

Interlude 1.3: Hope

Eriadren

My latest customer departed, leaving his farewell ringing in my ears, and I basked in a sensation that had yet to lose its fascination for me.

I'd done it. Years spent in a brawler's den, both fighting and practicing my healing arts, and I'd not only advanced to journeyman healer but earned enough coin to establish a shop of my own.

My shop. Shivering, I took it in once more. Yes, it was small. Yes, it was in one of the city's quietest marketplaces.

But it was mine.

Due to the resumption of war with the human kingdoms in recent months, I hadn't had to try very hard to establish a customer base. Everyone wanted to keep a stash of healing salves on hand in case the draft called one to war. If that happened, who wanted to spend time in a healer's shop when one could be saying goodbye to loved ones? I hated profiting off of the war, but it couldn't have come at a better time.

Settling on my stool, I retrieved the latest book in my collection, resuming my study of a diagram that detailed the path of the body's blood vessels through the body. The text was rare, from the time before Alouin had ushered my people to this world. To get my hands on a copy, I'd needed Arivor's help, and I was grateful to him for indulging me with it. I wondered how many healers knew the intricacies of what transported our blood from head to toe.

I'd about had my fill of this diagram, ready to move on to the next, when my shop's door banged open, rattling jars on shelves. Jerking my head up, I watched a diminutive woman struggle to carry a boy inside for a heartbeat, but then, I was leaping over the counter to help her.

"You have to help," she babbled. "It's my fault. My fault!"

"Shh. I've got this," I said. "Give me the child."

As she handed him over, the boy whimpered, and I winced on seeing the hand he had clutched to his chest. How many fingers had he broken?

I spun, meaning to bring him into the back of my shop, but catching hold of my sleeve, the woman raised glimmering eyes to mine.

"I can't pay you," she said. "You- you should know that."

No coin.

Well, taking care of the boy's injuries should take, what? A quarter hour at most? And it wouldn't eat into my supplies. Considering I had nothing else to do, why not sacrifice some of my time to repair a broken boy?

Plus, if the woman couldn't pay me, it meant she likely called the slums home. As a general rule, I didn't charge the people who lived there for my services. They had to stumble upon my shop in order to take advantage of that fact, but it was one of my policies.

"Ok," I said.

Pulling free of the woman, I got the boy into a cot. I set each of his bones as quickly as I could, mildly relieved when he fainted after the second one. After all of them were splinted, I returned to my stool, rubbing my eyes, and stopped short when I saw the woman pacing between my shelved wares.

She was still here. Why? If she were a slummer, she'd have run as soon as she'd dumped her burden on me, but when I cleared my throat, she rushed to the counter instead.

"How is he?" she asked. "Please, tell me I haven't maimed him."

Blinking, I gave this woman a second look over.

Blonde and brown hair spilled around her lovely features, and as far as I could tell, the concern on her face was quite genuine. Her clothes looked well made, if not as fine as a noble's. Perhaps she was a merchant's daughter. If so, it would explain why she'd stayed here, although it called into question her claim that she couldn't pay me.

"The boy should be fine. His fingers may be a little stiff in the future, but that's all," I absently said, drawing my eyebrows together. "I'm sorry. Who are you, and how did the boy come to be injured?"

The woman snapped her eyes open wide.

"My goodness. Where are my manners?" she said. "I'm Lirilith."

Pressing her hand over her heart, she dipped into a bow, which had my lips puckering. Why was she offering me deference?

"As for what happened, I was crossing through a deplorable part of this city when the boy brushed against me. After he did, he ran off, like I'd scared him," she continued. "I realized that my dagger was no longer on me, and thinking it might have tumbled from my side when he hit me, I took off after the boy. I didn't want him to accidentally hurt himself, if that makes sense. In my enthusiasm, I'm afraid I let the chase get to me. I tackled the boy when I caught up, and in the fall, he must have landed on his hand. Unfortunately, my coin purse disappeared during the fiasco, hence why I

can't pay."

Grimacing, she spread her hands in front of her.

Oh, fuck me. I didn't know if I could keep from smirking, but I'd try my damndest not to let my mirth show.

"I see," I said. "Mistress... Lirilith, is it?"

She nodded, and when she failed to provide a family name, as was proper, I mentally shrugged. She probably didn't have one, not that I cared.

"Mistress Lirilith," I repeated, "you're aware that the boy was robbing you, yes?"

Her face blanched for a moment before she turned contemplative.

"That would explain what happened, yes," she said. "So, the neighborhood I was walking through is this city's slums, then?"

She was taking this better than I'd expected.

"Probably," I said. "You must be from elsewhere if you didn't know that."

"Hmm? Oh. Yes, I am," Lirilith said, tapping her fingers on her lips. "If he was pickpocketing me, the boy might still have my coin purse..."

Trailing off, she pinned me like a bug to paper with her gaze, and I shifted in place, unsure what she wanted.

"Should I call for the authorities?" I hesitantly asked.

I'd rather not do that, if possible. People caught stealing were *not* treated well in this city.

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary," Lirilith said, fluttering a hand in dismissal.

And I realized why she was making me uncomfortable. Her demeanor had jumped from a commoner's to that of a noble, and I didn't like it. Almost as soon as I noticed the change, however, it melted into the charm of the bright woman who'd entered my shop.

"It's too bad about my coin purse," Lirilith said.

She was damned focused on that thing. I should probably search the boy for it but first...

"Why's that?" I asked.

Lirilith giggled, a carefree noise that I rather liked. How strange.

"Because it means I can pay you, silly," she said. "I was hoping I could treat you to dinner instead."

Um...

"Dinner?" I faintly echoed.

"Sure!" Lirilith chirped. "You're attractive enough, but more importantly, you helped someone in need without thinking of payment. Given that, I'd like to get to know you better."

Holy... shit. Was she...?

My voice, the disobedient fucker, had gotten caught in my throat when I most needed it, and based on Lirilith's resumed giggle, I was pretty sure I'd flushed as scarlet as I could get.

"That won't be possible if I give you coin instead," she said. "You'd rather have the money, right?"

As my voice leapt free, my brain struggled to keep up.

"*Hell* no!"

I froze as my shout echoed in the shop. Oh, no. Please, say I hadn't yelled something so stupid aloud.

"I mean," I said, choked, "the dinner and getting to know you thing. I'd like that. More than coin. If that's ok."

Eloquent, Eriadren. You're a regular fucking poet.

"You're adorable," Lirilith said with her eyes twinkling. "All right. I'll have someone schedule it with..."

Her voice faded from my awareness.

I couldn't believe this was happening. Arivor had often teased me about my lack of luck with women—caused mostly by my focus on my studies—almost as much as I'd teased him for settling down when he'd married Clariss. He'd always sworn that by the time I could devote my attention to luxuries like romance, I'd be too old for anyone to find me appealing.

Damn, I couldn't wait to shove this in his face.

As if summoned, my friend barreled into my shop, setting jars rattling on their shelves again.

"Eri!" he shouted. "The Council's called another draft-"

When his eyes landed on my guest, Arivor nearly tripped over himself, awkwardly stumbling to a stop, and I cocked my head at him. He looked like hell with wild eyes and his hair standing up in spikes. Those same eyes, ones that were staring at Lirilith, had snapped to the neutrality that he maintained with others of the nobility. Why was he staring at her like that?

Abruptly, he snapped into a deep bow, one I'd never seen him perform before.

"Your Eminence," he said, "what are you doing here?"

Your...

Wait. Lirilith. As in Lirilith *of the stars*? Daughter of Alouin's Voice, the leader of our damn Empire?

No wonder she hadn't given me a family name. She didn't have one, but not for the reasons I'd thought.

"I'm here to see how badly your uncle has managed this city," Lirilith said, "among other reasons."

Straightening, Arivor said, "You know he's done well here, despite our reservations about his policies."

Our?

"You know her?" I asked with my voice strangled.

Arivor blinked as if registering my presence once more.

"Her Eminence and I were briefly engaged a while back. It didn't work out. Obviously," he said. "Wait. Lirilith, why are you in this shop? And dressed like that!"

Briefly... engaged?

No. Better question.

Lirilith had started a sarcastic answer to Arivor's question, but I cut in with my voice dead.

"You wanted to treat me to dinner," I said. "Me."

I probably should have added an honorific, probably should have bowed, probably shouldn't have interrupted, but my sluggish, shocked brain could only process one thing at the moment: hurt. Was she making fun of me?

"Treat you to- Eriadren, what are you talking about?" Arivor spluttered. "And what are you doing? Show more respect. Her Eminence deserves better treatment."

"I'll treat her however I damn well please," I snarled, slapping my hand on the counter. "She barged into *my* shop with a patient, never telling me who she was. And you know my thoughts about those who rule us."

"Eri, not now," Arivor hissed, darting his eyes to Lirilith. "Just... please. Do what I say for once."

I sucked in a breath.

"Do what you say. For once."

I was going to leap over this counter and strangle him.

“You’re choosing to call rank now?” I growled. “Now. After all these years.”

“Yes!” Arivor shouted, throwing his hands overhead. “Because you’re being an-”

“Hush, both of you.”

We shut up, turning to the woman in our midst.

One who’d become a stranger. I could see why she was called ‘Her Eminence’ now.

“Arivor, you said something about a draft?” she asked.

Blood drained from my friend’s face, and it didn’t matter how much of an ass he was being. I rushed around the counter to steady him.

“Oh, right,” he breathed. “I’d forgotten...”

When he said nothing more, Lirilith huffed.

“So, this city’s Council has already called one,” she said. “Typical.”

But Arivor wasn’t paying her any mind, clawing at my arm with a panicked look in his eyes again.

“Eri, they called our names. Both of us,” he said. “Who’s going to look after Clariss? I can’t trust the rest of my family.”

We were going to war. To fight the notoriously vicious humans.

Hell, I felt a bit faint too, and I had no one to worry about, not since my mother had cut contact with me. Arivor had a new wife, and my friend had told me just last week that she was with child. Like he’d said, who would look after his family if he didn’t make it home?

Tightening my lips, I dug my fingers into Arivor’s arm.

“I’ll get you through this,” I said. “You will see your child.”

Swallowing, Arivor said, “You can’t know that.”

“You. will,” I growled. “I don’t care what it takes, I’ll get you home.”

“I can help with that.”

Again, the woman in our midst dragged our attention to her. Lirilith was watching us with sympathy, lifting two fingers from her crossed arms. I didn’t know what to think of her right now, but if she was offering us help, I had to ask.

“How?”

“Your Council wasn’t supposed to call the draft until I arrived. I wanted first choice as to who will join me,” Lirilith said, “but since they went ahead without my presence, I’ll have to make do. Arivor, you’re passable in a fight, but you also have a fantastic head for tactics. That’ll be useful. And Eriadren, was it? How are your skills in combat?”

How were my-?

Why was she asking that? And why...?

I was still trying to wrap my head around who’d been drafted. I understood why my name had been called. I’d made enemies among the city’s Council but Arivor? Was his Uncle Reive truly so vindictive that he’d send his favored nephew into war as punishment for associating with me? Or did he expect Arivor to make a name for himself on the battlefield?

My friend clapped my back, drawing me out of my thoughts.

“Eri’s a demon with the blade. When we were in school, he’d send his opponents home whimpering. He’s pretty decent with tactics too, but unfortunately, that talent won’t matter. He’s from the slums and so, can’t advance to an officer’s rank,” he said. “He’s usually much quicker on his feet than this too. I don’t know why he’s gone non-responsive.”

Arivor snapped in my face, and I swiped at his arm, meeting Lirilith’s eyes.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why what?” Arivor said.

But Lirilith knew what I was asking, and she smiled at my question’s double meaning.

“My father, in all of his benevolent wisdom,” she said, rolling her eyes, “has finally decided to let me test my skill as a commander. The soldiers called to war from this city will be under my command. As for why I’ve offered to help you two, Arivor’s my... what are we again?”

“Second cousins,” Arivor said.

Shrugging, Lirilith said, “We’re family. As for you...”

Resting her hands on her hips, she glanced me over before firmly holding my gaze.

“I already told you why, didn’t I?” she said.

So... she’d meant that? She really thought I was...

My stomach and heart did a strange flip-flop. On the one hand, an attractive young woman had said that she’d like to know me better. On the other hand, I’d garnered the attention of someone

who epitomized the Empire's class system.

Smirking, Lirilith turned on her heel, marching for the exit.

"Come on, you two. Let's see what else I have to work with."

When the door closed behind her, Arivor spun on me.

"What happened before I got here?" he asked.

I gave him a brief summary, and by the time I'd finished, my friend was uncontrollably snickering into a hand.

"What?" I snapped.

Arivor flapped a hand at me, making his own way outside.

"Nothing, Eri," he gasped. "Just... good luck."

Laughter burst from him as he stepped out of my shop.

My shop. After all the work I'd put into this place, it probably wouldn't be mine when I returned.

If I returned.

Running my hand over the counter's smooth surface, I patted it before turning to leave it behind. I had yet another mess to claw my way free from, after all.

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