

# Interlude 1.2: Hope

## Eriadren

Graduation. The day I'd long anticipated had finally come, and I was running late for the main event. For once, though, no one could fault me for my tardiness. No, the blame for that lay entirely at the feet of the woman in front of me, but I couldn't hate her for it.

My mother picked at the fabric of her gown, a garment that I'd spent months saving coin to buy, and she refused to lift her head from staring at the cobblestones. I shielded her nervous shifting from prying eyes while we stood in an out-of-the-way corner.

Not an alley. I'd avoided those since the thieves' incident.

"You don't have to come, you know," I said. "If you're uncomfortable, I can walk you home before the ceremony."

That was a lie. I definitely didn't have time for it.

My mother shot her eyes up to mine before lowering them once more.

"I'm not uncomfortable. I'm scared, Eri," she said. "What if someone recognizes me? What if they learn what I am and that I'm your mother? You'd be ruined."

All of this anxiety was over me? I didn't know whether to indulge my eyes' burn or the queasiness in my stomach.

"They won't recognize you. Trust me, mom. I've hidden among the wealthy for years. They're mostly idiots, believing whatever lie you sell them. Just mimic them like Arivor taught you, and you'll be fine," I said. "As for you ruining me, I sincerely doubt that could happen. The school's headmistress and at least one Council member know that I'm the bastard son of a disgraced noble. I'll graduate tonight no matter what happens."

I still didn't know what I'd do afterward.

My mother wordlessly stared at me with her face reddening, and all the while, I fought not to glance down the path toward Commencement Hall. When she slapped her cheeks, I suppressed a smile.

"I won't let those assholes keep me from celebrating my son's success," she growled. "Damn them. I can play a preening prima donna for a few hours. Let's go, Eri."

She marched off, holding her head high, and I barely kept from hugging her. Such a display would be unseemly for a noble, but watching her, I considered breaking that stupid social norm because this was my mother. Brash, comfortable in her skin, and stalking through this prestigious school as if she owned it. She'd encountered so many hardships while raising me, overcoming them all, and I loved her for it.

We found little trouble once we were inside the Hall, merely a few snide comments and glares over our tardiness. I escorted my mother to her seat, chastely kissing her cheek, before racing to my position behind the auditorium's raised stage.

"I thought you wouldn't make it," Arivor said when I arrived.

With a teasing grin, he slapped my back, and I nearly stumbled forward. When I could, I straightened, lightly punching Arivor's shoulder.

"It was a near thing," I said. "Mom almost had a breakdown on the way."

"She's here?"

If it had been possible, Arivor's face could have lit the dim crossover where we were waiting.

"Well done, her," he said. "I'm glad she came. Hopefully, my etiquette lessons will help her."

"I wish they hadn't been necessary," I said. "Why does it matter where I come from? We should be judged on merit, not class."

"Yes, so you said in your thesis," Arivor said. "After that disaster, you're lucky they're letting you graduate. No. You're lucky you didn't get expelled."

"I followed every rule for writing my thesis," I said. "They had no right to target me for what I presented. It didn't help that the conclusions drawn in it were *right*, Arivor."

I couldn't help the glare I directed at my friend, but he didn't seem to mind it, flapping a hand at me instead.

"I know that, but I'm the minority within my class," he said. "Going forward, you need to be more careful with your pushes for change. I'm not saying that you should stop! Just be careful."

"Arivor! You wound me," I said, plastering my hand to my chest. "I'm always careful."

Before he could give the snarky reply sure to be on his tongue, someone on stage called his name. Shaking his head, he trotted off, and I was alone in a crowd of my fellow students.

While I waited, I considered Arivor's advice. I knew he was right. My thesis had gotten me in plenty of trouble. So many disciplinary hearings had been held over it, more than I'd expected.

And that had come from my social views alone. What would happen if I continued along the path that I'd set for myself tonight? Should I abandon it?

I still hadn't decided what to do about that when my name trickled backstage. Making for the person calling it, I didn't notice when I stepped from behind the curtain. I probably would have continued to the other side of the stage if bright light hadn't made me wince.

