

Chapter 19: Advancing Mysteries

Raimie

Having returned to a world of black, I wasn't surprised to find one of my arms nearly freed from its hold. When I'd last been here, I could wiggle my fingers, and that had been a week ago. Why wouldn't more be free now?

Still, I couldn't lift the limb into view, not with something clamping my upper arm to the ground. Seeing it would be nice, as it would be my first proof that whatever this place was, I had a body in it. Hopefully, it wasn't as badly damaged as the one I was wearing in the waking world, the body with an ignorant version of me in it.

I could barely see my ally at the moment. The other man wasn't kneeling nearby, sawing at incorporeal tethers, as he had been before. Rather, all I could see of the wraith was his hooded head and the arms he'd flung over it.

His cloak's sleeves had fallen away, revealing pale skin and a sheath strapped around one arm. A string, attached to the sheath, stretched to that hand's pinky, presumably to allow the quick release of its weapon. The jagged knife, I assumed.

All fascinating but what the wraith was muttering to himself as he rocked in place was more so. Almost, I interrupted him, hesitant to intrude on something that was clearly private, but listening to it might help with solving one of the mysteries in my life.

So, I opened my ears.

"-cannot do this again," the wraith jabbered. "Not when hope was given- was given-

"He has to come back. HAS to! I could keep working to free him, still have heart of my heart's permission, but I will never finish in time. Gods! I am falling apart. It will be like the last time I lost him all over again.

"I. I, I, I. Fuck, such an awful word. Where is the we? I miss it. I miss...

"Please. Heart of my heart. Come back."

I couldn't eavesdrop on this. Clearing my throat, I watched the wraith whirl toward me, planting his hands on either side of my face. He left his hood's black pit staring down at me.

"You are here," he breathed.

Alouin, such intensity. Shouldn't it scare me?

"Yes," I drawled. "Forgive me, but do I know you? I thought you were just a figment of my mind, but you have incredible agency for..."

I trailed off when the wraith jerked back as though slapped.

"You heard what I said?"

"Sorry," I said in response. "Would you mind telling me-?"

Popping to his feet, the wraith paced the length of my body with his fingers clawing into his hood.

"No, no, no!" he hissed. "What if I disrupted the spell?"

Stopping short, he peered down at me.

"Although if I had, something terrible would have happened by now," he said before plopping to the ground. "My apologies. Being alone for so long can be debilitating."

"So... I don't know you?" I asked.

Without responding, the wraith summoned his knife to work on the last ties around my arm. I should probably protest having someone so unstable near me, especially when he had a sharp edge on him, but bound like this, how was I supposed to repulse the wraith? Snarl at him?

Instead, I tried to worm an intelligible explanation from what I'd learned.

"You mentioned a spell," I said. "What did you mean by that?"

For a while, the wraith worked without a word, and I'd decided to try another angle when he spoke up.

"I cannot tell you. Not outright. It does not work like that. You must struggle through it yourself, or it might cause damage."

This last detail was accompanied by a bond snapping, and so, it slipped through the sieve of my focus.

I lifted my freed limb, spreading my fingers in front of my face. It was real, or looked real at least. What about the rest of me?

As I ran a hand down my chest, the wraith stepped over me to kneel on the other side.

"The arms are easiest," he said, as if to himself. "We should avoid the dangerous bits for as long as possible."

Dangerous bits?

No. I could worry about that bit of ominousness later.

For now, all I cared about was regaining my freedom of movement. The ability to flail my arm around pleased me more than I cared to say, and I wanted this for all of me. So, I extended a hand toward the wraith.

"I don't suppose you have another knife," I said. "I'd love to help."

Chuckling, the wraith said, "That is, again, not how it works. Even if I gave you a knife, you could not touch it."

"Really?"

I bobbed my waiting palm, and with a sigh, the wraith placed his blade there. When he released its hilt, however, the weapon merely passed through my hand, and as it plunged for my body, I panicked before the wraith snatched the knife from mid-air.

"You see?" he said. "In order to cut through these ties, you require me and my knife, but conversely, I cannot help you without your permission. Freeing you is a team effort."

Without my permission. Hadn't the wraith asked for my permission as his price for freeing me?

