

Chapter 6: Disrupting Changes

Raimie

Raimie from the line of Audish kings...

Had I heard that right? I couldn't have. It was...

A burst of hysterical laughter jolted me back into working order, and I stooped to retrieve Shadowsteal from the ground. I didn't know what was going on, but right now, that didn't matter. I had monsters trailing me, and our cottage was the best refuge from them.

When I entered it, my father was shoving provisions into packs, much like we did when visiting Fissid, with Eledis helping him.

"Raimie can you gather anything you want to keep?" he asked.

"Why would I do that?" I said.

Setting Shadowsteal on the table, I leaned on it.

"Listen. I saw something in the woods-"

"We don't have time for this," Eledis snapped.

Snatching a knapsack from my father's bed, he thrust it at me.

"Pack," he growled.

He spun for the cottage's small kitchen, and I decided I'd had enough. I dropped what I'd been given, balling my hands into fists.

"No!" I shouted. "Someone, tell me what's happening and why my world has become a *string of crazy* since this morning."

Activity in the cottage paused with my family looking at me as if just now registering my presence. After a moment, Eledis shoved what he was holding at my father.

"Keep at it," he said. "I've got this."

My father pulled his lips thin, but he followed instructions while Eledis faced me from across the table.

"We've waited a long time for you. Three hundred years or so in fact," he said. "You read the book I gave you, right? That means you've read some of your family history, Raimie. As I said, you're of the Audish royal line—"

"*What?*" I interrupted. "Come on. You don't seriously expect me to believe that, do you?"

Eledis just fixed me with an unwavering stare, and as he moved about the cottage, my father kept shooting inscrutable looks my way.

"That... doesn't make sense," I said. "If we're royalty, why are we living in the middle of nowhere? Why barely survive out here when we could...?"

When we could what?

Cocking his head, Eledis said, "What better place to hide?"

A chill swirled to rest in my gut, and despite how much I might wish it otherwise, I found myself detaching.

"Hide?" I asked. "From what?"

"Who, actually," Eledis said. "The man who stole our kingdom from us. Doldimar."

"Doldimar," I repeated.

A cackle followed the name, spewing long and loud from me until I'd doubled over on myself with one hand gripping the table. Alouin, this had to be a joke. They couldn't be serious. They couldn't...

But as I examined my family—Eledis' face, pinched with annoyance, and my father refusing to look at me—the same sense of familiarity, of *knowing*, that I'd experienced while reading about Auden settled over me. I didn't know why or how, but I believed this story.

Which left only one question.

"Why would you keep this from me?" I shouted.

Implacable as always, Eledis turned to my father, who cringed as he tied off a pack.

"The floor's yours," he said.

Turning, my father faced me and swallowed

"It was your mother's dying wish," he said. "She wanted us to leave our history in the past."

Almost, the mention of my mother stopped me in my tracks. Almost.

"And the *nine years* before she died?" I growled. "You didn't think sharing this *insignificant facet of my life* was a good idea?"

Flinching, my father said, "Would you worry a child with the threat our family faces?"

"What threat?" I screamed through my teeth.

With a sigh, Eledis slammed his hands on the table, leaning over it.

"Again, your answer is Doldimar," he said. "He wants the Audish royal line dead but not because we pose a threat to his reign's legitimacy. I doubt he cares about that. No, he doesn't want the foretelling about our family to come true, as it has with you. Now, we need to-"

"But I read the foretellings about Shadowsteal," I said. "Nowhere did they mention Auden or its royal family."

"Are you sure about that?" Eledis said. "*Shadowsteal's rightful bearer shall destroy destruction's epitome, returning our land to peace a prosperity*, right? Stupidly convoluted, as usual, but that's clearly a reference to our current situation."

I knew my mouth was hanging open, but I couldn't seem to close it. They believed this supposed foretelling, one I wasn't convinced had anything to do with us. They expected me to *defeat an evil overlord*? Had my family... had *the world* gone insane overnight?

"I need a minute," I squeaked.

As I ran for escape, Eledis called, "Raimie, we need to leave!"

