

Misrule in Mirkwood



Author: Ningloreth

Title: **Misrule in Mirkwood**

Story Number: 5

Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: Legolas and Eowyn travel to Eryn Lasgalen hoping to persuade King Thranduil to give them his permission to marry-will Eowyn complete the tasks the Elvenking sets her? Who is terrorising Legolas' former lovers? And who is sleeping with Eomer?

Author's Note: Special edition with eight new scenes.

Disclaimers: **This story is rated NC-17 for violence and sexual scenes. Please do not read any further if you are not of legal age.**

The main characters in this story were created by JRR Tolkien and brought to the screen by Peter Jackson. No offence is intended and no profit is being made by borrowing them for use in this story, which is intended as a transformative commentary on the original.

Elvish

Tithen Lassui ... 'Little Leafy'

Gwilwileth ... 'butterfly'

Daer ... 'great, big'

Tolo Brightstar ... 'Come Brightstar'

bedithon minui, aphado nin ... 'I will go first, follow me'

Brôg ... 'bear'.

Gil sila erin lû e-govaded vîn ... 'a star shines upon the hour of our meeting'.

Baren bar lin ... 'my home is your home'

Adaneth ... 'mortal woman'

Adar ... 'father'; *Ada* ... 'dad' or 'daddy'

Firith ... (the name of the woodland sprite) the elves' fourth season, late autumn or 'waning'.

Ion nîn ... 'my son';

Bereh nîn ... 'my wife' and also 'my queen';

Hîril nîn ... 'my lady';

Melethril nîn ... 'my (female) lover';

Melethron ... '(male) lover';

Lasdithen ... 'Little Leaf'.

Eowyn vell nîn ... 'my dear Eowyn'

Cordof ... 'pippin'. Not the hobbit variety but a 'superior eating apple with yellow skin flushed with red; a person or thing that is admired'. ("She's a peach!")

Gerich faer vara! ... 'You have a fiery spirit!'

Gweneth ... 'virginity'.

Edair ... 'Fathers'

Sad Glawar ... 'Place of Sunshine'

No i Melain na le ... 'May the Valar be with you'

Sîlo Anor bo men lîn ... 'May the sun shine on your road'.

Adaneth dithen ... 'little woman'.

Avo dhago den! ... 'Don't kill it!'

Hervess orchal ... 'superior wife'

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Lasfain ... 'Fairleaf'.

Cuio mae, little adaneth brave. I wish you cuil 'lassui with Prince Legolas ... 'Live well brave little woman, I wish you a joyful life with Prince Legolas'.

The Sindarin word for 'joy' is *glass*. Adjectives can be formed by adding 'ui'. And when an adjective follows a noun, the sound of its first letter is modified ('lenited') so that *glassui*, 'joyful' becomes '*lassui*, Legolas... I think!

Naughty Elvish

Ceber ... 'erection' (literally, 'wooden stake')

Ceber daur chîn ... 'your huge erection'

Tynd ... 'breasts' (literally, 'mounds, hills'); *tynd voe*, soft mounds.

Thâr ... 'pubic hair' (literally 'grass').

Criss ... 'vulva' (literally, 'cleft, cut').

Tuiw, meril, mîr ... 'clitoris' (literally, 'bud', 'rose' and 'treasure'—thanks to Gimli for providing the last.

Rond ... 'vagina' (literally 'cave'); *agor*, 'tight (narrow)'; *laug*, 'warm'; *loen*, 'dripping wet'.

Ceber ... 'erection' (literally, 'wooden stake'); *Gerich veleth nîn*, 'I love you' (literally, 'you have my love'); *ceber vain*, 'beautiful stake'.

Ceryn ... 'balls'

Cuildithen ... 'orgasm' (literally, 'little life')

Carel ellith ... 'doing ellith'.

Cuion! ... 'I come!' (literally, 'I live!').

Cuinam ... 'We come'.

Nandorin (Green elvish)

caras ... 'moated fortress'

cogn ... 'bow'

cwenda ... 'Elf'

edel ... 'Elda, High-elf'

Garma ... 'wolf' though struck out by Tolkien, apparently

Lindi ... what the Nandor called themselves

swarn ... 'perverse, obstructive, hard to deal with'.

urc ... 'orc' (pl. yrc)

The Beornings

The Beornings have real Viking names and all the men have real 'by-names', or nicknames. These could sometimes be very insulting ('harm fart'). The chieftain's by-name, which makes both Eomer and Thranduil smile, appears to be quite flattering, however!

Bergthórr beytill - Bergthórr horse-penis

Óttarr in spaka - Óttarr the wise

Heðinn austmannaskelfir - Heðinn, terror of the east-men

Bjarni bjarki - Bjarni bear-cub

Snorri blátönn - Snorri black-tooth

Thorkell bogsveigir - Thorkell bow-swayer

Chief Bergthórr's children, Bjarni and Gunnhildr, have the 'surnames' Bergthórsson and Bergthórsdottir, 'son of Bergthórr' and 'daughter of Bergthórr'.

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PREVIOUSLY

"How many lovers did you have before me?"

"Twelve," Legolas admitted.

"Who were they?"

"I cannot tell you that—"

"Why not?" she interrupted. "I told you about mine—and, besides, I need to know."

Legolas sighed—she was right. "There was **an elleth** my tutor hired," he said, "after my coming of age ceremony—she was the first. There was **the daughter of my father's Chief Counsellor. Four ladies at court. An elleth I—er—knew in one of the settlements** to the north of Mirkwood. And **a serving elleth—**"

...

'My son,' wrote Thranduil.

'My messenger has returned from Eryn Carantaur and told me how things are with you. And I must say that I am disappointed by your behaviour. You admitted to me that you had performed a travesty of the harvest rite with this mortal, but Aerandir tells me that you are now calling her your wife. Do not be a fool, Lassui! Both Lord Galdor and Lord Nevlondeion have, quite separately, assured me that this cannot be the case.

'Whatever words you may have exchanged with her are not sufficient to bind an elf to a mortal. There is therefore nothing to stop you leaving her if you have since come to your senses. Oh Lassui, if you could not keep your leggings laced, why did it have to be a mortal? Could you not at least have chosen one of your own kind?

'Aerandir, of course, extols her charms and says that all of your Counsellors adore her. I have heard about human women and their unique ability to pleasure an elf. Are you absolutely sure that she is not demonstrating her talents to them? Your choice of lovers has never been fortunate, Lassui.'

"He tried to seduce them?" whispered Eowyn.

"To prove to me that they did not love me," said Legolas, hugging her fiercely.

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Chapter 1: Gwilwileth

"Come in!" called Eowyn.

The door opened. "Lady Eowyn? Is something wrong? Lord Legolas..."

"Legolas is on the archery field, practising with the March Warden and his brothers, Lord Fingolfin," said Eowyn, "which is why I sent for you—I want to talk with you in private. Please come in and sit down." She gestured towards the chairs by the fire.

Fingolfin, the oldest and most trusted of Legolas' Council of Advisors, looked uncomfortable, but did as she asked.

"Can I offer you a drink, my lord?"

"No, thank you."

Eowyn nodded. "I have asked you here because I want," she said, "to make *absolutely* sure that we give the right impression, and I really do not know how to go about it..."

"My lady?"

"If this were a human realm—say, *Rohan*," said Eowyn, "and we were making a state visit to another human realm—say, *Gondor*—I would know exactly how to arrange it," she said. "I would know exactly how many counsellors, how many servants, how many guards to include in the king's retinue to convey dignity without ostentation. I would know exactly what gifts to take. I would know how to manage business once we were there. But these are not human realms—and so I do not know."

"I see, my lady," said Fingolfin, though that was only partially true. "But surely, Lord Legolas —"

"Needs help on this occasion," said Eowyn, "for *he* would prefer to go alone, on horseback." She sat down in the chair opposite the elf. "Can I be frank with you, my lord?"

"Are you going to ask me to keep a confidence, my lady?"

Eowyn thought for a moment. "Not from Legolas," she said, "for I will tell him what we have discussed. But from others—yes."

Fingolfin considered her words. "From Lord Caranthir?"

"No. I have no objections to Lord Caranthir's knowing, but..." She rose again, and walked towards one of the elegant stained glass windows. "I would be grateful if this did not become common knowledge, my lord." She placed her hand on the carved wooden frame, slowly tracing its subtle curves. "Whilst Legolas and I were in Minas Tirith, we received a letter from King Thranduil. I will not go into details—suffice to say that the King does not approve of his son's choice of wife and he claims that two experts in elven law have confirmed to him that Legolas and I are not legally married."

"I see," said Fingolfin.

"You do not sound surprised, my lord," said Eowyn, turning towards him.

"In truth, my lady, I am not. King Thranduil is—shall we say—*conservative* where the law is concerned, and *protective* where his son is concerned."

"He treats Legolas like a child," said Eowyn.

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Fingolfin said nothing.

"King Thranduil insists that, as Crown Prince of Eryn Lasgalen, Legolas cannot marry without his consent."

"Is it necessary to pay any attention to the King's opinion, my lady? There is no one here who would challenge the legitimacy of your marriage. And, in time..."

"We plan to have a child, my lord. And *I* do not have much time."

"No. Of course, my lady."

"We could not bear for the child's grandfather to treat him—or her—as illegitimate."

"I understand, my lady."

"So we hope to persuade King Thranduil to give us his consent. Then we will remarry, here in Eryn Carantaur, according to elven custom."

The Counsellor nodded.

"I want to do two things on this visit, my lord," said Eowyn. She sat down again, and leaned towards him. "I want to show King Thranduil just how much the son he still calls 'Tithen Lassui' is loved and respected by his own people."

"Yes, my lady," said Fingolfin; now she had an ally.

"Secondly," she said, "I want to make sure that we are fully prepared—that we can support our emotional appeal with a strong *legal* case. Will you help me?"

Fingolfin smiled. "Of course, my lady. Tell Lord Legolas that he can leave the arrangements for the state visit entirely in my hands."

...

Three weeks later

"Ah, there you are, Fingolfin," said Maglor, the librarian, holding up a small book. "I do believe that I have found something useful, at last."

Fingolfin hurried over to his colleague. "Well done, mellon nín—but, please," he glanced around the library, quickly checking that the scholars scattered about the hall had heard nothing, "keep your voice down. Is there somewhere we can speak more privately?"

Maglor shook his head. "I have never had any need of privacy," he said.

"Then just show me the passage."

Maglor handed him the volume. At some time in the past it had been well used, and its deep pink binding, held closed with ribbon ties, was badly scuffed and faded. "*Ancient Laws of the Silvan Elves*," read Fingolfin, quietly. He opened the book. "Where do I look?"

"Page forty-two," said Maglor.

Fingolfin carefully turned the thick vellum pages and stopped at a delicately-tinted illustration showing a young elf weeping over the body of a dead woman.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

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"Read it," said Maglor.

Fingolfin studied the ornate chapter heading, *Decree 12: The case of Melethron and Gwilwileth*, then scanned the following pages quickly. "May I borrow this?" he asked.

"Of course," said Maglor. "Do you think it will help them?"

Fingolfin sighed. "The precedent it sets is unambiguous—you have done well, *mellon nín*. But the course of action it suggests is a dangerous one. I think we will keep this as a last resort."

...

A month later

For almost four weeks the elves had been following the course of the Anduin.

They had passed the lonely ruins of Minas Athrad, where they had found no further signs of the merman, then continued north and, for two days, had enjoyed Faramir's hospitality in the foothills of Emyrn Arnen. A few days later they had crossed the Anduin, just above Osgiliath, and had spent some time with Aragorn and Arwen.

They had travelled north-west along the river for a further two weeks, meeting with Eomer and Gimli beside the Falls of Rauros, where Legolas had planted a carantaur sapling in memory of Boromir. Then, straying for the first time from the river's edge, they had skirted Emyrn Muil, and instead followed the East Wall of Rohan until it rejoined the river, north of the hills. Slowly, the joint cavalcade had made its way, ever northwards, through the Brown Lands and across the plain of Parth Celebrant.

And now, with the southernmost tip of Greenwood the Great less than seventy miles to the east, they had decided to rest for a day or two, on the outskirts of Lorien.

...

It was hot for the time of year.

Eowyn unfastened her suede jerkin, slipped it off, and stretched out on the grass. A light breeze was stirring the blossom in the trees above her, birds were singing, and, somewhere nearby, a stream was bubbling over rocks.

She closed her eyes and began to drift...

"Melmenya?" Legolas' voice was gentle and concerned.

Eowyn pushed herself up on her hands and smiled at him.

"You are tired," he said. "We should have stayed in the camp today—then you could have rested properly."

She shook her head. "No, I am fine, Legolas—and I am enjoying having you all to myself for a few hours."

He sat down beside her, opened his travelling pack and pulled out a cloth, which he laid on the grass, and a parcel of food, which he unwrapped. There was fresh bread and cheese, some cold, roasted vegetables, a small jar of fruity pickles, and a rather misshapen, slightly burnt, pasty.

"I made that for you last night," said Eowyn, proudly.

Legolas picked it up and cautiously took a bite. "Ummm," he said, struggling to swallow the

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ashy crust, "it—er..."

"Is it *very* bad?"

"No..." he mumbled, his mouth still full.

"Yes it is," said Eowyn, sadly.

Legolas put the pasty down on the grass, and took her in his arms. "I am afraid it is inedible, *melmenya*," he said, kissing her forehead. "Even after all the lessons you have had from poor, long-suffering Master Elros, you are still a terrible cook. But I did not marry you for your housekeeping skills, *meleth nín*."

His voice trailed away when he realised what he had said, and they gazed at each other sadly.

"It will be alright, *melmenya*. I promise." He touched his forehead to hers. "My father will give us his consent. He will not be able to resist you, Eowyn *nín*." He smiled mischievously.

"Provided, that is, you do not offer to cook for him."

And he laughed as Eowyn swatted his arm.

...

"How long did you live here?" asked Eomer, as they rode across the Tongue and entered the forest of Lorien, following the overgrown path from the hythe to the city.

"I was The Lady's March Warden for almost five thousand years," replied Haldir.

"You were indeed fortunate," said Gimli. "I saw her no more than a few days..."

They emerged briefly from the trees and looked down into a vast, saucer-shaped depression filled with giant beeches and elms and, at the centre, on a natural rise, a great circular grove of yellow-leafed mallorn trees.

"There it is," said Haldir, softly, "Caras Galadhon. Once the heart of elvendom on earth; now almost deserted."

...

Legolas had stripped off his clothes and was happily splashing in the stream.

Eowyn smiled. Though she had been living with him for more than six months, she was still surprised at how innocent and unselfconscious a naked elf could be. She unlaced her boots and pulled them off.

"Come in, *melmenya*!" he called, "the water is wonderful!"

She raised her eyes to look at him and her breath caught in her throat. He was standing, quite still, ankle deep in water, his slender, muscular body damp and glistening in the sunlight, his long, blond hair lifting from his shoulders in the breeze.

Eowyn slipped out of her leggings. *Gods, he is beautiful*, she thought. *And he is all mine*. "The first time I saw you naked," she said, "*completely* naked, I was afraid."

"Of what?"

She giggled. "Your *size*," she whispered, as though someone might overhear her.

Legolas smiled. "And how many others have you seen, *melmenya*?"

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"Only two," she admitted, "but they were both much smaller."

"They were both men," said Legolas, "and I am an elf—though slightly bigger than average."

"Only slightly?" Excited by her attention, he had instantly grown to his full, impressive size. "*Daer Lassui*," she said.

Legolas laughed.

Still wearing her tunic of bright yellow silk, and very conscious that her feet had only recently fully healed, Eowyn carefully picked her way down to the water's edge, stretching out her arms to keep her balance. As she stepped into the stream, a sudden gust caught her loose tunic and fluttered her sleeves around her body.

"Come, *gwilwileth nín!*" cried Legolas, holding out his hands to her, "fly to me!"

...

They rode up to the outskirts of the city, crossed the bridge over the deep, dry fosse and passed through the Great Gates, now permanently ajar.

"It was a sad day for Middle-earth when The Lady left," said Gimli.

"The time of the elves had passed," replied Haldir.

"Why did you not go with her?" asked Gimli.

Haldir hesitated. "I had my reasons," he said, quietly.

