

Finding Freedom

Elliot enjoys an uneventful life in his nation's capital city until a call to war takes all of that away. Dorian has just escaped from a dangerous situation in the city, quickly settling into country life once more, when that same war comes to threaten all the peace he's obtained.

Edyth tends to her ailing mother in another nation's capital, where she quickly learns exactly how awful her people's oppressors truly are. Beatrice lives on the edge of society, embroiled in a resistance that has no hope of succeeding, when a mission behind enemy lines calls everything she thought she knew into question.

Victor has obtained hard-fought isolation in the depths of his nation's jungle. When an acquaintance from the past comes calling, it forces him into the life he thought he'd left behind.

Cast into the unknown, these five strangers will fight to survive until they find one another, but once they have, they'll band together in one of life's greatest struggles: the quest to find true freedom.

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Front Matter

Maps, pronunciation guide, content warnings, etc.

Front Matter

Content Warnings

I've done my best to include as many content warnings as I can here, but I can't guarantee that I've caught all of them. As always when reading a novel that covers heavier topics, please keep your mental health in mind!

Throughout: racism, slavery, dehumanization of a fictional race, eugenics

Prequel-Elliot and Dorian: conscription, death of loved ones

Prequel-Edyth and Beatrice: experimentation on prisoners, brief mentions of CSA (not on screen)

Prequel: Elliot and Dorian

Chapter 1: Me, At the Start

Elliot

Elliot had never considered himself less than human. At one point, the concept hadn't existed in his people's vocabulary, an unknown philosophy, but maybe that had been the point. Maybe the Lutovish had kept it from them.

They'd always presided over Ibis, his people's continent in the middle of a vast sea. For the most part, they stayed out of his people's business, or at least, they did in Elliot's home nation of Flosari. Sometimes, if one concentrated very hard, one could even forget they existed.

Except for the trackers in the hands of all children of Ibis. Except if one worked near them every day.

Beside Elliot, the room's beacon flashed pastel green, indicating an incoming arrival, and he tripped over himself to clear space, snatching up his bucket as he did. In his haste, sudsy water soaked his trousers, leaving its cloth clinging to his legs, and as soon as he'd reached a safe distance, he spun in place, raking his eyes across the floor for-

There. Where their newest guests would soon stand lay a patch of marbled stone that was shinier and decidedly *damp* than the rest. Hell. They'd kill him.

No. He couldn't think like that. This was simply another puzzle to solve, and Elliot was good at doing that.

Stripping off his tunic, he wadded it into a ball, tossing it on top of the puddle. As it settled, soaking up the potential tripping hazard, the beacon's blinking stopped, and four people appeared from thin air around it.

As always, the Lutovish baffled Elliot. They always wore the brightest and flashiest of clothing, and it was nearly always made of a stretchy material, never to be found in Ibis. If that weren't strange enough, they seemed to favor the most abnormal of hair and eye colors, sometimes going into the yellow or pink range. These oddities, along with their abnormally tall heights, made the Lutovish appear alien to him. Alien and terrifying.

One of the four, the man with his foot entangled in Elliot's tunic, leaned over to retrieve that bundle of fabric, holding it between two fingers.

"*What's this?*" he asked.

Clenching his hands behind his back, Elliot stood motionless, hoping he appeared as invisible as he felt. Unfortunately, it seemed he wasn't. Another person in the group, a woman, inclined her head in his direction.

"*I suspect it belongs to that one,*" she said.

Striding to Elliot, the man with his tunic lifted it higher, clearing his throat.

"Is this yours?" he asked, loud and slow.

Elliot had no clue why they talked like that after arriving. Sure, translators usually weren't inserted until a Lutovish had passed through a beacon, but they had to have learned at least some of Ibis' tongue before making the journey here. In the past, enough newly arrived guests had approached Elliot with questions or demands to make it so. Where their lessons lacking in some way?

"In my haste to make room for you, I spilled my water," he said. "I thought it better to dirty my clothing than allow our honored guests to slip. My apologies for the inconvenience."

After a heavy pause, the three people around the beacon broke into laughter with the woman among them tittering into her hand. Meanwhile the man in front of Elliot glanced back at them.

"*What do you think?*" he called. "*It certainly talks pretty enough.*"

"*Oh, leave it be, Varian,*" the woman said. "*We have better things to do.*"

Pursing his lips, Varian examined Elliot, and he returned the other man's gaze as placidly as he could. After a moment, Varian slapped Elliot's wet tunic to his chest.

"Be more careful, *bakava,*" he said.

Bakava. The one word in all his time spent puzzling out the Lutovish tongue that Elliot had yet to decipher. From the tone of voice used to deliver it, he took it to be an insult of some kind, but he'd never learned what it actually meant.

Clutching his tunic, he bowed.

"Of course, honored guest."

Elliot stayed frozen in place until their chattered voices faded from arrivals, four new visitors on their way to greater Ibis. He only straightened once silence had fallen again, soon wringing his shirt over the bucket.

That had gone better than he'd expected, but then, Elliot had always held luck's favor. How else could he, someone from a family with little means, have swung a job in the Travel Center, a position that people throughout Flosa would commit murder to gain? Here, he could study his life's

greatest puzzle to his heart's content, keeping himself in check. Here, he could have all the silence and solitude that he wanted. Except for when guests arrived, of course.

Even with that, luck had seen fit to bless him. During most arrivals, the Lutovish had ignored Elliot, which wasn't the norm. He'd heard horror stories from the other cleaners, those unlucky enough to greet rowdy guests, but he'd never experienced that displeasure for himself.

Eventually, luck would get bored with him. He'd accepted this fact. It was the way of things, after all, but until she left him for another, Elliot would take full advantage of her blessing.

With his tunic as dry as he could get it, he pulled it over his head and hurried to the beacon. No further arrivals would take place for a good five minutes, as the machine needed time to cool down. Or at least, that was what he'd always assumed stopped arrivals. Either way, he had several uninterrupted minutes to examine what had become the object of his obsession for the last five years.

Three tiers of metal tubes comprised the beacon with a cylinder in its center serving as their support. A hollow globe hovered, unattached, a meter above this with mist billowing inside of it. The mist's color shifted according to which process the beacon was about to run: green for arrivals, white for cooldown, blue for warmup, and red for error. Again, all as Elliot had assumed.

While the other colors were common, he'd only seen the beacon turn red once before, a shift that had occurred while the mist had been flashing green. Seconds after it had started, several Lutovish had sprinted into the chamber. One of them had pushed Elliot outside while the rest had gathered around the beacon. He guessed that what had followed hadn't been good. Flosari had experienced an unusually troubled week after the incident, after all.

This beacon wasn't the only one in the Travel Center. A few others populated one half of the building while departures occupied the second half. Those beacons were identical to the ones in arrivals save for the handles that formed a ring around their top tier. When an honored guest finished their business in Ibis, they only needed to touch a handle to be transported elsewhere. To Lutov, he presumed.

In his time as a cleaner, Elliot had deciphered some of the beacon's mechanisms. He knew the central cylinder was what completed the device's work. Following guests' arrivals, he'd burned himself on it enough to establish that fact. Work produced heat, right?

The tubes probably conducted a cooling material of some sort, but Elliot hadn't been able to confirm this hypothesis. His belief was based on the Lutovish script running down each tube's length

Once translated, it said 'Caution. Do not open except for in an emergency. Contents are cold and may cause severe burns.'

Or at least, that was what Elliot thought it said. Except when it came to processes, he'd never been great at reading script, even those that were in his own tongue. His interpretation of the Lutovish warning could be wrong. Parts of the message confused him no matter how many phrase variations

he tried. What could be cold enough to burn someone? The destructive part of him wanted to crack a tube open and find out.

So, his two discoveries: what made the beacons function and what kept them from melting through the floor. Pathetic for five years of study; he knew, but it was what he had, and he knew he could figure out the rest. He just needed time.

Time he didn't have now.

The beacon flashed green again, and Elliot hurried back to his bucket and mop. He wouldn't learn anything about the beacon if he didn't get his job done too.

Of all the Lutovish who supervised the cleaners, Finiuc was the worst. He was smug, his work attitude was atrocious, and when on duty, he made the cleaners' lives miserable, always finding the smallest of excuses to dock their rations. He was having an especially good time with Elliot today.

"A complaint was filed against you," he said. "I should make you leave here with nothing today."

Then, do it, was what Elliot wanted to say.

"Please, I have brothers who aren't old enough to earn rations," was what he said instead. "Would you let four boys starve?"

Elliot knew he would, odious man that he was, but his supervisors would frown on any sign of malnourishment in such valuable resources. Finiuc hated him, though, and because of that, the bastard might risk a slap on the wrist, just to see him suffer.

Rising from behind his counter, Finiuc marched toward an office in the corner, the one claimed by the Travel Center's supervisor. Shouting soon emerged from it, followed in short order by the current supervisor, Dract, marching toward Elliot with Finiuc trailing him.

"A recent arrival complained about your work," Dract huffed once he'd reached Elliot. "Tell me why Eighth Stratus Finiuc shouldn't dock your rations."

And of course, he refused to look at Elliot, fixing his eyes on a point above his head, but that was fine. It made it easier for Elliot to speak.

"I did my work. Yes, I made a mistake while doing it, but I also tried to correct it to the best of my abilities," he said. "Also, if I don't receive rations today, my siblings won't eat tonight, and they've done a lot of that lately."

His first reason would never sway Dract. The Lutovish didn't care if the children of Ibis faithfully complied with their demands. All they wanted was their games, and for those, they needed healthy youths. Like Elliot's brothers.

"*You didn't tell me it talks pretty, Finiuc,*" Dract said. "*I wonder how smart it thinks it is.*"

Smart enough to learn the Lutovish tongue as soon as he'd gotten this job.

"*It's too clever for its own good, sir,*" Finiuc said. "*Look at its eyes.*"

Dract deigned to lower his gaze, and meeting them, Elliot tried to dim the spark that blazed in him. After a moment, Dract lifted a wire from behind the counter.

"Tracker," he said.

Elliot offered the man the back of his hand, refusing to look at the socket in it. Inserting a wire into it, Dract bent down to a display, flicking his eyes back and forth as he read.

"Elliot Lockhart, age: twenty-four. Worked with us ten years, ever since the proper age was attained. Little to no blemishes on record. Mother and father alive, four younger brothers and one older sister. That's quite the family you have."

"Mom and dad have always striven to please," Elliot said.

Grunting, Dract turned to Finiuc.

"*Too valuable to let starve,*" he said. "*Give it its food.*"

Finiuc's face fell.

"*Yes, sir.*"

While Dract returned to his office, Finiuc slammed his fingers on his display, yanking the wire out of Elliot once the rations transfer had completed.

"Get out of here," he grumbled.

Elliot should do as the bastard had said and be grateful that today, things had worked out in his favor. Really, he should, but something in him just *refused* to let things lie. So, he pasted an insincere smile on and asked.

"Shouldn't you search me first? I wouldn't want to get you in trouble if I missed something while replacing my gear."

Like he'd ever actually do that, but the question made Finiuc grind his teeth together so hard that Elliot could hear them faintly screeching, a sound that gave him no small amount of joy. Striding to the other side of the counter, Finiuc patted Elliot down. He wouldn't find anything, and Elliot thought the man knew it, but he couldn't help poking the bear, no matter how much trouble it might get him in.

Once he was finished, Finiuc swept a hand toward the exit.

"Get. out. of. here."

"I will," Elliot said. "Have a pleasant evening."

As he passed Finiuc, Elliot tripped, falling into the man to keep from toppling, and Finiuc shoved him away, frantically swiping at every place Elliot had touched him.

"My apologies," Elliot said. "So clumsy, me. Do you need-?"

When he reached for Finiuc, the other man growled, taking a step back.

"Leave!"

"Yes, of course," Elliot said. "Apologies again."

He raced toward freedom. Once the sun was kissing his skin, he retrieved the device he'd palmed from Finiuc's pocket, giving it a once over. Another one of those fancy, glowing board games the Lutovish loved. He'd learn nothing new from it, having long ago figured out its inner workings, but he could use its parts. Pocketing it, he focused on the city around him.

Sometimes, it felt like Elliot lived in two worlds. The one where he worked, a Lutovish paradise, was all clean-cut lines, smoothed stone, and artificial creation. Flosa, where he spent his evening hours, was muck, crudely crafted homes, and wear.

