

Interlude 1.4: Hope

Eriadren

The war was over. Four years of fighting, of sneak attacks on human supply lines, and of pitted battles to liberate occupied cities. Of one massacred village, the horror of innocent lives deliberately ended never to be forgotten.

Four years of laughing about miserable conditions with soldiers who wouldn't do the same tomorrow; of frantically treating a friend's wounds, only for them to die a second later; or of bedding down, uncertain of the future or our side's cause.

Four years of pain and violence and death, and it was over. Or so they said.

The war lived on in its survivors. I wasn't the same person I'd once been. Neither was Arivor. Neither was Lirilith, but today, we put all of this aside, because today, we'd had a wedding.

Or the beginning of one at least.

"Are you sure about this?" I said from the corner of my mouth. "You could still change your mind. Go home."

"To what?" Lirilith said. "My father, who refuses to let me be myself and who thinks you're gutter trash? No, thank you."

I'd met Alouin's Voice once, shortly after the war's conclusion. We'd been in the capital to receive commendations for our service, and Lirilith had taken me to meet our Empire's benevolent ruler, the man who supposedly heard from Alouin himself.

The meeting hadn't gone well. All he'd talked about was Arivor and how he'd saved the Empire, conveniently forgetting how integral I'd been to the mission that had won us the last battle, but I'd expected that. It had been what had happened in every town we'd visited, and I couldn't blame my friend for it. He couldn't help the social system that he'd been born into any more than I could.

The way Alouin's Voice had talked about Lirilith, though...

Oo, I'd had several choice comments to throw in his face, examples of how exceptional she'd been during the war. Anything to stop the bastard from talking about his daughter like she was a commodity to be sold.

But I'd kept my mouth shut because Lirilith had asked me to and because I trusted her to handle herself.

Then, she'd told her father about us. We'd barely escaped the capital with our lives. So far as we could tell, the man's temper had cooled since then, but even still, Lirilith would lose her inheritance if she continued down her chosen path.

Like she was about to do.

"Life here won't be easy," I said. "You won't have the comforts that you've grown used to."

"But I wouldn't have what I wanted," Lirilith said. "I wouldn't have the freedom to fight, whether on the battlefield or for the people who need me. I wouldn't have you."

I looked at her then, so beautiful in her uniform. Torch and moonlight played over her face, and I knew I couldn't leave her side, even if she had decided to go home.

"Would you two just take the damn packages already?"

In front of us, Arivor was tapping his foot, holding a thin stick toward each of us. He looked quite dapper in his formal wear, something he'd roasted me over when I'd made a comment on it earlier, and somewhere behind me, Clariss and their toddler, Rafe, were watching the ceremony. How quickly Arivor's family had become mine.

"Let's get this Joining over with," my friend snapped. "If I have to hear the same ridiculous argument from either of you *one more time*, I'll scream."

"Goodness, you'd think we'd offended you personally," Lirilith said.

But she took what he was offering, and after a moment's hesitation, I did too.

"Finally," Arivor grumbled before raising his voice. "Before us, we have two stubborn people who wish to be Joined as one. Considering how much of a pain in the ass they are separately, letting them do this is probably a mistake—"

Our gathered friends laughed.

"—but we also know that their Joining was always going to happen. The two of you are so perfect for one another, it hurts, and I have trouble believing that anything but destiny brought you together. In my humble opinion, the Joining of Lirilith and Eriadren has always been written in the stars.

"So, let's oblige them. Let's see the two of you Joined to one another for life."

I'd half-heard most of what my friend had said. Focusing on him had been difficult with my heartbeat loudly pounding in my ears and my hands trembling as violently as they once had after a fight. It was strange to experience that for the simple anticipation of what would come next rather

than fear for my life. It was... nice.

I did, however, catch Arivor saying the words that released me to finish the ceremony. Turning to Lirilith, I watched her lift a blood-red stick, matching her movements, and together, we completed something started in a shop years before. Together, we broke what we held, it dissolved into powder, and we breathed each other in.

Lirilith's life, its every joy and conflict, passed before my eyes. Every emotion and life-altering choice. Everything that had made her who she was and I *knew* her. In that moment, something shifted in me, and I became her, and she became me, and solitary 'I' becomes perfect 'we'.

And we watched the one we loved grin. The world grew shadowed with them leaning closer. We felt hands on our neck, felt lips on our lips, felt hungry tongues in our mouths, felt our bodies coming together, and this bleed of need and want and fire between us was unmatched by any other. This was a storm, lightning sparking and fading only for another shock to follow. We'd never been stronger. We'd-

With a jolt, I was kissing Lirilith while our limbs were twined around one another, and I froze as she pulled away from me. The world was spinning with such diminishment of my essence taking place, but I also felt...

Lacing my fingers between hers, I smiled at Lirilith, this woman I knew as well as I did myself, and she giggled with the sound of it only a little broken.