As they followed the winding path to the summit of the hill, Haldir scanned the flets above, but could see no sign of occupation. To his elven eyes the forest appeared to be sliding into decay—the boughs of the great mallorns seemed to droop, and the lawn at the base of the vast central tree looked ragged, and scarred with fallen leaves.

"Up there was her house," said Gimli softly, "where she made us all welcome."

"Are you *sure* you do not want to see it again, Gimli?" asked Eomer.

"Aye, lad," said Gimli, "I am sure. I will sit down here in the glade, and remember it in happier times."

Eomer and Haldir approached the broad steps at the root of the tree—*Which once*, Haldir thought, *would have been flanked by Galadhrim Guards*—then began the long climb, up the graceful, spiralling staircase, passing the elegantly roofed flets that hung from the branches like living things.

"Like spiders," said Eomer. "It is magnificently built," he added, looking out across the city, "though I think I *prefer* Eryn Carantaur."

"Each city reflects the taste of its creators," said Haldir. "Eryn Carantaur is more severely beautiful. And, of course," he added, "Eryn Carantaur still thrives."

As they reached the top of the staircase, and stepped out into the Chamber of Celeborn, Haldir paused briefly, almost expecting his former lord to appear leading The Lady by the hand. *But this is the fourth age, and the eternal has passed*, he thought. He turned to his companion.

"Thank you for bringing me," said Eomer. "I count it a great privilege to have seen this."

...

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"Legolas..."

"Mmmmm?" He kissed her neck.

"What does *gwilwileth* mean?"

"Butterfly," he said.

"I thought so," said Eowyn, softly.

"My beautiful, yellow—what is wrong, *melmenya*?" He lifted her chin.

"I *am* no more than a butterfly, compared to you," she said, sadly. "It is no wonder your father does not think me good enough to marry you."

"I thought we were past this, Eowyn *nín*," said Legolas, more harshly than he had intended.

"We will never be past it," said Eowyn, turning her face away from him. "I will never be past it." She pushed her hands against his chest. "It is not the future that concerns me, Legolas, for, though I do not want to leave you—"

"You will not leave me for long, *melmenya*. I have said that I will follow you."

Eowyn shook her head. "I accept that I must die—I have never feared death. But it is the past—*your* past—the *length* of your past, that..."—she searched for the right word—"intimidates me."

Legolas sighed. "How can I convince you that no one but you has ever mattered to me?"

"I do not know." She looked up at him, sadly, "Will they all be there? At your father's court?"

"Many of them, *melmenya*."

She nodded, bravely.

"Oh, my love!" He crushed her in his arms. "*You* are the only one who has ever made me happy! In all my life, the only one. And I am *so* happy. When we make love, *melmenya*, we share something that only those who are truly bonded can experience. Do you not feel it?"

"Yes," she whispered, "yes, I do..."

...

"Tell me," said Eomer, who had been deep in thought since they had begun their descent, "how could an elf fall in love with a woman? He is immortal; she will live for no more than a few years. To him she must seem so much his inferior—like an insect compared to a man. How could he possibly give his heart to her knowing that their love cannot last?"

"Of course it will last," said Haldir. "It will last forever."

"How can it?"

"Because the elf will never forget her. Even if he sails to Valinor he will take her with him—in his heart and in his mind—to dwell in the undying lands for eternity."

"That is very poetic," said Eomer. "But a man cannot bed a memory. Besides, memories fade—a man marries, his wife dies, he marries again; the first wife is forgotten."

"No," said Haldir. "No, I do not believe that. Perhaps she is no longer his chief concern, but she

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is not forgotten. And she lives on in the man he has become. And for an elf..."

He stopped descending the stairs and turned to face Eomer. "An elf loves," he said, "*truly* loves, only once. Legolas has found his love and he is bound to her for as long as he lives."

"But—what will happen when she is old and he is still young?"

"Legolas is already three thousand years old."

"You know what I mean—she will be physically old. Surely he will not want to..." Eomer's voice trailed away.

"Make love to her? It is a human failing to find only youth attractive. Perhaps Legolas' love *will* change—perhaps it will deepen—but there is no doubt that it will remain. He will love and cherish Eowyn until she finally passes away. And then he will bury her. And I do not believe that he will outlive her long." Haldir sighed. "That is why the love between an elf and a mortal seldom ends happily."

"And what of you?" asked Eomer, suddenly. "She is not your wife and yet you love her, too. Are you also bound to her for eternity?"

Haldir resumed his descent. "I would not normally talk about this, your Majesty," he said, quietly. "But, because you are her brother, I will tell you: I do not know. All I can say is that since the day I met Eowyn, I have had no desire for any other."

...

He lowered her into the stream, tenderly kissing her mouth and her neck. The running water was cold, but the sensation only heightened her desire and, suddenly, her worries were forgotten. "Oh Legolas," she whispered, "are you going to take me *here*? Oh yes, *please*..."

"Shhhh, melmenya." He entered her slowly, pushing himself deep into her body.

"Wait," she whispered, "wait, stay still."

"Am I hurting you?"

"No... No, my love..." Her body arched. "You—oh—you feel so *beautiful*..." She stretched out her arms, grasping handfuls of the stream's gravelly bed, and began to move her hips beneath him, making little, incoherent noises of pleasure.

"Melmenya," Legolas gasped, "no—no you will graze yourself!" He slipped his hands under her buttocks, lifted her out of the water, and carried her, still desperately trying to ride him, over to the bank, where he laid her down on a smooth, flat rock.

She wrapped her legs around his waist. "Take me now," she begged.

He kissed her gently, then—moving and holding her legs to protect them—he rolled over, so that she was on top. "No," he whispered, "you take me."

She smiled down at him, almost sadly. Then, leaning forward and placing her hands on the rock at either side of his head, she did as he asked, her body rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

Trembling, Legolas reached up, pushed up her wet tunic, and enfolded her breasts in his hands.

"Oh!" Eowyn wailed. "Oh. Oh. Oh..." And she threw back her head and twisted like a flame as

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they both came together.

...

There were three of them, sitting beside the fountain. She approached them silently, without so much as stirring the grass beneath her feet.

The first was an elf, tall, proud—beautiful, in the way of elves. She stretched out her hand and lightly stirred his silvery hair, laughing softly as he tried to avoid her touch.

The second was a dwarf—a small, noble creature with coppery hair and deep-set, gentle eyes, filled, at this moment, with immense sadness.

And the third—oh, the third was *sunlight* made flesh!

...

"Listen!" hissed Eowyn, pushing herself up from the rock. "Is that a bear?"

Legolas wrapped his arms around her protectively. "I think so. And it is close," he said. "Very, very close. And curious. Where are your clothes?"

"On the other side of the stream."

He nodded. "Together with my bow."

"We should have been more careful."

"If I call Arod, can you mount him?"

"Of course."

He kissed her forehead. "Ride out onto the open flood plain and wait for me."

"Why are you not coming—"

"Do not argue, melmenya—not now. It does not want me. We need to get you away—I will fetch our things. Are you ready?"

"Yes," said Eowyn, her voice catching in her throat.

He whistled, soft and low.

Arod broke through the trees and crossed the stream, pausing only to take the woman on his back before returning the way he had come.

And Eowyn, clinging to the horse's neck, heard Legolas cry, "I love you, Shieldmaiden," before his voice was drowned by a terrible roar.

...

The elf was speaking: "We must go now," he said, "so that we can ferry the horses back across the Celebrant whilst there is still light."

"No," she cried, "*no... Do not leave yet.. I have been alone for so long...*"

The man rose to his feet and called to his horse.

"*Please do not leave me...*" She followed him, running to keep pace with his long strides,

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startling the horse in her hurry.

"Peace, Westwind," said the man, gently, stroking the beast's muzzle. "The forest is deserted; there is nothing here for you to fear." He sprang onto the horse's back, and seemed to look down at her, his beautiful dark eyes piercing her heart.

"I will not let you leave me behind..." she said. And, soothing the horse with her song, she climbed up behind him, and wrapped her arms around his waist, and buried her face in his golden hair.

For the first time she would leave the forest that bore her. And she would follow this man wherever fate took them.

...

Eowyn wheeled Arod around. "Why did he make me leave him behind?" she cried. "And why, why did I choose now to start following his orders?"

Where is he?

It has been far too long, she decided. *He needs me.* And with a kick of her heels, she spurred the horse forward.

It was darker now, and the forest, which had earlier seemed so inviting, suddenly felt alien and threatening. Eowyn gave Arod his head and, ignoring the forest paths, they galloped straight to the clearing.

Eowyn cried out in horror. On the rock where they had recently made love, Legolas, still naked, lay sprawled beneath the bear's great paws—and the huge golden beast, in a hideous parody of her own earlier actions, rocked back and forth, lapping at the elf's throat.

"Legolas," Eowyn shrieked. "Legolas!"

The bear raised its head and stared at her.

Eowyn had no sword! But, leaping down from Arod, she seized a stout, fallen branch and ran towards the animal with a blood-curdling yell. The bear snarled, baring its teeth. Without a second's hesitation Eowyn swung her makeshift club at its face, driving it back from the defenceless elf. The beast reared on its hind legs and lashed out. Eowyn blocked with the branch, taking the full impact of its blow on her shield arm.

Memories of a previous battle spun through her head. "I will *kill* you if you touch him again," she cried; and then, "Arod, help your master."

As she dodged two more blows, Eowyn heard Arod neigh behind her: Legolas was safe!

Then she saw Brightstar, galloping towards her, and she realised that her own life now hung in the balance. As the horse came to a stop beside her, the Shieldmaiden rammed her branch into the bear's jaws, threw herself astride her mount and dashed into the forest, following Arod, who was now bearing Legolas—dazed but otherwise unharmed—back to safety.

Extra scene (in which Little Legolas learns about mortality): [The Butterfly](#)

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Chapter 2: Shadows

Arod had stopped just beyond the forest edge and Legolas, still badly shaken, was beginning to slide off his back. Eowyn pulled in her reins, drawing Brightstar to a halt, leaped to the ground and ran to the elf.

"Careful, my love," she cried, helping him dismount. "Here, sit down." She guided him to the ground and then, lifting his hair, examined his neck and throat.

There was no sign of any injury.

"Legolas," she said, softly, "what happened?"

He stared at her for a long moment, as though not understanding what she was asking. "I do not know, *melmenya*," he said, at last. "A bear does not normally attack an elf. I do not know what happened..."

"I am not sure it was attacking you," said Eowyn, thinking of the bear's strange behaviour before she had managed to drive it away. "At least, I do not think that it meant to kill you."

He stared at her. "It... I... I do not know..."

"Can you ride?" she asked. "We should get you back to camp—though what are we going to do about your bow? And your clothes? And, more importantly, *my* clothes?" She looked down at her slim, bare legs beneath her short, yellow tunic. "I look like Senta's little yellow bird!"

Legolas managed a shaky laugh. "I will send guards to fetch them tomorrow, *melmenya*. It would be too dangerous to go back now."

Eowyn helped him to his feet. "Why are elves so unconcerned about walking around naked?"

"Because we are beautiful."

Eowyn grinned, refusing to rise to the bait, and watched him mount Arod. "Do you want me to ride with you?"

"No, *melmenya*, I feel much better now." He smiled, reaching down to touch her face. "You have saved me once again, Shieldmaiden."

"I will be glad to get back to camp," she replied, suddenly feeling very tired, and she brought her hand up to her mouth to stifle a yawn.

...

The next day—after a detachment of guards had retrieved Legolas' bow, and the remains of his and Eowyn's clothing (torn to shreds by the bear), but had found no sign of the bear itself—the cavalcade resumed its journey northwards.

"We will continue along the west bank," said Legolas, "until we reach the Old Ford. Once we have crossed to the east, we have a choice: we can either take the Forest Road, south of the mountains, until we reach the Forest River and then continue north; or we can follow the Anduin past The Carrock, and then take the Forest Path eastwards."

"Which do you recommend?" asked Eomer. "You know these parts better than we do."

"It is some years since I ventured into the south of Mirkwood and I doubt that it is still the wild, dangerous place it was then. But I still think that we should take the Forest Path. It is dark and narrow, but the Mirkwood elves and I know it well; and it leads directly to my father's

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Halls."

...

Two weeks later

Legolas was growing more and more uneasy.

He looked ahead, checking the riders one by one—Haldir, Valandil, Orodreth, and two Rohirrim, Captain Eofred and his lieutenant, Halrand. *Safe.*

He scanned the rocks to the west. *Clear.* Then the forest edge to the east. *Clear.*

On his right he could sense Eowyn, watching him anxiously. *She is worried about me,* he thought, and he gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

Then he reined in Arod and pulled off the track to check the rest of the cavalcade: Eomer, riding between his Chief Counsellor, Colgan, and his secretary, Florestan; Lord Fingolfin flanked by the cook, Master Elros, and the cartographer, Berryn; behind them, Master Dínendal, the healer; ten pack animals; and then, bringing up the rear, eight elven guards, including Camthalion, Amras and Finrod, and twelve more Rohirrim. *All safe.*

Legolas sighed with relief.

"What is wrong?" asked Gimli, who was riding behind him.

"Nothing, *elvellon.*"

"Nonsense!" huffed the dwarf, "you have been behaving like a rabbit trapped in a dog kennel ever since we left The Golden Wood—and you are driving your poor lady crazy with it. What is going on?"

"I have told Eowyn that she does not need to worry about me," said Legolas. He sighed. "But we are not travelling alone, Gimli. There are two shadows in my mind—something following us at a distance, and something—or someone—much, much closer..."

...

She spent her days riding with the golden man—*E-o-mer*—and her nights lying by his side, happy for the first time in her long, long life.

"*Where are we going, beloved...*" she asked. "*To the north, where The Great River disappears into Hithaeglin and Ered Mithrin... Or to the east, where the wood elves live amongst the caverns of Taur-En-Daedelos... And will we be staying there... Or are we to make our home elsewhere...*"

But *E-o-mer* did not reply.

"*If only I could find some way to make you hear me, beloved...*" she said. "*The elves can sense me—especially their prince... I will do you no harm, your highness...*" she called to Legolas as he trotted past. "*I will protect you... I will protect all of you, for the sake of my love...*"

...

For the first time since leaving Lorien, the cavalcade had decided to take a day's rest from travel, and had camped close to The Carrock.

Legolas looked at Eowyn, sitting on a rock by the river, watching the water sparkle in the

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sunlight. *I have been neglecting her*, he thought. *I have been far too preoccupied with the safety of the others.*

"Would you care for a stroll, melmenya?"

"Yes!" she cried, leaping to her feet. "Can we cross to the island?"

Legolas caught her about the waist, laughing. "Of course. But are you sure you are not too tired?"

She came up on tiptoe to whisper in his ear, "I am never too tired to spend time alone with you, Lassui."

Legolas kissed her forehead. "I am sorry melmenya," he said, as he watched her mount Brightstar. "I have been worried these last few days." He sprang up onto Arod's back.

"I know," Eowyn replied, softly. "But that is only to be expected. This meeting with your father..."

"It is not *just* my father, melmenya," he admitted, as they were riding, side by side, down to the ford.

"It is the bear," said Eowyn.

Legolas frowned. "What makes you say that, Eowyn *nín*?"

"You have been nervous ever since that day."

"The bear..." said Legolas quietly.

Eowyn urged Brightstar forward, and began picking her way across the partially submerged rocks. "Do you think it is the bear that you have been sensing? Following us?" she called over her shoulder. "But why would it travel so far from its home? What would it want with us?"

"I do not know, melmenya," Legolas replied, softly, and Eowyn, concentrating on the ford, did not notice his reluctance to answer.

"Do you know any more about the other shadow?" she asked. "The thing that is closer?"

"No, melmenya. I cannot quite... I cannot reach it. I know it is there, but I cannot reach it."

"What does it feel like?"

Legolas thought for a moment. "Like someone watching me from across a crowded room..."

When they reached the shore of The Carrock, they dismounted and started the long climb to the summit. After a few steps, Eowyn stopped, turned southwards, and stretched out her arms, to catch the cool breeze blowing off the Anduin.

"Are you sure you can manage the stairs, melmenya?"

"Why would I not be able to?"

Legolas grinned and, slipping past her, ran nimbly up to the next rocky ledge and waited, with exaggerated impatience, for her to catch up.

