

Chapter 9: What Happens When You Die?

Rhylix

Slowly, I pieced together what had happened to me. I'd died—*obviously*—and slipped into that place full of only black, the space between realities. I always went there after death, if only for a heartbeat or an eternity. I could never tell which.

Compared to there, this green-and-blue place didn't usually keep me for as long as it had today. I was typically here for a breath, sometimes gaining a glimpse of Alouin before getting shoved back into my body. Why was I lingering this time?

"Hello, Rhylix. Would you mind moving? You're blocking my view of the sky."

Speaking of which.

As I stepped to the side, I glanced down at Alouin, raising an eyebrow. He was sprawled comfortably across the grass with his hands folded on his stomach, which was... different.

"Shouldn't our positions be reversed, what with me just dying?" I said before lowering my voice. "Not that you'd care."

As expected Alouin had no reply for that, merely blinking at me with a sardonic grin, so I huffed and rested my hands on my hips.

"Any idea why I'm still here?" I asked

Alouin shrugged.

"The balance has shifted, perhaps irrevocably this time," he said. "Some aspects of your Eternal War are sure to have changed as a result."

...Greeeeeat. Yet another complication in my already complicated life.

It would help if I knew what Alouin was talking about. What 'balance' was he referring to?

Glancing at me, Alouin snorted a laugh.

“Ships, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to confuse you. Yet again.”

Sighing, he closed his eyes before giving his body a shake and settling back into a relaxed position.

“And don’t worry. If I’m right—which I usually am—you’ll rejoin the living soon enough,” he said. “In the meantime, would you join me? I... could use the company.”

At that request, I hesitated. I might not hate Alouin as much as I had when he’d first forced me into this life, but our relationship still couldn’t be classified as good. Why would he ask someone like me for company?

What did it say about him that I was his only choice in the matter?

Ultimately, that was what had me sinking to the ground beside this god-like being. After a few heartbeats of watching him and his unfocused stare, I shifted in place.

“What’s got you so distracted?” I said. “I know I haven’t seen you much this cycle, but usually when I die, you give me all of your attention. Should I be jealous?”

Even as I voiced the idea, I laughed at it. Much as Alouin tended to help me along in my visits here after death, giving me hints and the like, I’d never enjoyed seeing him.

He didn’t react to what I’d said, though, continuing to vacantly stare instead, but after an agonizingly long wait, he pointed at the sky.

“I’m considering everything that represents,” he said.

After following the line his finger made to the sky, I winced. A pinpoint hole lay at the sky’s apex, containing a storm of illumination and darkness. In the midst of this, a humanoid figure was hanging from an unknown support, visibly twitching from even this far away, and the apparent source of his distress, the pinpoint’s storm of light and dark, funneled into him.

As always when viewing this, I recognized the hum, ever-present in this place, as the drawn-out and thready scream that it was, and half-unwillingly, I looked away once more, catching sight of Alouin’s rapt gaze as a result. Why did he find that horrifying image so captivating?

After another beat of quiet, he licked his lips.

“It’ll be my turn again soon,” he whispered. “I won’t survive this time.”

And I could only blink at him.

“What?” I said.

That seemed to break Alouin’s reverie. He slapped his cheeks a few times before sitting up.

“I shouldn’t burden you with that,” he said. “You’ve got enough on your plate.”

As he stood, I joined him, leaving me unable to pull away when he took my hands.

“There are some things you should know before then. A few warnings,” he said. “From this point on, I might seem different, Rhylix. At first, you might find me a little... unstable, but then, I’ll go cold. Be careful of yourself when that happens. I don’t know what my intentions for you will be after that. I don’t have that piece.”

At my uncomprehending stare, he made a face, releasing me.

“Trust me. I know that seems like babble right now. It’ll make sense eventually,” he said. “Now. Would you like me to speed along your trip to the living?”

When he lifted a hand, I nodded.

“Considering what I left behind, that would be helpful,” I said.

Maybe if I got back quickly enough, Raimie and I could pass my death off as something else, sweeping it under the rug.

And maybe I could also figure out why my friend had been acting so strangely tonight.

Resting his finger on my forehead, Alouin paused instead of shoving me away.

“I wish you luck on your journey, Rhylix,” he said before sadly smiling. “Goodbye.”

He pushed me backward, and as I fell, his words and face swirled in my mind until—

—I jolted into my body and went still.

Where was the danger? Were potential hostiles around me, or had Raimie gotten me somewhere private before the damage had been done?

When only silence greeted me for several heartbeats, I started breathing normally, slowly opening my eyes. Cautiously, I scanned what little of the room I could see from my prone position, and after seeing no one with me, I sat up. Clinging to the edge of my cot, I simply stared at my feet for a while, letting everything that had happened over the last few hours wash over me.

I’d died again, and yes, I should be used to this after countless experiences of it. Yes, it should perhaps be as nothing to me.

But this time had been different. This time, I’d died only a few hours after another death, and this time... this time, I’d been murdered.

I didn’t know why, but that made it feel so much worse, even if the circumstance had been expected. What was it about me that made others want to end my life so badly and so often? I knew some of that was a side effect of the life I led but the rest...

Was I really that distasteful to other people?

But then, I remembered Raimie and how hard he'd worked to save my life, or tried doing that at least. I didn't care how strange he'd been acting both before and during those awful moments. He'd been there for me. I hadn't been alone while Ele had wrung the last drop of life from me.

Isolation while dying was quite possibly the only experience worse than death, in my experience. Thank the gods it hadn't happened this time.

Still. Where was Raimie? I'd like to know what had happened after I'd died.

Given, he wasn't the only one who might answer my questions.

"Creation?" I softly said. "Are you there?"

"Of course."

The splinter was standing beside the door, carefully watching me, and given how obvious their presence was, I wondered how I could have missed them.

"Do you know what happened?" I asked. "Besides the obvious, I mean."

"Unfortunately, no," Creation softly said.

When I shot an incredulous stare at them, they shifted in place.

"I know you died, but after that happened, I lost my anchor to this plane of existence," they said. "I'm not sure what happened here for the time you were gone."

Yes, that made sense. That was how it had always been.

But.

"You couldn't have asked Raimie's Order splinter for details?" I said.

Creation's lips tightened.

"They had nothing to report," they said.

"Nothing to... what's that supposed to mean?"

But Creation refused to reply, and I knew I'd get nothing further from them about that.

Shaking my head, I said, "Fine. Do you at least know why things went the way they did this time? I spent much longer than usual in Alouin's world."

"That's... a difficult question to answer," Creation said.

And I narrowed my eyes at them. How had that been difficult?

Before I could ask that question, though, the room's door cracked open, letting a voice spill through it—

"I'm telling you, sir. Nothing's changed."

—and I froze with all of me going stone cold. Someone was about to encounter a living, breathing me after a possible exposure to my dead body.

How many times had I been in this position before? And every time... every time...

"Well, that was obviously a failure," Reive says with a grimace. "Still, how fortuitous for me. It's good to know I'll survive that type of poison once we reverse engineer you."

He turns to his assistants.

"Let's move on, shall we?"

Someone grabs me by the hair, and dazed as I am, I can't fight back as they drag me to a nearby bucket and shove my head underwater.

Frozen in place, I watched as the door finished swinging open. In its entrance, Oswin stopped short with his mouth falling open, and when he dropped the apple he'd been holding, the sound of its roll across the floor was deafening to me.

Gods, I wanted to push myself away from him until my back had hit the wall, curling on myself once there, but I couldn't move. I was stone.

Still, I made my lips move.

"Please," I said. "Don't hurt me."

For some reason, this made Oswin blink at me instead of sneering, but I didn't get long to ponder that. As if summoned by the sound of my voice, a source of safety came into view.

"Rhy! Thank the gods."

Pushing past Oswin, Raimie hurried to me.

"I'm so glad you're ok."

He grabbed my shoulder, probably meaning for it to be comforting, and I barely kept from flinching.

This was Raimie. My friend. I was safe here.

"Yes, you are," Creation softly said from their corner. "No one's going to hurt you right now."

Maybe not, but even still, the fact that Oswin was still standing in the doorway, staring, didn't bode well.

I couldn't let him see how much this bothered me.

With difficulty, I turned to Raimie.

"What happened?" I asked.

Wincing, Raimie curled in on himself.

"A few soldiers attacked you," he said. "It was bad, Rhy."

Nodding, I said, "I know that. I was more curious about what happened... afterward."

Although I did still have some questions about what had happened during my death, most especially about Raimie's behavior. Unfortunately, I wasn't sure I could ask any of them with a spy hovering over us.

When was that man planning on coming into the room?

"Well, after you... you know," Raimie said before vaguely waving at me, "Oswin and I dragged you here."

So, at the least, the spy had seen me dead. That had seemed obvious, given his reaction on coming into the room, but the confirmation of my suspicion was nice.

"And what exactly have you told Oswin to keep him from... discarding me?" I said.

Had my friend told the spy my secret?

Shaking himself, said spy finally shed his shock, letting the door fall closed behind him as he leaned against the wall.

"Raimie said that sometimes, Ele does a magic... thing to people like you," he said, looking mighty uncomfortable as he did so. "He said that when you're close to dying, it puts you into a death-like state, there to preserve your body for a time. The hope is that a healer can reach you before that time runs out. Does that sound about right?"

Oh, thank the gods. Raimie hadn't shared my secret. Given how often learning about it had hurt people in the past, I was fairly unwilling to let that piece of me get out.

Seriously, though? He'd blamed my curse on Ele's healing ability? That wasn't *at all* how that technique worked, and Raimie knew this. On seeing my side-eyed glare, he gave me a slight headshake, almost as if he hadn't wanted Oswin to see it.

Which of course, the spy had. That man had probably been trained to spot even the smallest of changes in body language.

But in answer to his question.

“That’s... a sufficient explanation, I suppose,” I said. “Is that it, then? I almost died, and the two of you got me into hiding before anyone else could see what happened?”

If that was so, had they also been able to clean up the bodies we’d left behind? Gods, how was Raimie planning to fix *that* complication?

Wincing, my friend half-closed one eye.

“Unfortunately, no,” he said. “Um... you’ve actually been ‘dead’—”

There, he made air quotes.

“—for a little over a day. And before Oswin caught up to help me with *things*, several soldiers ran across me and your supposed corpse. I’d be surprised if rumors of your death haven’t spread through the ranks by now.”

...Great.

Sighing, I leaned back on my hands with my eyes closed. This cycle kept getting increasingly complicated. It was starting—and I did mean *starting*—to worry me. How long would I be able to manage this chaos? *Could* I do that, long enough to reach my end goal at least?

Did that matter right now?

With my eyes still closed, I said. “Then, Rhylix is dead. That’s fine. I can work with it.”

Across from me, Oswin coughed out an aborted laugh.

“And how do you mean to do that?” he said.

Frowning, I snapped my head down to stare at the spy. I wasn’t sure how I’d made a poor impression on this man, but the bad attitude he’d always had while in my presence was starting to bother me. Maybe it was time to show him I wasn’t someone to be trifled with.

“Simple, really,” I said.

Getting to my feet, I fixed Oswin with a cold smile.

“I’ll become someone else.”