

# Chapter 82: How Reality Works

## Rhylix

Getting Raimie into bed had required far too much pleading and cajoling, but somehow, I'd managed it, despite the sheer number of people who'd been crying out for help in the dining hall. The healer in me had been loath to abandon so many men and women to their wounds. I couldn't imagine what leaving that room had done to my friend, a man who often went out of his way to help complete strangers, but doing so had been *absolutely* necessary.

When Raimie had limped into the dining hall earlier today, I'd nearly lost my composure, both as a healer and a friend. In all my years of living, Raimie was quite possibly the most frustrating patient I'd ever had to deal with. He not only refused to rest, as his body required, but had the power needed to make sure no one compelled him to do so.

When he'd woken up in Qena, Raimie had ordered the march home to start with no delay, pointedly ignoring my protests, and with the Qenans quick to offer us the use of a wagon, any support I might have had from the soldiers for an imposed delay had vanished.

Since his injury near the Qenan tear, Raimie had spent one day unconscious, two weeks traveling, and four days in bed, so continually interrupted by people consulting with him on last-minute changes to the investiture ceremony that I couldn't, in good conscience, call it 'resting'. And today had brought its own chaos.

So, of course, Raimie currently looked worse than on the day he'd nearly bled out, and of course, I'd had a minor panic attack in the dining hall. The first person who'd called me a friend in centuries had wobbled on his crutch, the precursor to a bad fall, and my heart had stuttered to a stop.

Even now, fitfully sleeping as he was, Raimie was the picture of death. I was keeping watch over him in the sparse room that my friend had taken as his own, leaning against a wall with one arm hugging my chest.

"Can I *please* fix him?" I breathed. "I could Restore only his leg. It wouldn't cost Ele much."

Sitting at the base of the wall beside Raimie's bed, Creation said, "Feel free to do as you like, but don't expect the whole to come to your rescue after you acquire his injury. Can you afford to spend

a month as weak as he is? What happens if Arivor returns in that time?"

I couldn't hold it in anymore. Over the last few years, my defenses against the rage inside of me had worn down, and this inability to fix Raimie had become the final shove needed to shatter them. I had to speak up, to let the question that had haunted me since coming to Auden spill over.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I asked, keeping my voice down with difficulty. "I know, Ele's retreat begins with me, but *why*? Aren't there better ways to conserve its power? Why not keep splinters for awakening more primeancers, for one?"

Biting their lip, Creation shifted to a more comfortable position, drifting their eyes across the room until they landed on me.

"The whole's abandonment of you was the deal that I and several sympathetic splinters made with those who had other, more malevolent designs for you," they said.

For a handful of seconds or maybe minutes, I gaped at Creation with heat building in my chest until it was a blazing inferno.

"I don't know where to start with that," I growled. "First of all, malevolent designs? It's not bad enough that until the end of time, I'll be kept from death and compelled to repeatedly murder my oldest friend?"

"Second, sympathetic splinters? How do they know enough about me to be sympathetic? I know splinters report on their primeancers to the whole, but I didn't think you did the same with me, Creation. I thought your only job was to keep me on the straight and narrow-"

Gasping, I ground my teeth together, refusing to consider the changes that I'd thought I'd seen in our relationship. Maybe those changes had only been on my end. Maybe Creation was the same as they'd always been, and I'd been imagining things.

"Lastly, a deal?" I snapped. "Are the Ele splinters disagreeing with each other? Is that even possible? And if a deal was to be made, why wasn't I consulted?"

As my barrage of words stopped, Creation tightly hugged their knees with hunched shoulders.

"Report on you? Is that what you think happens when I return to the whole?" they whispered. "No. When I leave the physical plane, I'm incorporated into aspect Creation, and the whole assimilates my experiences here. I don't get a choice in the matter, and as I've said before, the longer I'm there, the more oddities that I've absorbed from you get scoured from me."

"That cleansing is why I've acted like such a stuck-up, self-righteous ass in previous cycles. Back then, you only let me into the physical plane when you needed me, which wasn't much. You never gave me enough time to pick up mannerisms from you. Stuck on the other side, I monitored you as best I could."

The room had started going red. A drowned-out, rational part of me recognized this warning sign, knowing I needed to calm down. When the Champion of Ele lost his temper, it never ended well, either for me or for those who'd stoked my wrath.

Such a wild loss of control hadn't happened in centuries. The only close call had been when I'd nearly been forced to torture someone in Da'kul, with Raimie.

Rational Rhylix didn't want to travel further down this path, but I'd already crossed a line. Anger had sunk its claws in me.