"Elves," Eowyn grumbled, as she carried on climbing, steadily. "Just because *you* can run up the leg of a Mûmak—and walk on top of snow..." She smiled to herself. *But you wait, melethron.*

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When she reached the ledge, she suddenly leaned forward and, resting her hands on her bent knees, made a great show of trying to catch her breath.

"Melmenya?"

The concern in his voice gave her a brief pang of conscience—but only for a split second. The moment she felt his hand on her back she grasped his waist and pulled him down to the ground. Laughing, Legolas wrapped his arms around her and they both rolled around the rock ledge, Eowyn tickling his sides whilst he tried, half-heartedly, to remove her hands. Eventually, they came to a rest, lying side by side, both gazing up at the cloudless sky.

"I have missed you," said Eowyn, softly.

"I am sorry, melmenya."

"We have not made love in days."

"I know. I..."

"You are uncomfortable, lying so close to the others—so am I."

He rolled over and brought himself up on his elbows. "It is not so much the others, melmenya," he said, stroking a strand of hair from her face. "Though I admit that Eomer scowls at me whenever I come near you. And I am always expecting Haldir to take me to one side and warn me that—if I expect to keep you—I must improve my *technique*—"

"*Legolas!*" Eowyn blushed and, at the same time, grinned at his wickedness. "What is it then?" she asked.

"It is—"

His explanation was cut short by a roar so deafening, it seemed to be coming from *inside* The Carrock, just a few feet above them. They both scrambled to their feet, and Legolas—grasping Eowyn by the waist—threw her over his shoulder and ran down the stone steps, back to the safety of the ford.

...

"Was it the bear again?" asked Eowyn.

"I do not know, melmenya, but I am not taking any chances." He lifted her onto Arod's back and sprang up behind her. "*Tolo, Brightstar,*" he called, as he urged Arod across the ford, "*bedithon minui, aphado nin.*"

And Eowyn, seated sideways like a lady, and cradled in Legolas' arms, wondered if she should protest but, when she opened her mouth, the only words that came out were, "Thank you."

...

"Anything?" asked Captain Eofred.

"I am not sure," said Halrand. They had searched every inch of The Carrock. "What do you make of this, Valandil?"

The wood elf crouched beside the man and drew his fingers lightly over the rocky ground. "No," he said. "There *was* something standing here, but it was not a bear."

"That is what I thought," said Halrand. "I think it is a woman's footprint—Lady Eowyn must have been here. But, then, I cannot find any trace of Prince Legolas."

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"I am not sure that elves leave footprints, Halrand," said Eofred, quietly.

"Oh, no—of course not." He grinned at Valandil. "Perhaps it was an *elven* bear..."

Valandil grinned back. "Perhaps it was an elven *elf*—perhaps the Prince just wanted to scare Lady Eowyn so that he could carry her back to the camp across his horse..."

They both laughed.

Eofred cleared his throat. "We had better be getting back," he said, and started down the stone steps.

Halrand winked at Valandil and whispered, "Captain Eofred thinks that the sun shines out of the Prince's—"

"*Halrand!*" barked Eofred.

Valandil flashed his human friend a sympathetic smile.

...

Despite Captain Eofred's report, Legolas had decided to move the camp several miles up river, double the guards on the perimeter, and join the first watch himself, sitting in one of the stunted trees that dotted the Anduin flood plain.

I must tell Eowyn exactly what happened that day, he thought. I must—"Elvellon?"

"Humph," said Gimli. "How do you see through the back of your head? And do not try to tell me that my breathing gave me away, for I was holding my breath."

Legolas smiled. "Yes; but you were not holding your beard, *mellon nín*," he said. "And the beads in your braids are noisy." He shrugged his shoulders. "Come, Gimli, climb up and sit beside me."

The dwarf shook his head. "No. You come down here."

Laughing, Legolas dropped lightly to the ground and sat down, cross-legged, beside the dwarf. "What is troubling you, *elvellon?*"

"I have been thinking about this bear business," said Gimli. "When my father travelled through these parts with Thorin Oakenshield and young Frodo's uncle—"

"Bilbo," said Legolas.

"Yes. There was a man that lived here—a skin changer—called Beorn."

Legolas nodded. "I met him," he said, "on several occasions."

"My father told me that Beorn could turn himself into a bear at will, and that he passed on his powers to all the men of his line."

"It is true, *elvellon*."

"Then could not this bear be one of Beorn's descendants?"

Legolas shook his head. "I have wondered that myself, Gimli, but, on reflection, I do not think so. Beorn was a noble, good-hearted man and his descendants have inherited his nature. Besides," he added, quietly, "this bear does not behave like a man."

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...

Two days later

It is hard to believe, thought Eowyn, as the cavalcade rode along the edge of Greenwood the Great, following the great impenetrable wall of its outer trees, *that Legolas was living here long before it was tainted by Sauron's evil...*

She glanced at the elf.

"Melmenya?" Riding close beside her, Legolas had sensed a change in her mood.

"Are you pleased to be home?" she asked.

"That is not what you were thinking," he chided, gently.

"No—no, it is not."

"Were you worrying about meeting my father?"

"No..." She glanced at Gimli, seated behind Legolas. The dwarf was dozing, his head resting on the elf's shoulder. "I was thinking," she said, quietly, "about the difference in our ages—"

"Oh, melmenya..."

"—and I was wondering why you have been so distant lately..."

Legolas did not reply.

"Every night you seem to avoid coming to bed until I am asleep." She looked again at Gimli, making sure that he was not listening. "You have not made love to me since Lorien, Legolas." She looked at him beseechingly. "I know that you still need me—sometimes, when I wake, you are holding me so tightly I can scarcely breathe. But what is it my love? Can you not tell me what is wrong?"

"I—"

"We are here, your Highness," called Valandil, from up ahead. "The Forest Gate."

Legolas sighed. "We will talk later, I promise, and I will explain *everything* to you, melmenya."

He pulled out from the cavalcade and cantered to where the Mirkwood elves were waiting for him.

...

Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves'-eyes!

Gerard Manley Hopkins

The entrance to the Forest Path was like an 'arch made by' two 'great trees that leant together, too old and strangled with ivy and hung with lichen to bear more than a few blackened leaves.'

The whole party dismounted and, leading the horses, passed one by one through the forbidding opening and made their way along the narrow path, winding 'in and out among the trunks' until 'the light at the gate was like a little bright hole far behind'.

At first the forest was oppressive, and the men were troubled by the unfamiliar shapes and smells, and by 'queer noises'—'grunts, scufflings' and 'hurryings in the undergrowth'. But as they travelled deeper, the forest grew lighter, the darkness broken by 'slender beams of sun'

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slicing through the 'tangled boughs and matted twigs', and splashing the ground with patches of brightness. And then, in the pockets of light, they began to notice little 'black squirrels' scampering along the branches, and birds nesting in the forest canopy, and colourful butterflies flitting amongst the bushes, and—*everywhere*—new, green shoots sparkling like precious emeralds against the old black leaves.

"The forest has begun to *live* again," said Legolas, looking around in wonder.

...

Every night the wood elves built Eowyn a small shelter to undress and sleep in. On their first night in Mirkwood, she had gone to bed early, exhausted by the day's worries, and had fallen asleep alone but, sometime in the early hours of the morning, she awoke to find Legolas lying beside her.

Remembering his earlier promise, she rolled over and straddled him provocatively—

To her horror, Legolas immediately threw up his arms, crying out, in a mixture of fear and anger, "Get away from me, *brôg!*"

Eowyn clamped her hand over his mouth.

"Legolas!" she hissed, desperately, as they wrestled in the bedroll, "hush, my love, *shhhhh*, *shhhhh!* I am not the bear; I am not the bear!"

He continued to struggle for just a moment longer, then she felt him collapse beneath her, as if defeated. Slowly, she removed her hand. "I am so sorry Legolas," she whispered. "I did not realise."

"I... Oh, *melmenya*, I..." Legolas shook his head, confused. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, my love." She settled down beside him, one arm lying protectively across his chest. "What is wrong Legolas?" she asked. "You must have been attacked by animals before—wargs, spiders, orcs—even threatened by bears—what made that day so different? What happened, my darling, before I arrived? Sometimes it helps just to say these things out loud."

Legolas sighed. "It *licked* me," he finally admitted.

"I saw it."

He turned to face her. "No, *melmenya*. It licked me. Licked *all* of me..." He could not say any more.

"Oh, my love!" cried Eowyn. She held out her arms to him and he laid his head on her breast.

...

"I *wanted* to tell you, *melmenya*," he whispered, "but I could not bring myself to admit it."

"Why?"

"I had the strangest feeling—as if the bear was trying to seduce me. What sort of elf is desired by a bear?"

"Are you still sensing that? From the shadow?"

"There is some desire, yes. But, mostly, there is anger."

"Towards me? For driving it away from you? Is that is why you carried me down The Carrock?"

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He nodded. "It seems to hate you."

"Just let it come near me again!"

He smiled. "I should have known how you would react, Eowyn *nín*." Then he added, very softly, "I need you, *melmenya*."

"Oh, my love!" She kissed him tenderly. "You have been needing me for two weeks. Lie back..." She pushed him gently onto the bedroll, unlaced his leggings, and lovingly stroked him, coaxing him to full hardness. "I have heard women say," she said, softly, "that the male member is ugly. But *I* think it is beautiful." She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his shaft, whispering, "I think that you are very beautiful."

"That is the most loving thing anyone could say, *melmenya*," he whispered back.

Smiling, she curled her hand around him and took him in her mouth, sucking gently. His body arched with pleasure but, after a few moments, he reached down and stroked her hair.

"Let *me* make love to you, Eowyn *nín*," he said.

...

She let him take his time, with long, slow, strokes, that had her writhing beneath him—begging softly for more—until, very gradually, with no increase of speed or vigour, he brought them both to a mutual release, clamping his hand tightly over her mouth to prevent her rousing the entire camp with her scream.

...

He awoke her just after dawn. "Good morning, *melmenya*," he said, cheerfully. "It is a fine day and we will be starting early."

"I need some breakfast," said Eowyn.

"All in good time, *meleth nín*." He dipped a piece of linen in the bowl of scented water he was holding. "We must make you presentable." He wrung out the cloth and gently began to wash her face. "You have a smear of dirt on your nose and chin," he said, smiling.

"Legolas..."

"Mmmmm?"

"Is the bear still following us?"

"I have not sensed it since we entered the forest, Eowyn *nín*."

That would explain his good mood, she thought. Though I may have helped, a little, too.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "What about the other shadow?"

"It is still with us, but it means us no harm." He sponged her arms and hands.

"How do you know?"

"It seems that I am not the only one who can sense it. Most of the elves are aware of it, though I seem to be more sensitive to it than most—sensitive to *her*—"

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"Her?"

"A woodland sprite, *melmenya*. A very ancient being. She has followed us from Lorien—in fact, the Lorien elves are quite familiar with her kind."

"Why did she come with us?"

"Lorien is deserted—I suppose she wanted company."

"Where is she?"

"She seems to spend most of her time with your brother."

"Does Eomer know?"

"No—and there is no reason why he ever should, *melmenya*. I doubt that she will remain with us much longer, now that she back in the forest, where she belongs."

He wrung out the cloth and began, slowly and gently, to wash her breasts.

Eowyn sighed contentedly.

"If I tell you something else, do you think you can keep it quiet, *meleth nín*?" he asked.

Eowyn looked surprised. "Of course," she said.

"You promise?"

"Yes."

Legolas leant forward and whispered something in her ear. Eowyn laughed loudly—and, for a moment, the buzz of conversation in the rest of the camp came to an abrupt halt.

"You *promised*," Legolas complained.

Eowyn swatted his arm, still smiling happily.

...

The enchanted river

On the seventh day after entering the forest, they 'found their path blocked by a running water. It flowed fast and strong but not very wide ... and it was black, or looked it in the gloom', and smelled brackish.

"It is known as the enchanted river," Legolas explained to the men. "Anyone who drinks from it will fall into a profound sleep that may last for several days. We must cross without touching it."

"How?" asked Gimli.

"There is a rope bridge," said Valandil, "concealed in the trees. It will not take us long to arrange it." He and Orodreth left the main path and followed an even narrower track—all but invisible to the eyes of men—along the very edge of the river bank, until they reached a tree that was straighter and even sturdier than those around it, and began to climb.

"I cannot do that," said Gimli.

"Neither can I," said Eomer.

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"And nor can the horses," said Eowyn.

"Do not worry," said Legolas, taking Eowyn's hand. "Once Valandil and Orodreth have erected the bridge, we can all walk across."

The men watched nervously as Valandil tied a rope around his waist then stepped gracefully along a narrow branch that almost spanned the river.

"Why is the water still tainted?" asked Eomer. "The rest of the forest is recovering, but the trees along the river banks look dead. Does the river flow from Dol Guldur?"

"No," said Legolas. "Its source is in the Mountains of Mirkwood—"

Several of the men gasped as Valandil leapt effortlessly down to the far bank.

"It was the wood elves who first cast the enchantment," Legolas continued. "In the days before the Greenwood was contaminated by Sauron's evil, the river granted travellers a few hours rest that did them no harm but was enough to deter all but the most honourable—or the most determined—from going any further."

Valandil had untied the rope from about his waist and was using it to haul a large bundle across the water.

"But when Sauron's evil turned Mirkwood into a place of dread and darkness, and his foulness leached out of the soil and into the water, the enchantment became a real danger." Legolas sighed. "We can only hope that, in time, the river will clear itself."

Valandil and Orodreth had unrolled the bundle and were securing its ends to two pairs of sturdy trees on either bank.

"Perhaps your father could build a permanent bridge," said Eomer.

"*You* will have to talk to him about that, *mellon nín*," said Legolas, smiling.

Haldir, Orodreth, Eofred and Halrand crossed first, to secure the eastern side of the river, then the remainder of the cavalcade made its way across the swaying bridge, one at a time, each leading his horse behind him.

Legolas and Eowyn waited on the western bank until the last man had crossed.

"Your turn, *melmenya*," said Legolas.

Eowyn nodded. She took hold of Brightstar's bridle and led him down to the river, talking to him quietly. But, as they reached the water's edge, the horse suddenly stopped.

"Come Brightstar," Eowyn insisted, "come, there is nothing to fear. What is wrong?—*oh!*"

The horse had pulled away from her and, rearing up on its hind legs, seemed to be trying to protect her from something in the trees behind. A second later, a huge, golden bear emerged from the undergrowth, knocked the horse away with a swipe of its paw, and lashed out at the woman.

Eowyn dodged backwards, and stumbled and, for a moment, she seemed to hang in the air, struggling to maintain her balance... Then she fell into the water, and disappeared under the blackness.

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Chapter 3: The Elvenking

"EOWYN!"

Ignoring the bear, which, despite having taken several of Haldir's arrows in the shoulder, was quickly closing on him, Legolas plunged into the black water and dived below the surface. Moments later he emerged bearing Eowyn's unconscious body, and, battling the enchantment that was already deadening his limbs, he began the long, slow struggle to reach the eastern bank, where Eomer and Haldir, shoulder-deep in the water, waited to help him.

...

"They look *dead*," said Eomer, softly, gazing down at the couple.

"They are not, your Majesty," said Dínendal, firmly. Legolas and Eowyn were lying side by side on a stretcher that the wood elves had improvised from fallen branches. The healer had already examined Legolas and was now checking Eowyn's pulse. "They are simply sleeping," he concluded, gently placing Eowyn's hand back on her breast.

"Well—then at least put her hands down by her sides," said Eomer. He yawned.

"You should be resting, too, your Majesty," said Dínendal, carefully moving Eowyn's arms.

Eomer shook his head. "No. There is nothing wrong with *me*. I am just worried at the prospect of appearing before King Thranduil bearing his only son on what looks like a funeral bier.."

"Perhaps we should wait here until they awake," suggested Gimli.

"We do not know how long that will be, Gimli," Eomer replied, yawning again. "And we would be risking another attack from the bear.. What do *you* advise, Lord Fingolfin?"

"I agree that this will not create a favourable impression on King Thranduil," said Fingolfin, pointing to the stretcher, "and he can be most protective where his son is concerned. But the bear almost seems to be..." He hesitated. "It seems to have an *interest* in Lord Legolas and Lady Eowyn. I think we should keep moving."

