

# Chapter 7: Depression, Anger, and Acceptance

## Elliot

The corporal of Twelfth Squad, or the Bloody Mongrels as they called themselves, barely stopped himself from cleaving Elliot in two. Somehow, he veered his sword to the left instead, leaving strands of hair fluttering to the ground in its wake. Elliot never moved, holding his army-issued weapon at his side, and after the danger had passed, his sister's glassy eyes bored into him once more.

"Hell, grunt," the corporal said. "Are you suicidal?"

In response, Elliot sheathed his sword.

"May I be dismissed?" he asked.

Shaking his head, Elliot's superior officer swept his eyes over his body, raising a pleasant tingle wherever they landed.

"Another crazy one?" he said. "Remind me of your name, grunt."

"Does it matter? Everyone in this company is destined to die in battle," Elliot said. "Why bother learning each other's names?"

With a sharply drawn breath, the corporal took a step back.

"Ok, then," he said. "Listen up, Why Bother. My job is to make sure you have a fighting chance when we join the Escadese in battle. Since you decided to show up late to muster, I'll have to spend extra time with you until I've deemed your skills proficient. Now, I don't care what you did to get assigned to my squad, but you leave it in Flosa. Heft that sword and defend yourself!"

When silence fell, Elliot blinked. Was the other man finished?

"If I nod and pretend to agree with you, may I be dismissed?" he asked.

Growling, the corporal grabbed Elliot's tunic, shaking him.

"Get your head out of your ass!" he said. "This is about more than you and your petty problems. If you let the Escadese kill you at an inopportune moment, the line you're a part of might buckle. They'll overrun us, and no matter that this battle has been forced upon both sides, they won't show us mercy, not once blood lust is upon them. Twenty thousand lives will be lost because one selfish grunt wants to die."

As Elliot hung from the corporal's grip, the blazing heat that had been scorching him since the Hunters had left him here lessened while the flames at his vision's edge diminished, and he rejoiced in that.

But he couldn't help pitying the man in front of him. This poor corporal hadn't comprehended what Elliot had already seen. He wanted to protect those under his command, cared about them. Which made speaking the truth to him all the more difficult.

"I don't want to die," Elliot said, enunciating each syllable. "I'm already dead. As are you. As is everyone in this company."

He saw rage ignite in the corporal's eyes, watched him consider committing murder, noted him resisting that urge. Snarling, he thrust Elliot away, and Elliot stumbled while the corporal stomped toward the Bloody Mongrel's part of the encampment.

He couldn't let that poor man leave like this.

"Have you seen much combat?" he called.

Pausing, the corporal half-turned toward him.

"One campaign against Crinas," he said.

"Commendable," Elliot said. "I've never seen any, but my dad was drafted four times in his youth. Quite unlucky, I know. He fought against Escad once. At the time, Marshal Alex had just begun his career, but even then, his work was well known. My dad barely escaped that fight with his life, and that was lucky.

"You must know of Marshal Alex. Everyone in Ibis does. The ruthless royal who's yet to lose a battle. Who leaves no survivors except the people that the Lutovish want spared. From what I hear, that's who we'll be facing. We. are. all. dead men.

"You're right, though. We must fight for a chance to survive. I need to fight, even knowing my family's empty eyes only turn away from me when death's approaching, and I'll do that for you.

"But corporal? I don't need your training. Dad did it for you from the moment I could pick up a sword. Now, may I be dismissed?"

The corporal's gaze on Elliot turned intense, as if trying to read something only he could see, and Elliot suppressed a need to move closer to him and-

"Why do they always send me the crazy ones?" the corporal said. "Come on, Why Bother. Let's get you some food and a bedroll."

Elliot trailed in his wake while he pushed into the press that was waiting outside of this makeshift fighting ring. New as he was to this place, he needed a guide. The various squads of Fifth Company had made no attempt at discipline when bedding down. Firepits and supply wagons lay everywhere with random blankets and bedrolls shoved between them.

When he'd arrived here hours ago, Elliot had immediately gotten lost. The Hunters who'd been escorting him had left him at the camp's edge with the stern warning that if he wandered too far from it, they'd be waiting. From their eager tone of voice, Elliot had gathered that they wouldn't be as 'merciful' to him as Varian had been. As they'd stalked away, he'd considered taking them up on that promise, and when he'd eventually wandered into camp instead, he couldn't pinpoint his reason for deciding against it.

