the worst thing I would hunt and kill.” Troyer looked thoughtful.

“If what you speak is true,” he said. “You are not a man to trifle with. I would do well not to merely pocket your money in hopes that you will fail and lose this wager.”

“I sensed you were a man of insight,” Eldritch said. “That’s why I made the offer. So, tell me of Miss Meeker.”

“I shall,” Troyer said. “But first I must deliver these crates. If you are here for the time you promise, there will be time to talk more later.”

So the days passed. Eldritch would arrive at the docks in early morning, take his shovel and begin clearing the piles that had already appeared with the first carts. Such was his industriousness that once the yard and warehouse were cleared, he needn’t spend all day in his efforts. To pass the time between, he watched the ships move in and out along the river, chatted with the laborers, and had Troyer tell him everything he knew of Meeker’s daughter. He learned that her given name was Camille, she was Meeker’s only daughter, and they all lived not far from the docks (Eldritch was pleased to learn that the Meekers’ residence was none too far from his own flat, but he didn’t mention that detail to anyone). Troyer reported that Camille was like family to the workers; she always had a greeting and kind word for them as she came by, and would take food to the families when anyone was ill. For all of Meeker’s gruffness, his

employees were deeply loyal, and most had worked for Meeker for years, unusual in a business where laborers often came and went. Eldritch made a point of always being along Camille's path when she came by to deliver her father's meal, and her stops to chat lasted longer and longer. Eldritch, aware of the watchful and sometimes envious eyes of the other workers, was always a gentleman, but he found himself becoming more and more taken with her green eyes and fair, lovely face.

Eldritch was into his third week, much to the amazement of all the other workers, except Troyer, who was looking happier and happier as the possible fruition of his wagers got closer and closer. He was leisurely scooping away droppings from inside the warehouse, as a burst of colder weather made the waterfront particularly chilly, and watching several of the longshoremen rolling a large barrel up a ramp into a waiting cart. Standing at the top of the ramp, the two had a rope attached beside them, which ran under the barrel and back over. As they pulled on the ropes, the barrel rolled up the ramp to the waiting cart. At least it did, until one of the ropes snapped as the man pulled, and the barrel, answering the pull of gravity, spun free of the other rope and rolled off the edge of the ramp. It fell onto the floor with a splintering 'crack!', and immediately dark, viscous fluid began oozing from the broken barrel. Meeker appeared instantly, shouting at the two, who waved the broken end of the rope, and shouted back. Eldritch leaned on his shovel and watched the altercation with interest. The broken barrel was carefully tipped and moved away from the spill, but left gooey streamers of treacle tracing from it across the ground. Fortunately the break was small, but still a large, dark area of spilled treacle spread across the work floor.

'Blast!' Meeker swore. 'Don't step in it! You'll track it everywhere, and we'll have our boots sticking to the ground for a year. Migs, Dibble! Get over here and get this cleaned up! Eldritch, help them!' Two of the younger laborers sauntered over and looked at the puddle of treacle. Eldritch sauntered over and caught Meeker's eye before the other man could return to his work.

'I think I know how to clean that up,' he said. 'But we'll need a few bushels of ice, some salt, and a barrow full of dirt.' Meeker shook his head.

'Too expensive,' he said. 'Scoop it up as best you can.'

'Certainly,' Eldritch said. 'We could do that. But it will soak into the ground, and drip all about. We'll be smelling treacle all winter, and come spring, well, the bees will find it particularly interesting. Of course, they will be vexed to not find what they smell, so we'll just have to accept all the stings.' He shrugged. 'And on a day like today, ice should be easy to buy; they know it's time to clear out their wares for the winter.'

'Fine,' Meeker said. 'But if it fails, the cost will come from your wages.'