But it was filled with the children of Ibis. People who greeted him as he walked down dirt streets, who spoke Ibis' tongue, who went about their business with a cheery attitude and none of the disgruntlement found in the Lutovish. Elliot didn't know which world he enjoyed more.

Home for him was a two-story building left standing regardless of its rickety appearance. No other structures stood near it despite Flosa's packed state, a circumstance that had always mystified Elliot. In the middle of a city overflowing with tens of thousands, how had his family received the privilege of empty space on all sides? Did his family carry a communicable disease that he somehow didn't know about?

As he stepped inside, he eased the front door closed, wincing as he listened to the resulting silence. He managed two steps toward the stairs before a cry rose from further inside.

"Elliot!"

Groaning, Elliot braced himself as four little boys raced from out of the house's depths to barrel into him.

"Did you see any strange people today?"

"Who was at security?"

"Did you make anyone mad?"

His annoying brothers. How he loved them.

"Ok!" someone new called. "Let's give El his space. You know how he is when he gets home."

Cathrine glided into the foyer with her arms outstretched. Clapping his shoulders, Elliot's sister kissed his cheek while the boys scattered, off to whatever game had been distracting them before he'd arrived.

"Thank you," he sighed.

"You should spend more time with them if you don't want them pestering you," Cathrine said. "They adore their older brother."

"I want to do things with them," Elliot said, "but they're so..."

"Rowdy? Rambunctious? Loud?" Cathrine said. "So were you a few years ago."

"Then, I grew up."

"And would you wish that curse on them?"

Cathrine arched an eyebrow, and Elliot scowled, an expression that always made her chuckle.

"Go play with your toys. We'll have dinner once mom and dad have come home," she said before hesitating. "Can we eat tonight?"

Which made Elliot wince. He hated how often circumstances, whether those under his control or not, had forced his family into hungry nights.

"I earned enough rations for it, yes," he said.

"Wonderful. I'll run by the market, then," Cathrine said. "See? You're an amazing brother."

Humming, she strolled into the kitchen. Cathrine had never ceased to amaze Elliot. Even raised in a chaotic household like theirs, she'd somehow grown into a giving soul, a decent human being who took up the slack for their parents without prompting. Elliot didn't know how she managed the boys without losing her mind.

Pounding up the stairs, Elliot bypassed the room he shared with Oran and Lucas, the eldest of his brothers. A ladder at the end of the hall led into the house's crawlspace, and in that confined storage room lay his thinking corner. He'd piled junk into organized stacks around the back of the crawlspace, creating a barrier between it and the rest of the world, and there, he solved puzzles.

That was all Lutovish tech was to him: a conundrum waiting to be pulled apart and assembled again.

Once he was settled, Elliot tossed his stolen board game device onto a heap of tech awaiting disassembly. He'd tackle that growing mound soon enough. For now, his most recent project was stealing his attention.

Lifting his modified remote, he waved it over his tracker, hoping to see a change, but no. Its display didn't show him his bio, and his tracker stayed dun with no white light to signal that he'd gained access to it. He must have messed with something vital while tweaking the remote before work this morning. Grabbing his tools, Elliot ripped it apart again.

He'd been so proud of getting his hands on one of these. The Lutovish guarded their remotes more zealously than any other tech, preferring to use wires for tracker access when possible. The first time he'd seen one had been when a woman had used it to stop a fight months ago, and after that, he'd been consumed by the idea of them. All of his free time had gone into devising a plan to get one for himself, and he'd accomplished his goal.

Four months ago. He'd spent so much time fiddling with this device and its processes, and still, it refused to yield its secrets to him.

But that was fine. The impossible puzzles were the most rewarding ones to solve.

Elliot had opened the remote and gotten halfway through relabeling its innards when Cathrine's voice floated into the crawlspace.

"Dinner time!"

"I'll be right there," he called.

Setting the remote down, he glanced over the contents of his thinking space. He needed to find a better way to conceal his hard-won bounty. If the Lutovish ever found this in his home, they'd kill everyone he loved before burning the house down around them, and Elliot hated imposing a risk like that on his family.

Much as he might like to abandon his puzzles, though, he knew he couldn't. He'd tried that once before. It had made him...

Suffice it to say that his family had insisted that he return to them, even with how much danger these Lutovish devices imposed on them. What he'd become had been... so much worse.

When Elliot strode into the kitchen, mom and dad were sitting at the table while Cathrine flitted between the fire and a spread meal. With every trip, she deposited another bowl of whatever masterful concoction she'd created today.

"El," mom said, "how was your day?"

Dad lifted his head to squint at Elliot through drooping eyes. Worked to the bone again, huh?

"Fine," Elliot said. "I got my rations, which is all that matters."

"So, we can eat tonight?" a boyish voice asked.

Tiny bodies raced to the table, dodging around Elliot.

"Yes, Martin, you can eat," he said.

When he ruffled his younger brother's hair, Martin swatted his hand while ducking out of reach. Cathrine plunked a final bowl on the table before spreading her arms.

"And all the Lockhart family blessed their eldest son, Elliot, for their sustenance on this, the night of plenty," she said.

Snatching a bread crust off of the table, Elliot tossed it at her.

"Please, Cat," he said. "You'll make me blush."

"I'm sure," Cathrine said.

She took an exaggerated bite out of the crust Elliot had thrown while eyeing the rest of the family.

"What are we waiting for?" she asked. "Let's eat!"

As Elliot slid into his spot between the boys, his family members dug into their dinners while cheerful chatter and appreciative murmurs filled the air. Having nothing to contribute to the conversation, he spooned stew into his mouth, watching them instead.

Much as his brothers might irritate him, much as his parents were necessarily absent, much as his sister could be overbearing at times, Elliot loved these people. He couldn't express what bound them to one another. It wasn't simply the fact that they were family. Elliot knew plenty of other families who squabbled and hated each other for their differences. Perhaps it was because his worked as a unit to survive. They strove for the betterment of not one but all of them. He was sure there was more to it than that, but their conjoined fight against life's hurdles was what had kept him from trying his luck in another nation.

"So, El," dad said, "what sort of guests came through the beacon today?"

In other words, should they soon expect unpleasant surprises anytime soon?

"It was mostly scientists," Elliot said. "Fewer tourists than last week. Not to worry. I think we're ok for now."

"Good," dad said. "That's good-"

A blaring whine cut him off, making everyone wince as they muffled their tracker-laden hands. After a few seconds, that unpleasant noise went quiet, and a smothered voice rose from eight spots around the table. A Lutovish voice.

"Flosari has declared war on Escad. A draft is in effect," she said. "All those called to fight are to assemble at their assigned barracks by end of day tomorrow. The chosen color is... yellow."

As everyone's tracker fell silent, a glow pierced through the skin covering them, and the family braced. As each member lifted their hand, another knot untied in Elliot's gut. Blue, green, purple. Once they were finished, he'd seen every color but the one he'd dreaded, and with his elbows on the table, he buried his face in his palms.

"Oh, thank *avan*," he said into them.

Given the silence, his family didn't seem to share his relief, but he couldn't blame them. The Lutovish and their damn war games had ruined another perfectly good meal.

"Elliot," mom breathed.

Her tone raised Elliot's hackles. Why had it done that?

Peering over his fingers, he met her tear-filled eyes. What-?

"Your tracker," Cathrine unsteadily said.

Oh, no.

Elliot's hands were shaking as he flipped them over. From beneath his skin, a steady yellow blazed up at him.

It seemed luck had abandoned him.

Chapter 2: An Unwelcome Intrusion

Dorian

"-assemble at their assigned barracks by end of day tomorrow. The chosen color is... red."

A rainbow flashed across the bakery, and people flinched as they checked their trackers. Dorian only spared his hand a glance—orange—before pulling his next batch of loaves out of the oven. Its heat washed over his chest and arms while flames accented the color shining from him. When he turned back toward the shop, he noted that four people had left, subtracting them from the tally of how much dough he'd need to prepare for tomorrow, before handing a loaf to Mr. Mahon.

"Can't believe they're forcing us into another war," he grumbled, "and with Flosari no less. We have no reason to fight them."

"We have no reason to fight *anyone*," said the woman behind him.

"I know that," Mr. Mahon said before heaving a sigh. "Sorry, kid. I didn't mean to hold up your line."

"It's not a problem," Dorian said.

Even still, as the other man turned to leave with his bread, he calculated how much the outburst had delayed him. As Mr. Mahon stepped through the bakery's door, Dorian head him mutter under his breath.

"They're bleeding us dry."

Which was true but not Dorian's concern right now.

After that small disturbance, events in the shop proceeded as they should. Dorian filled relegated rations requests while a shortening line chinked at the rigid walls he'd erected around himself. Only as the last woman left the bakery with the bell on its door tinkling behind her did he allow his trembling to break free. Leaning on the counter, he vibrated to the tune of guilty relief, one that all who'd been spared the draft this time would be listening to.

Lisa wouldn't lose him this time. Would he lose her?

Wrapping himself in the safety of his bakery's systems, Dorian forgot everything but kneading dough, stoking the fire, and baking. When he'd finished for the day, he closed up shop, pocketing its key as he left.

As always, Hythe lay quiet this late in the evening. Most of its villagers were home, spending time with loved ones, but some people's jobs, like his, kept them out later than others. Dorian greeted these people, stopping to chat with a few, before leaving the town's cramped center.

Beneath the deep dark of a starry sky, he quickened his pace. Despite the near-black of his surroundings, he never faltered in his path until light surged from a cottage's windows ahead.

Stopping, he shook the prickles running over his arms free. She'd be home tonight, regardless of whether her tracker had glowed red earlier today. The announcement hadn't called for the drafted to report until tomorrow. They'd at least have tonight.

Still, Dorian dragged his feet toward waddle-and-daub walls, grimacing at the patchy roof above him. The next time he had free time, he should repair it. Add that to the long list of tasks he still needed to finish. Like entering his own damn home.

"Get it together, Dorian," he said under his breath.

When he stepped inside, Lisa whirled away from a pot hanging over the fire.

"There you are! After the announcement, I didn't think you'd come home," she said. "Sit down! Dinner's almost ready."

Keeping his eyes fixed on her, Dorian felt his way to a chair, watching her every move. Three months married and he still couldn't get enough of her. People claimed that this infatuation would fade, that married people inevitably devolved into bickering cats. Dorian couldn't see that for them. He applied his every thought to her happiness, in part because he didn't know why she'd chosen him over the life she'd had before.

Hefting the pot off of its hook, Lisa shuffled to the table, glaring at Dorian all the while, and he stayed seated, remembering the first time he'd rushed to her aid.

"I'm not some delicate flower to be handled with care," she'd growled. "I can pull my own weight."

So, he waited until Lisa had set her burden down, dropping into the chair beside him, before leaning forward to sniff their meal. Unfortunately, that only turned his stomach.

"Smells great," he said.

Lisa dismissively waved a hand at him.

"I know it's awful. If it's really that bad, we have leftover bread to eat," she said. "Now. The announcement. Shall we? At the same time."

When Dorian nodded, they both took deep breaths.

"Orange." "Green."

Neither of them had said red, which meant she wouldn't have to leave! Dorian fought to hold himself together while Lisa smirked at him.

"We avoided it this time, huh?" she said. "How lucky."

She was the best thing that had happened to him, and he could keep her for a while yet.

"I know that look," Lisa said. "What about dinner?"

Avan, how did she do that?

"It can wait," Dorian said with a thrum in his voice. "Do you disagree?"

Standing, Lisa draped herself over him, hiding the world with her hair.

"Dorian Danvers," she softly said, "why would I argue with you?"

A few days later, Dorian couldn't force himself to get out of bed. If he didn't do it soon, his customers, people he'd known for his whole life, would get their rations late. For the ones who collected them at dawn, late rations would mean a late start to the day, and a late start to the day meant a higher likelihood of getting their rations docked, something that could be hazardous for many of Hythe's older residents. Dorian knew this, but still, he kept lying beside Lisa, running his fingers through her hair.

Soon enough, she stirred, blinking at him until she was full awake, and with a smile, she swatted his hand.

"Shouldn't you be on your way?" she asked.

"Probably."

Groaning, Lisa shoved Dorian off of their narrow mat.

"Then, get going!" she said. "Don't make me fend off an angry Vella again."

Rolling to his feet, Dorian stretched.

"Ms. Shea's crotchety, even when she gets her bread on time."

Pouting, Lisa said, "Yes, but if you're late, she'll be grouchy with *me*."

"Then, my lady," Dorian said, bowing to her, "I shall take my leave, if only to spare you the trouble of an old woman's lecture."

A hay-stuffed pillow smacked him in the face.

"Thanks ever so much, my asshole of a husband."

Hurriedly dressing, Dorian tripped to the door, pausing for a spoonful of the burnt gruel they'd left out last night. Ignoring his lurching stomach, he smacked his lips.

"A delightful concoction as always, Ms. Danvers."

Another pillow thumped into his side while Lisa's laughing screech chased him out the door.

"I love you, ridiculous man!"

Humming, Dorian retraced his path from several nights before. In the light of day, Hythe had transformed into a bustling village, if less so than normal on this particular morning. People were working in the fields that bordered the path into town square, but less of them were there than yesterday.

On his way into town, Dorian passed the occasional villager. They, however, forewent their typical, cheery greetings. Instead, they hurried along with their heads ducked, returning home presumably, although Dorian couldn't say why they were acting that way.

Only one person spoke to him.

"You should stay home with Lisa today, Dor. It'll be worth the rations cut."

With a cocked head, Dorian watched Burt, a trapper who daily ventured into the perilous forest on Hythe's fringe, jog toward his home. He hadn't thought anything could phase that stalwart teenager, and the fact that something had almost sent him scurrying home, following the kid's advice.

But he was responsible for feeding Hythe, to a degree at least. He couldn't abandon his job. If he didn't do it, people would go hungry, and everyone knew what would happen then. To keep Lisa and everyone else he loved safe, he needed to maintain the system of order that had been given to his village.

Town square was abandoned with only a few villagers going about their business. No one was waiting outside the bakery's door, and this, more than anything, sent a chill down Dorian's spine. People didn't skip rations distribution. They. just. didn't. So, why had they done so today?

Finding the disturbance to Hythe's system flow was a much easier task than Dorian would have liked. He followed the trickle of people hurrying home, moving in the opposite direction, and soon came upon a nightmare scene.

A blanket of people was stretched across once verdant crop fields, more Escadese than Dorian had seen assembled in months. Sunlight glinted like a flame's popping sparks from too many bodies and the weapons hanging off of them. Swords and glaives and shields and cuirasses and

chainmail...

An army. Camped outside of his hometown.

In a fog, Dorian strode toward a clump of tents on the outskirts of the encampment. He knew what this gathering meant. Hythe lay too close to the Escad-Flosari border for it to be anything other than...

Still, he wandered through drafted soldiers, ignoring their stares, until he'd found a tent with a gathering of officers beneath it and a weary voice emerging from their midst.

"The Flosarians will likely attack us from this point, near the road..."

The marshal kept talking as Dorian stepped under the tent's canvas. When he came into view, the other man glanced up, which had his voice faltering, but after a breath, he kept speaking, perhaps hoping Dorian would leave before causing too much trouble.

Dorian had no intention of obliging him. He'd come here for an explanation. He would stay right here until he got one.

"If we position a company here, we can minimize civilian casualties-"

"Why are you here?" Dorian asked.

The tent went silent with the army's hubbub turned deafening in its quiet. Officers faced Dorian with their hands on their weapons' hilts while the marshal crossed an arm over his chest, rubbing his forehead, and a clatter preceded a system anomaly pushing through the massed soldiers.

"What on-?"

"Why are *you here*?" Dorian roared.

He took a step toward the marshal before the man's subordinates grabbed his arms. More rustling rose into the quiet, and a higher-pitched voice started spewing foreign words.

"Kavaka, kwa'u raka tal?"

This jumble of strange syllables jerked Dorian toward the system anomalies that he'd barely noticed before. Lankily tall, the two were pale. One, a woman, bore a violet mass atop her head while her yellow eyes clashed with that color. The man's hair was a much lighter shade, although his eyes were brown. They were wearing trousers and tunics that defied every fashion trend Dorian had ever seen with the outfit's cloth slick and shiny.

Lutovish. He should have expected them here, but they so rarely visited Hythe, which had been a nice change from the years when he'd lived elsewhere. The one day every year when a Lutovish came to take stock of his home was an unrecognized, village-wide holiday with rations given to its citizens despite the lack of work done that day. Thankfully, the Lutovish acknowledged that the

children of Ibis couldn't be blamed for their 'indolence' if *they* were the ones keeping them from doing their job. Besides that one day, however, these strange people never showed their faces in Dorian's tiny village.

But here two stood with an army at their beck and call.

"Tracker," the man among them demanded.

As officers dragged Dorian forward, that man retrieved tech from an unseen pocket. After plugging a wire into the proffered socket, he read aloud.

"Dorian Danvers, age: nineteen. Baker for Hythe. Ah! The *bakava* we meant to see next."

The Lutovish's eyes jumped to Dorian as he frowned.

"Why such aggression, though? Let's see. Perfect record. An only child to long-dead parents. Recently married to-"

He clicked his tongue.

"Ah, that's why. A primitive need to protect a newly acquired mate."

Primitive? What was primitive about protecting loved ones? And Lisa was *not* just Dorian's wife. She was... everything.

The man turned to his companion.

"Kwa che kra tanz?"

The woman rattled off more nonsense in response, and once she was finished, the army's marshal cleared his throat.

"If I may, honored guests?" he said. "Replacing someone familiar with such a vital position in this town might weaken us to the point that we lose the coming battle. You want us to win it, yes?"

Glancing at the woman, the male Lutovish said, "Ku naj uv kis lanak."

As the two conferred, it looked like they were bickering, but eventually, the man's volume rose above the woman's, and she fell into a sulk.

"We agree with your assessment," the man said. "Katia and I will need a moment before we resume planning. Tell the baker what we require of him."

Taking the woman's elbow, the man escorted her out of sight, and once they'd left, the army's marshal shooed his subordinates out, including the ones holding Dorian. Swiping at the marks they'd left on his arms, Dorian eyed the man opposite him.

"Did you choose Hythe as your staging ground because we live here?" he asked. "Is this punishment for taking Lisa from you?"

Bending over his map, the marshal snorted.

"Come, Dorian. If I'd wanted you punished, I wouldn't have stopped our honored guests from doing what they wanted with you just now."

"Then, why are you here?" Dorian hissed. "I get it. War with Flosari. Why, of all the towns on the nation's border, did you make Hythe into your battleground?"

"I didn't get a choice."

Oh.

Squeezing his eyes closed, Dorian muttered a curse.

"Exactly," the marshal said. "Now, the only way to keep my daughter safe is for me to win this battle as efficiently as possible, and to do that, I need my people fed. So. Will you bake for me?"

"If it's for her, I'll get you whatever you need," Dorian said. "Given that, can I help in any other way, marshal?"

Always marshal. He could never speak this man's name because to do so might ignite the bad blood between them.

The marshal was silent for a long while, walking his fingers over the map as if hoping to feel the terrain it displayed.

"Will you tell her I'm here," he said, "and that I'm sorry?"

Sorry for driving her from her home? Sorry for banishing her because she'd chosen Dorian over the profession her father had forced her into?

A 'no' hovered on his tongue, begging to be released, but Dorian couldn't deny Lisa a chance to reconcile with her father, especially if the man couldn't win the coming battle. Not that a loss like that was likely for Escad, not with *him* running things.

"I'll tell her," Dorian said.

The marshal glanced up, creasing his brow. He hadn't expected that, had he?

"Then, do so," he said, "and get to baking. I need my bread."

When he returned to inspecting his map, Dorian turned his back on the other man. Why here? Why *here*?

The question hounded him as he sprinted home. Bursting into his cottage, Dorian found Lisa and gathered her into his arms, ignoring her questions until he'd calmed down. Then, he drew her to their mat, sat her down so she was leaning against his chest, and told her everything.

"Dad's here, huh?" she said once he'd finished. "Of course he is. He's the best military mind in Escad. Who else would lead this war?"

"Will you see him?" Dorian asked.

He tightened his arms around her as she considered the question.

"I want to," Lisa whispered, "but I don't think I can without hurting him or me. What do you think?"

Dorian thought they should ignore the man, making him go through the same pain he'd inflicted on her.

"You should visit him," he said, "and then, you should run. Get as far from Hythe as you can."

Twisting in his arms, Lisa laid a hand on his chest.

"I can't do that, and you know it," she said. "I'm not a priestess anymore, and my uncle has renounced me, both of which mean I can no longer freely travel. I haven't submitted a permit to move, so if I leave Hythe, Hunters will find me, and we know what would happen then."

"They might not," Dorian said. "Enough chaos is about to erupt here that they might overlook one unauthorized move."

"Which is surely what our friends and neighbors are thinking, as I'm sure the Lutovish have as well," Lisa said. "They'll have several Hunter packs on Hythe's outskirts to prevent us from fleeing. It will be better to stay here and trust my father to do what he does best: massacre an enemy army."

Pressing his face into her shoulder, Dorian said, "He wants me to help him, Lis."

"Then, help him," Lisa said. "We don't have much of a choice."

Taking a shuddering breath, Dorian kissed her.

"I thought we'd escaped trouble this time."

"Me too, love."

Huddling into one another, they ignored the peril breathing down their necks.

Chapter 3: Never Play with High Stakes

Elliot

Elliot was packing when Cathrine called him downstairs. Since he was almost finished, he ignored her summons, intent on stuffing his belongings into a sack. Intent on avoiding the reason he was doing it.

When someone touched him, he flinched while putting his back to a corner. Not that he'd needed such a strong reaction. The only person here was Cathrine, watching him with her hand outstretched.

"What is it? I heard you a minute ago," he said. "Let me finish packing, and I'll come to say my goodbyes."

With a frustrated growl, Cathrine grabbed Elliot's arm, pulling him after her. She dragged him into the gathering space on the first floor. Usually, it was full of squabbling children or Cathrine and her tailoring supplies. Now, a single chair teetered on uneven legs here with their parents slumped against a wall nearby.

"Where are the boys?" Elliot asked.

"With friends," dad said. "Sit."

He pointed at the chair, and Elliot frowned. Did they want to make their farewells without suffering the chaos that his little brothers always brought?

"Ok, but we should make this quick," he said. "Once I'm done packing, I have to get you as many rations as I can before leaving."

Elliot's parents and Cathrine exchanged a glance.

"That's the thing, El," mom said. "You're not leaving."

What was she talking about? Had they not seen his tracker's color after the announcement? Were they in denial about what had happened?

"Yes, I am," Elliot said. "I've been drafted. I'm off to fight in a war none of us wanted. I'll probably die in it too."

Oops. He hadn't meant to let that last bit slip out. How had it escaped? Also, why had his voice taken on a shrill edge?

Crouching in front of him, Cathrine grabbed his hands.

"El. We won't let you go," she said. "We've discussed it and decided to take the risk. We'll hide you."

...What?

"Are you insane?" Elliot hissed. "The Hunters will find me, and when they do, they'll show no mercy. To any of us. Including Martin, Lucas, Orin, and Lionel. The children who are conspicuously absent right now."

"Don't worry about the boys," dad said. "You know they'd do anything for you."

"That doesn't mean I want to risk them!" Elliot said. "Or any of you for that matter. When the Hunters come-"

"They won't," Cathrine said, "or rather, it'll take them time to pinpoint your tracker. We live in a city populated by tens of thousands, and you live in a house of eight. With so many signals interfering with yours, the Hunters will be slowed down, and by the time they might have found you, you'll have learned how to disable your tracker."

"Disable my..."

Sputtering into silence, Elliot whipped his head between them. They were serious. They thought he could...

"That's impossible!" he snapped.

Avan, he'd sounded like a little girl there. Their... *insanity* had somehow turned back the years and changed his gender.

"El, nothing's impossible for you," mom said with a tired smile reaching for her tired eyes. "Think of everything you've made. The miniature clockwork circus you gave the boys last solstice?"

"That was simple! Gears and pistons and a modified monitor. What you're suggesting-"

Cathrine squeezed Elliot's hands.

"It's a puzzle, El. Only a puzzle," she said. "Can you solve it?"

Elliot latched onto that idea with such singularity that it should have scared him. He should have run upstairs, grabbed his sack, and headed for his assigned barrack. Instead, that plan and the events that had prompted it skittered out of focus. Only a puzzle and its pieces were left for him while Cathrine's question echoed in his head. Could he solve it?

He didn't own a wire or a display to experiment with and had no desire to slice open his hand, exposing the device within. But. He'd gotten ahold of a remote. He'd been working on changes to it for months. Could he complete the task that his family had proposed before the Hunters found him? If he could, what would come next?

He couldn't think about that part now. He needed to focus on the immediate problem.

So.

"Of course I can solve the puzzle," Elliot said. "What do you take me for?"

"A genius inventor," Cathrine said.

"A wonderful son," dad said.

"Someone who shouldn't be wasted in a war," mom said. "Now, go to your thinking space. Don't come down until you're finished."

"O-ok."

As Elliot fled from them, swiping his prickling eyes, he hoped he hadn't lied to his family. He knew he could disable his tracker. The question was whether he could do it in time.

Four days into his efforts and Elliot had nothing to show for it. With a wince, he waved the remote over his hand. And nothing happened. Again.

Growling, he tossed the remote at a wall, sighing when it burst apart. He'd never get it. He'd found the one puzzle that was too complicated for him, and time was running out for his family.

"No luck?" Cathrine asked.

Jumping, Elliot glanced at his sister, kneeling beside him with a tray in her hands. On it were slices of bread and two mugs, one filled with water and the other with mushy beans.

"You shouldn't feed me," Elliot said. "Without my rations, food must be running low downstairs."

Cathrine set the tray in front of him.

"If you don't eat, you won't be able to think straight, and you'll never solve the puzzle that way."

"I'm not sure I can," Elliot said.

Crawling around him, Cathrine gathered the remote's pieces and placed them by his knee. She pressed a slice of bread into his hand before planting a kiss on his cheek.

"You will, El," she said. "Get to it."

While she retreated, Elliot ate. He wasn't sure why his family had such confidence in him. Sure, he'd made a few interesting mechanisms in the past, combining bits and pieces of Lutovish tech to create something new, but they thought he could modify a *tracker*.

He understood simple tech, and a tracker was not simple, especially since it was a piece of tech combined with the human body. After four days and several months spent playing with his, Elliot had barely scratched the surface of its workings. He was almost ready to rip it out of his hand, risking its inbuilt kill command, if doing so would remove the threat he'd become to his family.

With his meal finished, he shuffled to the ladder, setting the food tray at its apex. He'd started turning back to his work when Cathrine's muffled voice floated into the crawlspace. Something didn't sound right about it, something Elliot couldn't identify, but when mom and dad's voices joined hers, he knew what was wrong. An unfamiliar note had blended into their typical timbre, one Elliot had heard from other people but never from them.

Panic.

Had Hunters finally come for him?

Hurrying to his corner, Elliot stuffed his pockets with anything he could use against them. If he could reach the room he shared with his brothers, he could sneak through its window, gaining a clear avenue of escape, and try to draw the Hunter pack away from his home. From there, he'd have to hope he could outrun pursuit and-

His sister screamed, sending his plans crashing to a halt. Without thought, Elliot dropped out of the crawlspace, glided down the hall, and crouched at the head of the stairs.

In the foyer, his family was gathered, most of them at least. Lucas was missing, but any worries Elliot might have entertained for his little brother were displaced by the man in his family's midst.

He was the strangest looking human Elliot had ever seen, stranger even than the Lutovish. Where they were typically pale, this man was *ashen* with barely any hue to his skin, and his hair was white. White like snow when it fell at year's end. White like an elder's hair but it wasn't brittle or frail. His looked thick, even clipped short as it was.

Elliot had heard tales of people like this in the Travel Center, one of the many secrets he'd gleaned when the Lutovish had spoken their tongue around poor, ignorant him. They were *iisen*, or *ii* when referencing one, and supposedly hailed from a nation called Ostiu, a place unmarked on Ibis' map. When the Lutovish had discussed these people, they'd always spoken a word—*liiaresim*—in tandem, and its mention had always come in a hushed, reverent tone, almost as if they feared it.

And someone bearing the visage of an *ii* was standing among Elliot's loved ones. Why him and not a Hunter pack?

"Elliot Lockhart," he said, so empty, so lost. "I must find him. Where is he?"

The *ii* had sounded like the people who sometimes stumbled out of *kalvna* dens, begging for the rations needed to get their next fix, and on a closer inspection, Elliot noted a sway in his stance, a shift that revealed the lump lying behind him.

With each glimpse of that lump, Elliot further recognized it until all he could see was Lucas, vacantly staring at him from the floor. What had made the little boy who he was had disappeared from his body, and seeing that, a scream built in Elliot's chest.

Before he could drag himself out of suddenly stuttering thoughts, the *ii* snatched Oran, dragging the kid against his chest.

"Tell me where he is!" he shouted.

He hovered a shaking hand in front of Oran's face while a whimper rose from the boy, and in response, Elliot flew down the stairs.

"Here!" he shouted. "I'm right here! Don't hurt him."

"El, no!"

His parents moved to stop him, but Elliot thrust a hand out to stop them, although that didn't seem to be what had quite suddenly fixed them in place. They were still struggling to reach him too fiercely for their halt to be voluntary.

"It's *you*," the *ii* breathed.

When he flitted his gaze Elliot's way, his trembling magnified so much that he almost lost his grip on Oran while recognition dawned in his eyes. Did this man know him?

"El-liot Lo-lockhart?" the *ii* asked with his teeth chattering.

"That's me," Elliot said. "Let Oran go."

"Oran," the *ii* repeated. "An innocent. Oran. Yes."

With his hand still raised toward his family, Elliot padded toward the threat, reaching for his brother.

"That's right," he said. "He has nothing to do with this. Let him go and take me."

"Find the hidden one. Bring him to us. Eliminate witnesses," the *ii* rattled off.

The twitches cascading over him fell still, and he turned his eyes on Elliot. Eyes that made him recoil. Eyes that he knew would plague his dreams.

A jagged, silver line surrounded irises as white as the man's hair with shiny offshoots tying that ring to his pupils. These alien eyes stared at Elliot, and in them, he saw so much anguish that it froze him in place.

"Eliminate witnesses," the *ii* breathed. "*Ooluv po.*"

He twisted the hand he'd been holding in front of Oran's face, stopping his whimpering, and once released, the little boy fell to the ground.

As did the rest of Elliot's family.

Elliot released the scream that had been building in his chest as he dropped to his knees beside Cathrine. He reached for his sister with shaking hands, but when he touched her, she didn't respond.

No.

She'd kissed his cheek not a quarter-hour before.

No.

She *couldn't* be lying here, so silent and still.

"Cat," Elliot whispered. "Cat!"

"Eliminate witnesses. Destroy all traces."

Snarling, Elliot tried to jump on the *ii*, to tear chunks out of that damn white hair, to gouge out those damn white eyes, but an invisible, heavy hand pressed down on him, keeping him in place. He bowed and bent beneath it until he was lying beside his sister, staring at his reflection in her glassy eyes.

"Destroy all traces."

From out of nowhere, fire blazed to life on the floor behind Cathrine, and seconds later, the acrid scent of cooking meat tickled through Elliot's nose. Heat, something rarely experienced in Flosa's persistent chill, became unbearable as his home was transformed into a blazing inferno.

It had come. The end he'd always feared. His family lay dead around him, and he'd be burned alive, held immobile by something he couldn't see or understand.

"Find the hidden one. Bring him to us."

The *ii* countered the force that had been pinning Elliot down with ease, flinging him over one slender shoulder. They burst through a blazing door and into the cool, night air, which turned Elliot's scream into a hacking cough, but the cry resumed as they moved away from the bonfire.

He fought to bite, to scratch, to do anything but hang from the *ii*, anything but scream his rage, but as his home disappeared around a corner, he gave up, letting tears blur his vision. Cold pinpricks blossomed on his skin from where the year's first snow had released flakes onto the city below, and Elliot's sobs loudly rang in the air, bouncing between the city's buildings.

"*Ooluv po*," the *ii* said. "*Jount, ooluv po*."

Those words skipped in Elliot's brain, like his body on the *ii*'s shoulder, until he lost consciousness.

Chapter 4: An Intervention

Dorian

The world was bread. Dorian breathed in ground oats, dough had turned to crust on his hands, and the oven's heat was roasting his bare chest. All he knew was baking: kneading until his knuckles bled, bending to the fire until his spine felt ready to snap, grinding oats until his muscles cried a deep ache.

If he wanted to feed an army and Hythe, this work was necessary. He wasn't the only one applied to the task, of course. Over the last few days, Burt and the other trappers had spent their days in the forest, bringing home meat for soldiers and neighbors, but Dorian was the village's only baker. Until now, Hythe had never needed more than one, but since the army had arrived, he'd have killed for some help.

"Kid," someone said behind him, "are you ok?"

Dorian didn't turn toward the voice, pounding and flattening dough while ignoring that red streaks he was blending into its tan texture.

"No," he said. "The bakery's system wasn't meant to handle so many dependents, but I don't know how to fix it. I've usually fixed it by now."

A noise indicated something scraping over the counter, and soon, someone wrapped their fingers around Dorian's wrists, forcing him to stop.

"When was the last time you slept?" Mr. Mahon asked.

"Umm..."

Dorian... didn't know the answer to that question.

"That's what I thought," Mr. Mahon said. "Time for a break. Let's get you out of this place."

"I need to-" Dorian started.

After pulling a batch of finished loaves out of the oven, Mr. Mahon tossed Dorian his discarded tunic.

"Break time."

Reluctantly, Dorian followed the older man out of his bakery, blinking as his eyes adjusted to bright sunlight. The last time he'd checked, it had been dark outside. How many hours had passed while he'd been lost in his fugue? How much time could he afford to spend out of it?

When he'd 'visited' the army camped outside of Hythe, he'd seen how many soldiers had filled its ranks, and their number would only grow as more companies arrived. If the Lutovish kept to their pattern of drafting five percent of a population per war, around twenty thousand hungry mouths would end up here, and while those soldiers would have brought some supplies with them, said supplies wouldn't last through a military campaign, even one as short as Ibis' typically were.

Which left the army relying on local villagers for food and other essentials.

If Dorian spent all of his time working, he might put a dent in the hunger those people would soon face. By himself, he could never feed an army, but every loaf he baked meant more soldiers would be better prepared for the battle ahead and therefore, better prepared to defend Hythe.

Meaning he had no time to follow Mr. Mahon.

After making sure the older man was distracted, Dorian turned back toward his bakery, but he'd only taken four steps away before Mr. Mahon pinched his ear, flipping him around once again.

"Stupid, stubborn..."

Mr. Mahon kept muttering insults as he dragged Dorian into Hythe's lockup. This place rarely had visitors, as the village usually didn't see much crime, but today, it was crowded. People Dorian had known since childhood were whispering amongst themselves here with those on the fringes pushed up into the bars of the lockup's single cell.

"I've got him," Mr. Mahon called. "Let's get started."

"Get started with what?" Dorian asked. "I need to-"

"Dorian Danvers, you sit down and shut up," Ms. Shea said. "We need to talk."

Leading him through the crowd, Mr. Mahon pointed at a table in the corner, set to buckle from the paper stacked on top of it, and Dorian leaned against it, stumbling when it nearly broke beneath his weight.

"What are we discussing?" he asked.

"You, kid," Mr. Mahon said.

"Me."

What on earth was there to discuss about him? He did his job, helped around the village as best he could, and had always been as pleasant as possible to his neighbors. What complaint could they possibly have about him?

"I don't have time for this," Dorian said. "I have work to do."

When he started rising from the table, Mr. Mahon pushed him against it again.

"That," he said. "We need to talk about that. Why are you pushing yourself so hard?"

Why was he-?

"If I don't, our chances against the Flosarian army drop," Dorian said. "Right now, the soldiers I'm working to feed are all that stand between Hythe and enemy occupation or, as is more likely, destruction. Excuse me if I pour every bit of effort into my work."

"You're the only one who can feed them, huh?" Burt asked. "What about me and my people? We trappers not good enough for you or them?"

Sighing, Dorian rubbed his eyes.

"That's not what I meant," he said. "You're helping plenty, but if we don't all contribute as much as possible-"

"So, why not let *all* of us contribute?" Ms. Shea asked. "I've baked my fair share of bread when no one's watching. I could help you."

She had?

Of course she had. Everyone circumvented the rationing system in their own way. When they needed to, Lisa and Dorian had repurposed stale bread instead of disposing of it like they'd been told to do. Why shouldn't he expect others to have done similar things?

Still.

"The Lutovish won't stand for you to step outside the bounds of your profession-" he started.

"Damn the Lutovish!" Ms. Shea snapped. "Right now, they have me sitting on my hands with nothing to do but dread the coming battle. I want to help! I want to help *you*. You look terrible, dear."

He looked... what? Where had that come from?

"Thank you, but I'm fine," Dorian said. "I-"

"No, you're not," Mr. Mahon said.

Why did these people insist on interrupting him? It was starting to get annoying.

"You look like you're about to drop dead," Mr. Mahon continued, "and do you know what the soldiers have been calling your provisions?"

When he paused, it took Dorian a moment to realize he was supposed to answer.

"What?" he asked.

"Bloodbread," Mr. Mahon said, "and don't think we haven't noticed your mangled knuckles."

At their pointed stares, Dorian hid his hands behind his back.

"I'm surprised Marshal Alex hasn't summoned you to discuss the quality of your work," someone he couldn't see said.

The marshal's name had Dorian stiffening, and when he flexed his hands, the splits in them widened.

"If that man has a problem with what I've done, he can come to me for once," he said.

"That's not the point, ya big oaf," Burt said. "You need help. Take what we're offering, and let us worry about our honored guests' displeasure."

Somehow, the trapper had made the Lutovish's preferred title sound like an insult, and Dorian chuckled, which took him off guard. During the rare moments when the Lutovish came up in conversation, he didn't let himself react, preferring to avoid the subject instead, but he was exhausted with Hythe's lockup swimming in and out of focus.

He should take his neighbors' offered help. How often had he lamented his lack of it since meeting with the marshal?

"Say I was willing to let the lot of you risk your lives like this," he said. "What would that look like?"

"Surprising as it might be, some of us can bake," Ms. Shea said. "Those who can would take shifts in your shop, several of us at once. The first shift would go to us while you go home and sleep."

Sleep. What a novel concept.

"Take our help, kid," Mr. Mahon said. "What good will you be to Lisa if you work yourself to death before the battle's joined?"

No good at all.

Reaching into a pocket, Dorian offered a withdrawn key to Ms. Shea, and upon taking it, she danced in place.

"Look at us! Conquered our obstinate Dorian in an argument!"

"You have me at a disadvantage right now," Dorian said. "If you'll excuse me, I mean to correct that."

As he made his way to the door, people patted his back, but for the most part, they clustered around Ms. Shea and her held aloft key.

He hoped giving it to her had been the right decision. Having access to the bakery, where daily rations were made and stored, could become a source of contention under the right circumstances, but if there was ever a good time to relinquish control of it, it was before a battle started outside of one's village.

"Dorian!"

Glancing over his shoulder, Dorian paused to let Mr. Mahon catch up. Once he had, the older man leaned on his knees, catching his breath.

"May I walk with you?" he asked.

Wow. He really wanted to make sure Dorian went home and rested, didn't he?

With a slight smile, Dorian said, "Of course."

They started the journey to his cottage in silence, and all the while, Dorian waited for Mr. Mahon to say whatever was on his mind. He obviously had something more to discuss.

"How close are you with Marshal Alex?" he eventually asked.

This question had been so unexpected that Dorian tripped on hearing it, catching himself on the fence that bordered the path.

"Why would you think we're close?" he hissed.

"Because you walked out of his encampment alive. He's known for killing the civilians who enter it, accidentally or otherwise. Something about removing the chance for incursions by the enemy's scouts," Mr. Mahon said, "but given your reaction, I'd guess you two are the opposite of close."

He had no idea.

"We have an *interesting* relationship," Dorian said.

Mr. Mahon stepped closer, boxing Dorian up against the fence.

"Could you use that relationship to get close to his hosted Luts?"

Dorian blinked. Maybe his tired brain was imagining things because no sane person asked questions like that, not when they were almost always followed by words that were liable to get both of the conversation's participants killed.

"Pardon?" he said.

"Don't play dumb, kid," Mr. Mahon said. "You know what I'm getting at."

Yes, he did but-

"Are you crazy?" Dorian hissed.

Darting around Mr. Mahon, he took off down the path, hoping to put some distance between himself and rebellious talk. Unfortunately, it kept up with him.

"Think about it," Mr. Mahon said. "Why will Flosari and Escad soon be fighting? Because Lut tourists decided they wanted to watch how we do war. Eliminate the cause of this battle, and you stop it before it begins."

"Stop. Just... stop," Dorian growled. "Why would you bring this to *me*? You know I won't do anything to endanger Lisa, and I won't kill anyone. Not even the Lutovish."

"We're not asking you to kill someone. That would get you executed," Mr. Mahon said. "All we want is-"

"Wait. We?"

Dorian stepped into the older man's path, laying a hand on his chest to stop him.

"Who's we?"

Shifting in place, Mr. Mahon rubbed the back of his neck.

"I shouldn't have said that," he said.

Jabbing his chest, Dorian said, "Who's. we?"

Mr. Mahon slumped.

"Escad's resistance," he said.

The assertion blew Dorian back a step.

"You're real?!" he squeaked.

"Us and the ones in Acrar and Crinas, yes," Mr. Mahon said. "Flosari? Not so much."

All those times the marshal had railed against the resistance and Dorian had discounted it as the ravings of an angry man... All those once loved stories of an uprising that had been crushed in Kester, a revolt raised because the Specter had invoked the name of Crinas' resistance...

"And you want what?" he asked. "For me to get close to the Lutovish and..."

"Give them this," Mr. Mahon said.

He offered Dorian a vial.

"It will make them... unwell. Nothing deadly, just general unpleasantness. With how unaccustomed they are to suffering, they'll run home, and Flosari's hosted Luts will have to wait to watch their war. It'll give us time."

Dorian stared at the vial's contents. What Mr. Mahon was saying made sense, and Dorian had no problem with inconveniencing hostile people with something like this, but it would still be a risk. The Lutovish didn't tolerate any form of rebellion, as he was sure Mr. Mahon knew.

"How long have you...?"

Dorian trailed off, captivated by the vial and the promise it held.

"My whole life," Mr. Mahon said. "Escad's resistance may be small and pathetic compared to the others, all thanks to that damn Marshal Alex, but we knew Hythe, along with a few other border towns, would become the stie for Lut activity eventually. They sent me here to monitor the village, and eventually, this is where I retired."

This confession invoked the smallest sense of betrayal, of a portion of the past rewritten, and that wasn't helping with how addled Dorian already was.

"So... all those times growing up when you-"

"I love this village. My association with the resistance doesn't lessen that love," Mr. Mahon interrupted. "It's why I'm asking you to take this risk. I don't want to see Hythe wiped out in a battle to entertain the Luts. Do you?"

He shook the vial, swirling its contents, and as Dorian took it, his hands trembled.

"I have more questions for you," he said.

"And you can ask them after you've gotten some rest," Mr. Mahon said. "Go home. Tell Lisa I said hello."

Clapping Dorian's shoulder, he turned on his heel, heading toward town square with a whistle on his lips.

Dorian couldn't stop his head from spinning. His world had been bread and exhaustion, and because of that, he'd let others put themselves in danger. He'd learned the resistance existed, and because of that, he'd agreed to poison two Lutovish.

Oh, he didn't feel so good...

Pocketing the vial, he wove down the path toward home, meeting Lisa with a covered basket on her arm outside their cottage. When she saw him, she halted with blood draining from her face.

"Heading out?" Dorian asked, nearly slurring the words.

Dropping the basket, Lisa raced to him, shrugging his arm over her shoulder.

"Let's get you inside," she said.

After laying Dorian on their mat, she kissed his forehead, smoothing hair out of his eyes.

"Where were you going?" he asked.

Oo, his words had definitely been slipping and sliding into one another with that question.

"To see you, silly," Lisa said. "The basket has your dinner in it, if you're hungry, but I'm guessing you'd rather sleep right now."

"You'd guess... right."

Soothed by her fingers running through his hair, Dorian let his eyes fall closed, and right when he was about to fall asleep, she stood up.

"Where...?"

"Off to visit my father, love. I figured I should do it while I still can," Lisa said, all sunshine and rainbows. "I shouldn't be long."

Dragging his eyes open, Dorian tried to get to his feet, only to flop right back onto the mat.

"I should go with you."

Lisa laughed, a tinkling patter of delight that roused a swell of tired contentment in him.

"You've been awake for almost three days, silly man. I don't know how you're still functioning this well," she said. "Go to sleep. I can handle this alone."

But she shouldn't have to. She'd abandoned a life of comfort and privilege to come here with him. Because of that, she was living in a backwater village where they struggled to survive, a village now threatened by imminent violence.

The vial in Dorian's pocket lay heavy on his hip. Could he use it? Could he risk his life if it would keep Lisa safe?

"I'd do anything for you," he said.

Maybe he imagined her lips brushing his.

"I don't want that."

Dorian's dreams were filled with soldiers chasing resistance members and Lutovish, curled around themselves in agony.

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.

Chapter 6: A Summons

Dorian

When Dorian had been a child, Mr. Mahon's house had always fascinated him. In a town of mostly mud-walled cottages, the other man's home had been the only building made of stone and wood. Distorted glass panes filled its windows, and metal brackets held the torches that lit its entrance. Before learning differently, Dorian had thought the place was a magical construct held together by something he couldn't begin to comprehend.

Now, he knew the nails that bound it were wealth, and he wondered how much of that wealth had been contributed by Escad's resistance.

Knocking on the door, Dorian folded his arms behind his back before gazing at a cloudy sky. Would they see their first snow today? He hoped not. Hythe didn't need any complications besides the army already sitting outside of its boundary.

The door creaked open, and a short woman with graying hair peered through its crack before flinging it wide open.

"Dorian!" she cried. "What brings you here this fine afternoon?"

"Ms. Mahon," Dorian said. "Is Mr. Mahon home? I'd like to speak with him."

"Please, you know you can call me Nora," Ms. Mahon said, "and yes, Silas is here. Come in from the cold."

"Thank you."

The house's interior was, as always, immaculate. Wood slats kept dirt packed beneath them, and flickering flames on candlesticks passed light into the structure's depths.

"I think he's expecting you," Ms. Mahon said. "He's been puttering about the kitchen all morning, tearing through our week's supply of bread. He only does that when he's nervous, poor dear. You'll find him by the fire or out back."

Snatching a shawl off of the stair's banister, she threw it around her shoulders.

"I'm off to town. Maybe I'll see you later?"

"Perhaps," Dorian said.

With her hand on the doorknob, Ms. Mahon paused.

"Be kind to him, please," she said before leaving.

As the door closed behind her, Dorian headed for the kitchen, a room where he'd spent hundreds of his childhood hours. Upon finding it empty, he crossed to its second door, leading outside.

After his brief span shielded from it, winter's cold bit into him like a rabid dog. Wrapping his arms around his middle, he thanked his lucky stars that he wasn't in Flosari. The winters that far south were supposed to be brutal, which meant their soldiers, marching to meet Escad in battle, must be miserable.

How terrible was it that this thought loosened a knot in his gut?

Dorian joined Mr. Mahon in the forest's eaves. Together, they faced the darkness within it, untouched by human hands, and refused to retreat, even as they refused to step into it.

"What do you want me to do with what you gave me?" Dorian asked.

Mr. Mahon chuckled.

"Right to it, huh? he asked. "No greeting? No 'how are you, Silas'?"

"Hello. How are you?" Dorian said. "What am I supposed to do with what you gave me?"

Turning to him, Mr. Mahon looked Dorian up and down.

"Hell, kid. You're tense," he said.

"You asked me to poison two of the Lutovish," Dorian said. "Of course I'm tense."

"I'll give you that," Mr. Mahon said. "I'm sorry I had to make the request."

Avan, why was he being so difficult about this?

"Just tell me what to do."

Sighing, Mr. Mahon returned to his inspection of the forest.

"The poison needs to be ingested. Pour it into their drinks or dash it over a meal. The method of delivery is up to you," he said, "and don't worry about masking it. They won't notice a change in scent or taste.

"Once it's in the body, it'll be an hour or so before they notice its effects. You'll want to be far away by then. Our honored guests' initial reaction will be to blame their sickness on the person who provided their food, but they should forget about you once the poison has progressed through their

bodies. It's hard to remember details like that when your guts feel like they're going to burst out of your stomach, especially when everyone who serves you 'looks the same'."