The heat of unseen flames had begun soon afterward, but by that point, a superior officer had found him, quickly handing him off to his assigned squad, and its corporal had dragged him to the ring to test his skills.

While struggling through mass bedlam once more, Elliot wondered why he wasn't letting the corporal pull ahead of him. Once the other man had disappeared into the crowd, he could slip into the night and the Hunters' care. He was dead either way. Why wait to reach the Escadese army when he could end his struggle now-?

"Here, Why Bother," the corporal said.

He pulled Elliot toward a firepit with six people lounging around it. Elliot flicked his eyes away from the flames, focusing on the group instead. As the corporal moved toward them, their chatter died out while their gazes fixed on the new arrivals.

"Our last squad member has decided to show his face," the corporal said. "Everyone, this is...?"

Gesturing toward Elliot, he waited, they waited, and Elliot couldn't bear the weight of so many corpses' gazes on him.

"Nobody," he said. "I'm nobody."

Finding an isolated spot around the fire, he flopped to the ground, drawing his knees up, and blocked his view of orange and yellow tongues with his raised hands. Questions stabbed toward him with a filter fuzzing out their specifics, but when he gave them no response, the Bloody Mongrels turned their attention toward more talkative targets.

Unmoving, Elliot sat, listening to an unheard bonfire, enduring unfelt heat, accepting unseen glares, while his squadmates chatted or complained. At some point, someone pressed a bowl into his hands, tossing a bread crust into his lap, and he ate, loosely gripping the bowl once he'd finished. People came and went, although when one of them returned, the squad grew rather excitement.

"Rabbits, my friends, skinned and prepared!" he said.

He placed something over the fire, and after a moment, the smell of cooking flesh assaulted Elliot's nose.

*Mom, dad, Cathrine, Oran, Lucas, Martin, and Lionel. Seven charred corpses litter the floor as the ii rescues me from my well-deserved fate.*

As Elliot shot to his feet, his heart skittered in an uneven breath behind his breastbone, and air whooshed through his mouth at an accelerated rate. Meanwhile, his unnamed, already dead squad mates stared at him.

"Excuse me," he managed to choke out before plunging into camp.

He made it to a somewhat secluded corner before his dinner came back up. Vomit splattered into the dirt while disapproving whispers of 'drunk idiot' drifted his way. All the while, blackened bodies stood over him.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Please, please, please, leave me alone."

They said nothing, their empty eye sockets filled with accusation, and Elliot's body expelled the sight, the smell, and the heat of it in the only way it could.

When his stomach had nothing more to contribute to the disgusting pile at his feet, he stumbled through camp in no particular direction, wiping his mouth. Around him, drafted soldiers were playing games, holding contests, or... celebrating, passing in a blur because of the haze swirling around Elliot.

Only when the throng of people and fires fell away, leaving only moonlight to pierce the forest's darkness, did he fall to his knees, unable to continue. He hovered on the edge: in the army's encampment while also treading near the Hunters' domain as well. Why couldn't he take those final steps forward?

A winter breeze swooped below the trees' limbs with voices murmuring in it, and cold fingers picked at Elliot's thin clothes. Shivering, he shoved his hands into his pockets.

And encountered something solid.

Fishing this object out of his clothes, he lifted it into the moonlight, and his breath caught.

The remote for his people's trackers. Why did he...?

After Lian had stolen him from his home, the Lutovish must have searched him. He was still wearing his soot-streaked clothes from that night. He'd assumed someone had taken inventory of his belongings while he'd been unconscious, but it appeared he'd been wrong.

Why hadn't they searched him? Were the children of Ibis so little of a threat to the Lutovish?

*"It appears to be a normal specimen," Varian says.*

Specimen! As if the children of Ibis were merely bugs to pin and pull apart. Of course they hadn't searched Elliot.

But perhaps the Lutovish were right. Perhaps his people weren't a threat. Elliot had had this remote for months, and it still remained a mystery to him. Because of that, his family had died.

*"It's a puzzle, El. Can you solve it?" Cathrine says.*

"Of course, Cat," Elliot said in a thick voice. "You didn't give me enough time."