With so many people directing illumination my way, I couldn't make out most of what lay in the greater Hall. I could see a table off to the side, set out for the city's Council members, as well as the people in the audience's front row but not much else.

Smiling in my mother's general direction, I approached center stage, where my headmistress was waiting for me. She eyed me with caution, perhaps already aware of what I had planned, and once I stopped, she turned to our unseen audience.

"Eriadren, tied for first in his class," she said. "Full honors received in every subject. Thesis on our Empire's class structure."

She turned to me with a warning in her eyes.

"Your chosen field?" she asked.

In other words, 'how will you use the skills we've taught you to benefit the Empire?' My answer? I wasn't quite sure until the words left my mouth.

"I declare for science," I said, "the study of what's physically real."

At that, absolute silence descended, but I'd expected this reaction. In our world, so focused on the worship of Alouin and what lay beyond, any attention paid to the here and now was met with a disdain that approached outright hostility.

Leaning toward me, my headmistress hissed, "Don't you mean healing?"

I wanted to ignore her, but an image of my mother's face floated through my mind. After everything she'd sacrificed for me, I couldn't disappoint her. I'd make my own sacrifice.

"Of course, headmistress," I said. "Is that not what I said?"

My cold glare wasn't meant for her but the wealth of hidden people in front of me, people who would define what I could and couldn't do with my life, but my headmistress shivered anyway.

Nodding her approval, she said, "Novice Healer Eriadren for your consideration."

Hesitant applause answered her, and bowing, I stalked off of the stage. I ignored the other graduates' stares, placing a steadying hand on the first wall I could find.

I'd done it! I was a kid from the slums who'd graduated and therefore, was allowed to work. I wouldn't waste my life in that awful place, but it had come at a cost.

My life's work wouldn't focus on my passion but on a field that I found mildly interesting at best, and it didn't matter that science hadn't been ripped away from me. I could still study it in my spare time but the indignity of it...

I curled my hand into a fist, and almost, I cried. Arivor's approach saved me. As he came closer, I prepared for a string of 'I told you so's', but he merely clapped my shoulder.

"Will you miss this place that much?" he asked. "I know I will. Oh, the pranks I had planned that will never be!"

I chuckled at his mournful look.

"I imagine our professors won't miss us nearly as much," I said.

The two of us might be top of our class, but our names on a class's roster had struck terror in many a professor's heart.

"It's too bad, really," Arivor said, chewing on his lip. "I had some fantastic ones almost ready to trip."

"Like what?" I asked.

With my back to the wall, I slid down it, and after he'd joined me, Arivor launched into an explanation of a scare trick he'd had in the works, one quite similar to something we'd pulled last year. When I mentioned it, he laughed, retelling the story. While the rest of our class took their turns on stage, we swapped old stories, reminiscing about the good times we'd shared in this place.

When the headmistress came to gather the graduates for our celebration, Arivor helped me to my feet.

"I'm so sorry, Eri," he said while steadying me.

And we said nothing more about the crash and burn of my dreams.

One of the buildings near Commencement Hall contained a large, open space, typically used for teleportation practice. Usually drab and empty, it now glittered with all the trappings of a party hosted by the wealthy.

With my mood already sour, I ducked and dodged around graduates, their families, and guildmembers hoping to recruit the talented. Eventually, I reached my goal: the refreshment

tables.

As always when faced with such an extravagant display of food, guilt raised its ugly head. How could I partake of this when hundreds would be starving in the slums tonight?

As always, I swatted guilt down. Tonight, I'd celebrate, my bad mood be damned.

"Eri!"

With a pastry in my hand, I turned to my mother, pleased that she'd remembered to restrain her behavior. I knew she wanted to throw herself at me right now.

"Well done, son," she said with an edge to her voice.

It wasn't directed at me, though. Taking her hand, I kissed it before waving at the bounty behind us.

"The first way I can say thank you for everything you've done. May there be more to come over the years," I said. "Enjoy."

My mother took one look at the table before whirling to take a bite out of the pastry I was holding. Grinning at my stunned expression, she plucked it from my fingers before stalking to peruse the feast spread before us.

