

# Interlude 3.5: Despair

## Eriadren

I'd finished my recounting of everything that had happened in the last day, and Lirilith, already tired when I'd begun my tale, absently blinked at nothing. I was worried that I'd broken her, but then, she stirred, turning tear-filled eyes on me.

"Do you think he's gone?" she asked. "Eri, has my cousin been lost to grief and revenge?"

With a dry mouth, I said, "I don't know. I'm sorry."

Nodding, Lirilith buried her face in her hands for a moment, letting me rub her back, before vigorously scrubbing it.

"Right," she said. "So, you couldn't reach him tonight. That's fine. We'll just have to try again."

\*\*\*

The west gate had fallen, and the slums that it had guarded, neighborhoods I'd once called home, were burning behind me. My heart cried for me to turn back, braving the human's onslaught to find my mother, but I couldn't abandon the chance to save Lirilith and Sepiala on the off chance she was alive.

Instead, I kept my chin tucked to my chest while urging my legs to carry me ever faster. I had to reach my girls.

\*\*\*

"Can we do that?" I asked. "I love Arivor like a brother, but I won't risk Sepi's life to save him."

Giving me a disgusted look, Lirilith rolled her eyes.

"Neither will I. Our daughter is the most important part of my life," she said. "If I had to choose between her and you, she'd win hands down, every time. Sorry, love."

"Don't be. I'd be furious if you chose otherwise," I said. "So, if we're agreed that we should keep Sepi safe, why are we discussing reaching out to Arivor again?"

With a smirk, Lirilith said, "Because we can do that while also keeping Sepi safe, of course."

\*\*\*

Twice, I'd been cut off by humans while trying to reach home. Each time had seen the yowling voice of panic growing louder in me. I wouldn't reach my girls in time and if I didn't...

I wasn't sure what I'd do with myself.

\*\*\*

"How?" I asked.

"We do something that Arivor and the humans won't expect," Lirilith said. "In all honesty, it's our only chance anyway. We can't hand Reive to my cousin, no matter how convenient that might be for us. That would make you and me as much of a murderer as they are."

"Plus, getting him out of the city before sundown would be difficult," I added.

With her eyes twinkling, Lirilith said, "Not as much as you might think. Sneaking us out of the city would be more problematic, what with Reive's people watching us."

"Great. The way you've put it, it sounds like we don't have any options," I said. "So. What are you proposing?"

With a mischievous smile, Lirilith took my hands.

"We hide."

\*\*\*

After stumbling into a square, I stopped to catch my breath. I hated myself for needing this break, wanting to continue toward my girls, but I wouldn't do them much good if I reached home and collapsed from exhaustion. I'd have to be able to fight.

A laugh filled the square, one that chilled me to the bone. Slowly, I turned toward its source, and such pain spiked through me on seeing him.

Arivor... Doldimar was standing where a street broke off from the square, drenched in blood, and that froze me in place. How had he found me?

He'd cocked his head, as if in anticipation of what I'd say, and as he must have expected, I couldn't hold back.

"You used me, had your humans follow me inside the wall," I growled. "Did I ever have a chance of averting this battle? If I'd brought you Reive, would you have stopped?"

As Doldimar tilted his head the other way, I shivered.

“Why would I have stopped?” he said. “Either way, I get what I want. This path just comes with extra benefits.”

“You remind me of Reive when you talk like that,” I spat. “What do you want, Doldimar? I have to reach my family if we’re to have a chance of surviving this. Unless you mean to keep me from them?”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hear his answer.

“Why would I do that?” Doldimar asked. “I’d gain no advantage there. No. Go to Lirilith. I’ll be interested to know whether the humans can find her before you get home.”

As I sucked in a gasp, I took a step back while a sick sense of knowing churned in my gut.

“What do you mean?”

\*\*\*

“What do you mean?” I asked Lirilith.

With a fierce grin, she said, “Well despite what happened with Rafe, your bolt hole is still well hidden, and even if he did mention it in your meeting, I doubt Arivor would look in it when it so completely failed him back then.”

Slowly, I nodded.

“That makes sense,” I said.

“So, we’ll hide there while you speak with him once more,” Lirilith said. “We have to save him, Eri.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

I never got the chance. By the time I made it back to the wall, the humans had breached the gate, and I’d started running home.

\*\*\*

When Doldimar smirked at me, I rested my hand on my sword’s hilt, striding for him, but he clicked his tongue.

“If you fight me, it’ll waste time, Eri,” he said. “You may be the better swordsman, but I can hold my own in a fight, for a while at least. Use that time to save your wife’s life.”

He was right. I knew it. I should already be at the end of the street, hauling ass home, but a question had driven stakes through my feet, pinning me in place. It *burned* me as it ripped through my mouth.

“Why are you doing this?” I said, hating how needy I sounded. “Is it because of Rafe? You never forgave me for my part in his death, did you?”

Chuckling, Doldimar shook his head.

“My son has nothing to do with this. I would never do something so horrific in his name,” he said. “No. This is because of something else. If you’d read my letter, you’d know that. You could have prevented this.”

That damn letter. As I rested my hand over where it sat against my chest, Doldimar’s chuckle became a full-on laughing fit.

“Get out of here, Eri,” he gasped between giggles. “I have places to be and Councilors to kill while you need to make it home before the humans get there. Stars know what they’ll do once they find Lirilith.”

I knew. I remembered the terrible things I’d seen in the first war. I’d heard rumors about what they’d done during this one.

With my throat closing, I backed away from Doldimar, keeping my eyes on him until I could turn tail and run, and as the city flashed past me, I ignored the fact that my best friend’s once loved visage had raised something ugly in my heart.

---

By the time I turned onto my home’s street, I hadn’t seen any humans for a while, and because of this, I let hope nuzzle into my heart. It was a mistake, I was sure, but I couldn’t help it. After every awful thing that had happened today, something good had to come out of it.

I barged into the house with the door banging behind me, noting its darkened state with dread and relief. It could mean that my girls were still hiding.

It could also mean other things.

“Lirilith! Sepi!” I called. “Where are you? We need to go!”

I made my way through the common room and the kitchen, grabbing things that might be useful for our escape, before stopping short.

The back door was cracked open.

I was outside before I’d registered moving. Beyond the door, the garden—Lirilith’s refuge from the world—was wrecked. A stack of pots had been knocked over with their broken bits scattered across the ground, and clumps of grass had been torn from the earth, all evidence of a concluded fight. I didn’t see my girls, which...

Stars, what was this pressure, squeezing my lungs flat?

Slowly, I made my way to the shed in the corner, scanning my surroundings as I went.

“Sepi?” I called. “If you’re here, it’s ok, honey. I’m here-”

A pained grunt cut me off, and for the briefest of moments, I squeezed my eyes shut, ignoring what I’d heard.

“Eri...”

Her voice tore me out of my body. From far away, I watched myself trudge toward a tree, watched myself stop beneath its canopy, watched myself examining her injuries like the healer I was.

And I knew that I could do nothing for the love of my life. Not conventionally.

I crashed into my body at the rate of my fall to the ground, and once I was on my knees, I reached for Lirilith’s cheeks, the only untouched part of her, while calling on a power I hated.

A voice screamed at the back of my mind, shouting of a worse death to come if I healed her, but I ignored it. Reive wasn’t here. He couldn’t cleanse the world of any ‘abominations’ I might create.

Trembling, Lirilith grabbed my wrist.

“N...no, Eri,” she gasped. “Don’t want...”

Her eyes started glazing over while her hand slipped away from mine, and I had every intention of ignoring her. Lirilith couldn’t stop me from saving her life, not when it was the only thing keeping me from falling apart.

When I touched her, however, she snapped back into place.

“You... can’t take... injuries. They’d slow you...” she fought to say, “and Sep...i needs... you.”

Sepiala? Was she-? Could she be alive? I’d thought...

Usually, the humans treated my people’s children much worse than our women.

“Choose her... over me,” Lirilith gasped.

I didn’t have to choose, though. Couldn’t she see that? I could save them both.

“Taking her... to Arivor,” Lirilith continued.

And I stopped breathing. I... I... I...

Huddling over Lirilith, I rested my forehead on hers.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I should have been-”

“Were doing what... needed,” Lirilith mumbled.

My eyes burned as I pressed my lips to hers, tasting her and the metallic tang of her blood. For as long as I could, I let myself stay there, breathing her in while tears drizzled over my face. As I pulled away, I started shaking, running my fingers through her hair.

“I love you,” I said. “I have always loved you, from the moment you first stepped into my shop.”

Lirilith’s grin looked wrong with how much red was staining it.

“I know,” she said. “Why do you think... invited you to dinner?”

A broken laugh filled the space between us, and as it faded, I reached for a knife. I wouldn’t leave her to suffer. When I brought it into view, however, Lirilith weakly shook her head.

“My choice,” she gasped. “Give.”

Her fingers twitched on the ground, and at her insistence, I couldn’t help the relief that swirled in me. It almost choked out my shame or the wrench of my heart as I pressed the blade into her hand.

With her smile twisting, Lirilith said, “Now... go.”

My body had become a wooden doll, and as I got to my feet, fuzz had cloaked the world. Once on them, I couldn’t move, swaying in place as I looked down at her. How had this happened?

Then, I turned away, hurrying to the door, and Lirilith called after me.

“I love you... too, my Eri.”

Slapping a hand to my mouth, I pushed against it—maybe if I pressed hard enough, I could swallow the sobs bursting free of me—and stumbled into a home that was no longer mine.

---

Revision #1

Created 25 August 2024 06:06:49 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable