

Taking to the Skies

Farrendel raised his sword, the movement far slower than his usual pace. Across from him, Iyrinder parried half-heartedly, his heart no more in the morning practice than Farrendel's was.

No, their hearts lay far away in Aldon and Estyra where their sons were recovering from their near-fatal wounds.

Farrendel took a step back and lowered his swords. "I do not think practice will be profitable for either of us this morning."

With how distracted they were, they were likely to hurt each other. And that was the last burden either of them wanted to put on their wives at the moment.

Iyrinder nodded, lowering his sword as well, his gaze drifting toward the northwestern horizon. "I agree."

Farrendel sheathed his swords. He probably should at least get a good run in. But he simply did not feel like it this morning. A sign that he should push himself to use exercise to help with the malaise.

Tomorrow he would push. Tomorrow he would force himself into some kind of exercise.

But not this morning. He would give himself—and Iyrinder—a day to actually process what had happened. Then, maybe, they could both find it in themselves to forge onward tomorrow.

Farrendel spun on his heel and forced his heavy legs to walk toward Fort Defense. Perhaps he would work on the stack of paperwork piling up on his desk. Today seemed like a day for paperwork.

He trudged up the rise leading toward the larger hangar overlooking Fort Defense. The first few months he had been at Fort Defense, he had walked around the end of the hangar rather than cut through it, even though that was the far longer route. He had not wanted to be around people that early in the morning.

But now the sight of the hangar stabbed at him, aching in his chest even as he found his feet carrying him in that direction.

The hangar was Fieran's space, and this morning Farrendel needed that connection to his son. The reminder that his son was still alive.

As his boots crossed the line from dirt onto hard concrete, Iyrinder at his heels, he tried not to flinch at the way the voices of the various pilots and mechanics echoed off the floor, walls, and ceiling as they shouted and laughed at the beginning of their day.

A cluster of pilots—ones Farrendel recognized from when Fieran had introduced his squadron—gathered to one side. Several of them had visited when Fieran had been recovering. They likely thought they were talking quietly, but they hadn't taken into account elven hearing.

"It will be harder, going up without Fieran."

"All the other squadrons have been going into battle without magical protection. I guess it's our turn."

"We'll handle it."

"Still, if Mongavarria realizes Fieran isn't protecting the skies anymore, they might send over everything they have. Try to wipe us out."

"General! Sir!"

Farrendel suppressed a sigh and turned toward the voice. Someone had noticed the elven general in their midst, and now all conversations halted as everyone turned to him, coming to attention.

“At ease.” Farrendel hurried to release them and even more hurriedly crossed through the hangar into the open air on the far side.

But as he made his way along the road, around the section of tents, and down the rise toward the headquarters section of the fort, the pilots’ words niggled at him.

Fieran might be far away in Aldon. But perhaps there was a way Farrendel could help him after all.

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Farrendel strode into Julien’s office in the headquarters building, ignoring the adjutant that scurried past him. “What would it take to arrange to have me fly with Fieran’s squadron?”

Julien dropped his pen on the mess of paperwork, scrubbed a hand over his eyes, and peered at Farrendel. “I must be more sleep-deprived than I thought. Did you say fly? You aren’t a pilot.”

“No, but there are aeroplanes with two seats, I believe.” Farrendel halted before Julien’s desk, taking in the sea of paperwork. While Farrendel had some paperwork—such things seemed inevitable in this new, modern army—he didn’t have near this amount. He and Iyrinder were essentially listed as their own, small unit underneath Weylind. As one of the lead generals determining tactics on the ground, Julien processed a prodigious amount of paperwork. “I overheard a conversation between some of the pilots. They expressed some trepidation about what Mongavaria will do, now that Fieran is not in the air protecting the skies with his magic.”

“That’s a concern shared by those of us higher up the chain of command as well.”

Julien swiped another weary hand over his face. “Bombings will increase, including more bombs containing that new chemical gas. We will lose more pilots, and we could lose the current edge we have in air superiority.”

“Then riding along with Fieran’s squadron would be helpful.” Farrendel kept his arms crossed, not wanting Julien to see any hint of apprehension.

