

# Interlude 2.3: The Beginning

## Eriadren

Now that things in my shed had gone quiet, I was stuck in place with fear singing in every part of me. Fear worse than the moments before a battle. Fear worse than facing down an empire's leader.

Lirilith hadn't come to help me and Arivor, but I couldn't blame her for that. To this point, everything had been relatively quiet, or as quiet as my typical experiments went. She probably thought that everything was fine and dandy in here.

When Alouin stirred, I stopped breathing. He got to his feet, quickly locating the oval.

"Damnit, this iteration didn't need another one of those."

Continuing to swear, he kneaded his arms one at a time while looking over his surroundings.

And his eyes landed on me.

Swallowing hard, I tried to smile. It must not have come off well because Alouin stormed toward me with a grumpy look carved into his face.

"Is this your work?" he asked. "Hell, this is what I get for trusting Max and Wye with my body: some primitive forcing me into it again. *Damn*. I was doing something important..."

Standing over me, he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Where am I, and what did you do to me?"

My mouth was left flapping. I knew I should answer Alouin's questions, but I couldn't force my focus away from a single point of interest.

"For ships' sake, man, speak up!" Alouin snapped.

Licking my lips, I pointed at his chin level.

"Um. You have a..." I said. "My syringe?"

"What?"

Furrowing his brow, Alouin patted at the back of his neck—

“Oh.”

—before pulling my syringe free. To my surprise, he returned it to me without a change of expression, rather than breaking it as I’d expected.

“That explains why I was stuck here,” he said. “Hell, you’ve messed with my sequence organization, but since I’m not using this body, I suppose it doesn’t matter.”

And finally, *finally*, my dumb, piece of shit self realized something that I should have considered from the second Alouin had woken up.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I- I have no right to speak with you after what I’ve done-”

“Debatable,” Alouin interrupted. “After everything I’ve suffered in my life, this was merely an inconvenience. But please. Do go on.”

Frantically, I found the trailing thread of my thoughts.

“My friend has a son who’s sick. Dying,” I said. “That’s why I was experimenting... is there any way you’d help me heal him? I know it’s a lot to ask.”

I didn’t know if I could figure out Arivor’s situation on my own, not any more than I had with Rafe’s at least, but I doubted I’d get more than one favor, if that, from this man, especially when he should be punching my face in.

Rafe needed the help more. If he were here, Arivor would understand. He’d probably kill me if I wasted this chance on him.

Cocking his head, Alouin examined me with narrowed eyes.

“I’ve seen a lot of miserably sick kids in my life, accompanied by their desperate parents,” he said, “but never a parent’s friend who’d go so far to help, especially alone. Where’s this kid’s mom, dad, or guardian?”

“Um...”

I was saying that a lot.

“He’s here, actually.”

Scrambling to my feet, I dusted my hands off, glancing over my shoulder with pinched lips.

“Something happened while-”

“Shit.”

That curse had been so quiet I almost didn't hear it, but when I turned back to Alouin, he was eyeing my friend with anguished fascination.

"It's that time, is it?" he said before turning his gaze on me.

What I saw there chilled me to the core.

"And here you are, the perfect sacrifice," he said.

"...I'm sorry?" I said.

"I'm afraid that's my line," Alouin said. "You're coming with me."

I took a step back, banging my hip into something.

"Wha-?"

Alouin placed a finger on my forehead, and the world *wrenched*. When I could see again, dizziness made me cling to my knees.

I wasn't in my shed. Instead, I was standing on a thin, gray line, running in front of me until it met the horizon, and when I looked behind me, the same was true. On one side of this, the world became a never-ending landscape of glowing white, or I assumed it was never ending. It was hard to tell. No colors differentiated the ground from the sky, and the same was true on the other side. The only difference between the two sides was that instead of spotless white, black night blotted out the world on my right.

Ahead of me, Arivor was lying with half of his body in the gray while the rest had disappeared into black. I tried to run for him, but a grip on my tunic's neckline had me stumbling into Alouin, who pushed me upright.

"It's true, then," he said. "Daevetch has an avatar."

"Daevetch?" I asked, trying to catch my breath.

Alouin answered me, but I didn't hear what he'd said, too transfixed by the fingers of night that were creeping up my friend's chest. What was that?

I didn't like it. Something about it shivered disquiet into me, and so, tightening my lips, I again tried to reach my friend.

This time, Alouin's tug on my wrist sent me sideways, twirling me until my back was to the white landscape. Facing me, the god dug his fingers into my shoulders.

"Do you love your friend?" he asked.

What kind of question was that?

"I would do anything for Arivor," I said. "If it were needed, I would die for him."

A tension that I hadn't noticed before leaked from Alouin, even if his shoulders also drooped.

"And you will," he said. "Many, many times."

Many...? How did one die more than once?

"I'm so sorry."

Before I could register what was happening, Alouin placed his hand on my chest, and with a pulse of light, I was sent flying, tumbling on landing. I was on my feet as soon as I could roll to them, sprinting for the gray line. If the black on Arivor had made a primal part of me hiss, then I could only assume this white light would too.

When I reached the line, however, Alouin was waiting for me with roiling night coating his arms.

"Don't," he said. "You'll only hurt yourself."

I sneered at him, making to step into gray, but Alouin pointed down the line.

"Look at your feet and then, your friend," he said.

Reluctantly, I glanced down, shuddering on seeing a sheet of white rising up my legs. Arivor, on the other hand, was completely covered in black.

"He was already lost," Alouin said. "This way, you'll have one another."

"What does that *mean*?" I shouted.

But Alouin was gone, and I was alone, keeping perfectly still until white light swept over my head.

When a jolt ran through me, I knew I was in my shed, even without looking, but that was mostly because I banged my hip into the table at my back.

The one that had had a candle on it.

My eyes flew open, and I watched while, as if in slow motion, the candle rocked off of the table, falling onto Arivor's face. In a heartbeat, I was on my knees, plucking hardened beeswax free, but the damage was done.

The candle had landed with its wick on Arivor's cheek. Its flame had made a red circle on his skin, one that would scar, and molten wax was drying in spatters and rivulets everywhere else. Painful, a bit disfiguring, but nothing like what we'd endured during the war.

He should still be screaming.

When I focused on Arivor, though, I found the same empty expression there.

He hadn't returned yet. Was he coming back?

A quick check confirmed that Alouin had vanished, so I couldn't ask him these questions. I'd have to wait, then.

Sitting on my heels, I touched Arivor's cheek. I should get a salve for this, but no matter how much I wanted to treat my friend's wound, I couldn't leave his side. I had to know what he'd seen in that other world. I had to know that he was ok.

It should have been me. I'd knocked the candle off of the table. I'd flicked the syringe that had seen his essence fleeing his body. It should be *me*.

At this thought, heat bored into my face, spraying in pinpricks around its entry point, and with something between a yelp and a howl, I slapped my hand to it, which only made the pain worse. Of course.

I didn't have the presence of mind to appreciate my idiocy, though, too busy hunching on myself and quietly hissing.

Even with my focus on the sting lancing my cheek, a crackle and pop teased at my ears while a concerning smell tickled at my nose. The smell of something burning.

I hadn't put the candle out before tossing it aside.

Gasping, I straightened, meaning to put the fire out, when something familiar and unexpected slammed into me. An energy drain.

Dumbly, I swayed in place. Why was this-? I hadn't used magic!

Another one walloped me, letting black eat into my vision, and somehow, I screamed for help before crumpling. As the world drained to pinpricks, Arivor's face came into focus. He was still gone, his essence flown to that other world we'd visited, but...

No burns marked his skin.

Then, I was out like a light.

### **TTS Interlude 2.3**

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