

# Chapter 26: What's Wrong with Me?

## Raimie

*"Hello?" I called into the darkness. "Are you there? I'm sorry it's been so long."*

*Glancing around the inky landscape I was lying on, I sought out the wraith, a tad concerned about what I'd find...*

*Holy shit, I'd moved my head! Laughing, I sent my hands—both of them—to my face, caressing my nose and cheeks and chin.*

*Damn, the wraith had made progress. Where was that disturbing man? I should thank him.*

*I found him lying beside me, curled into my side, and while such close proximity might normally have me shoving him away, something stopped me before I could lay a hand on his shoulder. A quiet, mewling whimper rose from the wraith, a horrible melody that raised goosebumps on my skin, and every so often, he jerked: frantic motions when compared to his shivering.*

*And of course, there were his staccato bursts of words.*

*"No- Please! Don't- It hurts-"*

*Softly, I called, "Hey, everything's all right..."*

*What was the wraith's name? How did I not know it?*

*"Wake up."*

*Reaching for the wraith, I ran a finger over the edge of his hood, and a bundle of black cloth surged off of the ground. A wail accompanied his skitter backward.*

*"Wait! It's ok," I shouted. "You don't have to run. I won't hurt you."*

*With his burst of movement turning still, the wraith faced me, leaning back on his hands with his chest heaving.*

*"Of course not," he panted. "You would never hurt me."*

*Flipping to his hands and knees, the wraith crawled to me, and when he stopped at my side, he tucked his legs under him, clenching his hands in his lap.*

*"Apologies. I was not expecting you back for a while yet," he said.*

*"Happy circumstance," I said. "I didn't have a sleeping tincture on me tonight."*

*"Ah."*

*The wraith said nothing more, and in the resulting silence, I shifted as much as I could.*

*"Forgive me, but... are you ok? You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but that nightmare looked bad," I said. "Ha! A figment of my mind having a nightmare in my nightmare!"*

*But still, the wraith didn't speak. He didn't even move to cut me free, as he had in the past. The silence quickly turned awkward, leaving me scrambling for something to fill it, but fortunately, the wraith soon broke it instead.*

*"Do you remember how long you have had this... nightmare?" he asked.*

*Strange question.*

*"Um..." I hummed, sucking on my teeth. "Years? I'm not sure how many."*

*"Nine," the wraith said. "You have been trapped here, screaming, and I have been stuck here, listening to your pain, for nine years."*

*Well, that didn't answer my question from earlier, but that was ok. If the wraith wouldn't share his dream with me, I'd go with the topic he'd provided. For now.*

*"Oddly specific," I said.*

*"Yes, well," the wraith said, hissing a sigh. "They have been rather hard to forget. When you first spoke to me, I thought the shock of it would kill me, so sure was I that w... you would die like this. I wonder what caused the change."*

*Distractedly, I walked my fingers along the ground, brushing against cloth every so often. The wraith had never sat this close to me before.*

*...I really should ask him for his name.*

*"It doesn't line up perfectly, but perhaps it's related to the other upheavals in my life," I said. "We started speaking around the time that I found Shadowsteal, after all."*

*Stiffening, the wraith jerked his hood toward me.*

*“Shadowsteal?” he hissed. “Ancient blade of the Audish royals?”*

*Hmm. Had details from the waking world filtered to this level of my subconscious?*

*“Yes?” I drawled.*

*“But that would make u... you the one foretold to free that land,” the wraith said.*

*Rolling my eyes, I turned away from him.*

*“That’s what everyone keeps insisting,” I said.*

*“FUCK!”*

*With a frown, I peered at the wraith, wincing at the sight of him. Hunched on himself, he had one hand pressed to his forehead, and with his hood having almost fallen away, he rocked in place.*

*“Oh, my gods, heart of my heart. We are dead,” he rattled off. “We are dead, and this GODSDAMN SPELL is keeping me from helping.”*

*...We?*

*No. I needed to calm this man—my only hope of leaving this nightmare—down. Stretching, I reached for the wraith’s hand. It had to be around here somewhere.*

*“You’re counting me lost quite quickly,” I said. “My people and I haven’t reached Auden yet. We don’t know what we’ll face-”*

*I grazed my fingers against flesh that wasn’t mine, and at that contact, all thought stopped while something essential zipped through me.*

*Instinct seized control. Despite the awkward angle, I took the wraith’s hand, and our fingers curled around one another. With the blush of dawn invading it, the ink-black tapestry overhead swirled, and sound entered this place through a filter.*