"So do I," said Haldir. "The sooner we reach the safety of King Thranduil's Halls, the better."

Eomer nodded, thoughtfully. "I agree," he said. "Let us proceed then. Haldir, Eofred—since the path is wider here, I want elven lookouts at the front and rear of the column, archers before and after the stretcher, and Rohirrim—with swords drawn—along the flanks. I want that stretcher *fortified*—organise it between the pair of you." He yawned.

"Your Majesty..." Dínendal began.

"And I will *ride*, Master Healer," said Eomer, yawning again. "Will that keep you happy?"

...

Lulled by Westwind's slow, steady gait, Eomer was finding it harder and harder to stay awake.

His head fell slowly forwards—

"Take care, beloved..." said a soft, musical voice, close behind him.

His head jerked up, and he turned in surprise, but there was no one to be seen.

Now you are hearing imaginary women, he thought. *You have been away from Lothíriel for far*

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too long...

...

They made camp at dusk.

Eomer, yawning more frequently now, sat beside his sleeping sister and watched the wood elves build a series of small fires around the campsite. At night, when the sun's healing rays vanished, the forest was filled with moths and bats and strange pairs of eyes, but inside the charmed circle of the fires all was warm and comfortable, and the elves and the men supped together like old friends.

"Will the fire keep the bear away?" Eomer asked Haldir.

"I am not sure, your Majesty," said Haldir, "but the camp will be well guarded. Leave that to Eofred and me."

Eomer nodded wearily. "Why have *you* not been affected by the enchantment?" he asked.

"I have, but I am an elf," replied Haldir.

"How could I have forgotten?" said Eomer. He smiled broadly, but the smile quickly turned into a yawn. "How much further do we have to go?"

Haldir turned to Valandil, who, with Camthalion, was building a shelter for Eowyn and Legolas. "It is still two days' journey to King Thranduil's Halls, your Majesty," said the wood elf, "but many of his subjects live some way outside the caves—in trees and on the ground—and we should begin to encounter them early tomorrow."

"Good," said Eomer, using his hand to stifle another yawn. "I was beginning to think that we were the only people left in Middle-earth... Now gentlemen, if you will excuse me, I think I *will* get some sleep."

...

Eomer awoke just as the rising sun was beginning to break through the trees.

He looked around the camp site. Several guards were watching the perimeter but most of the cavalcade was sleeping, apart from a small group of elves who had already begun to strike camp, working silently, in perfect accord. Eomer watched them for a moment, admiring their graceful movements. *Elves*, he thought, shaking his head, *are like horses...*

A slim white hand touched his arm.

Eomer pulled away, falling onto his back in surprise and—for a second—fear. The being—for he was sure that it was a *being*, though it looked like a woman—leaned over him. "Do not be afraid, beloved..." it said.

"I am still sleeping," said Eomer.

"You are somewhere between sleep and waking, beloved, and that is why you can see me now..." She smiled and stroked his hair and her touch was like the breeze.

"You are a creation of my own mind," Eomer persisted, "something that the enchantment has summoned up."

"No, beloved, no—the elves know that I am here. And the elf prince has bid me welcome..."

"Legolas?"

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"*Leg-o-las...*" she said, sounding every syllable in her musical voice. "Yes..."

Then I shall certainly have something to say to Leg-o-las when he wakes up, thought Eomer. "Who are you? And what do you want?"

"My name is Firith," she said, smiling, "and I live among the trees..." She sat down beside him, wrapping her slender arms around her knees. "The elves left me alone in Lorien, but then *you* found me..."

"No, I did not find you—I did not even know you were there," said Eomer, shaking his head. And then, "*Lorien?* You have followed me from *Lorien?*"

"Yes, beloved..."

Eomer rubbed his forehead. "Do not call me that," he said. "I am married."

"Oh..."

"What do you want?" he repeated.

"To be with you..."

Eomer looked into her eyes. "What does that mean?" he asked.

"I do not understand, *E-o-mer...*"

He reached out and touched her hand; it was warm, but insubstantial. "I am a man, you are—what? A spirit? Or a dream? I will never see you again, will I?"

"No..."

"And I am *married*," he said, firmly.

...

Two days later

Eomer watched as Dínendal examined Legolas and Eowyn for what seemed like the hundredth time. The pair lay side-by-side on their wooden stretcher, their bodies slightly inclined towards one another, their hair and clothing dusted with hundreds of tiny, creamy blossoms that had fallen from the trees as they had passed beneath.

They truly look enchanted, thought Eomer.

"They are still sleeping very deeply, your Majesty," said the healer.

Eomer turned to the messenger from Mirkwood. "You say that King Thranduil awaits us?"

"Yes, your Majesty," replied the elf.

Eomer sighed. "Lord Fingolfin," he said, quietly, "what do you advise? There is no telling how long they will continue to sleep, so the decision becomes one of state craft—*he* is waiting. Do I jump to his command or do I make him wait longer? Which would give me the advantage?"

Fingolfin shook his head. "King Thranduil is a consummate negotiator, and his actions are never easy to predict, your Majesty," he said. "I advise that you do whatever feels most natural to you."

Eomer smiled. "Then I shall proceed," he said, "for I am not one for games. Everyone in their

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places," he called. "Let us give the King of Eryn Lasgalen a good show."

...

The Forest Path gradually widened into an imposing, tree-lined avenue, which—straight as an arrow—led down to the edge of the swift Forest River, across a massive stone bridge and up a tall flight of equally massive stone steps, to the Elvenking's fabled gates, where King Thranduil and his court were waiting impatiently.

This elf, thought Eomer, has more than a touch of man about him...

The Elvenking was sitting, beneath a pale green sunshade, on a magnificently carved wooden throne. Eomer's keen eyes took in the long blond hair, the perfect, impassive face, the slender body in heavy robes of silvery green brocade, the coronet and collar of silver and white gems... *He looks like Legolas' older brother, he thought. And he is just as vain as his son. But he is much more of a showman.*

Slowly, the cavalcade crossed the bridge—first, Haldir and Eofred with their lieutenants; then the two Counsellors, Fingolfin and Colgan; then the stretcher, with its guard of honour, followed by Eomer himself with Gimli riding behind; and then the rest of the party, men and elves, all riding side-by-side like the people of a single realm.

The great caravan came to a halt at the foot of the stone stair and the bearers carefully laid the stretcher on the ground. Eomer and Gimli dismounted and climbed the steps, followed by Lord Fingolfin.

"Do not concern yourself, King Thranduil," said Eomer, bowing briefly, "about your son's condition—my sister and he have merely been enchanted by the river and will, I am assured, awaken soon." He placed his hand over his heart and, bowing his head, recited, as Fingolfin had taught him, "*Gil síla erin lû e-govaded vîn.*"

Thranduil inclined his head, graciously. "*Baren bar lin.*"

"Thank you. Would you like to see your son?"

Thranduil rose with great dignity and followed Eomer down the steps. Eomer watched him examine Legolas. His expression was, as Fingolfin had warned, indecipherable, but Eomer heard him murmur, with obvious disappointment, "Oh Lassui," and it seemed as though he were looking at Eowyn when he said it.

At length, the Elvenking turned to the stretcher-bearers. "Take my son to his chambers," he said, "and the *adaneth* to the Healing Room."

Eomer opened his mouth to protest, but Lord Fingolfin quickly stepped forward. "With your permission, your Majesties," he said, smoothly, "might I beg that Prince Legolas also be taken to the Healing Room? He risked his own health to rescue Lady Eowyn"—he placed a slight emphasis on her name—"and I have no doubt that he would be extremely distressed were he to awake and not find her."

Thranduil looked at Eomer; the man inclined his head in agreement.

"Very well," said the Elvenking, "take them both to the Healing Room." He dismissed the bearers. "Eomer King," he continued, "I had planned to begin these negotiations, as is our tradition, with a great Welcoming Feast. But may I request that we postpone the festivities until my son awakes?"

"And my sister with him," said Eomer. "Of course, King Thranduil."

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...

The Elvenking's Halls were built in 'a great cave' that 'wound far underground' with 'many passages and wide halls'. Most of the caverns were 'lit with red torch-light' but, here and there, shafts cut through to the surface allowed natural light to filter in and, as Eomer walked through the passages, he caught glimpses of underground gardens—mysterious grottoes filled with ferns and exotic flowers.

"It is impressive," he whispered to Gimli.

"Humph," said Gimli. "The best parts were built by dwarves. All the foolishness is the work of the elves—and why anyone would want to grow plants underground is beyond my understanding. It is not natural."

...

With dusk came cool, favonian breezes...

Ed Darack, *Wind, Water, Sun*

Eomer's apartment was a large, well-appointed cavern close to the Elvenking's Great Hall.

Having arranged for Haldir, Gimli and Lord Fingolfin to join him and Counsellor Colgan as soon as they had rested, he quickly—out of years of habit—unpacked his own belongings, washed off the grime of travel and changed into a clean shirt and breeches.

Then he poured himself a glass of fruit cordial and took a sip. *Gods*, he thought, savouring the warm, slightly sharp taste, *liquid gold. Is there anything that elves do not do better?*

The apartment had its own garden—about ten feet square—filled with greenery of every possible shape, shade and texture, exuberantly spilling from small stone beds sprinkled by an artificial waterfall. Eomer sat down on a bench and watched a tiny red bird fly from plant to plant, sipping nectar from large white flowers.

Like folded handkerchiefs, he thought, then shook his head: *Gimli is right. And all this elven flightiness is corrupting me.*

But Lothíriel would love it...

A soft breeze kissed his face and stirred his hair.

Mmmmm, that is nice. He looked around the cavern. *But where is it coming from? The shaft is deep, the walls are solid, and there are no windows...*

Eomer sprang to his feet and walked quickly back into the sitting room.

...

"I have seen them both, very briefly," said Gimli, "and they seem comfortable. But Thranduil is guarding Legolas like a she-warg guards her cubs—even Master Dínendal was shooed away."

"King Thranduil has always been very protective," said Fingolfin, "and understandably so—do not forget that he has had to raise his son himself."

"What *did* happen to Legolas' mother?" asked Eomer.

"She was a fragile elleth, by all accounts," said Fingolfin, "and childbirth was too much for her."

"She died?"

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"In labour. She is waiting in the Halls of Mandos..."

"No wonder Legolas never mentions her," said Gimli. "That is a cruel fate—to die bringing life into the world. And a cruel inheritance—to be the cause of your own mother's death."

"Indeed," said Fingolfin. "And, at first, King Thranduil would have nothing to do with his son. But, in time, he softened, and then, gradually, he became fiercely possessive."

"That does not bode well for Eowyn," said Eomer. He rose. "More cordial gentlemen?" He walked over to the sideboard, collecting Gimli's glass on the way. "I will never understand what happened between Eowyn and Faramir, and I cannot say that I approve of dissolved marriages—as far as I am concerned a marriage is for life. But Eowyn loves Legolas and he loves her. And I will do everything in my power to see that they stay together."

"As will I, your Majesty," said Fingolfin.

Colgan nodded, and Gimli grunted, and only Haldir remained silent—but no one was in any doubt that the March Warden would give Eowyn whatever support she needed.

"Now, gentlemen," said Eomer, handing Gimli his refilled glass, "the Beornings. King Thranduil tells me that he will be introducing us to their chieftain at the Welcoming Feast. So we must be very careful to give nothing away..."

And he shook his head as a warm breeze ruffled his hair.

...

"Ada?" Legolas smiled up at his father, "What are *you* doing here?" He stretched his long, slim body luxuriously... then sat up, suddenly, in alarm.

"Sweet Eru," he cried, "where is Eowyn?"

"In the next bed," said his father.

Legolas threw back the coverlet, swung his feet to the floor, and stumbled across to her. "Is she all right?"

"She will soon recover."

"Oh, *meleth nín*," said Legolas, climbing up beside her and taking her in his arms, "I am so sorry..."

"Lassui!" chided his father. "What are you talking about? I have already told you that there is nothing wrong with her."

Legolas kissed the top of Eowyn's head and she sighed contentedly. "She knows I am here," he said, happily, gently stroking a stray strand of hair away from her face. "Is she not beautiful, Ada?"

Thranduil shook his head. "I dare say that she passes for a beauty amongst her own kind, Lassui, but by our standards she is quite plain... She really has very little to recommend her—apart, that is, from the fire that all men seem to possess, including that brother of hers."

"They arrived safely, then?" said Legolas, carefully arranging Eowyn's night-shirt.

"With great pomp and circumstance."

Legolas smiled. "Which I am sure you more than matched, Ada. How long have we been here?"

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"About three hours," said Thranduil. "I had intended to postpone the Welcoming Feast until tomorrow but, since you are awake, we can dine tonight as planned."

"Not unless Eowyn has awoken, too, Ada," said Legolas.

"Lassui," said Thranduil, with a long-suffering sigh, "I know you think of this *adaneth* as your wife—and I admit that your loyalty to her does you credit—but I will not treat her as my daughter-in-law."

"I am here to change your mind about that."

"See sense, *ion nín*." Thranduil was growing exasperated. "An *adaneth* is not for you."

"The Valar themselves gave her to me, Ada—"

Thranduil held up his hand. "We will discuss this in the morning, Lassui. When you have had a chance to consider it further. And you will dine with our guests tonight, whether the woman has awoken or not."

"I will not leave Eowyn's side while she is still sleeping, Ada," Legolas replied, firmly. "Besides, consider what an insult it would be to her brother to hold the Welcoming Feast without her—when you need him as an ally."

Thranduil sighed again. "Very well," he said, holding up his hands in mock submission, "we will wait until she wakes." Then he added, "She has made you insolent, Lassui."

"No Ada," replied Legolas. "It was *you* who taught me the importance of twisting my opponent's arm during negotiations."

...

"Is your father in here?" asked Eomer, peering round the door of the Healing Room.

"No," said Legolas, "you have just missed him."

Eomer stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "How is she?" he asked, taking a seat beside his sister.

"Still sleeping. But she is aware that I am here—and every now and then she murmurs something. I do not think it will be long before she wakes." He looked intently at Eomer. "Something else is troubling you, *mellon nín*. Has my father insulted you?"

"No, no. I can see that he will be a difficult man—*elf*—to deal with, but it is not that." Eomer paused, looking down at his hands. "Before we entered the forest, Legolas, you said that you could sense something else travelling with us, besides the bear..."

"Yes."

"Was it a woman?"

Legolas smiled. "No," he said. "It was a woodland sprite. A harmless being."

"Is she here now? In this room?"

"No..." Legolas was surprised at the question, but he looked around the Healing Room. "No, I do not think so."

"Good."

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"Why do you ask?"

"Because I would not want to hurt her, but—"

"Eomer!" Legolas' startling blue eyes widened. "You are saying that you know of her!"

"I have seen her, spoken to her, felt her touch." Eomer sighed. "I have *told* her that I am married—"

Legolas laughed.

"It is not a joke, Legolas. She says that she wants to *be* with me. What do I do?"

Legolas smiled reassuringly. "I do not think that you need do anything, *mellon nin*. I am sure that she will soon forget you now that she is back in the forest."

"She is not in the forest," said Eomer. "She is in my chambers."

Legolas was again surprised. "How do you know?"

"I can feel her when she touches me—like a warm breeze."

"Where does she touch you?"

"In the garden."

Legolas shook his head. "That was not what I meant, Eomer. Has she—how do I put this—has she touched you intimately?"

"You mean..." Eomer gestured towards his lap; Legolas nodded. "No! No, of course not. She is not that sort of woman—spirit—*sprite*."

"Good," said Legolas.

"What do I do?" Eomer repeated.

Legolas settled back against the head of the bed. Eowyn, in his arms, stirred but did not waken. "I am not sure there is anything that you *can* do, Eomer," he said. "You cannot see her and, though you can speak to her, you cannot hear her reply, so you cannot reason with her. And you admit that you do not want to hurt her feelings. Therefore, if she wants to follow you —"

"No! I cannot allow that! She sleeps beside me. If she returns to Edoras with me..." He held up his hands in despair.

"But Lothíriel cannot see her either."

"Legolas! If it were you and Eowyn, what would you do?"

