

# Interlude 2.7: The Beginning

## Eriadren

I was shoved into a carriage, barely catching myself on the floor before the horses were spurred into motion. Haltingly, I climbed onto a seat. I scanned the carriage's interior, stopping my eyes' swing on Arivor.

He'd propped his elbows on his legs, clawing at his hair, and in the sparse moonlight, I caught a glimpse of the hysteria building in his eyes before the homes outside threw us into shadows again.

I also noticed one important piece missing from the picture.

"Where's Rafe?" I asked.

With a choked giggle, Arivor said, "In another carriage, taking a different route to our destination. Alouin, he must be scared."

I was quiet for a moment, trying to think.

"Where are they taking us? The temple? The Council's chamber?" I said. "If we knew where the other carriage is headed, maybe we can intercept it. Alouin knows how easy getting out of this one would be. We've done it often enough."

But Arivor was shaking his head.

"He could be anywhere. Better to stay... stay put for now," he said while restrained sobs made him hiccup. "They too-took my *son*, Eri. They *took* him. I just- just- *just-!* Fuck!"

He folded on himself, muffling his voice with his knees.

"I can't lose, not after we worked so hard to heal him."

His shoulders started shaking, and I laid my hand on one.

"Don't, Arivor," I said. "He's not lost yet, and that means we can save him. Again. By the stars, that boy's going to owe me so many life debts by the time this is over."

Laughing, Arivor relaxed, hanging from his legs for a moment, before wiping his eyes.

"You're right. We can do this," he said. "So, what do we have to work with? I don't have any weapons on me. Didn't have time to arm before fleeing."

Squeezing my eyes closed, I groaned.

"Stars, if you'd made it to the slums, you'd have been fucked," I said before shaking my head. "I've got a knife. Not much, I know, but it's something."

I shrugged, and perking up, Arivor lifted a finger.

"And we have Lirilith," he said. "Knowing her, she'll be gathering our friends... not that many of them are left in the city right now. Or maybe she'll sneak into wherever we're going-"

"She'd better not," I growled. "Getting our friends? Sure, that's fine, but other than that, she'd better keep her ass at home."

Rocking back in his seat, Arivor glared at me, clearly wanting to throw a punch my way.

"Why wouldn't she help?" he asked in a sharp tone. "We'll need all the help we can get-!"

"She's with child, Arivor," I snapped.

At the look on my friend's face, I turned away.

"She told me earlier this evening."

After a beat of silence, Arivor said, "Hell."

"That sounds about right," I said, chuckling.

When I glanced back at him, Arivor had his brows scrunched together while opening and closing his mouth like a fish.

"What should-?" he said after a moment. "Do you want my congratulations? Or maybe... I'm sorry for the shitty timing? I don't know."

Grimacing, I waved his concern away.

"Don't worry about it. Focus on Rafe," I said, "but considering how little of an advantage we have, we'll probably have to wing it with this."

Frowning, Arivor said, "Yes. We don't have another option, unfortunately."

"Great."

Sighing, I slumped in my seat, and for a long while, Arivor joined me in silence, although he looked like he was working up to say something. When our carriage started slowing down, it gave him the push he needed.

"Listen. In case this goes poorly and Rafe..."

His face contorted into an expression that I'd never wanted to see on my friend, and I leaned forward to take his hand.

"Hey, it'll be-" I started.

Jerking away from me, Arivor said, "No! I need you to listen to me!"

Stunned, I nodded while the carriage stopped, and as footsteps crunched toward its door, Arivor stared at it with panic.

"About the day of the accident," he said. "Eri. There's something I haven't told you-"

The door opened, letting in a wash of noise, and at the sight of the mob on the other side, I forgot what my friend had been saying. So many people were here, people from all over the social spectrum, and all of them looked ready to murder someone.

"Not good," I muttered.

Arivor grunted beside me, but then, we were dragged through the crowd. Fortunately, they weren't focused on us but on the wide terrace ahead.

As guards marched us up its stairs, more of them filled in around us, and with a dry mouth, I forced my fingers away from the knife in my waistband. This was *not good*.

