

Chapter 7: Fissid

Raimie

Water cascaded over me, and sputtering, I tried to escape from the stream. This proved quite impossible, considering my hands had been bound behind my back. Instead, all I did was scrape myself against something with a rough texture.

What had happened? The last thing I remembered was fear. Fear of... something. A stranger? My father had skidded around the cottage's corner with a bow in hand, and... that was it.

Squinting, I shook my head, hoping to clear my clouded memory.

Only clouded memory. No headache. Why didn't I have a concussion right now?

Not important. First, where was I? The sun could never shine this brightly on a homestead shaded by a forest's canopy. I peered through my half-lowered lids while my eyes adjusted, and what I saw petrified me.

I knew this town square, bordered by a tavern and a stable. I knew the road I was facing, leading toward the woods that hid my home. I knew the people who were frozen around me—something wrong there—and that meant I knew the town's name.

Fissid.

It also meant that I knew what I was resting against.

Even with my mind begging me not to do it, I craned my neck until I could see a small roof covering a well. It had been here. Here, my mother-

Water closes over my head before I can think to breathe. My arm is dangling from its slap against the stone, and when I use it to swim, I nearly faint. Blinking at stars, I kick, managing to surface.

Someone stares at me from the hole overhead, and I scream before water sucks me under again. Thrashing my legs, I struggle to keep my head aloft.

"Mama!" I shout. "I can't-!"

Water claims me once more. When I fight free of it, I cough and sputter, sobbing.

"Mama, help!"

The tail end of a rope splashes into the water beside me, and my mother climbs over the edge overhead. She hurries to come down, but at the pace she's taking, she'll never reach me before I sink to the well's floor.

I grab the rope with my good arm, sending a shiver speeding up it. It jostles my mother off of the wall, jerking the rope out of her hands. Shrieking, she falls. Her head smacks into the wall before she flops on top of me.

A cry drew me out of my memories, and addled, I sought the noise's source. I found it in Arabella, the daughter of Fissid's baker. Also, the first girl I'd ever fancied.

She was standing perfectly still in front of a man cloaked in cloth and shadow, and he was holding a sword to her throat. I met the girl's eyes, saw the tears trembling in them, and abruptly realized what I'd missed before.

Twisting in place, I scanned the square, and indeed, everyone who called Fissid home had been crowded into it, lying or kneeling or crouching in the dirt. No one moved, even with twitching muscles betraying their desire to flee, but nothing was restraining them. No chains or ropes had been wrapped around their limbs. They just... didn't move.

"It's my battle magic, so rare in this age. I wouldn't be surprised if I was the last to claim it."

All of me had become stone: my head swinging toward the stranger, my wrists burdened with shackles, my shoulders bowing as I realized how much danger I was in.

So, it was with some surprise that I heard my voice emerge smooth and hard, like polished stone.

"What do you want?"

The stranger—monster really—continued as if I hadn't spoken.

"These good people feel it, the same as what I directed at you earlier. They are weak, never to overcome their fear. For a time, I've withdrawn it from you, not only because you appear to be as weak as them but because I require answers. These innocents will serve as hostages. I will kill one for every time you defy me. Do we understand one another?"

I had no doubt that he'd fulfill his threat. There was nothing empty about it, so I slowly nodded my head.

"Good," the monster said. "You, the old man closest to him. Release his shackles."

He tossed a key so that it thumped onto the cracked earth, and Vincelten, Fissid's blacksmith, scrambled to retrieve it. He wouldn't look at me as he maneuvered the key in its lock.

The shackles dropped to the dirt, but I didn't move, save for to curl my fingers around their chain. I didn't know what I'd do with this makeshift weapon, but with the weight of my hunting knife gone from my side, I was grateful to have any possible means of defense.

"What did you do to my family?" I asked.

As he hummed, the monster's sword twitched against Arabella's neck, and I shrunk against the wall.

"I'll be asking the questions, thank you," he said. "First, your name. What is it?"

Why did he care?

"I'm called Raimie."

With a snort, the monster shook his head.

"You shouldn't lie to me," he said, "or if you must, at least make it believable. Don't give me an Eselan name when you're clearly human."

Eselan? As in the race long vanished from the world? Why would he bring them up?

"Let me remind you that your actions have consequences, child," the monster said.

His sword flashed with an arc of red flying from its tip, and Arabella, released from the monster's clutches, folded to the ground, feebly pawing at the gash in her neck. I couldn't take my eyes off of her as she shuddered and fell still.

This couldn't be happening. Who killed someone over a perceived lie? That just... didn't happen, not in this world. Not in Ada'ir.

But there lay proof that perhaps my perception of the world was wrong, and I should be burning with anger or babbling with fear. I shouldn't have cold frosting my insides and numbing my mind.

Lifting my gaze, I found the monster already holding another person captive.

"Why would you do that? I told you the truth. Why would you punish me for that?" I asked. "Do you want me to lie? I'll do or be whatever you want if it will keep these people safe, but you have to tell me what that is."

The monster cocked his hood while the man he was holding visibly shook.

"You're quite strange," he said, "but I suppose that doesn't matter, much like your name won't. I don't know why I asked about it. Tell me about Shadowsteal instead."

Of course this strange and hostile exchange would have something to do with *that*.

"What do you want to know?" I asked. "I can't share much about it. I only found it yesterday."

The monster nodded.

"I figured as much. Its ringing started this morning, and anyone with a cautious bone in their body would take time to decide whether to accept the burden of such a mysterious weapon," he said. "I want to know what happened when you touched it."

But I didn't know how to describe that. I had yet to wrap my mind around everything that had happened this... morning...

Why was it only midday? Earlier, I'd noticed the sun beating down on me, but the implications of that hadn't hit until now.

The trip from my home to Fissid took several hours. It should be evening, not an hour or so since the monster had stolen me from my family. Had I lain unconscious for a full day?

A wet gurgle snapped my attention to the monster as he switched victims once more.

"I'm not a patient man, child," he said. "Quickly answer my questions, or we'll create a corpse pile much more quickly than I'd like."

For a moment, a flash of head seared through my numbness, and I fought to push words into the world, words that might have saved a man.

"I touched Shadowsteal, and... I don't know what to tell you. What happened involved a lot of light, but that's about all I can explain. I couldn't understand the rest."

Hissing, the monster retreated, almost unintentionally murdering the woman in his arms.

"It's come," he said. "Shadowsteal has emerged into the world once more, and you are *him*, n truth. What do I do?"

Was- was that all he'd wanted from me? Two questions answered? Why couldn't he have done that in the forest? Why had he brought me to Fissid?

"Gods, I made a mistake, not seizing the damn sword when I had the chance, no matter how much doing so would have hurt," the monster said. "Being near it was bad enough but touching it-"

Sickened coughing interrupted his spiel.

Ah. Yes, that might explain his haste to leave my home.

"Still, it must be done, my mistake rectified. My master will tolerate no less," the monster said, as if to himself. "That should be easy enough. If I lure the upstart family here, they'll bring Shadowsteal with them."

Stiffening, the monster turned to me.

"But what to do with you?"

I said not a word. Pleading would do me no good. Instead, I clenched my fingers around the chain with my body winding like a spring.

Which only made the monster laugh.

"Oh, you *are* tenacious, aren't you?" he asked. "Very well. I'll give you a chance to escape. If you can, my master should find you plenty entertaining."

Releasing his captive, he shoved her away before raising a hand.

"But for now, submit."

He flicked his fingers, and I fell to a throb in my head, one that turned my vision white, and terror strong enough to trip my thoughts over themselves. For a time, these were all I knew, but gradually, they retreated from me, although each slow step away was a taunt about how easily they could conquer me once more.

When my head was filled with only a dull ache, I blinked at a once more changed scene. I recognized Ytrella's waystation from the many times my family and I had spent the night here. The illumination coming through its windows seemed wrong, though, changed from sunlight, and when I tried to stand, I nearly tumbled myself and the chair attached to me sideways.

Glancing down, I tugged at the rope holding my wrists and ankles to wood. Damn, that was tight! How was I supposed to escape this? Could I?

After several minutes of squirming, I fell still, gasping with sweat soaking into my clothes. Why was it so hot in here?

Awkwardly, I dried my face on my shoulder, and something outside the waystation's windows caught my eye. I scooted closer, frowning when I saw a black sky overhead. If night had fallen, what was lighting this room? There weren't any candles or lanterns lit in here.

Also, no people. Duh. Why hadn't I tried the easiest solution to my problem?

"If anyone's out there, I need help," I shouted. "I know you probably hate me now but..."

But what? How could I excuse what my mere presence had done to interrupt these people's lives? For all I knew, they'd been the ones who'd tied me to this chair.

Shaking my head, I inched toward the window. Maybe if I got a better view of what lay outside, I could... decide...

Well. That clarified the heat and the strange lighting. It explained the smell and the faint roar filling the air too, now that I thought about it.

Fissid was in flames, great tongues of fire licking at the air above its buildings. The conflagration hadn't reached Ytrella's waystation yet. In fact, all of town square seemed peaceful, but it wouldn't be long before the blaze spread to engulf it.

Thrumming my boot tip beneath the rope, I twisted to examine it, and on seeing knots that made my eyes cross, I didn't think I'd have much luck with untying myself, especially not when the tension from it already had my fingers tingling. No way could I squirm free of this without getting hurt.

Was that what the monster had meant when he'd said he'd give me a chance to escape? Was I expected to hurt myself?

I almost missed the weakness in the rope. Along the inside of one portion, a slash had indented the fiber around it, as if intentionally nicked. Considering how shallow it was, I almost ignored the given opportunity, but I didn't see how else I was supposed to escape. Gritting my teeth, I rubbed the slice against a rough corner, all while watching the inferno grow outside.

By the time the rope snapped, the fire had begun its feast on the far side of town square. With no time to shake out my hand, I bent for an ankle and was stopped just short of reaching it. Making a face, I tried for my offhand wrist instead.

Ever so slowly, I worked the rope's end through one knot, but by the time that was done, fire had claimed dominance across the square. I'd never free myself in time by doing it this way, and a quick scan of the room revealed no sharp edges within my reach. I'd have to make my own.

Or break what I was bound to.

"Shit."

This was a terrible idea, but when one's choices were definite immolation while staying upright or a likely chance while lying on one's side...

Hopefully, this chair wasn't well crafted. Tipping it, I braced, hoping the impact wouldn't break my ankle along with the chair.

The sound of splintering wood masked my hiss. Ignoring the pain shooting up my leg, I tore the chair's backrest off of its seat. Friction burns and splinters were the price for freeing my other hand, and while cloth shielded my ankles from getting the same, the one that I'd landed on throbbed. When I prodded it, nothing screamed at me, so I cautiously decided it must be sprained instead of broken.

That made it no less painful to walk on, although my personal hell was nothing compared to what lay outside.

During my frantic escape from the chair, the fire had surrounded me. What I'd seen from the window—the peril that had sped me to such reckless lengths—had met another inferno, coming from behind the waystation. They'd converged on either side of the town, right where a road ran

through it.

"Alouin damn it all," I said.

How was I supposed to survive this?

TTS Chapter Seven

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