

Interlude 2.4: The Beginning

Eriadren

I took a breath with sunlight bathing my body, and for a while, I just lay in bed, tracking dust motes in the air above me. I was waiting for my brain to catch up, letting whatever it was hiding from me flow through the cracks, and when I remembered, I sat bolt upright, falling onto my elbows when the room started spinning.

Arivor! He needed my help.

When I rolled out of bed, I ended up falling instead, and the crack of my body on the ground was loud in the quiet.

Ow.

Now that I thought about it, my surroundings hadn't reminded me of home, and whatever I'd been laying on definitely wasn't my bed. In fact, I was pretty sure it was-

"Familiar, isn't it, Eriadren? Years ago, you lay here, recovering after saving my nephew from thieves. Now, look at the two of you."

Just who I'd always wanted to see after waking up from a near death experience: my mortal enemy.

"Reive," I growled.

Bracing for pain, I pushed myself off of the floor, all while glancing around the healing house, and was surprised by how normal I felt.

Normal? I was positively glowing with health, which wasn't something I should show around the man glowering at me.

Swallowing hard, I asked, "Is Arivor...?"

"He's alive. Went home about an hour ago. Some sort of emergency at home," Reive said.

"Well..." I said, shakily sighing. "That's-"

"I wasn't finished," Reive snapped. "Arivor will be scarred for the rest of his life because of your stupid experiment. Ruining his reputation wasn't enough for you, was it? Well, I hope you're happy because you've certainly made your mark on him now."

But... there at the end, before I'd lost consciousness, I could have sworn that the burn marks on my friend's face had gone.

I needed to talk to him so we could compare our stories, and then, we should figure out what had happened.

Had I actually woken Alouin up? What had he created in my shed, and by the stars, what had that place of light and dark been? What was Daevetch?

"Was it you two who stole from the temple?"

Jerking free of my contemplation, I blinked at Reive for a moment, first wondering why he was still here and then, controlling the panicked gibbering that I wanted to unleash. Instead, I smirked, playing the part of the deriding asshole I'd always been around him.

"Something was stolen from the temple?" I said before clicking my tongue. "If that gets out, it won't reflect well on the Council."

For a while, Reive just stared at me, but when he opened his mouth to speak, someone interrupted him.

"You shouldn't be here."

Lirilith. By the stars, how that woman saved me.

She advanced on us with a hint of the regal air that she'd abandoned long ago, looking down her nose at Reive.

"If I find out you've been less than pleasant to my husband, Councilman, there will be consequences," she said. "I still have friends in the capital, friends who owe me, so unless you want to see what sort of punishment I can devise for you, you'll kindly get the hell out of here."

Despite the amused front he was raising, Reive couldn't hide the brittleness of his smile.

"I'll do that," he said. "While I'm here, is there anything I should tell your father when next I see him?"

Stepping into Reive's personal space, Lirilith peeled her lips back.

"Fuck you," she breathed. "That's for both of you."

With a half-smile, Reive said, "I'll be sure to relay your message."

But he stalked away, ridding us of his nasty presence. Lirilith sat on the edge of my bed, taking my hand with pinched eyes.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

After glancing around for eavesdroppers, I leaned toward her.

“Perfect,” I said. “Better than I ever have, in fact, which is a bit troublesome.”

“How so?” Lirilith asked.

For a moment, I hesitated. I'd like to share my fear: that my perfect condition had something to do with a place of white and black, but what if she thought I was crazy, suffering from delusions after a brush with death?

In the end, though, I couldn't keep it from her. She was my wife, after all.

So, I shared everything that had happened: stealing Alouin's body from the temple, experimenting on it, and the disastrous conclusion of those efforts.

“I'm sorry that I've kept this from you,” was what I ended on. “I wasn't trying to. It's just... you know how I get when I'm engrossed in a project.”

“Completely oblivious to anything but it? Yes, I know,” Lirilith said, “as I've known that you've been in one of your moods for a while now. And before you ask, I believe you. Arivor was acting... strangely before someone retrieved him.”

“Reive mentioned that an emergency had come up at home,” I said before pausing. “How is he?”

My voice was quiet, but still, Lirilith heard the question, tightening her hold on me.

“Not good, Eri,” she said. “If you're feeling as recovered as you say, we should visit him. I'm worried. He's-”

She bit her lip, pulling her hand out of mine.

“Before he left, he was acting like he did in the weeks after we massacred that human town,” she said.

“Shit,” I murmured.

Lirilith nodded, and I threw my legs over the cot's edge.

“If that's true, then we need to leave this place,” I said. “Now.”

A few healers tried to stop us as we left, insisting that I needed bed rest, but I pushed through them, and they couldn't stop us. No one had been able to stop Lirilith and me once we'd put our mind to something.

Once we were outside, I shelled out the coin needed to hire a carriage, wanting all the speed we could get. Lirilith and I were silent on the ride there. Sitting opposite one another, we leaned forward to clasp each other's hands.

Soon enough, we reached Arivor's estate, hurrying over the pathway to his front door. When I knocked, a manservant answered it.

"Ah. The master said you might be coming," he said, sneering at me like he always did. "I'm to show you to him, although why he wants to see you at this difficult time is beyond me."

Difficult time?

"Is Clariss here?" Lirilith asked, stepping over the threshold.

"Yes, Your Eminence. She's with the master."

Rolling her eyes, Lirilith waved for the manservant to take the lead before sharing a worried look with me. With Rafe's illness having driven them apart, Clariss and Arivor couldn't stand to be in the same room right now. That they were together now was concerning, and this worry deepened when we turned onto the hallway that Rafe's room led from.

Rushing around the manservant, I sprinted for where I knew Arivor would be. After banging the door open, I took in the space: Clariss quietly crying in a corner, Arivor holding his son's hand to his forehead, Rafe lying pale and still in bed.

And I thought the worst had happened, releasing a silent wail from deep inside of me.

Then, the boy's chest rose and fell—such a shallow inhale—and the air in my lungs rushed out of me.

The adults in the room turned to face me as I inched inside, but I had eyes only for Rafe. Arivor said something I didn't hear, and I barely made out Lirilith, rushing to her friend, while lowering myself onto the bed.

Beside me lay a boy that I loved as if he were my own, and hesitantly, I brushed a knuckle over his cheek before resting my hand on his shoulder.

This wasn't fair. Rafe was too young for this to be happening. He should have years ahead of him, not hours as he did now. His face blurred as I considered all the things he'd never do.

He wouldn't attend school or go on adventures with his friends. He wouldn't fall in love or join with someone. He wouldn't have children of his own, if he wanted them.

And the world would never experience his brilliance.

It wasn't fucking fair!

When I lowered my face, burying it in the boy's chest, I might have started soaking his clothes with tears. I wouldn't know, too caught up in my own self-loathing to notice.

This was my fault. If I'd found a cure, this wouldn't be happening. Rafe would be running around the house, doing all the things that little boys did.

By the stars, I wished I could take this from him. It was what I deserved. If a way existed for me to suffer this illness instead of him, I would do it because-

From out of nowhere, the energy that I'd enjoyed since waking up was sapped from my body, and I couldn't think past the nausea that had taken hold of me. Somehow, I pushed myself away from Rafe before spewing vomit all over the floor, and I tumbled off the bed.

My head cracked on something.

The lights went out.

The next thing I knew, Lirilith and Arivor were hovering over me with pinched faces, and on actually seeing my friend, I winced at the deplorable bandaging that was covering half of his face. The scent of lavender... or something equally as useless strongly hovered around him.

"Why the hell did you let someone do that?" I asked, slurring my words a bit. "You couldn't wait for someone competent to treat you?"

Chuckling, Arivor said, "He's all right."

While he sat back on his heels, Lirilith took hold of my head, turning it every which way.

"I thought you said you felt fine," she snapped. "If you have a concussion, you should have stayed in the healing house."

Shoving her hands away from me, I sat up, massaging my temples.

"I promise you, love, I'm fine," I said before lifting my head.

And at what I saw, my mouth went dry, which had me forcing my words out.

"Pretty sure the fainting wasn't because of a concussion."

On the tail end of this, a sleepy voice said, "Uncle Eri? What are you doing here?"

Arivor was on his feet faster than I'd thought possible, spinning toward the bed.

Where Rafe was sitting up with a healthy glow to his skin. He ran his eyes over the adults in the room, frowning.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Why are all of you here?"

Having gained my feet at some point, I lifted an arm in front of Arivor to keep him from running to his son. Was this truly safe yet, or were we about to barrel into another tragedy? Best not to let my friend get closer until we knew what was happening.

Meanwhile, Clariss was slowly turning into a hyperventilating puddle in her corner, and Lirilith moved toward her, absently patting her back.

“Hey, buddy,” I said with numb lips. “How do you feel?”

Cocking his head, Rafe said, “I feel...”

His eyes went wide.

“I feel fine. I feel...”

“Better?” Lirilith gently asked.

But Rafe wasn't listening. Carefully, he climbed out of bed, testing his ability to stand, before jumping in place, and a giggle spilled from his lips.

“Not sick,” he said before glancing at me and his father. “I'm *not sick*.”

Arivor made the smallest whimper beside me, and I couldn't hold him back anymore. While he raced to hug his son, Clariss scrambled to join them, and I met Lirilith's eyes.

What had just happened? Had I done this?

I saw the same questions reflected in my wife's eyes, although fear was there too.

It wasn't meant for me, though. What would this superstitious, stuck-in-its-ways city think of Rafe's miraculous recovery?

Arivor extended a hand toward me, waving for us to join them, and we did, if slowly. By the time I'd reached my friend, though, I'd pushed worry aside. For the moment.

I hugged Rafe, ruffling his hair and laughing when he made a face at me. For a while, we five people were transported to a wondrous place of joy, where anything could happen, and we reveled in it.

But at some point, I caught myself staring at Arivor's bandaged cheek. If I was right and I'd been the cure for Rafe, why was Arivor still injured? If my little miracle hadn't stuck for him, would Rafe regress too?

When I peeled my eyes off of his cheek, Arivor was looking at me.

“If you're worried about... that, I'm pretty sure you don't need to,” he quietly said.

“What? Why?”

Again, Arivor shook his head.

“We need to talk. Later.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We really do.”

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