

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.

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