“Are you sure? You already protect Fort Defense on the ground. If we are attacked, you cannot be in two places at once.” Julien shuffled around some of the papers on his desk, clearing a spot.

“I am aware. But it is my hope that merely flashing my magic about will deter Mongavaria from any major attacks until Fieran can return.” Farrendel had spent far too long yesterday pondering just how to best help. “The Mongavarians have no way to tell my magic apart from Fieran’s. If we can convince them that Fieran was not as grievously injured as they might have believed, it might make them back off and reassess before they make any major attacks.”

“I wouldn’t want to ask this of you if you weren’t willing. You don’t have to take more on your shoulders right now.” Julien opened a drawer, withdrawing a piece of paper.

Farrendel suppressed a sigh at his brother-in-law’s rather familiar concern.

Yet Julien didn’t understand. Or, perhaps, didn’t want to acknowledge the truth. As it had in the last war, the battle fell on his shoulders whether he remained on the ground or took to the sky. While Fieran had been there, he had shared the duty as he had never shared it before.

But now the familiar weight of standing alone settled on him.

If this gamble could convince Mongavaria that two warriors of the magic of the ancient kings remained at Fort Defense, then the burden might be lessened, not increased.

“I am volunteering to do this.” Farrendel refused to back down. He had made his choice already.

“Very well.” Julien scrawled a few things on the piece of paper. “I’ll begin the official paperwork, but I’ll call Colonel Dentley to get things moving before the paperwork becomes official.”

Julien called in an adjutant and handed off the piece of paper. “Take this to King Weylind.”

The adjutant hurried off down the hall, headed farther into the building toward the elven section of the building.

Within moments, Weylind appeared in the doorway, brandished the piece of paper, and eyed first Julien, then Farrendel. “Explain.”

Farrendel—significantly aided by Julien—explained his reasoning for the request.

Weylind sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I am sticking you with the paperwork for this. Just to remind you that the more reckless you are, the more paperwork you need to fill out.”

“I suppose that is an acceptable consequence.” Even that much extra paperwork would not be too arduous. Paperwork was at least an excuse to hide in his room and enjoy a little peace and quiet.

What would it be like to fly? He had a good head for heights—all elves did, after all. But to actually have his feet leave the solidness of the earth and trees? That seemed like something else entirely.

Yet he would do it. Not just to protect Fieran's squadron—who seemed important to him—but also so that Farrendel could understand why Fieran loved flying so much.

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Farrendel strode into the large aeroplane hangar beside Colonel Dentley, Fieran's commanding officer. The human colonel stood several inches shorter than him, but he walked at such a brisk pace that Farrendel did not have to shorten his stride.

Iyrinder strolled at Farrendel's back. Once he had heard the plan, he had volunteered to ride with a pilot as well. Not that he would be able to do much to protect Farrendel, if they should get caught in a battle in the air. But perhaps he felt the same need to connect with his son in this way that Farrendel did.

"Since you are an elven general, sir, I asked Flight B of the squadron for volunteers." Colonel Dentley gestured ahead of them at the array of aeroplanes waiting inside the cavernous space.

Two rows of elven pilots also awaited them, all of them coming to attention as Colonel Dentley, Iyrinder, and Farrendel approached. Farrendel gave them leave to stand at ease, though none of them truly relaxed in his presence.

An elf with lieutenant insignia stepped forward and gave a small bow. "It would be my honor to be your pilot, Amir."

"This is Lt. Rothilion. He is the commander of Flight B, and one of the very best pilots in the squadron." Colonel Dentley waved to the elf who had stepped forward. "You will be in good hands. And this is Lt. Daemaer. She has volunteered to pilot Col. Loiatir. She is also one of our best pilots."

A female elf stepped forward, a hint of a smile twitching on her face as if she was fighting to keep it from breaking through the blank, military expression.

Since something seemed to be expected from him, Farrendel nodded to the two pilots.

For a long moment, everyone stood in an awkward silence. Was Farrendel supposed to take charge now? He was the general in the room, after all.

He swallowed and forced a stilted wave of his hand. "Let us proceed."

Col. Dentley clicked his heels, seeming to take that as a dismissal. "I will leave you in the capable hands of Lt. Rothilion and Lt. Daemaer."