"I would ignore her."

"And let her watch you? With Eowyn?"

"Perhaps she would not want to watch that. Perhaps that would be too painful for her." said Legolas. "But, Eomer, there are many beings—corporeal and incorporeal—that follow us and watch us as we pass through life. Some we can see; some we cannot. If they do not harm us—or our loved ones—they are of no concern to us."

"She..." Eomer hesitated. "She has *made* herself of concern to me," he said, softly. He rose to

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his feet, walked over to the sideboard, and began fussing with the glass tumblers. "I do not know if you know this," he said, still very softly, "but I did not choose Lothíriel. Our marriage was a matter of political alliance. And..."

He sighed. "But I would never betray her, Legolas, even if such a thing were possible. Marriage is a commitment for life."

"How did you come to see her—the sprite?" asked Legolas, gently.

"I think it was the enchantment. I must have swallowed some of the water. I did not fall asleep, as you did, but I was completely exhausted—she said that I was between sleeping and waking."

"Then perhaps that is the answer," said Legolas. "Send someone to the Enchanted River to fetch a flask of water—Valandil and Orodreth would do it for you. Then take a drop, and see if you can speak to her."

...

"Hello..."

"Hello, melmenya." He kissed her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Thirsty."

"I will fetch you a drink."

Legolas climbed off the bed, walked gracefully over to a side table and poured out a tumbler of water. He was wearing a short white night-shirt and as he bent with the jug, Eowyn could see the beautiful curve of his buttocks through the thin fabric, and his muscular thighs beneath.

"And *frisky*," she added.

Legolas laughed heartily. He held the glass to her lips and helped her take a few sips.

"You are in a good mood," she said. She looked around the room. "Where are we, Legolas?"

"In the Healing Room of my father's Halls. Do you remember what happened, *meleth nín*?" He set the glass down on the nightstand and took her in his arms.

She laid her head on his shoulder. "I remember the bear coming out of the trees; I remember *falling*... You pulled me out of the water?"

"With Eomer and Haldir's help."

She smiled. "Thank you," she said. "Are Eomer and Haldir all right?"

"Eomer was here just before you awoke, melmenya. They are both fine—"

"Brightstar!"

"He is fine too. He had a few scratches, which Valandil has taken care of."

"What about the bear?"

"Haldir wounded it, but it is still at large." He smiled. "You are safe here, though, melmenya."

"It is *you* it wants," said Eowyn. "I was just in the way. But..." She hesitated. "Why did you not know it was there, Legolas? You knew that it was following us along the Anduin..."

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"I have been wondering that myself, melmenya. And why did I not sense it on The Carrock?" He shook his head. "Perhaps I was distracted. Paying too much attention to other things."

"To me."

"Oh, melmenya, I did not mean that, I just... I feel I let you down."

"No, you did not! You rescued me—both times. Besides," she whispered in his ear, "I would far rather have a lover than a bodyguard. Especially at the moment..." She slipped her hand under his night-shirt and stroked him encouragingly.

"You are a wicked woman, melmenya."

She grinned, sliding her fingers up and down.

"Mmmmm." Legolas moaned as he kissed her neck.

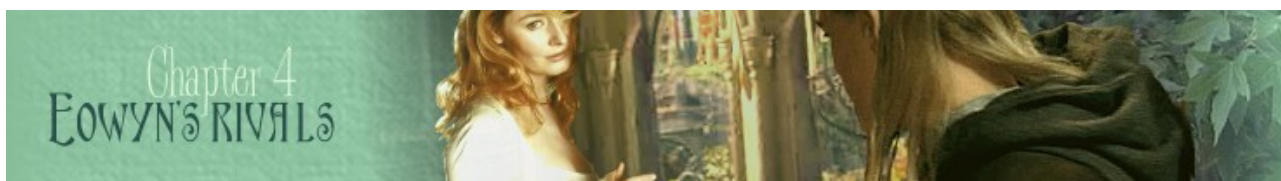
"Does your father know anything about the bear?"

Legolas laughed against her skin. "You never stop do you? I have not had a chance to ask him, mel—"

"No, Princess Eowyn, I do not."

Extra scenes: [The misadventures of little legolas](#)

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Chapter 4: Eowyn's rivals

The couple instantly sprang apart. Legolas pulled down his night-shirt. "Ada!" he cried. "You might have knocked!"

"This is a public place, Lassui," said Thranduil, unimpressed. "Anyone could have walked in." He sat down beside the bed. "Well—are you going to introduce me properly, *ion nín*?"

Legolas took a deep breath. "Adar, this is Princess Eowyn, *bereth nín*; Eowyn, this is my father, King Thranduil."

Eowyn was blushing deeply, but she still managed to smile, place her hand on her heart and bow her head graciously. "*Gíl síla erin lû e-govaded vín*," she said.

"*Baren bar lin*," replied Thranduil.

"Thank you."

"To return to your question, *híril nín*," continued Thranduil, looking at her with some interest, "as far as I know there have been no bears in the Woodland Realm since the time of Beorn the skin changer. Do you know of Beorn?"

"Legolas and Gimli have told me a little," said Eowyn.

"Beorn dwelt, some years before the Ring war, on the east bank of the Anduin, near The Carrock. It is said that he lived in a house full of animals..." Thranduil shrugged his shoulders. "It is certainly true that he could take the form of a giant bear and that, in that shape, he would guard the fords and mountain passes from orcs and wargs. Where he learned the trick of changing skin I do not know—perhaps from Beren, his distant ancestor, or perhaps from the bears themselves. No matter; he was our friend, and the wild bears followed him as soldiers follow their general. That is why, since his time, no bear has ever troubled Eryn Lasgalen."

"Until *now*," Eowyn corrected.

Thranduil was momentarily taken aback. Then he smiled. "As you say, *híril nín*, until now."

"But, if Beorn could change shape," said Eowyn, "and if, as Legolas says, he is believed to have passed on the gift to some of his descendants, might not this bear be one of them? I have little experience of bears, but, to me, this one did not seem to behave like an animal. Could it have been a Beorning?" She glanced at Legolas.

Thranduil shook his head. "I do not think so, *híril nín*. True, Beorn is reputed to have passed his knowledge to the men of his line. But his son, Grimbeorn, fought beside me during the Ring war. The Beornings have territorial ambitions, but they are still a noble, if simple, people. No—this creature is not a man. This creature is wild bear from the south."

"Then what are you going to do about it?" Eowyn asked. She heard Legolas clear his throat, but she chose to ignore his warning. "After all," she added, "the bear has attacked your son."

"I am aware of that, *híril nín*," said Thranduil, and his tone had an edge that could have been anger but could, equally, have been admiration. "I have already sent a detachment of guards

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to the Enchanted River. They will find this animal and kill it. It is regrettable; but once an animal has attacked an elf—or a man—it can no longer be trusted." Then he added, "But you said that it does not behave like a bear. How, then, does it behave?"

Eowyn considered his question for a moment. "Like an orc," she said. "It behaves like an orc."

...

Thranduil walked slowly down the corridor.

Lassui is right, he thought. She is quick and clever and brave—a fearsome warrior, too, by all accounts. And he could not help wondering, for a moment, what a Shieldmaiden might be like in bed, for he had caught a glimpse of her little hand...

He shook his head.

Yes, she would make the perfect consort for Lassui were it not—he sighed—were it not that, like some beautiful butterfly, she will flutter her wings, and mate, and die within the day.

And then my son will die too.

So I must separate them.

But suppose it is already too late?

...

"My father likes you, Eowyn *nín*," said Legolas, softly, still looking towards the door.

"He hides it well."

Legolas smiled, and shook his head. "No, *melmenya*. No, he shows it very clearly." He turned to her. "Are you sure that you want to attend the Welcoming Feast tonight, *meleth nín*? Because, if you do, we will need to bathe and dress."

...

He led her down one of the long, torch-lit passages. "You must remember, *melmenya*," he said, "that I have not been here for some years."

"Are you trying to warn me that your chambers will be untidy?" Eowyn asked, playfully.

Legolas laughed. "Here we are," he said. He opened a heavy, panelled door and stepped aside to allow her to enter.

Eowyn gasped. "It is *wonderful*!" she said, clasping her hands together.

Someone had already lit the candles and, in the soft light, Eowyn could see two rows of natural stone pillars—tastefully rugged in some places but delicately carved with leaves in others—flanking a large central living area. To the left, beyond the pillars, was the bedroom, its elegant bed draped with translucent silks embroidered with more leaves. To the right was the bathing room, with a carved marble bath silhouetted against an open doorway, which led to a garden cavern filled with exotic foliage. Eowyn stood in the centre of the chambers and turned full circle. "It is all so beautiful, Legolas!" she cried. "*Lasgalen!*"

Laughing, Legolas pulled her into his arms and kissed her happily. "I am glad you like it. It is very different from Eryn Carantaur."

"Yes. But it still shows the same *refined* elven taste—"

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Legolas nipped her neck.

"Ow!"

"Aw—I will kiss it better, melmenya..." he said, slowly manoeuvring her towards the bedchamber. Giggling, Eowyn slid her hands down to his leggings, pulled at his lacings, and slipped her hands inside.

"Oh," he whispered, "oh, yes..." He gently pushed her down onto the bed. "We are alone at last, Eowyn *nín*. We do not need to be quiet—"

From somewhere by the garden, an elleth cleared her throat.

Still straddling Eowyn, Legolas looked over his shoulder. "*Rothinzil?*"

"My lord..." The elleth stepped forward and curtsied. "I was just—er—I was just tending the *plants*..." She gestured towards the garden cavern. "And King Thranduil has asked me to take care of the lady."

Eowyn sat up, pushed her hair back from her face, and peered around Legolas' arm, smiling. "That will not be necessary, thank you, Rothinzil," she said, cheerfully. But then she noticed how the girl's eyes were lingering on Legolas. And something stirred in her memory: *A serving elleth... I treated her well*. Eowyn felt a sudden surge of annoyance. "So you may leave us now," she said, firmly.

"Yes, my lady." The girl curtsied again and hurried from the room.

"That was one of them," said Eowyn, softly.

Legolas sighed. "Yes, melmenya. I am sorry." He lay down beside her.

"And she still wants you." She sighed. "But not as much as *I* want you!" And she threw herself on top of him, and pinned him to the bed.

...

Their playful wrestling quickly turned to urgent lovemaking.

After almost three weeks of strained celibacy, frequent interruptions and the constant fear of being overheard, it was glorious, finally, to let themselves go. "Oh my love," Eowyn gasped, between Legolas' exuberant thrusts, "oh—oh—I had forgotten it could be like this..."

And suddenly, with almost no warning, her release rushed through her, twisting her body with its power, and she cried out to her elf in gratitude. And then, as the pleasure began to ebb, she felt another tiny, miraculous spark flicker deep inside her and, as her beloved elf kept thrusting, a second release, softer than the first, but no less beautiful, washed through her limbs and left her weeping with joy. And Legolas, trembling from his own climax, kissed away her tears.

And then they lay together, clasping hands and gazing into each other's eyes, smiling.

...

Once everyone had been seated in the Great Hall, Thranduil's Chief Counsellor called for silence and the Elvenking himself rose to welcome his guests. He introduced Eomer and Gimli, sitting on his left, to Bergthórr beytill, High Chieftain of the North Beornings, and his son, Bjarni Bergthórsson, and his lovely daughter, Gunnhildr Bergthórsdottir.

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Then he asked them all to join him in celebrating the return to Eryn Lasgalen of his only son, the Crown Prince Legolas.

At a sign from the Chief Counsellor, the court musicians played a joyful fanfare, and the assembled company applauded as Legolas, wearing his state robes and coronet, entered the Hall leading—to Thranduil's annoyance—Eowyn by the hand.

...

The Elvenking—who never spent a silver piece without good cause—had spared no expense on the banquet. His magnificent Hall, hewn from living rock, glittered with the light of a thousand candles, and his tables, laid with the finest silver, groaned under platters of roasted meats and exotic vegetables and dainty elven delicacies—lavender cakes and rose petal sorbets and creamy cowslip syllabubs—and flowed with ale and mead and with the strong wines of Dorwinion.

...

Legolas was so completely absorbed by Eowyn's company that he had not noticed the beautiful elleth sitting opposite.

"Good *evening*, Lassui," she repeated

Legolas slowly dragged his eyes from Eowyn and looked across the table. "Lindorië," he said. "It has been a long time..."

"Only five years," said Lindorië. Then she added, in Elvish, "Nothing to us; though I imagine a mortal would feel the passage of five years."

Legolas turned back to Eowyn. She did not appear to have caught Lindorië's comment, but she raised her eyebrows slightly as if to ask, *Another?* and Legolas nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"*Melethril nín*," he said, "may I introduce Lady Lindorië? Lady Lindorië, this is Princess Eowyn, my wife."

Eowyn had deliberately chosen to emphasise her non-elven nature by wearing a gown cut in the human style—though exquisitely stitched and beaded by her own elven seamstress—and by leaving her thick, waving hair loose about her shoulders, the way that Legolas liked it. She held out her hand, human fashion.

Lindorië looked at it dubiously; after a long moment's consideration, she briefly grasped it, then she turned back to Legolas and said, in Elvish, "I had heard that your father did not approve of your mortal, Lassui."

"Use the Common Tongue, Lindë," said Legolas. "There is nothing you cannot say in front of Eowyn."

The elleth smiled at Legolas wickedly. "How long have you known Tithen Lassui, Princess Eowyn?" she asked, still watching Legolas' face.

"Since the Ring war—almost five years, Lady Lindorië," said Eowyn politely.

The elleth's smile broadened. "Hmm—then he must have climbed straight into *your* bed after leaving mine."

Legolas swallowed hard. But he had underestimated Eowyn.

"Oh no," said the woman, sweetly. "He made *several* more conquests after he left you; but

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once he had met *me* he lost all desire for any other."

Legolas squeezed her hand in admiration.

...

"Would you care for some roast venison, my lady?" asked Gimli, politely. He had been trying to draw Bergthórr beytill's daughter into conversation all evening.

"No, thank, you," she said—so softly that Gimli could scarcely hear her.

"Some wine then?" he persisted.

Gunnhildr shook her head again.

"Ale?"

The girl's shoulders quivered slightly.

At last! thought Gimli. *I have made her laugh.* "Will you not raise your veil, my lady, and let us see your lovely face?"

"That is not the custom amongst my people, my lord," she said.

"But you are amongst friends from different lands here, my lady," said Gimli. "And you may rest assured that, if anyone tried to treat you immodestly, I would defend your honour instantly."

The girl still hesitated for a moment longer, then slowly raised her veil.

She is, sadly, no beauty, thought Gimli, *but it is a good, honest face.* He smiled warmly. "Gimli, son of Gloin, at your service, Lady Gunnhildr," he said, "and may I present my friend, Eomer King..."

Eomer bowed his head politely. "My lady," he began, "it is a pleasure—"

A sharp gust of wind blew across the table, and extinguished the candles.

...

"Pay no mind to Lindorië, my lady," said the elleth sitting to Eowyn's right. "Her tongue can be sharp but she is not really malicious."

Eowyn turned to her neighbour, a pretty elleth with pale brown hair and intense, golden-green eyes, and briefly wondered where her strange colouring had come from—she had learned that elves, gentle and compassionate in so many ways, could be unthinkingly harsh towards those they considered to have tainted blood.

"I am Aredhel, my lady," said the elleth, placing her hand on her heart and bowing her head, "daughter of Astaldo, King Thranduil's Chief Counsellor."

Eowyn returned her greeting. Then she remembered Legolas' confession: *There was the daughter of my father's Chief Counsellor...* She looked deeply into the elleth's eyes.

Aredhel smiled warmly.

Yes, thought Eowyn, *we will be friends.* She held out her hand, "I am pleased to meet you, Lady Aredhel," she said and, leaning towards her, she added, softly, "Legolas has told me a great deal about his past."

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The elleth blushed slightly. "That ended many years ago, my lady," she said. "We—Legolas and I—we were both very young, but now we are grown up." She smiled. "And I am betrothed to Prince Legolas' friend, Singollo. See—he is sitting beside your March Warden. And the elf beside him is my cousin, Voronwë. Legolas, Singollo and Voronwë were inseparable as elflings. Always getting into scrapes."

