

Weylind, king of the elves, was freezing.

He huddled in his blankets as a blizzard howled around the shelter he had grown to keep him and the three royal brothers of Escarland warm through the night. His teeth were chattering so loudly he could barely hear the whispers of those same three brothers where they were piled together to keep warm across the shelter from Weylind.

“He sounds cold.” One of the brothers whispered.

“He didn’t want to huddle with us. Nothing much we can do.” That was King Averett’s voice.

“Unless we dog pile him.” Prince Edmund’s voice.

Weylind let out a huff under his breath. Farrendel’s one letter from his time in Escarland indicated that he seemed to actually like these annoying new brothers of his. Inconcievable, really.

“You could start an international incident.” King Averett hissed. He was probably trying to stay quiet, but Weylind could clearly hear him.

The two princes snorted. Blankets rustled as Prince Julien spoke, “Not likely. He needs us too much.”

“Besides, it would cause more of an incident if he freezes to death during the night.” Edmund this time.

“Fine. Let’s do it. Farrendel would never forgive us if we let him freeze.”

More blankets rustled, then boots scuffed on the wooden branch floor, soft and slow as if trying to be stealthy.

When they were nearly upon him, Weylind rolled to his knees and pressed a hand to a floor. Branches whipped out from the floor and the walls, wrapping around wrists, ankles,

waists, accompanied by grunts and exclamations of surprise, until King Averett, Prince Julien, and Prince Edmund were wrapped around their waists, arms pinned to their sides, and lifted from the floor.

Prince Edmund rolled his eyes. “Touchy elf.”

“We should have known better. He is Farrendel’s brother.” Prince Julien wiggled against the slim branches restraining him.

King Averett shook his head. “You’ve made your point, King Weylind. Perhaps trying to sneak up on you while you slept was not a wise move. But you’re freezing. You won’t last the night like this.”

Weylind gritted his teeth and tried to stop their chattering. He curled and uncurled his fingers, trying to work feeling back into them. Wiggling his toes did not relieve their numbness. Truthfully, he was on the verge of frostbite.

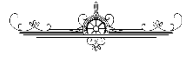
But to accept what these brothers were offering? To have to huddle with them for warmth? Weylind could barely keep his mouth from curling. It was...undignified.

Did he have a choice? He would be in no shape to rescue Farrendel if he lost fingers or toes to frostbite.

“Fine.” Weylind brushed his hand against the floor again. The branches snaked back into the wall, releasing the Escarlish brothers. Annoyingly, they all managed to land on their feet.

Weylind settled into his bedroll again, holding his breath as King Averett plopped onto the floor on one side of him, Prince Julien on the other. Prince Edmund flopped onto his bedroll on the other side of King Averett.

It was warmer, but Weylind's back crawled having these humans crowded around him. The things he had to put up with in order to rescue Farrendel. Hopefully the help of these humans would be worth it.



Weylind woke to Prince Julien snoring directly into his ear. An arm that wasn't his draped over his chest while someone's foot was resting on his shin.

Lip curling, Weylind pinched King Averett's sleeve between two fingers, lifted the human king's arm, and tossed it away from him. King Averett's hand smacked into Prince Edmund's face.

With a snort and a groan, both Prince Edmund and King Averett startled awake in a surge of flailing limbs. Weylind had to lunge out of the way to avoid an elbow to the nose and accidentally knocked into Prince Julien, setting off another round of rolling and thrashing.

Weylind extricated himself from the mayhem as the three human brothers scrambled to disentangle themselves from their blankets and each other, straightening their clothes with little coughs as if trying to regain their dignity.

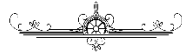
It did not help. There was little dignity to be regained after they had sprawled across each other during the night.

Still, Weylind had all his fingers and toes. He supposed that was worth putting up with their close proximity.

Besides, he would not complain. Farrendel would be faring much worse as a prisoner of the trolls. No indignity or sacrifice on Weylind's part would compare to what Farrendel was suffering.

Even if...Weylind sniffed at his shirt and allowed himself to grimace. He reeked of the humans. A mix of body odor and gunpowder. A stench that would only get worse as this war progressed without a chance for bathing.

This war had better be short.



Two nights later, after the trolls ambushed the rear lines near the hospital tents and where Jalissa and Elspetha had been sharing a shelter, Weylind assisted King Averett in hanging tent canvas across the tent since it had been decided Jalissa and Elspetha might as well share this shelter as the rear lines were no safer.

Prince Julien stomped his feet, then stepped inside the shelter, followed by Elspetha. Elspetha's gaze swept over the shelter before latching on the four bedrolls laid out side by side. When she glanced at Weylind, her eyes twinkled, and she smirked.

Weylind glared back. *Do not say anything.*

Jalissa stepped inside next. After her gaze landed on the bedrolls, she turned to Weylind with a raised eyebrow, her own smirk playing at the corners of her mouth.

Weylind raised his eyebrows back. She could not judge. He assumed she had been huddling with Elspetha just as much as he had with Elspetha's brothers.

Elspetha elbowed Jalissa as she pushed aside the canvas to enter the far side of the shelter. "Told you."

Jalissa's smirk widened, and she shot one last glance in Weylind's direction before the canvas fell back into place behind her.

Weylind would never live this down.



Weylind rested his hands on his knees as Farrendel drifted back to sleep. At least Farrendel had awakened and had been alert and aware of his surroundings. That boded well for his recovery.

Especially after they had come so close to losing him that day. If not for Elspetha's determination even when everyone else, including Weylind, had given up hope, Farrendel would have died.

He still looked mostly dead with his face taut with pain even in sleep. The hacked ends of his hair stuck to his forehead.

It was not just Elspetha Weylind had to thank for Farrendel's survival. If not for Escarland's army and weapons, Weylind's army alone never could have forged across Kostaria, and certainly not this rapidly. Without Escarlish gunpowder and ingenuity in storing some of Farrendel's magic, it would have been nearly impossible to breach Gror Grar. The small team never could have gotten past the blocked, rear entrance into Gror Grar in time to save Farrendel without the humans.

In all his years scorning humans for their lack of magic beyond a few magicians, short lifespans, quarrelsome nature, and undignified ways, he had somehow missed the fact that they had a sheer stubbornness that was almost a magic unto itself.

The tent flap behind him whooshed open with a blast of cold breeze against Weylind's back. "How is he?" King Averett asked as he approached, his footsteps only somewhat muffled by the rug spread over the ground.

"He was awake a few minutes ago." Weylind studied Farrendel's drawn, haggard face.

“That’s good.” Averett halted next to Weylind. “Go get some sleep yourself. I have the next watch.”

Weylind rested a hand on Farrendel’s shoulder. He was loath to leave, but he had agreed when Averett had proposed watching Farrendel in shifts through the night. Weylind would need to be alert to deal with the complications that would arise on the morrow. They had to figure out how to hand the conquered Kostaria back to the trolls and work with the soon-to-be crowned troll king on a plan to allow the Escarlish-Tarenhieli army to peacefully withdraw.

After squeezing Farrendel’s shoulder, although his brother was most likely too deeply asleep to feel the gesture, Weylind forced himself to stand. He could trust King Averett, Prince Julien, and Prince Edmund to guard Farrendel the rest of the night.

With one last glance over his shoulder, Weylind strode from the tent, nodding to the guards outside the tent, two humans and two elves, as he passed. As he trudged across the camp, a few of the bustling humans and elves greeted him, though none lingered. Even through the night, duties kept many busy.

Finally, Weylind reached the shelter he had grown earlier that day and crawled inside. In the darkness, he found his bedroll and wormed his way between the sleeping Prince Julien and Prince Edmund. He had to elbow Prince Julien to give him enough room and lift one of Prince Edmund’s arms out of the way. The arm ended up flopping right back onto Weylind’s shoulder, but Weylind left it. There was no point in resisting it.

Besides, these humans were not all bad. Weylind might even come to like them. Eventually.