

# Chapter 9: The Battle

## Elliot

Someone was calling for him. Elliot didn't know how or when his squadmates had learned his name, but since that midnight scuffle a week ago, it had been a hushed whisper on their lips, silenced whenever he'd come near. Only one person had spoken it at such great volumes, and he could wait. Elliot was almost finished.

They'd been marching for a week. A week spent struggling through the snow drifts left by winter's first storm. A week catching a few hours of sleep every night, his abstinence of it making rationed tea from Crinas his new best friend, while the rest of the evening had been devoted to his project.

A project that would have been finished by now if *someone* hadn't been shouting for him for the last ten minutes.

As Elliot tightened the last screw into place, a shadow fell over him.

"Found him!" someone shouted.

That had sounded like one of the men who'd attacked him in the forest. The hell did that asshole want?

He crouched into view while Elliot twirled his invention in front of his face, looking for any tweaks he might need to make on its exterior.

"What have you got there, Lockhart?" his squadmate asked.

He reached forward, as if to take the new invention, and Elliot snapped his eyes up.

"Just curious. Are you that eager to hobble home, like you've been doing for the last week, or are you just stupid?" he asked.

Blanching, his squadmate fell backward as another set of legs joined his.

"Elliot, I've been looking for you," the Bloody Mongrel's corporal said. "We need to form up soon, and I'd like to give this squad our orders before then."

"What's there to know besides serve as meat shields?" Elliot said.

He wouldn't look up at the other man. He *would not*.

As if to spite him, Elliot's gaze inexorably traveled upward. The dark eyes he'd found himself daydreaming about over the last few days were staring down at him with disapproval, and those lips...

"Don't infect the squad with your pessimism, Why Bother," the corporal said, "and get up. You don't need to listen to my orders if you think it's pointless, but you at least have to pretend like you are."

Dragging his eyes away from *that face, avan* above, Elliot shoved it out of his mind. He couldn't think about what the sight of the corporal had been doing to him in recent days.

"We won't be defeated," he said.

Holding his breath, Elliot passed his invention over his tracker. The slender box failed to light up, but then, it didn't have a monitor that would let it do so, only a button in its center and one end tapering into a rod. What Elliot had hoped for, what he prayed for, would come from his hand.

When white light glowed from his tracker and into his thirsty eyes, he smiled. Finally.

Abruptly, hands were under his armpits, hauling him to his feet and leaving burning need everywhere they'd touched.

"You don't think Fifth Company is full of dead soldiers anymore, then?" the corporal said. "I thought you were dead set on that idea."

He dragged Elliot out of his hiding space with their squadmate following them.

"Oh, we're probably still dead," Elliot chirped with a bounce in his step, "but Flosari will win this battle."

Waving for the other squadmates within view to join them, the corporal glanced at him.

"When I found you after your hazing last week, I thought we'd ruled out the possibility that you had a concussion," he said. "Maybe we should consider it again."

Hazing. What a polite way to say that his comrades had beat the shit out of him, but for the moment, Elliot didn't mind it. He'd enjoyed the last few mornings, spent sipping tea while his assaulters had shivered without it—their punishment for their infraction—and loved every glimpse he'd caught of a woman's splinted wrist and a man's awkward limp.

When he said nothing back, the corporal scanned their surroundings, looking for the rest of the squad.

"Earle posed a good question earlier," he absently said. "I've ignored you fiddling with what's clearly Lutovish tech over the last week, but I'd like to know what it is before we run into probable doom."

So, even he was admitting their low chance of survival this morning. That was a stark change.

Maybe Elliot could cheer him up with his news.

"This old thing?" he asked while displaying his invention. "This is why we're going to win."

Laughing at the look on the corporal's face, he tossed and caught the box before pocketing it.

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They'd given the soldiers shields. No chainmail, no helmets, no armor. Only round shields to serve as protection against the arrows and blades that would kill Fifth Company. They meant for those squads to absorb the enemy's initial flurry.

