

Interlude 2.5: The Beginning

Eriadren

"I'm worried about Rafe."

With the day almost over, I was sitting in bed, waiting for Lirilith to join me. She was taking a long time in the washroom tonight, long enough that my thoughts had once more turned to the anxiety that had been eating at me in the months since Rafe's recovery.

It hadn't been too bad at first. People had reacted to something they'd consider 'unnatural' with unexpected stoicism, but tensions had been rising in the city lately. Despite the thrashing we'd given them a decade ago, the human kingdoms had once more moved against the empire. Rumors of another war were rife in the city, which had people on edge, and this had started eroding Rafe's protections.

"That boy will be fine, Eri. He has people looking out for him, and his status as a noble will make anyone think twice before hurting him," Lirilith said. "So, stop worrying. Tell me how your research went today."

Groaning, I thumped my head against the wall. Shortly after the accident, Arivor and I had compared notes about what we'd experienced on the day in question, but unfortunately, my friend hadn't been able to add much to what I'd already known. Considering he'd been unconscious throughout those events, his ignorance hadn't surprised me, but from the smattering of disconnected memories that Arivor did recall, one thing had stood out.

Unlike the strange circumstances that had left me in consistently perfect health, Daevetch, the substance that had infected Arivor, wouldn't let him heal. Fortunately, it ignored small things like bruises or stubbed toes, but anything more, like burns, would stay present for the rest of his life.

When Arivor had woken up in that place of darkness and light, this delightful fact had been the only thing that Alouin had shared before sending him away, like the god had with me.

My healing tick didn't work on him either. We'd learned that the hard way.

Since then, Arivor and I had spent every free hour scouring the city for information about Daevetch. We hadn't found much, just vague or useless facts, and I was getting frustrated with our lack of progress. In a sick way, I was glad now that it had taken so long to find a cure for Rafe. That struggle had taught me the value of having patience when a search for answers looked endless.

"Well?" Lirilith asked.

"Can we please not talk about it?" I said. "I don't want to think about the accident or the burns on Arivor's face or *any* of it. Not here."

"Why not?"

For a moment, I was lost for words. Was she serious?

"Because this is the only place where I can drop all my cares and worries," I said. "Because this place is safety, somewhere I can focus completely on—"

"Me?" Lirilith interrupted.

Standing in the entrance to our cramped washroom, she was leaning one shoulder against the doorframe, but as she smirked at me, I couldn't focus on what that look might mean, not after I recognized what she was wearing.

It was her uniform from the war, but she'd removed the medals that typically hung from it, and the jacket's top buttons were undone. With her hair pulled into a messy bun, a few strands—

The exact same ones. By the stars, how had she remembered that?

—had fallen around her face, and she'd painted her lips and eyes.

The clencher, however, was the necklace peeking from beneath her neckline. Lirilith only got that piece out for the most serious and special of occasions. It was all she had left of her mother.

Looking at this ensemble I was struck by a sense of déjà vu, one so strong that it transported me to the years of the war. On the night Lirilith was evoking, we'd camped near the battlefield, too tired to flee the cries of the dying and the smell of those already gone. She'd received new orders a few hours previous, and after she'd shared them with us, I'd crawled into my bedroll, dreading the next day.

Right as I'd been drifting off, I'd heard a voice outside my tent. When I'd lifted the flap, I'd found a twin of the woman before me now, and she'd said—

"May I come inside Sergeant Eriadren?" present-day Lirilith asked.

Licking my lips, I scooted backward in bed, remembering one of the best nights of my life.

"Of course, commander," I said, echoing a past version of myself.

Lirilith stalked forward, crawling over our bed sheets until she was sitting in front of me. Hesitantly, she brushed my cheek, and I leaned into it, exactly and I'd once done.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

And again, I felt the urge to look away from her, although the cause was different now.

"I'll survive," I said.

Again, Lirilith smacked the bedding beside me, drawing her face into the fiercest of expressions.

"That's not good enough," she said.

As my cajoling urge insisted, I looked away, focusing on the sword that I kept propped in the corner of our room. It was a much better sight than the blood-stained blade that had once lain at the head of my bedroll.

"What do you want me to say, Lirilith?" I said. "Should I talk about how terrified I am, both for myself and Arivor? What if I can't keep him safe, like I promised? Should I share how I won't sleep tonight, too eaten up by guilt to find dreams?"

Hell, it was uncanny how well those words fit my present-day circumstances too.

"I understand," Lirilith said.

And here, she'd paused. And here, I'd silently begged for her to say. I hadn't been sure what I'd do if she'd left me alone in that cold tent.

When her voice burst on my ears, as sharp as it had been back there, I almost smiled instead of reeling away, as our reenactment required.

"You're not the only one feeling these things, asshole," Lirilith snapped. "All of us are, but if we're to survive this war, we must help each other with them. So, help me, Sergeant Eriadren, by letting me help you. At the least, I can fix the last thing you mentioned."

