

# Chapter 10: Unexpected Compassion

## Rhylix

I started with my cursed height. To this point, I'd never bothered with correcting that horrible aspect of my body, but if daily magic use was to be forced upon me, I might as well make myself comfortable. Yes?

The view from one foot down was... disconcerting. Any extreme change to my body was like that, of course, but with this one, I got a good view of Oswin's shocked surprise and Raimie's wry grin.

Next came my hair. Slowly, I shifted the green in it down to my eyes, muting its red color to a darker shade, and once that was done, all that was left was to modify smaller items, like softening my cheekbones and shifting my eyes closer together. Little changes to perfect the painting I'd become.

Once everything was finished, I released a breath while shaking out my arms. Over the next few days, I'd have to practice my sword forms, getting used to the change in my reach, but that should be simple enough to accomplish.

"We'll have to pick a new name for me too," I distractedly said. "It should be something similar, otherwise the change might have one of you breaking my disguise. Ryvolim, maybe? I haven't used that name in a while, and he was one of the few times I've been happy in life."

Turning to Raimie, I raised an eyebrow.

"What do you think?" I said. "Is it human enough?"

Snorting, my friend nodded, but he got interrupted before he could say anything else.

"Wait, wait, wait," Oswin shakily said. "You can *change how you look*? How have I never heard about this before? And... is this another application of Ele or something else?"

"It's Eselan magic," Raimie said with amusement.

Smirking, I added, "It's called shape change, and of course you've never heard of it. We Esela keep this magic type under wraps, only sharing it with the Audish royal family in recent years. Humans

tend to get fussy once they realize that the 'inferior' race can look like them."

For a moment, Oswin was speechless, simply shaking his head, but soon enough, he was snorting with laughter.

"Alouin, that's such a useful skill," he said. "I can't even... it would help *so much* with what I do."

"It has been rather handy, especially when I've had to infiltrate an enemy's ranks in the past," I said.

Chuckling, Oswin said, "I'll bet."

A knock on the door jarred us out of whatever strange sense of camaraderie had been forming, and at Raimie's nod, Oswin moved to open it. For a heartbeat, I panicked, needing to *get behind the door*, before I remembered that I'd already assumed a shape change. Whoever was about to come through that door wouldn't know who I was and subsequently, wouldn't freak out about the dead-man-walking that I'd become.

I really needed to address that anxiety of mine at some point.

A nameless soldier soon came inside, scanning the room as he did. His eyes briefly lingered on me, but considering how quickly he moved on to his king, I assumed he'd been merely curious about the stranger in the room.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "I didn't mean to interrupt, but I have the report you requested."

Report? Report on what?

"Oh, good!" Raimie said. "Please, tell me what you've learned."

"First, we've finished debriefing this fort's former Overseer," the soldier said. "Someone's writing those proceedings up for you, so you should have the information we learned soon."

Shifting in place, the soldier took a breath before pausing. He looked away, swallowing a few times before he could speak again.

"Second, the incident from last night has been contained. The three men who attacked... your friend were working on their own. For the moment, no one else is acting like they want to hurt him, although I suppose that doesn't much matter now."

As this man had been speaking, I'd had to hold myself perfectly still, hoping to disappear in the room. Drawing attention to myself right now would be bad.

Was this how Raimie had chosen to address the issue of the men he'd killed while helping me? By turning what had happened into a crime so he could investigate it?

It made sense, of a sort. Those people *had* assaulted me... I supposed. Unfortunately, I was so used to that sort of thing happening that I was surprised others might consider it a crime.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it,” Raimie said, “but come. You shouldn’t feel-”

Jerking his head up, the nameless soldier blurted, “Forgive me, sir, but I was wondering if I could make a request of you.”

Raimie blinked for a moment before nodding.

“Of course you can.”

His easy acquiescence seemed to have made the soldier uncomfortable, given how much the man was shuffling in place.

“During the battle on the beach, I was one of the people who served as a distraction for our main cohort,” he said. “I... or rather *we*—those of us Rhylix saved—would like to know what you’re planning to do with his- his body. If you mean to hold a memorial for him, we want to be there. He deserves to be honored.”

