

# Interlude 1.1: Hope

## Eriadren

Gasping from my sprint, I leaned on the fence outside of my friend's estate, willing my body back under my control. Bodies didn't work like that, of course, so I was forced to wait for a return to normalcy instead.

My mother hadn't wanted me to come here today. I could tell, despite how much she'd protested otherwise. Her pinched lips and the wrinkles around her eyes had told me her true thoughts.

I, however, couldn't afford to skip today's meeting. If I did, I'd fail this year's group project, and I couldn't have that.

Once I'd recovered, I straightened my uniform, ensuring that I looked the part I must play, before striding to the house's door. After I knocked, it didn't take long for the lady of the house to answer my summons.

"Oh, Eriadren! How nice to see you," she said. "Do come in."

It never ceased to amaze me that no one in this household, save for my friend, saw me for who I was. They noted the uniform of our city's most prestigious school and assumed I belonged to a noble family.

Not that they were wrong, but unless pressed, I'd never admit to that fact. Throughout my life, my father had been useless. His success with getting me into school had been the only good thing that he'd done for me before his exile.

"-get you anything while you wait?"

Blinking, I realized I'd tuned the lady of the house out. How fortunate that I'd caught the tail end of her question.

Giving her my most charming smile, I said, "I'm fine, thank you."

"In that case, I'll only be a few minutes."

After the lady of the house had gone, I inspected the room she'd left me in. It was exactly what I'd expect to find in a wealthy family's home with one exception.

Books.

So many tomes of knowledge sat on the shelves around me that my fingers started twitching. Unfortunately, as I perused them, I discovered my excitement had been misplaced. Religious texts all, not one was spared the name 'Alouin' in its title.

Useless.

Before I could summon a water bucket to douse them with, Arivor pounded down the stairs behind me.

"I'm leaving mom I love you Back before dark," he called in a rush.

Catching my eye, he continued out the door, and I raced to keep up. Once the estate lay far behind us, we stopped.

"So," Arivor panted, "what're we doing exactly?"

"Group project," I said. "Considering it will be our theses' starting point, I thought we should start a little earlier than usual this time."

"Why?" Arivor asked. "It's not like it matters. Our graduations are guaranteed, and after that, we'll join our families' businesses."

"Maybe you will," I snapped.

Besides my neighbors, Arivor was the only person who knew where I laid my head at night. He was the only one who knew my full story, and because of that, he flinched at my grumble.

"Sorry. I didn't mean-"

"It's fine," I said, waving a hand. "Let's just focus on our project."

Seemingly happy to let that awkward subject drop, Arivor said, "Ok. What topic should we tackle?"

I couldn't share my chosen thesis subject with him. He'd probably understand it, but I couldn't be sure of that.

Plus, if a Council member's nephew got involved with a dissertation on the oppressive class system found throughout the empire, it might end up hurting him. But that just meant I should be subtle with today's project.

"I thought we'd look into the Healers' Guild," I said. "Their practices make it impossible for slummers to procure their services, which leads to less well-trained healers treating the poor. This, in turn, leads to people suffering and at times, the rampant spread of disease throughout the empire. All theories, of course. I'd like to prove them."

Arivor eyed me like he knew I was hiding something.

“So, what you’re saying is that you’ve decided to become a healer after all,” he said.

Shaking my head, I said, “You know I want to further the scientific field.”

“And you know they’ll never let you,” he countered.

It was an argument we’d held more frequently as graduation day approached, and as always, I brushed his doubts off.

“Well, that’s my suggestion,” I said. “What do you think?”

For the longest moment, my friend watched me.

“Will it involve visiting your neighborhood?” he asked.

Narrowing my eyes, I said, “Probably.”

“Great! We’ll start there.”

He took off ahead of me, leaving me muttering curses in his wake. Sometimes, I forgot how obsessed my friend was with the slums.

As buildings grew more dilapidated around us, my senses heightened. I usually changed clothes before coming home. Any display of wealth here, such as our school’s uniform, attracted unwanted attention, and true to form, when we rounded onto a side alley, two thugs from a local street gang were waiting for us.

