

# Chapter 60: Escape

## Raimie

The military man, looming over Eledis, didn't seem surprised by my sudden entrance. In fact, his eyes pierced into me with something like fascination, and if I hadn't been so on edge after reading Queen Kaedesa's message, I might have found this curious. As it was, I wrenched Silverblade out of its scabbard before advancing on the hostile in our midst.

"Damn, Eledis," the stranger said. "You didn't tell me how much he's grown—"

He was cut off when I shoved him into the wall.

"*Stay away from my grandfather,*" I growled.

With a soft chuckle, the military man said, "He has the proper bearing too. That'll be helpful."

Again, his words choked off as I slammed him into stone.

"Eledis, a little help?" he squeaked.

Wait. That was the second time this man had used my grandfather's name.

With a sigh, Eledis got to his feet before laying a hand on my arm.

"He's an ally," he said.

Which meant... *shit*.

Releasing the military man, I retreated several steps before bowing with Silverblade pressed against my leg.

"Please, forgive me," I said. "With the way you were standing, I thought you were threatening Eledis."

"Um..."

On the edge of my vision, I watched the military man lean toward Eledis.

"You should probably teach him about proper decorum again," he said.

Again?

Eledis merely shrugged, which had the stranger turning back to me. Crossing his arms, he examined me with his eyebrows drawn together.

“Please, don’t bow to me, Your Majesty. I’m not worthy of it,” he said. “Plus, it’s your right to discipline a lowly subordinate as you see fit.”

Slowly, I straightened. Your Majesty?

From where they’d been hiding, Bright and Dim flanked me. Both of them watched the stranger with narrowed eyes.

*Does he mean...?* I said.

“Maybe,” Bright said with a frown.

“But he could just be showing respect for your family,” Dim added before leaning forward. “Either way, sucks to be you.”

With twitching lips, I resisted the need to roll my eyes.

*You’re an ass,* I said.

As a genuine smile spread across Dim’s face, they flourished an extravagant bow.

“Why, thank you,” they said.

While Bright groaned, I focused on the men shuffling in front of me.

“I don’t like being called ‘Your Majesty’,” I said before focusing on Eledis. “You plan on introducing us?”

While chewing on his lip, Eledis drawled, “Certainly.”

He clasped the stranger’s shoulder.

“This is my good friend...” he started before turning to the other man. “Are you sure you want to go by that name? Perfect opportunity to change it here.”

Flushing, the stranger said, “It’s what everyone knows me as. Get on with it.”

“Well, that’s not *suspicious as hell*,” Dim said while Eledis shook his head with a sigh.

*Mm. Can’t ask about it now, though,* I said.

Again, Eledis slapped the stranger’s shoulder, hard enough for him to wince this time.

"This is Marcuset," he said.

At that, I cocked my head. Was there something wrong with that name? It was a little unusual, to be sure, but-

"Raimie, the queen's note," Bright said.

Right. The threat to our lives.

"I don't suppose you're one of the people who's been helping with escape plans, are you?" I asked.

That would be godsdamn lucky, something I'd never been, but I had to ask.

With an odd look on his face, Marcuset said, "We've been meeting in that capacity since you arrived here, Your Majesty."

Again, with that honorific.

Huffing, I said, "What unusual luck. Hopefully, it'll carry through the night."

I sheathed Silverblade, hurrying to retrieve a belt. While I buckled it around my waist, Dim excitedly bounced on my bed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Eledis asked behind me.

As Dim's antics grew increasingly erratic and *distracting*, I glared at them while responding.

"When I was in the queen's room tonight, I stumbled across my sword, obviously, but I also found a note attached to it. In it, Kaedesa shared that her decision about us has been made and that we should run. Considering I don't know when she penned the note, I thought we should get out while we still..."

Having turned to Eledis and Marcuset, I was struck silent by their guarded expressions, fighting the urge to draw Silverblade again.

"Why were you in 'desa's room?" Marcuset asked.

Oh... they'd thought...?