"Your betrothed is very handsome," said Eowyn. She smiled at the thought of Legolas as a mischievous elfling. "Now, you *must* tell me some embarrassing stories of Legolas' childhood..."

...

"Just what do you and Thranduil expect to achieve by these negotiations, Eomer King?"

Eomer shook his head, good-humouredly. "The talking does not begin until tomorrow, Chief Bergthórr beytill," he said, and he could not help but smile at the man's name. "Tonight is for feasting." But Bergthórr—a small, shrewd man—was clearly still suspicious and Eomer decided that a diversion was required. "I have heard the Beornings praised for two things," he said, loudly, "their fierceness in battle and their ability to hold their liquor."

Bergthórr beytill's companions cheered loudly. "But we Rohirrim are no blushing maidens in these things either—and nor are our friends, the dwarves. Which Beorning is willing to match Lord Gimli, here, and me, tankard for tankard?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Eomer saw King Thranduil shake his head, disdainfully. *You will get your chance to prove yourself in the council room tomorrow, my lord Elvenking,* he thought, *but I will prove myself, here, tonight.*

...

Legolas slipped his arm around Eowyn's waist and kissed her cheek lightly. "I am glad to see you making friends with Aredhel, melmenya," he said. "Hers is a kindly spirit."

"I like her very much," said Eowyn. "And we have a great deal in common."

"Melmenya!"

"I did not mean being bedded by *you*, you conceited elf!"

"Yes, you did."

"Well, perhaps I wanted you to *think* that I did..." She grinned mischievously. Then she asked, more seriously, "Your father has surrounded us with your former lovers, has he not?"

"Yes."

"Then you had better introduce me—we cannot have him thinking that you are keeping secrets from me."

Legolas smiled. "Have I ever told you how much I admire your spirit, Shieldmaiden?"

"Yes. But I always enjoy hearing it again."

"Are you ready?"

"How do I look?"

"Like a golden flower," said Legolas.

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"Is that good?"

"Very good."

"Then let us do it."

...

"Twelve," said Heðinn austmannaskelfir, calmly, adding his empty tankard to a carefully constructed pyramid.

"Twelve," cried Snorri blátönn, wiping his forehead on his sleeve.

Eomer threw back his head and emptied his tankard in a single draught. "Twelve," he said.

"Thirteen!" roared Gimli.

...

"Lady Carnëmírië," said Legolas, "may I present my wife, Princess Eowyn. Melmenya, this is Mírië."

Eowyn and the elleth both smiled, each recognising a kindred spirit. *Another friend*, thought Eowyn. "I am very pleased to meet you, Mírië," she said, bowing her head.

But Mírië held out her hand, human fashion and, laughing happily, Eowyn clasped it in both of hers.

...

The drinking contest had attracted a large crowd of onlookers.

Heðinn austmannaskelfir, still calm, and showing no signs of flagging, added another tankard to his neat pile, "Eighteen."

Snorri blátönn paused to belch, "Sixteen," before slamming his empty tankard on the table and lifting another.

Eomer loosened the collar of his tunic. A cooling breeze blew softly across his temples and he suddenly felt invigorated. He drained his tankard. "Eighteen," he said.

"Twenty!" shouted Gimli and, ever the showman, he set down his tankard with a mighty flourish, raising a cheer from the elves of Eryn Carantaur, who considered him their champion.

...

And they say, thought Thranduil, shaking his head, *that the future belongs to men.*

They have the all refinement of swine—except that swine do not hack down the trees and burn away the undergrowth. I shall never sail west. Not whilst the Greenwood needs my protection.

But Legolas has already heard the gulls' cry...

He watched his son, calmly introducing the woman to each of his former lovers. *She is exceptional*, he thought. *And I suppose there is some consolation in his bedding a mortal, for she cannot sail with him and he will not leave whilst she lives. Should I, then, give them my blessing? He could certainly have chosen a worse companion—*

A loud cheer rose from the crowd watching the drinking contest.

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Eomer King is far shrewder than I gave him credit for, Thranduil thought. But I suspect we will still find little Bergthórr beytill a hard—he smiled at the pun—*negotiator.*

...

"*Meleth nín*, may I introduce Lady Tindomerel? And her sister, Lady Culurien?" said Legolas. "*Hiril nín*, this is Princess Eowyn, my wife."

"I am very pleased to meet you, Lady Tindomerel, Lady Culurien," said Eowyn, bowing her head with a smile.

The two ellith returned her greeting with frosty politeness.

...

"You slept with two *sisters*?" whispered Eowyn as they walked back to their seats. "They must have made your life a misery"—she had a sudden thought—"not *together*?"

Legolas hesitated. "Only once..."

"Legolas!"

"It was during a harvest ceremony. They ambushed me."

Eowyn smiled, wickedly, "Were you *very* badly hurt?"

Legolas grinned.

"Can we go back to our chambers?" she asked, suddenly.

...

Snorri blátönn lay, face down, in an elegant dish of sweetmeats, surrounded by his empty tankards.

Eomer had slowed slightly, but was still drinking gamely. "Twenty-two," he said, wiping his beard.

Gimli and Heðinn austmannaskelfir were now neck and neck. "Twenty-five," they both gasped, banging their tankards down simultaneously.

...

"Legolas—I have left my purse in the Great Hall!"

Legolas smiled. "You should have strapped it around your waist, like a sword, *melmenya*. Do you know the way back to our chambers?"

"Yes."

"Then you go ahead and I will go back for it." He kissed her forehead, "And, when I return," he added, in a whisper, "I hope to find you undressed and waiting for me."

...

I, thought Eomer, cannot drink another drop. Not a sip. Not a... He lowered his tankard very precisely, but the table moved at the last moment and the metal hit the wood with a deafening crash. "Gentlemen," he began, belching, "gentlemen..." What was it he was trying to say? *A few gracious words to concede defeat.* He began again. "Gentlemen..."

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A cold blast of wind whipped past his shoulder. Eomer turned to his neighbour, Heðinn austmannaskelfir, and watched him, curiously. For a few moments the Beorning remained frozen in mid-sip, his eyes round with surprise. Then he lowered his tankard, leaned forwards, very, very slowly, and fell asleep the instant his forehead touched the table.

"Gimli, my friend," said Eomer, gratefully laying his own head down on his folded arms, "you have won..." And, as he closed his eyes, a soothing breeze caressed the back of his neck.

...

Legolas pulled out a chair and looked under the table.

"Has your woman run away, Lassui?" asked Lindorië in a little-girl voice. "Do you need company, *melethron*?"

"Thank you, Lindë, but no thank you. Have you seen Eowyn's purse?"

"She makes you run errands for her?"

"Shameful, is it not?" said Legolas, smiling. "But she rewards me so well."

Lindë pouted. "Do you ever miss me just a little bit, Lassui?" she asked.

Legolas sighed. "We had fun, Lindë," he said, leaning on the table, "I cannot deny that. But we both knew that it was never meant to last."

"It was fun," agreed Lindë, "especially that night in your father's bedchamber..." She glanced across at Thranduil. Then she asked, wistfully, "Is it true what they say about women and elves, Lassui?"

Legolas, pulling out another chair, did not answer.

"Well, at least you have the staying power. Voronwë would not be up to it."

"You are exhausting Voronwë now, are you?"

"He tries, but he does not have your big *ceber*, Lassui," said Lindë, sadly, "*ceber daur chîn*. There is *no one* like you. If *she* ever leaves you—"

"You are drunk, Lindë," said Legolas, firmly. Then he patted her shoulder, kindly. "Go to bed. Go on..."

He watched her leave, unsteadily, before turning to the woman sitting bedside him. "Excuse me, Lady Gunnhildr, have you seen my wife's purse?"

...

Eowyn sighed. *I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere*, she thought, as she tried to retrace her steps. *This is beautiful*—she stepped through a carved stone door into a large garden cavern, cupped her hands around a slender branch and sniffed a cloud of sweetly scented blossom—but *I do not remember passing it before...*

Back in the corridor, she looked around anxiously. *Legolas will be back before I am...*

A familiar figure drifted past an opening to her right.

"Lindorië!" cried Eowyn, lifting her heavy skirts and running after the elleth, "wait! Lindorië!"

...

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"It does not suit you, Lasdithen," said Thranduil, nodding at Eowyn's purse. "Nor, to be honest, does it suit her. I see her with a bow..."

"A sword," Legolas corrected, smiling. "She is an outstanding swordswoman, Ada. And you like her, I can tell. So why not give us your—"

"We will talk about that first thing tomorrow morning, Lassui, as we agreed."

"As *you* agreed, Ada," said Legolas, mischievously. "I had no say in the matter."

"So you always claim," said Thranduil, dryly, "but I find that you generally get your way in the end."

"Does that mean—"

"*Tomorrow*, Lassui!"

Legolas grinned. "Good night, then, Ada."

"Good night, *ion nín*."

Legolas had turned to leave, still smiling. But something in his father's tone made him pause. He turned back and said, very quietly, "Please do not take her from me, Ada. I know that you only do what you think is best for me but, this time... I *love* her, Ada."

"Oh, Lassui—"

Thranduil reached out towards his son and Legolas stepped back towards his father. But—the moment they embraced—both elves suddenly sensed danger.

Legolas pulled back. "Eowyn!" He gasped.

"Near your chambers!"

Father and son ran from the Great Hall together.

"Come! Follow us!" called Thranduil to the guards at the door.

...

Eowyn hurried through the ornate doorway and turned to the right. *Gods*, she thought, catching a glimpse of Lindorië's deep green skirts disappearing around another corner, *elves can move fast!*

"Please wait, Lindë; I am lost—"

Before she could turn the corner, a familiar sound echoed through the vaulted space and a huge shape lumbered across her path, following the route taken by the elleth.

No, it cannot be! Gods! Lindorië!

The Shieldmaiden pulled a torch down from the wall and, holding it like a sword, ran through the arched doorway.

The elleth was cowering before the huge golden bear, frozen with fear.

Extra scene: [The Sisters](#)

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Chapter 5: The trial

"Lindorië," said Eowyn, calmly, swinging the torch over her head to draw the bear's attention, "drop to the ground."

The elleth did not move.

"Lindë! Listen to me! You must get out of the way! Drop to the ground!"

Lindorië began to turn...

"DOWN!" Eowyn bellowed.

Suddenly understanding, the elleth collapsed to the floor, and the Shieldmaiden ran forward, swinging the torch back and forth, the full width of the corridor.

The bear took a step backwards.

Eowyn, now standing protectively over Lindorië's huddled form, jabbed her torch at its head, shouting, "Get back! Get back! You will not have her!"

The bear retreated another step.

Eowyn felt Lindorië's shaking hand clasp her ankle. "Courage, Lindë," she said, softly, never taking her eyes off the bear, "help will soon be here." She jabbed the torch again.

"Eowyn! Melmenya, where are you?" Legolas' voice echoed down the tunnel.

"Legolas!" Eowyn shouted, "Legolas! We are here! Come quickly!"

...

"Ilúvatar!" cried Thranduil.

He tore another torch from the wall. "Back," he shouted. "Back, *brôg!* Get back!" He ran up beside Eowyn and, together, they lunged at the creature. The bear backed away a few more steps.

Legolas threw himself in front of Eowyn and held up his hands in a gesture of peace.

"I *love* my wife," he said, "*and* my father, and Lindë is my *friend*. Please do not hurt them." Then he repeated, in Elvish, "I love them."

For a moment, the bear seemed to listen; then it dropped to all fours and, with a howl filled with immense sadness, it turned and loped away.

Thranduil made to follow.

"No, Ada," Legolas cried, as he reached for Eowyn. "No! Do not go after it! Send the guards!"

"But—"

"Please, Ada!"

Thranduil turned to the four elves who had followed them from the Great Hall. "I want it captured," he said. "Bring it back alive."

The guards took off in pursuit.

Legolas gently removed the torch from Eowyn's hands. "Are you all right, melmenya?" he

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asked.

"Yes." She smiled. Now that the danger had passed she seemed dazed. "But *Lindorië* needs attention," she said. Legolas kissed her forehead; then, handing the torch to his father, he knelt, with Eowyn, beside the terrified elleth.

"Your woman saved me, Lassui," whispered Lindorië, "she saved me..."

Legolas smiled. "I know," he said.

"Can you carry her to the Healing Room?" asked Eowyn.

"I will carry her," said Thranduil. "You take your *adaneth* back to your chambers, Lassui, and put her to bed. We will talk about this—and the other thing—tomorrow."

Legolas gave his father a grateful smile.

...

"I have singed my sleeve," said Eowyn sadly.

"I am sure that Valaina will be able to replace it for you, my darling," said Legolas. "Shall I help you undress?"

Eowyn nodded.

Legolas began unlacing her gown. "What are you smiling at, Eowyn *nín*?" he asked.

"You call me 'melmenya' when everything is normal and 'Eowyn *nín*' when you are either pleased or angry with me. It is only when we have had a real scare that you use the Common Tongue and call me 'my love' or 'my darling'."

Legolas, carefully drawing her sleeves down her arms, paused to kiss her hands, then smiled up at her.

"I am so tired, Legolas," she said, touching his face. "Do you mind if I just sleep tonight?"

"Of course not, my darling."

"Will you lie with me?"

"Of course."

"And sing?"

Legolas smiled. "You know I will." He slid her bodice down to her waist. "Can you stand?" Eowyn rose to her feet. "Step out of it... Good. Now, sit down, and I will fetch some water to wash that soot off your face. Would you like a drink, melmenya?"

Eowyn nodded.

"You were very brave tonight, Eowyn *nín*," said Legolas, as he poured a glass of fruit cordial. "Brave and selfless, going to Lindë's aid like that." He uncorked a small flask and added a few drops of a thick, silvery liquid. "I am so proud of you."

"You will make my head swell," said Eowyn, yawning.

Legolas smiled. "Drink this. I have added some miruvor; it should make you feel better."

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He fetched a bowl of water. "My father wants to talk to me early tomorrow morning," he said, carefully sponging her face, "I think he intends to give us his permission."

"Can I come with you?" asked Eowyn.

"I do not see why not—if you are awake by then." He pulled back the silken sheet and helped her into bed, then began to undress himself.

"It is strange," said Eowyn, watching him. "Now, we are as close as ever—closer perhaps. But there were moments, during our journey here, when I really thought I was losing you. I was afraid that you were ashamed to show me to your father. But Gimli kept saying—"

"Gimli?"

"Gimli is wise in these matters," said Eowyn, smiling, "and a good friend to both of us."

"What did he say?" asked Legolas, climbing into bed beside her.

"That fool of an elf is just worrying about the cavalcade and he thinks he is sparing you by not telling you, lassie!"

Legolas laughed. "You sound just like him." He pulled the embroidered coverlet around her shoulders. "He was right, melmenya."

"Especially about the fool part. You should know by now that you do not need to spare me anything, Legolas. I *want* to share your troubles."

He drew her into his arms and settled her head on his shoulder. "I think I will always be a fool when it comes to you, Eowyn *nín*. Half the time I want to wrap you up in lambswool and keep you safe; the other half I want you fighting by my side. I need two of you."

"One to wear and one for best," said Eowyn, chuckling. "Which would you sleep with?"

"Oh, the warrior. No question." Legolas laughed. "Do you remember the night I spent drinking with Aragorn and Eomer at Minas Tirith, with some of the Gondorian nobles? One of the lords was describing, in some detail, his notion of the ideal woman. And I happened to say, 'I prefer a warrior'—"

Eowyn laughed.

"And he said—"

"I can imagine what he said!" said Eowyn. "He said, 'We already have too many of your sort down in the barracks!'"

"Almost word for word."

"You are so innocent, Legolas! What did *you* say?"

"I said, very coldly, 'Then they will each need to find their own Shieldmaiden, my lord, for I intend to keep my wife for myself.'"

Eowyn snuggled against his chest. "How do you suppose the bear got through your father's gates?" she asked, suddenly.

"I have been wondering that myself, melmenya; and I daresay my father has too."

"Is there another way into the palace?"

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"From the river—the way Gimli's father escaped."

"Gimli's father *escaped*?"

"It is a long story, *melmenya*. My father caught him trespassing and imprisoned him and his companions—I do not now remember all the details but I am sure that Gimli would be only too pleased to tell you his father's version of events."

Eowyn smiled. "How did he get out?"

"There is an underground stream, running through the mountain, beneath the palace, that is used to transport supplies—a trapdoor in the palace cellars opens straight into the tunnel."

"But the trapdoor must be locked?"

"No. There is a watergate at the tunnel mouth, where the water flows out of the hillside, but so much traffic passes along the stream that even that is often left raised... Though getting *in* by that route would still be difficult, even for an elf. And a bear is nowhere near so agile."

"No." Eowyn thought for a moment. "You know," she said, "I still think it could be one of the Beornings. He would have come in through the gates as a man and not turned into a bear until he was safely inside. And that would explain why you can feel him only some of the time—when he is a bear."

"It would make sense," Legolas agreed, slowly. "But why would a Beorning attack Lindë? Or you or me, for that matter?"

"That, I do not know," said Eowyn. She smiled at him. "Legolas," she said, running her fingers across his cheek and over the tip of his ear, "suddenly, I do not feel tired at all..."

...

Legolas poured a little more scented oil into his palm and rubbed his hands together. "Where were we?" he asked.

"*Tynd*," said Eowyn.

"Yes..." He laid his hands lightly on her breasts, gently massaging them. "*Tynd voe*," he said. "Soft—"

"That tickles," said Eowyn.

"It is supposed to be *sensual*, *melmenya*."

"No, it tickles."

"Relax..."

"It still tickles."

Legolas laughed. "Perhaps Shieldmaidens are not sensitive there," he said. "What about this?" He swept his hand down, over her stomach, and let it rest, lightly, on her small patch of golden hair. "*Thâr*," he said.

"That," said Eowyn, wriggling against his hand, "is a *much* nicer word. *Thâr*... What next?"

Legolas slid his fingers down between her thighs and—whisper soft—tickled her swollen lips. "*Criss*," he said

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A peal of laughter burst from Eowyn's throat, "*Criss*," she giggled.

"*Shhhhh*, melmenya," said Legolas, laughing too. "We are only just starting!" He stilled his hand and waited until she had regained some of her self-control. Then, leaning down to kiss her mouth, he slipped his fingers just inside her.

"*Rond*," he said, exploring her, gently, "*agor... laug... loen... rond*."

"Oh... *rond*. Even *nicer*..." Eowyn arched her back, trying to take his hand deeper. "Legolas," she said in a small voice, "I *want* you..."

"Just one more to learn, melmenya," he said, kissing her forehead.

He slowly withdrew his fingers, sliding them over her sensitive flesh, then brushed them against her swollen bud. "*Tuiw*," he said, circling his fingertips, "though some call it '*mîr*'"—he pulled up his nightshirt with his free hand—"and others"—he knelt between her open legs—'*meril*'..."

He slipped his oily hands beneath her, lifted her onto his lap, and—

"*Ceber*," whispered Eowyn as he entered her. "*Ai, gerich veleth nin, ceber vain*."

...

Someone was pounding at the door.

"Leave me!" cried Eomer.

"Your Majesty," said a familiar, gentle voice. "I think I can *help* you."

Eomer sat up far too quickly. "Gods!" He clasped his head. "Come in then," he called.

The door opened and Master Dínendal entered, diffidently.

"Did you put me to bed?" asked Eomer.

"I helped, your Majesty," said Dínendal, "but it was the March Warden and your Counsellor who carried you."

"Did I win?"

"Not quite, your Majesty. But I think you might be considered to have come second."

Unwisely, Eomer nodded. "Oh!" he gasped, shuddering. "I do not remember much..."

"That is why I am here, your Majesty," said Dínendal.

He had already half-filled a tumbler with water and was carefully adding various ingredients to it. "It occurred to me," he explained, "that you and Lord Gimli will need all your wits about you later today." He carefully added a measure of red syrup to the water. "Though dwarves seem far less affected by the after effects of alcohol than men"—he dipped his wooden stirrer into an earthenware jar and drew out a small quantity of white powder—"which is strange, because you would think that their bodies, being so much smaller, would be more easily overwhelmed..."

"Dwarves are as tough as old boots," Eomer grumbled.

Dínendal considered his assessment. "They are certainly very resilient," he said, uncorking a small flask and adding a few drops of miruvor. He stirred the cocktail carefully, then handed

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the glass to Eomer.

"This is my mother's recipe, your Majesty," he said. "You must drink it all down at once."

"Does it taste bad?"

"It is not pleasant," Dínenal admitted, "but its effects are almost instantaneous. It is worth the ordeal."

Eomer looked dubiously at the foaming pink liquid. Then he raised the glass to his lips, threw back his head, and drained it. "By the gods," he cried, shuddering as he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, "that is powerful stuff!" He let out a long, slow breath. One by one, he stretched his limbs. Then, smiling at Dínenal, he stood up. "Your mother is a very clever woman—elleth—Master Healer."

"Thank you, your Majesty," said Dínenal. "One glass should be sufficient, but if the discomfort returns, just send for me."

"I shall. Thank you."

Eomer looked around his chambers—memories of the previous night had suddenly come flooding back to him. "Master Dínenal..." he said, as the healer began packing up his ingredients, "are you as sensitive to—to *things* as Legolas is?"

"Things, your Majesty?"

"If there were something—invisible—in this chamber, could you sense it?"

"You mean the sprite?"

"Thunder and lightning," said Eomer, "can everyone see her but me?" He sighed. "She is still here, then?"

"Yes, your Majesty. I cannot see her, but I know that she has been... guarding you, ever since Lorien," said Dínenal, closing his bag.

Eomer shook his head. "If you happen to see Valandil in your travels, will you tell him that I would like to speak to him? And thank you again, Master Dínenal."

He waited until the healer had left. "Firith!" he called, slowly turning round to face each corner of his chambers in turn, "Firith—I know what you did last night. And I am grateful. But you cannot stay with me! You *cannot*!"

...

Thranduil opened the door of his study and—uncharacteristically—allowed himself to show his surprise—and annoyance. "I had planned an informal talk between father and son, Lassui; I did not expect you to bring your advisor."

He beckoned Legolas and Lord Fingolfin into his spacious study-library and closed the door behind them. Legolas looked around the chamber. It had not changed in all the years he had been away—piles of open books still littered the marble floor, tattered notes and sketch maps still hung from the finely carved mouldings, and a deep drift of paper still hid the massive oaken desk.

Thranduil took a seat by the fire.

"If this *were* an informal talk, Ada," said Legolas, gesturing that Fingolfin should sit opposite his

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father, "we could have had it last night. Besides, Lord Fingolfin has a legitimate interest in this matter."

"Indeed?" Thranduil looked to Fingolfin for an explanation.

"I represent the citizens of Eryn Carantaur—"

"Citizens?"

"The people of Eryn Carantaur—elves and, increasingly, men—are not subjects, your Majesty," said Fingolfin. "We live there by choice. And Lord Legolas encourages us to take part the day-to-day decision-making of the colony—"

"Yes, yes," said Thranduil, dismissively. "But why would that give you any say in my son's private life?"

"Because Princess Eowyn is not just Lord Legolas' chosen companion, your Majesty," said Fingolfin, unintimidated by the Elvenking's brusque manner. "She is our Lady; and the people of Eryn Carantaur love her."

Thranduil sighed.

Then he turned to his son. "I am not unaware of this *adaneth's* merits, Lassui. She is brave and clever and—I have to admit—she has a certain"—he shrugged his shoulders—"beauty, if you happen to be attracted to mortals. But she has already lived for—what?—more than a third of her allotted span. She will *die*, Lassui! In much less than fifty years, she will die. And what will happen to *you* then?"

"I will die with her, Ada," said Legolas, simply, "unless..." He stopped short. He was certainly not ready to tell his father about the prophetic dreams he had had at Yuletide.

"But you are too late, Ada," he continued. "Far too late! Even if you *could* take her from me I would still be bound to her. And no one *can* take her from me. I want to marry her, properly. But if you refuse your permission I will simply live with her unmarried. And, then, if we have a child—your grandson, Ada—he will be illegitimate."

...

I love my wife, and my father, and Lindë is my friend. Please do not hurt them. I love them.

Eowyn awoke with a start and sat bolt upright.

"Legolas?"

A small piece of parchment lay on the pillow beside her.

'Since my father is not accustomed to waiting I thought it wise to leave my sleeping beauty undisturbed this morning,' it said. 'But if you do wake before nine o'clock, come and join us in his study, melmenya.

Your prince.'

Eowyn leaped out of bed, quickly washed and dressed, then set off in search of Legolas and some answers.

...

Thranduil turned to Fingolfin. "My son says that the Valar themselves selected this *adaneth* for him. What evidence have you seen of that?"

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Fingolfin shook his head. "The way the Valar indicate their choice is a mystery known only to the celebrant—"

"Do not presume tell me about the harvest rite, Fingolfin Cammirthorion. I have performed more rites than you have had conception days. And *I* know," he said, looking sharply at Legolas, "that the sign allows a degree of interpretation. It is not hard to overlook the Valar's principle choice and instead take her neighbour, if she is more to one's own tastes—"

"*Ada!*" cried Legolas, scandalised. "Use the rite as an excuse to satisfy my own desires? I would never do such a thing!" His eyes narrowed. "Have *you*?"

"Mind your own business," said Thranduil.

"Your Majesty," said Fingolfin, tactfully. "What I *can* tell you is that Lady Eowyn is exactly what the colony needs—what it has needed right from the start—a strong, capable co-ruler who throws herself whole-heartedly into all the business of state; a gentle champion of our weaker citizens; and an inspiration to our ellith and women. And I can also tell you—if Lord Legolas will permit me"—Legolas nodded—"that it is clear to all the people of Eryn Carantaur that she has brought your son immeasurable happiness."

Thranduil sighed deeply.

Then he rose to his feet, walked over to his desk and picked up a small, pink book. He pulled open the ribbon ties and carefully turned the pages.

"In this book there is a ancient decree," he began.

"'Pertaining to the case of Melethron and Gwilwileth'," interrupted Fingolfin, somewhat unwisely.

"You have heard of it?"

"Yes. Lady Eowyn asked me to search out any legal precedent that Lord Legolas might use to help persuade you."

Legolas stared at him in surprise.

Thranduil smiled. "Are you sure you want this woman who runs rings around you, Lassui?" He turned back to Fingolfin. "Why did you not mention it before?"

"Because the case ended in the woman's death—"

"Lord Fingolfin," said Thranduil, showing just a tiny *fraction* of the legendary cold fury that petrified friends and enemies alike, "do you seriously think that I would set my own prospective daughter—my son's *beloved*—any task that might threaten her already far too short life?"

For the first time since the meeting began Fingolfin seemed lost for words, but his discomfort was interrupted by a light tap at the door. Thranduil handed the book to Legolas, crossed to the door, and opened it.

"Ah, Eowyn *vell nín*," he said. "Come in, sit down. We were just talking about you."

...

Eomer laid down the lengthy intelligence report—compiled and painstakingly translated into the Common Tongue for him by Thranduil's March Warden, Singollo—and turned towards the door.

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"Enter," he called. "Ah, Valandil—thank you for coming."

"Your Majesty." The elf, apparently deciding that the easy camaraderie he and the king had shared on the journey was no longer appropriate, bowed courteously.

But Eomer hated ceremony. "Please sit down, my friend," he said, warmly. "Would you like a drink?"

"Yes—thank you, your Majesty," said Valandil.

Eomer poured a glass of fruit cordial. "I have never tasted anything like this stuff before," he said. "What is it called?"

"*Peich vallen*," said Valandil. "Golden syrup."

"King Thranduil could make himself a small fortune if he exported it to Rohan," said Eomer, handing the elf a glass. "But *please* do not tell him I said so." The man and the elf grinned at each other with something like their previous ease.

"Perhaps Legolas could make it in South Ithilien," continued Eomer, "though he would have to find a better name for it." He took a sip. "The reason I asked you here, Valandil, is that I need a favour, and Legolas thought that you might be willing to help me."

He placed his glass on the side table, clasped his hands together and stared intently at his fingers. "I will not go into the details of *why*, but I need a small quantity of water from the Enchanted River." He looked up at Valandil and caught the fleeting expression on the elf's face. "But, of course, you already know why," he said, "because, like every other elf in the cavalcade, you can sense her too."

"The sprite? Yes..."

Eomer shook his head. "You all knew that she was following me, and yet nobody told me."

"*Some* of us knew," corrected Valandil. "But, no, we did not tell you..." He looked uncomfortable, and Eomer found the expression quite incongruous on an elf. "You see," he continued, "sprites often attach themselves to men or—more rarely—to dwarves. The sprite does no harm, but it is generally better that the man does not know. Otherwise he is always uncomfortable, always wondering where the sprite is, and what she is doing."

"What she is doing is meddling in my life," said Eomer. "I know that she means well, but..." He sighed. "That is why I need the water, Valandil. A small amount seems to allow me to see and hear her. I want to talk to her—to reason with her."

Valandil looked dubious. "Woodland sprites are not known for their powers of reasoning, your Majesty. They are creatures of *instinct*."

"I must try *something*," said Eomer. "Will you fetch me some enchanted water?"

"Of course, your Majesty."

"Thank you. Legolas thought that Orodreth might be willing to go with you. And, please, Valandil," added Eomer with a broad smile, "be careful. I do not want to have to send out a search party to rescue you. Just think how embarrassing it would be to have King Thranduil's guards—your former comrades—see you carried back, snoring, by a bunch of Rohirrim."

...

"I have a simple proposal," said Thranduil. "Since we cannot decide this matter ourselves"—he

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ignored Legolas' attempt to contradict him—"we will ask the Valar to guide us. This case"—he held up the book, *Ancient Laws of the Silvan Elves*—"the case of Melethron and Gwilwileth, provides a clear precedent." He turned to Eowyn. "Melethron's father set Gwilwileth three tasks on the understanding that the Valar, if they approved of the union, would make it clear to him by helping her complete them."

"And did she succeed?" asked Eowyn.

"No, my lady," said Fingolfin softly. "The final task proved fatal."

"I see..."

"No, Ada!" cried Legolas, throwing himself down beside Eowyn and wrapping her in his arms.

"I will not permit it!"

"Do not be a fool, Lassui," said Thranduil curtly. "I have already said that I would do nothing to risk Eowyn's life. The tasks I shall set will be simple and practical—they will merely test her fitness to be your co-ruler."

"And if I fail the test?" asked Eowyn.

"If you fail, you will leave Eryn Carantaur and never see my son again."

"Ada!"

"You have already assured me, Lassui, that the Valar approve your choice. If you are right, there is no risk. But if you are wrong this will save you from the consequences of your mistake."

"It is a sort of trial by ordeal, my love," said Eowyn.

Legolas shook his head. "What is that?"

"In ancient times my people would try a suspected murderer by forcing him to perform a seemingly impossible task—he might be held under water for several minutes, or made to carry hot coals in his bare hands. If he survived the ordeal unscathed, the Elders took it as proof of his innocence—they assumed that the gods would protect a blameless man, no matter how extreme the trial."

"Are you willing to submit to the test, Eowyn Eomundiel?" asked Thranduil.

Eowyn bit her lip.

"Suppose she is not?" said Legolas. "We could go on living as we are."

"You *could*. But would you *want* to, Lassui? If the Valar really have blessed your union, there is no risk. Would you want to spend the rest of your short life knowing that you behaved as a coward—in this of all things? Would your lady?"

"I will do it," said Eowyn.

"Melmenya..." Legolas' eyes were shining with tears.

"I will do it, Legolas. And I will succeed."

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Chapter 6: The first task

"Eowyn! Wait!" Legolas caught her by the arm. "Where are you going, *meleth nín*?"

"We need to talk," said Eowyn.

"Yes, but"—he pressed his hand against her back—"come this way."

"We need *privacy*," said Eowyn, trying to pull him in the direction of their chambers.

"I know—please—this way."

"But there are guards everywhere..."

"Not where we are going."

With a sigh, Eowyn gave in and followed him.

"No one comes here any more," said Legolas, drawing her away from the main thoroughfare and down a long, narrow passage that led deep into the mountain "because my father forbids it. In here."

Together, they stepped through a low, crumbling, arched doorway.

Eowyn gasped.

