

## Chapter 14 – Endurance

Eldritch first became aware of a dull, throbbing pain in his arm. He was trying to push it away, but every time he moved, the pain was answered by an burning ache across his back. He was trying to shove the pain off of his arm without moving his back when he awoke, his bandaged arm in the grip of his other hand. He raised his arm, and was rewarded with another dose of pain, so he lowered it and looked about the room.

He lay in his own bed. Of this he was sure, as he recognized the tin panels on the ceiling, particularly the way some hung down at the corners. William sat in the chair beside the bed, and as Eldritch watched, a worried expression crossed his face and he mumbled something to softly to hear. Eldritch continued his tour, and saw a pitcher of water beside the bed. Upon seeing this he realized he was greatly thirsty, and nothing could be done but to fetch a drink. He tried to sit up, but was granted another throb of pain from his arm, and the companion from his back, which drew a quiet, involuntary gasp. William jumped, and sat up.

“Monkeys!” he said, looking about wildly, but caught sight of Eldritch half way to the pitcher. “Eldritch! You’re awake!”

“Yes,” Eldritch said. “And if I could trouble you for a drink of that water, I would be even more in your debt than I am already.”

“Of course,” William said. “Lay down, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“Too late for that,” Eldritch said. “But technically, I had someone else hurt me.” He leaned back, and gratefully accepted the water William handed him. He drank a mug, and then another. William offered a third, but he waved it off.

“I should not have too much,” he said. “But I will want more soon.” He slid back down, grunting in pain each time he moved too fast. William tried to help, but could only fuss with the covers until Eldritch was settled again.

“Right then,” Eldritch said. “How did I come here? My last memory was of falling in the streets. I was sure I was at Death’s door.”

“You were,” William said. “It was a near thing, and there were many night where we thought you would not survive.”

“Many?” Eldritch asked. “How long has it been?”

“Two weeks, tomorrow,” William said. “You were burning with fever, but you must be the toughest man I know. The fever abated, and you slept for the last two days.”

“Two weeks,” Eldritch said, and stared at the foot of the bed despondently.

“We found you in a knot of people on the street outside the estate,” William said. “We had hoped you would flee. We had been waiting all night.”

“Why?” Eldritch asked. “You were to withdraw.”

“We did,” William said. “But we returned, hoping that you might have not yet gone. Vogel has spies in the air, small creatures that hover above us and somehow report back our moves. He knew you were entering the manor even as you did it.”

“That I know,” Eldritch said. “And he waited for me. As I stalked him, he lay in ambush, yet again.”

“Tell me what happened,” William said. “How is it you escaped?” Eldritch told his friend about the night’s events. William was shocked when Eldritch mentioned Camille, and a look of grief-stricken disbelief crossed his face.

“So she is...?” he said. Eldritch nodded.

“She has been turned,” he said. “He stabs us yet again, and twists the knife. Do you not see? He allows us to live to torment us. We are his playthings, and suffering is the only game.”

“But he meant to kill you,” William said. Eldritch nodded.

“I owe my life to Viktor,” he said. “Even as I was willing to give my life to slay Vogel, I remembered his words. ‘As you enter a nest, prepare your way out.’ If I had not done so, I would have died in there that night. As it is, I’m not sure I would not have preferred it.”

“I am sorry, Eldritch,” William said. “But it is done. Tell me now if you are going to waste away, surrendered to self-pity and grief, or are you going to return to the fray so we may bring him down?”

“Bah!” Eldritch said. “You’re right. I carry the hurt, but I will not let him vanquish me that way. When Vogel lies as dust at my feet, then I shall grieve. Where are the others?”

“They wait at their lodgings,” William said. “We stand guard against attack, but we seem to be at a stalemate. Vogel knows where we are, but does not move against us. We know he watches, and cannot evade his view. If we attack, we face reprisal. Champion said we should wait until you were able to be moved, and perhaps we can find a way to hide from his sight.”

“These creatures,” Eldritch said. “Are they like small, hairless apes with wings?”

“We have not gotten close enough to seem them clearly,” William said. “But they fly day and night, without tiring.”

“Homunculi,” Eldritch said. “Constructs of magic, not really alive, and at his command. I think there may be a way to remove them from the game. Tell Champion to prepare by seeking new

clothing for us all, something subdued, so we may blend in with those who roam the streets. If I have lived so far, my wounds are healed enough for me to travel. We will shake our watchers, and find more covert lodgings to launch our next attack.”

“And what will that be?” William asked. Eldritch shook his head.

“I have no idea,” he admitted. “But I will not stop until we have succeeded in our task.”

“And what of Camille?” William asked. “If she has turned, then... You know we must...”

“I know,” Eldritch said. “She is no longer the one I loved, some foul demon may fill her body and speak her voice, but it is not her. I trust that this will be enough to not stay my hand should I see her yet again.”

Despite Eldritch’s wishes, it took several days until he could move up and about. The others were pleased to see him, and told him how lucky he was. The shrapnel he had received had not been deeply placed, and the bullet in his arm had passed between the bones, rather than shattering them. Eldritch ventured that he would have felt lucky if he had escaped unscathed, but admitted that he had once again been brushed with the very scythe of Death, and yet lived.

Eldritch was near ready to be up and about the day that Campion appeared at the flat. He exchanged a look with William, who announced that he was going out for a time. Eldritch was sitting up in bed, reading, as Campion entered.

“William says you are healing quickly,” Campion said. “And you expect to be ready to rejoin the fight within the week.”

“It is my hope,” Eldritch said, putting his book down. “How do things progress?” Campion shrugged, and drew up the chair to the side of the bed.

“We wait,” he said. “I know not how best to proceed. We face an enemy that is stronger than any we have faced before.” He stared at the bedspread, eyes tracing the folds as if looking for something within them. Eldritch started to make a snide retort, but held his tongue as he regarded the other man’s demeanor. Finally, Campion continued.

“It seems a long time since we vied for Merrick’s favor,” he said. “I was sure you would win him over and be leader of the group. Those maneuverings seem unimportant now.”

“They are,” Eldritch said. “You have earned your rank. I have no quarrel with that.” Campion gave him a quick glance, then returned his gaze to the linens.

“I know. You still argue with me, and for that I should be grateful. If I had been the one to venture into Vogel’s manor, I don’t know that I would have made it out alive. That should count as another time you have saved my life.”

“True,” Eldritch said. “But I’ve lost track of the number of times. Many, I believe.” Campion waved a hand.

“You see, I told myself that your jests were a sign that you were unfit to lead,” he said. “But I believe I felt inferior. You could make the others laugh, and yet win their trust and guide them into battle. I could never do that.”

“Do not belittle yourself,” Eldritch said. “I may have been cruel to you, but not because I truly thought you lacking. You are a worthy leader. I have no doubt of that.”

“Then you are more fortunate than I,” Campion said. “Since Merrick’s death, I have seen this company drop from a score of men to the three of us. Not a rousing mark of success, if I may say.”

“Against an enemy who knew our every move and slowly tore down our numbers,” Eldritch said. “And I count five, not three.” Campion sighed.

“Curse you yet again, Eldritch,” he said. “I came here expecting you to tell me how I was failing, not to praise me. You’re doing this all wrong.”

“Now I’m confused,” Eldritch said. “You *want* me to insult you?”

“Precisely,” Campion said. “So I can say ‘Oh, so you think you could do better?’ At which you would say ‘Yes, of course,’ or words to that effect. I then could say ‘Then do so; I put you in command.’”

“Forgive me for being slow,” Eldritch said. “Is your plan that I would then lead us into certain death, thereby proving that you are a better captain?”

“No, of course not,” Campion said. “Must I say it plainly? I fear that I would but lead us to a tragic fate. You have always been the one who can see the other path, find the enemy’s weakness. I do well when our opponent is known and we merely need to stand and fight. I have not your gift for clever tactics and surprise attacks. Will you lead us in this fight?” Eldritch sat, as if stunned into silence by the other man’s words. After a time he shook his head.

“No,” he said, and raised a hand to still Campion’s protests. “Hear me out. I will not lead. You are the one of rank, and I won’t usurp that. As pleased as I would have been at one time to hear you ask this of me, our circumstances have changed. I will offer my ideas, and freely be your advisor. Tell the others that I speak with your authority, but I think it best that you be the final word. You have earned that.” Campion nodded.

“I find your terms acceptable,” he said, and Eldritch laughed.

“We still may face defeat, Eldritch said. “Vogel has shown he can crush us at will.”

“I know,” Campion replied. “That may be our fate. Yet I can’t surrender now. Merrick, the others, Viktor; they died at Vogel’s hand and it seems wrong to let their lives go unavenged merely because I fear for my own.”

“Indeed,” Eldritch said. “Then I shall turn my mind to devising a plan for his downfall. Perhaps we five may succeed where we have only found failure before.”

As soon as Eldritch was able to leave the flat, he and William gathered their belongings and met with Campion and the others early one morning. They had a small cart and hack, as Eldritch pointed out that he would not be able to travel much distance in his condition, but didn’t mention that William would fare better by riding as well. Eldritch led them to the edge of London, where large expanses of land spread away into farms and hedgerows. As instructed, no one looked upward at their watchers, although they were certain of their presence.

“With any luck, Vogel will think we are fleeing the city,” Campion pointed out.

Despite queries from the others, Eldritch was close-lipped on his plan. Arriving soon after dawn at the edge of a large, open expanse, they tied the horse off under the cover of some trees, and threaded their way along. After a distance, Eldritch instructed them to sit and wait. They could see the three tiny bodies circling above them, watching.

“If all goes to plan,” he said. “Our unwelcome guests will be handily removed.” No more would he say. It was not long before the group heard voices from across the fields. Looking out, they saw a party of nobles, leading a pack of retainers and servants. As they watched, they saw the group looking up at the circling homunculi, pointing and talking excitedly. They called to their servants, who brought up a number of raptors, poised restlessly on supporting arms. Their hoods removed, the birds flapped hard into the sky, quickly climbing above the watchers, and circling themselves.

