

# Chapter 5: Denial and Guilt

## Elliot

His family was dead, gone in the blink of an eye and with the twist of a hand. How was that possible?

In his white box, Elliot paced back and forth, focusing on the mechanics of what had killed his loved ones and on its puzzle. To dwell on anything else was to become an unreasoning thing, flinging itself at the sparking wall that contained him. Focus on anything else and he'd become grief and self-hate made manifest, a shadow of another self that had always haunted him, and he couldn't let that happen while he was a prisoner. If he was to have any chance of surviving, he must appear docile.

Did he deserve to survive?

Did that matter?

"Cling to the puzzle, Elliot," he said under his breath.

So, how did a human kill six people with the wave of his hand? Had the Lutovish created a new monstrosity?

Obviously, the *ii* from last night had been under their control. How else did one explain such a strange person finding a home where a drafted man had been hiding? Plus, there was the way he'd been acting, as if he hadn't wanted to commit any of the crimes he'd completed.

If this *ii* was a Lutovish creation, what did that make him? Was he as beholden to their honored guests as the rest of Ibis?

And what about his powers? Starting a fire without tinder? Killing people without touching them? That was the stuff of children's stories. Magic.

But perhaps that was what *liiaresim*, the word the Lutovish had always spoken in hushed tones, meant. They'd always relied more on tech than the world's mysteries, after all. It would make sense that they'd fear something like magic.

They'd fear it but find an application for it. Like burning down the house of a dissident family.

The smell of crisping hair filled Elliot's nose, and he gagged, pausing in his pacing. Slowly, he controlled his stomach. Showed no weakness.

"Focus on the puzzle."

But there were no pieces to combine. Elliot had solved the puzzle or at least, solved it as best he could with the facts on hand. He had nothing else to keep his mind off of his family's deaths.

So sudden. Half-expected.

His fault.

Oh... *no*.

"*What do we have here?*"

Thank *avan* for that little interruption.

Facing his cell's shimmering wall, Elliot fought not to sneer at the Lutovish on the other side of it, two men who'd barely deigned to spare him a glance, and the *ii* huddled beside them. He locked his gaze on that last man's white eyes, and no matter how much he must want to avoid it, the *ii* maintained Elliot's stare, perhaps hearing his soul's screaming need.

"*A drafted trying to skip deployment,*" one of the Lutovish said. "*Nothing special. Standard punishment.*"

Meaning death.

The two Lutovish moved on, but unlike them, the *ii* had transformed into a statue in front of Elliot's cell with his whole body trembling. Like it had last night.

Taking a step toward the shimmering blue wall, Elliot laid a hand on it, cocking his head. Could the *ii* feel the pain rising from him?

A second more passed, and after taking a deep breath, the *ii* seemed to forcibly leak tension from his body.

"You may wish to revise your definition of special," he called after the Lutovish. "His notes within the bloodsong are... unique."

Groaning, the Lutovish started backtracking, and while they did that, the *ii* whispered Elliot's way.

"Save your wrath, *xeecaz*. Focus on those looking to kill you."

Much as Elliot might wish to burn this man with his glare, he had to admit the *ii* was right. If he wanted to survive this confrontation, he had to pay attention to the people who held his fate in their hands.

Did he want to survive it?

Elliot recognized one of the Lutovish pair. He was the man Elliot had kept from slipping in a puddle days before. Varian, he thought the Lutovish's name was.

"*What's so special about it?*" he asked. "*It appears to be a normal specimen.*"

He didn't recognize Elliot. Of course he didn't. When had the Lutovish ever thought to differentiate between the individual members of Elliot's people?

"I couldn't tell you," the *ii* said. "I can only describe what I hear in the bloodsong, which is that this man is singular in all of humanity. Or that's what the ability I share with-

The Lutovish made hushing noises at him, throwing glances Elliot's way, but he was still too caught on what Varian had said to pay that much attention.

Specimen? As in the test subjects sent to Crinas? As in an animal? Was that how they saw the children of Ibis?

It fit, given how often the Lutovish spent his people's lives in their war games, but Elliot had always thought they'd at least rated as human in those strange people's eyes. Surely his newfound theory was wrong.

