



Dorian

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RATH HALL, March 1814

Blood dripped onto the gravel path, leaving a trail as Dorian Perrin, the Duke of Rath, strode out into another day of torment. His Irish wolfhound, Titan, trotted by his side, their steps rustling in the silence of his ancestral estate. The black outlines of barren trees stretched their thin branches through the mist like claws as cool, damp air sliced through his shirt to his hot, sweaty skin.

Good. He deserved every pain.

Dorian's torn knuckles on his left hand bled freely, while his right remained gloved, concealing scars that served as a constant reminder of the duel that haunted him—evidence of the most horrific thing he had ever done. He removed the glove only for his boxing sessions, as he had this morning. Twelve years encased in a glove hadn't done his scarred skin any good.

Titan kept trying to lick the blood off Dorian's exposed knuckles with his pink tongue. The dog's wiry gray hair was springy under Dorian's palm as he absently stroked the wolfhound. One of Titan's eyes was milky white, the other black and shiny. He reached Dorian's waist, and his long, sharp teeth made even the footmen wary.

On the cut lawn, a groom held Erebus, Dorian's massive

black Thoroughbred, in place, the stallion snorting and pawing the grass as they waited. Dorian laid his gloved right hand on Erebus's neck, feeling blood ooze beneath the leather.

"Dorian, dearest," came a high, feminine voice from behind him, and Dorian turned, swiftly putting his hands behind his back.

Lady Buchanan, his deceased mama's sister, stood before him with his sister, Chastity.

The dark walls of Rath Hall emerged from the mist behind them—three stories of weathered stone, covered in lichen and moss. Tall pointed paned windows pierced the façade with their leaded glass. Turrets flanked the structure, their spires dissolving into the fog above.

"Aunt," he said in greeting. "Sister."

The morning chill stuck needles into his skin, and his forehead felt cold and clammy as his hair, misted from exercise, stuck to it. But that was not nearly enough pain and discomfort to distract the beast within him.

His aunt's eyes, gray, kind, and intelligent, took him in with concern. "Will you not break your fast with us? I'm only here for the day."

A lady in her sixties who still preferred dresses with fitted bodices and full skirts—the fashion of the previous era—his aunt had arrived yesterday to stay overnight on her way to London for the opening of the season in a few weeks. Rath Hall was only one hour away from London, an exclusive location that was close enough to enjoy both the country and the city.

Titan sat down by Dorian's boots and gave an impatient whine.

His sister, Chastity—shockingly brilliant and happily unmarried—was twenty-eight, four years younger than Dorian. She was as dark haired as he, with striking blue eyes shining behind spectacles. Unlike what most ducal sisters

would wear, she was dressed in a simple gray gown, her hair in a tight and functional chignon.

“I assumed you would want to take breakfast in your chamber,” he lied. “And Chastity knows I go for a ride every morning.”

He felt blood drip from his hands to fall on the grass behind his feet. Chastity’s gaze slid over his bod, stopped on the crimson drops, then followed their trail from the grass to the gravel path on which she stood.

Her face paled. “Dorian, you’re hurt!” she exclaimed, moving towards him.

He stepped back, bumping into the horse’s side, but Chastity didn’t stop. She flew past the groom, and grasped Dorian’s left hand before he could stop her. She gasped, looking at the bloody splits on his knuckles.

His aunt gasped as well, and he winced. He should have bandaged them. Or ridden away faster.

“What did you do?” Chastity demanded.

He felt his teeth gnashing against each other. “I overdid it with boxing, that’s all. There’s no need to cluck.”

Earlier this morning, he’d driven his fists into the well-worn leather of the punching bag in his training room for hours. Each punch hurt to the bone, the taste of sweat on his upper lip salty, the coppery scent of blood satisfying. The constant pain of his right hand was replaced with a sharper agony, which felt sweet.

His aunt hurried towards him, skirts rustling. “I’m here for only one night, and you’re doing this? Beating yourself into a bloody pulp?”