Still, the feebly small, clear-headed part of me struggled to once more buck the approaching storm of rage, one that would end with me standing over a pile of groaning, broken bodies again.

"You decided to answer *that* question out of everything I asked? The one of least importance, the safest one for you? Just—"

I dismissively waved.

"—go away, Creation. I can't deal with you right now."

While leveraging their head to stare at me, Creation otherwise looked like a statue.

"...You want me to return to the whole, after what I've just told you?" they asked in monotone.

"I suppose that would be... cruel, wouldn't it?"

As pity splashed into my wrath, I choked off further words. Those two sensations made for an odd combination, and in the midst of experiencing it, I wondered if I shouldn't take back what I'd said.

"Yes, Eriadren. Yes, it would be," Creation said, "but don't worry. I've learned a few tricks over my years with you, and I'm sure you won't keep me there for long. I shouldn't have changed when you call me back. Much."

They popped out of existence, and despite fury's loosening grip on me, I balled my hands into fists.

What had Creation expected? The game had changed, and they refused to explain the new rules or the reason for this alteration. Had they thought I'd be happy with this unexpected shift?

For a short time, all I did was breathe. In and out slowly, focusing my thoughts. The red around me receded, and while anger still bubbled beneath the surface, I was in control.

When I was no longer teetering on the edge, I found that I could think about what Creation had said. Lingering questions snagged at me, but I doubted I'd be able to pry answers out of Creation. Years had passed since their initial revelation, and I'd learned nothing new about my loss of power. Since my attempts with my 'babysitter' had gone nowhere, I should try a different tactic while the splinter couldn't interfere, but what else could I do?

"I'll feel incredibly stupid when this doesn't work," I said, mostly to myself, "but can we-?"

"Talk?" Order interrupted, popping into view at the head of Raimie's bed. "Of course we can. What do you want, Eriadren?"

Wow... that had actually *worked*.

"Have I always been able to do this?" I quietly said.

"Summon others' splinters into view? Yes. Maybe if you'd allowed your curiosity free reign at any point since the first cycle, you'd have discovered the skill by now," Order huffed. "*What do you want?*"

"For one thing, I'd like it if you Ele splinters would treat me with any modicum of respect. Your air of superiority gets tiresome," I said through my teeth. "Would using your manners kill you, Order?"

"My name is *Bright*, thank you," the Ele splinter hissed.

"I'll call you Bright when you call me Rhylix!"

On the bed opposite me, Raimie mumbled incoherently, rolling over, and both the splinter and I went quiet, sharply watching him for further signs of waking. Raimie only took up a gentle snore once more.

Relaxing, I considered Order. I hadn't talked with Raimie's Ele splinter much, which was why I'd gone on the defensive after their first irritable question. Experience had taught me that splinters of Ele had an overbearing aura of arrogance or disdain, both of which I poorly reacted to. I couldn't say whether Raimie's splinter would follow suit, but at the least, Order and I had one point of common ground to build on, a human we both strove to protect.

"Perhaps we started off on the wrong foot," Order said. "Forgive me for my less than congenial behavior. Raimie has spoiled me when it comes to taking orders from primeancers and- and from you, apparently."

That... made a lot of sense. Raimie had never been comfortable with telling people what to do, so why wouldn't he be the same with splinters? And I knew that splinters didn't enjoy their primeancers ordering them around, although how much they disliked it varied.

See? This was why I needed to stop making assumptions. Order hadn't been acting like an asshole. They'd been aggravated about something I'd done.

"I'm sorry I reacted with sarcasm. Truly," I said. "I'm unused to splinters behaving in anything less than a holier-than-thought manner."

"We can be rather snobbish when we've been away from the physical plane for too long," Order said, "but enough of that. I assume you had a reason for requesting my presence?"

"I need answers to questions," I said. "I was hoping an aspect other than Creation might be willing to share them with me."

"We won't know until you ask, will we?" Order said.

Their bland features contorted into an approximation of a smile, all while they sat on the bed. Once gracefully perched there, they started playing with Raimie's hair, watching their fingers pass through those strands with a softened smile.

That was interesting. Was Order fond of their human? How rare.

"Fair enough," I said with a shrug. "So, first. Creation has mentioned that Ele's consensus is to use me for some purpose that they seem repelled by. They said that they and several other splinters have dissented from this accord which has led to a precarious compromise."

"My questions are as follows. How is Ele, the force that encapsulates harmony, in discord with itself? And what fate is so ghastly that Creation would rather have me suffer the slow leak of what sustains me rather than having me submit to it?"

Order wordlessly stared at me with their smile dropping into a flat line.