"And if I'm caught?" Dorian asked.

Mr. Mahon arched an eyebrow at him.

"Don't be?"

Dorian held Mr. Mahon's gaze until he looked away.

"If you're caught, you'll probably be too dead to care about next steps," he said, "but if you can, my suggestion would be to run like hell. Take Lisa and make for Acova with all speed. I've heard Acrar's resistance knows how to keep people hidden from Hunters, for a time at least."

Dorian *supposed* that could be useful.

"Acrar's resistance is centered in their capital?" he asked, a little surprised.

"Where else would they put their headquarters?" Mr. Mahon. "The country is basically a bunch of rocky hills."

"Fair," Dorian said. "How would we find their resistance when we got there?"

"Ask around. They'll find you," Mr. Mahon said. "You sure are banking on disaster, kid. Do you think you'll fail?"

"It's always a possibility, and I like having the system mapped out in my head," Dorian said. "That way if anything goes wrong, I know which rules to follow to achieve the best outcome."

"You and your systems," Mr. Mahon said in a grumble. "You know there's more to life than rules and the methods we're governed by, right?"

Was there a polite way to tell someone to shove their opinion up their ass? Dorian couldn't think of one, so he asked the only other question he had.

"Is there anything else I should know about?"

Mr. Mahon scrunched his face up as if in thought. Or maybe pain. Dorian couldn't tell which of those it was.

"I don't think so," he said. "Why? Are you in a hurry?"

"I have a meeting with the marshal within the next hour, after which I need to return to my bakery," Dorian said. "Thanks to everyone in town, I'm well rested now. Therefore, I should return to work. If you'll excuse me."

He stalked from beneath the trees' boughs, hunching against the cold, but before he could reach the path, footsteps pounded to a stop beside him.

"That's it?" Mr. Mahon asked. "You don't want an explanation from me? You aren't curious about what your favorite neighbor plans to do while you're risking your life?"

"I do, I am, and favorite's pushing it," Dorian grumbled before breaking into a grin, "although you're pretty up there. But it's just that. I'm planning to poison a pair of Lutovish. I don't have room for anything in my brain besides the task you've given me and everything it entails. Maybe after it's done, you can buy me a drink and share your stories, but for now, you should keep them to yourself."

Pursing his lips, Mr. Mahon examined Dorian for a moment before nodding.

"Ok, kid, I'll hold you to that," he said. "Be safe at your meeting."

"I'll try."

Dorian turned to leave, but again, Mr. Mahon held him back.

"I almost forgot to ask," he said. "Who's Marshal Alex to you?"

Stopping short, Dorian let out a long sigh, stretching his fingers wide before glancing over his shoulder.

"He's my father-in-law."

Dorian knew how serious this meeting would be when the marshal's aide led him to an enclosed tent and pulled its flap aside to reveal no one but the man himself within it. Stepping inside, he waited for the marshal to set his book down, noting the cot and stuffed pack nearby.

The marshal's private tent. Not good.

"Thank you for relaying my apologies to Lisa," the marshal said. "It was good to see her again."

"She said the same after coming home," Dorian said.

Flipping a page in his book, the marshal stayed silent, so Dorian waited. And waited.

"What do you want?" he eventually asked. "Surely you didn't have me walk all this way just to thank me."

"Always so impatient, Dorian, but you're young. I suppose it's to be expected," the marshal said. "Take a seat."

He gestured toward his cot, but Dorian stayed in place, although he kept himself from tensing.

"I'd rather stand," he said.

"Suit yourself."

The marshal set his book aside before tugging on his tunic's hem.

"Let's discuss the bread my soldiers have been taking from your shop in recent days," he said.

"What about it?"

Please, say this man wouldn't act like the bastard Dorian knew him to be.

"My soldiers have been complaining," the marshal said. "The first batches they retrieved were fine, but after a while, the rank and file started noticing a red tinge to what they were eating as well as a metallic taste to it. Some of my veterans recognized the flavor and told the new recruits what it was. Now, they're refusing to eat your bread. They're calling it-

"Bloodbread," Dorian said. "I heard."

Crossing one leg over the other, the marshal folded his hands in his lap.

"I have to ask," he said. "Did you add this extra ingredient on purpose? Is this some sort of twisted revenge on me?"

And there it was.

"You think I'd let my loathing for you hurt your drafted soldiers?" Dorian said, pointing beyond the tent's wall. "I'd never! Come on. I thought you knew me better than-

Surging to his feet, the marshal marched toward Dorian, grabbing his raised hand. While Dorian resisted the urge to punch him in the face, the marshal pulled his split knuckles into view.

"Is this because of my request?" he asked.

At the tone in the marshal's voice, Dorian snatched his hand to his chest.

"I'm a solitary baker trying to make bread for thousands," he said. "Figuring out the logistics of handling such a work load took me a while, but I did that, if with help. Don't worry about the hit to your soldiers' efficiency. They shouldn't see bloodbread anymore."

"I wasn't worried about my soldiers' efficiency!" the marshal snapped. "I was worried about-

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath before returning to his seat.

"I'm glad you worked it out," he said. "I'll need you in tiptop shape for Lisa."

"Like you care about my condition," Dorian said. "After Lisa and I got married, you sent *assassins* after me. We had to move away from Daka to shake them off of our trail. As if the constant

harassment from you while we were courting wasn't bad enough-

"And when you fled and I was left in the capital, alone, I realized how idiotic I'd been acting," the marshal interrupted. "My daughter is happy with you, and no matter that I might hate you for taking her away from her sacred duty and her family, I have to let her make her own choices.

"I've... changed, Dorian. Losing Lisa made me understand how extreme my decisions had become in those last few months when the two of you were in the capital. Over the last few weeks, I'd meant to visit you to try mending our relationship, but then, war was declared, and here we are. I never expect you to forgive me, but please, know that everything I've done and will continue to do is for my daughter's sake."

That was probably as close to an apology as Dorian would ever get from this man, and it *wasn't enough*.

"Nice speech," he said. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"As you should," the marshal said.

With his elbows on his knees, he rubbed his eyes.

"As you should," he repeated, "but I didn't call you here to fight. No. The reason for this summons is much worse."

With that, the air in the tent grew thin, and Dorian sipped at it while his thoughts started racing. What could be worse than a summons to visit an army's marshal...?

Oh, *avan*. Please, let him be wrong. *Please*.

"Why am I here?" he asked, barely containing his wince.

"Your bloodbread has caught our honored guests' attention," the marshal said. "That combined with your earlier outburst has led them to requesting your presence a week hence, around when we expect the Flosarian army to arrive. They want you to cook a meal for them."

When Dorian shifted to his back foot, the vial in his pocket brushed up against his leg, and he fought to keep his hands at his side instead of patting it. Serving food to the Lutovish could be the perfect way to deliver this poison. Except now, they'd remember him. Except-

"I don't know how to cook," Dorian said. "I can bake but cooking? That's a separate realm. Similar? Yes. But still separate."

"Which is what I told our honored guests," the marshal said. "They gave you a week to learn the skill."

"On top of working to feed an army."

No, no, no! He couldn't-

Even with help, there weren't enough hours in the day to accomplish everything that had been asked of him! This wouldn't work. He'd-

Stop.

"It's only another variable in the system."

Dorian could do this. He had the baking crisis in hand, and the food he'd prepare for the Lutovish didn't need to be mind-blowing, just good enough for consumption.

"If you keep your neighbors quiet about it, I can send a few soldiers to help you," the marshal said. "I don't know how much good they'll do you, but more hands couldn't hurt, right?"

Actually, more people in the bakery would do more harm than good but...

If he had the soldiers grind oats and prepare dough elsewhere while others kneaded and baked in the shop, it might cut down on production time.

"I'd appreciate that," he said.

"Good. You'll have five of them at your disposal come morning," the marshal said. "Try not to wear yourself out, and... good luck."

He offered Dorian a hand, and Dorian stared at it for a moment before realizing he was supposed to shake it. Was that it? They were finished now?

The marshal didn't protest when Dorian strode away from him, but once he'd lifted the tent flap to step outside, the other man cleared his throat.

"Regarding our honored guests' meal," he said. "Whatever you do, don't let Lisa teach you how to cook."

Despite himself, a smile spread across Dorian's face.

"*Avan* help me if I did," he said.

"Tell her I said thank you for the dinner she brought me last night, would you?" the marshal asked.

"Of course."

As he strode away from an encamped army, Dorian shook with contained laughter. *Avan* love his wife. In one way or another, she always found a way to brighten even the worst of days.

When his feet hit the well-worn path into town square, Dorian turned, heading in the opposite direction. He'd spend an hour or two with Lisa before returning to the bakery. After the last few days, they deserved some time alone.

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.

Chapter 8: A Betrayal

Dorian

This was it.

Two weeks ago, an announcement had declared war between Escad and Flosari, and a few days later, Dorian's life had been turned upside down again, less than three months after he and Lisa had fled from Daka. For the last week, he'd worked himself to the bone, striving to create a dish that might send the Lutovish home. This moment would decide his success.

Lisa took a bite from the stew-soaked bread she was holding. Closing her eyes, she tilted her head in contemplation, and Dorian held his breath.

"It's better than anything I could cook," she pronounced.

"That's what Ms. Shea said," Dorian said with a sigh. "Followed by, 'You're a terrible student, it'll have to do, and it was nice knowing you'. I'm paraphrasing a bit but..."

When he shrugged, Lisa threw her arms around him.

"You'll be fine," she said. "Surely the Lutovish won't expect you to make them a masterpiece."

"Yes," Dorian breathed. "I'll be fine."

Both of them heard the lie. Neither acknowledged it.

Besides, Dorian only needed his meal to be palatable, tasty enough to deliver the poison in his pocket. Maybe if he repeated that assertion enough, the butterflies in his stomach wouldn't erupt from his mouth in a cloud of bloody wings.

"Right," he said. "I'm off. Wish me luck."

Cupping his face, Lisa kissed him. Need, worry, and trust spoke to Dorian through her lips, and he clutched her to him, conforming their bodies to one another. When she pulled away, he tried to calm his racing heart down.

"Maybe I can stay a little while longer," he whispered.

Patting his cheek, Lisa pushed him away from her.

"Save it for when you come home."

"Is that a promise?" Dorian asked.

"You'll find out, won't you?" Lisa said. "Get out there. Dazzle our honored guests."

"I'll do my best."

Dorian paused at their home's threshold.

"I love you, Lis."

Standing by the table with her hands folded in front of her and a smile on her face, Lisa reminded him of why he'd risked everything to pursue her. Simply by existing, she made the world a brighter place.

"Love you too," she said.

And Dorian turned away.

As he strolled toward the path into town, he put Lisa out of his mind, patting his pocket with the vial inside. The marshal had assured him that he'd have access to everything he might need for this meal in his camp, but the liquid in that vial was the one ingredient Dorian would have to bring himself. The Lutovish wouldn't hand him the means to poison them, after all.

Upon stepping out of the trees surrounding his cottage, Dorian turned toward the army's encampment, ignoring the campfires dotting the distant grasslands. Flosari's army had made its first appearance earlier in the day, which had sent Burt barreling into the bakery to tell Dorian about its arrival. Dorian had ignored the news, although he'd used it to persuade his helpers to go home. They didn't have any control over when the hostilities would commence, so why keep them with him?

Once he'd heard the Flosarians had made camp for the night, Dorian had closed up shop. If they weren't attacking today, he'd spend what little time he could with his loved ones. Anything he could bake today wouldn't shift the balance.

Most of Hythe had had the same idea. Dorian only saw a familiar face at Mr. Mahon's house. When he passed it, the older man was standing outside, raising a hand, but besides that single exchange, the path was abandoned, leaving Dorian with few distractions to keep him from thinking about what he was planning to do.

Needless to say, when he reached the Escadese army's encampment, he welcomed its bustling state.

The drafted soldiers he passed seemed more jittery than normal. As he walked through them, a ghost among the dead, several fights broke out, and briskness infected the step of those moving around camp, which only made sense.

Everyone could see the enemy on the horizon. Violence simmered in the space between two armies, a kettle coming to a boil, but no one knew when that vicious cacophony would spill over. Better to be in the midst of it than waiting for it to come with a scream forming in one's mind.

Dorian saw this tension in the soldiers around him. He wondered if they knew how keenly Hythe's villagers felt it too.