His hand inside his glove was slippery and hot, pulsating with pain. He was breathing hard, struggling to take enough air into his lungs.

“I did not know you did this,” she continued. “Chastity, were you aware?”

Chastity shook her head. “Only that he trained in the mornings. Not what he did... Dorian, why haven’t you at least bandaged these?”

He swallowed. The wretched truth was he wanted to feel more pain. Every drop could bring him closer to his atonement. “I’m fine.” He tore his hand away from Chastity.

“Let me get the nearest medicine basket,” she said, all business. “My antiseptic... The wounds need to be treated right away, to avoid rot.”

Rot...

Oh yes. He knew how dangerous rot was and what the sight of his blood did to his sister. She’d almost lost him once. That was the reason she had become so invested in medical research.

Lady Buchanan’s eyes filled with tears. “Look at yourself—hiding from your family, punishing your body, isolating yourself. Why are you doing this?”

Dorian met her gaze, his jaw clenched. How could he explain the demons that haunted him? The guilt that gnawed at his soul? “I am content as I am, Aunt,” he ground out. “I have no need for society’s frivolities or familial obligations.”

She shook her head. “My dear boy. You should be embracing the joys of life—finding a loving wife, starting a family, living out your happiest years.”

Dorian turned away, his shoulders tensing. The weight of her words settled heavily upon him. A wife? A family? Happiness? Such things seemed distant and unattainable. How could he, with hands stained by blood and a heart blackened by rage, ever hope to deserve such blessings?

“You know not of what you speak,” he muttered, his tone harsh even to his own ears.

Chastity's gaze dropped to his gloved hand. "I know you can barely write with your right hand, and yet you keep beating it into bloody pulp? It's as though you're punishing yourself for something, brother!"

Dorian's head snapped up. "Mind your own business, Chastity."

Tears welled in Chastity's eyes as she squared her shoulders. No, he was too harsh with her. She didn't deserve this. His anger melted into a gnawing guilt.

"Do not snap at your sister," his aunt commanded. "I meant what I said. What you must do is marry. You must father an heir. It's not just your duty as a duke. It will also be good for you. Love can heal you, nephew. If not your wife's, then your love for your child."

He let out a low growl.

"Do not growl," said his aunt. "You're not a lion. And you know I'm right."

"Aunt, I swear—"

"I know I've been talking about this for years, but who else would, with both your parents being gone? You know your mama, my dear sister, would say the same were she alive. She would! And your babies will be like my grandbabies."

He let out a long sigh, making a conscious effort to not growl. "Aunt, I have told you many times, I do not want a wife. I do not want children."

His aunt stepped forward, making her eyes big and teary like those of an abandoned kitten, and leaned towards him, laying her hand on his shoulder. "A grandniece or -nephew would make me so very happy, dearest. Who knows how many more years I have on this Earth? I'd like to spend them rocking and playing with a grandbaby."

Goddamn it...

The only way to get to him was to make him feel pity for

the woman who was like a mother to him. His own mama had passed away when he was twelve, and he hadn't seen her for several years before that—his papa had sent her away to “make a man of the future duke and not a soppy, misbehaving brat.”

He owed his humanity—what there was of it—to his aunt.

He would move mountains for these two women.

“I'll give it my consideration,” he muttered.

His aunt beamed at him. “That's all I ask. Now, we won't stop your exercise. Go and ride your hellish steed.”

“What about your hands?” asked Chastity.

“His name is Erebus,” he mumbled, still somewhat speechless at his weakness in the face of his aunt's emotional manipulation and the irritating feeling of joy at seeing her happiness. “And my hands are fine.”

He hated the look of helpless anguish on his sister's face as she and his aunt turned and retreated into the house. But he didn't care about his wounds. If he died of rot, even better. His misery would finally end.

He mounted Erebus, and the groom stepped away. He was grateful to finally be alone, with just his horse and his loyal hound. Dorian clicked his tongue and spurred Erebus, and they flew, with Titan a little behind, his strong legs pumping.

