

# Interlude 2.2: The Beginning

## Eriadren

After Lirilith and I had gotten married, we'd pooled our resources to buy a house in the merchant's district. It wasn't much—a narrow, two-story building with little to differentiate it from its neighbors—but it was ours, an oasis from the scorn that we daily faced.

There was a garden in the back, Lirilith's domain. I loved listening while she tended to her plants, addressing them in the same way she'd done with her troops during the war. It was very her.

But in this garden was a shed, my haven in our oasis.

Lirilith didn't have the same disdain for science as the rest of the empire, but it didn't much interest her, which would be fine if my indulgence in its study hadn't been such an inconvenience at first. After a month or so, spent dealing with various experiments spread across the kitchen table, she'd had our old friends build the shed for me, adding a few modifications to the project at my behest once I'd found out about it.

So, here was where I messed with science, although Lirilith liked to be somewhere nearby when I did that. In the past, I'd had too many accidents for her to be comfortable otherwise. Here was where Arivor and I had brought Alouin's body after stealing it.

When we'd lugged it through the house that day, we'd frozen on encountering my wife in the sitting room. Neither of us had expected her to be home, but she'd merely taken a sip of her tea, lifting an eyebrow at us, and said not a word. She'd gotten used to the antics of 'her boys', as she called us, long ago.

She was also the only reason I'd left my shed over the last week, tempting me outside with home-cooked meals and promises of soft pillows and *her*.

I was ever grateful to her for watching the shop while I'd been busy. Lirilith might not be as knowledgeable when it came to the healing arts, but she'd picked up some first-aid techniques during the war. That, combined with her natural charm, should be enough to keep the shop running for a while.

At least, I hoped it would be so because I was having no luck with my testing. At first, I'd tried a few, minimally invasive things with this current experiment, squeamish about poking around the insides of a dreaming man. We couldn't know if he felt pain, and I hadn't been sure if the rumors about his healing rate were true.

But the cautious approach had yielded nothing, and Arivor, by my side throughout this, had started acting... cranky, letting his desperation show itself. So, I'd moved on.

After that, we'd learned that the stories about Alouin were true. Half of my time spent messing with his body, I'd been racing to stay ahead of its ridiculous healing rate. Even still, I'd managed, systematically going through its many different parts, but I'd been at that for days.

This afternoon, I'd be sticking a needle into the filling of his neck's bones. As I prepared for this, my stomach, lurching beneath my ribs, kept reminding me that I'd made the mistake of eating breakfast this morning, and I couldn't help feeling like I needed to bathe. In between checking my various instruments, I scrubbed my arms, aware of Arivor watching me.

He was perched on the table where we'd lain Alouin's body, sitting beside its head with his feet swinging, but this casual pose didn't match the grim aura hovering over him. It was making my already rattled nerves flare more strongly.

We needed a distraction.

"Have you heard anything from your uncle about our trip to the temple?" I asked.

"No."

Well, that had changed nothing. Maybe I should attack the source of my friend's gloom, no matter how much that might scare me.

"How's Rafe?" I asked.

This question got a reaction. Hopping off the table, Arivor stormed to me, grabbing my wrist so he could slap a syringe into it.

"Stop stalling," he said. "Let's get started."

I held still until he let me go before speaking.

"I know you're stressed right now, but don't touch me like that. It's not ok."

Swallowing hard, Arivor squeezed his eyes closed.

"I know."

He rubbed his face.

"I'm sorry. It's just Rafe... he hasn't gotten out of bed for a week, and even when he's in it, he can barely move. He hasn't kept any food down for two days."

Dropping his hands to his sides, he worked his jaw for a moment before opening his eyes, letting a solitary tear roll free.

“He asked me to make it stop last night, Eri,” he whispered.

Shit.

I wasn't sure what, if anything, I could say to help Arivor, so I spoke not a word. Closing my fingers around the syringe, I marched to my subject, rolling Alouin's body so that it was lying face down.

“You'll have to support his head, otherwise I might mess up the angle on this,” I said, glancing at my friend.

Nodding, Arivor wiped his eyes before hurrying to me. He did as I'd asked, and I sucked on my lip, considering where I should start.

I'd need a tissue and fluid sample first. It was what I'd done with every body part we'd tested, hiding them in case the subject was taken from us.

These samples lay in the bolt hole that led out of this place. It was one of the modifications that I'd asked my wife to include during the shed's construction, knowing that sooner or later, our neighbors would come after Lirilith and me with pitchforks.

Getting the needle into the neck bone properly would be difficult. I'd never done it before and for good reason. Every medical text I'd read—both those from a tear and from the time when Alouin had walked among us—advised against penetrating the spine this high, recommending an entry point much lower. Doing it here could have severe consequences.

Which was partially the point. I needed to see how many ways this body could heal itself.

Given that, I supposed it didn't matter how clumsy I was with this. Once I was finished, we'd begin the laborious process of peeling apart skin and breaking bone to reach the tissue within. I could get a sample then.

So, I jammed the syringe into my subject's neck, only careful to avoid bone, and when I did, something besides candlelight flared inside the shed. Startled, I jerked the needle out, and that artificial light died.

Breathing hard, I met Arivor's eyes. Besides his healing, that had been the first unusual reaction we'd gotten from my subject, and it made me cautious.

“Eri, is this...?” Arivor started. “Do you think-?”