"You wanted me out of these restraints all along, didn't you?" I said. "And if you say you can't answer because that's not how it works, so help me. I'll start screaming again."

Carefully, the wraith set his knife beside my head before hovering his hand over my cheek. It came so close that I could feel its warmth, and the depth of my desire for that distance to close surprised me.

"Raimie—" the wraith started.

And at this stranger first speaking my name, something reverberated through me from the inside out.

"—seeing you escape from this place is my greatest wish."

As if waiting for this confession, a hook sank between my shoulder blades, and I resisted its pull, unwilling to leave this place when I was making so much progress. If only I could remember what I'd learned.

Remember...

I was getting sick of waking up, only to stare at the same bumps in the rock overhead. Oh, and with new injuries on me too. It would be nice if I could rise from dreams without my body screaming at me for once.

Walking my fingers along my chest to where I'd been stabbed, I stopped when they encountered bandaging. So, Rhylix had already dressed the wound. When I could, I should properly thank that man.

"He's awake now, for sure this time," someone unseen said. "When should we come closer?"

"After I've donned my most terrifying visage, of course! Wait. Are you asking for my opinion?"

"*What?* No, you repugnant stain! I was merely speaking out loud."

I knew those voices. They set a chill in my heart, and my thoughts started racing because those voices? They were copies of mine.

Slow as sap from a tree, I sat up on my cot, backing along it until I was plastered to stone. Frantically, I searched for a weapon, but before I could find one, I stopped short.

Two men, lounging against the clinic's doorframe, had stolen my focus. My twins—the figures swathed in white and black—caught me staring, and at their cautious smiles, *my* smile, I pushed myself further into rock.

At that, the one in black surged forward with its face drawn into a horrifying mask, and I froze. Sighing, the one in white pushed itself out of the entryway.

"Stop that," it said.

Bristling, the twin in black spun on its antithesis, raising one hand as if to throw something.

"You want to start something now, ya bore?" it snarled.

Rolling its eyes, the twin in white said, "No, simpleton. I'm simply suggesting that we explain ourselves to our human before he dies of fright."

"Oh."

Lowering its hand, the twin in black glanced over its shoulder, grimacing.

"I hate to agree with you, but you're right," it said. "Excuse me while I go puke in a corner."

"Of course I'm right. When am I not?"

Striding toward my cot, the twin in white 'bumped' into its counterpart, making it stumble, and recovering, the twin in black followed, hissing the whole way.

When they reached the cot, they folded onto its foot. The one in white sat with folded hands and a crossed leg while the one in black sprawled with its foot kicking.

Meanwhile, I couldn't breathe. I must have gone crazy, cracking under recent strain, because if I hadn't, what were these things staring at me with my eyes? Would these unknowns be like Teron, leaving me for dead before someone saved me?

Pursing its lips, the twin in white said, "Relax. We're not here to hurt you-"

"Yet," the twin in black interrupted.

An already rigid copy of me further tensed with a vein in its neck throbbing, and it fixed its gaze further up the wall.

"Would you keep. your. mouth. shut?" it hissed. "I'm best suited for this first introduction. We learned that last time. You'll get your turn once he's calmed down."

Flapping a hand like a mouth beside its face, the twin in black spoke several silent words, making the twin in white shake its head.

"You aren't seeing things. Well, you *are*, but we're perfectly real, not figments of your mind," it said. "In case you were wondering."

Not crazy. According to twins of me, both of whom the Esela in the arena hadn't seen.

Yeah, sure. I hadn't lost it.

My lungs, having remembered their need for air, had begun working again, but they were in overdrive with hyperventilation about to ensue.

So, I peeled myself away from all thoughts about my sanity. I retreated from the terror pounding through my body, and as I'd learned when I was a boy, I detached, focusing not on the problem but on how to solve it.

Fortunately, unlike the moments following Eledis' revelation of my heritage, I had tangible means of unravelling this conundrum.

Tangible. Ha!

"If you're not figments, then what in the *void* are you?" I snapped before glancing toward the other side of the clinic.

I'd spoken more loudly than I'd intended, and the last thing I wanted was to wake up the boy lying several cots over. After what had happened during our first trial, Dath would probably want to kill me, even if I didn't provoke him further, but if he saw me talking to thin air...

"A good question, if a little crassly put."

I snapped my attention back to my twins, where the one in white was gently smiling at me.

“In answer,” it said, “we are -zzz-.”

At that buzzing noise, it stopped, rocking in place, and laughing, the twin in black collapsed on the cot. It rolled across the blanket, incessantly teasing its counterpart, until it started buzzing as well. Shooting upright, it spat something in a high-pitched screech before swiping at its exposed tongue, and I relaxed, sinking into my pillow.

“Oh, you’re Bright and Dim,” I said, pointing to each of them.

“Who’re you calling dim, useless whelp?” the twin in black growled before gasping.

With an evil grin, it ran through a list of profanities, some of which I’d never heard before, presumably in a test of its voice.

“So, the nicknames did stick,” Bright said. “I wasn’t sure, even when you woke up after...”

It fell silent, so I finished that sentence for it.

“Teron and Fissid?”

Dim snapped its mouth shut, shifting its attention away from me.

“I’m sorry for that, by the way,” it said.

Frowning, I asked, “How are you, in any way, at fault for what happened?”

Bright was also looking at Dim, although it appeared more befuddled than me, and flicking its eyes to us, Dim bent double, snickering and slapping its knees.

“You think... I meant... the fire and killings?” it gasped. “No. I’m sorry that I couldn’t help you more.”

That made much more sense.

“You and Bright did plenty,” I said. “I’d have died in that fire without your guidance.”

Wincing, Bright said, “Still. Your poor hands...”

My hands were fine. Over the last week, Rhylix had been overly attentive with them. The skin across my palms was still stiff, but that should ease with time, or so I’d been told.

Regardless, the reason I’d escaped Fissid with such minimal injuries was because of these two.

These two who’d been distinctly unable to talk when we’d arrived in Allanovian. What had changed?

Lifting my head off of the wall, I narrowed my eyes at my anomalies, watching Dim give Bright an incredulously dubious look.

“What do you mean ‘your poor hands’?” it asked, almost sarcastically.

Before Bright could respond, I said, “What *are* you two?”

I’d been exceedingly quiet, almost hadn’t heard my own question, but Bright and Dim whipped their heads toward me anyway.

“I think we can assume that the block on our communication hasn’t lifted yet,” Bright said, “and identity seems a forbidden subject. For now.”

“What stuffy here’s trying to say is we can’t answer that,” Dim said. “Not now. Maybe not ever, although that would be inconvenient.”

So, basically every important question I had would continue to go unanswered, although I’d made some progress with this mystery.

...Why did this situation seem like an echo of another one?

Shaking myself, I said, “So, you’ll be sticking around for a while, then?”

“What else would you expect us to do?” Dim growled. “We can’t exactly go anywhere else.”

Interesting. Did that mean they were attached to me?

Did that matter at the moment? Better to propose a few changes to our situation, changes that would keep me from getting killed. Hopefully.

With caution, I said, “If we can’t discuss what you are—”

And if I can believe you’re real.

“—maybe I can ask inconsequential questions.”

They exchanged a glance that ended with Dim shrugging.

“There’s no harm in trying,” it said. “What’d you have in mind?”

First, something for my safety.

“Can you control when you appear to me?” I asked.

After another glance, Dim drawled, “Yes?”

“In that case...”

How did I put this in a way that wouldn't offend two... beings?

Yes. Beings I didn't fully understand. Beings that might or might not have unimaginable power behind them.

"I see you," I said, "but others do not."

"Mostly true," Bright said.

Mostly...? Not the time for tangential questions like that.

"Can we agree that, for the moment, we don't want people thinking my mind's snapped?" I asked. "I don't know what to think of my family's plans, but what might or might not happen in the future doesn't matter. With the way my life is, I don't get the luxury of looking forward. I can only consider the present, and my circumstances demand that I build an army. No one will follow someone with a broken mind or a..."

Hmm. Now, that was a terrifying thought. The stories about primeancers occasionally mentioned that they could talk with the sources of their power, but one of those legendary—and usually reviled—thaumaturges hadn't walked the world in centuries. They weren't coming back now.

"No one will follow an unstable man or a primeancer into battle," I continued, chuckling to myself. "So, I have to look stable, yes?"

Turning to Bright, Dim cupped its chin in its hand, obviously passing off responsibility for answering this question, and its counterpart glared back.

"Your argument makes logical sense. At this point in time, others' perception of you greatly matters," it carefully said before facing me. "What does that have to do with us?"

"Well," I drawled, "if you two, or more importantly, that one—"

I pointed at Dim, who was swaying back and forth while humming under its breath.

"—hang around me, my eyes are likely to drift your way, and soon enough, someone will notice if I'm staring into nothing. My family might dismiss something like that. I played with imaginary friends often enough as a child but other people? I don't think so. So, could you only appear to me when I'm alone? Or in danger, I suppose. Is that too much to ask?"

I cringed, expecting one of them to explode on me for my soft criticism, but neither did. Bright merely looked thoughtful while Dim continued with its antics.

"As always, your suggestion is reasonable. We can do as you've asked," Bright said, "although we should discuss it again later."

"For the love of *me*, can you, for once in your existence, not hedge your bets?" Dim snarled before softening. "We'll give you space, kid. Got anything else for us?"

Second, something for my peace of mind.

Shifting in bed, I asked, "Must you look like that? Like me, I mean. It makes talking with you..."

What was the right word for it?

I never got to decide. Between blinks, two copies of my visage were replaced with Eledis, and yelping, I slapped a hand over my eyes.

"Not him!" I hissed. "Anyone but him!"

"What would you prefer, then?" one of the two asked.

"I don't know. Nothing that you've used so far," I said. "These appearances are disguises, I'm guessing? Something to keep me calm. Obviously, what you're trying isn't working. So, why don't you show me what you really look like?"

In the silence that followed, I almost lowered my hand, but I didn't want to see two copies of my grandfather again. A single instance of that had been enough, thank you.

"Are you sure about this?"

No, of course I wasn't, but Bright and Dim's natural appearances couldn't be worse than the versions of them I'd already seen, right?

"Yes," I said.

"Then, look."

"See."

With my heart in my throat, I peeked through my fingers, and when I saw what lay on the other side, I lost control of my body, letting my hands thump on the cot.

To my left, where Bright had been perched, a swirl of white light and rigid peace spilled into the room while to the right, where Dim had lounged, a miasma of darkness pooled and crept forth, screaming of pain and fear and insanity.

Between them, a war was playing out in miniature. Light resisted darkness until those shadows grew protrusions, sending the enemy into retreat. So, it went with both sides pushing and shoving against their foe, but nothing resolved.

I watched this, and the longer I did, the more the battlefield enlarged until it surrounded me, and I was strung between the two combatants. They rushed into me, a new vessel waiting to be filled with one or the other, but neither could claim dominance. They ripped at each other inside of me, and as they did so, pieces of *me*, the core of me, were sucked into this conflict, and I didn't know what to do, didn't know what-

Somewhere far distant, a voice I recognized was keening at deafening volumes with such wretched grief there, but any desire I might have had to help this unfortunate being was consumed by my own personal hell.

And abruptly, I was lying against a stone wall with my muscles twitching, and my twins were staring at me with glittering eyes.

“Fascinating,” Bright said. “Every time-”

Something soft and fluffy hit my face, and when it fell into my lap, Dim and Bright had vanished.

“Shut... *up*. Trying to sleep.”

Sluggishly, I glanced toward the voice’s source in time to watch Dath collapsing into his cot again. I’d woken him up. Damn.

In increments, I tested my ability to move, eventually sliding to my feet. Grabbing the pillow, I tottered toward Dath, unsteadily tucking it under his head when I reached him.

Alouin, why did I feel so drained?

Shakily, I started back toward my own cot, only making it so far before my legs gave out. Fortunately, my body had gotten used to hitting stone over the last few weeks, so I didn’t flinch when I hit the ground.

Instead, I leaned against a cot. Relaxing there, I waited for energy to replenish in me.

TTS Chapter Nineteen

Revision #3

Created 19 August 2024 19:28:08 by FatalisticFable

Updated 18 March 2026 21:50:57 by FatalisticFable