'Naturally,' Eldritch said. Quickly he described to the other two men what he intended to do, and they set off to find the required implements. Returning only a short time later, they set three bushels of ice beside the treacle, Eldritch had Migs and Dibble put the ice into large sacks, and beat them with mallets to break the ice into smaller pieces. Meanwhile, Eldritch reached for the salt. Those workers that were not otherwise distracted, drifted over to watch what Eldritch was

doing. He shook a handful of the salt over the puddle of treacle, and then had the other men pour the broken pieces of ice on top. As they poured, he threw more salt into the mix. When they finished, where the treacle had been was now a white pile of ice. Tiny rivulets of water snaked away from the pile, but the cold air was only slowly causing it to melt.

“Now what?” Migs asked, and Eldritch poked at the icy mass.

“We wait,” he said. The watching laborers tried to return to their duties, but their curiosity was piqued, and every time Eldritch would poke at the ice-capped treacle, they would slow to watch. Finally Eldritch announced it was ready, and all pretense of work ceased as the workers gathered around to watch the next step.

While waiting, Eldritch had found several shovels and a large piece of sailcloth, which he spread on the ground near the treacle. He positioned Migs and Dibble on either side of the barrow of dirt, and carefully slid his own shovel under the mass. Prying gently, he slowly lifted the edge, and the near-frozen syrup lifted like a pancake. Migs and Dibble threw shovels full of dirt under the edge, and Eldritch lowered the treacle mass.

Meeker came out from his office to see why everyone had stopped working, but stayed to see the process. Eldritch and the other two worked their way around the puddle until all of it had been raised and dirt-coated. Eldritch then pushed the sailcloth up against one side of the treacle, and instructed some of the watching men to grab the corners. He, Migs, and Dibble then slid their shovels under the edge of the treacle and lifted, as the men pulled. The dirt-encrusted mass allowed the sailcloth to slide underneath, and the three men maneuvered the large disc of frozen syrup onto the top of the sailcloth.

“There,” Eldritch said. “Slide that into the river, and the fish can have a tasty treat tonight.” The watching men laughed and applauded, and even Meeker nodded approvingly. Eldritch had Migs and Dibble scrape the ground where the treacle had landed, scooping it onto the cloth, and several men grabbed the cloth to haul it to the river. Eldritch dumped the remaining dirt from the barrow into the depression that was left, and the three patted it smooth.

“Well done,” Meeker conceded. “Now, back to work everyone! I’m not paying you to jaw about.” The group of workers dispersed, revealing Camille watching from just inside the doorway. Eldritch gave his usual tip of his hat.

“Miss Camille,” he said. “A pleasure, as always.”

“Well done, Eldritch,” she said. “You’ve impressed my father. Not many can do that.”

“He didn’t seem so impressed,” Eldritch said. “But at least he didn’t make me pay for the ice.”

You don’t know him,” she said. “He isn’t one to show much, but I can tell. I think he likes you.”

“Really?” Eldritch said. “Is he the only one?”

“Perhaps,” Camille said with a sideways look and a smile. “But perhaps not. Are you so busy with your shoveling that you could not take some time to walk me home?”

“Nothing would please me more,” Eldritch said. “But your father would not allow me to leave.”

“Today he might,” she said. “But I must give him his basket. Wait here.” She strode off briskly, and Eldritch quickly looked about for any handy rag to clean his hands and face. He had found one, none too clean, but adequate to remove the dirt and treacle remnants from his hand by the time Meeker approached with Camille following.

“Eldritch,” Meeker said. “See that my daughter gets home safely, and come right back. Leave your shovel.” He turned and left before Eldritch could do more than sputter an assent. He looked at Camille, whose eyes were dancing happily.

“Milady,” he said. “I believe I am to walk you home. Shall we?” They left the building and were a way up the street before Eldritch asked the question that was nagging him.

“What did you say to him to have him *ask* me to go with you?” he asked. Camille dimpled, and Eldritch enjoyed the look of her face as she smiled so.

“I heard that there were ruffians about,” she said. “And with your background, you were the best choice to escort me.”

