

To His Death
Amelia Connell (2017)

He was going to die today.
Supposedly, his mind whispered.
His horse shifted beneath him, flicking its ears back as it sighed.

The men around him were eerily quiet; only the sound of nervous shifting drifted to him on a breeze. They watched him as he watched the empty horizon. Shadows spilt across the barren field, as if somebody had overturned a great pot of ink and left it to sink into the earth.

His palms sweated against his horse's reins and he clenched his fists. For all his readiness to fight for his people – to *die* for his people – now that he was faced with the possibility of his demise, he found himself— terrified.

Coward, he heard his father's voice in his head, thick with disdain, dragging the memory of two days prior to the front of his mind.

His hands were steady as they secured the saddle to his horse. He focused on the buckle and ignored the tap-tap of the approaching woman's shoes. She stopped on the other side of the horse.

'What on earth are you doing?' she asked, her voice sharp in the morning air.

He ran a soothing hand down his horse's neck. The beast had never been fond of her. He glanced over the animal's back, seeing only a pile of snowy blonde hair atop her head.

'I'm leaving, Seraphina,' he replied, returning his attention to the saddlebags.

She moved around the horse, dodging its swinging head to get to his side. 'But—' she began, faltering for a moment as her brow furrowed. 'Why?'

He sighed, not responding as he turned away to gather his weapons. She dogged his steps and skipped in front of him.

'Did you not get my letter? The oracle said that if you leave, you won't make it back,' she said, scrunching her nose and crossing her arms.

He shrugged. 'Then I won't make it back,' he said, and sidestepped her to gather his supplies.

‘You don’t need to go, Damianos. Let Alucard command the army and you stay here. This is where you’re supposed to be; not off fighting battles like a common soldier,’ she said, the venom so often in her voice making an appearance.

He scoffed, frustrated. ‘How could I possibly expect my people to be loyal to me as a king if I don’t prove that I’ll fight for them? If I stay here, I’ll be no better than Father.’

His father, who had received a similar warning and had hidden behind palace gates while his people fought his battles. His father, who had let thousands of soldiers die, so that he could live. His father, who called him *coward*.

No, he would be better than his father.

‘But you will be alive,’ Seraphina shouted, her composure cracking. ‘You will be alive and we will marry in the spring and when your wretched father dies, you will be King and I will be *Queen*.’

‘And that’s what this is about, isn’t it? Your hunger for power. Sorry, sweetheart, but you won’t be getting it through me,’ he said, bitterness tingeing his voice.

Her eyes softened and welled with tears as she stepped forward to cup his face, attempting a different approach. ‘That’s not what it’s about. I want to marry you, Damianos. Stay, please.’

Used to her manipulation, he refrained from rolling his eyes. Grasping her wrists, he pulled her hand from his face. ‘No, Seraphina. You’ll find somebody else to marry.’

Her face hardened and she yanked her hands from his. Stepping back, she glared, hatred simmering in her dry eyes. ‘Go to hell,’ she said, turning on her heel to storm from the stables.

To her retreating back, Damianos called, ‘Only if you promise to meet me there!’ Turning back to his horse, he continued to pack his saddlebags for the coming battle.

Movement in the distance brought him back to the present. First one horse and then more, pouring up and over the slight incline, until the horizon was bristling with armed men, their swords glinting in the predawn light.

Damianos squeezed his legs around his horse and moved forward, his armour clinking in the quiet. He turned to face his men, looking to his commanders, his friends, for reassurance.

Laurent gave him a flicker of a smile, his pale skin tight around his eyes. Beside him, Alucard nodded, his mouth pressed into a thin line. Damianos dipped his chin in return and

turned to face the enemy forces, pushing his helmet down to protect his face. He unsheathed his sword and raised it to the sky.

A roar moved through the army behind him and his horse lurched into motion, mirrored by a thousand more at his back. In the distance, he saw the enemy burst forward, their army spreading like a blanket of wrath. His hand clenched around his sword and his horse raced forward, galloping towards the nearing army.

The two forces collided and the *whoosh* of a sword swinging toward him caused Damianos to rear back, avoiding what would have been a deep slice to his arm

Raising his sword, Damianos swung hard, catching the other man on his chest plate and knocking him from his horse. Damianos swiped out again, hitting the downed man in the neck, slitting his throat.

A sound came from beside him and he turned. Alucard fought at his right, as they had trained: Damianos in the centre with Alucard to the right and Laurent watching his back. His friend was busy halting a soldier's progress before he reached the prince.

Moving forward, Damianos slashed his sword down the flank of an enemy horse, sending it and its rider tumbling to the ground. Blood pounded in his veins as he swung at a passing enemy, catching him in his midriff. Blood spurted, coating Damianos's arm in wet heat.

To his left, he saw a soldier dragging a sword up his horse's side and across its neck. The beast whinnied in pain before the sound was abruptly cut short. It stumbled and fell, sending Damianos tumbling to the ground.

Tucking his shoulders in, he tightened his grip on his sword and rolled forward when he landed, remaining crouched on the balls of his feet for a moment before he rose. Immediately, he sliced his sword into the arm of an oncoming soldier, spraying blood across his chest plate. Before the other man could retaliate, Damianos pushed forward, pulling a knife from his belt and shoving it between his ribs.

Laurent's deep voice sounded from behind him, shouting a warning. Damianos spun and lifted his sword a moment too late. Pain sliced through his left bicep and he tripped back, dislodging the blade in his arm. The enemy soldier grunted, already swinging his sword in a second attack. Damianos raised his own weapon and they crashed together, sending a jolt up Damianos's arm as the blades slid against one another. Glancing over his opponent's shoulder, Damianos withdrew and stepped back. A moment later, the tip of a knife was protruding from the man's throat. Laurent nodded to his prince before turning to an enemy and slashing his sword.

A pained gasp came from his right and Damianos spun, his gaze landing on Alucard. The blade of a sword protruded from his midriff, below his ribs. The weapon was pulled back and out. Alucard's legs gave out and he fell to his knees, a hand pressed to his bleeding stomach, the other supporting him against the ground. Stepping around Alucard's crumpled form, the enemy soldier raised his eyes to Damianos's, his sword dripping with blood.

Red tinted his vision as Damianos lunged forward, his sword swinging. The other man met him blow for blow, causing Damianos to retreat a few steps. The soldier inched to the right and Damianos followed, unprepared when the man lurched to the left and swung low, catching Damianos in his thigh. Air hissed through his teeth as he went down on one knee, his sword forgotten as pain singed his skin.

Damianos looked up at the man standing over him and his fear returned, flooding his system.

He was going to die today.

Desperately, he scrambled for a knife, his slick fingers finding one a moment before it slipped from his grip. The man stepped forward and kicked the knife away.

No, he thought. No.

He heard Laurent's bellow as the soldier raised his sword and brought it down. The sharp bite of the blade stung Damianos's neck, and then—
