

Interlude 3.3: Despair

Eriadren

With a tight jaw, I stood on the city wall, looking over the blanketed spread of angry humans that surrounded my home. I hadn't seen anything like this since the first war.

In its last battle, we, the defenders, had been sure that reinforcements wouldn't reach us in time, leaving our days numbered. I remembered how when interacting with the city's citizens, my insides had felt torn apart. From past experience, I'd known what would happen to them if we failed.

It was worse this time. The humans were besieging my city, and the people they were threatening were mine too. Especially two, precious ones from among them.

"Lotta people," Sepiala piped up.

I clutched my daughter more tightly to me, refusing to let her see how deeply afraid I was for her.

"Yes, it is," I said, never taking my eyes off of a potential battlefield.

Taking handfuls of my tunic, Sepiala tugged to get my attention, and when I looked at her, she had the most serious expression in place.

"Uncle Ar-i-vor there?" she asked.

Despite the sudden burn in my eyes, I schooled my features into a pleased form of calm.

"Last I heard, he's out there, yes," I said.

He was the human's top general now, and that was partially why I was standing here. The Arivor I knew would never have perpetrated the crimes attributed to his name in this war. He'd have found them appalling.

So, what had happened? Sure, since I'd last seen my friend, three years had passed, but was that long enough for someone to change as much as he had? I'd hoped that coming here might help me reconcile what I knew of Arivor with what I'd heard.

It hadn't.

"Daddy, I want to see him," Sepiala said.

I couldn't help my frown this time.

"That's not a good idea, Sepi," I said. "Uncle Arivor..."

How did I put this in a way that a child might understand?

"Before he left home, bad things happened to Uncle Arivor. Mama and I have never told you about them because we only wanted you to know about the good in him," I continued, "but those bad things, Sepi? They might have changed your uncle while he's been gone."

Plus, he was in the middle of the enemy's damn army, but Sepiala didn't need to know that or how much danger said army had put her in.

"He's a bad man now?" she asked.

I hesitated. Should I tell my daughter the truth: that I didn't know? If what I'd heard was more than rumors, then yes, he most definitely was, but- but-

Or should I preserve her innocence until we came out on the other side of the eminent battle?

"No," I slowly said. "From what I remember of him, your Uncle Arivor isn't a bad man."

As if considering what I'd said, Sepiala tilted her head before nodding once, and her face took on a hint of her mother's determined expression.

"I want to see him," she repeated.

"That's not-"

On hearing the edge in my voice, I fell silent, clicking my teeth together, while regarding my daughter.

I wished I was certain about Arivor right now. Years ago, it wouldn't have mattered what rumors had been attached to him. I'd have believed in my friend regardless of the consequences to me, but I had more than myself to worry about now. No matter how much I wanted to indulge Sepiala, introducing her to a man who'd been like a brother to me, I wasn't sure if I could allow it.

So, I gave her the most noncommittal answer possible.

"I'll see what I can do."

Sepiala didn't yet understand the subtleties of that phrase, so she bounced in my arms, clapping her hands.

"Thank you, daddy," she said.

Stretching up, she kissed my cheek like she'd seen her mother do before, and sighing, I ruffled her hair.

Then, I returned my focus to what lay beyond the wall.

At least coming here had answered one question for me. No matter how much I'd rather avoid it, I should make a trip to the city's center.

I only wished that Lirilith was free so she could watch Sepiala for a time, but this morning, my wife had been called to consult with the Council about the city's defenses. I doubted they'd let her go yet.

As we started our trek into the city, my daughter was quiet, which concerned me. Sepiala trended more toward a chatterbox than reticent.

When I set her on the ground to walk for a time, she stopped me from straightening by clutching my cheeks with her small hands.

"Daddy, why are you shivering?" she asked. "It's not work time. You won't go away today. Mama said."

Oh... shit.

Taking a calming breath, I smiled at my daughter.

"You're right. I don't have work today," I said. "I'm meeting someone I work with."

Three years, I'd been Reive's test subject. Three years, he'd done all manner of unspeakable things to me. I'd long ago lost track of how many times I'd died, but each instance where I'd temporarily left the world behind had left its mark on me.

Lirilith and I had done our best to hide the horror that my life had become from our daughter. When I came home, I snuck into the house, staying in our bedroom until I no longer needed to hide under as many blankets as I could. Some days, I never saw my daughter because of this, and still, she'd noticed that something was wrong.