The two Lutovish in front of him continued to bicker, and watching this, Elliot found himself weary beyond belief. Weary of subservience to them. Weary of hiding himself. With no one to protect, he threw caution to the wind.

"*Did you have to kill them?*" he asked. "*They had nothing to do with my crime. At least, the boys didn't.*"

He didn't know what he'd expected from the Lutovish upon revealing that he could speak their tongue, a feat he was sure not many from Ibis could claim. Shock perhaps? Confusion? Certainly not indifference.

Varian turned to his companion.

"*Is your leash secure on this ii?*" he asked. "*They've tried to mess with us like this before.*"

The *ii* in question clicked his tongue, crossing his arms while tapping a finger on an elbow.

"Nothing in my *liiaresim* allows control of another person like your leash does of me," he said, "and I haven't been near him long enough to have changed his notes without his permission. You'd know this if you'd read my file, honored guest."

There was a pause.

"*You allow this ii too much freedom, scientist,*" Varian eventually said.

Eyeing the *ii*, the other Lutovish said, "Yes, I do."

The scientist cocked his head, and in response, the *ii* turned red in the face with sweat beading on his skin. He fought whatever was causing this; Elliot could tell, but within seconds, the *ii* clutched his head while the most awful wail Elliot had ever heard burst from him.

So, he'd been right about the Lutovish's control of the *ii*, but this fact did nothing to lessen his enmity for the man, no matter how much he knew it should. Even if the *ii* had been the glove for the Lutovish's hand, he'd still been the one who'd killed Elliot's family.

Despite that, Elliot couldn't stand the noise he was making. No human should experience pain intense enough to turn them into a twitching mass on the floor. Not even this man.

"Stop!" he shouted. "*My mastery of your tongue is my accomplishment alone!*"

The Lutovish turned to Elliot as if they'd forgotten he existed, and behind them, the *ii* fell silent, gasping into his knees.

Squinting at Elliot, the scientist said, "*It truly thinks it knows our tongue.*"

Approaching the shimmering wall, Elliot pressed against it, ignoring the sparks surging from it to him.

"I do," he growled.

Where was this aggression coming from? Did he want to die? Because challenging the Lutovish wasn't conducive to survival.

Did he deserve to survive this?

Elliot strained against the translucent wall holding him in check, trying to break through it with force of will alone. His hands ached to wrap around the necks of the three men opposite him and squeeze. Every person he'd loved in his life was dead, never to comfort or tease or pester him again, because these people conformed to a system of governance that would eventually see everyone in Ibis killed.

After a tense moment, Varian burst into laughter, slapping a hand over his mouth as he stared at Elliot.

"*What wonderful entertainment it will make!*" he said. "*Scientist! Commute its sentence. Put it in Fifth Company. Let's see how long a clever one survives on the front lines.*"

If that was supposed to scare Elliot, it had missed its mark.

Holding Varian's gaze, he hissed, "*If you don't kill me now, I will see you dead, asshole. You and all your people. I will burn Lutov to the ground.*"

His promise only made Varian laugh harder, and after a hesitant moment, the scientist joined in with a chuckle. He cut off when his companion waved a hand.

"Next, scientist," Varian said. "Leave the *ii* for now. It can catch up."

They strolled away from the cell, leaving Elliot alive.

How the *hell* was he alive? His attitude should have seen the Lutovish triggering the kill command in his tracker. That was what would have happened if he'd made such a threat while free, let alone when imprisoned for a crime that already carried a death sentence, and yet, he'd been left breathing. He'd survived.

Did he deserve to survive?

It didn't matter. Assigned to the front lines of a war? Elliot wouldn't live through a battle's first five minutes, and he couldn't decide if this terrified or relieved him.

Struggling to sit upright, the *ii* leaned against the cell's shimmering wall.

"Thank you, *avaari*," he said.

"I didn't do it for you," Elliot snapped.

The *ii* wheezed a laugh.

"Why else would you help me?" he asked.

Common human decency? To stop his unbearable racket?

"You're kinder than I expected," the *ii* continued.

Retreating from a barrier that was tinging the world blue, Elliot huddled in a corner, meaning to ignore the man, but as soon as he sat down, images he'd rather forget crept into his mind.

*Bodies drop around me.*

No.

"What does that mean?" Elliot asked. "*Xeecaz. Avaari.* I've never heard those words before, not even from the Lutovish."

"That's because they come from my people's tongue," the *ii* said. "I'm not surprised you haven't heard them before. The *davashrien* keep my home well hidden from the rest of Ibis."

So, the mystery nation, Ostiu, existed. More fodder for Elliot to chew on once this man had slunk after his masters.

"And what do the words mean?" he asked.

Shifting, the *ii* hung his wrists from raised knees.

"*Avaari*. Savior," he said.. "Xeecaz. Destroyer. Secondary translation: annihilator of countless lives."

"Interesting words to use for a stranger," Elliot said.

"Mm."

The *ii* wouldn't give him more. Elliot knew the set of those shoulders. He'd been lucky the other man had relinquished the little information that he had.

"I'm sorry, Elliot," the *ii* said. "I knew you had a reason behind your decisions. I never imagined that I would be your cause."

Elliot couldn't think about that. It wouldn't be good for him right now.

So, set it aside. Gloss over it. Ask something, anything else.

"And what about *ooluv po*?"

That question treaded dangerously close to pushing Elliot off of the ledge he was teetering on, but those words had rung in his head since this man had killed his family. He had to know what could come from someone after murdering so many people.

Sighing, the *ii* flipped to face him, folding his hands in his lap.

"You butcher the words with your pronunciation," he said, "but in answer, *ooluv po* is akin to a cry for forgiveness in your tongue."

Snarling, Elliot lunged toward him, but the *ii* lifted a hand for him to wait.

"I don't expect you to grant it, and a part of me is grateful that you never will," he said. "It means my self-hatred is justified. I can punish myself with the looks on your family's faces after I killed the first of them."

*A hand twists, my brother drops to the ground like a limp sack, and my family follows him.*

With tears blurring his vision, Elliot hissed, "What are you?"

The *ii* cocked his head.

"Don't you know, *avaari*?" he asked. "I'm an *ii*."

"And what does that mean?" Elliot growled.

How many times must he repeat that question?

"You don't-"

The *ii* paused, humming to himself.

"I thought you knew. Keeping track of details like this is... difficult. Apologies for the assumption," he said. "In my homeland, *ii* translates to what you would call a god, but here, it's more similar to... mage. That's a good word to describe what I am, I suppose."

Mage. Elliot had been right about that too. Magic was real and kept hidden from the children of Ibis. Somehow.

And fucking magic wielded by a fucking mage had killed his family.

"Any other pressing questions, *xeecaz*?" the *ii* asked. "The pull from the *devashrien* grows-"

"What's your name?" Elliot said, rising to his feet.

As he strode to a shimmering wall once more, the *ii* matched his pose. He clenched his jaw with his eyes growing distant before air hissed through his teeth.

"Lian Yijun," he said.

"Well, Lian Yijun."

Elliot smacked the barrier between them, and the *ii* flinched.

"My name is Elliot Lockhart. Not *avaari*. Not *xeecaz*," he growled, "and if I survive the coming battle..."

Did he deserve to survive it?

"You will," Lian said.

Jerking out of his stupor, Elliot could only stare as the *ii* met his hand on the other side of a blue wall.

"You'll live," he continued. "Soon after that, we'll meet again, and you will take everything you want from me. I look forward to it."

With his hand falling from the wall, Lian bowed to Elliot.

"Until then. *Xeecaz. Avaari.*"

He left Elliot staring after him, alone in an empty box.

Elliot couldn't say how long he stood there, working through the twists and turns their conversation had taken, but even his fascination with that couldn't long stand against the raging storm he'd been retaining with puzzles. He needed another distraction if he was to function, and he'd need that functioning state if he was to survive this war with Escad.

Did he deserve to survive it?

Perhaps a better question was whether he wanted to. Lian had said he would. He'd rather not think about why the other man had believed that, but whatever his reason had been, Elliot wouldn't accept the assertion because...

Did he deserve to survive?

"No," Elliot whispered into the silence of a Lutovish prison.

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