As the colonel strode away, Farrendel released a long breath. That was one fewer person to have to deal with, at least.

Lt. Daemaer strolled forward, grinning as she approached Iyrinder. "Col. Loiatir, sir, we have a spare set of flight gear for you. I will introduce you to the aeroplane."

The two of them strode away. The other elves began to drift away as well, leaving Farrendel more or less alone with Lt. Rothilion.

"Rothilion." Farrendel tried to place why that name was familiar. When he placed it, he tried not to grimace. "Any relation to Velethuil Rothilion?"

"He is my damasha." Lt. Rothilion spoke stiffly, his gaze focused above Farrendel's head.

Interesting that the lieutenant would use the more formal word for father. Yet it did not necessarily mean that the lieutenant was at odds with his father. It could be an indication that he did not trust Farrendel enough to use the more familiar word in this discussion.

"I...see." Farrendel studied Lt. Rothilion. Did he dare trust the lieutenant? Rothilion's father and uncle were among the cadre of noble elves who most harassed Farrendel at social

functions. While many of the noble elves scorned Farrendel for his illegitimate birth, most tolerated him and had come to terms with his role as a prince and protector of Tarenhiel.

But the Rothilion family was one of the few who hated Farrendel to the point that they would likely be glad to see him dead. Did Farrendel dare trust Lt. Rothilion with his life by riding in an aeroplane with him? It would, admittedly, be hard to hurt Farrendel without hurting himself, but it was still a consideration.

Lt. Rothilion's shoulders fell as he exhaled, his gaze dropping to the floor. "I understand you may not trust me due to my family. But due to serving with Capt. Laesornysh, I have come to question my family's stance regarding you and your family. You might not trust me, but I trust my captain and thus I will trust you."

Right. Lt. Rothilion was putting his life in Farrendel's hands as much as Farrendel was putting his life in the lieutenant's hands.

But it was as Lt. Rothilion said. Farrendel trusted Fieran. He would trust this member of Fieran's squadron.

"Very well." Farrendel nodded.

Lt. Rothilion led the way to a two-seater aeroplane and handed Farrendel a stack of flight gear before grabbing his own. He explained the various pieces and demonstrated how he and the other elf pilots usually tied back their hair, then tucked it under their flight coats to protect the long strands.

Following the instructions, Farrendel had to remove his boots to pull on the flight boots, and he had to unbuckle his swords and their harness to put on the flight coat, tucking his hair underneath as instructed. After settling the flight cap on his head, he picked up his swords, a pang going through them. Would he have to leave them behind?

Something in his chest squeezed at that thought. Yes, the swords would do him little good up in the sky. But he just...could not leave them behind. If he was going to fly, he wanted the security of his swords.

Lt. Rothilion glanced at him, then tipped his head toward the aeroplane. "There is a rack along the side of your seat. It was for a rifle, but you can secure your swords there if you wish."

Some of the tightness in Farrendel's chest eased. Good. He could breathe somewhat easier if he could have his swords with him.

Around them, various other aeroplanes were wheeled out of the hangar, and the sound of the engines purring to life, propellers whirring, filled the air. Within a few more minutes, the ground crew arrived and pushed the two-seater out of the hangar and toward the airfield.

This was it. In a few minutes, Farrendel would fly.

His stomach churned, and he tried to focus on keeping his breathing even. Just because this was new did not mean it would be bad.

Outside, Lt. Rothilion indicated that Farrendel should climb in first. He placed his foot into the step and swung his other leg over into the cockpit. He settled into the seat, strapped his swords into place, and buckled himself into the seat.

Lt. Rothilion climbed into the other seat and started the engine. A vibration traveled through the aeroplane, a steady thrumming similar to that of an engine through a motor car.

Perhaps this would not be so bad. Farrendel liked driving motor cars.

Craning his neck, Farrendel could just make out Iyrinder sitting in the second seat of the aeroplane lining up behind his and Lt. Rothilion's.

Farrendel faced forward and tugged his goggles over his eyes. Lt. Rothilion motioned and demonstrated where to plug in the wire trailing from the flight cap.