"Are they a bad person?" Sepiala asked.

Focusing on my daughter, I said, "The man I'm meeting?"

When Sepiala solemnly nodded, I made a face. Should I tell her the truth?

In the end, I couldn't stop myself.

"Yes, Sepi. He's a very bad man," I said, "but sometimes, we must work with bad people, at least until we can do something about them. Ok?"

In stark contrast to her serious demeanor, Sepiala's grin was like a brilliant sunrise, reminding me of the rare times when I'd taken her and Lirilith out of the city for picnics.

Patting my cheeks, she said, “Ok, silly daddy. Sneaky, sneaky until you can stop the bad guy. Like the heroes in bedtime stories!”

My vision misted over as I pulled my daughter to me, kissing her forehead.

“Yes,” I said against her skin. “Exactly like that.”

Reive’s office was in the temple, which given his ambitions to become a god, I’d found hilarious in recent years.

What could I say? In a life like mine, one had to find humor where one could.

The location proved fortunate today as I found a fair number of my acquaintances from the first war—any who’d avoided the draft this go ‘round—here. After entrusting Sepiala to one of them, I made the trek to a most hated place.

When I arrived, I knocked. Much as I despised Reive now, more so than I had before, I’d learned that showing him some respect was better for me. He held not only my life but also my family’s in his hands.

After receiving permission, I entered the office, working to keep my hands from shaking, but when that bastard looked up from the parchment on his desk, I couldn’t stop my insides from shifting into acid. I refused to let it escape from my stomach and lungs, though.

After a surprised blink, Reive said, “Eriadren. I’m surprised to see you here. I didn’t think we had an appointment today.”

“We don’t,” I rushed to say.

I wouldn’t put it past him to start another group of experiments because I’d reminded him that I existed.

“I’m here because of the army on our doorstep,” I said. “What’s the plan to keep them from attacking? Because if you need it, I’d like to volunteer my services.”

Folding his hands on the desk, Reive examined me, and I fought to stay still. My mind was shrieking so loudly.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I mean...”

And now, I let myself fidget, looking away from my mortal enemy.

“I mean that I can’t die,” I said before forcing myself to meet Reive’s gaze, “and if that’s not enough to send me out there so I can start negotiations, I know their top general. I don’t understand why you’ve kept me behind the wall for so long.”

With an indulgent smile, Reive said, "I've kept you here because you're too valuable of a resource to waste on-"

"I can't help you with becoming a god if the Alouin damned humans wipe us out!" I snapped.

Oh, shit. Swallowing hard, I ignored how pointed Reive's stare had become while struggling to control my respiration. Even still, I couldn't make myself apologize.

"Look," I said. "What's the harm in letting me speak with Arivor? If the humans kill me, I'll just start breathing again soon. I can do that for as many times as it takes to get home, and you have your hostages to make sure I don't switch sides. Please, Councilman. Let me avert a pointless battle."

I couldn't tell if I'd gotten through to him. Reive was, as always, inscrutable.

Lifting his folded hands, he pressed them to his lips, leaning his elbows on the desk.

"All right," he said. "You can try, but know that I'll have people watching your family until you return in the morning."

At his implied deadline, my eyebrows shot for my hairline.

"I should leave soon, then," I said.

With the shortest bow I could manage, I left Reive's office, hurrying to retrieve my daughter. I should leave her with her mother, no matter how busy Lirilith might be. If I was seeing my best friend tonight, I needed to prepare, and I couldn't have a child around for most of that.

Sucking in a breath, I stopped short, leaning against a wall.

I'd be seeing Arivor soon. How had he been? Had he... recovered since I'd last seen him? I barely had.

Had he looked into the experiment that had changed us so long ago?

With shaking hands, I retrieved the letter Arivor had given me before he'd left. The wax that sealed it was still unbroken, which was pathetic considering how long I'd had the thing, but I couldn't bring myself to open it.

What would I read there? Would Arivor blame me for Rafe's death, even if he'd refused to do it in person?

Licking my lips, I stashed the letter. I couldn't focus on tonight and a confrontation that I'd been dreading since I'd last seen my friend. I had to think about Sepiala and Lirilith and what I'd do to keep them safe.

With a long sigh, I breathed out my worries, marching forth to wage my own war in the midst of the greater one.

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