“Coin purses. Now,” said the one in the lead, extending a hand.

I stepped in front of Arivor before he could comply.

“No,” was all I said.

“What are you doing?” Arivor hissed in my ear. “Give them what they want, and let’s go.”

But he didn’t know these streets like I did. He didn’t see the third man, crouching on the roof with his knives flashing in the lamplight. He didn’t recognize the tattoos on their arms. Even if we paid, we were going nowhere.

“Aren’t you a defiant-?” the leader started.

“Right of street rule, you bastard,” I interrupted.

The thieves stiffened, as well they should. Street rule had been established long ago to protect the people who lived in the slums. If members of a thieves’ guild caught them unaware, a slummer could petition for single combat rather than getting robbed. This gave thieves an ‘honorable’ way

to back off of a mark while also saving face. Most took this safe way out, as duels between slummers usually ended in death for one or both parties.

“How do you-?” the leader asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “Will you accept my challenge or not?”

The thieves on the ground looked like they wanted to retreat, and I let myself believe that Arivor and I might escape this fiasco unscathed. Then, the man on the roof dropped to the ground between me and his associates.

“Can’t wait to carve you down a notch,” he said.

...Damnit.

Quickly, I stripped off my jacket, tossing it to Arivor while another thief pulled him to the sidelines.

“What are you doing, Eriadren?” he asked.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Just do what they say, and... don’t get involved.”

Because if he did, it would nullify this challenge, and I didn’t like our chances against three thieves.

Not that I liked mine against the knife wielder. Why hadn’t I worn a weapon when leaving home today?

Turning to my opponent, I was surprised to find him waiting. No rules governed street duels, but he’d decided to be courteous.

No matter. I wouldn’t extend the same civility to him.

As soon as I’d finished spinning, I rushed him. When I reached the bastard, he’d barely raised his knives, slashing one at my waist, but I leapt to the side. As I hooked his neck in my elbow, I pushed off of the alley’s wall, using my momentum to drag him to the ground. I heard the breath get knocked out of him and whirled to kick his head, but he was on his feet already.

He was fast. Not good.

A knife jabbed for my neck, and I couldn’t dodge it. I caught the blade in my hand with a distant part of me acknowledging the deadening of my skin, and once it was in my grasp, I twisted and jerked, claiming the weapon as my own.

Meanwhile, I’d snatched a wrist, descending for my shoulder. Pulling on it, I spun my opponent around, dragging his arm up his back until he lost his grip on the second knife. Shoving him away, I kicked the blade to the side, but before I could follow my opponent, he recovered, barreling into me, and I lost my balance.

With a grunt, I landed on the cobblestones while my hold on a claimed knife dug the blade deeper into my hand. Biting my lip, I flipped the weapon to a better position before trying to knee my opponent. I met air, and the weighted toe of a boot slammed into my side.

Groaning, I rolled to my side so I could gain my feet, but another kick had me seeing stars. He continued beating the shit out of me for reasons I couldn't explain. When an enemy went down, one should kill them quickly. Every slummer knew that.

In the end, though, his viciousness proved my saving grace. As I started losing consciousness, I sightlessly flailed at him. One of those swings caught on something, and a shout followed a thump somewhere nearby.

Rolling away from the noise, I almost, *almost*, fainted then and there. Only the knowledge that Arivor's fate lay in my hands saw me stumbling to my feet.

The world blinked in and out of focus as I trudged toward my opponent. I'd severed one of his tendons, and while he was still struggling to stand, an injury like that wouldn't let him.

Was this enough? I looked to the thieves' leader for approval, noting his widened eyes, before a choked gasp came from my opponent. He collapsed with one of his knives embedded in his throat.

"No one touches my friend!"

The roar whipped my head to where Arivor was standing with a red face. As I glanced between him and the knife, he took a step toward the remaining thieves.

"Leave!"

They fled, and as our threat level lowered, I woozily swayed until my knees buckled. Arivor's arm, circled around my chest, kept me upright.

"Mom will be so pissed with me," I mumbled.

Chuckling, Arivor tugged me toward the alley's end.

"I don't envy you when she finds out," he said. "Come on. Let's get out of here. We should find you a healer."

With my head lolling, I said, "Looks like we'll work on that group project after all."

While his shoulders shook, my friend stopped, flinging his head to the sky, and howling laughter filled the alley.

"Only you could think of schoolwork after something like that."

"Yeah... well..."

I couldn't stay awake. I needed to, but I didn't think I...

"Eriadren?"

"Yes, Arivor?" I asked.

"Let's not do that again," he said. "Also, shut up. You need to save your breath."

I petulantly mumbled at him in my head, but as he'd asked, I kept my mouth closed for the entirety of our slow hike to a clinic.

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Once more, I stood outside the estate of Arivor's family, but this time, I fidgeted in place. I'd come here so many times before, but never, *never*, had I been invited.

Had I dressed appropriately? I had nothing fancier than my school uniform to wear, but I'd compensated for that lack with an unusually clean-shaven and otherwise impeccable appearance. I could, of course, do nothing to hide the injuries that I'd sustained during my recent fight, but I was fairly certain they were the reason for my invitation tonight.

When I announced my presence, a manservant escorted me inside. As he led me toward the home's dining room, anxiety spilled up my throat, almost allowed to spew out of my mouth when I stepped into the room and saw who was sitting at the head of the table.

I folded on myself, bowing as low as possible, because the man examining me from that place of honor was Councilman Reive, the most powerful man in our city's ruling body.

"No need for that, Eriadren," he said with a chuckle. "Tonight, you're our honored guest."

I didn't know if I believed him. Sure, Councilman Reive had implemented numerous reforms that had advanced our city and Empire, most notably our current truce with the human kingdoms, but he also kept our class system rigidly in place. He was the primary reason why my father had treated my mother and myself as pariahs when I'd been born, although the bastard's efforts to ingratiate himself with Reive hadn't worked. The councilman had exiled him anyway.

Did Reive know whose child I was?

Arivor's welcoming smile beckoned me to the table despite my apprehension, and once I'd taken a seat, our meal began. So much food was passed in front of me that it made me sick. Idly, I wondered how many slummer families this dinner could feed.

So many times, Arivor's parents asked me to tell the story of how I'd saved their favored son, and so many times, my friend subverted my tale with an over-glorified representation of what I'd done. By the time our meal had concluded, I just wanted to go home.

Unfortunately, Councilman Reive wasn't finished with me.

While servants cleared the last dishes from the table, he said, "Let's speak privately, Eriadren."

Ignoring how Arivor was excitedly bouncing in his chair, I followed the man with a heavy heart. Would this be where he told me to return to the slums, never to emerge from them again?

We ducked into a room that I'd never visited before, and for the briefest moment, my trepidation vanished. Shelves filled with books surrounded us, and I strained my eyes, seeking out a volume I had yet to read.

"Your thirst for knowledge will get you into trouble someday, you know," Reive said. "Come, boy. Sit with me."

An armchair was already enfolding him, and his calculating gaze followed me as I joined him in front of the hearth.

"I don't know how you've earned my nephew's friendship," was what he started with. "I've sent so many noble's brats to do the same, and all of them have failed. Honestly, I don't care what you did to gain Arivor's confidence, but I should warn you. I have plans for him, and if you disrupt those in any way, I'll send you crawling back to your whore of a mother, and you'll never leave the slums again."

He knew who I was. *He knew who I was!*

I should concede to this man. Here, I should bow, but pride had ever been my downfall.

"What makes you think I'm afraid of you?" I asked in a mild tone.

"If you aren't, then you're not as smart as I gave you credit for," Reive said. "Heed my warning, Eriadren. Play nice, and perhaps I'll have a decent position for you when you graduate. Alouin knows you'll need my help to find one."

Bristling, I straightened in my seat, but Reive raised a hand.

"Don't say anything, not when your temper might get you in trouble," he said. "I mean to rejoin my family now. In a little while, you'll come to make your farewells and go home. There's nothing more for you here tonight."

Rising, he strolled to the door.

"It was nice to meet you."

He left me trapped, not the slightest bit tempted to peruse the wealth of knowledge around me.

## **TTS Interlude 1.1**

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