He galloped through the foggy countryside, his muscles burning, rising slightly from the saddle as his hips moved in sync with the horse's gait, absorbing the motion. Dark silhouettes of gnarled trees loomed through the fog overhead, old and lifeless, just like he felt inside. He relished the sensation of the wind cutting through him. The speed. The freedom. A wild flight.

Dorian's fury burned within him as he rode, seeking solace in the intensity of his physical exertion. Yet no matter how far

or fast he rode, he could not escape what was in his head... what never left him.

The vivid memory of the day when his wrath had led him to take Mr. John Rose's life in a duel...

His suspicion of John sabotaging his pistol.

The assurance of both his and John's seconds that nothing was untoward.

And then the explosion of the gun in his hand.

Wrath consuming him, taking over him in an unimaginable force.

The fight... John's gun firing... His body slackening against Dorian.

Dead.

When Dorian finally returned to Rath Hall and dismounted next to the pond at the back of the garden, his clothing was drenched with sweat. His breath pumped out of him, blending into the cold, foggy air. Titan was breathing hard, too, as he walked around the pond's shore sniffing at the overgrown grass.

Dorian's muscles ached, which was exactly what he wanted. Yet his mind remained restless, haunted by memories of that fateful morning twelve years ago when he became a murderer. Though it was March, and the water was bitterly cold, Dorian took off his boots, ran a few steps, and plunged into the pond's murky depths.

The shock pierced through his very soul, but he welcomed it. The icy embrace of the pond enveloped him, its numbing touch creeping through his veins. Each stroke felt like a battle against the relentless grip of the past. Dark, silty water clouded his vision. He continued swimming, his limbs growing heavier with each passing moment, his chest tightening. Could he ever escape this darkness? Could he ever be free? he wondered, his heart heavy with sorrow and regret.

The icy water clung to Dorian's skin like a shroud, chilling him to the bone as he dragged himself up the muddy bank. He collapsed, gasping for breath, his chest heaving.

As he blinked the water out of his eyes, a movement caught his attention in the distance—two riders he recognized at once, even through the fog. These dukes were his closest allies, bound together by their shared sins and secrets. As he stood up, water running off him to puddle on the ground, they rode closer and stopped before him.

"There you are, Dorian," Lucien, the Duke of Luhst, called out as he descended from his horse, his voice amused as he surveyed his friend's drenched form. His golden hair was accentuated by the yellow patterns on his coat, his family crest bearing an elegant stag. "Engaging in your customary pursuits, I see. Enough. We've come to fetch you back to the city. Your absence has been noted."

Next to Lucien, Constantine Buccleigh, the Duke of Pryde, dismounted as well, standing tall and proud. He was clad in indigo, the wolf on his crest a testament to his fierce loyalty and honor. He hadn't changed much in the past twelve years, apart from growing colder, wearing his pride like suit of armor. However, since that terrible morning, he had become a friend, Dorian's closest after Lucien.

"Where are the rest of the seven?" asked Dorian.

He meant the rest of their brotherhood—the Seven Dukes of Sin, as they playfully called themselves, since they seemed to embody the seven deadly sins. Even their names fit: Rath, Luhst, Pryde, Enveigh, Irevrence, Eccess, and Fortyne.

"Waiting in Elysium, of course," replied Pryde.

Emitting playful whines, Titan trotted towards them. The fearful beast was gone, and Dorian's hound of hell wagged his wiry, broom-like tail as he licked the hands of the dukes,

whining and whimpering. Pryde's face split in a grin, and the prideful duke was replaced by a boy happy to finally be able to play with a puppy. He dropped to his knees and scratched Titan's long belly as the dog lolled on his back in bliss.

"Let us depart for the city, and may the demons within us be appeased," said Lucien.

They left their horses at the stables and strode into Rath Hall through the grand but dim hallways where portraits of Dorian's ancestors stared at them from dark oil paintings. Tall Greek statues, sideboards with statuettes, vases, and relics from all over the world filled the halls—treasures his father had been so proud to acquire.