"Let him-" my father started.

A closing door cut him off. I desperately wanted to sprint into the forest, letting rain and trees surround me, but I didn't know if those creepy figures from before had left or not. Instead, I circled the cottage before slamming my back into a wall and sliding down it.

With my knees up and my hands to my head, I shoved everything that had happened since waking up to the side. I focused on breathing, in and out. In and out.

When roaring denial stopped threatening to drown my thoughts, I picked at recent events, shrinking as I did so.

A foretelling. I was the subject of some long-ago seer's vision of the future. That couldn't be right. I wasn't... I just *wasn't*. Anything.

But if I was, should I worry about the foretelling that Eledis had mentioned alone, or should I take the others seriously as well? Alouin, what if I should? *How he soars, how he falls, how he will*

suffer? That couldn't- couldn't-

"Stop before you faint," I breathed.

Say my family was right. Say we were royalty.

Snorting, I said, "Alouin, that's crazy."

If it wasn't, though, what would I do about it? Eledis and my father thought we faced some unknown peril, and I had no reason to doubt them. Given that, the best course of action, for now at least, was the follow their lead and see what happened. I could do that. It was what I'd done for my whole life, after all.

No way would I touch that damn sword again, though, not until I knew why the world had shifted when I'd last done it. Someone else could take responsibility for it until then.

"Ok," I breathed. "Ok, ok, ok."

With my decision made, I opened my eyes and scrambled backward, trying to merge with the wall.

The figures from the forest, one of light and one of shadow, were standing on either side of me, bending over to peer at me with cocked heads. With my breath stolen, I couldn't scream while slits peeled open where their faces should be, and buzzing was pushed from them in spurts.

A moment of silence followed, one where they seemed to be waiting for a response. If they were, I didn't have one for them. I pulled as much of my body away from them as possible, and soon enough, the figure of light hummed once more. The shadowed figure straightened, crossed its arms, and hissed back.

Between blinks, they faced one another while screeches and whines punctuated the buzzing between them. The shadowed figure's hissing claimed dominance, and it jerked forward, throwing its fist toward the other one's face.

Halfway through its swing, however, it stopped short, turning the scene into a motionless painting. Both figures released a shrill screech before spinning toward the forest.

I didn't know what could have distracted such incomprehensible anomalies. At the moment, though, I didn't care.

Mounting pressure was threatening to crack my head, spilling my brains over the grass and fallen leaves, but I couldn't find the will to press my hands to my skull and hold that bone together.

Something terrible had found a home in the seat of who I was, and a shrieking child sprinted circuits inside while tears wept from his white-drowned eyes. It was unnatural, but I couldn't fight it. I sat as though made of stone while gibbering questions filled my thoughts. While a specter-like form peeled away from the forest's shadows, much like the primeancers of old were said to have done.

All of which was impossible.

It strode toward me, becoming merely a man with a hooded cloak to shroud his features, but rather than lessening my panic, this revelation sent my internal screaming up in pitch, a state that wasn't helped when the figures of light and shadow stepped between this new stranger and me.

One of them raised a hand in warning while the other one's shadows conglomerated in its hand. That figure tried to throw the resulting ball at the stranger, but the bolt dissipated when it lost contact with its creator.

Were they... protecting me?

Their efforts didn't make a difference. The hooded stranger advanced on me as if they were invisible, passing through them without pause. He came to a stop in front of me, looking down on my still form.

"Can't even resist my battle magic," came a voice from the hood's confines. "How are *you*...?"

Shaking his head, he drew a dagger from beneath his cloak before crouching to graze its edge along my cheek.

"I should make sure you're the right one first."

With my throat working, I tried to speak while the stranger reversed his grip on the dagger, but my voice failed me. As the stranger raised his weapon overhead, I caught movement on the edge of my vision.

"Raim-!"

Then, steel cracked into my temple and-

"Shiiiiit!"

I screamed my numbing fear into the confines of my nightmare realm. I'd love to thrash and punch and kick and in general, throw a tantrum as well, but as always, damn incorporeal bonds arrested any movement I might make.