The marshal met him outside a ring of tents, erected for the Lutovish.

"I'd begun to think you wouldn't show," he said.

"What else would I do? Run?" Dorian asked. "Where would Lisa and I go?"

Sighing, the marshal beckoned for Dorian to follow him.

"I know that, and I know you're not stupid enough to decline our honored guests' request," he said. "I'm just..."

There was no good reply for the marshal's expressed unease, so Dorian trudged behind him until they reached a pavilion, set upon a hillock's rise. Stopping outside of it, the marshal faced him.

"It's different this time," he said. "Normally, the night before a battle sees me calm. Confident. I'd sleep like a baby until morning. This time, there's-"

He waved toward Hythe.

"The stake's are raised. It's more than mine and my soldiers' lives on the line and I'm..."

The marshal let his eyes drift over Dorian's head.

"I don't know what to do."

Great. A crisis of faith in the man tasked with Hythe's protection. Why had he turned to someone he'd wronged for reassurance?

"Lisa believes in you."

The words clawed on their way out of Dorian's mouth, and he'd ground his teeth together so hard that his jaw ached.

"Your daughter thinks you'll keep danger at bay," he said. "Will you prove her right? Or will you let your fear for her cause you to fail?"

Shuddering, the marshal cleared his throat.

"You're right. And what am I thinking, unburdening on you like this? You have your own trial to face, and I shouldn't distract you from it," he said. "So. Our honored guests want to greet you before you begin."

A slow crawl took up residence under Dorian's skin.

"Delightful."

Outside the pavilion, one could find dirt, sweat, and people ignoring their impending demise. Inside was luxury, ease, and two Lutovish laughing at an unheard joke.

As soon as the children of Ibis entered it, the dull roar of many conversations was replaced with quiet music, something filled with bells and drums. A shimmer on the tent's walls provided illumination, and occasionally, outside noise crept inside when the wall's hem pulled away from the ground.

Plush fabric lay in haphazardly thrown rectangles across the floor, and a dainty sculpture hung from the pavilion's apex. Within the sculpture, glass globes were nestled with a steady light beaming from them. Beneath this impossible creation sat a table with a runner spread down its length and a strange centerpiece at its midpoint. Made of incorporeal mist and beams of colored light, Dorian refused to look at it, lest he induce a headache while trying to map the beam's twisting contours.

The Lutovish were waiting behind the table, watching him with gleaming eyes.

"This is him?" the man asked.

"Yes, honored guests," the marshal said with a short bow.

"Kavi?" the woman asked.

She was jittering her leg under the table, and laying a hand on her shoulder, the man nodded.

"Dorian Danvers, if I'm remembering correctly," he said.

"That's right," Dorian said. "I should apologize for my behavior when last we met, honored guests. I was... upset. Please, forgive me."

Dropping to his knees, he pressed his forehead into the fabric covering the ground. He hoped his deference would excuse any eccentricities he must show these people this evening.

Plus, in a way, he was begging forgiveness for what he was about to do.

"There's no need for that," the male Lutovish said. "Please. Rise."

Once Dorian was back on his feet, the man tapped his chest.

"I'm Brodrick," he said, before squeezing his hold on the woman's shoulder. "This is Katia. You may use our names this evening."

"An honor," Dorian said.

"Vak ku laku vath bloodbread," Katia said, bouncing in her seat.

"Tatash, savaka," Brodrick said before smiling at Dorian's confused expression. "My sister refused a translator when we arrived. Its insertion can be uncomfortable, you see? I'll serve as an interpreter in its stead. In this instance, Katia wants to know the purpose of your bloodbread. Why did you add that extra ingredient to your rations? Did you hope that by using it, you'd increase your people's strength and vitality, perhaps?"

...What? Who would do such a thing?

"I... had a difficult task to accomplish. Feeding an army alone seemed impossible," Dorian said. "To have any chance of success, I worked non-stop for almost three days. My hands suffered because of it."

Lifting said hands, he flipped them back and forth, displaying the ugly scabs forming across his knuckles.

"The addition of an extra ingredient was an honest mistake."

Frowning, Brodrick turned to his sister.

"Ku sant ku nun uv huvuk," he said.

With a sigh, Katia waved a hand in dismissal.

"Rakalt," she drawled. "La'k atuk. Klaav ku xa ruvk shataku."

Rolling his eyes at her, Brodrick said, "We're eager to taste your concoction, *bakava*. Please, begin."

Here? Without a cookfire or ingredients? Dorian almost snapped at the man for his impossible expectations, but Brodrick's irritated expression made him think twice about doing that.

"Forgive me, but my technique is a family secret," he said instead. "I'd hoped for privacy while I work, if it's not too great of an imposition."

If anything, his request returned a smile to Brodrick's drooping face.

"Oh! A mystery!" he said. "Yes. You may have your privacy. How long will the process take? My sister hungers, you see?"

"If that's the case, I'd advise her to eat something light while you wait," Dorian said. "Your meal won't be ready for an hour or so, but I promise. It will be worth it."

Brodrick's smile turned sharp as a knife.

"It had better be," he said. "Alex! Accompany Mr. Danvers, if you please. See that he has everything he needs."

The marshal and Dorian bristled at that command, if for different reasons.

"Honored guest, we're likely to see battle in the morning," the marshal said. "I'd like time to review my scouts' reports and modify plans as needed--"

"You're worried. I get it," Brodrick said. "If Mr. Danvers delivers on his proposed deadline, you should have plenty of time to assuage those fears, though, yes?"

The marshal must have had a lot of practice in dealing with the Lutovish. Where Dorian would have grimaced, he merely inclined his head, and where he would have hissed a response, the marshal's voice emerged from him smoothly.

"As you say."

"Good!" Brodrick said. "Now, bring us our food."

The two children of Ibis traveled far from the pavilion before the marshal transformed from the collected man he'd been playing inside of it. He veered off of the path, punching a tent's support hard enough to buckle it, and the soldier's within it yelped as it collapsed around them.

"Damn the Lutovish," he growled. "This is a waste of time."

Surprisingly, this display of the man Dorian had known in Daka comforted him to a degree. He didn't feel as off-kilter around the older man as he had from the moment they'd met once more.

"You could ignore their request," he said. "I don't need your help."

And he'd honestly rather not have it.

"No. If I don't do as I'm told, those two will learn about it eventually, and the punishment for my disobedience wouldn't be pleasant."

Shaking himself, the marshal set off once more.

"Let's just get this over with."

The area where Dorian would be cooking had been arranged as he'd asked. A fire was already blazing in its pit with a soldier keeping watch and a pot hanging over it. All the ingredients he'd need, save one, rested in bowls around the flames.

When he saw Dorian eyeing the soldier, the marshal said, "Parker here will be doing your chopping for you."

"Don't trust me with a blade?" Dorian asked.

"You're the only man here not under threat of death if you don't obey," the marshal said, "and Escad's resistance is everywhere. Forgive my paranoia. It's caused by a lifetime of trusting the wrong people."

Fantastic. Just bloody fantastic.

"Fine," Dorian said. "Let's get started, shall we?"

For the first part of the process, he played the director of the most boring production of all time. The marshal and Parker diced potatoes, onions, and other tubers at his discretion, preparing the meat once the vegetables were ready. While they finished with that, Dorian filled the pot with water, and once their ingredients had been offered to it, he poured a small pile of precious salt and spices in his palm before throwing it into the mix.

"Now, we wait for it to boil," he said with a sigh.

"What about bread?" the marshal asked. "They'll want the 'authentic experience', and bread is what most of us spend our rations on."

"I cheated," Dorian said. "Had a soldier bring a loaf of it from the bakery this morning. It should be fresh enough for them."

"I doubt our honored guests would know fresh if it bit them in the ass," the marshal said. "I've eaten their food before. It tasted... wrong somehow."

"Figures the Lutovish would ruin something as simple as food," Parker said under his breath.

Dorian contained a smirk at the soldier's insolence, but it made the marshal stiffen.

"Kid, I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," he said. "Go make sure no one's planning to disturb us while we finish up here."

"Yes, sir."

Groaning, Parker rose from the ground, brushing dirt from his clothes, before clomping to the area's far perimeter.

"He's right, you know," the marshal said once he'd gone. "Our honored guests are such a different animal from us that they *would* spoil something as simple as food. Given that, you did well while speaking with them."

Had that been a *compliment*?

"Thank you," Dorian said. "I thought my groveling would make up for any mistakes I might make."

"It was a good call," the marshal said. "Our honored guests love having us sprawled at their feet."

Boiling water's rumble snuck from beneath the pot's lid, and Dorian climbed to his knees to stir its contents. When he sat back down, the marshal was staring toward the fires in the Flosarian encampment, chewing his lip. He obviously didn't want to be here.

"Have you ever considered... *not* doing what they tell you?" Dorian cautiously asked.
"Hypothetically, of course."

The marshal whipped his head toward Dorian with an ugly expression creasing his face, which made Dorian wince.

"Hypothetically," he spat, "every child of Ibis has a tracker in their hands, one with a kill command set to initiate at the slightest provocation. Hypothetically, if you disobey them, it's not always you who suffers for your choices. Hypothetically, refusing a Lutovish's command is what once killed Lisa's mother. I would suggest you put such thoughts out of your mind, for your wife's sake."

Raising his hands, Dorian patted the air, ready to bolt if the other man turned violent, as he had so many times in the past.

"Alex," he breathed.

That name, so rarely on Dorian's tongue, startled the marshal's snarling beast back into hiding.

"Sorry," he said, rubbing his eyes. "I- I'm sorry."

Returning to hover over the fire, Dorian stirred his stew, ignoring the silence behind him for as long as he could, but that attempt didn't last for long.

"I never knew how your wife died," he said. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"It was a long time ago," the marshal said.

Glancing over his shoulder, Dorian encountered a sight he never thought he'd see. The marshal appeared to be his normal self, rigid and unyielding, but the eyes that refused to meet his were glistening.

"It still hurts," Dorian said. "You loved her. No matter how many years have passed since she died, it still hurts, and for that, I'm sorry."

And surprised to mean the words.

Eager to move past the uncomfortable moment, Dorian peered into the pot before grimacing.

"Food's ready."

At least, he thought it was.

"Could you grab me some bowls?"

When Dorian heard scuffling behind him, he retrieved the vial in his pocket, concealing it as best he could. Unstopping it, he hesitated for a moment.

He'd thought he'd accepted the risk of doing this, weighing it against the possibility of the Flosarians breaking through the Escadese lines, and found it the least dangerous option of the two, but the marshal's story had given him pause. If he were discovered, what would he do if the Lutovish left him alive, punishing a loved one instead? Could he live without Lisa?

Something awful ripped through him at the thought, but compared to the image of an enemy army rampaging through Hythe, that possibility frightened him less. So, he'd stay the course.

Before he could tip the vial into the pot, however, the marshal caught his wrist, and Dorian's heart stopped in his chest.

"What is this?" the marshal asked, so blank and cold.

Seeing the fire brimming in the other man's eyes, Dorian chuckled, numb to the bone. What had been the point of that question? The marshal already knew what 'this' was.

"If I said it was a secret ingredient, full of love, would you believe me?" Dorian asked.

Squeezing his eyes closed, the marshal wrenched his captive wrist to the side, splashing the vial's contents into the dirt, and Dorian bit the inside of his cheek to keep from yelping.

"How long have you been with the resistance?" the marshal asked.

"I'm not."

When the marshal twisted his wrist further, Dorian gasped.

"I'm *not*," he hissed. "They asked me to do them a favor, said making the Lutovish sick would delay the battle."

"Making them sick," the marshal echoed in a hollow voice.

Plucking the vial from Dorian's fingers, he sniffed it before grimacing.

"Hemlock extract," he said. "No matter how resilient they typically are, this would have killed our honored guests, and once they were dead, their comrades would have sent Hunters after you."

"But..."

Mr. Mahon had *lied*? That... couldn't be right. It couldn't!

"This is what the resistance does," the marshal sighed while unsheathing a dagger. "They have no regard for their fellow Escadese's lives. They will sacrifice anything and anyone if it means a Lutovish dies. You're lucky I caught you before you did something stupid."

Resting his blade under Dorian's chin, he nudged it.

"Now, get up."

Scrambling to his feet, Dorian held his hands in view.

"What will you do with me?" he asked.

He should probably be more concerned about the answer to that question than he was, but for some reason, he couldn't drag his focus away from Mr. Mahon. He couldn't believe that man had...

