

# Chapter 28: Beyond the Veil

## Raimie

I didn't know how no one landed a blow on me before I reached a space absent violence, but soon, I shot out of a spreading pool of it, stopping with my hands on my knees.

Gasping, I glanced over a mass of Zrelnach, fighting with civilians in their midst. At the center of this, my twins had yet to stop rolling on the ground, beating on one another.

They'd been right. Their presence had caused a disaster.

"Damnit, Bright and Dim," I grumbled.

"Who're Bright and Dim?"

Glancing up at Rhylix as he joined me, I straightened.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Any ideas for how to stop this?"

Rhylix slowly shook his head.

"I've never figured out how to negate a tear's influence. The only thing that works is moving away from it," he said, "and I don't see how we can get these people doing that."

People who were slowly killing each other while Rhylix and I dithered.

"The tear's causing this," I said to myself.

If we couldn't move away from it, could we move *it*?

No, that was ridiculous. It was a rip in reality.

But rips could be stitched together. Tears could be closed.

"Yes?" Rhylix drawled. "We've already established the cause of our crisis."

Oh, this was a bad idea. I didn't like thinking about what might happen to me if I followed through with it, but looking over the people fighting each other because of Bright and Dim, I knew I didn't have a choice. If this continued for much longer, I wouldn't have any allies to stand with me against Doldimar's minions.

“This will get me killed,” I said.

“Will what now?” Rhylix asked. “Hey!”

But I’d already taken off, sprinting for the tear as fast as I could. If I went any slower, I wouldn’t outrun the terror fighting to overwhelm me, and from what Rhylix was shouting at my back, my friend might stop me too. So, I dashed over stone hills, only faltering when the tear came into view.

An oval almost as tall as me hung in a wide valley, hovering a handspan above cracked stone. Those cracks radiated outward from beneath it, and when I hit the first of these, I swallowed. Alouin, my eyes were so wide that they might pop out of my head.

The tear itself nearly sent me fleeing from it. A void—an ellipse made of a black so deep that it sucked light into it—sat in its center, and yet, a white glow danced around its circumference, defying what was trying to extinguish it.

Looking at this marvel, I thought I might be sick while my body protested something that should *not exist*, and I knotted my fingers in my hair, tugging on it. Something inside my head clamored to be released, reaching out for the tear in desperation, and I found my free hand lifting to match it.

I didn’t want to do this. It would kill me!

I needed to do this. “Can’t you hear the call of something...?”

The tear sang to me, and I brushed a finger against its inky—

*—black. I was floating in nothing, a non-existent place that was so dark it reminded me of... somewhere else. I thought.*

*But this place was good. This was nice. This was ho-*

*A wash of images spilled through me, projecting into my vision. Snippets of people who looked nothing like me and places that couldn’t exist. Scenes of events that I could only watch with bafflement, unsure how their participants grew plants with the flick of a wrist or zipped across snow with only planks on their feet.*

*The deluge saturated my mind in what felt like seconds, but who could keep track of time in a place where nothing existed?*

*Nothing except the images.*

*And the voices.*

*They jabbered nonsense at me, words with no meaning and concepts that I could never understand, and with both streams of information pouring through my head, the accumulated pressure threatened to burst my skull into bits of bone and brain.*

*Why had I thought this was...?*

*When I screamed into oblivion, the heat of lightning, crackling inside my brain, boiled off as it left my tongue, but it kept building and building and building and building.*

*Until it stopped.*

*Limp, I let viscous liquid drizzle from my nose, trying to remember what I'd been doing.*

*"It's him! Light, it's actually-"*

*"That can't be right. It's not time... No, it IS right. Shit."*

*"It's him, it's him! The successor!"*

*What... was this? It seemed like the voices from before had focused. Yes?*

*But if they could do that, did that mean something sentient lay behind them?*

*"We should kill him now. Stop Alouin's future before it comes to pass."*

*"No! Of the seven, he's the one most essential to us, especially if we want to get rid of THEM."*

*"So, do we...?"*

*I couldn't listen to their nonsense.*

*Coughing, I rasped, "Help me. Please."*

*And a million-million voices coalesced to ask.*

*"Would you like to make a deal?"*

*A... deal?*

*"What would be the terms?" I asked.*

*"Well, that would depend on what you want now, wouldn't it?"*

*Of course it would. I was such an idiot, just as the voices had said.*

*Had they said that?*

*But, no. What was it that I wanted? I could swear I'd known a minute ago.*

*"I need to close a... tear," I gasped.*

*Oh, the pressure in my head was mounting again. It was going to kill me. It would!*

*Laughter burst into the void, discordant and rankling, and with each bounce of it, multi-colored spheres blinked in and out of existence. There were so, so many of them, spreading in every direction, and sluggishly, they drifted around me. Transfixed, I reached for one, but before I could touch it, the voice's merriment abruptly ceased, and the spheres disappeared.*

*"You want to close a rip in reality? Oh gods, earth and fire, Sgaradh, light! We'll need no payment for a request like that. Watching you try will be recompense enough."*

*The voices fell silent, and I hissed at the bloom of an ache in my skull.*

*"So... help?" I said.*

*"Right. You need us to tell you. Ok. Reach out, Raimie. Feel what's around you. Then, share what you find with us."*

*What was around me? Nothing was around me, not even the spheres anymore!*

*But... I couldn't afford indignation or doubt, so I did as the voices had asked. Closing my eyes, I stretched out my senses, paying attention to what they might tell me, but there was nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing-*

*Wait.*

*Yes, nothing lay in the void but BEHIND it...*

*A war. A never-ending struggle. A push and pull. Life versus Death. Perpetuation versus Disintegration.*

*"Order versus Chaos," I said.*

*I'd felt something like this before, hadn't I? When Dim and Bright had shown me their true forms.*

*"Hmm. Such powerful aspects you've attracted, but it makes sense. You are the successor, after all."*

*"Great. I've found something that I don't understand in a place I have yet to wrap my head around," I growled. "How does that help me close a tear?"*

*I wasn't sure how much longer I could stay here. Not that I knew how to leave.*

*"So impatient. Very well. Do you feel the energies coming from Order and Chaos?"*

*Energies? What did that-?*

*"Yes," I breathed.*

*"Draw those energies to you, blend them, and feed them to the reality rip. Once that's done, it will be done. Your answer, Raimie."*

*That sounded simple enough. Well, simple, even if I had no idea how to do the individual parts, but I wouldn't get much more from the voices, and I had one vitally important question left.*

*"Thank you," I said. "I was also wondering... how do I get home?"*

*The void hiccupped, and I could swear that the voices were staring at me with tilted heads, even having no bodies as they did.*

*"What does he mean 'home'? Is he not already...?"*

*"Ohhhh. He means the Auden iteration. That makes sense."*

*"Silly child doesn't know yet."*

*"What?" I yipped.*

*"Until next time, successor."*

*"Wait. No!" I shouted.*

*Please, not another—*

—mystery of the tear drew me in, even as I screamed my voice raw, and somewhere far away, someone called my name. I couldn't pay these things any mind, though. I had to finish what I'd started before the unknown turned my brain to mush.

What had the voices told me to do? Call on energy?

Reaching for what I'd found, I drew threads of Chaos and Order from the tear, gathering them into separate bundles. They repelled each other, to the point that it threatened to rip me in two, and I knew of only one way to stop it.

Forcing them closer, I wove the edges of those energy together, no matter how loudly they squealed in protest. I *would* amalgamate them. They would blend, damnit!

And they did. And I was whole.

Well, nearly whole. Nothing could fill the piece of my essence that was forever lost.

Still, I'd never experienced a greater sense of peace in my life, and as I clutched it to my chest, the idea of releasing it made me recoil, almost removing my touch from the tear.

"Raimie, let it go *now!*" someone roared in my ear.

Why should I care about what Rhylix said? This peace was *mine*. Mine, mine, mine, and Rhylix...

Rhy. My father. Eledis. They were trapped in conflict, and as long as I hoarded this harmony to myself, they'd stay there until they died.

Oh... oh, oh, oh... this wouldn't be fun.

Taking a deep breath, I unleashed my combined energy... Balance... onto the tear, and it wavered.

I might have seen more of this if returning strife hadn't had me curling on myself. Every fragment of thought and effort went into pouring peace out of my body, and as the last drop was wrung from me, something in my core *wrenched*.

Falling to my knees, I swayed in place with the cavern's sudden darkness matching my spirit. Oh, Alouin. Something was wrong with me.

Someone shook me, saying my name. I couldn't be bothered to answer.

Because something was *wrong*.

A warm hand led me along. Bitter liquid flowed into my mouth, and my jaw was held closed until I swallowed. Scratchy fabric settled over my body, and words were spoken in tight voices.

Couldn't they see? SOMETHING WAS WRONG!

But no one noticed, so I huddled beneath the surface, licking the wound on my mind like a dog. I was content to stay here. What was the point in returning to the world?

"Did we...?"

A cough interrupted the question.

"Did that break him?"

"If anything could, it'd be trying something so stupid."

A different tone, a different person.

"Impressive but very, very stupid."

I knew those voice.

Rushing to the surface, I jumped to my feet, spinning on Bright and Dim.

"What the *fuck* was that?" I shouted.

The anomalies flickered, there and gone again faster than I could keep track. Their clothes had turned ragged, and they'd shed patches of their skin, revealing limbs of light and shadow.

What had happened to them? They looked horrible.

Wait. Why did I care?

“We were taking a path beside something that’s known to drive people mad, and you started a *fight*? Are you kidding me?”

Cringing, Bright said, “We didn’t have control-”

“I don’t give a damn about your control,” I said. “You don’t endanger people over petty disagreements!”

As I took a step forward, Dim slid in front of me, raising a hand.

“If I may,” it said.

“I’m not finished,” I snapped. “From the way you’ve treated me, I know you want something from me. I’m not an idiot. If you’d like me to give you whatever it is, I. can’t. be. dead.”

I jabbed a finger into their faces. Their first appearance during the Zrelnach trials had almost got me skewered and now this? It was too much.

“An efficient way to keep me alive would be to STOP TRYING TO KILL ME!”

As this roar faded into the night air, it left Bright and Dim watching me like one would with a crazed animal. I couldn’t bear to look at them.

“Get out of my sight,” I growled.

They hesitated with their guttural flickering growing erratic, so I took a step forward, almost merging with their bodies.

“I said get out of my sight!”

With a pop, the anomalies disappeared, revealing the host of people behind them. They were standing or lounging several feet away from me, but the tree branches, stifling moonlight overhead, did nothing to hide how every eye was turned my way. Crackling flames filled a deep silence, and with panic singing in the back of my mouth, I took a step away.

And another. And another until a tree trunk hid me from view.

Gasping, I leaned on one knee while my eyes jumped across the forest floor.

They’d seen me screaming at thin air. What in the *void* would I do?

From the side, somebody took hold of me, and I tensed, reaching for a weapon. Any weapon.

“You’re back,” my father breathed into my hair. “You’re ok!”

I held still while he squeezed me. I didn’t know why I was still getting ready to defend myself, but I wanted him to release me. How did I ask for that, given how pleased he seemed?

“Dad...” I pushed through my throat.

It was my father’s turn to go stiff. Prying himself off of me, he retreated with his hands raised. Why was he acting so cautiously?

“You need time alone, don’t you?” he asked.

Why would he think-?

Without my permission, my head jerked in a nod.

Deflating, my father said, “All right. I’ll give you space if you’re ok. You are, aren’t you?”

Was I?

“I... think so,” I said.

“Ok, then. I’ll smooth the Zrelnach’s ruffled feathers,” my father said. “Good night, son.”

I didn’t have the energy to reply. Slamming my back into a tree, I slid down it, peering at the canopy above. Why did I feel so drained?

Tree limbs swayed, leaves rustled, and after a time that I couldn’t measure, footsteps crunched to a stop in front of me.

“That was a decent speech you gave.”

A speech? Was that how my angry rant had been taken?

“Rhy,” I sighed.

The shadow shrank, and when a flame burst to life between us, it outlined my friend’s serious features.

“Will I have to fix you up again?” he asked.

Coughing a laugh, I shook my head.

“I’m just tired,” I said. “Will probably get some sleep soon.”

“Can I stay with you?” Rhylix asked. “Your father mentioned that you needed solitude, but you have an unnatural tendency to attract trouble, my... friend.”

Why did Rhylix always sound so surprised when he said that word?

“I don’t mind,” I said.

I'd hate to disappoint my father with this weakness but Rhylix? He'd seen me at my worst. What was another instance of it?

Settling on the ground nearby, he extinguished his summoned flame.

"I thought you despised magic," I said.

"Doesn't mean I won't use it when I have to."

Alouin, such disgust. Snickering, I sank further into the fallen leaves.

"I have so many questions for you," I said, "but I'm so-"

A yawn nearly cracked my jaw in half, which had Rhylix softly laughing.

"Sleep, Raimie," he said. "Your questions can wait until tomorrow."

"Including the one about Silverblade?" I asked.

Shifting in place, Rhylix said, "Yes. Even that one."

"That's... good. The question's... been on my mind... since you-"

*The wraith hovered over me with his shadowed features twisted, and warm skin was circled around my neck, although this hold hadn't tightened.*

*"What did you do to us?" the wraith shouted.*

*Someone was about to strangle me? I should be frightened by this.*

*But I wasn't.*

*Raising an eyebrow, I said, "Us?"*

*Jerking away, the wraith retracted his grip, grazing his knuckles on my chest.*

*"You... do not feel it?" the wraith said. "The burn in your being, the diminishment?"*

*"No..." I drawled.*

*"You have no idea what you did."*

*With a sob, the wraith clapped his hands to his face.*

*"Of course you do not. Why should I have expected any differently?"*

*His shoulders shook, and hesitantly, I took hold of his wrist.*

*“Hey,” I said. “Everything will be ok.”*

*Exploding off of me, the wraith towered over my body, and with a foot planted on either side of my chest, he shoved a finger in my face.*

*“You always say that,” he shouted, “but it will not be ok. It will NEVER be ok, Raimie. You forgot me for nine years! How could you?”*

*Frowning, I dragged my head along the ground, cocking it.*

*“Forgot you?” I asked. “Did we know one another?”*

*The memory of my last visit here filtered through the cracks, and with its repeat, I sucked in air, but the wraith didn't notice. He stretched his arms toward me as if to strangle me again.*

*“You see? DO YOU SEE?” he growled. “When you started talking to me, I thought things would get better, but it has only gotten worse. Just... go to sleep, Raimie.”*

*Swooping toward me, the wraith touched my forehead, and I frantically reached for the one who echoed my emptiness.*

*“Wait! I-”*

*Claws dragged me into dreams.*

*My dreams held only nightmares.*

## **TTS Chapter Twenty-Eight**

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Revision #3

Created 20 August 2024 01:35:31 by FatalisticFable

Updated 18 March 2026 21:57:59 by FatalisticFable