Which meant that after my cursing fell silent, I had to consider what had happened. What had that been? A blow to the head, hard enough for me to lose consciousness, would have been bad enough. I was looking at a concussion, at the least, when I woke up.

If I woke up.

But the rest? Terror crashing over me so strongly that I couldn't lift a finger while a threat casually strolled forward to do me harm? It was too much.

"It's too much! Do you hear me?" I shouted. "Magic swords and a life-altering revelation? Alouin, my family's been keeping this secret from me for years. What else have they kept hidden?"

Panting, I sightlessly stared at swirling black. I couldn't dwell on the possibility of more lies, not when more pressing concerns required my attention.

The stranger, whoever he was, obviously wasn't friendly. A friend didn't pin one in place or knock one unconscious, and I was in the hands of someone who'd done both.

Which meant.

"I need to wake up," I said under my breath. "I need to get out of here."

But how-?

"I can help with that."

For a moment, all I could do was shudder with my eyes fighting against what was holding them open.

That voice. I knew it, didn't I? It-

The hooded wraith from my last nightmare peeked into view, and I frowned.

"You're talking to me now?" I asked.

The wraith cocked his head.

"Wait. You can actually hear me this time?" he whispered.

"Of course I can. Why wouldn't I be able to?" I asked. "And what do you mean you can help?"

Shooting to his full height, the wraith lifted fingers to his mouth.

"Oh my gods, he can hear me," he said. "Does that mean...? No. Still blocked."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Who are you?" I asked.

Stiffening, the wraith bent over me, clasping his hands behind his back. I could almost see a fierce smirk beneath that hood's all-consuming black.

"At the moment, my designated identifier will mean nothing to you," he said. "Perhaps later, I will share it, but for now, you have mentioned a desire to leave this place?"

For a long pause, I simply stared, and not once in that examination did the wraith move, not even to breathe. Not visibly at least.

"I don't understand anything that's happened this morning," I eventually said. "I'm not sure I can handle another mystery on top of everything else, but if you can get me to the waking world before someone hurts me there, I'll try to ignore that."

The wraith turned my silence back on me; his previous motionlessness frenetic when compared to the appearance of a man absent his essence. The nightmare turned chilly with ice filling my lungs.

"I have a price for my assistance," the wraith said.

Of course he did. Nothing in life came for free.

"What is it?" I asked through gritted teeth.

An arm shot out of the wraith's cloak while a knife slipped into his hand. That blade, in all of this nightmare's dark landscape, was the only thing that shone. If I could, I'd recoil from it, but immobilized as I was, I could only stare with my breath quickening.

"Cease your fear. This is not meant for you," the wraith said, "but I shall require it for my price. If you want me to help you, heart of-

He paused, almost flinching, but moved on before I could ask what was wrong.

"If you want help, I require your permission to free you."

...What?

"How is that a price? I've wanted my freedom for years," I said. "Also, you can do that?"

Again, the head was cocked.

"Yes," the wraith said, "but only if you give me permission."

I wasn't a fan of a stranger with a knife, especially someone as disturbing as the wraith, standing anywhere near me while I couldn't defend myself. I couldn't, however, do much to change my circumstances, and leaving my fate in this relatively benign man's hands seemed wiser than doing the same for the stranger in the waking world.

"Do as you like," I said. "Free me."

A convulsion ran over the wraith, and when he threw his head back, the hood started slipping off of it.

"Finally," he said.

His rough voice filled the nightmare, sending fingers of unease sliding over my skin. The wraith dropped to his knees with his knife clattering beside him, and cold hands were rested on either side of my face.

"I will begin immediately," he said, "but in the meantime, you must WAKE UP!"

Something tugged between my shoulder blades, making my nightmare narrow to a point. A voice chased me as I fell away from it.

"Do not leave me alone again. Return to me. Please."

[Audiobook Chapter Six](#)

Revision #3

Created 18 August 2024 18:27:41 by FatalisticFable

Updated 30 December 2024 00:25:10 by FatalisticFable