

# Chapter 52: Polite Interrogation

## Raimie

Squaring my shoulders, I stiffly strode to the table, folding into the chair opposite Queen Kaedesa. While she retrieved items to lay on the table, I examined her. Keeping my attention on her was difficult with Shadowsteal lying *right there*, but I had to decide how I should play this.

Thanks to Ferin's etiquette lessons—who'd have guessed I'd be grateful for those?—I knew that I had options. Should I act like one of Kaedesa's subjects, giving her deference, or would treating her as an equal be better? According to my family, I had the same standing as her, although as an exiled royal, I should offer her greater respect than I might show to someone of the same rank.

Kaedesa, however, didn't know that I came from the Audish royal line, and I wasn't sure if I should play that card yet. So, what should I-?

"What has your face so scrunched with concentration?" Kaedesa said.

Still wrapped in my thoughts, I said, "I'm deciding how I should address you."

When Kaedesa burst into laughter, I went cold at the realization that I'd said that *out loud*.

"I- I beg your pardon, Your Majesty," I stammered. "I didn't mean- I wasn't trying-"

Waving at me, Kaedesa said, "It's fine, Raimie."

"Still," I said, "I must beg your forgiveness-"

"Raimie. Please," Kaedesa said, rolling her eyes. "For this conversation, treat me like you would a passing acquaintance, setting aside rank. It tends to get in the way of the truth."

Truth? Oh, no. What truth did she want from me?

"Over the last few days, I've considered the question your grandfather posed in Sev, and I've come to a decision about what I'll do with you," Kaedesa continued. "Before I can finalize that, though, I have a few follow-up questions, ones I'd rather ask you instead of your grandfather. I mean no offense with this, but he irritates the hell out of me."

Before I could stop it, laughter overtook me, and I slapped my hands to my mouth, trying to contain it. When I could, I cleared my throat.

“Eledis usually has that effect, yes,” I said.

Narrowing her eyes, Kaedesa picked up her quill, wetting it.

While writing, she murmured to herself, “Subject refers to grandfather by the man’s first name. Interesting.”

Raising her gaze to me, she chewed on her quill while I worked through what she’d meant. Subject?

“You have questions?” I asked after a moment.

“Mm.”

Lowering her quill, Kaedesa tapped it on the table, leaving behind ink dots.

“First, a personal question,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

And again, I had to decide how I’d behave. Did I stick to the polite road, or did I answer as I’d like? She’d enjoyed my previous deviations from protocol, encouraged them even, so...

Tilting my head with a smile, I said, “I don’t have much of a choice about it, do I?”

Kaedesa smirked.

“I suppose you don’t,” she said. “So. Your name: Raimie. It’s quite short for a human.”

When she stopped speaking, I frowned. Had there been a question in there?

“You’re not the first to comment on that,” I said. “What does the length of my name have to do with anything?”

“I want to know where you’ve come from. I’ve already set my spies on accomplishing the task, but why shouldn’t I explore the clue that’s been dropped in my lap as well?” Kaedesa said. “So. Considering you have a name of Eselan length, do you have traces of said race in your blood? Or was the choice simply a cruel peculiarity of your parents?”

“Wait, *what?*” I said, drawing back in my chair. “What do the Esela have to do with my name?”

Kaedesa stopped her quill’s tap on the table.

“Because it’s *Eselan*,” she said. “They use names with two or less syllables while humans have three or more. You didn’t know this?”

“No,” I said.

Why hadn't I known? Was this another fact that my family had kept from me, or was it common knowledge, something they'd thought I'd learn over the years?

"I don't have Eselan blood in me, more's the pity," I said. "Having magic would be..."

Trailing off, I shook my head. I already had magic, didn't I? When I glanced at Bright and Dim, hovering behind Kaedesa, they grinned.

"I guess I *could* be part Eselan," I mused. "My mother chose my name, and I don't know much about her history, although I'm fairly certain she was human."

Leaning back in my chair, I crossed my arms.

"Linking the syllables in someone's name to their race, though? Really?" I said. "Who thinks up these stupid social norms?"

With a cough, Bright pointed at Kaedesa, who was bent over her journal, and I winced.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wander off like that," I said. "Did that answer your question?"

"Not really, but it's ok. It still helped," Kaedesa said before straightening. "Thank you for the honest answer."

I inclined my head to her, and while she considered her next question, I let my gaze drift to the sword, sitting between us. When I touched it again, would degrees of light drape over the world again? If they did, would that be the only reaction I experienced, or would something more come to plague me?

"That's one reason I summoned you this morning."

Kaedesa brushed her fingers over Shadowsteal.

"I found it while inspecting your grandfather's belongings," she said. "I already thought you were strange. Why would someone so young and bright-eyed get involved in a rebellion? But then, I saw this, a blade that clearly belongs to a seasoned warrior, and my puzzlement deepened. How did it fall into your hands?"

Should I be insulted by that question? Eledis and I weren't 'seasoned warriors', but hearing that fact spoken aloud stung.

Still, Kaedesa's question trod on a delicate subject, so in the end, I kept my answer simple.

"I found it," I said.

Lifting an eyebrow, Kaedesa said, "Care to elaborate?"

No.

