

Forever More

CHAPTER ONE

HE DIDN'T TURN his head, remained facing forward despite the crowds lining the causeway, cheering and calling out his name.

Women broke ranks along the roadside, running to husbands and brothers and fathers trudging along the road at his back.

He allowed it.

How could he not?

Three years he and this contingent of soldiers had been on the front lines, relieved only in the past month, and only for a small period of rest. In far too short a time, he would call his banners and these men he brought home with him would gather up their arms and return to the battlefield and Stones Below knew how many would return when next they were given leave.

Even a prince was not immune to the worry of death.

His hands clenched around the reins and his horse sidestepped at his agitation. Taly pat the great neck of the beast, and Toranto calmed to his touch, the road weary gait offering a prance or two in support before calming back to a steady walk.

This outermost part of Goulad'n held the farmers and the grounds keepers.

The mundanes, though the word was an insult to they who broke their backs to feed and care for the dwarfen country.

If he didn't know many of their kind, hadn't fought beside countless untold numbers of the so-called mundanes in battle, would he feel differently than the nobility he was prince of?

His eyes caught the swaying of corn stalks in the fields to his right.

There was no wind to cause the movement, only the heft and swing of a scythe singing through the air.

The one person he would have looked for in the crowd...

The one he knew would never come.

He turned his head forward, forced a smile to his lips, nodded to those who cheered his name, and headed for the stone walls looming ahead.



HE SIGHED, FINALLY able to let his shoulders sag after the endless march home, the hours in the great hall delivering his reports, receiving the nobles come to wish him a welcome return.

His mother had nodded to him in passing, silent, as she always was, before the court.

Never let them see your emotions. Be calm. Be collected. You are prince here, Talyessin. You will be king. You are above the common thoughts of your people. You do not live for yourself but for them.

A hard lesson, to grow in the shadow of, years upon years of forcing away all that made him himself in favor of doing his duty for his country.

He pulled the gloves from his hands, white gloves, to hide the scars and calluses decorating his palms and fingers.

No mortal man, yet his flesh was mortal enough on the field.

A soft touch brushed his nape, moved to the ties of his cuirass, began the laborious process of helping him to remove his armor. At least it had been cleaned before they reached the city.

She would not have approved her son returning home covered in the blood of their enemies.

He hadn't wanted to tell her most of the red coating him was that of his own kind, comforted in his arms as they laid dying for a cause he didn't understand yet stood to fight all the same.

"How is your father faring?"

"Well. He and Grandfather alternate turns on the front."

"Cruim should not be fighting at all, Taly. He is far too old to be in battle."

"Mother," he shook his head, "you and I both know that Grandfather will be on the field till he is struck from it or the humans bow to us in defeat."

She spat on the floor at his side and he flinched at the inelegant gesture from the queen of his people.

For all his mother might adhere to courtly principals in public, she was as crude as the rest of their kind behind closed doors. They had had fun together, when he was a child and she held the prospect of further children close to her heart.

He didn't remember the day it changed, when she grew cold and distant and began treating him as heir rather than son.

He missed the woman she had been, but understood.

She did not ask why he and not her father had returned home for a rest.

He was grateful for that small mercy.

"And your father? Surely, he does better than a simple 'well,' might imply?"

"He fights, as do we all."

She took little care in letting his hard leather armor drop to the floor, her gaze dropping to the red line crossing the blue of his tunic from beneath his right arm to hipbone.

"The surgeon said the ride wouldn't help it heal, but it would heal. I'm in no danger from it, Mother."

Hillevi tsked at him, pulling at his tunic until he helped her raise it over his head, reveal the long length of linen wrapped around his torso.

"The court healer is supposed to come see me when he's free."

"You are the prince. He should see you first."

He took her hands in his, forcing her to let his bloodied shirt drop to the floor where she couldn't ring it between her fingers. "I am all right. There are those far worse off than myself that need Nigelis' aid more. A prince does his duty to his people."

"Don't quote me to suit your needs, Talyessin." Her tone was harsh, but her lips quirked with the hint of a smile.

He bent the few inches between their heights and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Go on. Nigelis saw me in the stables when we first arrived. He wouldn't have let me sit in court all afternoon if he thought the wound serious."

"Wounds are always serious, Taly."

He knew that truth well.

But this was war, and wounds were unavoidable, even for the best of warriors.

He nodded.

She stepped away from him, bent to retrieve his discarded garments from the floor.

If his side hadn't been paining him, and if he hadn't just returned from a battlefield where the clothes retrieved were usually far more soiled than his had been, he would have blushed and stopped her, mother or no. As it was, he stepped back and was grateful for her assistance, even more so when he sank in the chair at his desk and she squeezed his shoulder in passing towards the door, allowing him the sanctuary of his own rooms.

He leaned his head back against the hard stone chair and closed his eyes.

Walls kept out the cries of dying horses and screams of injured men far better than the leather of a war tent ever could, but the memories weren't silent, and his closed eyes couldn't protect him from the visions of what he'd seen, what he'd done.

The footsteps crossing the carpeted floor towards him would have been silent if he had not spent the past three years listening for the slightest shift in sound.

These were not footsteps to fear though, and he opened his arms when she stepped close enough to receive him.

"Let me tend you first."

"Nigelis truly is coming at some point."

"Nigelis is more butcher than surgeon and you know it."

He frowned, opened his eyes to the red-headed witch kneeling at the side of his chair.

It was far too close to the position of a supplicant before the crown.

"That's unfair, Valislava. He's a good man and a good healer."

Nigelis was – he was the best all of Gouldaria had to offer as far as healers went.

But he was no elf who could use magic to tend wounds.

Nor even a human sorcerer whose spells sped a return to health.

The tips of her fingers grazed over the line of skin above his bandages, cold to the touch, as they always were.

It had been a long time since he'd felt her caress.

Warmed her with his touch.

The ring on his hand pulsed and he sank deeper into the chair, slouching back as she stroked him.

"It is not bad, but Flouse is right. You should have had more care in your travels to return home. A slower march would not have hurt you or the men too greatly."

"We wanted to be home." He met her gaze when she turned her amethyst eyes up to his. "I needed my home."

They both knew he wasn't referring to the castle walls surrounding them.

“I am always here.”

“I—”

He flinched at the hard pounding on the door, the scratch of her nails against his skin as she rose to flee his room before she was caught, and he in the moment with her.

“My lord, the healer would see you now.”

The scrape of stone over stone was loud in the near silence of his room.

He rose when the last echoes of grating rock had faded and walked evenly to his door to admit the surgeon to his chambers.

His guard frowned, but did not follow the older man into the room.

Taly nodded and closed the door, awaiting the healer’s commands.