

Interlude 4.3: The Ending

Eriadren

Finally, I was here.

As the last of Doldimar's soldiers slid off of my blade, I kept my eyes fixed on the doors in front of me. Behind them was my goal. Behind them, I'd find him.

Hopefully, I'd get to enjoy killing him before Reive and the others caught up.

When I banged into the next room, I found it empty save for several patches of shadows and Doldimar, lounging in one of the humans' former throne.

"Finally, you're here. I've been waiting for ages, Eri."

Doldimar's sing-song voice filled the room, setting my teeth grinding, and as he straightened in his chair, I settled into a ready stance, diminishing my profile. Back in the day, I might have been the superior swordsman between the two of us, but who knew if that had changed in the decade since?

Seeing me shift, Doldimar leapt to his feet with clapping hands, manically giggling all the while.

"Do you like it?" he asked. "We've told a fine story together, you and I, but now, it's time for the finale! Who will prevail? The hero or the villain?"

Gritting my teeth, I hissed, "This isn't a storybook, you bastard. You took my family from me! You ended their lives."

With a sob, I broke off, and Doldimar cocked his head as I collected myself.

"You, my best friend, destroyed my life and brought the world to ruin. How could you?"

I didn't know why I'd asked that. Over the years, I'd learned that any remorse this man might've had had died along with his son, long ago.

It was with surprise then that I watched Doldimar's manic energy fade. With a heavy sigh, he squeezed his eyes closed, glancing away, and for a moment, he looked like my friend again.

Then, he said, "You'd know why I've done these things if you'd read my letter. You could have prevented this."

And acid burned away my vision of a ghost.

That damn letter. I still carried it on my person, tucked into my jacket's pocket, but that was because it was part of my revenge, not because of an unspoken promise I might have made.

"I'm going to kill you," I snapped. "You will suffer, just like them."

Like Lirilith, watching me from the sidelines with a broken body. Like Sepiala with black energy riddling every part of her. Like every other unnamed person he'd killed.

Meeting my eyes, Doldimar said, "Good."

And he smiled. And that was it for me.

I charged him with a roar, unthinking in my advance, and he calmly waited for me. For some reason, I didn't find this odd until I caught a flash of movement from the corner of my eye.

That one glimpse and my quick reflexes saved me. Nearly tripping over myself, I barely dodged the sword plunging for my chest, spinning around the body that followed it. I was quick to recover, changing targets in a breath, but so was my new opponent. As our blades met, Doldimar's cackle rose above that clash.

"I'm sorry, Eri. I should have introduced you before now," he said. "This is the final, major character in our tale: my ward and heir."

How fortunate for me. I'd get to end his tyranny in one fell swoop.

Snarling, I pushed my new opponent away, hardly seeing her before I sprinted for Doldimar once more, but something in that one glimpse tickled at the back of my mind.

I cast consideration of it to the side, at least for the moment. Why waste time on that when my goal was so close?

Again, the woman appeared from nowhere, and on pushing her away this time, her hair slapped me in the face. Red and green. That was an unusual combo.

Shaking the thought off, I advanced two more steps toward Doldimar, and his heir rose from a patch of shadows on the ground in front of me.

How had she done that? What magic had allowed it?

Raising her blade, she snarled, "Leave him alone, degenerate."

And I stumbled to a stop, blankly staring. It couldn't be.

"Lirilith?" I breathed.

No, that couldn't be right. The faces might match, but my wife had had blonde hair...

In a blur, Doldimar's heir moved, and several feet of steel plunged into my chest and through my heart.

When I saw him this time, Alouin was watching me with pity.

"Brace yourself, Eriadren," he said. "This next one will be bad."

White light ushered me into my body, and surprised to find myself unbound, I stumbled to my feet, coughing. Even as I snagged a hidden knife from its sheathe, the blurry figures in front of me clarified.

One: Doldimar with a disappointed frown in place.

"Well, that didn't work."

Two: A ghost from the past, staring at me in horror.

Why was she looking at me like that? Why was she so familiar?

Licking her lips, Doldimar's heir hesitantly said, "Daddy?"

And I locked up, in body and mind. Not Lirilith. This was much worse.

"Sepi?" I breathed.

My daughter.

It couldn't be, though. I'd seen her body, hadn't I? *Hadn't I?*

No, this wasn't right. She was...

What had Doldimar made of her? What had she done?

All because I couldn't keep her safe.

With tears in her eyes, Sepiala dropped her sword.

"Daddy!" she gasped over its clang. "You're... no, you're dead! He told me... I... Oh, Alouin. What?"

Despite my horror, I found myself speaking.

"It's ok, sweetie. We'll fix this. You're all right."

Maybe she heard what I was really saying. Maybe she knew from those meager words how much I still loved her. I hoped so because in the next moment, Doldimar was at her side, cleanly separating her head from her shoulders.

As my daughter collapsed in pieces at his feet, he clicked his tongue.

“Looks like that still needs work too,” he said.

I didn’t know what happened next. Something unreasoning and powerful took over, and when I was next aware of the world, Doldimar was kneeling in front of me with one leg gone and a sword through his gut.

“Finally, we’re here,” he coughed.

Shakily reaching for me, he laid a hand where I was gripping the blade.

“Thank... you, Eri.”

Snarling, I ripped the sword free and brought it down on his head. I wasn’t sure how long I spent hacking at his body, but eventually, I grew tired, throwing the weapon aside. Fixing my gaze on the remains of that hated face, I withdrew a letter, yet unopened, from my jacket.

Everything else—*Sepiala!*—could wait, just for a moment. I needed this. Now.

Breaking the wax on the letter’s seal, I unfolded it.

“Let’s see what you thought would excuse all of this,” I growled before clearing my throat. “My dearest friend. If you’re reading this, please know that I never hated you. You weren’t to blame for what led to our conflict. In fact, if anyone should take responsibility for it, it’s... me.”

Scowling, I scanned the rest of the letter, and once I was finished, my legs failed me. Limply hitting the ground, I rested loose fingers on my thighs, letting parchment flutter free of them.

No.

I wanted to howl this, but the breath had been knocked out of me, and I wasn’t sure if it was in response to what I’d read or what had started rising in my core. I didn’t get long to ponder this as that rapidly escalating heat stole all thought. Pain flashed through me—

—and my ashes floated to the ground between my loved ones’ corpses.

When I woke up, I was surrounded by white. White formed the sky. White covered the ground. White was the world.

Except for in a thin strip of gray, one that separated me from a black landscape. Why did this place seem so familiar?

“Hello, Eriadren. Congratulations are in order. You appear to have won this time.”

Shooting upright, I barely stopped myself from screaming. My friend... my daughter... *myself*... we'd all died!

Still, that voice cut through thoughts that had been scattered in the wind.

“Alouin.”

How many times had I caught a glimpse of that man in the brief seconds after my many deaths? Unlike before, however, I wasn't going anywhere this time.

“I'm sorry that the backlash caught you before you'd processed what you read.”

Dazed, I lifted my head, staring at Alouin. The hell was he talking about?

Shifting in place, he cleared his throat.

“Here. I'll recite it for you.”

He pulled himself upright, folding his hands in front of him.

“Eri,

If you're reading this, please know that I never hated you. You weren't to blame for our conflict. In fact, if anyone should take responsibility for it, it's me. I'm the one who pushed you toward our lives' destruction, and others, in their hate, took advantage of our weakness. Please, Eriadren, forgive yourself for something you had no control over.

“Before I lose myself again, I must set this into writing, for when I next see you, I may not have control. Since our disastrous experiment, I've been trapped in Corruption's sway. Every day, its madness overtakes more of my mind. I don't know how much longer I can resist its influence, but in the end, how can I do that? I'm fighting a god.

“Instead, I marshal the remnants of my sanity to delay Corruption, one last fight to convey my wishes before I no longer can. I would make a final request of you, my friend. When next we meet, please kill me. I cannot live under the control of a god whose sole aim is to destroy creation.

“I know what I'm asking of you. I do not ask it lightly, but you're the only one who can end me. I've placed myself in harm's way more times than I can count, even attempting suicide as my desperation has increased, but still, I've found no release, only a continuation of life.

“We share a unique bond, Eriadren, one that I hope will let me slip free of this prison. I beg you, for the friendship we once shared, to do what must be done. End my life. Stop the misery that I may, in my insanity, wreak upon the world. You're the only one I've ever known with the strength to do what's right.

Ever your friend,

Arivor.”

As when I'd first read the letter, I was cast adrift, and in agonizingly slow movements, I craned my head toward the man that many of my people considered a god.

“He wasn't in control?” I numbly asked.

“By the time he joined the humans, Arivor had lost his fight with Corruption, yes,” Alouin said.