"Creation hasn't told you?" they eventually asked.

"They avoid the subject every time I bring it up."

"That little-" Order growled, trying to strangle the air. "Creation was *supposed to tell you!*"

"If they were, they're taking their sweet time about it," I said.

With a frustrated yell, Order slumped on themselves, supporting their forehead with their hands.

"I suppose it's become my job, then," they said with a sigh. "How wonderful for me."

Straightening, they hopped out of bed before pacing the room.

"In answer to your first question, yes. The whole can disagree with itself by means of its splinters," Order said. "The vast majority of us stay incorporated on a permanent basis, maintaining the whole's purity, but those of us who are sent into the physical plane develop qualities that we never could while within it. The whole relies on our... *unique* perspectives to combat our enemy, although this only happens when both wholes exist on this plane, attached to you mortal beings."

Ele and Daevetch on this plane...

"Are you saying that the existence of splinters and primeancers in this world is *my* fault?" I asked. "Neither Ele nor Daevetch would have broken into the physical plane if my experiment hadn't caused a breach."

Pausing, Order poorly contained a laugh at the look on my face.

“Don’t worry about that. Our existence here is hardly your fault,” they said. “This isn’t the only iteration where we’ve embedded ourselves, and besides, Alouin split *much* larger breaches into this one when he and his people fled from their failing iteration.”

Itera....? What? Why had Order mentioned Alouin? And what *in the void* was an... iteration?

It didn’t matter. I couldn’t let the splinter’s strange jargon sidetrack me.

“So, Ele lets a part of itself become impure in order to learn new and more efficient strategies to use against Daevetch?” I asked.

Gods, that was a difficult concept for me to warp my head around, especially when Order tilted their hand back and forth while making a face.

“An accurate, if... crude, summary,” they finally said. “Splinters sent to the physical plane are supposed to check for signs of excessive corruption within themselves, returning to the whole for correction when needed, but on occasion, *some* of us deliberately ignore that responsibility. Only when the situation warrants it, of course, or if one’s mortal...”

Looking back at Raimie, Order shook their head.

“Only when the situation warrants it,” they repeated.

“You and Creation...?” I asked, pointing at them.

“Among others, yes.”

I’d spent millennia alive and was only now beginning to figure out how Ele worked. How short-sighted had I been in previous cycles to ignore this?

“Don’t go self-flagellating on me, Eriadren,” Order said. “You’ve performed admirably for a flawed Eselan, stuck in what must seem like a curse. Blaming yourself for this mess hasn’t encouraged your natural curiosity, and your quest’s start with the deaths of Lirilith and Sepiala scarred inquisitiveness out of you, I know.”

I sucked in a breath. It was funny how that loss still burned brighter than the others. I’d lost so many parents and siblings to the Eternal War, and those first two were still a burning brand, jabbed into the festering wound of my heart.

One would think that after so many years, it would have healed but no. Maybe this lingering agony persisted because at the time of its infliction, I hadn’t yet mastered compartmentalization, or maybe it lashed against me because they’d been the family I’d chosen, not the one I’d been assigned.

Who knew? All I could do now was reject a swell of uncontrollable grief, repressing the memories of Lirilith and a tiny bundle of joy that I'd have ripped my heart out for.

"What about my other questions?" I gruffly asked.

Watching me, Order looked so melancholy, but as soon as they noticed my attention on them, they glanced away, resuming their pacing.

"Do you know why the whole has retreated?" they asked.

Didn't that question have a simple answer?

"Because Daevetch is winning, no?" I said.

"It's a bit more complicated than that," Order said, grimacing.

Holding one hand level with the floor, they raised another to a stop just below the first.

"Beneath the physical plane's skin, both wholes persist in eternal conflict. This, you know."

Order turned their hands so that they were perpendicular to the floor. Slapping them together, they drew the two apart, leaving behind a softly glowing bead of Ele.

"On the same level as the wholes, a single locus exists, endlessly spread along the front where the two meet. This is the balance point."

"During this cycle, you may have heard Creation talking about a shift in the balance? That expression wasn't merely a curious way of expressing a power shift between the wholes. The balance point that has for eons, kept us in check is in the process of failing, and when it eventually ruptures—"

The Ele bead went out, and Order slapped their hands together again, hard enough to make me jump. Looking at their clasped hands, the splinter shuddered.

"—an end to all things."

Glancing between Order's hands and their face, I waited for more, but when they merely continued staring into nothing, I cleared my throat.

"That seems a bit dramatic," I said.

Brought back to reality, Order gave me a sour look.

"Tell me, Eriadren, what happens when two opposites meet? They repel one another, is that not correct?" the splinter asked. "All of reality, your iteration and the others, exist with miniscule measures of both wholes within it. The balance point serves as a... barrier, if you will. What do you suppose would happen if that barrier vanishes and the two primal opposites, 'Ele' and 'Daevetch' "

as you lot call us, truly meet for the first time?"

For a brief flash, a thousand variants of Arivor's corpse were sprawled at my feet, and the rusted-red tinge of my oldest friend's blood stained my hands. Even with my need to break me and Arivor free of our curse, even given how much I'd once cared for him, I couldn't stop myself from killing my friend, and that was because of an all-encompassing enmity for Daevetch's Champion.

"The end of all things," I breathed.

Grimly nodding, Order said, "When the balance first shifted, my whole, being what it is, began looking for a solution to this problem, and the enemy, being what it is, went on the offensive, intent on taking every advantage that it could get. That is why my whole has retreated. From a desire to heal, not harm."

"Fascinating," I said with a dry mouth. "What does it have to do with me?"

Wincing, Order stopped short, fixing their eyes on the ceiling.

"You were one of the proposed solutions," they said. "Some of us argued to send you into the balance point once this cycle has finished, but you don't need to worry. Creation and I joined with several other aspects to convince the whole that an attempt like that would be futile. You'd be torn apart the moment you entered the balance point."

Gods...

At least I understood why Creation had avoided the subject now. The healer in me longed to fix this wound at the world's core, and the scientist hungered to worry at the problem until it unraveled for me. In short, the splinter had known that I would find this conundrum irresistible.

Had Creation been *protecting* me?

"You said one of the proposed solutions?" I said.

For the first time this evening, Order seemed reluctant to answer. Wringing their hands, they shifted in place as if ants were swarming under their feet.

"In all honesty, only two were put forth," they said with a strained voice. "The other one—"

"—isn't something he needs to know," a third voice growled as it entered the conversation.

Order looked intensely relieved by the interruption, but I recoiled with my retreat blocked by resin-coated obsidian. In my haste to withdraw, that resin ripped against my back, drawing blood and making my breath catch.

Meanwhile, Order cringed before the fury of the splinter that had joined us.

“What are you doing?” Chaos hissed. “Our agreement requires his ignorance! He’ll ruin the plan if he learns about it.”

“I know! I’m sorry. He’s just-”

Glancing at me, Order clicked their tongue before hugging themselves.

“There’s something irresistible about him.”

“I resist my whole *every day* that I work with you. Not attempting your annihilation takes *everything I have*, but I resist the urge for the greater good, which I honestly don’t give a shit about, but also for the continuation of our eternal conflict,” Chaos snarled. “You can do the same with this poor reflection of your whole.”

While Chaos battered Order with its indignation, I fought to keep from gagging at an unexpected influx of Daevetch into the room, which had the splinters’ words floating nearly unheard past me. I flicked my eyes to Shadowsteal, resting against a wall.

Raimie had asked me to return the weapon to Eledis before he’d fallen asleep, but I hadn’t done it yet, too absorbed with ensuring my friend had undisturbed rest tonight. Thank the gods for my delay! With Shadowsteal here, now might be the perfect and only opportunity to free Raimie of Chaos’ influence. After hiding my palm in my cloak’s cuff, I reached for the elegantly crafted blade, drawing it from its plain scabbard.

All the while, Chaos reprimanded Order, unaware of the danger to it.

“How could you come so close to ruining our plan?” it hissed. “I can’t believe how weak you are! You displayed such strength when you defied your whole’s consensus. Presenting an alternative to it goes against everything you are. I know. I did the same. So, why abandon that strength now?”

“I already apologized, cretin!” Order snapped. “What more do you want?”

“For you to help me with carrying this team!” Chaos yelled, throwing its hands above its head. “I realize that it might take time to regain your former vigor after your destruction and reassembly, but our human’s automatic reliance on *me* when we’re near a minor rip in reality has begun to annoy me, not to mention all the other, completely uncomfortable ways I’m keeping you stable.”

“I answered our human before you when he was approaching the reality rip near Qena,” Order said.

“But I’m the one who, in essence, saved his life once we were standing beside it!” Chaos shouted.

“I’m doing the best I can!”

As if prompted by the cry, Raimie shot upright like a puppet jerked into motion by its strings. His surprisingly focused gaze sidestepped the splinters to land on me, where I was lunging for Chaos.

“Do not destroy my splinter,” he said.

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Revision #1

Created 6 September 2025 20:12:10 by FatalisticFable

Updated 6 September 2025 20:38:48 by FatalisticFable