For a moment the two sets of flying creatures merely arced through the sky. Then one of the falcons tucked in its wings and dropped like a plunging arrow of death. Busy observing the ground below, the first homunculus was oblivious to the talons of the hunter above until the falcon slammed into it, knocking it spiraling to the ground. The other two hovered, at first too startled by their companion’s abrupt disappearance, and the second falcon struck another. The third watcher tried to flee, but even its magical wings were no match for the hunting speed of the raptor. It struck, the small creature held firmly in its grip. The hunting party on the ground laughed and applauded the success of their birds.

“Come, gentlemen,” Eldritch said softly. “We should slip away unobserved. I fear these men may be sorely surprised by what they have felled, and I would not have us around to explain.” Quietly the men retraced their steps, and found their way back to their cart.

“Well done, Eldritch,” William said. “I would not have thought to have falconers solve our problem for us.”

“I couldn’t think of any way to bring them down ourselves,” Eldritch said. “And I chanced upon the thought that we might find those who would like to do it for us. I do regret that we could not see the looks on their faces when they find the prey is not what they expect. Now we change our garments, and make our way back to the city. With any luck, we have depleted Vogel’s supply of airborne scouts, and he will not be able to create more before we can complete our mission.”

The way back to the city was quiet, but more cheerful than any one of the men had felt for quite some time. They frequently scanned the sky, and could see no sign of flying scouts. During the ride, Campion and Eldritch tipped their heads together and spoke so the others could not hear. As they blended back into the crowds, Campion turned to the others.

“We must find a new place to stay,” he said. “We shall go find lodgings while Eldritch seeks out some materials we need. William, you will meet him at the spot you first encountered each other in London, and bring him back to us. Make sure you are not followed.” The men all nodded, and Eldritch hopped off the cart.

“Keep a careful eye,” Campion said. “Vogel will know that we have blinded his scouts, and it may be enough for him to try to wipe us out for good.”

A ragged, hooded figure lurched down the street along the river. Stepping around those who passed, and hardly noted his presence, he made his way to Meeker’s warehouse. He scuttled along the wall, dodging inside when no one was looking. He quickly made his way to the small space that Meeker called his office, and as he entered, the figure made a miraculous transformation into a tall, steady man. Eldritch, for that is who it was, tossed the hood back, and looked about. Meeker sat at a rough desk, with a ledger before him. He looked up as Eldritch made his appearance, and startled.

“Sweet mother of God!” he said. “What happened to you?” Eldritch looked about, and caught his reflection in a shiny lamp reflector. The wound on his face from his fall the night of Camille’s capture had evolved into a rippled scar and greenish bruises that spread under his skin. What he had not seen previously were a number of cuts, still healing, from the debris that scattered across his face during his escape.

“I found the... man responsible for Camille,” he said. Meeker was on his feet instantly.

“Where is she?” he asked. “Is she harmed?” Eldritch looked the other man in the eye, and could see the fear and worry. His heart ached, and he wished he could give any news other than what he had.

“I’m sorry,” Eldritch said. “Camille is gone.” Meeker’s face flushed red, anger and grief welling up in his eyes. His hands trembled and his breath came fast and sharp, but he stood his ground.

“Tell me where he is,” Meeker growled, his hands clenching tight.

“I beg you not to act against him,” Eldritch said. “He is rich and powerful. Armed guards surround his home, and you would be dead before you could be close to him.”

“Would you have me do nothing?” Meeker raged. “You tell me my daughter is gone and expect me to let the man who did this live?” Eldritch grabbed the larger man’s shoulders, and once again looked him in the eyes.

“No indeed,” Eldritch said. “I came to ask your help to destroy him, but it cannot be at your hand. You have your home, your wife, to think about. I have nothing. You may have heard stories told of my life and what I have done. I have the skills to fight him. I can be the one to kill him. I will be the tip of the spear, but you must provide the shaft. Will you help me?” Meeker ground one fist into his other hand, but nodded.

“As you wish,” he said. “Tell me what you need, and if it is within my power, I will do it.”

“I will,” Eldritch said. “But first, a warning. I have told you that your daughter is gone. Yet someone may come to you, at night, either here or at your home. She will look and speak as Camille. You will not be able to tell that she is not your daughter, but know that the true Camille is gone. Her face, her voice, they are all a bitter imitation. The one that wears Camille’s body like a costume is very dangerous, she will tell you lies, deny all that I tell you now, and would kill you if she can. Let her not into your home. Warn your wife. It will tear the very heart from your chest to refuse this false Camille, but it is a matter of life itself.”

“The stories I have heard the men tell,” Meeker said. “Are they true?”

“Yes,” Eldritch said. “Before I came to London, I saw all manner of evil things that walk the earth, and killed them when I could. One of them has taken Camille’s form. If there were any way I could save you from this knowledge, I would do so, but the sad truth is that pain is often more a part of this world than joy. I swear that what I tell you is as I have seen.”

“Then I will do as you say,” Meeker said. “What is it that I can do to help?”