

Interlude 2.1: The Beginning

Eriadren

As I wandered through the ruins of a human village, I searched for survivors, although I couldn't move as stealthily as I should. The last few hours had left me numb, drifting in a fog. Only my orders kept me on my feet, and I had to carry them out. I had-

I'd had to!

Muffled sobbing drifted from behind a pile of rubble, and with my heart in my throat, I eased toward it, raising my sword. Crumbled stone gave way to a woman, crouching over the body of a child with her shoulders shaking.

I should creep up on her and slit her throat, finishing the work that my unit had started here, but I couldn't. I lowered my sword until its tip scraped through the dirt, and the woman spun to her feet with her face twisting.

"Unlike what the priests have told us, Alouin never vanished into the ether," she calmly said. "His spirit may have left us, but his body didn't. It is, in fact, in our insignificant city."

That... wasn't right. This woman had screamed and cursed me to a lifetime of torment. Why-?

A pounding sound filled the air around me, and at it, the woman walked toward me, lifting my blade until its point rested against her chest.

"You know the stories about Alouin, Eri. How he healed near instantaneously from his wounds. How he couldn't die," she said. "I want to find Alouin's body. I want you to study it, and if we can, I want to transfer these abilities to Rafe. Will you help me?"

I didn't understand. Why would this woman say these things? Why were those words so familiar?

The pounding of the world, of my heart, grew more insistent. Baring her teeth, the woman thrust herself forward, driving my blade through her chest, and an anticipatory silence fell. In it, the woman grinned at me while her voice echoed in my ears.

"Don't follow through on something else you'll regret."

Gasping, I bolted upright while slapping my hand to my chest. I skittered my eyes over a darkened bedroom, landing them on where Lirilith was lying beside me.

I didn't know how she was still asleep. She usually woke up when I had bad dreams, much like I did for her, but she did so most especially for the nightmares about the massacre.

Reaching out, I brushed her hair out of her face and almost jabbed a finger in her eye when raucous noise burst in the air around me. Someone was knocking downstairs.

While I forced my lungs to start working again, I remembered the promise that I'd made yesterday. Slinking out of bed, I donned my clothes, wincing at every slam of my friend's knuckles on wood. As I hurried downstairs, I cursed under my breath, and when I yanked the door open, I ignored his raised fist.

"If you've woken Lirilith up, I *will* poison you, Arivor," I hissed. "I don't care how high up the social ladder you are."

Pouting, Arivor said, "You'd kill me?"

"Any poison that I gave you wouldn't kill you, and you know it. I'm too good with them," I said, rolling my eyes. "What do you want?"

Twisting back and forth, Arivor scuffed his foot on the ground.

"Oh, I don't know. I thought I'd steal the priests' most prized possession and possibly get mangled in the process," he said. "Want to come?"

He gave me the brightest smile that I'd seen from him in months, but all I could hear was the voice from my nightmare.

"Don't do something you'll regret."

Shaking it off, I returned Arivor's grin.

"You know I do," I said.

"Excellent!" Arivor said.

Clapping his hands, he stepped off of my home's stoop.

"How should we do this?" he asked. "We could enter through the front doors or through the temple's side entrances. What do you think?"

When I caught up, I flatly stared at my friend.

"Why are you asking me?" I said. "I've never been to that ghastly building."

My relative ignorance only made Arivor laugh.

"Oh, this'll be fun," he said.

I certainly hoped so. I hoped I wasn't making the biggest mistake of my life, but a tiny voice inside whispered that I was.

Getting into the temple turned out to be less difficult than expected. The vast majority of its guards were soldiers we'd known during the war, people who were more than willing to look the other way while we walked by, and of the few who weren't, Arivor only had to glance at them to make them scramble out of our way. If he held himself the right way, his resemblance to Councilman Reive was uncanny.

Once we'd made our way into the inner sanctum, Arivor and I became more cautious. This deep into the temple, priests littered the hallways, and neither of us wanted them questioning us.

They didn't seem to care about our existence, too lost in their 'important business' for that, and while normally I might find this insulting, I was grateful for it today.

All too soon, we reached the final checkpoint between us and our goal, but on seeing the holy guards ahead, people who'd been raised from birth to protect this one place in the temple, I pulled Arivor into a side room.

"How are we getting past them?" I asked. "The Council probably won't take note of you wandering around the temple today, but they *will* check up on why you went into their most sacred of spaces."

"I don't know," Arivor said. "I honestly didn't think we'd get this far."

Huffing, I glanced at the doors.

"Well, you've always been better with strategy, so you'd better come up with something," I said. "Preferably before one of those guards comes to check on the suspicious individuals who just ducked out of view."

"All right, all right. Give me a minute."

Chewing on his thumb, Arivor assumed the distracted look he always wore when he was planning, and I fought to keep my foot from tapping. After a moment, he sharply nodded—"Right!"—before pulling his tunic over his head.

I turned aside to give him privacy, no matter that I'd seen him undressed plenty during the war. A lot of his surveillance plans had included shape change, and that magic type almost always ended with the user's apparel shucked.

"I'll cause a distraction. Once the guards are gone, you sneak in and figure out how to get what we need. Thinking on your toes is something you're better at, after all," Arivor said. "I'll give you as long as I can, but to be safe, get out of there by the count of two hundred. We'll meet back here."