I could swear my breath had been knocked out of my body. How...? When had the world changed around me?

I hadn’t thought my actions over this cycle had been enough to overcome people’s typical fear and revulsion of primeancers. With those feelings so deeply entrenched in the world’s populace, changing them was usually impossible, and yet, here was proof that maybe this time, I’d been wrong.

With a gruff voice, Raimie said, “You’re right. Rhylix certainly deserves any honor that you would like to bestow. But!”

Moving forward, he rested a hand on the soldier’s shoulder.

“I won’t be in charge of his memorial. That job will fall to Ren, his sister, and anyone else she wants to include in the process,” he said. “In fact, the man who will be transporting Rhylix’s body to her is with us now.”

As he waved at me, I fought off a shiver of appreciation. That had been a *masterful* manipulation of the truth.

“Honestly, though, my advice is for you to honor Rhylix in whatever way you think best,” Raimie continued. “You don’t need a body for that, not when he wouldn’t be in it. For now, Rhylix exists *here*—”

He nudged the soldier’s forehead.

“—in your memories.”

Coughing, the soldier had to clear his throat a few times before he could reply.

“Thank you, sir. We’ll do just that.”

With a grin, Raimie patted his shoulder.

“Whatever you and your friends end up doing, make sure you invite me,” he said. “I’d love to join you.”

“We- we wouldn’t dream of doing otherwise,” the soldier said.

“Good!” Raimie said, clapping his hands together. “Now. Was there anything else? I should finish briefing Ryvolim here about what’s needed from him. Given how little we have on hand for preserving bodies right now, he has quite the task in front of him if he’s to reach Ren in time.”

...What-?

“No, no. That was all,” the nameless soldier said. “Except... as you’re probably aware, the Zrelnach’s commander, Gistrick, arrived earlier this afternoon. He asked me to tell you that he and his people are ready to take over here. Something about you—and I’m quoting here, sir—‘getting on with the next phase of this ridiculous plan’.”

At that, Raimie huffed.

“He *would* put it like that,” he said. “Thank you for letting me know, Dravenik. If there’s nothing else, you’re dismissed.”

When he heard his name, the soldier’s eyebrows shot for his hairline, and he hurried to salute.

“As you say, sir,” he said.

But then, he left the room, moving so fast that it had Oswin chuckling.

“I don’t think they like you knowing their names,” he said.

Making a face, Raimie said, “Well, that’s too bad. I can’t help learning them, and if my soldiers insist on calling me ‘sir’ and ‘Your Majesty’, they can deal with me using their own damn names.”

“I’m sure they’ll get used to it soon enough,” I said. “Can we go back a little, though? You mentioned something about preserving bodies a minute ago, presumably in reference to how quickly they tend to rot. And what was that about Gistrick arriving earlier today?”

So far as I’d been aware, he shouldn’t have arrived until tomorrow morning. Had I missed something?

Shifting in place, Raimie and Oswin exchanged an uneasy glance before my friend made a face.

"It's like I said earlier, Rhy. You were 'dead' for a little less than a day, which means it's almost nighttime again," he said. "Remember? I did mention that, right?"

He looked to Oswin for confirmation, but I barely registered the spy's nod. Turning on Creation, still hovering in a corner, I lifted an eyebrow.

"A little less than a day?" I said.

That was an unprecedentedly long time for Ele to keep from Restoring my body. Unless a delay like that was planned way ahead of time, I was usually back on the physical plane within a couple of minutes.

Shrinking on themselves, Creation said, "There have been some problems with... *things* recently. In the whole, I mean. I've been meaning to tell you about it for a while now but..."

Trailing off, they shrugged, and I narrowed my eyes at them.

"Yes, that seems like something I should have known about," I said.

If I was unaware of shifts in the Eternal War, no matter how slight, then my ability to accomplish Ele's purpose for me got compromised. I doubted the primal force wanted that to happen, meaning Creations should have *already* told me about these supposed 'problems'.

They seemed to know what I was thinking because they shot a hand up to stop me from speaking.