It didn't bother Elliot. Here on the front line, he had a clear view of the enemy—

*Escadese. Children of Ibis.*

—ENEMY far distant from them. Waiting for the order to advance, he aimed his new invention at the opposing front line, trying to find someone, anyone, to test it on. Even from this far away, he could see blurry faces on the other side, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't separate those faces from the lives lying behind them.

Did that man have a wife who loved him? Did that woman have children who needed her? Did that boy have a sister-?

*Fix the problem, Elliot, someone whispered in his mind.*

The one Elliot chose looked just like him, and for some reason, his choice brought the boy's blurred features into clarity, so sharply that it shouldn't be possible.

His hair wasn't quite as frizzy, and his build was a bit more muscular than Elliot's, but he had the same umber eyes. The same full lips. The same sweat plastering his hair to his forehead, despite the cold. The same terrified look. A face Elliot would remember for the rest of his life.

A nameless soldier. Like him.

Pointing the box's rod his way, Elliot pressed its button with part of him desperate for it to fail. At the push of that button, however, the boy clutched his chest, staggered into the no man's land between the two armies, and fell, face down, into the grass.

It had worked. Elliot could trigger a tracker's kill command.

Which meant he'd killed someone. Deliberately.

A ripple spread through the Escadese army, and at his side, a squadmate glanced between what Elliot was holding and the fallen soldier.

"What-?" she started.

A bugle wailed, and the Flosarian army moved. Elliot's squadmates trotted forward, and caught in a cold embrace, he was almost trampled by the bulk of soldiers behind him, but the corporal shoved him into a jog as he passed.

"Whatever you did just now, do it again there."

He pointed toward a spot on the enemy's front line.

"If we soften them up, we can carve through them to Marshal Alex. Claim his head and we win this."

Dazed, all Elliot could do was place one foot in front of the other until the corporal sharply nudged him.

"Elliot!" he shouted. "Whatever you did. There. Or we're all dead."

More deaths? More murders on his conscience?

Elliot's heart screamed as he raised his invention, but still, he pressed its button. One after another, men and women fell. No arrows had pin-cushioned them, and no steel had impaled their bodies, they simply clawed at their chests and died.

Like wolves drawn to wounded prey, Fifth Company converged on the weakened front line, and when they reached it, Elliot was relieved that the time for drawing swords had arrived. Even more of a relief was how the Escadese buckled before them. Elliot exchanged blows with two of them before his next opponent bolted away with more of them following on her heels.

"Let's go!" the corporal shouted. "This hole will close soon!"

The Bloody Mongrels charged after fleeing Escadese soldiers, eventually blending in with them. Here was where uniforms or armor might have helped either army, but who wasted resources like that on soldiers who were sure to die? As this apparent mistake let the Bloody Mongrels sprint through Escad's army, unimpeded, Elliot blessed a situation that he'd recently cursed.

On plunging into the remnants of the enemy's encampment, the corporal paused, waiting for the others to catch up. Behind them, the battle raged. Elliot was no expert in tactics or strategy, but even to his untrained eye, it looked like any plans either side's marshal might have made had gone to shit. All that was left was a nebulous blob of torn flesh, screaming, and death.

Chaos.

And despite his dry throat, his wide eyes, and his left-ajar mouth, Elliot couldn't stop his lips' corners from reaching for the sky. With this much disorganization thrown into the mix, the Flosarians surely had a chance now.

Once his squad had gathered, Elliot took stock of the survivors. They'd lost one; whether to death or desertion, he couldn't say. The rest were clumped around the corporal, although most of them edged away from Elliot as well.

"What the hell was that?" a woman asked.

As she stepped forward to poke a finger in his face, Elliot flashed back to what he'd done. The people he'd killed. So many people.

When his squadmate shifted to take a swing at him, possibly fearful of his lack of response, the corporal yanked her off-balance, stepping between Elliot and the rest of the squad.

"We can ask Elliot questions after the battle's over," he said, "or did you think we were safe because we made it through their formation?"

From their resulting shuffle, Elliot would guess most of them had.