The dukes followed Dorian to his bedchamber where his valet, Howe, threw a glance at his hand. The flesh was still raw, although it had stopped bleeding. "I'll clean them myself," Dorian said.

He didn't even let his valet see the scars on his right hand. He went into the changing chamber alone and removed the glove, absorbing every bit of the excruciating pain. He cleaned the blood in the washbasin, dried his skin, and put a fresh leather glove on his right hand.

As he returned to the room, the butler, Popwell, was pouring drinks for Luhst and Pryde, the clink of fine crystal and the rich aroma of aged brandy filling the room.

"Is Chastity at home?" asked Lucien as he looked out the window.

Dorian, Chastity, and Lucien had grown up together, and Lucien always asked about Chastity. Dorian knew he could trust Lucien like a brother, after everything they went through, but Lucien was a rake, a man who could seduce almost anyone he set his sights on.

"She is, probably still breaking her fast with my aunt."

“Lucien, you know you can literally have any woman in the world but Lady Chastity Perrin?” asked Pryde.

“He knows.” Dorian threw a somber warning look at Lucien, who, uncharacteristically for him, looked sheepish.

“That must be killing you,” Pryde said.

“What of your aunt?” Lucien asked, clearly changing the subject. “Did she speak to you of marriage again?”

Dorian sighed, his thoughts momentarily pulled away from the past by the mention of his beloved aunt. “Yes, she remains ever hopeful. I would do much to make her happy, if only I could reconcile it with my own desires.”

He paused, meeting the silent, understanding gazes of his friends. They all knew well the weight of familial duty and societal expectations that accompanied their titles. And the constant struggle of rebelling against all that.

“Speaking of desires,” said Lucien. “I hear the city is positively teeming with lovely young ladies this upcoming season. Perhaps one of them might yet thaw Rath’s icy heart?”

Pryde chuckled at Lucien’s jest, but Dorian remained silent while Howe pulled a fresh shirt over his head. He couldn’t get his aunt’s request out of his mind. He wished he could make her happy, yet he couldn’t fathom the idea of having a wife. Or looking for one...

Good Lord, he could only imagine the dreadful nights of attending balls where eager debutantes and their mamas would hover around him. A physical shudder ran through him. This caused Howe to stop tying the collar of Dorian’s shirt and murmur an excuse.

“It’s not you, Howe,” muttered Dorian. “No need for an apology.”

“Do you know whom I saw in the city last night?” said Pryde, and relief flooded Dorian at the change of topic. “Mr. George Rose.”

Rose...

Dorian froze, his knuckles whitening where they gripped the edge of the table. He felt as though a cold hand had reached into his chest and seized his heart, squeezing mercilessly.

“Indeed?” he managed to force out, his voice tight.

His valet fastened the last button on his waistcoat, seemingly oblivious of the storm brewing within his master.

“Ah, yes,” Pryde continued, seemingly oblivious to Dorian’s discomfort. “Poor man was attempting to sell whatever he could to pay off his family’s mounting debts. It appears that John’s education at Oxford drained them dry, and now they’re left with nothing.”

Dorian clenched his jaw, struggling to maintain his composure as guilt gnawed at his insides like a ravenous beast.

“Why are they left with nothing?” he asked through parched lips.

“Well,” Pryde said, clearing his throat, “because everyone believes John ended his own life, rumors started circulating around the Roses. You know what happens to families in those situations. Their old acquaintances, especially the good ones, stopped seeing them, afraid to be associated with a tarnished family. The six daughters became unmarriageable, so they’re left with the expenses of a large household but dwindling income. Since John was their last hope to change their financial situation, they’ve been scarcely able to provide for themselves.”

“Six daughters...” Dorian echoed.

As the faces of his two friends swam before him, his mind reeled.

“How unfortunate...” mumbled Luhst, his eyes still on Dorian.

“It is. I tried to help,” said Pryde. “I gave the Duke of Fortyne’s card to Mr. Rose, and they’re meeting later today.”