"We can discuss it later," they said. "When you're not around *them*."

Creation gestured at Oswin and Raimie, who were curiously watching me, and sighing, I nodded.

"Fair enough," I said before turning my attention to the other two people in the room. "Sorry. I didn't mean to get so distracted."

"It's fine, Rhy," Raimie drawled, cautiously eyeing me. "Given everything that's happened in the last day, it makes sense that you'd need to discuss things with your splinter. And you know... if you need a moment to just breathe, you can have that too."

I was a little tense and if that stress was showing enough for Raimie to notice it...

Damn. I hadn't meant to worry my friend.

"Is that what he was doing?" Oswin said. "Talking to his Ele splinter?"

As Raimie nodded, I sharply glanced at the spy. How much did he know about primeancy? Sure, the fact that primeancers usually had a splinter hanging around them was common knowledge. But still.

And speaking of the spy...

“Now that we’ve established how we’ll handle my apparent death, there’s only one other issue to address,” I said. “Oswin. Can you keep this secret? I don’t want to go through an annoying amount of magic use, along with its associated energy drain, if my cover could get blown by a slip of the tongue.”

Oswin let loose a single laugh.

“You’ll have more of a problem with that from Raimie than me,” he said. “No offense meant, sir. I know you wouldn’t endanger your friend by doing something so careless.”

“No offense taken,” Raimie said.

The spy’s assertion had done little to reassure me, and I had to be *perfectly clear* on this point. With how hectic life was about to become, I couldn’t deal with juggling another shift in name and personality on top of everything else.

“Are you sure about that?” I said. “Keeping secrets can be-”

“Rhy, stop,” Raimie said. “He’s a *spy*, remember? Keeping secrets is part of his job.”

And wasn’t that a terrifying thought?

“But if it’ll make you feel better...”

Turning to face Oswin, Raimie glanced back at me.

“Are you paying attention?” he asked.

When I inclined my head, he turned solemn, putting all of his focus on the spy in our midst.

“Oswin. What we’ve discussed in this room, including Rhylix’s many abilities and the way we intend to hide them, is privileged information,” he said. “You should consider it as highly sensitive as the most prized of state secrets. This, your king commands. Understood?”

Oswin snapped into a bow.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he said.

And even if I couldn’t see his face, I knew Raimie was wincing.

“Get up!” he snapped. “There’s no need for that. Let’s move on with the day.”

Rising, Oswin smirked at my friend.

“Of course... Your Majesty,” he said.

“Alouin, your snark knows no bounds, does it?” Raimie said.

He was still rolling his eyes when he faced me.

“Satisfied?” he said.

“Supremely.”

After all, there wasn't much more I could do to ensure Oswin's silence.

“So glad my trustworthiness has been established,” the spy drawled.

Which made me wince. Much as I might have needed to draw this line in the sand, for my own safety, it probably hadn't helped with improving Oswin's disposition toward me.

“Is that it, then?” he continued. “We cover up a giant internal issue as best we can, and Rhyli... Rylvolim pretends to be human for a while?”

“At least until things have calmed down, yes,” I said. “Maybe once that happens, Rhylix can make a return, but for now, this is the best solution I have for the problem.”

Sighing, Oswin rested his hands on his hips with his head bowed.

“All right. I'll sell the story as best I can,” he said, “but in the meantime, we all have things to do. Now that Da'kul is secure, we should return to Tiro as quickly as possible so we can get ahead of any rumors that might form, and before we can leave, I'll need to brief my subordinates about this and their next assignments. I'm sure the two of you have things to do as well.”

“Unfortunately,” Raimie said. “Now that chaos has started back up again, it's unlikely to relent anytime soon.”

“Such is life,” I said. “If you'll remember, I *did* warn you about this, not too long ago in fact.”

At my friend's groan, I shot him a silly grin.

“Yeah, you're right,” he said, “but *anyway*. Let's get our shit done, and then, it's time to go home. Yes?”

I didn't know if I'd call Tiro *home* but...

“Yes, let's leave this place.”

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Revision #1

Created 6 September 2024 19:32:24 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable