

Interlude 4.1: The Ending

Eriadren

For what seemed like forever, I aimlessly wandered down the city's streets, half-hoping I'd run into humans that might end me. I vaguely recalled passing through the wealthier neighborhoods at some point, observing the same violence there as I'd seen in the slums. It seemed I'd discovered the one way that the different classes might be found equal.

As something burbling and manic filled the air, other people on the street paused long enough to cast uneasy glances my way.

I wondered where they were headed. Did they have a vain hope of escaping this battle? Did they have any sort of plan at all?

If so, I envied them. I didn't know where to go or what to do with myself. How did I keep going without...?

"Sepi," Lirilith whispered in my mind.

My daughter. She needed me.

Slapping my cheeks, I focused. Lirilith—I flinched at a summoned image—had said they were taking Sepiala to Arivor.

No. *Doldimar*.

So, I needed to think. Where would my... was he still my friend?

I shook my head. Where would he be right now?

That was an easy enough question to answer. After checking my weapons, I started trotting toward the temple.

When I arrived, something impossible was happening. I'd read about it in reports but always discounted it as overexaggerated versions of what had really occurred. It appeared that I'd been wrong.

While plastered on a roof opposite the temple, I watched Doldimar fling a web of pulsing strings over it. I wasn't sure what that dark substance was, but it reminded me of what Arivor had

summoned when Rafe had died.

The city's Councilors were cowering behind him, surrounded by unmoving soldiers. As I ran my eyes over them, I was surprised to find that Reive was missing. Did Doldimar have something special planned for him?

My heart, long abused today, stuttered before resuming its rhythm. There. In the middle of the Councilors, a little girl with my daughter's distinctive red and green hair was standing. Why was Sepiala there?

Cursing in my head, I made my way to the street. I'd reached it, getting halfway to the Councilors when a rumble sent me skittering into shadows. As it grew louder, I glanced toward its source, and my eyes widened.

The web surrounding Alouin's temple flexed, and slowly, the building crumbled, jetting dust and debris into the air.

"Shit," I said.

Was this the power Doldimar had gained from my disastrous experiment? Stars... how would I...?

No. I couldn't think about that. Instead, I considered the fact that a temple had been destroyed.

"He must hate Alouin now," I said.

Shaking awe and fear off, I resumed my approach, moving as fast as I could. By the time the Councilors had come into view, Doldimar was standing in front of them with his feet shoulder-width apart, inspecting them like he would have with his troops during the first war. Something passed over his face, and he cocked his head, gazing at the sky.

"I know you're here. I can feel you," he said. "Did you save Lirilith, Eriadren?"

Restraining a hiss, I kept myself from leaping forward, clutching my sword's hilt instead.

"My subordinates tell me they left her mangled," Doldimar continued, "and I must confess. I was curious about whether you'd use your annoying power on her, but from your presence here, I'd guess you didn't. I'm told that healing from the wounds you assume takes a while. It's too bad really. I always liked my cousin, even after she murdered Rafe."

He paused, as if expecting me to attack him, and I almost did. The only thing that stopped me was the knowledge that it was probably what he wanted. I couldn't save Sepiala if I was dead, no matter how guaranteed my return to the living world would be.

Sighing, Doldimar slumped.

"Still not enough of an impetus for you, huh?" he said. "You have to hate me, Eri. We're writing a beautiful story here, one that needs a hero and an antagonist, but we can't have that if you refuse

to see me as your enemy.”

The hell was he talking about? Was he killing people, killing Lirilith, because he thought we were in the middle of a damn book? Was he insane?

“I will make you hate me, Eri. By the time we’re done, you will despise me to the core of your essence,” Doldimar said. “I don’t care what I have to do to make that happen.”

That was enough. I was almost close enough to the Councilors. A few more steps and I could dart for Sepiala before escaping. With my immortal body as a shield, doing that shouldn’t be too difficult.

Before I could try, Doldimar snapped his attention to the Councilors.

“I find you unworthy of sharing my strength,” he said.

Dozens of black spikes sprouted from him. Each one arched through the air to skewer a Councilor, and as I watched this, the world hiccupped for me. Blinking images told me of how the spikes quickly dissolved into the air, of how bodies fell on top of one another, of how Doldimar laughed.

And really. Seeing all of this? I should be rage incarnate. I should charge the bastard who’d murdered...

I should be raining hell on him, screaming all the while, but I couldn’t move. My eyes wouldn’t shift away from a pile of the dead.

“Well?” Doldimar shouted. “Is this enough for you?”

He needed to die.

I couldn’t do it now, though. I needed an opportunity where I was guaranteed success, and if he truly could ‘feel’ me, like he’d said, then I’d need allies who could distract him.

He started another goading monologue, but I didn’t hear it. Backing away, I made it somewhere safe before running. I needed to escape this city, my home, but once I had, I could regroup.

And once that was done, maybe I could figure out why I couldn’t bring myself to grieve the death of my family.

Finding a decent source of resistance took a few weeks. As I’d always known he would, Doldimar ran an efficient military campaign, making sure every city and town he acquired was fully his before moving on. Not many enemies were left alive in his wake, or at least, not many with the power to see him dead.

By the time I stumbled across the right camp, most of the empire had fallen, something that should probably have bothered me, but I only cared about it because it had made my goal more difficult.

Fortunately, this group appeared both well-organized and decently equipped, which should negate that raised difficulty level.

Strangers took me to their leader, deep within their camp, and when we stepped into his tent, I stopped dead. I'd expected to find any number of people here: town mayors, city councilors, and the like.

Not Alouin's Voice, the leader of our empire. Or former empire, I supposed.

He didn't see me when we stepped inside, intently talking with a woman instead, and restrained by my escort, I just watched him for a time. Eventually, however, he glanced my way, and when he did, he blanched before sending everyone else out of the tent.

"You're alive," he said once they'd gone. "Does that mean...?"

I didn't know what he saw that shut him up, but it also had his body shaking. Since I'd seen him, my expression hadn't once changed... I didn't think.

As for what he'd asked about, I hadn't touched on that subject for days. The method of compartmentalization that I'd learned during the war had become useful once more.

I was curious, however, as to why Alouin's Voice had started crying. Considering everything he'd done, I wasn't sure if he had a right to grieve.

"I'm sorry," he said. "When I saw you, I hoped... I hoped I'd have a chance to redeem myself for-"

"Forgive me, Your Eminence," I interrupted, "but might I inquire as to your resistance's status? I'd like to offer you aid, but until I know where I might best serve, I can't do that."

I didn't have the patience to wait while he collected himself. Now that I'd found my distraction for Doldimar, I wanted to start preparing the pieces.

"I... I don't know," Alouin's Voice said before scrubbing his face. "I'm only here to give this group legitimacy. I'm certainly not the one calling the shots."

...Interesting. If he wasn't in charge, it could be beneficial. An unknown leader wouldn't have old biases that I'd struggle with.

At the same time, I'd have to prove my worth to them, and I wasn't sure I could do that without using my special little curse. I'd rather not die today.

"If you're not running things, who is?" I asked. "I need to see them. I have some information that they might find useful."

Nodding, Alouin's Voice said, "I see. I'll show you to him, then."

As we walked through camp, people bobbed their heads or bowed to their leader, which might once have irritated me. Now, I just wondered why people were genuflecting to someone whose position didn't exist anymore.

Alouin's Voice took me into the woods, muttering something about their leader liking his privacy. I wasn't paying him much mind, lost in planning how I'd introduce myself to this group's leader, but all of that flew out the window when we strode into a clearing and I saw the man waiting there.

Within a breath, I'd drawn my sword while racing after the knife I'd already thrown. It missed—how did I keep missing?—but nothing could stop me from swinging my weapon down on my foe's head.

As if a solid surface had intercepted it, my blade stopped just shy of Reive, sending strands of his hair floating to the ground, and frowning, I tried to press forward.

My body didn't respond to me, though.

What the hell was going on?

Heat stabbed through my shoulder, which had me turning to Alouin's Voice. Panting, he lifted his bloodied dagger as if to defend himself, but I ignored him, stalking away.

Several paces out, I flipped backward, facing two, soft men. They were staring at me with wide eyes and their mouths open, which had me shaking my head. They should have attacked me while my back had been turned, but while I knew why Reive hadn't hurt me, I wasn't sure what had stopped Alouin's Voice.

Oh, well. Retrieving my last knife, I tossed it at Reive, and again, it missed. As it thumped into the grass, I clicked my tongue.

"Hell," I said. "I can't kill you."

As if I hadn't just tried to end him, Reive brushed himself off.

"I was wondering when you'd find us, Eriadren," he said. "It took you long enough."

Whipping his head to the former Councilor, Alouin's Voice said, "You said he died when Doldimar took your home."

"Yes. I'm almost certain that he did," Reive said.

"Then... why have you been expecting him?"

Still glaring at Reive, I said, "I can't die."

With a quick, almost friendly smile, Reive dismissed me.

"Not by any means I've discovered, at least," he said.

This bastard.

“What?!” Alouin’s Voice shouted.

Never looking at him, I pointed to where he’d stabbed my shoulder, and he scurried to inspect my unmarked flesh.

“I want to give Doldimar the harshest possible fate I can devise,” I told Reive. “I want to break him so thoroughly that he becomes as nothing. Will you stop me?”

I’d like to know whether I should look for another resistance cell to serve as my distraction.

“Hardly,” Reive said. “For once, your goals align with mine.”

“...You want to destroy your nephew,” I said.

I didn’t know why this surprised me. For years, Reive had tortured me without a problem. He’d killed Rafe, starting our descent into these shitty circumstances. Why wouldn’t he get rid of a once-favored piece on his game board after it had misbehaved?

“You already know the answer to that,” Reive said before glancing at me. “Well?”

Could I work with this evil man, someone who’d been a thorn in my side for my whole life?

As if he could feel my reluctance, Reive rolled his eyes.

“I’m your best shot at getting what you want,” he said.

And despite myself, I fiercely smiled.

“Let’s get started, then.”

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