

Interlude 3.4: Despair

Eriadren

Getting to Arivor was surprisingly easy, at least at first. My disguise got me through many a human checkpoint until I was closer to my friend's tent, and then, his elite troops spotted me. He, however, had been expecting my presence.

I was taken straight to him, lifting a hand to guard my eyes from torchlight as I passed through a tent flap. When I lowered it, I was greeted by a sight that could have come straight from the first war.

Arivor was lying on his bedroll with one leg crossed over the other, holding a map over his face. With his propped-up foot bobbing, he was humming the same discordant tune that he'd been singing the last time I'd seen him.

When several heartbeats passed without him acknowledging us, one of the soldiers cleared her throat.

"Sir. We found the spy exactly where you said he'd be," she said. "What would you like done with him?"

I was curious if Arivor intended to speak with me while three strangers were present. Given our circumstances, he'd probably have to. I doubted any human would leave my people's greatest war hero alone with a compatriot.

Arivor stopped humming, stilling his foot's bob, and the humans beside me shifted, glancing at one another.

"Thank you," he said. "That will be all."

And the humans bowed. And they left. And I was left gaping at my friend.

"How did you do that?" I asked. "They shouldn't trust you..."

Unable to finish the thought, I glanced between him and the tent flap. Arivor ignored me, sitting up and setting his document aside. Resting his fingers on it, he looked up at me, and I bit my tongue to keep from gasping. Such hopeful resignation rested in him that it lit his eyes with a fanatical glow.

“Are you here to kill me?” he asked.

I hadn't seen my friend for three years, and this was the first thing he said to me?

Recoiling, I hissed, “No! Why would you think that? Stars above, Arivor. You're my friend.”

Arivor stared at me as if reading my essence before frowning.

“You haven't read the letter I gave you,” he said.

It wasn't a question, but I shook my head.

“Should I have?” I asked. “I can do that now if you like. I have it with me.”

Before I could pluck the blasted thing from its hiding spot against my chest, Arivor said, “No. Reading it won't make a difference now. Will you sit with me?”

He gestured in front of him, and without a word, I folded to the ground where he'd indicated. Before he could speak again, I started rooting through my pockets, pulling out the supplies that I'd retrieved after leaving Sepiala with her mother.

Pointing at the horrid bandaging on Arivor's cheek, I said, “Let me see it. I swear. If you haven't been washing those open wounds to prevent infection, I'll kick your ass.”

Rocking back, Arivor blinked at me for a moment before snorting and shaking his head.

“You haven't changed,” he said.

Once he'd peeled the bandaging off, I seized his chin, turning his head so I could better see his burns.

“I don't know about that,” I said. “Ok. These don't look so bad. Palm.”

Wordlessly, Arivor rested his hand in the one I had outstretched, and I winced on seeing that the skin around its lacerations was red and puffy.

“You idiot,” I said. “You've been fighting with these exposed, haven't you?”

“Maybe,” Arivor said.

Groaning, I rolled my eyes.

“Alouin, you're lucky I decided to check on you,” I said. “Any other wounds I should know about before I get started?”

“Not any I'm showing you,” Arivor said.

And he smiled. Alouin, it was faint, but I took joy in it regardless.

Arivor was quiet as I prepared poultices and the like, watching me with an unreadable expression, so I stayed silent too. This? Treating my friend's injuries and scolding him for neglecting them? It was a familiar role, one I loved, and I had the horrible feeling that tonight would be the last time we did this.

So, I savored it while it lasted, but eventually, Arivor broke the quiet.

"How's Lirilith?" he asked.

That was *not* the question I'd expected from him.

"She's quite well. In the last year, slummers have stopped targeting her shelter for thefts and scams, but even before then, her efforts were making a difference there."

I paused for a brief, internal argument before plunging forward.

"She loves being a mother."

I finished bandaging Arivor's cheek, much more neatly than the monstrosity he'd been sporting before, while he decided what to say. Children were a sensitive subject for him, I knew.

Had Arivor ever considered how guilty I felt about having a child when he'd lost that joy? Stars, I hoped not.

"You have a daughter, yes?" Arivor asked. "For the first few months I was away, I kept up with current events back home, but communications broke down so quickly after I left..."

Biting his lip, he went distant, and I took hold of his injured hand, working while he collected himself.

When he eventually did, he asked, "What's her name?"

"Sepiala," I said, "but Lirilith and I call her Sepi."

"It's beautiful," Arivor said with a half-smile. "Will you... tell me about her?"

"Of course. All you had to do was ask."

I was cautious at first, worrying that my stories would poke knives into the hole of Rafe's loss, but Arivor hung on my every word, laughing at Sepiala's antics and cooing at every adorable moment.

I continued speaking long after I was done with my friend's hand, but he didn't stop me, letting me ramble until I ran out of steam.

"She asked if she could see you today," I eventually said. "After all the stories we've told her about you, she loves her Uncle Arivor."

"And what did you tell her?" Arivor asked.

I looked away, unable to meet his eyes.

“That I’d do what I could to make that happen,” I said.

“I see.”

The weight of so many unspoken words pressed down on me, and I couldn’t bear it. I’d buckle beneath it, sobbing my apologies for everything that had driven us apart.

Before I could fall to pieces, Arivor asked, “Why are you here, Eri?”

And I could no longer ignore the threat that my friend had become.

“I’m here to negotiate,” I said. “Can we prevent a battle here? From what I’ve heard, you haven’t given other cities much of a chance before your army overruns them.”

“And I make no apologies for that,” Arivor said. “Who sent you? Or are you here on your own?”

The change in his tone had me jerking to face him, and I flinched when presented with his piercingly dead eyes. I’d only seen my friend like this once before: when dispensing orders before our unit massacred a village.

“It was my idea,” I said, “but...”

No matter how much I wanted to speak that hated name, my body wouldn’t allow it. It got stuck in my throat, choking me every time I tried to dislodge it.

“My uncle,” Arivor said.

Slumping, I nodded while he watched me with clinical detachment.

“He’s hurt you,” he said with no question in his voice. “How bad has it been?”

When I thought back on the many experimental sessions I’d been forced to endure, my mind shied away from the memories, and I started visibly shaking. Rubbing my arms, I focused on how grateful I was that my stomach was behaving, not on how I needed to answer my friend’s question.

“Bad, then,” Arivor said before cocking his head. “Are you afraid of him?”

“No,” I snapped, showing my teeth. “Any fear I might have held for him has long since been driven away, leaving only a desire for his death. The only reason I haven’t slaughtered him in his sleep is because of Sepi and Lirilith.”

Nodding in understanding, Arivor said, “He’s using them to keep you in line. They’re your weakness.”

Ducking my head, I unfurled my fingers from the fists they’d made in my lap.

“Yes,” I said, “they are.”

“Hmm.”

Arivor drummed his fingers on his knees, and with my head still bowed, I glanced up to catch him sucking on his lip.

“You want to know how to limit the coming violence?” he said. “Send me my uncle and his cronies on the Council. I don’t care how it’s done, whether with the city’s approval or not, but I want them in my hands by day’s end tomorrow. Otherwise, I won’t lift a finger to stop the humans from indulging in their base nature.”

“Tomorrow?!” I squeaked. “I can’t...”

Even if I’d been inclined to hand people over for murder—which I wasn’t, no matter who they were—Arivor hadn’t given me enough time to extract the Council from the city. I could maybe do it if I included Lirilith and our friends, but we’d be cutting it close.

“If you can’t do as I’ve asked, then I’d advise you to leave the city,” Arivor said. “In the heat of battle, humans aren’t discriminate when it comes to their victims. If you’ve heard about the cities we’ve captured, I’m sure you’ve also heard what happens to their citizens.”

The rumors... Did that mean they were true?

One look at my friend and I knew they were.

“Arivor,” I said with wide eyes, “what’s happened to you?”

Shaking his head, my friend retrieved the piece of parchment that he’d set aside, glancing over it again.

“Arivor died three years ago. I resurrected him now so we could have a moment with things the way they should be,” he said before meeting my eyes, “but I have a new name now. I’m sure you’ve heard it by now. People do so love to whisper it with fear.”

And they were right to. From everything I’d heard... from everything...

“Doldimar,” I said with my heart fluttering in my mouth.

Please, say he’d deny it. *Please*. I didn’t want to learn that my friend had become a-

Arivor... Doldimar grinned at me, fluttering his fingers as he inclined his head.

“But Doldimar is a monster,” I said.

“So I’ve heard.”

Ari- Doldimar lifted his piece of parchment in front of his face.

“I hope you can perform as expected,” he said, “and if not, I hope you have a better bolt hole than the one from three years ago. I truly don’t want to see you hurt, Eriadren, but if I must, I’ll let it happen.”

For a long stretch of shocked silence, I couldn’t move. I’d come here to talk sense into my friend. Instead, I’d gotten an ultimatum from a man hellbent on revenge.

With a sigh, Doldimar lowered his piece of parchment.

“You should go,” he said. “You don’t have much time, remember?”

Swallowing hard, I got to my feet, making to exit, but Doldimar halted me at the tent flap.

“Once this is over, whichever way it goes, read the letter, Eri,” he said. “Please.”

Glancing at him, I nodded and stepped outside.

While another pair of humans escorted me toward the city, I considered what I’d do. I didn’t want to hand the Council over, but that option had a higher chance of keeping Lirilith and Sepiala safe. I couldn’t get my family out of the city, not with Reive watching us and an army on our doorstep.

Grimacing, I rubbed my temples.

I knew exactly what to do. As soon as I was home, I needed to tell Lirilith what had happened. Together, we could make a plan, and having reached this conclusion, I breathed out a wealth of tension.

When we worked as a team, Lirilith and I had not once met a challenge that we couldn’t overcome. Everything would be fine.

Revision #1

Created 25 August 2024 06:00:55 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable