

## Reunion

Farrendel halted in the doorway to the tiny bedroom in his quarters at Fort Defense.

The room remained exactly as he had left it weeks ago when the army had moved headquarters closer to the front. Tryndar's pictures remained tacked to the wall above the bed where he could lie there and look at them when he could not sleep. Essie's letters, which he had not dared take with him into Mongavaria, were likely still in the drawer of the table beside the bed, along with an elven light so that he could read them late into the night.

Yet he remained rooted to the floor at the incongruous sight of Essie slowly meandering around that room, taking in everything from Tryndar's pictures to the otherwise stark interior. He could not reconcile her in this place of war and pain.

The weight of all the death and pain of the past months settled even more heavily on his shoulders. That morning, he had run into her arms, holding her close, too overjoyed to feel anything else.

But now he could not bring himself to step closer. How could he reach for her with hands so stained with blood yet again?

Essie turned to him, her smile wide and sparkling in her green eyes. Yet as her gaze rested on him, the smile died. "Farrendel?"

"I have blood on my hands. Again." He held out his palms between them, as if he could show her the stains.

Last time, he had been a boy killing out of desperation to preserve his kingdom. This time, he had gone to war as a man, knowing what he was about to do. He had taken lives with the full knowledge of the horror of unleashing death. And he had done all of it anyway.

“I know.” Essie took a step forward, approaching him with a wariness he had not seen in her for decades.

“I killed as I had never killed before.” He could still taste the gunpowder on his tongue, the warm blood spattering his face as he carved into the Mongavarian Army.

“To save our son.” Essie eased another step closer, her eyes focused on his face.

“I burned him with my magic.” Bile rose in his throat as he heard Fieran’s scream echoing in his ears.

“To close his wound in desperate circumstances.” Another step brought her nearly within arms length, but she did not reach for him any more than he reached for her.

“I taught our children to kill, and they are very good at it.” He had shaped Fieran and Adry into warriors like himself. The burdens of war they now carried were his legacy. What kind of father did that to his children?

“They survived.” Essie rested her hands lightly on his face, tilting his head so that he was forced to look at her. Her green eyes searched his. “For seventy years, I feared the day this war would come, and what it would do to our family. In my darkest moments, I believed it would inevitably snatch one of you from me. Either you or one of our children. And yet all of you returned to me.”

Had he returned? Despite the fact that she stood before him, her hands cradling his face, he still felt so very far away, a gulf of blood and death between them. He could not easily step across that divide to return to the husband and father he had been before the war had driven him to become once again the hardened warrior, one more ruthless and merciless than ever before.

Essie stepped closer still, one of her hands brushing his cheek before her fingers threaded into the shortened strands of his hair. Her mouth was close enough to his that her breath brushed his lips as she whispered, “Come back to me.”

He dared to rest his hands on her waist as he leaned his forehead against hers. “I do not know if I can.”

“Then just let me love you.” Essie tugged him closer. “If you need to break, then break. Just let me hold you while you do. I will be here when you pick up the pieces, as I always have been before. I know the warrior I married, and I will never turn away from you. I love you and always will.”

He could feel the truth of those words deep in his chest where their elishina remained as strong as ever.

He tightened his arms around her, pressing his face against her hair as he drew in the comfort of her presence, of her warmth in the elishina, of her strength to hold him together when he was falling apart.

The words were drawn from him on a shudder, a groan. “I love you.”

Then he kissed her. And this time, he did not have to let her go. This time, he did not have to walk into the night, headed for war. He could remain here, in this moment, with her as he remembered the man he was in her arms.