As soon as Farrendel did so, the crackle of many voices on the radio assaulted his ears. At least the volume was manageable, with a layer of moss padding covering the speakers inside the cap to prevent the noise from becoming too overwhelming for sensitive elven hearing.

Then the ground crew removed the wheel chocks, and their aeroplane was motioned forward.

“Here we go, sir.” Lt. Rothilion spoke as the aeroplane jolted forward.

Farrendel cast about, looking for something to hold onto. He was jammed so tightly into the tiny space that he did not need to grip anything for safety. But he felt adrift with his hands uselessly in his lap as the aeroplane pointed its nose down the long, broad field of shorn grass.

In the end, he settled for gripping his leg with one hand and clinging to his swords with the other.

The aeroplane barreled down the field at a frantic pace, the breeze whipping into Farrendel’s face and tugging at his hair despite how securely he had tucked it within his coat. His heart climbed into his throat, and a part of him wanted to beg Lt. Rothilion to halt this contraption before his teeth were rattled out of his head.

Then the whole aeroplane grew light with that same near weightlessness that he experienced during a flip in the air. That breathless moment when the world faded away, his cares dropped away, and he could just lose himself to the thrill of the moment.

A heartbeat later, he was pressed down into his seat as the aeroplane left the ground and roared into the sky. The jolting disappeared as soon as the wheels left the ground, turning the ungainly machine into a graceful warbird.

This...this was wondrous. Freeing. He peered over the side, a thrill going through him as the ground fell away farther below.

He had to resist the urge to whoop like a young elfling at the sensation. Now he understood why Fieran had taken to flight so fully. Soaring into the sky like this held the same heady rush as performing flips on the thinnest branch possible high above the ground. Perhaps even more so with the power of the engine thrumming into his bones.

As he glanced around, he had the urge to unbuckle his lap belt and climb out onto the wing, as he had seen barnstormers do during their performances. That would be a real rush, with the wind in his face and nothing holding him in place.

Nope. He could not let himself think such reckless thoughts. He had two young children at home. And three older children for whom he needed to be a model of taking only sensible risks rather than reckless ones.

Through the heart bond, now that he let himself feel it, he could sense Essie's sigh, the roll of her eyes. She knew just how much of their children's reckless streaks came from him, despite most people assuming that trait came from their human side.

Lt. Rothilion's voice crackled over the radio once again. "There are wires around this aeroplane and the others in the squadron. They have magic infused into them that helps direct the magic of the ancient kings to provide a shield around the aeroplanes. If we wish to fool the Mongavarians into believing Fieran is here, we will wish to recreate the shield as much as possible."

"Yes." Farrendel had seen the shielding network from the ground during the battles. Surely he could recreate it now that he was in the air.

He placed a hand on the side of the aeroplane, reached into his chest, and unleashed his magic. Bolts of magic twined around his hand and over the skin of the aeroplane, and he had to concentrate to prevent his magic from incinerating that rather flammable lacquer on the canvas.

His magic reached the wiring and eagerly jumped along it, following the thread of iron magic coating the metal.

This was a magic he recognized from the times his magic had interacting briefly with hers during battles. Pippak Detmuk-Inawenys. The shy girl who had come to visit Fieran and elicited the confession of love.

She, indeed, had great skill with an interesting magic. No wonder Lance had been so eager to have her transferred to the AMPC. Even without her connection to Fieran, she could have a job at the AMPC whenever she wanted.

Once Farrendel had the shield steady around this two-seater, his magic under tight control, he shoved it outward. His magic touched other wires similarly infused with Pippak's magic and flared into more shields around those aeroplanes.

"Well done, sir. If anything will fool the Mongavarians, this well." Lt. Rothilion turned the aeroplane so that they were paralleling the border.

This high up, the still smoking destruction of the Mongavarians camp spread out on the left. The Mongavarians who had survived the battle were dug in on the higher ground to the east of the marshy flood plain. From there, they would just be able to see the flashy display Farrendel was creating, but they would not be close enough to get a good look at the two-seaters.

This might not be much but a good show, but it was something he could do to aid the war effort and protect the squadron for whom Fieran cared so much.