

Chapter 36: Cross the Line

Raimie

I was back. It had been weeks, and gods, I'd missed this place. Or maybe it was more that I'd missed someone who was only found here. At the thought, I laughed, and it reverberated back to me as something far less pleasant.

"Are you here?" I called. "Please. I want to see you. I really, really do, and- if it helps, I know who you aaaaare."

Idly, I watched swirling colors mar the black above. I discarded this mystery to lift myself onto my elbows. Slowly, I looked over my nightmare's horizon, and when I spied a bump in the distance, a manic giggle flew from me.

"Nooooo..." I drawled, pouting. "Come here. Ny-"

In an instant, the wraith was standing over me, and I grinned at that all-encompassing hood.

"I know who you are," I repeated.

"I heard you the first time," the wraith said. "It does not matt-"

The bond around my waist snapped. While I snickered, the wraith glanced at where it had once been.

"Huh. Maybe repaired memories do make a difference," he said. "Still, it does not matter now. I cannot rouse you in the typical manner, and it is killing us too quickly. So..."

Taking hold of my tunic, the wraith lifted me off of the ground, leaving me hanging from his grip. All I could see was the sky and yes. There WERE colors in the black.

"Pretty," I said, reaching for them.

"Please, forgive me, heart of my heart," the wraith whispered, "but you will—"

He punched me, driving me into the ground. Before I could process my shock, the wraith pulled me up again.

"—wake—"

Once again, pain accompanied my impact with a far too solid surface. Once again, I was left dangling from someone's hold.

"—up."

With this blow, the wraith left me on the ground, and growling, I lunged, wrapping my arms around his legs. When I tugged, he landed on me—gods, it felt right, RIGHT—before rolling to the side, and his hood retreated enough for me to recognize the face beneath it.

"Please, wake up," a piece of my essence said.

And colors reached the horizon.

Gasping, I jerked upright, but a spinning landscape forced me to the ground again. I vomited, letting that sick splatter all around me, and for a while, I didn't move, listening to the silence. Marveling in the fact that I was alive, if not for much longer.

Because sucking mud had engulfed me to the waist, and I saw no sign of rescue. Plus, I was *awake*, which wasn't conducive to surviving the poison pulsing through my body.

But like before, I couldn't lay here and let something kill me, even if fighting it would bring death along faster, and I certainly wouldn't want to leave this world while unconscious. Thank Alouin that I was awake, no matter what Dath had said.

I clawed at the reeds around me, shimmying in the mud, and raked my fingernails in the soil, but nothing pulled even the slightest bit of my body free. Soon, I was up to my shoulders, and the rapid beat of my heart matched the rate of my hyperventilation.

"You always were a stupid child, weren't you?"

At the question, I went still, becoming a sculpture made of ice. Hardly daring to believe what I'd heard, I didn't look for the woman who'd spoken, whispering to her instead.

"Mama? Is that you?"

"Pathetic. Ungrateful."

It was my mother. I'd know that voice anywhere. As mud crept up to my neck, I searched for her in the mist.

"You ruin everything," she snarled.

Something stabbed at my heart, making me desperate enough to gasp. Mud reached my chin, and with my heart thundering in my ears, I tilted my face to the sky, seeking a few more seconds of air. Of life.

“You’re right, and I beg for your forgiveness,” I said. “I didn’t mean to make you fall, and everything I did to disappoint you as a child... I’m sorry for it.”

“It’s not enough!”

She loomed over me until her face blotted out the sky.

“It will never be enough!” she screamed. “Do you know how much I’ve sacrificed for you? You killed me, you ungrateful wretch!”

Why could I hear her through the mud? This sludge should do a better job of plugging my ears.

Maybe I could drown on my tears instead of liquid soil.

“I know,” I sobbed. “I’m so sorry, mama. Please! I’m sor-”

Mud filled my nose and mouth, and I breathed it in.

I woke up to a blank slate of a world. A bland field of cropped grass stretched in every direction with not a tree in sight, and a blue sky made a solid canopy from horizon to horizon. In the background, a barely audible whine hummed.

The only flaw in this scene of blue and green was a hand-sized hole in the sky’s apex. There, a miniature battle was playing out between forces of light and darkness, reminiscent of what I’d seen when Bright and Dim had showed me their true forms.

Speaking of which.

“Are you two there?” I asked. “You can come out if you want.”

I wasn’t too surprised when they didn’t.

So, this was the afterlife, was it? It wasn’t at all how I’d pictured it.

“Bright?” I said. “Dim?”

After what had happened, I could see them being stubborn, refusing to heed my call, but I had to ask for them anyway. Right now, they were my only means of figuring out what was going on. If they’d carried over to the afterlife with me, I needed to talk to them.

Instead of my splinters, a middle-aged man stepped out of thin air several paces away, scrubbing his hands on stiff, blue trousers. His tunic had its sleeves cut off halfway down his arms, and a demonic, hooded figure was painted on the front.