With a growl, I shot to my feet, tugging at my hair.

“Why didn't he just say something?” I hissed. “Why leave such an important message in a letter I might not read?”

Alouin let me pace for a moment before saying.

“You've done your research since our first meeting. You understand what Ele and Daevetch are now, meaning you probably have a glimpse of the predicament you've landed yourself in.”

Halting, I mutely nodded. Stupid. I'd been so stupid to experiment with the unknown.

“Given that, do you think that Arivor had any choice about how he gave you this information? Frankly, I'm amazed he snuck that letter past Corruption. Daevetch's avatar indeed,” Alouin said with a headshake. “Also, can you blame him for wanting to be nowhere near you when you learned the truth?”

As if to emphasize his point, a pained cry ripped through this strange place, eventually morphing into intelligible words.

“No! What... *what did I do?*”

I jerked my head toward the noise. On the other side of the gray line, a familiar form was hunched on himself, sobbing with shaking shoulders, while Alouin's twin stood over him.

And I took off. I didn't care how impossible my current circumstances were. I had to reach my friend.

Alouin stopped me before I could.

Interposing himself between me and the gray line, he said, “Stop. If you enter the balance point, it will tear you apart. If you must speak with him, do it from here, but be quick about it. Your time here is running out.”

In this moment, I didn't care who this man was or how powerful he might be. Stepping toe-to-toe with him, I bared my teeth.

"Get *the fuck* out of my way," I snarled.

Alouin slapped me. It was a bitch move, to be sure, but in this case, it was effective. With fury dampened, I clutched at my cheek, glaring at him. He'd better have an explanation for me.

"You cannot go to Arivor, not in this place," he said. "When you experimented with my body so many years ago, it ended with the formation of yet another rip in reality, one that reached though those layers until it touched the bedrock. This is where Arivor went when his essence slipped out of his body. Later, it's where I sent you.

"You were lucky, landing in the balance point as you did. Arivor was less so, and Daevetch eagerly latched onto him, making him an easy conduit into your layer of reality.

"So, I did my job. I pushed you into Ele's sway as a way to counter him. If I hadn't, it would have thrown every iteration into disbalance.

"What this means? You're bound to one of the primal forces, Champion of Ele, just as Arivor is to Daevetch!"

Oh. Was that all?

"I figured as much. I had ten years to do research, when I wasn't focused on other goals. Did you think I wouldn't put that together? The only thing I didn't know was how little control my friend had over the last decade," I said. "It doesn't matter now, though. Arivor and I are dead, the same as everyone we ever loved. The threat that we posed has been neutralized, so as I was saying, would you kindly get out of my way? I don't know what sort of afterlife this is, but I'd like to use it to reconcile with my friend."

...Why was Alouin looking at me with such pity?

"You're not dead, Eriadren," he said.

After a beat, I snorted, bursting into laughter.

"What are you talking about? My body is ash," I said. "Over the years he controlled me, Reive may have killed me in many ways, but he never tried immolation. Reconstructing a body from that is impossible."

"Which is why another one will be provided."

My laughter cut off as my eyes widened.

"*What?*" I shouted.

Crossing his arms, Alouin said, "Did you think that the loss of your bodies would stop Daevetch and Ele from using you? That will never happen, not when they have their claws so thoroughly embedded in your essences. Once they've reasserted their control, you and Arivor will be returned

to the physical plane, where he will once more go mad, and together, you'll repeat the tragedy of your lives in a representation of the Eternal War. I'm sorry, Eriadren."

Silence fell while I absorbed everything he'd said with my fingers twitching. Eventually, I cleared my throat.

"How long?" I gruffly asked.

How long would my friend and I be trapped like this? How long would this torture last?

"For as long as the primal forces' War persists," Alouin said, "which if I have any say in it, will be for eternity."

At those words, I didn't know how I stayed on my feet.

After a moment, Alouin stepped aside, letting me approach the gray line where my friend was already waiting, and I sank to my knees opposite him.

Tear tracks were streaked across his face, and I badly wanted to wipe it clean, but... I couldn't. Instead, I listened to him blubber at me, offering so many apologies, which I didn't understand. We both had things to be sorry for, both had wronged the other in unforgivable ways.

All the while, a sheet of black rolled over his body, the same as one of light was doing for mine. Somehow, I found my voice before either sheet could complete their journey.

