

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.

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