"Oh, I fully intend to," she called to me.

Shaking off my shock, I checked whether anyone had observed her display, but no one was staring at us with disapproval. No dangerous hush had fallen, and I let myself relax.

"An interesting performance, Eriadren."

Raising my shoulders nearly to my ears, I spun so quickly that I almost fell.

"Councilman Reive," I squeaked.

As he tapped his cheek, the man looked at me with something inscrutable in his eyes.

"Science?" he asked. "Why would you choose an abandoned field as your profession?"

He hadn't seen my mother. Again, I nearly collapsed, although this time, it was from relief.

"I chose healing," I said. "Didn't you hear?"

With a faint smile, Reive said, "Of course. Healing. Do you know which master healer you'll apprentice with? I'm sure you'll get your pick of them, being top of your class."

"I hadn't considered it," I said with my tone stiff. "What about Arivor? He's top of our class as well."

Reive dismissively waved a hand.

“My nephew doesn’t need anything found in this school to get what he wants,” he said. “To him, top of his class is a meaningless designation.”

This bastard.

“When you’ve decided who you want to study under, let me know,” Reive continued. “I’ll put in a good word for you.”

“Thank you. You’re kind,” I said, “but I won’t need your help, Councilman. Maybe you should focus on the people who do.”

Raising an eyebrow, Reive asked, “Like your mother?”

My breathing hitched.

“My mother?” I echoed.

“Yes,” Reive said with a nod. “She’s in the midst of a rather harsh escort from our celebration. Quite warranted too. We can’t have one of her like tainting our purity.”

With my hands curling into fists, I barely restrained myself from punching him in the face.

“You son of a bitch,” I said.

Chuckling, Reive said, “I’ve been called worse. Now, I believe you have a choice to make, young Eriadren. Her or the life I can offer you.”

That wasn’t a choice. Spinning, I found my mother, the current source of the room’s fascination, and sprinted for her. She saw me coming, which had her eyes widening, and I had a split second to watch her love for me flicker through a list of possible futures.

Then, something I’d never seen from her twisted her features, and screaming, she escaped from the people holding her arms. As a veritable storm, she advanced on me, and before I could say a word, she slapped me hard enough to sprawl me on the floor.

“Such a disappointment,” she growled. “I taught you better than this, comingling with the assholes who keep us ground in the dirt, but I suppose you’re not one of us, are you? You’ve chosen your bitch of a father’s society over ours. Well, I hope you find fulfillment in this empty community because you’ll never find refuge in my home again!”

She lifted her fiery gaze, sweeping it over those watching.

“Vultures, the lot of you,” she shouted. “In every sense of the word.”

As I raised myself to my elbows, my mother turned her back on me. As people helped me to my feet, unable to resist the drama now circling me, I was the only one who saw her shoulders shaking. As the questions began, I realized how alone I was.

Except for one person.

With my eyes burning, I scanned the crowd until I found Arivor on the fringes with his father restraining him. When he caught my eye, the distress blazing from him slowly dropped, leaving neutrality in its place, and a carefully crafted smile brought life to his expression, intended as a reminder for me.

'I'll find you later,' he clearly mouthed.

Dipping my head to him, I abandoned all vestiges of my old life, taking up a new one with distaste. With my most cheerful smile in place, so false it wrenched my heart, I clapped my hands.

"Wasn't that exciting?" I chirped. "All of you must be dying to know what just happened, so let me tell you the story that led to tonight's fun. Let me tell you about how my honorable father was seduced by a wretched woman..."

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Master Healer Zeran looked up at me from over his fingers, steepled in front of his face. With a vacantly pleasant grin in place, I ignored my feet, screaming for me to shuffle, and kept my body rigid instead. I couldn't let this man see my anxiety or how badly I needed a yes from him. Rejections had trailed me since graduation, and I couldn't take another one. Not today.

Zeran flattened his hands on the desk, taking a deep breath, and I knew I wouldn't get what I needed.