“I see,” Eldritch said. “And how would you know of my background?”

“I hear rumors,” she said. “I spend little time at the warehouse, but I speak often with the wives of the men. There are some strange tales about you, I daresay.” Eldritch was silent, trying to think what he had told the other laborers.

“So, what have they told you?” he asked.

“That you’ve traveled around the world, and fought fabulous monsters everywhere you went!” Camille giggled excitedly. “They say you’ve fought a hundred men raised from the dead single-handed, and drove a graveyard full of ghosts from a monastery. You’ve killed vampires, and werewolves, and horrible ogres. It’s all quite exciting, really.”

“Excitement is not always a good thing,” Eldritch said. “And do you believe any of these tales?”

“Oh, no, of course not,” she said. “I can believe that you have traveled, but there aren’t ghosts and monsters. I know those are just stories to frighten children.” She looked at him, and the smile faded from her face when she saw his expression.

“Oh, Eldritch,” she said. “Have I made you angry?” He shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I am not angry at you.”

“But I’ve said something wrong,” she said. “I’m often doing that. I say the wrong things. Mother says it comes from spending too much time at Father’s warehouse, but I just get to saying what I think, and it often isn’t what a young lady is supposed to say. I’m sorry if I’ve offended you. Please don’t be angry with me.”

“I’m not angry,” he repeated. “If anything, I am a little sad. These stories of my life that I’ve told are true. The versions you have heard have been changed, such is the way of storytellers, but I have done these things. Well, I haven’t fought ogres. I don’t think they exist.” He stopped walking, and rolled up the left sleeve of his doublet, revealing a jagged scar.

“I wasn’t the only one fighting those men raised from the dead, but this is where one bit me. He seemed real enough.” Fascinated, she ran her fingers along the rough edge of the mark, and he felt an electric tingle at her touch. He rested her hand upon his arm. It was soft and warm.

“But I’ve always been told such things are just fairy tales,” she said. He pushed his sleeve back into place, and resumed walking. She followed, a little meekly.

“I take it you have lived in the city all your life,” he said. “You’ve never roamed the wilderness, or walked a graveyard at midnight. I have seen such things that... that are not right for young women to know about. I shouldn’t speak of them.”

“Oh, please,” she said. “If you tell me they’re true, I’ll believe you.” Once again, Eldritch stopped, and turned to face her.

“You are very kind,” he said. “But it’s in my past. I wish I had not spoken of it to the others, but for a very long time it was the only life I knew. It is not that you would disbelieve me, but I have seen things that cause brave men to fall to the ground, frozen in fear. I’ve fought creatures that most people do not believe even exist. I have done terrible things. None of these are appropriate for a woman like you to know about. I would not be the one to tell you.”

“Do you know the most exciting thing that happened to me last year?” Camille said. “I got a new hat. Do you know how pathetic that makes me feel, talking to a man who has traveled in distant lands and fought monsters that I thought were merely children’s stories?”

“I should see you home,” Eldritch said. “I think I’ve said too much.” They walked in silence, and all too soon arrived at the Meeker’s residence.

“I’m sorry if I misspoke,” Camille said. “I would not have you upset with me.”

“I’m not,” Eldritch said. “And I would not have you worried that I am upset.” Camille smiled.

“Then let us agree that we are friends,” she said. “So tomorrow we may start new. You may tell me stories, if you wish, and I can tell you of my new hat.” Eldritch laughed.

“I doubt I will have time for stories,” he said. “Your father insists that I appear busy.” Camille dimpled again, making Eldritch’s heart beat a little faster.

“Do you think you can remember your way here?” she asked, and Eldritch nodded. “Good. I’ve decided that you should escort me to and from home, for my safety. You may meet me here at mid-day.”

“And your father will ask me to do this?” Eldritch said.

“Yes,” Camille smiled. “He will.”

“Then until tomorrow, Miss Camille,” he said. “I look forward to being your protector.”