When we climbed a final stair, letting us see across the terrace, I stopped short, ignoring the guard trying to push me forward. The Council was here, chatting amongst themselves, but one of them was set apart from the others. Reive scowled at his comrades from where he was babysitting... humans.

Sitting around a table, a delegation of humans was being catered to, and when Arivor and I came into view, a few of them stopped talking, glaring at us instead.

They knew us. Former enemies, perhaps? And why on earth was Reive keeping watch on them?

This, however, wasn't what had rendered me immobile. No, that honor went to the pyre, built in the center of the terrace, and Rafe, trussed into a sitting position on top of it.

Trembling so hard that it was visible from here, he kept looking around him, occasionally flinching, and when he turned his tear-streaked face toward us, his eyes went so damn wide. Jerking against rope, he raised his voice in a high-pitched shriek, one I hadn't heard from him in years.

"Daddy! Daddy, please! I'm scared! What did I-? I'm *sorry*. Please, let me go!"

...I would *end* every single fucking one of these people.

When a roar split the night, the crowd's attention snapped from a screaming little boy to Arivor. Escaping the guards around him, he ran for the pyre, easily downing two hostiles.

And with not a weapon on him.

I was moving to help when Arivor froze in place, which made me do the same. Given the current chaos, I wasn't sure what was happening—my friend would never have stopped fighting until he'd saved his son—and until I did, it was probably best to bide my time and wait for an opening.

As Reive advanced on his nephew, he had two fingers lifted in front of him, and while guardsmen took hold of Arivor, I went cold. Reive could control another person's body? That- that was *old* magic. Why hadn't I know about this?

He dropped his hand, and immediately, Arivor struggled to reach his son, but the guards had a firm hold on him this time.

"Be brave, Rafe! Everything will be fine," he shouted. "I'll fix this, so just- just- calm down, and don't apologize! You did nothing wrong, ok? I love you."

Reive stopped in front of his nephew, who demanded an explanation, and while the bastard gave it, I half-listened, scanning my surroundings for something I could use. With every reason the Councilman gave—needing to intimidate the human kingdoms, ridding the world of an abomination, restoring the family's reputation—my face further twisted with disgust, but that expression dropped from me when I saw a figure roll over the terrace's edge opposite me. The figure quickly scuttled into the shadows, but still, I knew her.

Lirilith. I'd know her anywhere. What was she doing here?

"I don't understand. You have nothing more to justify murdering a child, Uncle Reive?" Arivor asked. "He's family!"

But he said this so quietly that I could barely hear him, and I knew the fight was going out of him. Why did he always give up like this?

"I know he's family," Reive said. "That's why we have to do this."

Arivor was quiet for a moment before bursting into laughter, and sagging in the guards' arms, he lifted his face to the sky.

"I get it now," he gasped. "I always wondered why Eri hates you so much, but *I get it now*. You're an evil son of a bitch."

Still drooping from the guards, he lowered his head.

"If you do this, you will destroy me," he said with his voice dead. "You will rip out every shred of decency in me and what remains..."

He clicked his tongue, and the monster mask that he revealed had me shrinking away from him, even seeing as small of a portion of it as I had.

"The shade that you'll make of me will do everything in its power to destroy you as thoroughly as you did with me," Arivor said.

And even knowing it was a risk, I squeezed my eyes closed. Did Reive hear it? That hadn't been a threat, meant to scare him into stopping. That had been a promise. That had meant, 'You light this pyre, and you're making your life a living hell.'

With a world-weary sigh, Reive said, "Someday, you'll see I'm doing this for your own good."

Gasping, I opened my eyes in time to see him summoning fire to a spot above his hand. While the other Council members did the same, he turned away, and as the group bent to the pyre, I reached out for that flame, desperate to pull it away from Rafe, even if it might kill me. Distantly, I was aware of Lirilith's arm shooting out of her cloak while Arivor's face turned red from effort.

It wasn't enough. These people were Council members for a reason. Their control on what they were holding was too strong.

