

Interlude 3.1: Despair

Eriadren

I waited in my cell for the Council to decide my fate. It was taking them a while to do that, but I supposed I could understand. They were likely still dealing with the fallout of their public spectacle, considering it hadn't gone as planned.

I didn't know how much time had passed since then. Deep beneath the earth, I couldn't use sunlight to keep track of time, and my meals had been sporadic at best. I didn't much care about how long I'd been here, though.

Most of my time in this place, I'd spent curled on the cot that they'd so graciously provided. I kept waiting for this numb state to fall away from me, so badly did I want to feel everything that I rightfully should, but it had yet to do so.

Instead of weeping, I reviewed that awful night a million times, looking for how I could have changed it. Instead of cursing myself, I wondered how Lirilith was doing. I couldn't imagine what she was going through. Instead of focusing on what I'd lost, I thought about Arivor.

Oh, my friend. Would he ever be the same?

And so it went for however long it took for a guard to unlock my cell. She and a friend dragged me off of my cot, and I shuffled between them through the city's dungeons. So many people were here, enough to ring a pang of surprise in me until I noticed their shabby clothing.

From them, I felt the utterly defeated air that only those from the slums knew. Alouin, it had been forever since it had raced its clammy fingers over my skin, but I knew it.

Oh, how I knew it.

And seeing these people, only here because of a bullshit class system, reminded me of who'd caused every woe in my life, who had pushed me down every time I'd achieved something noteworthy, who'd killed Rafe. Not Lirilith, although her knife had severed the boy's final tie on this world.

Reive.

And my numb state receded, replaced by something I'd never expected. It gave me purpose, shoving lethargy to the side, and from the way the guards stiffened around me, I'd guess they'd

noticed the change.

Eventually, we entered a room with a single chair in it. Not the setting that I'd imagined for when the Council condemned me to death—I'd thought they'd want the pomp and circumstance of a show—but I didn't protest when I was told to sit. After a long time spent waiting, the door opened again, and Reive walked in front of me.

Snarling, I leapt for the bastard, but hands on my shoulders slammed me back into the chair before I could get far. Even still, I growled at him with my teeth exposed. Why was he here? Unless...

Unless the Council had already passed sentence on me.

"Are you here to do it?" I snapped. "Typical. I won't even have the dignity of a nameless executioner. You have to do the deed."

Raising an eyebrow, Reive said, "Journeyman Healer Eriadren, I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

Nothing more came from him, and I gritted my teeth. He'd make me ask, wouldn't he?

"Why are you here, then?" I hissed.

Folding his arms behind his back, Reive started pacing in front of me.

"I've been given leave to decide your fate," he said, "a decision that was made because of the sacrifices my family has made in recent days... or some such nonsense."

He dismissively waved a hand, and the guards holding me down grunted as I tried to tackle the bastard so I could *scratch his eyes out*.

"You murdered Rafe!" I shouted. "He was Arivor's son, you asshole, and you're using his death to get control of *me*?"

"Oh, you were a side benefit, don't you worry. I'm the most powerful member on the Council again, thanks to what happened," Reive said. "Also, if I'm remembering correctly, you killed my great nephew."

...I had? Wincing, I reviewed the events of that horrible night again and...

No, my knife had definitely missed, but in the chaos, I could see how people might have mistaken Lirilith's weapon for mine. No one else had seen her there.

Which meant I was getting blamed for Rafe's death.

I was ok with this, though. Don't get me wrong. It hurt like hell, but it would keep my wife out of the limelight. I could handle people thinking I was a murderer. Not so much her.

How to respond to Reive, though?

Letting my gaze slide off of the bastard, I said, "The hell do you want from me, Reive?"

"To offer you a job."

As I snapped my eyes back to him, I scrunched my face up, both in confusion and at his pleased expression. Nothing good had ever come from that look.

"A job," I blankly echoed.

Nodding, Reive said, "I want you to be my test subject."

Before I could fully process that, he snapped his fingers, and again, the door opened. Another pair of guards dragged a man inside, dumping him at my feet.

In the grimmest of clothes, he was gaunt and dirt-streaked, and the sweat slicked over his skin only added to his filthiness. Considering the wound he was hunched around, though, I thought his state was perfectly understandable.

Pushing myself out of the chair, I dropped to my knees, prying the man's hands away from his tunic.

"He's been stabbed!" I said. "He needs a surgeon. Now."

Crossing his arms, Reive said, "You're the only help that he's getting."

...What?! Was he insane?

"And how, pray tell, am I supposed to treat a stab wound without any supplies?" I hissed.

Sighing, Reive threw his head back.

"Please, Eriadren," he said. "Stop treating me like an idiot. I can string clues together, especially when someone leaves as many of them behind as you have."

I just blinked at him for a moment, wondering if he was hinting at what I thought he was hinting at, and once more sighing, Reive raised a finger.

"One, the body parts found in your bolt hole. Tissue samples taken from Alouin's stolen body, I'm guessing," he said. "Two, the accident where you and Arivor got out of a blazing inferno with minimal burns. Three, Rafe's miraculous recovery. Four, and the one that ties everything together, your barren wife suddenly being with child."

He wagged that last finger, and I tried to remember how to breathe. How did he know about Lirilith? Had the healer that she'd seen told him? And- and...

Would he spread the news about her? Considering what had happened when I'd cured a Councilor's family member of a disease, what would happen if Lirilith's condition became known throughout the city? Insignificant as we were, the birth of our child would probably go unnoticed under normal circumstances, but if attention was drawn to it...

Oh, stars. This was what Reive would use to keep me in line, and it... would work. Hell.

A smile spread across Reive's face when he saw realization hit me.

"That's right. I do indeed have you by the balls," he said before pointing at the man lying between us. "Now, heal him."

But could I? What would this bastard do once I'd complied? After what had happened to Rafe...

My potential patient grabbed my hand, panting.

"Please," he said. "If you can... the pain... make it stop."

Oh, fuck me.

Biting my lip, I rested my hands on the wound and closed my eyes.

And nothing happened.

Humming to himself, Reive said, "Maybe this one's too incompatible-"

"No!" I shouted, shooting my head up. "I've only done this twice, damnit. I don't know how it works. I don't..."

I might have no clue how to fix this man, but I wanted to. Based on his garb, he'd probably gotten this wound in a street duel. I didn't care whether he'd been the one who'd started the fight or the thief who'd accepted. He was a slummer, just like I'd been, and I wouldn't let him die because Reive had said so. I'd rather die myself-

A flash of heat dug into my side, and screaming, I fell flat on my face. Someone else's body jabbed into my stomach, but that was nothing compared to the burn of my guts leaking into my abdomen or the disturbingly cool numbness on my skin...

White light flashed, and as suddenly as it had come, the pain in my side vanished. I lay in place, catching my breath, until someone pushed on me. When he shouted for me to get off, I slowly did so, expecting pain that never came.

The man I was supposed to heal scrambled away from me.

Pawing at his side, he gasped, "What did you do to me?"

"Healed you, apparently," I said, waving a hand over his body. "You're welcome."

Licking his lips, my patient uncertainly eyed me.

“I-”

A string twanged, and as a crossbow bolt sprouted from his eye, the man slumped to the side. Springing to my feet, I identified the threat—a guard calmly winding his crossbow up—and spun on Reive.

“WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR?” I shouted.

Reive was examining the corpse with fascination.

“He was tainted like Rafe. We can’t let an aberration like him live,” he said before turning to the guards. “Take the body to the slums. Make it look like a mugging gone wrong.”

I waited until they’d disappeared before exploding.

“According to you, I’m an aberration,” I growled. “Why am I alive?”

“You might be useful to me.”

Striding to the bloodstain on the wall, Reive touched it before rubbing his fingers together with a wrinkled nose.

“Sit down, Eriadren,” he said.

I wasn’t listening. The guards had gone, leaving me alone with Reive. I could kill him, this man who’d caused me nothing but misery. At times, he seemed intent only on destruction.

He glanced at me before rolling his eyes.

“Have you forgotten about Lirilith?” he asked. “I’m not stupid, Eriadren. I put my contingencies in place long before arriving here.”

Slumping, I shook my head, and he pointed at the chair.

“Sit down,” he said.

Once I was arranged to his liking, Reive started wandering around the room.

“You set my plans back by befriending Arivor, you know,” he said. “I had such influence over that boy, and then, you came along.”

With a grimace, he inspected his fingernails, and I fought to hold my tongue.

“Then, you married Lirilith and oh! That- that-”

Growling, Reive dug his fingernails into his palms before continuing his circuit of the room.

“I planned to have her and her father assassinated, like I did with her mother,” he said. “It would have been so very sad, and the chaos created by the scramble to choose a successor would have been the perfect time to put Arivor in position.”

By the stars, he’d murdered Lirilith’s mother too. He... he was a monster.

“Then, I’d make a few suggestions in the right ears, and Arivor would have been the new Voice of Alouin. With him as my puppet, I’d have controlled the empire,” he said, “but you ruined that. You, the by-blow of a lowly noble, who’s proper place is in the slums with the rest of the city’s trash.”

Was he done? Please, say he was done because I couldn’t take another second of his monologuing. I was just about ready to risk Reive’s contingencies if I could kill him.

As he moved behind me, Reive said, “At the same time, I have to thank you, Eriadren. You’ve given me a purpose, a greater dream than ruling an empire.”

After a pause, I frowned. Was I supposed to respond now?

“What’s that?” I stiffly asked.

Reive tangled a hand in my hair, pulling my head back, and when our eyes met, he smiled.

“You, most blessed of Alouin, will help me become a god,” he said.

Something flashed at the edge of my vision, and cold pressure drew a line across my throat, quickly followed by a wash of sticky warmth. Reive shoved me away, and toppling to the floor, I grabbed at my neck.

My heart rate jumped when I touched the gash in it. Frantically, I pressed my hand against the slash, but it was too long and deep, and everything was going black too quickly, and I couldn’t breathe. Oh, stars above, I couldn’t—

I blinked up at a familiar face: a man leaning over me with his hands on his hips.

“That didn’t take long,” Alouin said.

Alouin!

“Wha-?”

White light exploded around me, and as quickly as my shaking body would allow, I reached for my neck. Even gasping as I was, I ran my fingers over unbroken skin, not quite believing what my senses were telling me.

“Fascinating.”

Dazed, I jerked my head up, gazing at Reive and the guards beside him.

"You- you *killed* me," I said.

Nodding, Reive said, "Indeed. And as I theorized, you have some of Alouin's powers. We'll have to determine which ones and how they work."

Ugh. He'd sounded so... clinical. Was that how I sounded when I was indulging in an experiment?

Yes, focus on that rather than the fact that a man had slit my throat and I'd survived.

Sighing, Reive said, "You won't be of much use now, though, will you? Not when you're in shock's grip."

With a head shake, he flicked a hand, and the guards dragged me to my feet.

"Take him home. Our test subject's mind can't break yet, and Lirilith will stabilize him faster than anything else. One of you keep an eye on him, though. Let me know when he's ready to return."

Turning to me, Reive showed off a mocking half-smile, appearing the arrogant Councilor in every way.

"Next time, we'll start with poisons," he said.

My knees buckled, and as the guards struggled to keep me upright, Reive left the room, letting the ring of his laughter chase him.

Revision #1

Created 25 August 2024 05:41:47 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable