

Phone Call in the Night

The loud clanging wrested Farrendel Laesornysh from sleep so abruptly that he did not fully register what had woken him until he was rolling upright in bed, one hand already gripping a hilt of one of the swords resting on their rack mounted to the bed frame.

Next to him, his wife Essie gave a groan and rolled, still not fully awake.

The clanging ring came again, snapping him to full wakefulness, even as a tight lump settled into his stomach. That was the telephone, a contraption he was still getting used to, even if it had been around for several decades now.

Something was wrong. Not only was a telephone call at this time of night never a good thing, but the ringing telephone was not the one mounted in the kitchen near the back door. That telephone was connected to the normal, public grid of operators and hubs.

No, this telephone was the one in the little room next to his and Essie's bedchamber that functioned as an office of sorts. That particular telephone had a direct line to Winstead Palace, the line itself buried and encased in stone so that it was tamper-proof.

Farrendel forced himself to release his grip on his sword and rolled to his feet. Instead of his sword, he reached for his shirt.

Essie scrubbed at her eyes, murmuring sleepily, "What is it?"

"I will find out." Despite the ringing phone, Farrendel found himself lingering, reaching to brush a strand of Essie's hair from her face. Perhaps it was instinct. Maybe his pessimistic nature. But he had the feeling this night was the last one he would spend at her side for a long time to come.

Forcing himself to turn away, he hurried across the room, tugging his shirt over his head as he went, the waistband of his sleeping trousers loose around his hips. Stepping into the

hallway, voices echoed from the direction of the children's rooms, though none of them had wandered this direction yet.

Entering the study, Farrendel reached the phone mounted to the wall and unhooked the earpiece. "What is wrong?"

A sigh came through the line, then Averett, Essie's oldest brother and King of Escarland, spoke, weary and burdened. "Mongavaria has attacked."

"Where?" Farrendel leaned a shoulder against the wall, the weight of those three words settling heavy on his shoulders. After seventy years, the long-dreaded war with the Empire of Mongavaria had begun.

With a deliberate movement, Farrendel flipped the switch next to the telephone. The switch was connected to alarm bells in both Iyrinder's and Lance's homes and in Treehaven's guardhouse.

Essie stepped into the room, tugging her dressing gown over her nightgown and tying the belt around her waist. She joined him by the telephone, and he wrapped his arm around her, holding her close. He adjusted his grip on the earpiece, holding it so that both of them could hear. Through their elishina, he could taste her dread, an echo of the twisting inside his own chest.

Avie's pause was so long that Farrendel could hear the noise of voices and more ringing phones in the background above the crackle always present in the lines. Then Avie said, the words even more laden than before, "Fort Linder."

Fort Linder. Not Dar Goranth nor Fort Defense as everyone expected. Not even Fort Charibert or Aldon.

But Fort Linder. The very fort where Farrendel's son was in training.

Essie's arms tightened around his waist, a small noise rising from her throat.

"Fieran is at Fort Linder." Farrendel leaned his forehead against Essie's, a fear beyond anything he could name or express welling inside his chest and pouring through the elishina from her. His son was in danger, and Farrendel was too far away to protect him.

Worse, this was only the beginning. In this war, Farrendel would not be able to protect his son. Fieran was an adult and would have to stand as a warrior in his own right, in all the bloody burden that would mean for him. There was nothing Farrendel could do to take that away or ease the weight he knew his son would carry.

If he survived the night.

"Is he all right?" Essie's voice was tight but steady, though her fingers trembled as she tangled them in Farrendel's shirt. "What about Merrik? He's there too."

Farrendel's hands, too, were shaking as he hugged her with one hand and tried not to drop the earpiece with the other.

"I don't know. The attack is still in progress, and I'm getting updates sporadically. But from what I've gathered, a fleet of Mongavarian airships are dropping bombs on the fort." Avie's voice grew a bit faint, as if he were turning away from the receiver. "Hold a moment. I'm getting another update."

Voices spoke in the background, too indistinct to make out that words. Avie must be in the palace's communications room. Not the one used by the press secretaries and palace staff for daily communications, but the one deep beneath the palace with direct lines to all important military installations, the elven palace of Ellonahshinel, the troll palace of Khagniorth Stronghold, Treehaven House, and both Julien and Vriska's townhouse in the Little Kostaria district of Aldon and their stronghold in Kostaria.

Farrendel shifted his hand up Essie's back and cradled the back of her head, pressing a kiss to her forehead while they waited for more news.

These would be his last few moments to hold her like this, and they both knew it. After tonight, he would leave to go to war. A modern war with guns and airships and weapons unlike anything he had faced seventy years ago. And he would not return until the war was won.

If he returned at all. This war might be the one that succeeded in killing him.

"Don't think like that." Essie's whisper rang raw and insistent in the silence of the study. Even if she couldn't hear his thoughts, she could read his emotions well enough to decipher them. She tilted her head to peer up at him in the darkness, one of her hands moving from her grip around his waist to rest against his cheek. "I know you aren't invincible. War brings the possibility of death. But don't leave me—leave our family—believing you'll die. You *will* come home to me. I have to believe that."

He nodded and pressed another soft kiss to her forehead, cradling her close. "I will try to believe it too."

He would have to. The separation would be hard enough on her and their family without him adding to the burden by falling back into old patterns of dark thoughts.

"Essie? Farrendel?" Avie's voice came from the line again.

"Yes, we're still here." Essie's grip around Farrendel's waist tightened to near painful.

"I just received word that someone is holding a crackling, blue magical shield over Fort Linder and swatting bombs out of the sky." Avie's tone held just a trace of weary humor. "I think it's safe to say that Fieran is alive, at least as of a few minutes ago."

Essie's breath came out somewhere between a laugh and a sob as she dropped her head to Farrendel's shoulder.

He pressed his face against her hair. Their son was alive, and he was fighting as Farrendel trained him to do. And if Fieran was alive and well, then Merrik was too, as he wouldn't be far from Fieran's side.

Farrendel had never known parental pride could hurt quite like this in his chest, tangled as it was with the terror of knowing just what Fieran was facing even now, so far to the north.

"How soon can you get here?" Avie's voice returned to that weary, strained one once again. "If the attack on Fort Linder is just the first wave, Aldon could be their next target."

Avie didn't have to explain further. There might, even now, be more airships on their way to bomb Aldon. Would Estyra, too, soon be under attack?

There was no way Farrendel could get to Estyra tonight. Weylind and the elven capital city would be on their own tonight.

But he could reach Aldon and keep it safe. Built on either side of the Fyne River as it was, Aldon was precariously easy to find by the air if the Mongavarian airships followed the river. At least Estyra, hidden among the trees as it was, would be a more difficult target.

"Half an hour. Twenty minutes, perhaps." Farrendel shoved down the fears and whirling thoughts, letting the hard warrior he had once been take over.

"Don't kill yourself trying to get here." Avie's voice lowered. "And thank you. I should have more news for you when you arrive."

Farrendel murmured a farewell, then hung the earpiece back on its hook. He leaned more fully against the wall, wrapping both arms around Essie, his face pressed to her hair as she buried her face against his shoulder.

For long moments, they stood like that, holding each other, drawing in as much comfort as they could. Sharing both their fears and reassurances through the elishina.

Voices came from the hall outside the door. Adry, Louise, and Ellie speaking together, wondering what was going on. And there was Tryndar's sleepy voice joining them.

Down below, the kitchen door opened, then closed. One of the guards, or perhaps Iyrinder, letting himself inside to await news of why Farrendel flipped the alert switch.

"I need to go," Farrendel murmured into Essie's hair.

"I know." Her reply was muffled against his shoulder. A pause. "I should tell the children what is happening."

"I know."

Neither of them moved.

He did not want to let her go. Once he did, it would not be for just a night. Just a day. Just a week. It would be months. Perhaps longer.

They had not been separated like that since the first few months of their marriage. Never since having children.

He was not sure he was strong enough to make the choice to let her go, step out of this moment, and walk into the coming war.

"It's our anniversary today." Essie spoke into his shirt, her arms still tight around him.

He released a breath into her hair. "Will you be angry if I admit I had forgotten?"

"No. I'd forgotten too until I felt your memories of our wedding through the heart bond."

Essie shifted in his arms, as if preparing to pull away.

He was not yet ready to let her go.

Instead, he shifted his hold on her, cradling her face. "I do not want to leave."

"I do not want to let you go." Essie wrapped her arms around his neck, not waiting for him to close the distance before she was kissing him.

He buried his fingers in her hair, kissing her in return, knowing she could feel his heart through the elishina and in his kiss. A kiss to last for all the long, lonely nights ahead. A promise that he would fight with every breath in his body and crackle of magic in his veins to return to her.

Eventually, he would have to stop kissing. Eventually, he would have to let her go. Eventually, they would have to make plans, organize their children, and take the roadster to speed through the night to Aldon.

But for one poignant moment, he could pretend that eventually would not come.