"Congratulations," Arivor said. "With this, you have become one."

"We are one," Lirilith and I said, completing the ceremony.

And the friends who'd become our family cheered.

Magic had always caused me trouble, even as a child. Not only could I maintain it for the shortest of times, but the cost that it carried also wiped me out every time I used it.

It was one of the reasons I enjoyed science so much. When studying the physical and natural world, I knew the rules it must obey, rules I understood, whereas magic...

At times, I thought it was my nemesis.

It wasn't giving me much trouble today, thank the stars. I'd decided on a simple shape change, making modifications to my nose and ears, and once I was done, features similar to a cat's stared back at me from the mirror. Hopefully, I could hold the shift until the party was over.

Stepping out of our washroom, I finished bundling my supplies together, calling over my shoulder as I did.

"Lirilith, are you almost ready?"

She didn't respond, but after clattering down the stairs to find her, I stopped short. By the door, my wife was glaring at me, tapping her foot with her hands on her hips. I remembered the days when that look had sent accomplished warriors whimpering from her presence, and faced with it now, I swallowed hard, wondering what I'd done wrong.

Advancing on me, Lirilith poked my chest.

"I've been ready for almost an hour," she said. "You're the one who'll make us late, preening over your appearance like a school girl."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wasn't trying to offend you."

I'd learned fairly early on in our relationship that in the long run, an immediate apology was better for me than to protest my innocence. Lirilith almost always won our arguments.

Clicking her tongue, she cupped my cheek, brushing a thumb beneath the changes that I'd made to my face, before rising onto her toes to kiss me. Relaxing, I wrapped my arms around her waist, tugging her to me.

This. This was why she won.

Retreating so that our noses were touching, I said, "We'll already be late, you know. What's another half an hour?"

When I kissed her this time, Lirilith laughingly pushed me away before batting at the whiskers around my nose.

"Kissing you is difficult enough with these," she said. "What might happen if I let you do other things to me?"

Growling, I nipped at her neck, which only made her laugh harder.

"Wrong animal, Eri. You're not a dog today," she said. "Come on! We'll make Arivor and Clariss worry."

Leaning back, I sighed.

"I doubt anything can make Clariss worry more than she already does," I said.

"What else is she to do? Her whole world is Rafe," Lirilith said. "Worrying helps her take care of him."

"Yes, yes. I know," I said before releasing her. "Well? If we're going, then let's go."

Pecking my cheek, Lirilith hovered her lips by my ear.

"Don't sulk. It doesn't suit you."

Dropping from her toes, she laced her hands together while the sloppy grin that I so adored lit her eyes.

“Besides, I have every intention of making it up to you later.”

Damnit. Why did she do this to me?

I followed her out the door without further complaint, and we strode through our neighborhood, arm in arm.

Most people here ignored us, as our oddities had become normal to them, but when we moved into wealthier parts of the city, scandalized glances were darted our way. No one was rude enough to outright stare. People did, however, make their disdain known.

That was fine. If there was one thing Lirilith and I had become well-practiced in, it was refusing to care what others thought of us.

As we approached Arivor’s home, the happy shrieks of children floated from behind it, and Lirilith hunched her shoulders, making my heart clench in my chest. Ignoring this issue was something that we both needed to work on.

We’d been happily married for four years, and despite how much we wanted one, we’d yet to have children. I, ever the healer, wasn’t sure which of us was at fault for this hiccup, nor did I care.

Lirilith, on the other hand, insisted that she was to blame. I cursed social pressure, both from those who loved us and those—like her father—who distinctly didn’t, for her wholehearted belief, and every time I saw her hurting because of it, I wanted to erase the people who’d caused her pain.

Usually, though, I couldn’t defend her as I wished, so I did what I could instead. Taking her hand, I lifted it to my lips.

“Someday,” I said against the back of it. “I promise, love. What you hear will fill our home someday.”

She gave me a brave smile, one that meant she didn’t believe me.

“I hope so,” she said. “We can’t worry about it now, though. Today, we’re supporting our friends and their child.”

Her words squeezed my heart tighter, and while I waited for the fragile organ to burst, every part of me turned brittle.

“Of course,” I managed to say after a moment. “You’re right.”

“I always am,” Lirilith said with a tiny grin.

As soon as we entered the garden behind Arivor's house, the hostile scrutiny we'd endured on the street vanished, replaced by our friends waving or calling greetings. With strings of colorful cloth stretched between trees and bushes, this typically serene place seemed ready to burst with energy. As if imbued with it, Rafe's friends were darting between the adults, and I wondered if the birthday boy had felt up to joining them today.

Lanterns in the trees had yet to be lit, and a table near the entrance supported a heaping pile of paper-wrapped lumps. Arivor was standing beside this, and when he saw us, he waved us over.

Patting my arm, Lirilith said, "You go. Tell him I said hello. I'll find Clariss."

Once she'd slipped into the crowd, I headed toward my friend, eyeing him. He looked tired, but exhaustion had been his natural state for the last few months. That was what happened when one stayed up into the small hours of the morning every night, doing research. What mattered was seeing the air of defeat, constantly hovering over him, lifted. As I came closer, he even slapped a hand to his mouth, laughing.

"A cat?" he gasped. "That's what you went with this year?"

With a feigned pout, I said, "I think I did rather well, considering my deficiencies. You don't like it?"

"No, I do!" Arivor said with twinkling eyes. "And Rafe will *love* it. It's just... a cat? It matches your personality so well."

Rolling my eyes, I dropped my satchel between us before scanning the garden.

"Speaking of Rafe, where is he?" I asked.

Hugging himself, Arivor said, "Out there somewhere, playing. Clariss is keeping an eye on him."

"Ah."

Together, we watched people chatting while everything we'd left unspoken hung between us. Did any of them see us, leeches of what they took for granted, and consider how to dispel what had us blinking burning eyes?

"This'll be his last birthday, won't it?" Arivor quietly asked.

Sucking in a breath, I forced myself to let it out slowly, giving myself time to quell my temper. I couldn't nurse my own growing grief and pain. My friend needed my support in this, perhaps more than with anything else I'd helped him through.

"Don't do that," I said. "Your son needs you to have hope. He needs us to keep looking for a cure, and we'll find one. Rafe will be with us next year."

Arivor turned haunted eyes on me.

“But what if he isn’t?” he asked.

I took a breath, about ready to slap my friend. Fortunately, something in the form of tiny limbs and blue-brown hair stopped me before I did something I’d regret.

“Uncle Eri!” Rafe shouted.

As I turned to the boy, my heart both lifted and stuttered to see him running toward me. What if he fell?

As if thinking about that had caused it to happen, Rafe tripped, and a hand squeezed my throat closed. Before I knew what had happened, I was crouching in front of him, holding one of his elbows while Arivor had the other. I met my friend’s eyes before smiling at Rafe, steadying him.

“You should be careful, buddy,” I said. “We don’t want you hurting yourself.”

As if he hadn’t heard me, Rafe grabbed my ears, rubbing them, and I barely kept from wincing.

“They’re so soft!” he gasped. “And you’ve got whiskers too. I love it!”

“Told you,” Arivor said.

Right. Rafe didn’t need any reminders that he was slowly dying. He saw enough of that in the mirror with his unusually pale skin and the bruises that formed at the slightest impact. The weakness that left him in bed most days. The nausea that had him vomiting half of his meals back up.

He didn’t need me to mention these things. Not today.

“Are you having a good birthday?” I asked.

Rafe excitedly nodded.

“But it’s better now that you’re here,” he said. “Did Aunt Lirilith come too?”

“Of course she did. She went to find your mother,” I said. “I’m sure you’ll see her soon.”

“Oh, good!” Rafe said. “We wouldn’t want you to start your science tricks without her to ‘help’.”

Lirilith had always been the one to keep the tricks I pulled from getting out of hand. Many were the fires that she’d put out because I’d started a chemical reaction too close to something flammable.

Snapping my eyes to slits, I glared at Rafe.

“Why, you cheeky little-”

Hell, I wanted to pinch his cheeks like I’d once done. How was I supposed to reward his snark now?

After sticking out his tongue, Rafe said, "You know you love me, Uncle Eri."

Oh, shit. I couldn't shed these tears. Not here.

"I do, buddy," I said, trying to smile. "Why don't you get back to your friends? We can talk more later."

Crossing his arms, Rafe slowly scanned me.

"Ok," he said, "but only because you're about to cry."

With a winning grin, he spun in place before running out of view, and I rubbed my face.

"That boy is absolutely your son," I groaned into my hands.

"He *is* talented at getting under your skin in the most endearing of ways."

Rising from my crouch, I glanced at my friend with my jaw set.

"We have to save him," I said.

"I know," Arivor said. "Eriadren-"

Clicking his teeth together, he looked away, and I suppressed the urge to seize his shoulders and shake him.

"What is it?" I asked instead.

With his lips drawn into a thin line, my friend was fighting with himself. I'd seen him do it often enough to recognize the look.

"Arivor, I would do anything for you or your family," I said. "Tell me what it is."

Taking a deep breath, he crossed his arms, watching me from the corner of his eye.

"It's a long shot," he said, "and dangerous."

"More dangerous than the shit we pulled during the war?" I asked, chuckling.

"Infinitely more so," Arivor said.

My laughter died. Hell, he was serious. What sort of danger did he expect us to court?

Only one way to find out.

"Tell me," I said.

With a long sigh, Arivor faced me, dropping his arms to his sides.

“How much do you know about Alouin and his disappearance from the world?”

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