"I found the damn thing in a clearing, and within a day, my life was uprooted," I hissed through my teeth. "I was dragged to Fissid. Once there, I escaped the town while it burned down around me, was nearly murdered, and have been on the run ever since. All because of that go- Alouin damned sword."

Maybe if I displayed enough disdain for the sword, Kaedesa would consider it less important than it was.

"But you don't hate it, do you?" Bright asked. "Not anymore."

Narrowing my eyes at the splinter, I shook my head. I didn't *hate* it. Because it was needed, I'd even touch the blade, but I still didn't want to wield it. Someone else could hold that role.

"So, you admit your involvement in Fissid's destruction," Kaedesa said.

But her tone had changed. There was something dark in it, even if she was wearing a carefully blank mask. She stared at me as if waiting for a response, but I didn't know what to say, which had been a common issue today.

"Well, you can't tell her the whole truth, *obviously*. She smells like she's ready to murder you," Dim said. "Hedge."

I'd already known that, but a traitorous part of me couldn't follow Dim's suggestion. The corpse-faces of Fissid's residents were staring at me too intently for that. So, I scrubbed my eyes with a grimace.

"I had a hand in it," I said with a thick voice.

In the silence, the snap of Queen Kaedesa's quill was loud, and I lowered my hands to accept her wrath, only to be greeted by Dim, growling in my face.

"You're hedging in the wrong direction, idiot," it snapped.

"I know," I quietly said. "Trust me. I know."

Hissing, Dim got out of my face. The splinter had blocked my view of Kaedesa long enough for her to regain control. The only evidence of her reaction to what I'd said was a broken quill and an ink splotch on her journal's page. She was currently drawing another quill into view with a flush to her cheeks.

"For weeks, I've been working on learning what happened in Fissid, trying to understand how someone could..." she said before slamming a fist on the table. "Those were *my* people. *Good. people.*"

Slowly, I breathed out, fighting with myself. I couldn't have a breakdown in front of a queen.

"I know," I said.

Snarling, Kaedesa scribbled messy letters in her journal before snapping her fiery eyes up to me.

“What about Paft or Lancik or Drigel?” she snapped. “Did you massacre everyone in those towns too?”

“Wha...?”

Rapidly blinking, I struggled to understand what she’d said.

Lancik. Paft. Drigel. Those had been towns where my people had stopped to restock. They were gone?

“H-?”

Clearing my throat, I tried again.

“How?” I asked. “What happened to them? Please.”

Kaedesa, who’d looked ready to strangle me, paused with a confused expression on her face.

“They were burned to the ground with no survivors,” she said. “Don’t you... know that?”

No survivors. Burned to the ground. Like Fissid. But... I’d thought...

“I told you he was still hunting you,” Dim softly said. “‘His Volatility piece says hi’. Remember?”

I shot to my feet so quickly that my chair clattered to the ground behind me.

“THAT. FUCKING. *BASTARD!*” I roared. “Why would he kill so many people? He could have gotten what he needed without murdering them. I *helped* those people! Why- why would he-?”

Slowly, Dim rested a hand on my shoulder.

“His Volatility piece is... demanding,” it said. “If he weren’t under their influence, I doubt he would have gone this far.”

Gasping, I said, “That- that doesn’t-”

“Excuse what he did? Make sense?” Bright said. “No. Nothing to do with your enemy ever will.”

“Oh, gods.”

I pressed a hand to my mouth, barely holding back tears as realization hit me.

“He won’t stop,” I said into my palm. “He’ll spread a swath of death in my wake until he catches me.”

“Or until you’re strong enough to stop him,” Bright said.

Which would be never.

Dropping to my haunches, I tangled my fingers in my hair, tugging on it.

“All those people,” I said. “Alouin, *all those people*. It’s my fault they’re dead.”

The crunch of footfalls stopped in front of me, and someone pulled my hand free of its tangle, nudging my chin up. Crouching in front of me, Queen Kaedesa examined me with an empty expression, which I was grateful for. Even dazed as I was, if she’d shown me compassion or pity, it would have sent me over the edge.

“You didn’t set fire to my people’s villages,” she said.

It wasn’t a question, but I shook my head anyway.

“You have, if fact, killed none of Ada’ir’s citizens,” Kaedesa continued.

When I shook my head this time, my insides twinged. Even now, I could clearly see a criminal’s face, the man I’d killed during my second trial, but I shouldn’t mention that now.

Shifting to sit on the ground, Kaedesa said, “Tell me what happened.”

So, I did. I didn’t share everything, but I relayed most of what had happened in Fissid in a monotone voice. When I was finished, Kaedesa cocked her head, looking into the distance.

“Accepted as truth,” she said.

Waving at someone, Kaedesa righted my chair before helping me into it. While she circled the table, the remaining attendant pressed a glass of water into my hands, and I sipped it, waiting for the queen to finish scribbling in her notebook.

Already, I was ready for this interrogation to be over, but I knew we were nowhere close to the end. I wasn't looking forward to finding out what other answers Queen Kaedesa would demand from me.

## **TTS Chapter Fifty-Two**

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Revision #2

Created 22 August 2024 04:13:52 by FatalisticFable

Updated 27 March 2026 02:51:38 by FatalisticFable