“Maybe. We'll find out,” I said, “but first, I'll put Lirilith on standby, in case this blows up in our faces.”

“Smart,” Arivor said. “Hurry it up, then!”

Grinning, I bounded to the door, sucking in a breath as I yanked it open.

“Lirili-!”

"By the stars, you're loud."

My wife frowned up at me from where she was kneeling beside a garden bed.

“What do you want, most obnoxious and wonderful of husbands?” she asked.

“I’m about to do something hazardous for my health,” I said, forcing solemnity into my voice.

“Thought you should know.”

Turning back to her task, Lirilith waved a pair of gardening shears overhead.

“I’ll be out here, listening for screams, then,” she said.

Hell, I loved her.

Returning to my subject and my friend, I lifted the syringe.

“Ready?” I asked with a mischievous grin.

Was he ready for a chance at a cure? Was he ready for the likelihood that this chance was as empty as the others? Was I ready to face another of the world’s marvels, to unravel it until it was mine to understand?

Arivor jerked his head in a nod, and once more, I sank the needle into my subject’s neck.

And nothing happened.

Groaning, I leaned my elbows on the table, dragging my hands over my face, while Arivor held perfectly still.

“Great. Just great,” I said. “Another dead end.”

At least, it seemed that way now. I’d have to poke at this part of my subject a little more before I could definitively declare it useless for our goal, but from how things had been going for us so far, I didn’t think much would change between now and then.

Arivor woodenly rounded the table to flop against its leg, jostling it. On the tabletop, the body jumped, making its hand slip over the edge, and when that appendage landed, it was wedged between the back of my friend’s head and the table’s leg.

If he found the touch of a living-dead man disturbing, Arivor didn’t show it. He stared into nothing while all of him was loosened with defeat. I’d never seen him like this, not even during our short captivity with the humans during the war.

“My son is going to die, and nothing can change that,” he said, surprisingly calm. “I should never have hoped for something else. Every time we think we can cure him, the possibility gets ripped

away, and I can't do it anymore."

How did I pull him free of this despair? He was my best friend, and he was hurting, and *I had to fix him*. That was what healers did, right? Fix what was broken?

"I know it's hard, Arivor. I do, but you have to hold onto hope for a little while longer," I said. "I'm not finished with this body yet. Until I'm done, can you hold out? Please?"

Slowly, Arivor rolled his head until he could see me, almost letting the hand on him slip free, and I suppressed a shudder.

"What else is left?" he asked.

"Oh, a handful of grisly bits and pieces," I said, "and I need to wrap up this part."

With a half-smile, I flicked the syringe, still sticking out the body, and Arivor's face went slack. His eyes emptied of his presence before he toppled to the side.

For a precious few seconds, I was stuck staring at this scene with my bewildered brain trying to figure out what had happened, but then, I was on my knees, rolling my friend over.

He looked dead. I'd seen enough corpses to know what it looked like when someone's essence had left their body, but although that visage was what shrouded my friend—oh stars above, Clariss was going to kill me—he was still breathing.

Like Alouin was.

In a haze, I hauled Arivor upright, pinning Alouin's hand behind his neck once more. Precariously holding this arrangement together, I flicked the syringe again, but as when I'd inserted it for a second time, nothing happened. Grabbing the end of it, I jimmied it back and forth, dragging its needle in a circle.

When white light collected around the hand that I'd pinned, I paused, but Arivor didn't move, so I continued with my breathing going ragged. Had I killed my friend?

Well... he wasn't dead, but in many ways, that might be worse. Had I- had I done this to him?

Coughing jarred the stream of my frantic thoughts while the hand behind Arivor, still filled with light, lifted to slap on the table. Much slipping and sliding occurred first, but the body on the table... Alouin pushed himself upright.

For a brief moment, I lost my hold on the world. The next thing I knew, I was on the other side of the shed with Arivor behind me, and Alouin had his hands lifted, frowning at one full of light and the other filled with darkness.

"What on earth?" he said.

A distracted look overtook him, and when focus returned, he widened his eyes to saucers.

“Oh, *fuck*. Why are those sequences initia-?”

Grunting, he curled on himself with a continuous string of curses spilling from his mouth. As if pushing against something solid, he brought his hands together at an agonizingly slow rate, gritting his teeth, and when they came together, a pained whine filled the shed.

At it, I scooted Arivor and myself further back, glancing toward the door. I didn't think we could escape from here unnoticed, not with my friend in his current state. Instead, we thunked into a wall, and my already abused heart skipped a beat when the candle on a nearby table almost fell to the floor.

What was I doing? I should keep my eyes fixed on the- the god in my shed.

When I found him again, though, I squeaked. Gray mist, or maybe fog, was jetting from Alouin's hands to a point in front of him, one where the air was doing something that I couldn't quite comprehend, but it made my head hurt.

Almost, I looked away from this point. Before I could, though, the stream of mist causing it trickled to a stop. With it gone, Alouin limply fell to the table, flipping over it to tumble onto the floor.

Meanwhile, at the place where the mist had stopped, the air... shattered, and a hairline crack appeared. It expanded until it had made a pinhole, and streams of black and white flowed toward it from Alouin. Around the pinhole, the black trickle formed an oval while the white bits outlined this shape.

And the shed was still.

## **TTS Interlude 2.2**

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