

# Interlude 3.2: Despair

## Eriadren

After the guards brought me home, I couldn't do much besides lay in bed for who knew how long. I should have gotten up and found Lirilith or perhaps visited Arivor, but I couldn't find the energy to do... anything.

I'd died. For a time, I'd left this world, had been gone, had crossed to the other side.

Murdered.

And from what I could tell, Reive meant to do that again. And again. As many times as it pleased him.

What was I going to do?

Eventually, a door slammed downstairs, and a frustrated screech filled the house.

Lirilith. She was home.

I tried so hard to get out of bed or at least raise my voice, but... I couldn't. Not even when she started crying downstairs.

When that stopped, she stomped up the stairs, and something similar to panic seized me. I should sit up. I should make an effort to appear normal for her, to smile...

"Eri?!"

Or I could just keep laying here. That sounded good too.

When Lirilith sat behind me, releasing a quiet sigh, I bounced on the bed.

"Can I touch you?" she asked.

*Shit.* She was being so strong, and I couldn't even roll over to look at her. I couldn't even answer her question, not with my voice long gone.

Fingers brushed my arms, and I flinched, but this was fine. This was Lirilith, the woman I loved above all, giving me as much comfort as she thought I could take, and I appreciated it, thanking the stars for our past experience in dealing with traumatized people.

Then, she touched my hair.

*Reive yanks on my hair, exposing my neck before laying it open.*

The energy I'd been seeking surged through me, and I flung myself off the bed, stumbling to the washroom. Somehow, I made it to a chamber pot before nausea forced acid out of me. When my stomach stopped heaving, I curled into a ball on the floor.

"Not- not again, please," I sobbed. "How many- how many-?"

Lirilith was wise enough to stay in the bedroom while I lost it, and when I could, I shuffled toward the doorway, stopping short when I saw her.

Something was bulging from her abdomen. How long had the Council held me prisoner if she was showing already?

Tearing my eyes off of the evidence of her condition—the shackle that bound me to Reive—took great effort, but I did it to drink in a face I'd longed to see. She was carefully blank when looking at me, which hurt more than it helped, but I wouldn't tell her that.

I shuffled to sit beside Lirilith, hesitantly touching her abdomen before pulling her to me.

"You're beautiful. I love you. I'm sorry," I whispered, never paying attention to what I was saying.

I kept talking until Lirilith pushed on me. When she tucked her hair behind her ears, refusing to look my way, my throat closed on itself. Hell, how selfish had I been acting?

Taking her hand, I said, "How are you, love?"

Lirilith tensed, snatching her hand away from me, and I died inside until she faced me. By the stars, she had such determination in her.

"I would love to answer that question, just like I need to know what happened to you," she said before biting her lip, "but Arivor needs you right now. Things have been bad, Eri. Clariss left him shortly after... after. And the Council has decided to send him far away for harboring an... abomination. They're appeasing Reive by removing a source of embarrassment from the city but..."

Shaking her head, Lirilith rubbed her eyes.

"They're sending him to negotiate with the human kingdoms," she said. "He's leaving within the next day."

For a moment, I sat in silence, absorbing what she'd told me.

"Arivor destroyed them in the last war," I said with my voice dead. "They'll kill him."

Nodding, Lirilith said, "I think he wants them to. You must see him, Eri. Alouin knows I've tried talking to him, but he won't let me near him. He might let you in, though."

"Shit."

But there'd been no anger in that curse. I no longer had the energy for outrage.

"Ok. I'll go," I said, "but I'll be back soon, and when I come home--"

"We'll talk about everything. Of course we will," Lirilith said, giving me a weak smile. "I love you, Eri."

"Love you too."

Hesitantly, I kissed her before putting my back to her and racing outside. I expected that the guards watching me wouldn't let me reach Arivor's estate, guiltily half-hoping that it would be so, but much sooner than I'd like, I was staring at his front door, working up the courage to knock. Before I could do that, it opened with my friend's manservant behind it, and I watched with confusion as his face morphed through a variety of expressions.

Eventually, it settled on relief.

"Thank the stars you're here," he said. "Maybe you can snap him out of it."

Well, that wasn't a good sign.

Pushing into the house, I asked, "Where is he?"

The manservant cleared his throat, and when I glanced back at him, he looked distressed.

"In the young master's room," he said, staring at his feet.

Comprehending what he'd said took me a moment. My mind kept hiccupping on the sound of a child, shouting at me.

*"Uncle Eri!"*

Shaking myself, I muttered, "Fuck."

Nervously giggling, the manservant nodded.

"That sounds about right," he said. "I don't need to show the way, yes? Shall I bring you and the master refreshments instead?"

"If you think it'll help," I said. "Give me a few minutes first, though."

"Of course."

Bowing, the manservant ducked out of the room, letting me make the trek to my friend alone.

On seeing this familiar home so darkened, my heart pinched, and when I was outside Rafe's room, I rested my forehead on the door, preparing myself, before knocking.

"Arivor, can I come inside?" I asked.

And I waited, knowing how hard it was to resist the lethargy he must be feeling.

"Do what you like," was what came back to me.

After hearing my best friend speak, I bit my lip, resisting the urge to punch the door. Instead, I straightened, got my appearance into order, and stepped inside.

With its curtains drawn over the windows, the room was shadowed, but unlike the rest of the house, this place looked the same. Nothing had been packed, and no concealing sheets were in sight.

Arivor was sitting on his son's bed, pouring whisky into two mugs. He slid one toward me while running his eyes over my body.

With his voice raspy, he said, "You look like shit."

Laughing, I took my drink, lifting it to my friend.

"So do you," I said. "Hell, Arivor, I haven't seen your eyes so red-rimmed since... since never, actually."

Grimacing, Arivor drained his drink in one go.

"Things haven't been great for me lately," he said.

Wincing, I crouched in front of him, dangling my mug between my legs.

"I got here as soon as I could," I said. "Had to make a quick stop home after Reive let me go, but I came here straight afterward. Is there... can I do anything for you?"

Blankly staring at me, Arivor shook his head.

"You and Lirilith, with that damnably wonderful need to help," he said before reaching for the decanter again. "Did my uncle hurt you?"

By some miracle, I retained my flinch. Donning my best grin, I took a sip of my drink.

"While under his care, no harm came to me," I said. "I spent most of my time in the dungeons lying on my cot, just thinking."

Technically true. I'd experienced no lasting harm at Reive's hand.

Sighing, Arivor said, "Don't dance around the truth like that. You're bad at it."

For a third time, he filled his mug, and I watched him, chewing on the inside of my lip. Lirilith had been right. My friend was badly hurting.

And part of it was my fault.

Rubbing my eyes, I said, "I'm so sorry, Arivor. If I'd been quicker that night... if I'd never touched Rafe with this unknown power-

"He'd still be dead."

Rocking back from Arivor, I almost fell from my crouch. By the stars, he looked so empty and yet furiously there.

"Don't apologize for what happened, Eri," he said. "It wasn't your fault, not yours or- or Lirilith's. I don't know if I can forgive her for what she did, but I know it wasn't *her* fault. It was Reive's and the fucking, weak-willed cowards on his Council-

Something shattered, and liquid splashed to the ground alongside glass's tinkle. For a moment, I could only gape at this, stunned that Arivor had crushed his mug.

Without a sound, he opened his closed fist, and I whimpered at the sight of so many shards sticking out of his palm. When he started picking at them, I snatched his wrist.

"What are you doing?" I hissed. "We have to treat this properly, get the wounds clean before-

Arivor shook me off.

"Stop, Eri. It's fine. Everything's fine," he said. "Although, speaking of this..."

With a small sigh, he used his good hand to dig in a pocket, withdrawing a creased and water-stained letter, sealed with wax. Refusing to look at me, he thrust it my way.

"This is for you," he said. "It explains what I was telling you... that night. Before we got out of the carriage."

Accepting the sheet of folded paper, I turned it between my fingers.

"Something to do with the accident?" I asked.

When he nodded, I slid my thumb under the paper's edge to break its seal, and Arivor flew forward to stop me.

"Not here," he said, breathless. "Read it after I'm gone or better yet, when I return. If I return. I can't- I don't want to see your face when you understand."

"Ok..." I said, frowning at him.

But I stashed the letter, and relaxing, Arivor rubbed his face before pointing at my still full mug.

“Are you going to drink that?” he said.

While giving my drink to him, I kept my lips sealed, afraid of what I might say, and again, my friend knocked the whiskey back in one go. Setting the mug on a side table, he laid back on the bed, fiddling with the glass in his hand. I couldn't move as he plucked a piece free, dropping it on his chest, and blood pattered around it.

“You should go to Lirilith. Stars know that you need her right now,” he absently said. “Tell her that she shouldn't hate herself, will you? I'm afraid it's the best comfort I can give her and... whatever happens, please remember that I love you like a brother. Meeting you was one of the best things that's ever happened to me.”

I would argue that last point. It, however, wouldn't do any good right now, and I wasn't sure what else I could say.

Arivor was right. I needed to see Lirilith, but it was so we could figure out how to ease my friend's grief before he left us, possibly for forever.

Standing, I squeezed Arivor's shoulder and hurried out of the room, ignoring the discordant hum that started up behind me.

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