"I haven't decided," the marshal said. "On the one hand you make my daughter happy. On the other, you tried to do something that would have gotten her killed, something I could use to get rid of you if I so choose. My brother might welcome Lisa back into the family with you gone. Fortunately for you, I have bigger concerns than your fate to handle right now. You'll have to wait. Parker!"

The soldier came running, only to stumble on seeing the marshal holding Dorian at knifepoint.

"Take Mr. Danvers somewhere quiet and secure him, would you?" the marshal said. "I need to serve our honored guests their dinner, and once that annoyance is done, I must finish making plans for tomorrow. I'll see to Dorian once the Flosarians are dead."

"Yes, sir!"

Drawing his sword, Parker took Dorian's arm with his face set into grim lines.

"Gently now," the marshal said before Parker could do anything more drastic. "That's my son-in-law."

The rigidity enfolding the soldier loosened, and he inclined his head to his superior.

"Of course, Marshal Alex."

Tugging Dorian along, Parker led him once more into the contained chaos of the army's encampment, but Dorian was barely aware of it.

"He lied to me," he said, finally giving voice to what had been holding him captive. "I told him I didn't want to kill anyone, and he said it wouldn't be necessary. He lied!"

Parker said nothing, merely towing Dorian along faster, and he tried to understand why he believed the marshal, a man who'd once tried to kill him, over Mr. Mahon, who'd helped raise him. Perhaps it was because of the conviction he'd heard in the marshal's voice. Perhaps it was because of his shaken trust in Mr. Mahon. Perhaps it was because of the tiny voice inside of him that had screamed that something about this plan had felt off since it had been proposed.

He should have listened to it. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

But it didn't matter why Dorian believed the marshal. That man had caught him while he'd been agonizing over his decision, and now, he was stuck here with his fate uncertain while Lisa was waiting for him at home. She'd be alone tonight, worrying about him. She'd be alone tomorrow when-

Dorian stopped short, barely noticing when the flat of a blade was pressed against his side.

"Don't even think about it," Parker said.

His voice helped Dorian relax his tensed muscles, but it didn't stop the thought that was now shrieking through his head.

Lisa would be alone when the battle began.

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 wanted?

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.

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 amber 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.

Chapter 10: An End to My World

Dorian

The noises coming from outside the tent were the worst ones Dorian had heard in his life.

Everyone talked about the sights and smells of battle, the fear that sang through everyone fighting, but no one mentioned the screams of the dying, the clash of metal, the wet rip of flesh parting. One would think that with so many noises rising into the air, they would become just that—white noise—but when one was bound and gagged with nothing to do but listen, certain sounds stood out.

A man cried for his wife and mother, people he'd never see again. A shout was raised in triumphant defiance, one that was choked on in the next moment. A roar accompanied heavy footfalls while steel clanged together and curses rang.

Innards squelched with a pained grunt following. Something thudded to the ground.

Wait.

Opening his eyes, Dorian met a stranger's empty stare, squinting at the blood trickling out of his mouth...

A girlish shriek, his contribution to the dissonance outside, flew from him as he jerked backward.

Fuck! That was a-

"It's only a corpse, Dorian. I don't know whether to be pleased or horrified that the sight of one sickens you this badly."

The marshal strode into the tent. Hauling Dorian to his feet, he tore the gag free before hacking at his bonds.

"What's happening?" Dorian asked while rubbing his wrists. "Why are you here? Why is a dead man-?"

"A Flosarian squad just broke through the line. You're looking at one of them, but I'm not sure where the rest went," the marshal said. "They might have headed toward Hythe, so I need you to find Lisa and protect her because I can't. Our honored guests won't let me."

Finished with the rope around Dorian's ankles, the marshal straightened, frowning at him.

"This doesn't mean I've forgotten what you did, of course. We still need to... *discuss* it," he said, "but Lisa's more important."

"Lisa is always more important," Dorian said.

The last few minutes may have dazed him all to hell, but he was still aware enough to grasp that much.

With a nod, the marshal retreated from the tent, leaving Dorian to rub feeling into his hands and feet, before returning with a sword in his hand.

"Do you know how to use this?" he asked.

"Umm..."

"I'll take that as a no," the marshal said with a sigh. "It's simple. The sharp end goes into the other person's fleshy bits, and you use it to keep other sharp ends from killing you. Take it. I have to get back to the command tent and make sure the Flosarians don't massacre us."

The marshal extended the sword toward Dorian. When he hesitated, though, the other man clicked his tongue, thrusting the sword into his hands.

"You'll be fine," the marshal said.

How much of that had been a reassurance for Dorian, and how much had been for himself? The marshal took off before Dorian could ask that question.

With all the soldiers fighting in the fields, the Escadese encampment stood deserted, but activity still flurried around the Lutovish's tent, where the instigators of this violence watched the children of Ibis killing one another. Despite Dorian's *need* to find Lisa, a small part of him felt a tug to sneak into that place and eliminate the source of this problem, but most of him still quailed from the thought of ending someone's life, even someone like the Lutovish.

So, instead, he pounded down the path into town, and while he did that, he might or might not have observed the battle that was soaking the crop fields with blood. Caught in a panic-soaked fugue, he certainly didn't absorb it. Not yet at least. All he knew was home, home, home, and...

And Lisa.

Please be safe.

When he made the turn toward his cottage, Dorian was going so fast that he skidded in the dirt, but it was as if the fall had never occurred, so quickly did he spring back to his feet. As he approached his home, a copy of the noise found within the greater battle greeted him. Hearing it, he became near airborne with his feet only touching the ground because they must. A thatched roof, so badly in need of repair, came into view, and when it did, a screeching giggle, one that he'd been holding fast inside nearly flung off the lid containing it.

All the while, a streaming litany poured through Dorian's head.

Please please please please please please

No no no no no no

Oh please

Three men and a woman were standing in front of his cottage, although perhaps 'standing' wasn't the right word. One of the men and the woman weren't moving, frozen in place instead, but the other two...

One of them defended against a flashing blade, barely keeping ahead of each strike.

As for the other one, a battle rage had taken him. His face was fury made manifest with a roared word accompanying each swing of his blade

"-monster! They. are. us! We. don't. kill. our. own."

This display was fascinating, and Dorian let it hold his attention. He knew what soldiers fighting outside of his home must mean. He knew what he'd find at these people's feet, and he didn't want to see it

He made himself look anyway.

And almost collapsed when he found her.

"Lisa," he wheezed.

She was beautiful. Oh, so very beautiful. So beautiful that it crushed Dorian's heart. Even with her throat gashed wide open. Even with blood seeping from her.

The two motionless Flosarians shook themselves free from their shock, and while the man rushed to help his companion, the woman fixed her eyes on Dorian.

"The husband's shown his face!" she called. "And oo... he's gorgeous."

As a lazy smile crossed her face, she sauntered toward Dorian. He hardly noticed, too occupied by the wordless shriek tearing through his brain and the pressure shredding his heart.

Lisa was dead.

Something pierced through the haze, alerting him to the woman's jab at his chest. He couldn't say what that had been, nor could he explain what made him stumble out of her reach. He couldn't say what made him bat her swing aside, punch her in the face, and stick the sword he'd been loosely holding through her neck. He couldn't say what made him step over her fallen body to reach Lisa's side or why he didn't use the sword to end his life.

That last bit, after all, what what his torn-asunder heart demanded.

His knees hit the ground beside his wife at the same time as a man's body kicked dirt into the air. Another of those followed soon after.

Had it been soon? Dorian couldn't tell, not with time having lost its hold on him. He existed in a drift, a float dominated by his wife's face. One that had been rendered inert by the flight of her life.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Blinking, Dorian dragged himself out of his drift, peering at the man sitting opposite him. He'd pulled his knees to his chest, as if to ward something unwanted off. Black hair framed his face in jagged spikes with its strands loosened from the tail at his neck, and his eyes held a fire in them to match the blood smeared across his skin.

"I did what I could for her."

His teeth were stained red with a chip in one while his wiry frame looked wrong, wrapping around his legs as it was.

Which of the soldiers was he: an ally or an enemy? Must Dorian find his anger from where it had gone to quietly die?

"My squadmates... I couldn't stop them. I brought them to justice instead, although it doesn't feel like justice."

He spread his slender fingers in front of his face, staring at them for a moment.

So, he'd been the one in a battle rage. How did someone with such smooth hands, *small* hands, learn how to handle the sword like he had?

"I suppose I should have left their fates up to you. I'm sorry to have taken that from you. I'm sorry for it all."

"Why are you apologizing?"

Dorian's voice had sounded alien to him. Any other time, he might have flinched from its dull tone. Now, he simply moved on.

"This isn't your fault," he said. "You didn't declare war between our nations. You didn't decide to make Hythe a battleground. You didn't pitch us against each other. None of that was you. It was all the damn Lutovish."

The stranger stayed silent for a while, but Dorian was content to wait. What else was he supposed to do? Stride into the house and eat some of Lisa's awful cooking? Grab her about the waist and kiss her so she knew his heart's desire?

Never, never, never again.

When the stranger spoke up, his words emerged in a croak.

"The Lutovish killed my family before burning our house down around them. The bastards made me a murderer-"

With his voice strangled, he curled his fingers into a fist before meeting Dorian's eyes. A flow of shared pain passed between them, and after a moment, Dorian extended a hand.

"I'm Dorian Danvers," he said. "I'd say pleased to meet you but..."

He glanced at Lisa, which nearly had him falling into a drift again. The stranger's clasp of his hand kept him afloat.

"Elliot Lockhart," he said. "What now?"

Prequel: Edyth and Beatrice

Chapter 1: The Chandler

Edyth

Candle making had always been a soothing, if sweaty, process for Edyth. Something about a familiar routine, a job she was good at, brought her deep peace, which was nice.

Avan knew she needed it at times.

Plunging what would become a wick into molten beeswax, Edyth drew a liquid candle forth before placing it on her drying rack. After doing this several more times, she hung that rack to dry while a bell tinkled in the next room.

Brushing her hands off, she smoothed her hair down with a faint smile. Her newest guest had had perfect timing.

"Evening!" her customer said when she emerged from the back.

"Good evening, Henry," Edyth said. "How's life in the castle?"

Leaning on her shop's counter, Henry gave her a fond smile.

"It would be better if you were there," he said. "Are you sure you won't accept your uncle's offer? Save me the trip into town every week?"

"You and he both know why I can't."

"Well, it's our loss," Henry said with a sigh. "You're the best chandler in Crinas, let alone Kester. Your father would have been proud. WE could use you."

"And I'm grateful to be of service," Edyth said, completing their weekly ritual. "Same order as always, yes?"

"That's right," Henry said.

"Give me a minute."

Ducking through a curtain, Edyth lifted a crate sitting beside the doorway with a grunt. As she hauled it to the counter, she noted another customer behind Henry, someone she'd never seen before.

Fantastic! She sorely needed a potential new source of income.

"I'll be right with you!" she called.

When she set the crate down, a louder thump, entirely too familiar, came from above, and Edyth winced, silently pleading for that to be the last of those noises. Please, let there be no more until she could get her customers out of her shop.

Opening the crate, Henry gave its contained candles a cursory glance before humming.

"Perfect as always," he said. "Your advance."

Digging through his coat's pockets, he retrieved a small chest, which was followed by a second thump through the ceiling. While her next customer glanced up at it with a frown, Edyth hurriedly checked the chest's contents: several cuts of meat lying beside a bread loaf.

"And the rest will come as always?" she asked.

"Jonathan and his cart will crop by later this week," Henry said before pausing. "Are you ok, Edyth? Everything all right up there?"

He flicked his eyes to the ceiling.

"Everything's fine," Edyth said. "Thank you for your concern."

Henry looked doubtful, but shrugging, he tapped the counter.

"I'll see you next week, then?" he said.

"Until then."

While King Wilfred's seneschal left her shop, Edyth smiled at the woman who'd been waiting behind him, but the object of her attention continued craning her neck to stare at the ceiling. After a moment, Edyth cleared her throat.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Jumping, the woman stepped forward.

"Yes," she said. "I need candles for-"

A crash interrupted her while an angry shriek from above pierced the shop's innards. The woman's eyes went wide, and she took a step back.

"Wait! It's only-"

Whirling, the woman ran out of Edyth's shop, and she sighed. Another customer lost.