Gods, what sort of horrible person did they think I was? And on the tiny chance that I had been planning to do what they were considering, did they really think Kaedesa couldn't defend herself?

"I was looking for Shadowsteal," I said. "The queen's gotten bored with me lately. I thought that if I made Shadowsteal disappear, it would catch her interest."

"Ah."

Marcuset and Eledis relaxed, which had me crossing my arms. I wanted to call them out for making assumptions, but any berating I might unleash could wait until we were free of Daira.

Frowning, Marcuset glanced around the room.

"If you were in 'desa's room, then that means..."

His searching eyes landed on me.

"How did you get out of here unseen?" he asked.

...Shit.

Gliding forward, Bright stared at Marcuset with an intensity that scared me.

But after the shortest of breaths, they said, "You can tell him. He's not radiating anything that's of the enemy."

Which was reassuring. Still, it was best if I was vague. I pointed at a window, still cracked open.

"I left through there," I said.

Striding to the window, Marcuset leaned through it before jerking back inside.

"How?" he asked. "Unless..."

He glanced at Eledis.

"Has he...?"

Shrugging with one shoulder, Eledis said, "Maybe. There have been signs, but I can't be sure until--"

What in the void were they doing?

"Can we have this conversation once we're out of the castle?" I asked. "I wasn't subtle when getting back. In fact, I'm surprised the castle guard hasn't come to check on us. Who knows when they'll tighten their security?"

"They won't. Not tonight, at least."

Leaning against the wall, Marcuset grinned at my bewilderment.

Narrowing my eyes, I asked, "Why wouldn't they?"

"Because I told them not to," Marcuset said with his grin widening.

...Where the hell had his deference gone? I was glad it had disappeared, but that was annoying right now.

Rapidly tapping my foot, I asked, "And why would they listen to you?"

As Marcuset opened his mouth to speak, Eledis pinched the other man's wrist.

"Stop, Em... Marcuset," he said. "Just tell him."

For some reason, this sobered Marcuset. He pushed off of the wall before bowing to me.

"I am the commander of Ada'ir's armed forces," he said before glancing up. "Until the queen says otherwise, they'll do as I order."

That certainly explained why he and Eledis weren't panicking.

"Get up," I absently snapped.

If Marcuset served Kaedesa, then why was he helping Eledis? Because of their friendship? And if that was the case, where did his loyalties lie?

Speaking of friends, how had that happened between these two? Not counting the difference in age, one had held a prominent position in Daira, and the other had lived in anonymity on the other side of the kingdom for as long as I'd been alive.

Scrunching my eyebrows together, I swept a finger between them.

"How...?"

With a faint smile, Eledis said, "We weren't always who we are now. Your father and I did have lives before you were born."

"As did I," Marcuset said before shaking his head, "but we should focus on the present, not the past. No matter that we're not as rushed as you believed, you were right about needing to leave. It's why I was here, talking to your grandfather."

"You're sure the rumors are true, then?" Eledis asked.

Lifting his eyes to the heavens, Marcuset said, "Yes, I'm sure, and everything's ready to go. Loyal soldiers are waiting-"

"Wait," I interrupted. "What rumors?"

Stiffening, both Marcuset and Eledis shifted in place, which only made me more wary.

"Before you arrived in Daira, several of the realm's villages had been wiped out, yes?" Marcuset asked.

Oh, no. No, no, no.

"Yes?" I said.

Refusing to meet my gaze, Marcuset said, "In the last few weeks, we've had more incidences like that, all of which are headed toward Daira."

Slowly breathing out, I closed my eyes, fighting to stay grounded. Detaching wasn't a good idea right now, and I shouldn't visit that state unless it was needed.

*Why didn't you say anything?* I asked.

"For two reasons," Dim said. "One, I didn't know. I haven't returned to the whole in a while."

Even unsure what that meant, I said, *Why not?*

"Because, ya dingus, being part of the whole is uncomfortable for me as I am, *and* it changes me," Dim said. "Besides, if I'd known what was happening, how would telling you about it have helped? Reason number two right there, by the way."

With another deep breath, I opened my eyes to find my Daevetch splinter.

*That's fair,* I said.

Then, I turned my attention to the mortals around me.

"So, after months of inactivity, Teron's finally coming for us," I said. "Why are we still here?"

After exchanging a glance with Marcuset, Eledis said, "Shadowsteal. We haven't found it."

For a moment, I could only blink at him.

*"And?"* I said.

"And the foretelling about Doldimar implies that you'll need Shadowsteal for your role," Eledis said. "Seems important that we don't lose it when it's just been found."

"What's the point of a foretelling if *we're dead before fulfilling it?*" I hissed. "If Shadowsteal's so necessary for our goal, then the sword will eventually return to me. This is given, of course, that the lot of you are right about who I am, but even if I'm not, we should get out of a city where we're not only condemned criminals but have a battle mage coming after us."

If Eledis argued with me, I swore that I was going to learn what happened when Daevetch was propelled through a human.

"I wouldn't," Bright said. "You won't like the end result."

Before I could snap at them, Marcuset turned to Eledis.

"He's right," he said.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Eledis said, rolling his eyes. "Fine. Let's get out of here."

“So glad we’re all on the same page,” I growled. “Eledis, get your things together. I’ll be in the hallway while you do that. Marcuset-”

At the commander’s raised eyebrows, I stopped short. Had I really been planning on telling that man what to do? The hell was I doing, taking charge like that?

“Yes?” Marcuset drawled.

Flushing, I said, “Never mind. It’s not important.”

I hurried out of the room, wincing when I saw a guard, sprawled on the floor outside. In the drama that had come with Marcuset’s introduction, I’d forgotten about this poor man.

Crouching, I checked his pulse before gently turning his body so I could see the back of his head. Finding no evidence of bleeding there, I’d started propping him into a more comfortable position when the door opened.

“Shit!”

The next thing I knew, I was hitting the ground, hard, while Marcuset had taken my place. With his fingers on the guard’s neck, he had the most concerned look on his face, one that might have made me feel guilty if I hadn’t just been knocked out of the way.

Climbing to my feet, I said, “He’s alive. I don’t kill people, commander, and my options when it came to this man were knock him out or sneak past. Considering that I thought my grandfather and I were soon to be executed...”

I gestured at the guard while brushing myself off.

“Is he an ally too?”

Slumping, Marcuset rubbed his face.

“No,” he said. “He’s one of mine, but he doesn’t know where my loyalties lie.”

After taking a steadying breath, he glanced up at me.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I shouldn’t have been so rough with you.”

“It’s fine. You were worried about your subordinate,” I said, flapping a hand at him, “and would you please stop saying that honorific? I’m not worthy of it, and even if I were, I’m only eighteen, at least two decades your junior. Don’t give me more respect than I deserve.”

A... a fond smile flashed across Marcuset’s face—the hell? We’d known each other for less than an hour—and he opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, Eledis strode into the hallway, looking through his pack one more time.

“Right. Not many people will be awake right now, so getting out of the castle should be...”

On observing the scene at his feet, he fell silent, flicking his eyes between us.

“He’s alive,” Marcuset said.

“Oh. Well, that’s all right, then,” Eledis said before gesturing down the hall. “Shall we?”

Wow, that had been callous, but I didn’t comment on it, watching Marcuset straighten instead.

“Which way?” I asked.

As we hurried through the castle, Marcuset and Eledis took the lead, having planned our escape route long ago. Even still, after a few turns, I had a good idea about where we were headed, but I didn’t join the older men. Not only was I quite comfortable with letting them stay in control, but they were having an *interesting* conversation as well.

“The guard back there reminded me,” Marcuset said. “Should I be worried? Is *he* back?”

...He? He, as in me, or he, as in... I wasn’t sure who else the guard could have reminded the commander of.

“No. We’re fine,” Eledis said. “I haven’t seen any signs of him, unlike with the other thing.”

“Are you sure?” Marcuset asked. “I haven’t mentioned it because I thought they’d deserted, but while you were in Sev, *the day ‘desa picked you up*, two of her royal guard went missing. It could have been *him*.”

They were silent for a while, giving me time to work through what they’d said, but in the end, I couldn’t take advantage of it. Dim chose that moment to increase their pace, only slowing when they were between me and the older men.

Cocking their head, they frowned as if trying to remember something, before getting in my face. With the splinter less than a pace away from me, I stopped short.

*What on-?* I started.

Dim jerked back as if slapped.

“Fuck!” they shouted before seeking out Bright. “We have a huge problem.”

Sucking in a breath, Bright said, “Is it enough to risk-?”

“Yes,” Dim hissed. “Very fucking much, yes.”

Bright’s face hardened while I looked on with my mouth gaping.

*What-?* I tried again.

The splinters popped out of existence, and I rocked away from where they'd been standing. What the hell was going on?

From ahead, Eledis and Marcuset's footfalls echoed down the hall, and I hurried to catch up with them. Whatever had distressed my splinters had started with those two, after all.

"-could have been, yes," Eledis was saying once I was back within hearing range, "but I seriously doubt it. Come on, Marcuset. If he were back, would we still be alive?"

Sagging a bit, Marcuset said, "I suppose that's true."

After that, they had nothing else to say, and the three of us soon stepped onto a cobblestone road, one that carved through the grass until it passed through a far distant gate.

My splinters had yet to reappear, no matter that I'd mentally called for them a few times. I wasn't sure if that would summon them, even in typical circumstances, but I had to try something. Now that it had been taken from me, I realized how much I didn't want to give up my magic.

So, I climbed into the waiting carriage with no small amount of trepidation. Collapsing in the seat opposite the others, I eyed them while Marcuset drew the curtains over the carriage's windows.

As we trundled forward, I said, "Who's 'he'?"

Jumping, Eledis snapped his gaze to me while Marcuset went still.

"What do you mean?" the commander asked.

Rolling my eyes, I fell back into my seat, crossing my arms.

"If you start talking about something I don't understand while *in front of me*, you should expect me to ask for clarification," I said, "and if it's something you're trying to hide, you both need to review how to keep a secret."

At that, Eledis relaxed.

"Oh, that. I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to keep you out of it. I just didn't want to worry you," he said. "Over the last week, Marcuset and I have noticed signs that an old enemy of ours might be returning. Long ago, he staged corpses in a similar position to how you laid our room guard, and seeing that on top of everything else had us on edge."

Damn. I might believe that story if earlier, my splinters hadn't reacted so animatedly to Eledis and Marcuset's discussion.

"...Uh huh," I said. "So, this enemy. You don't think he's coming back?"

Marcuset laughed, although when put into the context of everything else, it seemed a bit nervous.

“I certainly hope not!” he said.

With a cautioning look at him, Eledis said, “I’d be surprised if he did. The last time we saw him, we thoroughly banished him from our lives.”

“Maybe you did,” Marcuset said. “If you’ll remember, I wasn’t there because I thought it was a bad idea.”

Eledis backhanded his chest before leaning forward.

Resting his elbows on his knees, he said, “You don’t need to worry about it.”

Should I call my grandfather out on his bullshit? If I did, I couldn’t admit why I didn’t believe his story.

In the end, the choice was taken from me. Dim and Bright appeared from thin air between me and the older men. Dropping to the carriage’s floor, they scratched and bit at one another for a five count before freezing in place. Dim had Bright pinned while they had hold of the Daevetch splinter’s wrists. Caught in this position, they glanced at me before scrambling apart.

“Ok,” I distractedly told Eledis, focusing on my splinters instead.

What had drawn them away from me, and why were they back now?

## **TTS Chapter Sixty**

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Revision #2

Created 24 August 2024 18:17:24 by FatalisticFable

Updated 25 May 2026 17:57:20 by FatalisticFable