

# Interlude 4.2: The Ending

## Eriadren

My efforts to murder Doldimar weren't going as planned. In fact, nearly a year into them, I had yet to step out of camp.

Reive said that my inability to kill made me a liability. I could endanger any team I might go on a mission with, and no matter how much I argued that my other ability outweighed that disadvantage, he wouldn't change his mind.

So, I'd been stuck here, wondering if I shouldn't try my luck elsewhere, for an entire year. To date, the effort of leaving hadn't seemed worth it, although that could change at any moment.

On top of everything else, Reive probably wanted to continue with his experimentation on me once this war was over. He still wanted to become a god, but if he thought I'd let that happen, he had another thing coming. Any leverage he'd once held over me had been lost.

All this meant, though, was that over the last year, I'd lingered at the edge of camp often, wishing I could go further. When people asked what I did out here, I answered that I was keeping watch, but my true reason for coming out here was far worse and perhaps a tad worrisome.

"I don't know what to do, love," I said. "If you were here, what would you tell me?"

In the moonlight, Lirilith blankly stared at me. I'd long ago grown numb to the evidence of abuse scattered over her body, just like I no longer flinched at her eyes on me. The nights when my mind conjured her were the good ones. When Sepiala appeared instead...

Those were the nights I'd have gnawed through my palm, containing my screams, if not for my unnatural healing.

"How long can I sit around, waiting for Reive to make a move?" I said. "I want this over, although what I'll do once it's done still mystifies me. Everyone I loved will be dead..."

With a gasp, I slapped a hand to my mouth. Apparently, this would be a bad night, even without my daughter to haunt me.

"I want him dead. I do!" I said into my palm. "He murdered you. He's not Arivor, my brother, anymore. He's Doldimar. A monster. A- a-"

Taking a shaky breath, I hugged my legs, burying my face in my raised knees.

“How did this happen?”

Lirilith didn't reply, but then, she never did. A noise did, however, jerk me upright.

Getting to my feet, I moved toward the sound of rustling leaves. Was someone taking a midnight stroll? Or perhaps a group of hopefuls had come looking for this resistance's base.

When I found the source of the disturbance, I froze with my stomach roiling. It was definitely nothing like what I'd been considering.

Ahead of me, a woman in shoddy armor was failing miserably at pushing through the underbrush, but this was no ordinary person. Black lines flickered and writhed beneath her skin, and as always, something about them made me sick. I'd never identified why this happened, but considering how many strange things I'd seen in my life, another mystery didn't bother me as much as it used to.

She was one of Doldimar's new soldiers: a Kiraak. Exceptionally bloodthirsty, they were almost impossible to kill. Even something as debilitating as a sword through the heart couldn't stop them.

I needed to warn my allies that one had gotten so close to camp.

Before I could back away, though, the woman lifted her face toward the sky, sniffing at the air, before spinning toward me with a hiss.

What the hell? How had she known-?

She rushed me, barely giving me time to draw my sword. I batted her initial strike aside, and all the while, I was scrambling for a plan.

I'd fight this woman, of course. What else was I supposed to do?

I couldn't end her, though, and since she might share the news of this encounter with the enemy if she escaped, letting her kill me didn't seem wise. So, what should I-?

When I swung for her, the woman didn't duck as she should, and I had a split second to wince. I'd barely gotten used to my body stopping me from landing killing blows.

It didn't happen this time, though. My sword sliced into her neck, carving through it to the other side, and my enemy's head fell from her shoulders.

Stunned, I could only blink as the body crumpled, working through what had happened. Then, I took off toward camp, running as if a flash flood was chasing me.

When I plunged between tents, people didn't pay me any mind, used to my eccentricities by now. I ignored them too, racing for the place where I would most likely find Reive.

Barging through a tent flap, I dismissed the others gathered here, zeroing my focus on the bastard who'd ruined my life. Storming to him, I drove my sword point at his chest—

—and was brought up short.

Glancing at the blade, Reive said, "Really, Eriadren. I thought we were past this nonsense."

With a growl, I sheathed my sword while Reive waved off the people, poised to attack, around us. Only Alouin's Voice was watching us with anything approaching calm.

"I need to speak with you," I snapped. "In private."

Nodding, Reive said, "Everyone out."

Without protest, they went. Hell, he had such control over them. After this horror show, any remnant of the empire that remained would be fucked because he would almost certainly be in charge of it.

After the others had filtered outside, Reive crossed his arms.

"What was that about?" he asked.

"I ran into an enemy soldier in the forest, one of Doldimar's new monstrosities," I said. "I killed her."

Humming, Reive stroked his chin for a moment.

"You're sure?" he said.

"If you doubt me, send someone to check," I said, throwing a hand toward the tent flap, "but you know what this means, right?"