Besides his strange clothes, this man could have posed as an average human. Short brown hair, salted with gray, framed a plain face with murky blue eyes peering from it.

“Ships damn Earth. I hate visiting that disconnected iteration,” he said, as if to himself. “At least I’ll get a minute to myself now.”

He looked up, freezing when he spotted me, and perfectly aware of what he’d just said, I awkwardly waved.

“Hello,” I said.

The stranger ate the ground between us with his stride, grabbing my arms when he reached me.

“How did you breach my safe space? I thought I’d fixed my sequences to keep essences out,” he snapped. “Tell me what you did, and I might not hurt you.”

Shoving me away, the stranger lifted his hands, holding light in one and darkness in the other, and unsure of what was happening, I threw my own hands over my head.

“I died? I don’t know,” I stammered. “I was eating mud, and the next thing I knew, I was here.”

Even in danger as I was, something was dragging on my focus. Something above me.

The draw of it was powerful enough for me to sneak a glance overhead, focusing on the battle between light and darkness, but now that I was truly looking at it, something about this depiction seemed different from what my splinters had shown me. Something was hovering in the center of it, in the frontline where shadows formed.

What was that? A black spot maybe, or no. A splash of light revealed a figure, suspended between the combatants, and its body was twitching. The high-pitched whine that I’d noticed earlier took on a new meaning.

Hell, I couldn’t look away from the scene, trapped by something I didn’t *at all* understand.

“Holy shit, you’re my- Wait, no. Sorry. Can’t know that yet. What is it I’m supposed to say? Ah, yes. You’re like *me*.”

Right. The possible threat. Whatever had hold of me broke with the reminder of what I was facing on the ground.

But at the moment, the stranger looked fairly harmless. He had his hands hanging by his sides with his mouth left gaping.

After a moment, he said, “I’m sorry for how I acted before. You have to understand. No one’s visited this place in forever. So... may I come closer?”

Why not? So far, the stranger hadn’t hurt me, merely reacted in a manner appropriate for finding an unknown man in one’s home. I hesitantly nodded.

When the stranger stepped within reach, however, he summoned light and darkness again, and I automatically leaned away.

"I won't hurt you," the stranger said. "I just want to test something. Will you let me?"

What was the worst that could happen? He killed me for a second time?

With a nervous laugh, I nodded again, and hesitantly, the stranger placed one hand on the base of my neck while hovering the other over my forehead.

Energy flooded through me, two forces opposing one another so fiercely that they threatened to tear me apart.

Like what had happened at the tear.

Frantically, I fought to recapture how I'd dealt with this sensation the first time around. This second encounter with it was *too much*, overwhelming in its intensity.

As the two forces started teasing at my sanity, a memory of that horrible, wonderful event returned, and gritting my teeth, I wove the energies together. Before a seductive sense of peace could take me over, I leaked my creation into my surroundings, and this time, it didn't knock me flat on my ass. This time, I didn't feel drained or *wrong* after it had left.

"Ships, you are," the stranger said. "You *are*, and you're too damn early."

"I'm what?" I asked around a mouthful of cotton.

The pity in the stranger's eyes gave me pause.

"I can't explain everything right now. There's not enough time," he said, "but if you want to know, we can talk through your iteration's tears. Suffice it to say that for now, I'm intervening."

He turned away, gesturing at the air.

"She could start CPR thirty seconds earlier, but then... no, too high of a cost. They find him a minute sooner? Could work. He'll be brain dead for a bit, but that shouldn't be a problem. Let's see."

Supremely confused, I didn't know where to begin with my questions, so I waited, wondering when I'd see what the afterlife had to offer. Once the stranger had finished with his nonsense, he faced me with a grin.

"You're going home now. It was so good to meet you, Raimie," he said. "You have no idea."

How did he know my name? How did he know how I'd died? What did he mean about-?

When the stranger moved forward, I pulled away from him, repulsed by all the unknowns he now represented.

“Wait!” I said. “You said to find another... tear?”

I wasn't sure where I'd find one in the afterlife, but it couldn't hurt to ask. Like with every other mystery in my life, I had to figure this out, no matter how intimidating these unknowns might seem.

“When I find one, who should I say I'm looking for?” I asked.

Narrowing his eyes, the stranger said, “That's right. I never told you.”

Straightening his posture, he smirked.

“My name is Alouin.”

Choking on a gasp, I could only imagine how bugged my eyes look. Alouin? The *god*?

“Always loved that part,” Alouin said with a laugh. “Until next time!”

When he poked my forehead, I fell backward, and the ground opened up, swallowing me whole.

I float in the space between realities. My next adventure calls to me, and I'm eager to follow it. I'd imagine that doing so would be like crossing a line, and lo and behold, one appears before me.

I can't see what lies on the other side of it, but does that matter? Nothing ties me to where I once was. Does it?

Perhaps I should check.

In an absence of anything substantial, voices force their way to me, enticing me back.

“You found him?” Rhylix asks.

“By the barest of luck,” Ferin says, panting. “Rhy, when I got there, only his fingers were free of mud.”

“I should have sounded the alarm when he didn't show up for his lesson.”

“You did the best you could.”

“Maybe. Help me get him to camp. You! Run ahead of us and get a tent raised.”

A grunt and the creak of armor fills the void.

“You think we should hide this?” Ferin asks.

“Did you see the gash on his arm?” Rhylix says. “Someone’s tried to kill him, and they... they may have succeeded. Whether or not he survives, I don’t want the perpetrator to know. Not yet.”

“That’s... probably wise.”

A long period of heavy breathing follows with the sound of a burden lowered into cloth coming soon after.

“Can you do anything for him?” Ferin asks.

“I don’t-” Rhylix starts.

“What’s going on?”

Eledis’ booming voice joins the other two.

“Why have I been-?”

I chuckle at the imagined look on my grandfather’s face, and as if requested, I observe the scene from a great height, adding another temptation to the voices’ pull.

From beside a bedroll, Ferin and Rhylix face Eledis with both of them stricken silent. Alouin, my friend looks like his world’s ending, and seeing this, I wish that cloth wasn’t keeping me enclosed with these people. I’d like to fly into the sky, far away.

Eledis’ face almost matches my imagined expression, but alongside my expected shock, anger is twirling as well.

“Someone explain,” he says with a hollow voice.

Before Ferin or Rhylix can oblige, the tent’s flap lifts, letting my father inside.

Alouin, my father. With his wife and son dead, he’ll be left with Eledis, and I know how those two feel about one another. Maybe this is what’s tempting me, preventing me from stepping over the line.

A denying whine flies from my father, and he’s across the tent faster than I can track, kneeling beside the bedroll. With trembling fingers, he brushes grimy hair away from his son’s face while Eledis ignores him, glaring at the Esela in their midst.

“A few hours ago, Rhy came to me in a panic, saying he’d lost Raimie. He asked me to help look for the kid,” Ferin says. “I indulged him, setting up a search party. Felt pretty foolish for doubting him when I found sinking mud almost engulfing the boy. With some help, we got him out. Brought him here.”

Eledis’ fury transfers to Rhylix.

“And *why* aren’t you treating him?” he demands.

Licking his lips, Rhylix says, “I-”

And is interrupted again. An Eselan woman... the one who ran into me a few days ago, pushes into the tent, taking everything in with a glance. As she hurries to the bedroll, she pointedly ignores Rhylix, moving my father’s hand away.

“Excuse me,” she says. “I need room to work.”

She didn’t have much to begin with. With so many people in it, the tent is exceedingly crowded.

As bidden, my father scoots back with his eyes turning glassy. As for the woman, she does a once over of the body.

“Barely sustained respiration rate and a thready pulse,” she says before glancing up at those watching. “I’ll do what I can, but you need to let me work. Go back to bed, if you can. Otherwise, go. This may take a while.”

Nodding, Ferin hurriedly departs, and while Eledis appears grim, he hauls my father to his feet, supporting him as they head outside.

Only Rhylix stays behind, hugging his elbows.

Clicking her tongue, the woman rubs her face.

“What am I going to do?” she says. “His essence has already fled his body. I can’t fix that!”

“I know,” is all Rhylix says, tense. Resigned.

“Alouin, they’ll kill me,” the woman says with a hiccupped sob. “Their blessed child of foretelling gets himself killed, and I’ll pay the price for it.”

With thin lips, Rhylix moves to her side, briefly rubbing the top of her head.

“No, you won’t,” he says. “When they return, you won’t be here. I’ll tell them that you left his care to me.”

Jerking her head up, the woman says, “You’d do that?”

When he nods, she jumps to her feet, attacking him with a hug.

“Thank you!” she says. “I won’t forget this.”

As if afraid that Rhylix will change his mind, she’s quickly gone, and alone, my friend slumps with air bursting from him. He sits beside the bedroll, resting his hands on a chest crusted with dried mud. For a while, he merely stares at that deeply dreaming face before shaking his head.

“You bastard,” he says. “Don’t you die on me.”

And the temptation yanking me to this abandoned world, full of grief and pain, snaps. I stand in front of a line with nothing on the other side, but still, I want to cross it. I want to explore, see for myself how empty the other side is.

With a half-smile, I lift a foot, and blinding light pulses around me. As it fades, a hook buries in my back while a magnetic force rips me away from the line, and I tumble through the space between realities.

My body jerked on the return of its essence, and I screamed before lapsing into unconsciousness.

TTS Chapter Thirty-Six

Revision #3

Created 21 August 2024 00:22:44 by FatalisticFable

Updated 18 March 2026 22:01:33 by FatalisticFable