Dorian scowled at Pryde while Howe fiddled with his cravat at his neck. “You know Fortyne. No doubt he’ll pick up the estate for pennies and then turn it profitable.”

“Well,” said Pryde, “Mr. Rose is desperate to sell today to avoid landing in debtor’s prison. Anything he can get quickly is better than nothing.”

Debtor’s prison? And what would happen to the six young women and their mother? Without money or connections, would they all end up in a workhouse? Dorian’s hand ached again, the scars, the torn sinews, the new splits on his knuckles... Fury burst through him like the blast of a gun, followed by remorse for the life he had destroyed.

Not just one, as it turned out, but eight more. Six sisters and two parents.

Could he have eight more lives on his conscience? Goddamn it. His aunt’s pleading expression came to mind, the hope and the tears in her eyes as she spoke of grandbabies.

Goddamn it again.

Mr. Rose had six unmarriageable daughters and a large debt he was desperate to pay off.

“Perhaps...there is another way,” Dorian said, and he couldn’t believe the words had actually left his mouth.

“Another way?” Pryde raised an eyebrow.

Dorian let out a curse. The solution swirled in his mind. He must be mad thinking about this, but he’d have to endure one of John’s sisters for only a year if her family agreed. He’d pay off the family’s debts. He’d pretend it would be a real marriage for his aunt’s sake. He wouldn’t touch the girl, would never claim his rights as a husband. When no child would come in one year, they’d just say the woman was barren and there was

nothing to be done. Then his aunt would, with luck, leave him alone and concentrate her efforts on her next victim who could still bring her grandbabies—Chastity.

Was he mad, or did this plan make sense?

“Yes,” Dorian said, locking eyes with each of his friends in turn.

His mind reeled. Was he truly considering it? To marry his victim’s sister was to bind himself to the family he had so grievously wronged. Doubt and hesitation clawed at him. Was he being a fool? Was he that desperate to relieve this plague on his soul?

And yet he knew this was the closest he could ever come to atoning for his sins.

His knuckles hurt, pain pounding with the beating of his pulse. He would do this, not for his own sake, but for honor, for penance, for the chance to right even a fraction of the wrongs he had done.

He took in a lungful of air. “I will marry one of the Rose daughters. I will pay off Mr. Rose’s debts.”

“You’ve never even met any of the daughters!” exclaimed Pryde. “Will you propose without laying eyes on your betrothed? And how will you decide which of the six to choose?”

“Why not? It doesn’t matter who she is. I will choose the youngest if she’s of age—she will likely be the most pliable and amenable and unencumbered by romantic attachments. How old is she?”

“Eighteen, as far as I know,” Luhst answered.

He always seemed to have the relevant information on every unattached female in London.

“Then she will do.”

“Are you certain, Dorian?” Lucien asked quietly. “This is a

monumental decision. It'll change the course of your life forever."

"I know," Dorian replied. "It is the only way I can appease my aunt while helping the family of the man I murdered."

"You must think again!" Pryde said. "There are so many things to consider. Think of your reputation. The Roses have been surrounded by scandal for years."

"Because of me," said Dorian.

"And what about us—me and Lucien? We helped you cover up the murder."

"I'll never betray you two. No matter what. You know that—loyalty till death."

"And how in the world are you ever going to look her in the eye and be yourself?" Pryde asked. "What if you fall in love with her—or she with you? Have you considered that? And what about getting closer to the family of your victim?"

"No, Constantine. I won't have an issue with her ever wanting to get close to me. I must be the least lovable person in the entire world."

Howe helped him put his arms through the sleeves of his black coat bearing the Rath coat of arms: a lion in flames. As Dorian looked at himself in the mirror, Howe took a brush and swept away any dust from his shoulders and from the crimson waistcoat.

"But—" began Pryde.

Dorian stood straight, squared his shoulders, and tilted his chin up. His gaze was stern on himself. He would accept this challenge, even if it led to his destruction.

"You were there," he said. "You know what I did. You know I must atone. Take me to Mr. Rose..."

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