

# 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.

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Revision #1

Created 18 February 2025 20:05:06 by FatalisticFable

Updated 18 February 2026 17:36:47 by FatalisticFable