

## Chapter 9 – A Visit From The Past

Every day for a week after, Camille would tell the story of her first encounter with a ghost as they walked to or from her home. Eldritch always listened and asked questions as would a friend who heard the tale for the first time, and even would utter exclamations of surprise and excitement when the ghost appeared or passed so close by. As she spoke, he would watch the way her eyes danced, and the curve of her jaw. He would follow the way her mouth looked as she smiled, and the way she waved her hands when the excitement was just too much for words alone. If she noticed that his gaze upon her was more than mere joining in with her story, she did not say. They did not speak about their kiss, although it was never far from Eldritch's mind whenever she was near.

It was not just because he was enamored of hearing her speak that he listened to the story repeatedly, but he did not want to dissuade her from allowing it to be the sum of her otherworldly experience. He feared that once the excitement of the encounter had run its course, she would start asking for another brush with the supernatural world, and this was not a road he wished her to follow. Each day he said a silent prayer that she would not ask the question he dreaded; could she see another ghost or monster? At the end of the first week, she still had not, and Eldritch left her at her home with a wave and a sigh of relief.

The day was sunnier than was seasonal. The wind had a chill edge to it, and dark, rounded clouds scuttled across the sky, but in between the sky was blue and the sun bright, even if it could not warm the day as much as one hoped. Eldritch decided to take the longer way back to the warehouse.

He moved along briskly, taking in the sights and sounds. If someone was observing him, they might think he moved with singular intent, looking only to the fore as he strode along the street. They would be wrong; his attention flitted constantly, scanning the crowd, noting each figure as it came into view, marking any unusual attributes, and almost always, dismissing them as yet another laborer, merchant, or vagrant that filled the streets. So it was that he passed a beggar perched on the edge of the road. He wore filthy clothes, and a ragged, gnarled beard. One leg sprawled uselessly in front of him; the leg of his trousers slit so a huge, jagged scar was plainly visible. One hand was wrapped in grimy cloth, obviously little more than a stump.

“Alms for a cripple?” the beggar chanted as those on the street passed. Occasionally one would hand him a coin, which always was met with a grateful, bobbing nod of the head. As Eldritch passed, the beggar spoke his plea, but Eldritch's face-forward march did not waver.

“*Eldritch?*” the beggar said, in a tone that drew the man up short. He turned, looking at the beggar on the ground. The dress and beard were totally unfamiliar, but the eyes...

“William?” Eldritch said softly, and the beggar nodded. “How have you come to this?”

“Help me up,” William said, reaching his good hand up toward his friend. “I take it you are late for an appointment. If you'll stand a slower pace for a bit, I'll trail along.”

“No,” Eldritch said. “I mean, I’m merely on my way back to my work. I am not late. We can stay here if you cannot walk.” William grabbed Eldritch’s hand and hefted himself up with his friend’s help. He turned and scooped up a long crutch that lay on the ground behind him.

“I can walk,” William said. “Perhaps not as fast as you. My leg is not as bad as it appears, but the coins come faster for a cripple than for a man who is merely slightly maimed.”

“So again,” Eldritch said as they made their way down the street, “How have you come to this?” William shrugged.

“After you left, we continued our pursuit of Vogel,” he said. “He led us a merry chase, I must say. We were more cautious, knowing that he was aware of our presence, but his traps were clever and increasingly frequent. As he traveled, his ranks of henchmen grew, raised from those who he and his minions fed on. Our ranks shrank, as more fell to his followers. We followed him to Calais, and hoped to trap him as he crossed the channel, but he deceived us. We followed and boarded a ship, only to learn that he and his men had already slipped overboard and were on another vessel. So we knew he headed for England, but it took some time for us to gain his trail again.” William paused, taking a few hopping steps with his crutch to catch up to his friend. Eldritch, caught up in the story, slowed his pace to a more comfortable rate for his friend.

“A day outside of London, we were attacked as we slept. The guards woke us, right before they were slain, but we were not ready. Many were killed. A beast was at Champion’s throat, and I knocked it down. It took my hand before I could recover. The owner of the blade that found my leg did die, at Champion’s hand, but the damage was done. I was weak, in a fever, and so was left at a London hospital to be tended until my death.”

“So you are undead?” Eldritch said. “That would explain the clothes.” William laughed, a clear, happy laugh that gave Eldritch a twinge of sadness at hearing it come from such a broken body.

“No, my friend, I did not die,” William said. “I lay ill for days, but for whatever reason, I was spared Death’s visit. But when I finally had the strength to rise, I was as you see me now. Short one hand, and with a leg that cannot carry me without help.”

“And the rest?” Eldritch said. “Did they not come back for you?” William shook his head.

“For what reason?” he said. “Even if I was not dead, I cannot fight. I am no use to them any more. I know not where they are. I do not blame them.”

“Well, I am glad to see you,” Eldritch said. “Have you a place to stay?”

“The sisters let me sleep inside when there is room,” William shrugged. “Most days I find what I can.”

“Then find yourself outside this warehouse here at sundown,” Eldritch said. “And you can stay with me. I haven’t much, but all that I have is yours to use as long as I live.” William blinked, and he started to say something.

“I must go,” Eldritch said, “Be here at sundown.” He hurried off so William would not have to have the tears in his eyes be seen.