"I'm sorry, Novice Eriadren. Your qualifications are more than adequate," he said, "but I have no need for another assistant at this time."

He'd repeated nearly word for word what every other healer in the city had told me, and for a moment, panic threatened to send me, begging, to my knees. If Zeran refused me, I'd have no other options for training. I wouldn't advance beyond the rank of a novice healer, and no one went to see a novice unless they were desperate. The desperate didn't usually have much coin either.

Before I could humiliate myself, however, a blanket of icy calm fell over me, and instead of screaming my need at Zeran, I bowed.

"Thank you for your consideration," I said.

"Of course," Zeran said. "Good luck to you."

Straightening, I headed for the door, but before I opened it, I glanced over my shoulder, daring a final question.

“Are you following Councilman Reive’s orders as well?”

His flinch was the only answer I needed.

Outside, Arivor was waiting for me, tapping his jittery hands on his thighs. The bright expression that he turned on me fell as soon as he saw my face.

“No?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

Hoping to move on from my failure, I joined the flow of street traffic with no destination in mind, letting my feet wander. Arivor, however, wasn’t ready to let the subject drop.

“Was it my uncle again?” he asked.

“When is it not Councilman Reive?” I said.

My feet apparently wanted to take me toward the slums, seeing as how the buildings around us were getting steadily dingier. I corrected them, pointing myself toward the home of my newest host.

The only good thing to come from the revelation of my parentage was that I’d suddenly become a hot commodity to the wealthy. Everyone wanted to welcome the displaced noble’s son into their home, but I knew this fascination wouldn’t last. If I wanted to avoid sleeping on the streets, I had to find a way to support myself. Soon.

But how?

Of course, this conundrum lay partially wrapped in how I could learn the healing arts without a teacher.

As my feet slowed down, I considered those words. Without a teacher. There was something in that.

“I wish you’d let me help you,” Arivor said. “I may not carry as much weight as my uncle but-”

“No. I won’t ruin your reputation,” I said. “Not more than it already is by your association with me.”

“Why should I care what the vultures think?” Arivor growled. “My whole life, you’re the only one who’s been my friend for *me*, not because of my family.”

“And that’s why I’m telling you to keep your distance,” I said. “Besides, I have an idea.”

“Really?”

Nodding, I said, “Why would I have one healer teach me when I can learn from the best?”

“What do you mean?” Arivor asked.

Flipping to face him, I continued on, walking backward.

“I mean that I’ve always learned best from books. Having graduated and become a novice healer, I have access to our school’s library as well as the city’s. I’ll study in these places and take my advancement tests when my knowledge meets their requirements.”

Arivor screwed his face up as he considered what I’d proposed.

“The guild won’t like it,” he said. “If you operate outside of their norms, they won’t let you practice in one of their healing houses.”

“Then, I’ll have to establish one of my own,” I said, facing forward again. “It’ll take a lot of coin, though.”

And I was already struggling to find a means of supporting myself. Given that, how would I earn enough to open my own shop?

“Eri,” Arivor said.

Glancing at him, I noted his smirk and raised finger. Following it, I cocked my head at the crowd gathering outside of a building ahead, but on observing the crier at the door, I clicked my tongue.

A brawler’s den. In the last year, these places had grown quite popular among the merchants and nobles alike, which I found funny. Fights like this had been funding the slum’s gangs for as long as I could remember.

“A bunch of idiots congregating to watch people beat each other up,” I said. “What about it?”

“Do you know how much money those brawlers take home at night?” Arivor hissed. “You’re fantastic in a fight, and coming from the slums, you’d have plenty of tricks that the others won’t. Plus, if you fight, whoever organizes these brawls might let you practice your healing arts outside the ring.”

That... wasn’t a terrible idea, much as I hated it. I could at least start from there.

Pounding on Arivor’s back, I said, “I knew I kept you around for a reason. Feel like braving this den of violence with me?”

Arivor flashed me a smile.

“Most definitely.”

Together, we pushed and prodded our way through the line of spectators trying to get inside.

## **TTS Interlude 1.2**

## **TTS Interlude 1.2.1**

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