When I snapped my head toward him, my friend was laying his neatly folded clothes on a chair.

“That’s a shit plan, Arivor,” I said. “If you cause a ruckus, how will we get out of the temple?”

“We’ll figure it out then,” Arivor said while rubbing his eyes. “It’s the best I can do right now, Eri. If you want to back out, I wouldn’t blame you.”

That offer only stiffened my spine.

“I’m not backing out. Fuck you for thinking it,” I said. “I’ll do anything for Rafe.”

With a small smile, Arivor said, “And I love you for that. May we die only when we must?”

“Only when we must,” I said.

Over the course of five heartbeats, my friend transformed into a golden-haired monkey, and it raced into the hall. When screaming started a few seconds later, I couldn’t resist. I poked my head out the door, slapping a hand over my mouth to stop my laughter once I had.

Monkey Arivor had wrapped himself around a guard’s face, scratching and biting them. Once he had the group’s attention, he jumped to the floor, racing out of sight with the holy guards hot on his literal tail.

I began my count. No matter that it felt like a waste of my limited time, I waited until I’d reached ten before racing down the hall. Slipping through the door at its end, I eased it closed before scanning my surroundings.

Although richly decorated, this octagonal room was small, maybe fifteen paces across at its widest. Starting at the door, stairs led up to a rectangular dais, and on this sat a waist-high display, draped in white cloth.

A man was lying there.

Hurrying up the stairs, I didn’t let myself think about who this was. I merely judged his proportions, deciding whether I could bear his weight.

For a moment, I considered simply taking samples from him. I’d brought vials and a syringe with me for just such a purpose, but why take a piece of the subject when one could have the whole thing?

Only as I stood over the man was I walloped by what I was doing.

He looked rather plain, this final hope of ours. Salted brown hair framed a soft face with crinkles at the corners of his closed eyes.

He was asleep with his chest rising and falling in an even rhythm, and this, more than anything, struck me dumb. If the stories about him were true, then this man was thousands of years old. He should be long dead.

Shaking my head, I shoved my arms under him, throwing his body over my shoulders. What a waste of a thirty count.

Once I'd returned to the room where I'd started, I propped my cargo against a wall, refusing to look at him as I paced. Was Arivor ok? Had he escaped from the people chasing him?

Right as I'd resolved to go after him, a beetle flew through the door's crack, expanding to a man as it reached the floor. Gasping, Arivor stumbled to lean on a wall, and I hurried to him with his clothes.

As he took them, I said, "All right?"

"I will be," Arivor said. "Shaking off an animal's mindset might not be difficult for me, but the energy drain this time was..."

When he fell silent, I gave him a moment before asking.

"Bad?"

"Understatement," Arivor said.

Great. That meant I'd be in charge of any further magical expenditures, and given my lack of talent with that, it could be disastrous. Unfortunately-

"I have an idea for how to get out of here," I said, "but it'll involve a lot of illusion work."

"Eri, I don't think I can-"

"I'll handle it. Illusions are the simplest of magic," I said. "I'll just need help with him."

I pointed to where I'd left the man, and on seeing him, Arivor went still.

"Is that...?" he breathed.

"Alouin? If your intel is correct, yes," I said. "Reverence later, Arivor. Escaping this place first. Help me get him on his feet."

As we threw one of his arms around each of our shoulders, I winced in anticipation of the magic I'd be using.

"With the guards still distracted, getting away from their holy of holies shouldn't be difficult. Once we're in the main temple, though, we'll need to act like we're a trio of friends, having a good time. Can't exactly make these arms disappear and I'm stumped for another way to explain them," I said. "And disrespecting the temple should fit with the typical noble's personality, considering their firm belief that the rules don't apply to them."

Clicking his tongue, Arivor said, "You think that too, Eri."

“Yes. But I’ll happily admit to that.”

When Arivor glared at me over Alouin’s head, I stuck my tongue out at him, and he rolled his eyes.

“We should get out of here before the holy guards realize that their prey has vanished,” he said.

“Yeah. That seems wise.”

Making a face, I applied my illusion to Alouin. Covering a person with an animated facade like I was doing was one of the most complex types of illusion work, and combined with the role I was playing, it kept me from paying much attention to our rush out of the temple.

Fortunately, Arivor was creative enough to get us past any difficulties we encountered and smart enough to have a carriage brought to us once we were outside. He nudged me after we’d finagled our way inside of it.

“We’re good.”

After I’d dispelled my illusion, a wave of exhaustion crashed over me, one that had black lapping at the edges of my vision, but I managed to stay awake. Once I’d rallied, I found Arivor sitting beside me, raptly staring at the man sprawled opposite us.

He was still deeply asleep. Mentally groaning at the many hours I knew were coming, ones where I’d have to deal with my friend’s belief in our people’s greatest superstition, I poked him in the side.

“Hey.”

When he turned to me, I smirked.

“We just stole a god from his temple.”

And Arivor cracked up laughing, falling against the carriage wall.

I watched this with a soft smile. Whether studying Alouin’s body got us a cure for Rafe or not, seeing my friend freed from his troubles for the first time in almost a year was worth all of the danger I’d braved today.

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