*Two children giggled together.*

*And ghostly fingers played over my cheeks, coming to rest along my jaw.*

*“I love you, Raimie.”*

*Despite the flood of bliss that had my body bucking against my bonds, I reached toward the sky. Invisible strands of hair tickled my palm as I slid it down, and my voice mixed with a matching one, coming from all around.*

*“I love you too, N-”*

*Shooting to his feet, the wraith hugged himself while teardrops fell to patter on my face.*

*"I... need a moment," he said with a thick voice.*

*Spinning, he marched away, and with my throat closing, I followed his progress, unsure why I was flinging an arm after him.*

*"Please! Gods, please!" I cried. "Don't- Don't leave-!"*

Stinging on my cheeks brought me to awareness, and as I shot upright, I swatted at what was holding me.

"I'm awake, damnit!" I growled.

Once I was released, I scanned a tunnel and a mine cart and my father while scrubbing at my eyes. With a frown, I pulled my palms away, cocking my head at the moisture found there.

Had I been crying? *Why?*

Shaking my head to clear it, I winced when I saw my father's grim expression.

"Did something horrible happen?" I asked. "Or equally as bad, did I have a nightmare?"

"Your screaming woke nearly all of the Zrelnach," my father said.

"That explains the sore throat," I said. "I don't suppose you have a water skin for me, do you?"

As if expecting the request, my father extended the desired object to me, and while I guzzled from it, he offered me a hand up. How many times had we repeated this pattern for him to know its proceedings so well?

Lowering the water skin, I examined how many people were watching us. Too many, I determined.

"Bad one, then?" I asked.

Nodding, my father pointed at my feet, where the books that I'd been studying were scattered across the mine cart's tracks. Wincing, I collected them, hoping Ferin wouldn't be upset if I'd damaged any.

"You kept saying something between bouts of shouting. Something about needing to be free, but I woke you up before I could make it out," my father said. "Did you remember anything this time?"

Sighing, I rubbed my temples.

"Nothing," I said. "Same as always."

"That's a shame," my father said with a sigh, "but perhaps it's for the best. I'll have Rhylix make you more of those fancy potions. In the meantime, we'll have to hope that a day of normalcy will soothe the others' unease."

“Alternatively,” I drawled, “we could get me out of sight. Let me go scouting with you.”

Shifting in place, my father said, “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. We’ll probably run across the tear today, and while I may have gotten used to its affects during my training, you’ve never been near one. I’ll already have several people joining me this morning so-”

“What’s one more?”

With a nervous glance at the Zrelnach, I shoved books into my bulging pack.

“Besides, have I acted like most everyone else over the last few days?”

Expression dropped off of my father’s face as he wordlessly examined me.

“No,” he said. “No, you haven’t.”

“Great! Then, will you please get me away from these suspicious people?” I asked. “I can fix this disaster once we’re on the other side of the mountains.”

Glancing behind him, my father grimaced.

“Fair enough,” he said. “Are you ready to leave now, or do you need a moment?”

I shrugged the pack on my shoulder in answer.

“Follow me, then.”

Rather than heading into the mass of Zrelnach behind us, my father led me further into the tunnel. As we approached the spot where torches had yet to be lit, illumination gradually diminished, and at the line where shadows started forming, a group of four Esela was waiting. Three of them were putting as much distance between themselves and the fourth person as they could, and as we approached, one of the three, Gistrick, brightened.

“Aramar!” he called. “Will you please tell this healer that he can’t come with us?”

Sighing through his nose, Rhylix shook his head above his crossed arms.

“Why not?” he asked. “I’m as proficient of a fighter as everyone here, have had no issues while traveling toward the tear, and can fix up the injured if we run into trouble.”

“Plus, I want him with us,” I said.

With his eyes widening, Gistrick blinked as if just now seeing me.

“Raimie, why are you here?” he asked. “You can’t-”

“He’s joining us today,” my father interrupted.

He stopped between the estranged parties while I kept quiet. For now, I was content to fade into his shadow.

Glancing at Rhylix, my father said, "You think this is a good idea? The tear-"

"Won't affect me," Rhylix said with a bright smile. "I'd like to keep an eye on my new... friend."

After a sharp nod, my father jerked his head toward the darkened tunnel.

"He's coming," he said. "Let's go."

"But... Aramar!" one of the unknown women said.

Already striding into the dark, my father called, "I said let's go, Aya."

With many a grumble, the Zrelnach trailed after their friend while I hung back with Rhylix. The two of us strolled more slowly down the tunnel, and every so often, we watched the Esela ahead of us light the torches on the walls.

"Are you ok?" Rhylix asked. "Last night's nightmare sounded much worse than the ones you've had before."

"Maybe it was. I wouldn't know," I said with a shrug, "but yes, I'm ok."

I refused to look at my friend, certain I knew what he was thinking. I'd had this conversation often enough to predict how it would go.

After a moment, Rhylix asked, "What do you mean 'you wouldn't know'?"

Sighing, I scrubbed at my face.

"I mean I don't remember it," I said. "The damn things have plagued me since I was a kid, and not once have I remembered what I was dreaming about."

"Hmm. That's unusual."

Laughing under my breath, I said, "You're telling me."

Thankfully, Rhylix didn't press the issue, not for a while at least. In silence, we hiked down an unusually smoothed path for what seemed like hours, and all the while, I struggled with how to ask the questions I had for my friend. Chewing on my lip, I listened to the chatter of the scouts ahead, considering where to start, but before I could decide, Rhylix stepped into our quiet.

"These nightmares..." he said as if musing. "I wonder if their strength is what's had you blazing through my tinctures more quickly than you should. Did you know that the ones I've mixed for you are twice as potent as my normal dose?"

"Really?" I said, crinkling my brow.

That seemed odd.

Nodding, Rhylix said, "Indeed. The reason for it has puzzled me over the last couple of weeks. But why am I bothering you with this? It's a healer's concern."

Should I tell him? Every time I'd brought this subject up in the past, it hadn't ended well. In fact, those instances were the only times I could remember my father getting angry with me.

At the same time, seeing if this issue was as unnerving as my father had implied would be nice. Plus, I'd meant to tell Rhylix about it for weeks now.

"I may know why," I mumbled, half-hoping my friend wouldn't catch the words.

From the wrinkle of his face, that hope seemed dashed.

"You do?" he asked.

Nodding, I fiddled with my tunic's hem with the ground having become my focus.

"So, I have this-

Hell, what was the best way to describe it? Swallowing hard, I tried again.

"There's a pit inside of me, one I've had for years," I said. "It's not the typical emptiness that everyone gets throughout life, though. This is persistent, like someone's taken hold of my essence and yanked a piece of it out and-

Alouin, but it ached. It always did when I acknowledged it, but this time felt worse. Hugging my chest, I held an invisible, throbbing wound together.

"Years ago, I stopped telling dad about it because he doesn't like hearing that it's there. That's why I haven't spoken about it with you," I said, "but anyway, I think it's related to my nightmares. Lately, I've woken up from them, and I've- I've heard a voice in my head. It makes the hurt go away, which seems like an indication of correlation. At least to me. But what do I know?"

This was where Rhylix called me crazy. What else was he supposed to think after such an *insane* confession? Even my family had trouble accepting this part of me.

"Hmm. I've never heard of something like that before," Rhylix said, "but that's ok. Maybe together, we can figure out why this pit is causing your nightmares. Or maybe it's vice versa?"

He shrugged.

"I'm sure we'll find out one way or... What is it?"

Several paces ahead, Rhylix was looking back at me, and jolted into my body by the question, I cleared my throat.

“It’s... nothing.”

Did my voice sound as tight to Rhylix as it did to me?

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Ok...” Rhylix said.

He resumed his hike, and after shaking myself, I hurried to catch up. When it came to this sense that I wasn’t whole, *no one* had taken me seriously. It usually got brushed off as youthful dramatics or something similar. But Rhylix...

Hell, I thought my eyes might burn to cinders in their sockets while that warmth seeped into my chest, but I couldn’t let Rhylix see how much his acceptance had affected me. What would he think after learning how extreme of a reaction I’d had? Would he pity me?

So, no. I’d keep this to myself, moving onto another topic.

“You never told me why you had Silverblade made for me,” I said.

Giving me a sidelong glance, Rhylix said, “What do you mean?”

“Before my second trial, you said you were giving me the blade for reasons that you’d discuss after I passed it,” I said. “Well, I’ve passed. So?”

Lifting his head, Rhylix suddenly seemed to find the stone above us fascinating.

“I’d hoped you’d forgotten about that, at least for a little while longer,” he said.

“Wha-?”

“Raimie! Rhylix! Get up here.”

Ahead, the tunnel widened, and at the mouth of this opening, the other scouts were waiting. Rhylix darted to meet them, and I narrowed my eyes, hoping he felt needles shooting into his back. My new friend was hiding something.

I didn’t like it.

## **TTS Chapter Twenty-Six**

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