"If we're not safe, then what do you propose?" Donnie asked. "Will you return us to that nonsense?"

Drawn by his pointing finger, Elliot's squadmates turned their heads toward the carnage behind them, and on truly seeing it, two of them started manically giggling before stalking off without another word.

"Where are you going?" the corporal shouted at their backs.

The two didn't respond, merely raising their hands in dismissive waves.

"Fine! I had no plans to return us to the melee, but if you want to get yourselves killed by Hunter, you're welcome to it!"

Even that didn't make them pause. Within moments, they'd disappeared behind a wagon.

From the people under the corporal's command, only Elliot and his 'hazers' remained, and those last three examined their commander with closed-off faces.

"You didn't answer the question," Earle said. "What's the plan?"

The corporal waved toward a string of tents, resting on a hillock.

"Sneak in there, find Marshal Alex, and take his head," he said. "Bring it to their Lutovish spectators. That should provide enough entertainment for the bastards to stop this battle."

The others had gone from closed-off to skeptical.

"Yeah... no," Donne drawled. "I'm headed for the village we're squabbling over. Hopefully, I can find booze and maybe a pretty woman or two there, and we'll see where things go. You two coming?"

When he glanced at his companions, Earle grunted, but the woman sneered, and Elliot thought she might refuse the proposed scenario. He'd started revising his opinion of her when she said.

"Nix the pretty woman. Make it a pretty man, and then, we're talking."

She smirked while Earle chuckled and...

Shouldn't their reprehensible behavior make Elliot feel something?

"Sorry," Donnie told the corporal with a shrug. "Looks like you'll only have the crazy one to help you."

With nothing else, they took off toward the distant roofs, and Elliot blinked, trying to shake off the emptiness filling him. It held him tight, prevented him from speaking, and kept him from sprinting after the deserters so he could *put them down*. It stopped him from comforting the corporal, who was staring at the dirt as if the world had failed him.

When he noticed Elliot watching him, he grimaced, reaching out to grip Elliot's shoulder.

"This is important," he said. "I know you're hurting after... what just happened, but I need you to focus on what I'm saying. Can you do that, Elliot?"

The warmth of that hand on his skin returned feeling to Elliot's numb state, enough of it to let him nod.

"I need you to follow them," the corporal said. "Stop them from doing anything stupid. The people of Hythe may be Escadese, and the Escadese may be our enemy right now, but they're also-

"Us," Elliot breathed.

The corporal squeezed his shoulder.

"Exactly."

"What about you?" Elliot asked. "Should I return if I-?"

"If this crazy plan succeeds, I'll be fine, at least until the next war," the corporal said, "and if I fail, well... I'll be dead, won't I? Watch those three, protect who you can, and once the battle's over, we can discuss the Lutovish tech you're carrying."

The thing that had given the Flosarian army a chance in this battle. The invention that would see Elliot dead, sooner or later.

Leave that thought. Leave it all right here.

"Good luck," Elliot whispered.

"And to you, Why Bother," the corporal said with a nervous smile. "See you later."

As the corporal turned toward a group of tents, Elliot didn't fill his mind what would probably be his last view of the other man. Instead, he ran after the worthless remnants of the Bloody Mongrels.

It took him a while, but soon enough, he found a footpath bordering what had once been crop fields. Unfortunately, his quarry was long gone by the time he'd reached it.

So, he headed toward the cluster of buildings that must be Hythe's town square, hoping it had been the direction his squadmates had picked as well. Jogging along, he kept his ears pricked for any noises that might reveal where they'd gone.

They didn't take long to produce it. A shriek rose over the nauseating sounds of combat found behind Elliot, and he swerved toward the cry, soon entering an outgrowth of the forest. He didn't hear anything else until he'd spied a thatched roof through the trees. Then, muffled sobs floated to him.

"Dance for me, bitch!" came soon after that.

Earle.

Picking up speed, Elliot approached a clearing where a cottage lay. It would have been a picturesque place, except for the Flosarian soldiers leering at the woman trembling in front of it. One of them, Donnie, had lifted his sword toward her.