The forest was silent, save for a breeze rustling through dying leaves, and in that soft murmur, he heard a well-loved voice.

*You have all the time in the world now.*

Shooting to his feet, Elliot spun in place, searching for someone he'd never find. Not again.

"Cat?" he breathed before shouting. "Cat!"

The breeze died, the rustle fell quiet, and Elliot was left staring through sparse branches at an empty night sky. As empty as the eyes fixed on him.

"CAT!" he shouted at it.

"Yes, yes, grunt. We heard you the first time."

Elliot didn't know why he expected to find the corporal behind him when he turned, but that man wasn't in his expected place. Instead, two strange men and a woman were watching him a few meters away with faint smiles on their faces. They were his fellow squad mates, one of whom had brought back the rabbits that had sent Elliot fleeing from camp.

"What do you want?" Elliot asked.

"Oh, look!" the woman says. "He can speak!"

"You mean besides in a wail?" one of her companions said. "Cat!"

Plastering his hands to his face, he dramatically fell to the forest floor. The other two chuckled while he got back up, brushing leaves from his clothes.

"Do you want something, or are you just here to mock me?" Elliot asked.

One of the men, tall with a well-built physique, stalked toward him.

"What have you got there?" he asked.

He snatched the remote from Elliot's fingers, and Elliot froze while Cathrine's voice whispered in his ear.

*All the time in the- Solve it- All the- Solve it- ALL- SOLVE-*

"Give it back."

Elliot didn't recognize his own voice. Cold and detached, barren as a wasteland, this was the voice of a monster. Or a destroyer.

Something else had taken hold of him, something he didn't understand or recognize, and he wasn't sure what would happen next. He wasn't in control anymore, wasn't the one choosing his own damn actions. Given that, what might soon be coming? Oh, *avan*, if this was like... other times, what might he soon do?

The other man didn't seem to notice Elliot's struggle. He dangled the captured remote in front of Elliot's face.

"What, this?" he asked.

The question ended in a cough as Elliot chopped his fingers into the man's throat. The remote fell from his hand and straight into Elliot's waiting palm, and he buried his fist in the man's diaphragm. As he doubled over, Elliot stepped away.

"I told you to give it back."

*...What the hell had that been?*

But the unspoken question had been so far distant that Elliot wasn't sure it had been his. In this moment, there was only heat and something so, so violent and a distant fragment of himself, pulling his body along.

After a shocked pause, the woman rushed toward him with a yell, swinging for his jaw, and he instinctually responded. He caught her wrist, twisting it, and as it was wrenched backward, something snapped. Screaming she cradled her arm while kicking Elliot's shin. He let the weak blow land in favor of dodging the second man's fist, coming for his head.

Why were they so focused on his face? The body had plenty of other weak points to attack.

Lunging to his full height, Elliot landed an uppercut into the second man's groin, and groaning, he toppled to the forest floor. The woman raked her fingernails down Elliot's shoulder with cloth and skin peeling beneath them. When he directed a chop to her extended arm and a shoe, she stumbled. He planned to kick the second man in the head before twisting the woman's arm behind her back when sharp steel touched the base of his skull, drawing blood.

"Hold still, asshole," his first victim said.

And just like that, Elliot fell back into his body, desperately needing to shake his head. Damn, the other man had recovered faster than he'd expected.

The man holding him at knife-point plucked the remote out of Elliot's hand while his companions got to their feet.

"Why would you get so upset over this?" he asked.

He tossed it to the other man, who was hunching as he shuffled toward them.

"Looks Lutovish," he wheezed. "Is that why you're a Bloody Mongrel, *bakava*? Did you steal this from our honored guests?"

He'd used that damnable Lutovish insult on Elliot. Why on earth would he do such a thing?

And why was Elliot concerned with that when a single thrust from the man behind him would see metal shoved into his head?

...Should he force the other man's hand?

*Can you solve it, EI?*

"It doesn't matter," the second man said. "It's trash now."

Dropping the remote, he slammed his heel into it, and its crunch overrode the roar of flames in Elliot's head. Howling, he sprang for the second man, but the woman had been prepared for that reaction. She shot her ankle into his path, and he tripped with his breath whooshing from his lungs. Gritting his teeth, he climbed to his hands and knees, meaning to throw himself at his new enemy, but a foot between his shoulder blades had him eating dirt again.