"That your inability to kill isn't as absolute as we thought?"

Well, yes. That had seemed obvious. But...

"No. It means that you can't keep me here anymore. Your reason for it is gone."

Stepping to where my toes brushed Reive's shins, I crouched, jabbing a finger at his face.

"Send me out there. Use me like you should have done from the beginning," I said, "or this tenuous partnership is over."

And damn the consequences for that choice. I was done sitting idly by.

---

"You can't keep doing this, Eriadren," Alouin said.

\*\*\*

As white light flashed around me, I gasped, sitting upright while slapping at my chest. It didn't matter how many times I died. Coming back still surprised me.

While checking for enemies, I said under my breath, "You want me to stop, Alouin? You'll have to force it from me."

No one was in sight. Delicately, I slipped off of the stone slab I'd been lying on, ignoring the pool of dried blood that I'd left behind. If that did nothing to me, maybe the bodies on all sides should, but after eleven years of wading through similar scenes, such houses of horror no longer affected me.

This was what Doldimar had made of me and the others living in his chaotic kingdom: someone who walked through mangled corpses as if it were nothing. I had become immune to horror.

Hope, on the other hand...

Twelve years had passed since the empire had fallen. Ten years ago, Doldimar had slaughtered the leaders of the human kingdoms, taking over from them, and even still, my allies and I toiled to bring our enemy down. It had been a long, frustrating decade, filled with many promising opportunities, and all had proven infeasible in the end.

That would never stop me from seeking new ones, though.

Tonight, I'd infiltrated the fortress of Doldimar's top lieutenant, letting myself get captured. I'd let an absolutely sick man plunge his dagger into my heart, all so I could stand here, completely undetected.

After clothing myself in an illusion, I stepped into the hall, hurrying to find the lieutenant's bedchamber. This didn't take long. The man was known for his paranoia, so all I had to do was look for the thickest clump of soldiers, guarding a hall or door.

From there, it was a simple matter of finding an isolated corner, shucking my illusory clothes, and assuming an insect's mindset.

Stars, but once it came, the energy drain for using so much magic today might knock me out. It would be worth it, though, for the time it would save.

By the time I'd flown into the lieutenant's bedchamber, I'd fallen so far into a fight against the mindset I'd assumed that I almost shape changed in the middle of the room. Considering it was occupied, this would have been disastrous. Fortunately, at the last second, I remembered where I was, flitting beneath the bed before becoming human again.

Holding still, I listened as the lieutenant bowed and scraped to his guest, someone I hadn't expected when planning this mission. I wondered who it could be.

"-done as commanded, great one," he said. "How else may I serve?"

“Hmm.”

A pair of feet moved into view.

“You’ve done ‘as commanded’. I suppose you think that you deserve praise for your competence.”

A woman? And not only that but she’d sounded so young...

Oh, no. It couldn’t be. Could it?

“My dear guardian doesn’t reward mere adequacy,” the woman said. “In fact, he’d probably praise me if I punished you for failing to go above and beyond expectations.”

As the lieutenant thumped to the ground, presumably knocked there by the woman, I absently hooked my fingers into the bed’s slats, pulling myself off of the ground so he wouldn’t see me, if he was still alive.

Doldimar’s ward, a she-demon responsible for several atrocities that matched her patron’s, stood not a dozen paces from me. What an opportunity I’d stumbled upon. If I eliminated my old friend’s heir, it would set his plans back, at least a little.

Was it worth abandoning a chance at killing the man himself, though?

“Please, great one. You’ve seen my performance over the years,” the lieutenant said. “You know that mere adequacy isn’t typical for me. Give me another month to prove I can continue with that excellence.”

The problem with this opportunity was that if I chose to take it, I didn’t know if I could kill the woman. Given that she rarely left people alive, reports on Doldimar’s heir had been sparse on details, so I didn’t know if black lines crawled under her skin. I didn’t know if my body would let me make a killing blow.

“Get up,” the woman snapped. “You have a month. Do not disappoint me, or I’ll tell my guardian that he should visit you personally.”

“Ye- yes, great one.”

Something scraped along the floor, letting me lower myself back to it, but I didn’t roll out from under the bed. In this case, I’d rather be cautious than attack these two. Another opportunity to kill my enemy’s heir would come along, and besides, what could happen until then? I died?

Ha!

“Until next time.”

A set of small feet strode into a patch of darkness before... vanishing. What-?

“Bitch,” the lieutenant muttered.

A few heartbeats later, a door slammed, and I got out from under the bed. Casting aside thoughts on what I’d heard, I searched the bedchamber as swiftly as possible. When I found a piece of parchment that described the realm’s troop distribution for the next month, I let a rare smile cross my face. This was perfect.

After memorizing it, I began the process of shifting to an insect but paused when I spotted the lieutenant’s specialized insignia lying nearby. That could be useful, and it was small enough that a larger bug, like a beetle, could carry it.

Snatching it up, I softly hummed to myself. This had been a ridiculously successful mission, even if I’d died to accomplish it. Hopefully, something in what I’d gained would get me to my end goal.

---

Somewhere in the valley below, Reive was addressing our hastily cobbled together army, trying to inspire them for the coming battle. I was on a cliff on the outskirts of our camp, overlooking the small patch of woods between us and the giant fortress on the other side. The sprawling building had been partially built into the mountain at its back, an attribute that the humans who’d once ruled this land had favored, and the fact that one of its towers nearly rivaled said mountain in height made the place rather imposing.

As I finished with my preparations for my end of this morning’s plan, someone came to join me on my perch, but I ignored them, fairly certain of who it was. Alouin’s Voice had recently finished with his portion of today’s speech making, and I’d grown familiar with the sound of his footfalls over the years.

He joined me without comment, although when his gaze fell on the gathered soldiers below us, he let out a soft laugh.

“He’s planning on having me killed soon, isn’t he?”

I knew exactly who he meant, even without the mention of a name. Barely visible from up here, I could see Reive pacing back and forth in front of the first line of soldiers, shaking his fists overhead with his voice bouncing to us.

“Are you going to let him try?” I said.

No need to reply to the other man’s question. I was pretty sure he already knew what my answer would be. Still, I was glad that Alouin’s Voice had finally picked up on Reive’s ambitions, although he might have noticed them long before now. I avoided the man whenever possible and so, wouldn’t have noticed when that revelation had happened.

With a long sigh, Alouin’s Voice leaned back on his hands, lifting his face to the stars.

"Maybe I should," he said. "I'd deserve it after how terribly I've handled every responsibility I've had in my life."

That made me freeze in place. The few times Alouin's Voice had caught me out like this, he'd tried expressing his regrets for certain... things, things I did my best not to think about. I didn't want or need him to do something like that now, in the hour before I'd be infiltrating Doldimar's citadel.

Fortunately, he shook his head, softly laughing, and moved on.

"But no, I don't think I will. Reive can have whatever wreck of a kingdom is left once all of this is over. I've already proven I'm not fit to lead."

I didn't reply. He probably knew my opinion about that.

"No matter how today's battle goes, I'll be leaving after it," Alouin's Voice continued after a moment. "But before I do..."

He turned to watch me strapping a weapon into place, and stiffly, I forced myself to meet his gaze.

"I'll be backing you up on your mission today, Eriadren," he said.

He held up a hand when I opened my mouth to deny him.

"I know you don't need or want help. I'm not offering to do anything silly like that," he said, "but you're bringing something quite valuable with you to your confrontation with Doldimar."

Alouin's Voice nodded toward the sword lying on the stone beside me. It had taken me years to locate this god-forged blade, a quest that no one but this man and Reive had known about. If I was going to confront a man who *wouldn't fucking die*, I'd wanted every advantage I could get, and a blade crafted by our old empire's god had seemed like the perfect weapon to satisfy that goal.

"I'll be waiting in the wings while you fight him," Alouin's Voice said. "I know what this fight means to you. I won't interfere in it, no matter how much I'd like to satisfy my own grievances with *that bastard*."

Looking away, he clenched his fists in his lap.

"But you deserve it more," he soon continued. "So, I'll watch, and win or lose, I'll be there to make sure that sword doesn't fall into Reive's hands."

That made me blink. Out of all the fears I had about this morning's battle, Alouin's Voice had named the one that had most often kept me awake over the last week. I found myself... grateful, strangely, to this man for alleviating that worry for me.

Alouin's Voice seemed to see my acceptance of his offer in my eyes. He nodded once before getting to his feet.

Patting my shoulder, he said, “Good luck over the next few hours, Eriadren.”

As he walked away, I tucked the insignia of Doldimar’s top lieutenant—the one I’d retrieved during my recent infiltration mission—into a pocket. It and a shape change would be the first part of today’s plan, getting me through the gate into Doldimar’s citadel. With it, I’d be closer to my old friend than I’d been able to get for the last ten years. I was trying not to think about how nervous I was to see him again. How much I looked forward to...

Actually, I wasn’t sure what I was looking forward to with this. Ending him, maybe? Figuring out why...?

Shaking my head, I got to my feet and slid Shadowsteal into the scabbard on my back. The visit from Alouin’s Voice had brought emotions up to the surface again, which wasn’t conducive to what I’d soon need to do. I pushed them all away, falling into a cold and compartmentalized version of myself, and turned away from the army at my back. I should get started with trying to kill my best friend.

---

Revision #1

Created 28 August 2024 21:05:53 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable