

Chapter 10 – Closer To The Past

The rain fell in a slow drizzle that slowly soaked the clothes of those who walked outside. Deceptively light, but constant, it fell upon those who thought the rain was not worthy of blocking with umbrella or heavy cape. The kind of soaking that made its presence known suddenly, as if the moisture held back until it had sufficient strength to rush forward and make the unfortunate aware that they were not just damp, but soaking wet.

William and Eldritch sat upon a small balcony of an abandoned building, tucked almost out of the rain. An occasional gust of wind pushed the drizzle under their slight cover and sprinkled them, but not enough to dampen them as much as those fully exposed. Side by side they sat, watching the nearly-empty streets before them in the near dark.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” William murmured, scarcely audible even above the soft rain and wind “how you have been feeling? You’ve been unusually quiet the last few weeks.” Eldritch shrugged.

“My life is good,” he said. “I have no right to complain.”

“Interesting,” William said. “You never let that stop you from complaining before.”

“Such a friend you are! You are correct, though. I will admit that I have not been so cheerful of late.”

“I hope it is not on my account,” William said. “If I am causing problems in your life, I can find other accommodations...”

“Don’t be absurd,” Eldritch grumped. “I am only glad that you are here. No, my distress has nothing to do with you. It has most to do with my employment.”

“Are things amiss at the warehouse?” William asked. “Troubles with the teamsters? Clashes with Meeker? You were never one for bowing to authority, I could see you butting heads with him.”

“None of those things. In fact, by almost any standard, my work is a rousing success. I started with the menial job meant to drive away the weak-willed and lazy, lasted longer than anyone else, and was promoted to drive carts about the city. Did I tell you how I won the wager set against me by the rest of the men?”

“Several times, I believe,” William said. “And earned Troyer’s eternal gratitude. But none of this tells me why you are distressed.” Eldritch raised a hand, and gestured down the street. Four men in heavy coats shuffled along with frequent glances behind them.

“Are they...?” William whispered, and Eldritch gave them a thoughtful look.

“Not sure,” he breathed back. Eldritch and William watched the group progress down the street, then suddenly turn and quickly shuffle into the door of a dimly-lit tavern in the middle of the street. Eldritch shrugged.

“They look more like men of business who do not wish to have their tastes in strong drink and easy women be known. I doubt we’ll see them again this night,” he said. He settled back and for several minutes the two merely watched the empty, rain-washed street.

“You have not answered my question,” William said.

“I had hoped you had forgotten,” Eldritch said. “But you are always the tenacious hunter. I am reticent because I should have nothing to complain about, yet I am not happy.”

“Not happy? But you have found the life you wanted!”

“Found the life I thought I wanted,” Eldritch said. “I do admit that there is much pleasure in knowing where one’s next meal will be. Knowing where one will sleep, and that it will be in a bed, under a roof, without the fear of wild animals, or worse, finding a meal of one’s sleeping body. Knowing exactly what will happen the next day, and the next, and next.” Eldritch lapsed into a surly silence. William was just wondering if Eldritch was seeking to allow the topic to drop, but his friend spoke again.

“I wish it was a life that I could find joy in. But I cannot. I see the men around me take happiness in the routine of each passing day, each week, each year. I feel I am only being suffocated by the unrelenting sameness of it all. I thought I would leave the pain and terror that came with facing beasts across the blade of a sword, but I find myself craving it. Even as we danced inches from death, I felt alive. We had no safety, no future, and the only guarantee would be that if we lived to see the next day, it would have more hunting, more drink, more women, and more death. No I walk a path toward a long life, and it seems wrong to find the predictable future less appealing than the futureless life.”

“But what of Camille?” William asked. “Does she not bring happiness into this predictable life of which you lament? From what you have said of her, and what I have seen when the two of you are together, your path may easily include marriage and family with her.” Eldritch sighed.

“Camille,” he said. “Indeed.” He paused to watch a hansom cab pass, the driver hunched over in a thick coat against the rain. The sound of hooves upon the street faded before he continued.

“With her, I am of two minds, or perhaps it is a split between heart and mind. My heart sings her praises. I have felt for her what I have never felt before for any woman. The look in her eyes when she gazes at me, the smile she gives... the feel of her hand within mine. When I think of these things I have only the greatest love for her. The thought of forsaking all others to make her my wife seems the only reasonable thing to do.”

“Have you spoken to her about this? William asked. “And does she feel the same? Or has her father blocked you from courting his daughter?”

“So many questions!” Eldritch said, shaking his head. “I would think you had nothing better to do with your days than dwell upon the well-being of my romance. You should spend more time at the theater, perhaps it would satisfy this need for gossip in you.”

“More evasion!” William said. “I have touched a nerve, I see.”

“Yes, it is a sensitive issue,” Eldritch gloomily agreed. “I have not spoken to Camille about marriage. But I think that she and her father would be well pleased if I asked. I’m told that Meeker had never let one of his workers court his daughter, as he claimed that she could find a man of much higher station, despite his lowly status. Yet he seems to take a pride in my advancement that has won over his resistance. Or Camille has explained to him that he would do well to allow her to accept my suit.”

“Again, you seem to have drawn a winning hand,” William said. “A lovely woman who would be your wife with the blessings of her father. Few men have such handed to them so easily.”

“Aye,” Eldritch said. “Yet my mind speaks against what my heart desires. If I am so unsatisfied with my life now, would marriage and fatherhood be the key to my happiness, or yet another thing to make me miss what I do not have? It is one thing for me to feel stuck in a life that does not please me, I can still relinquish all that I have found here and return to the way things were. Yet if Camille and children become a part of my new life, I could not turn my back on them so easily.”

“True,” William said. “But she does not seem so interested in being an ordinary wife who merely keeps a home for her family.”

“No, and that is yet another problem. She has an interest in the otherworldly creatures, and I fear if we were married, she would do more to make me think of such things than forget about them. I swear that if she had met us on our travels, she would have cut her hair and joined the gang in boy’s clothes.”

“A woman as a vampire killer?” William laughed, and had to push his face into the heavy folds of his cloak to muffle his chuckles. “I cannot imagine such a thing.”

“It is not unheard of,” Eldritch said. “And she has more passion and wit about her than many of the lads that joined us. Given a sword and some training in its use, I would wager for her to last longer than most of them.”

“Point taken,” William said. “Some of those lads were next to useless, and the thought of an armed Camille attacking me would fill me with terror...” He trailed off as a small group of figures rounded the corner down the street. While most travelers that night moved with a sense of urgency, it usually seemed due to a desire to get out of the rain. These men moved with heads uncovered, as if immune to the weather. Two strode at the fore, looking about as if searching for something in the doorways and alleys. Behind followed two pairs of three. Each set had two on the outside of the third, in the middle. The center man in each group hardly walked, instead they

appeared to be deeply drunk or asleep, and solely borne by those on each side. William and Eldritch's eyes met, and Eldritch gave a quick nod. The two started to rise after the group had passed, but then Eldritch put out a hand on William's arm. William looked at him, and followed his gaze to the corner of the street below.

Several figures were moving stealthily around the very corner from where the others had just come. They hugged the shadows, and moved in quick bursts from cover to cover, holding their places when any of their quarry seemed to glance behind. Eldritch and William froze, hardly breathing, as the silent pursuers worked their way up the block and around the corner in pursuit of their prey.

"Go!" William breathed to Eldritch. "Track them, and I will follow as best I can." Eldritch nodded, and quickly scaled down the wall to the street below. William took the longer route within the building. By the time he reached the broken door to the street, his friend had already rounded the corner and could not be seen. Moving as fast as he could, with several hops on his good leg, followed by a step with his other in conjunction with his crutch, having the tip heavily padded to muffle the impact on the cobblestones, he arrived just in time at the corner to see Eldritch down the street slip around yet another turn. Gamely he scurried as quietly as he could to follow.

Fortunately for William, their selection of location was close to the destination of their quarry. He barely managed to spot Eldritch as he made a few more turns, and came to one intersection without any clue as to the direction to go, but took a guess, and at the next corner, saw the first group opening the gates to a large estate. He hobbled his way as quietly as possible down the street as they passed through the gates, locked them, and disappeared into the darkness toward the center of the grounds. As he neared the middle of the street, he stopped, and gave a soft bird call. He did not wait long, a tall, blond man stepped from the shadows to confront him.

"Who are you?" the man asked, quietly, but with a firmness of voice that indicated he was not in any mood for resistance.

"Campion?" William said.

"William?" Campion returned. "We thought you dead!"

"I'm not," William said. "But it was close for a long while."

"What brings you here?" Campion asked.

"He's with me," Eldritch said, leaning forward from a narrow gap between two buildings to be seen. Campion jumped, and stared at the other man.

"Eldritch?" he said. "This is indeed an unexpected reunion. Come, let us move away from the view of our prey and I would speak more to you." The group moved as quietly and secretively as they had arrived, back up the street. They huddled in an alley far away from direct observation by the estate.

“I had not thought to see you again, Eldritch,” Campion said when they were situated, and the others of the group nodded agreement.

“I am as surprised as you,” Eldritch said. “When I left the company, I never expected to see any of you again. But two months ago, William and I crossed paths yet again.”

“Which leads me to ask how did you come to be in London, and more importantly, how here, tonight?” Eldritch gave a brief history of his travels, and how he decided that the best way to escape his old life was to come to where people could not imagine it was real. William chimed in with his adventures since the group had left him at hospital.

“A fascinating tale,” Campion said. “But it does not explain why you appear on our trail as we follow a pack of the Dead to their lair.”

“William said you were attacked outside of London,” Eldritch said. “It occurred to me that Vogel might have made the same decision, and came to London to make his home. We have been watching for anything suspicious at night. We saw them pass, and we about to give chase, but saw you following. Then there was nothing for it but to find out who was following our intended prey.”

“Prey?” Campion said. “Do you plan to hunt them, then? The two of you?” Eldritch’s eyes drifted to the side, not wanting to look at the other man.

“I know not,” he said. “It would be foolish for us to attack without knowing their strength, and if there were more than a few, there is little we could do.”

“Indeed,” Campion said. “So it seems odd that you would be scouting for an enemy that you could not expect to fight.”

“True, when you put it that way,” Eldritch said. “But you are here! Do Merrick and the others search elsewhere?” The others shifted uncomfortably, and turned their eyes down as to not meet Eldritch’s gaze.

“Merrick is dead,” Campion said. “As are the others. We are all that are left.”

“So few!” Eldritch said. “I’m sorry to hear it. Was it Vogel?”

“Indeed,” Campion said. “He knew where we were, set more traps. Each time he would taunt the living as they fled, and our anger kept us coming back. If we fail in our attempt this time, he will have won. We have sworn to either slay him, or die in the attempt.”

“Campion,” Eldritch said. “I admire your bravery, but not all brave acts are wise. If it is indeed Vogel in that manor house, he could have a hundred minions at his command. If the gang at its full strength could not best him, how will the few?”

“We are not many,” Campion said. “But I think our meeting was not an accident. Fate has brought you to us. With your help, our odds improve.” Eldritch shook his head.

“I am greatly sorry,” he said. “But my life as a hunter of the Dead is past. I will not swear to face certain doom, not even to avenge Merrick.”

“Or Viktor?” Campion asked. Eldritch shot him a look, eyes narrowed.

“No,” he said. “I won’t.” Campion looked at William.

“I owe you my life,” he said. “So I cannot ask any favors of you, but if you can help bring him into this fight...”

“No,” William said, echoing his friend. “I would not ask him. I would help if I can, but not that way. You know that I am limited, so ask me something else that I may do.”

“I am sorry that is your choice,” Campion said. “Tomorrow we will strike.”

“If you attack that manor, you will die!” Eldritch said.

“We will not attack directly,” Campion said. “We will watch for those who foray out, and take them by small number. We will wear away their forces, until they are weakened and we can strike. I ask you again, fight with us. Your help will only increase the likelihood of our success.”

“I cannot,” Eldritch said. “You have your vows, and I have mine. Godspeed, my friends, and may you find victory where so many others have not.” The men said farewell, and they moved away, small shadows within the larger ones that stretched along the streets. Their eyes and ears were open for the slightest sign of anyone following, but none thought to look to the skies, where a small flock of winged creatures flitted overhead. As the men dispersed, the creatures followed, and Eldritch and William made it all the way home without realizing that two small bodies flew in the night sky above them the whole way.