"Do as he says," he barked. "You claim you were a priestess? I hear the followers of Escad's cult are rather nimble. I assume the same holds true for its holy women. So, dance!"

Elliot didn't think this woman could follow that command. She looked about ready to collapse.

"Please," she whispered. "I'll do whatever you want just- just-"

When the woman among Elliot's squadmates started mocking her, he went cold inside. Once this was done and if they survived, he was going to make sure these three never had another peaceful day in their lives.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he snapped, stepping out from among the trees.

"Sheathe your weapons! You're scaring this good woman."

He assumed the sternest demeanor he could, hoping that it and the fight he'd given them in the woods would knock his squadmates back to their senses.

He was destined for disappointment.

Grabbing the stranger, Donnie pulled her to him, holding his blade to her neck, while the other two scattered.

"Why don't you make me?" he snarled. "Huh? Can you do that, EI?"

The family nickname floated past Elliot and...

*Go play with your toys, El*, Cathrine whispered.

She was all he could hear, so he shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Don't call me that," he said.

But Donnie was too distracted by the woman he was holding to hear Elliot. He buried his nose into the nape of her neck, breathing in her scene, and all the while, she shuddered.

"Isn't she gorgeous?" he said. "Look at her and tell me she's not the picture of beauty."

To appease him, Elliot gave the woman a cursory glance.

Lush, black hair. Dark eyes, wide with fear. A skin tone more tawny than taupe, like his. Tall with a slim figure.

"Yes, she's quite pretty," he said.

"Wouldn't you like to share her with me? I wouldn't mind," Donnie said. "Join us, Elliot. Forget whatever Corporal Boring told you to do, and have some fun."

Once more, Elliot ran his eyes over the woman his squadmate was holding. Slender shoulders, full breasts, wide hips.

All wrong.

Then again, even if she had been to his taste, what Donnie was suggesting made his stomach roil on itself.

"I'd rather not," he said. "How about you let her go so we can go find some ale instead. Or *kalvna*. Whichever you prefer."

Anything that might quiet the violent lust he could see in Donnie or the slightly crazed gleam in his eyes.

"He won't share with us!" Donnie whined. "And he won't leave us be either. Does that sound about right, El?"

Resting his chin on the woman's shoulder, he ran a hand down her side, which made the stranger take on a sick look. Elliot wished he could focus on helping her, but all he could do was replay his nickname, just as it had been spoken by an utter bastard.

"I told you not to call me that," he said.

"What? El?" Donnie said. "So, you don't like that. What are you going to do about it, El. Will you stop me *El*?"

*El, nothing's impossible for you, mom* breathed.

Elliot took a step forward, resting his hand on his sword's hilt. With the captive woman shaking in his arms, Donnie laughed, even as his companions bristled from the implied threat.

"This is too easy!" he said. "Let's see. How else can we rile you up?"

With a satisfied noise, he leaned forward to kiss his captive's cheek, right as big tears started rolling over them.

"Please, don't hurt me," she sobbed. "I want to see my husband. I want-"

With an exasperated sigh, Donnie rolled his eyes before cutting the woman off.

"Ugh, used goods," he said. "What a disappointment, although..."

Meeting Elliot's gaze, he smiled as if he were about to tell a joke.

"Stop me, El," he said.

Before Elliot could move a muscle, he'd dragged his blade across the woman's neck, leaving a fountain of blood cascading after it.

Holy shit. He'd killed her. Elliot hadn't thought...

*Who the hell* did something like that?

Choked gasps intermingled with Donnie's laughter as he dropped the stranger, beckoning to Elliot, and the world turned red.

Red, bathing soldiers as they carved into one another, screaming their rage and begging for forgiveness. Red, mingling with the soil both here and there, quenching its thirsty cry. Red, leaking through grasping, feeble fingers, staining them before they fell free.

And all Elliot saw.

Was.

Red.

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Revision #1

Created 19 February 2025 20:36:07 by FatalisticFable

Updated 18 February 2026 17:36:47 by FatalisticFable