

Chapter 10: An End to My World

Dorian

The noises coming from outside the tent were the worst ones Dorian had heard in his life.

Everyone talked about the sights and smells of battle, the fear that sang through everyone fighting, but no one mentioned the screams of the dying, the clash of metal, the wet rip of flesh parting. One would think that with so many noises rising into the air, they would become just that—white noise—but when one was bound and gagged with nothing to do but listen, certain sounds stood out.

A man cried for his wife and mother, people he'd never see again. A shout was raised in triumphant defiance, one that was choked on in the next moment. A roar accompanied heavy footfalls while steel clanged together and curses rang.

Innards squelched with a pained grunt following. Something thudded to the ground.

Wait.

Opening his eyes, Dorian met a stranger's empty stare, squinting at the blood trickling out of his mouth...

A girlish shriek, his contribution to the dissonance outside, flew from him as he jerked backward.

Fuck! That was a-

"It's only a corpse, Dorian. I don't know whether to be pleased or horrified that the sight of one sickens you this badly."

The marshal strode into the tent. Hauling Dorian to his feet, he tore the gag free before hacking at his bonds.

"What's happening?" Dorian asked while rubbing his wrists. "Why are you here? Why is a dead man-?"

"A Flosarian squad just broke through the line. You're looking at one of them, but I'm not sure where the rest went," the marshal said. "They might have headed toward Hythe, so I need you to find Lisa and protect her because I can't. Our honored guests won't let me."

Finished with the rope around Dorian's ankles, the marshal straightened, frowning at him.

"This doesn't mean I've forgotten what you did, of course. We still need to... *discuss* it," he said, "but Lisa's more important."

"Lisa is always more important," Dorian said.

The last few minutes may have dazed him all to hell, but he was still aware enough to grasp that much.

With a nod, the marshal retreated from the tent, leaving Dorian to rub feeling into his hands and feet, before returning with a sword in his hand.

"Do you know how to use this?" he asked.

"Umm..."

"I'll take that as a no," the marshal said with a sigh. "It's simple. The sharp end goes into the other person's fleshy bits, and you use it to keep other sharp ends from killing you. Take it. I have to get back to the command tent and make sure the Flosarians don't massacre us."

The marshal extended the sword toward Dorian. When he hesitated, though, the other man clicked his tongue, thrusting the sword into his hands.

"You'll be fine," the marshal said.

How much of that had been a reassurance for Dorian, and how much had been for himself? The marshal took off before Dorian could ask that question.

With all the soldiers fighting in the fields, the Escadese encampment stood deserted, but activity still flurried around the Lutovish's tent, where the instigators of this violence watched the children of Ibis killing one another. Despite Dorian's *need* to find Lisa, a small part of him felt a tug to sneak into that place and eliminate the source of this problem, but most of him still quailed from the thought of ending someone's life, even someone like the Lutovish.

So, instead, he pounded down the path into town, and while he did that, he might or might not have observed the battle that was soaking the crop fields with blood. Caught in a panic-soaked fugue, he certainly didn't absorb it. Not yet at least. All he knew was home, home, home, and...

And Lisa.

Please be safe.

When he made the turn toward his cottage, Dorian was going so fast that he skidded in the dirt, but it was as if the fall had never occurred, so quickly did he spring back to his feet. As he approached his home, a copy of the noise found within the greater battle greeted him. Hearing it, he became near airborne with his feet only touching the ground because they must. A thatched roof, so badly in need of repair, came into view, and when it did, a screeching giggle, one that he'd been holding fast inside nearly flung off the lid containing it.

All the while, a streaming litany poured through Dorian's head.

Please please please please please please

No no no no no no

Oh please

Three men and a woman were standing in front of his cottage, although perhaps 'standing' wasn't the right word. One of the men and the woman weren't moving, frozen in place instead, but the other two...

One of them defended against a flashing blade, barely keeping ahead of each strike.

As for the other one, a battle rage had taken him. His face was fury made manifest with a roared word accompanying each swing of his blade

"-monster! They. are. us! We. don't. kill. our. own."

This display was fascinating, and Dorian let it hold his attention. He knew what soldiers fighting outside of his home must mean. He knew what he'd find at these people's feet, and he didn't want to see it

He made himself look anyway.

And almost collapsed when he found her.

"Lisa," he wheezed.

She was beautiful. Oh, so very beautiful. So beautiful that it crushed Dorian's heart. Even with her throat gashed wide open. Even with blood seeping from her.

The two motionless Flosarians shook themselves free from their shock, and while the man rushed to help his companion, the woman fixed her eyes on Dorian.

"The husband's shown his face!" she called. "And oo... he's gorgeous."

As a lazy smile crossed her face, she sauntered toward Dorian. He hardly noticed, too occupied by the wordless shriek tearing through his brain and the pressure shredding his heart.

Lisa was dead.

Something pierced through the haze, alerting him to the woman's jab at his chest. He couldn't say what that had been, nor could he explain what made him stumble out of her reach. He couldn't say what made him bat her swing aside, punch her in the face, and stick the sword he'd been loosely holding through her neck. He couldn't say what made him step over her fallen body to reach Lisa's side or why he didn't use the sword to end his life.

That last bit, after all, what what his torn-asunder heart demanded.

His knees hit the ground beside his wife at the same time as a man's body kicked dirt into the air. Another of those followed soon after.

Had it been soon? Dorian couldn't tell, not with time having lost its hold on him. He existed in a drift, a float dominated by his wife's face. One that had been rendered inert by the flight of her life.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Blinking, Dorian dragged himself out of his drift, peering at the man sitting opposite him. He'd pulled his knees to his chest, as if to ward something unwanted off. Black hair framed his face in jagged spikes with its strands loosened from the tail at his neck, and his eyes held a fire in them to match the blood smeared across his skin.

"I did what I could for her."

His teeth were stained red with a chip in one while his wiry frame looked wrong, wrapping around his legs as it was.

Which of the soldiers was he: an ally or an enemy? Must Dorian find his anger from where it had gone to quietly die?

"My squadmates... I couldn't stop them. I brought them to justice instead, although it doesn't feel like justice."

He spread his slender fingers in front of his face, staring at them for a moment.

So, he'd been the one in a battle rage. How did someone with such smooth hands, *small* hands, learn how to handle the sword like he had?

"I suppose I should have left their fates up to you. I'm sorry to have taken that from you. I'm sorry for it all."

"Why are you apologizing?"

Dorian's voice had sounded alien to him. Any other time, he might have flinched from its dull tone. Now, he simply moved on.

"This isn't your fault," he said. "You didn't declare war between our nations. You didn't decide to make Hythe a battleground. You didn't pitch us against each other. None of that was you. It was all the damn Lutovish."

The stranger stayed silent for a while, but Dorian was content to wait. What else was he supposed to do? Stride into the house and eat some of Lisa's awful cooking? Grab her about the waist and kiss her so she knew his heart's desire?

Never, never, never again.

When the stranger spoke up, his words emerged in a croak.

"The Lutovish killed my family before burning our house down around them. The bastards made me a murderer-"

With his voice strangled, he curled his fingers into a fist before meeting Dorian's eyes. A flow of shared pain passed between them, and after a moment, Dorian extended a hand.

"I'm Dorian Danvers," he said. "I'd say pleased to meet you but..."

He glanced at Lisa, which nearly had him falling into a drift again. The stranger's clasp of his hand kept him afloat.

"Elliot Lockhart," he said. "What now?"

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