I couldn't help but smile now, even if I kept my eyes fixed on my sword.

"I don't know..." I said.

By the stars, I'd tried to project uncertainty into that phrase, mimicking the same tone I'd had back then, but hell, if I hadn't failed miserably at it.

Wrapping her hands in my tunic, Lirilith growled. "Look at me."

When I refused with my grin turning impish, she shook me.

"I said *look at me!*"

So, I did, but here, Lirilith went off script. Releasing me, she grabbed something lying on the bedroll beside her, bringing it into view.

"Join with me, Eri," she said with a shy smile.

I stared at the red sticks she was holding. She wanted to do a Joining?

First, the necklace and the recreation of our first night together and now, this. Suddenly, I was apprehensive. What was going on? Was something wrong?

"Are you sure?" I asked. "It's been a while..."

I trailed off at the pleading in her eyes.

"I know," Lirilith said, "but still, I'm asking."

Hesitantly, she extended a stick toward me, and I took it.

"Thank you," Lirilith said, more relieved than she should be, "I love you, Eri."

She broke her stick, breathing in its red particles, and bracing for what was coming, I did the same.

But then, I was her, and she was me, and we were we. We knew exactly that the one we loved wanted and what the one we loved had feared, and those fears dissipated once we realized how silly they'd been.

As the one we loved wished, we reached for them, drawing them to us. Our lips pressed against something wonderfully soft—or was it familiarly chapped?—and when we opened our mouths, letting our tongues taste tongue and teeth and skin, we sighed, running our hands over our loved one's body. We pulled clothes off of them, desperate to press our skin together, and when we did... ahh...

Pulling on our loved one's hair, we panted, "Stop, stop. We need—"

But they quieted us with a kiss, whispering into our mouth.

"We know, love."

It was slow and careful, but soon enough, we were as thoroughly merged physically as we were mentally. And all we could do was look into our loved one's eyes, watching them go wide. Their face slackened, leaving only bliss behind. Every muscle, every vein, every bit of us was filled with this, and consciousness was gone for however long it took that swell to crest and diminish.

When we returned from this, we were lying on our loved one, struggling to breathe. Their weight was uncomfortably pinning us, so we rolled over, bouncing as our loved one curled up beside us. The Joining wasn't over, however, although it was fading... fading...

Hazily, I Eriadren, watched Lirilith as she paced across the kitchen, gnawing on her thumb. What...?

Holy shit, she'd reversed it. I was seeing her past *after* our consciousnesses had wound together. How on earth had she—?

I was dragged across time. Its events flashed by too quickly for me to register them, and when the rush slowed down once more, I was sitting beside Lirilith in a healing house's waiting area.

Oh, no. Was she sick? Was that why...?

"Lirilith?"

A stout woman beckoned my wife into a private room, and once inside, Lirilith took a seat.

"Go on, my dear," the healer said, getting herself settled. "What's wrong?"

Uncomfortably shifting, Lirilith clasped her hands in her lap, staring at them, and I wished that I could have been there to support her.

"My- my cycles," she said, swallowing hard. "They've... stopped, and I... I'm sterile, so I'm worried..."

She couldn't continue, and I was stuck watching her. Oh, Alouin, why hadn't she come to me?

She hadn't wanted to worry me. Yes, I got that, but I could have told her-

Wait. Was this what I thought it was?

"All right," the healer said. "I'm going to list some symptoms, and you tell me if you've noticed any of them. Can you do that?"

When Lirilith nodded, the healer started, and as she went on, I leaned my elbows on my knees, hiding my face. My poor wife, she'd avoided this side of her life for so long that she'd thought this, something most women would recognize, had been her body failing on her.

Once the healer had finished with her list, she chuckled.

"My dear, you're not sick," she said. "Unless you consider the miracle of life a disease, that is."

When Lirilith stiffened, I laid a hand on her arm, even knowing she wouldn't feel it.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

The healer's face crinkled.

"Why, you're with child, my dear," she said.

The Joining snapped, leaving me alone in my body. I had no connection to the one I loved, and as I shuddered, tears spilled over my cheeks.

I didn't know how long I stayed like that, adjusting to a solitary existence again, but when I was aware of the world once more, Lirilith was hovering over me with worry pinching her face. Softly smiling, I tangled my fingers in her hair, humming when she leaned into my hand, until everything

from the Joining had integrated. Once it had, I snapped my eyes open wide.

"You're with child?" I said.

Grinning, Lirilith nodded.

"We... we're having a baby?" I asked, terrified and desperate for the answer.

Years, we'd wanted this. *Years* and now...

Leaning down to me, Lirilith whispered, "Yes."

She kissed me, and for a beat, my poor brain tried to process everything.

But then, I tackled her into our sheets. Thus, we performed a repeat of our Joining.

Once we'd finished, we stayed awake for a while, making plans and talking about our hopes and joy and *everything*, but eventually, Lirilith fell asleep on my shoulder. For a while, I watched her dream before following her into that unconscious state.

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