"Please. Don't get up on our account."

A blow to the head caught Elliot by surprise, even though it really shouldn't have. Given their situation, what outcome besides this should he have expected? He absolutely deserved this punishment.

So, he endured it, same as always. One after another, sites of pain sprouted like wildflowers all over his body, and he clenched into a protective ball.

Or he tried to. A boot rolled him onto his back, and the first man pinned Elliot there when he dropped onto his chest. Through a fog, Elliot watched that man's fists rise and fall in a stuttering rhythm, one that whipped his head from side to side. Droplets flew from his attacker's knuckles, spattering across his face.

Why the fascination with his face?

"Enough!" the woman shouted. "We don't want him dead, Donnie."

"Why the hell not?" the first man shouted.

But he paused with his pummeling.

"Keep him alive and maybe the Escadese will kill him before they get to us," the woman said.

Glaring at Elliot, the first man peeled his lips back, and he released one more punch, landing it right in the nose. Fire bloomed there, letting a whistling gasp escape from Elliot, and at that moment, he noticed that the heat long chasing him was gone. Flames weren't licking his skin, and blank eyes weren't staring at his face. As he lay here, a punching bag for his squadmates, his demons fled from him, if only for a time.

At that thought. Elliot noticed crazed laughter coughing into the air around them, raising goosebumps all over his skin. Who was making that noise? He hadn't hit any of these people hard enough to cause such a rattle in their lungs.

It was only as the first man eased off of him with his hands raised that Elliot understood the laughter was his.

"Done already?" he rasped through it. "I was enjoying the break from my pain."

The first man scrambled away from him with his laughter in pursuit. Elliot couldn't control it anymore. It shook his body, bucking him as it rose in volume, and he couldn't catch a breath. His lungs were crying for air, but he couldn't stop. He was drowning on his own hilarity.

"He's crazier than the lot of us combined," one of the man said.

"Maybe we should-?"

"Yeah."

The sound of crunching leaves barely rose above Elliot's howl. Tears dribbled over his cheeks, forging trails through the stickiness covering them. His brain only let him breathe when his vision began to darken, and while he listened to his body's weeping, he waited for his demons to return.

They'd come eventually. Elliot knew it. It was only a matter of time.

When he could, he flipped onto his belly and dragged himself to the dropped remote. It was smashed beyond recognition, its puzzle pieces warped to the point that Elliot couldn't repair them, and he trailed his fingers through their pile.

*Can you solve it?*

"I don't know, Cat," Elliot said.

*You will, El. Get to it.*

"I can't solve a puzzle without working pieces."

Again, a breeze flowed through the forest, and the rustling within it carried words.

*Then, make new ones.*

Sucking in a breath, Elliot picked through the remote's junk. He searched his pockets, discovering more items that he'd stashed on that fateful night and-

Without warning, seven, blackened husks were standing around him with a fire flickering in the forest behind them. Wincing, he lifted himself until he was sitting in front of them, like a supplicant. He met their indifferent postures, their empty gazes, and after a moment, one stepped forward with a gash splitting her distorted face.

"Can you solve it?" she asked.

And finally, *finally*, Elliot decided to be honest with himself and with her.

"No, Cat. I can't solve this puzzle because it's never been one," he said. "Getting drafted, your murder, the quickly approaching battle? They're problems, not some fanciful puzzle I can solve like a child."

As his sister turned away from him, disappointment radiated from her, so Elliot braced himself, opening his mouth to say something he could never take back.

"But I can fix it."

The husk paused with flakes drifting through the air as she rotated her head.

"I can fix it, Cat," Elliot repeated. "All of it."

For the longest time, all that existed was the moon arcing through the sky, the rustle of voices in the breeze, and the stares of his family's corpses. Did they understand the promise he was giving them and what it might cost him?

He hoped not. He wanted them to rest easy.

"Then, fix it," seven voices said, rising in the quiet.

A gust of wind burst through the forest, as if to punctuate their command, and as it fell to a breeze once more, a cloud of ashes followed it. Alone, Elliot bent to his task.

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