

# 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?"

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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.

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