"I'll fix this, Arivor," I said. "I promise. One day, we'll be free."

The white sheet from the bedrock of reality finished enveloping my body, and when I opened my eyes, light blinded me. I squinted to let them adjust.

"What's wrong? Why isn't he crying?"

Who had that been?

"Don't worry, my dear. He's perfectly fine. Just quiet."

Having given my eyes time to adjust, I cracked them open more fully, wondering where Ele had dropped me, and gazed upon a woman, looking down at me with a radiant smile.

O... k... this was awkward. How did I-?

"He's beautiful!" the woman said. "Look at those eyes! He has an old soul."

She brushed my cheek with her knuckles, and I froze. What the hell was going on?

Glancing around, I found another woman nearby, but this only escalated my already pounding heart because her hands were covered in blood. I had to help!

“She’s fine, Eriadren. Please, calm down. No one’s in danger here.”

Who’d said that?

When I located the speaker, I tried to jerk away, tried to warn the women about the anomaly in their midst, but this only ended with me squirming in place, screaming my head off.

“There it is,” one of the women crooned.

What...? No. This madness needed to stop. I needed to get control now, needed to get up...

“Welcome to your new body, Eriadren.”

That was the second time the anomaly had said my name. Gradually, I slowed down my breathing rate so I could take them in.

Roughly humanoid in shape, they were made of white light, standing with their arms folded behind their back, and at my stare, they cocked their head.

“You have questions, I’m sure,” they said.

Of fucking course I had questions!

Clicking their tongue, the anomaly said, “There’s no need to curse.”

And again, I could only stare.

Leaning over, the woman with bloodied hands lifted me single-handedly out of the other woman’s lap.

“I’ll get him waddled for you, my dear. Shall I send your husband in?”

“He’ll want to see his son...”

“And he will! Let me clean him up first.”

Realization hit me.

A baby? Ele, primal force of creation, needed to give me a body so I could carry out its purpose, and I got stuck as a *baby* again?

“Is that not how new Esela are created?” the anomaly asked. “A male and female come together to exchange genetic matter. The resulting zygote gestates for nine months, forming a body that can survive outside the womb, and once that’s finished, it’s expelled into the world. That’s correct, yes?”

Technically, yes, that was where babies came from, although I was unfamiliar with some of the terms the anomaly had spoken. What did that have to do with-?

“We inserted you into this body as late as possible,” the anomaly continued. “Keeping one alive without a sustaining essence is extraordinarily difficult. Given that, you should be grateful. You could just as easily have spent months inside the mother.”

Ugh. That was a disgusting concept to consider.

But wait. Did this mean I’d have to learn how to walk and talk again? By the stars, I’d be treated like a child. I’d go through puberty again. Hell.

“You’re assuming this cycle will last long enough for you to grow up,” the anomaly said. “If we find the enemy whole’s avatar quickly enough, then the backlash will destroy this body long before then.”

So, this being *had* been responding to me.

Who are you? I snapped, intent on getting answers.

Shifting in place, the anomaly said, “My name is Creation.”

... How informative.

WHAT are you? I asked, wishing I could roll my eyes.

“I am a piece of my whole, splintered off to ensure you keep to our purpose,” Creation said. “I’m here to make sure you destroy your friend.”

So... you’re basically my babysitter, I said.

“In essence, yes.”

Well, that wouldn’t be annoying at all.

I was still fuming about this when I was returned to the other woman’s arms, although... given the context, perhaps I should start thinking of her as ‘mother’. I’d have to do that if I was to blend in here.

I refused to think of my true mother, massacred with my hometown years ago.

Soon enough, a man stepped into view, and when his face lit up on looking at me, I assumed he was ‘father’. That would be interesting. I’d never had a real father, just a man who’d abandoned me to a life in the slums.

“Isn’t he beautiful?” ‘mother’ said, glancing at the man.

As he gazed at me, ‘father’s’ eyes held nothing but wonder.

“Yes, he is,” he said.

Maybe... maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

“Have you decided what we'll call him?” ‘mother’ asked.

After a moment's consideration, ‘father’ said, “His name is Gaelen.”

Gaelen. I liked it. A new life with a new name and a new family. When thinking about it like that, I realized what I had here.

If I kept my tragedies buried, I could become a different person now. Managed properly, I might even lead a happy life.

“Don't forget why you're here, Eriadren,” Creation said.

Except for that. Given enough time, that nuisance might become a problem.

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