They touched that fire to the pyre's wood, making it blaze into the night, and with their cries twining through the fire's building roar, a father and son howled.

"NOOO!"

"Daddy, no! Please!"

I'd waited too long. Too. fucking. long.

Even still, the strategist in me was ratcheting through our options and their projected odds.

Option one.

I could eliminate enough of the Council to weaken their magical hold. Once I'd summoned the fire to me, I'd have to trust that Arivor could snap out of his shock in time to save Rafe, since using that much magic would weaken me.

Even with that, though, I seriously doubted I could finish my side of the plan before a guard ended me, which would negate any other part of the plan.

So, it would leave Rafe to die by fire.

Option two.

I could charge the pyre, sweep through the flames, and pull Rafe free of them. There were two problems with this plan, though. After twice passing through flame, I'd be in no condition to fight, and said condition would draw Lirilith and Arivor in to defend me.

Even together, fighting our way free of this mess had infinitesimally low odds of success, and again, the guards would probably cut me down before I reached Rafe, leaving him to die by fire.

Who'd chosen this method of execution anyway? It wasn't enough that they were killing an Alouin damned child, but they had to do it in such an agonizing way as well?

Absently, I watched while as if in slow motion, a boy I cared for kicked away from the fire, scrunching on himself when it came closer. Weeping, my friend screamed his throat raw, reaching for his son from where he'd fallen to his knees.

This was Cruelty, and I *loathed* it.

Maybe I could have devised other plans, ones with a better chance of saving Rafe's life, but if so, I didn't see them now. I looked at this horrible image and wanted, with all of my heart, to spread as much Mercy here as I could

Even if it meant that when I did, my surviving loved ones would hate me.

Including Lirilith.

When I found her, my heart stopped on seeing glinting steel in her hand. She'd come to the same conclusion as me, and somehow, I knew that she'd sought me out, as I had her.

"No," I said, even if she couldn't hear me. "This isn't for you."

The guards around me shuffled, and drawing my knife from my waistband, I threw it. The blade seemed to spin, end over end, for forever. The worst pressure I'd ever felt fought to burst free of my body, but as it had always been meant to, my knife reached its target.

And missed.

Which was impossible. During the war, I'd been the best in my unit at knife throwing. That skill couldn't have rusted away so quickly...

Rafe lifted his head toward me, and at the betrayal I saw there, radiating off of him as strong as a gale, I stumbled backward.

'Uncle Eri-?' I watched his lips form.

But then, his body jerked while something shiny appears in his neck. As blood seeped around this foreign object, he toppled into the fire that he'd tried to hard to escape.

The world went still, and as it inched forward, the crack that had been growing in my vision snapped. It *split* like lightning, shattering the world.

And chaos erupted.

As if a hand had lifted him off of the ground, Arivor was on his feet, and shadows, like what we'd seen in Alouin's domain, furiously whirled around him, setting the pyre's fire into a greater frenzy. With mania and grief battling on him, he took a step forward, seeking a target among the crowd, and when his eyes landed on Reive, he smiled, raising a hand with darkness around it.

People on the terrace were running away from him, probably screaming, but I didn't hear it. I'd gone deaf.

In silence, I watched a guard sneak up on Arivor and smack him in the back of the head. I watched my best friend crumple, which dissipated his summoned darkness. In silence, I watched Lirilith stumble away, soon slipping over the terrace's edge. In silence, I watched as order was restored on the terrace.

Healers rolled Arivor onto a stretcher so they could take him away, all while Reive strode to a stop in front of me. He examined me while the sounds on all sides returned to normal: aa dying fire's crackle, excited conversations, a host of footsteps.

When I focused on Reive, he nodded before glancing to the side.

"Take him to the dungeon," he said.

Had he waited here just so I'd hear him say that?

It didn't matter. Any reaction that Reive had meant to goad from me didn't happen because as the guards led me away, I was numb.

## **TTS Interlude 2.7**

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Revision #2

Created 21 August 2024 21:42:48 by FatalisticFable

Updated 26 March 2026 02:18:12 by FatalisticFable