

# Chapter 56: Sneaky, Sneaky

## Raimie

I'd been doing this for three months, but even still, when I opened a window for tonight's escapade, I looked out over Daira's landscape with longing. It was rather beautiful, and as I had every night since Kaedesa had dragged me here, I wondered why I was seeing it again.

Escape would be so simple for me. Gods, I could hear it calling, but Eledis said he had a plan, and I trusted my grandfather.

"Get a move on, would you? We don't have all night."

I glared at Dim, which only made them giggle. If I wanted to, I could stop their delight. Weeks ago, I'd learned that if I wanted to insult the Daevetch splinter, I should be pleasant to them rather than nasty, but pissing them off didn't seem like a good idea right now.

Instead, I drew on Daevetch, having its energy coat my hands like gloves, and Dim shuddered. Shaking my head at them, I climbed out the window so I could make my way down the castle wall.

The first part of my descent was easy with windowsills and buttresses serving as hand and footholds. Once those ran out, however, I had to hope that I could find a trail of holes—created over the weeks by Daevetch—to reach the ground. Otherwise, I'd have to make a new one.

Tonight, that wasn't necessary. Soon enough, I jumped from a last perch, rolling when I hit the ground, and after dusting myself off, I glanced up at my room's window with my hands on my hips.

I'd had to escape from my room unnoticed for about two months now, all part of my antics to keep the queen entertained. Despite every new and fantastic primeancy technique I'd learned over the last three months, this escape route would soon be discovered—how could it not be?—and when that happened, I wasn't sure how I'd slip past my guards unnoticed.

The first few times I'd done this, I'd walked past the man, fast asleep on duty, who'd been watching my room. When he'd been replaced, I'd fooled a few of the new guards into thinking I was a servant, tending to the prisoners, before they'd known better, and once or twice, I'd gotten out during a shift change, but in general, that window had been my best way of escaping. Who'd believe that someone could survive a climb as impossible as that?

"Raimie, your timeframe..."

*I know, Bright, I said.*

Quietly racing through the castle's grounds, I considered tonight's destination, ignoring how uneven that made my breathing. It wouldn't be like my trips to Kaedesa's library, rumored to be one of the most extensive book collection in the world.

I'd been doing a lot of research there, mostly on things that might help me and Eledis escape—like a castle floorplan—but I'd also looked into other subjects of interest, such as primeancy or what little I could find on Doldimar. I'd even done more reading on etiquette, to my dismay, and on a single night, I let myself investigate certain foretellings as well as... as...

That night, I'd spent far too long tearing through the library, seeking a single mention of the Balancer. My splinters hadn't been pleased by my poking around and I...

Besides that single night, I didn't let myself think about that. Not anymore.

In addition to the library, I'd thoroughly explored the castle, frequently visiting its barracks. I'd needed a space where I could practice the skills Rhylix had taught me, but I didn't go there often. It was too dangerous.

Not nearly as dangerous as what I had planned for tonight, though.

Kaedesa's interest in me was waning. Where we'd spent hours together at first, discussing my life or other nonsensical things, she hardly ever called on me lately. Not only that but from what I could tell, her court's disposition toward me wasn't favorable. Given how highly they influenced their queen, I was pretty sure of my coming fate, once she'd made up her mind about it.

So, I'd decided to try something drastic tonight.

Having reached the door I needed, I nodded for Dim to scout ahead. I didn't exactly trust the Daevetch splinter—they were far too mischievous for that—but unlike a *certain someone*, they'd do as I asked, at least in this area.

Bright, as usual, ignored my annoyed stare, but tonight, they also had their head cocked with a look of concentration wrinkling their face.

*What is it?* I asked.

Jumping, Bright gasped, flinging a hand to their chest.

"Sorry," they said, licking their lips. "I have a suggestion for tonight's activities, but I wasn't sure... I was considering what the whole would think of it. Our... someone important to us uses the technique but it's—"

*Sneaky?* I interrupted. *Or that's what I'd assume, considering what we're doing tonight.*

Nodding, Bright said, "And that's very... of the enemy."

Ah. The excuse that had interrupted my training so many times in the last few months. The one I was coming to despise.

With as much patience as I could muster, I said, *Why don't you share your suggestion anyway? Let me decide whether to take it. You should know I won't abuse my powers by now.*

Bright made a face.

"You have resisted Chaos' influence admirably well," they said.

*And yours*, I added with a grin.

With their expression souring, Bright said, "And mine."

They turned to the door, keeping silent for so long that I worried Dim might return before they got their words out.

"Tell me again how it feels when you draw from my whole's life source," they eventually said.

Frowning, I said, *There's a point in you that's distorted from its surroundings, and behind... or maybe through it? I don't know. On the other side of this point lies a well of unending peace and contentment, both with the world and with myself. I suck a bit of that to myself and-*

White light briefly washed over my raised finger, circling my hand before it disappeared.

*Now, what's this about the whole's life force?*

"Interesting," Bright said before wincing. "Technically, when you bring a bit of the whole to the physical plane, you're contributing to its slow depletion."

I just blinked at Bright.

*Are you telling me I'm killing off a god when I use Ele or Daevetch?* I asked.

"Technically, yes," Bright said, "but-"

*There's no 'but' to something like that, Bright!* I shouted. *That's awful! Gods, I should never touch primeancy again-*

Bright slapped me. The blow didn't actually land, so it didn't hurt, but it did surprise the hell out of me, enough to shut me up.

"Get ahold of yourself, and let me finish! I swear. Humans and their emotions," Bright hissed. *"Like I was saying, both wholes' life forces are basically infinite, or that's how it would appear to you. You could never come close to draining one. Your primeancy use is comparable to when a mosquito tries to drain your blood. So, stop freaking out."*

A mosquito? Really?

Crossing my arms, I said, *Fine. Why did you have me explain something like that?*

"I had a reason for it, but I have another point to make before sharing," Bright said. "The wholes infuse all of reality, from the ground beneath your feet to the air that you breathe, right? So, why can't you see them?"

Unwilling to make a guess, I shrugged, but Bright didn't seem to mind. In fact, they started pacing in front of me, randomly gesturing like Ferin had once done during her lectures.

"The physical plane covers us up. We influence it every way we can: through natural disasters, preying on living beings' emotions, or through our primeancers," they said. "We can't, however, exert full control here."

Tapping a finger on my elbow, I drawled, *Fascinating. What does that have to do with anything?*

Stopping, Bright wildly gestured around them.

*"Everything,"* they said. "It has *everything* to do with-"

Clicking their tongue, they sighed while rubbing their forehead.

"Look. As a primeancer, you bend the physical plane through me and Chaos, your splinters, thereby reaching through this layer of reality to touch the wholes," they said. "You can also bend the physical plane, or reality, around yourself, essentially hiding behind the veil like the wholes do."

*So... I can make myself invisible like you,* I said, *which is just... holy shit, that's awesome.*

I was having a hard time with containing my excited squeal.

*How do I do it?*

"Draw the point you feel in me around yourself like a bubble," Bright said. "You can manipulate your source as well as the wholes' life forces."

*That would have been mighty useful to know before now,* I said. *Why didn't you say something?*

At that question, Bright looked distinctly annoyed with themselves.

"I didn't think about it," they said. "The technique is only useful for hiding people or things, like how Shadowsteal was concealed for so long, and besides that, the only primeancer who's used it in recent days is... well. Your Rhylix."

Shadowsteal had been hidden beneath the physical plane when I'd found it? If that was true, then how had I seen it?

However that question was answered, Shadowsteal's state back then would explain why I'd fallen flat on my face when trying to pick it up for the first time. Why had my second attempt succeeded?

Shaking my head, I asked, *Is this manipulating my source thing something I can only do with you? Or can I use the point in Dim as well?*

Bright went still.

"You could use your source to the enemy's whole as we've discussed," they said, "but I would advise against it."

Raising an eyebrow, I drawled, *Why...?*

Shifting in place, Bright picked at something on their nails.

"Using Chaos in that way would make you go insane more quickly," they said.

Go insane? I shakily smiled.

*I thought you and Dim weren't recruiting for your wholes, I said. You seem to like that I won't pick a side.*

"No, we definitely want you undecided."

Spinning, I nearly had a heart attack on seeing how close Dim had come to my back. While I caught my breath, the splinter stuck their tongue out.

"And the predictable one is right," they said. "Primeancers on my side have unbelievable power at their disposal, but they all eventually go barking mad."

Jerking forward, Dim barked like a dog, snapping their teeth in my face, and stumbling backward, I fell to the ground, which had the splinter roaring with laughter.

"You- you're good to go inside," they gasped, wiping tears from their eyes. "No one in sight for quite a ways."

Carefully getting to my feet, I let out a long, slow breath.

"Ele it is," I said.

With their eyes flying open, Dim said, "Wait, *what?*"

Ignoring them, I reached for my source in Bright. It was resistant to me, disinclined to stretch like I wanted, but after a few unsuccessful tugs, I got it around my body, sealing it where it joined together.

"Oh," Dim said, slumping with relief. "Oh, I see. That's brilliant, kid, and kudos on not using me. That would have been an *interesting* experience for you."

Smirking, I said, *Wasn't my idea.*

"Really?" Dim said, drawing their eyebrows together. "Then, who-?"

Beside me, Bright threw two fingers in a wave, and Dim made a funny noise before gagging.

"Nope!" they said. "Nope, I take it all back."

Bright chuckled under their breath, although they frowned when they noticed my unabashed staring.

*Did it work?* I asked. *And if it did, why can I still see you? Wait. Should I be able to see you?*

"So far as I can tell it worked, but the only way we'll know for sure is to test it," Bright said. "As for seeing me... should we get into that now, considering your timetable?"

When I refused to move, they sighed.

"Fine. I'm your source, yes?" they said. "That means I'm surrounding you right now."

I tried to hide how much that idea made my skin crawl, although I wasn't sure if I succeeded with it.

With a sour look, Bright said, "As you know, what you're seeing isn't truly *me*. My true form is—"

*Something that I never want to see again,* I interrupted, remembering a war between light and darkness, viewed long ago.

Pausing, Bright flicked their eyes to Dim, whose countenance and bearing had gone grim.

"I hope you'll never have to," Dim said before turning away.

"The point, though, is that these human projections you're seeing? They're representations of us. Not real," Bright continued. "So, why would they always appear where we're located in the moment?"

After thinking for a moment, I said, *They're shown to make me comfortable. How much of what you do is for my comfort?*

Dim spun toward me with a snarl.

"What's it matter?" they growled. "You've wasted enough time talking. I swear to *me*, I'll make your life miserable if you waste the time that I spent scouting, so chop-fucking-chop."

They double clapped in my face, and with a single glare, I eased the door open a crack, ready to start the difficult part of tonight's trip.

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