They were standing inside an enormous garden cavern. She walked out into the space and turned full circle to look at it properly. It was not, in fact, a garden, but a small piece of woodland—shafts daylight, spilling from vents cut through the hillside above, fell on beeches and hawthorns, on creamy, scented elders, and on patches of delicate meadow grass littered with wild, pastel-coloured flowers.

"This is how I imagine the Shire..." she said.

"That is exactly what my mother wanted. This was *her* garden," said Legolas, smiling. "It is my secret place," he explained, leading her to a wooden seat beneath the trees. "However bad things may be, they always seem better sitting here."

Eowyn held out her arms to him.

"I could not live without you, *melmenya*," whispered Legolas, burying his face in her hair.

"It will not come to that, my love," said Eowyn, "not if you are right about my being the Valar's choice for you."

"There can be no doubt of that, Eowyn *nín*," Legolas replied, shaking his head. "They surrounded you with an aura—with glorious rays of mithril. You glowed like Ithil." Eowyn pressed her hand to his lips, trying to stop him revealing too much. But he kissed her fingers and whispered, "*Ithildin nín*."

"Oh, Legolas!"

They sat in silence for a long while, holding each other. Then Eowyn said, "I *shall* succeed, Legolas; I *shall*."

"I know. But if you do not—"

"I *shall*."

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"But if you do not, Eowyn *nín*, I will follow you. To Edoras or to wherever else you go—"

"I promised your father that I would never see you again."

"Then we will meet in the dark—"

"Legolas!"

"I mean it, Eowyn *nín*. I am an elf. My love is eternal. I cannot live without you."

...

"King Thranduil," said Eomer, bowing his head, stiffly.

"Eomer King. Please, take a seat." Thranduil was all graciousness. Eomer looked cautiously at the chair before sitting, worried that its legs might be designed to collapse beneath him.

"Can I offer you a drink?"

"No—thank you," said Eomer.

"I must congratulate you on your remarkable recovery after last night's—er—contest," said the Elvenking, pouring himself a glass of wine. "Very remarkable."

"We Rohirrim are known for our resilience," said Eomer, "and," he admitted, "your son's healer is very skilled."

"You know my son well," said Thranduil. He seated himself opposite Eomer.

"I consider him one of my closest friends," said Eomer. Then, watching Thranduil carefully, he added, "I consider him my *brother*."

"Indeed?" Thranduil gazed into his wineglass.

"And that will not change," said Eomer, firmly.

"In what respect?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you saying that you will always have brotherly feelings towards my son? Or are you saying that you will always count him your sister's husband?"

"Both," said Eomer.

"Would it surprise you to know that your sister has agreed never to see my son again—"

"She would not!"

"Oh, but she has. She has agreed to perform three tasks that I will set for her. If she fails to complete any of those tasks, she will comply with my wishes and never see my son again."

"Eowyn has never failed at anything in her life," said Eomer.

Thranduil smiled. "You think very highly of her."

"She is my sister; I love her."

"It is more than that, I think," said Thranduil. "You *admire* her—for her strength and for her quickness, and because she is far cleverer than you are."

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...

Legolas pulled Eowyn down from the wooden seat and laid her on the grassy ground.

"You look like a woodland sprite, *meleth nín*," he said, tracing his fingers along the contours of her face, and carefully spreading them through her golden hair, letting its strands fall amongst the pink and lilac flowers. "Oh, Eowyn *nín*!"

He leaned down and kissed her mouth, gently sucking her lips, like a succulent fruit. "I will not give you up," he whispered. "Not for *anything*..."

She pressed her hand to his mouth. "Please, do not say that, Legolas," she said. "It is not like you to say something like that."

"I am *not* myself here," he said. "Not any more. It is strange..."

Eowyn took that as her cue. "Last night," she said, softly, "when your father and I were holding off the bear, you spoke to it." She bit her lip, uncertainly. "I did not think anything of it at the time but, when I woke up this morning, I remembered what you said—and how you said it."

"Eowyn..."

"*I love them*', you said, and it worked. The bear was—it sounded—*hurt* by your words, but it walked away. Why?"

Legolas lay down beside her and stared up at the roof of the cave. "I do not..." he began.

"Yes you do! You *do* know; so tell me: why?"

Legolas said nothing.

"*Why*, Lassui?"

"It loves me."

Eowyn nodded. *At last!* "I know," she said. "I think I have known since Lorien. Why have you tried to keep it from me all this time, Legolas? Do you think that I am some foolish *elleth* who cannot understand—"

"*I do not understand!*"

"—who cannot understand that it is none of your doing!" said Eowyn, still exasperated. "It is *clearly* one of the Beornings," she added, "though it is hard to see which of those *real men* would set his cap at an elven warrior. Perhaps it is Chief Horse-penis himself—"

"*Melmenya!*"

"I am sorry, Legolas." Her apology was sincere. "Have you met any of them before?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"Well—what are we going to do about it?"

"I do not know—"

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He stopped abruptly, sat up, and leaned over her. "We?"

"You fool of an elf!" said Eowyn, annoyed again. "How many times do I have to tell you? You think that I will be—what?—scared away by the idea of your being desired by a Beorning skin changer..." She smiled. "It does sound strange, now that I say it aloud," she admitted, reaching up to touch his face. "Perhaps you are not being so foolish after all!"

"Oh, melmenya! I cannot cope with all of this—my head, my heart... I feel I am ready to explode—like one of Mithrandir's fireworks."

...

"You do not honey-glaze your words," said Eomer, dryly.

"I find it wastes time."

"I thought that elves had all the time in Arda."

"True; but those we deal with often do not," said Thranduil. "Your sister does not. She is a remarkable woman, but she *is* a woman, not an eldar."

"Of course. But Legolas believes that the Valar marked her out for him," said Eomer, firmly. "He told me that they made her glow for him, like Ithil—"

Thranduil's head jerked up. "He told you *that*?"

Eomer shrugged.

"He *does* regard you highly..." Thranduil shook his head. "You are a riddle to me, Eomer King," he said. "Last night you acted like a buffoon. Yet I am reliably informed—and, indeed, the evidence is here before me—that you are a brave leader and a shrewd king—and I must admit that your antics last night will almost certainly have improved your status with our Beorning friends."

"Which—of course—I would not have realised, being such a buffoon, had you not, so graciously, pointed it out to me," said Eomer angrily. A cool, calming breeze softly caressed his forehead. "You," he insisted, "are a bully."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You are a bully. You can say this to me because you know that I will not retaliate whilst I am receiving your hospitality. You can bully your son because you know that he loves you—the gods only know why!—far too much to ever risk hurting you. And you are bullying my sister because you know that she would risk everything she has for the chance to be with Legolas. You find people's weaknesses and you bully them."

"It is called state craft," said Thranduil, coldly.

"Then," said Eomer, rising, "may I suggest that you take your state craft and sheathe it—"

"Do not be foolish!"

Eomer began walking towards the door.

"Oh—*ceryn*," Thranduil muttered. "Eomer King!" He held out his hand in a peacemaking gesture. "Please!"

Eomer remained where he was standing, waiting expectantly, his dark brows raised.

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Thranduil sighed. "I am sorry," he said.

"Good," said Eomer. "Then I suggest that we discuss *this*"—he held up the intelligence report that Singollo had prepared for him—"that is, after you have told me how you plan to deal with our friend, the bear."

...

"Gods," she whispered. "I am almost there, just looking at you." She leaned forward, and kissed his shyly emerging head, licking its moist tip. Low inside her body she could already feel the place where that beautiful ruby flesh would be pressing...

"Take me," she whispered.

He laid her on the ground and knelt between her spread thighs. He was fully erect now, his penis standing stiffly against his belly, and he took it in his hand and began to lower himself towards her. But then he seemed to change his mind and, raising himself up again and sitting back on his heels, he began to stroke himself.

"Legolas!" Eowyn gasped.

"Look at me." He smiled—a serene, dimpled smile. "*Watch* me." And he continued to stroke himself, slowly and thoroughly, sighing with pleasure.

"*Please...*" Eowyn whimpered.

Legolas shook his head. His hand was moving faster now. "Where do you want me to come, melmenya?" he asked, rising up on his knees. "On your breasts?"

"Please!"

"Oh Valar," he gasped, shivering with pleasure. "Where do you want it?"

"Take me!"

Legolas leaned forward—his belly tense and his testicles, drawn up against his body, beautifully tight. Eowyn cupped her hand around them. "Take me..." she begged.

But it was too late; he held himself over her breasts and, with a groan torn from deep inside him, covered her in gouts of pearly fluid.

...

Eowyn came.

The moment his warm seed splashed across her body, Eowyn came, shaking and screaming like a speared warg.

...

"You are *late*."

"I am sorry, King Thranduil," said Eowyn.

He gestured towards the chairs by the fire. Eowyn took a seat.

"Are you well? You look *flushed*..."

Eowyn swallowed hard. She had bathed since the 'incident' in the garden, and he could not

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possibly know... But perhaps he was just trying to unsettle her. "I am perfectly well, your Majesty."

"Good," said Thranduil. He sat down opposite. "Before I set you your first task, Eowyn, let us clarify a few things. First, I accept that the Valar may help you in any way they see fit—they can send a man, or an elf or"—he shrugged—"they can send an army of *ants* to help you, if that is their choice. I accept that. But they will *not* send my son—I am convinced that they will not send *him*. Do I make myself clear? I will not accept anything that has been accomplished with my son's help as a sign."

"I understand, your Majesty."

"Good. Secondly, I am relying upon you to recognise what is legitimate help and what is simply another person's performing the task for you."

"Of course," said Eowyn, and she allowed her annoyance to show in her voice.

Thranduil held up his hand, appeasingly. "Thirdly," he continued, "you must agree that the moment you fail a task—whether it be the first, the second, or the third—you will remove yourself from my Halls—from my son's life—and return to your husband at Caras Arnen—"

"No, your Majesty," said Eowyn, shaking her head, "my marriage to the Prince of Ithilien has been legally dissolved by the King of Gondor." She waited for Thranduil's acknowledgement. "I shall *not* fail these tasks, your Majesty," she continued, "but, nevertheless, I agree that, should I fail, I will return, with my brother, to Rohan. Though I trust that you will allow me to remain here in Eryn Lasgalen until Eomer has concluded his business with you and the Beornings?"

Thranduil smiled. "You could teach my son a thing or two about state craft, Eowyn *vell nín*," he said. "We agree then." He placed his hand on his heart and bowed his head.

Eowyn returned the gesture. Then she said, "And the first task, your Majesty?"

Thranduil pointed towards his desk. "My correspondence is out of order," he said, indicating the massive pile of papers that covered its huge surface and spilled down onto the floor. "You have until dawn to sort it according to sender."

Eowyn looked around the study. "Are you *sure*, your Majesty?" she asked.

"What?" Thranduil was taken aback.

"It is my experience," she said, "that people who—er—store things the way you do, always know where to find what they need whenever they need it. If someone introduces order into the chaos, they are lost..."

Thranduil laughed "You may well be right, *mell nín*," he said, "but that is the task I have set you." With his hand on his chest, he gave her another brief nod of the head.

"And, now," he said, "I will leave you. I will have food sent to you at the appropriate hours, and I will return tomorrow at dawn to see how well you have fared."

...

Before they had parted, in the garden cavern, Eowyn had made Legolas promise to talk to Haldir.

"I would normally have said speak to Gimli," she said, "but if you have not confided in him by now you clearly cannot. Talk to Haldir—tell him what we suspect. He is your March Warden, after all. It is his duty to protect you."

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Legolas sighed. "Ada is right: she *does* run rings around me." He tapped lightly at Haldir's door.

"Come in..."

Legolas entered. The March Warden, sitting at his desk, carefully closed the small journal he had been writing in and looked up at his visitor. "Legolas!" he said. "I mean—"

"If the words 'my' and 'lord' or 'your' and 'highness' pass your lips, Haldir, you are a dead elf."

Haldir nodded ruefully, then gestured towards two seats, just inside the garden cave. "Please, come in," he said. "What can I do for you?"

Legolas took a seat but remained silent for several moments. At last, he said, "It must be difficult for you, so old, so used to serving the High Eldar like Lord Celeborn and The Lady, to be reduced to taking orders from a wood elf and his *adaneth*."

"I count it a privilege," said Haldir, simply.

"Especially from the latter," said Legolas.

The two elves stared at each other.

"Sweet Eru!" cried Legolas, rubbing his hand across his forehead, "I am sorry Haldir! I truly... If you want satisfaction, *mellon nín*."

Haldir shook his head. "Of course not," he said. Then he added, quietly, "She *will* succeed. I am sure of it. And she will soon be back home with you..."

"I could not live without her, Haldir."

"I know."

"It is hard for you, too." Legolas looked down at his hands. "It was Eowyn who told me to come to you," he confessed.

"Why?"

He looked up at the March Warden. "The bear, Haldir," he finally admitted. "I need your help to capture the bear."

"But, surely, that is a matter for your father's guards now."

Legolas shook his head. "No," he said.

He rose to his feet and walked further into the garden. "I am sorry, but I cannot look you in the eye when I tell you this." He took a deep breath. "The first time the bear attacked, I sensed desire. I was convinced that it was lusting after Eowyn—that it had somehow mistaken her for a she-bear. But it had not." He hesitated for another moment, then he added, very softly, "It wanted *me*, Haldir. And had Eowyn not come back for me when she did, I have no doubt that it would have taken me."

He turned back to Haldir. The March Warden was staring at him, open-mouthed.

...

Eowyn looked at the pile of letters. *There must be thousands*, she thought.

She lifted one from the top of the pile and looked at it carefully, trying to remember everything

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that Lord Fingolfin had taught her about the complex fluidity of *Tengwar* characters. The letter was written in Sindarin. She scanned the last few lines, trying to deduce from its layout where the sender's signature might be.

Slowly, she spelled out the name, E L R O N D.

She carefully laid the letter on the floor and picked up the next. *This will take me the rest of my life*, she thought. *Oh, Legolas!*

The second letter was written in Westron and she quickly identified its author, Bergthórr beytill. She laid the parchment on the floor, in a second pile.

The third letter boasted a very familiar signature: Elessar Telcontar! She gave Aragorn his own pile. *Three done*, she thought; *still approximately two thousand left to do. Dear Valar, send me some help!*

The fourth letter was in a strange dialect of Sindarin, and she remembered Fingolfin telling her that the wood elves spoke a mixture of Sindarin and Silvan. *From a wood elf then*, she thought. *Probably one of Thranduil's subjects. Not a formal document; not a sophisticated writer...* She scanned it, noticing a few familiar words: *mithril, sabar thurin—Mine; no, secret mine*, she thought—*gynd 'lyss—White rocks?—and ebænnin—men—*before she managed to find and spell out the name, E R E I...

There was a light tap on the door.

"Come in!" ...N I O N.

Where do I put it, she wondered. *If I find another letter from this Ereinion, how do I find his pile again?* She shook her head. *Of course! The piles must be arranged in Tengwar order.* She glanced towards the door. "Lord Fingolfin!"

"I have been having the strongest feeling that it is time for your next Elvish lesson, my lady," said Fingolfin.

Eowyn froze in the midst of placing Ereinion's letter on the floor. "Oh no, my lord!" she cried, "I really do *not* have time for a lesson now!"

"Are you sure, my lady?" He looked from the parchment in her hands to the huge drift of documents spilling from the desk behind her. "I think you might find it very useful..."

Joining her at the desk, he selected a beautifully illuminated letter from the top of the pile, and showed it to her. "For example," he said, "this word, here, beginning with a *calma* and ending with an *óre*, reads Ce-le-born."

He handed it to her.

Eowyn smiled. "I see, my lord," she said.

She laid the letter on the floor, arranging her piles in order. Fingolfin took a quill from the inkstand—shaking his head at the condition of its nib—tore a piece of parchment into small squares, wrote a *Tengwar* character on each, and handed the labels to Eowyn.

Carefully, Eowyn labelled the piles, "*Yanta, umbar, calma*. Thank you, my lord."

Smiling, Fingolfin picked up the next letter. "S A E R O S," he spelled out, pointing to each character in turn.

Eowyn started another pile.

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...

"Since that first attack," said Legolas, "every encounter has felt the same—there is desire for me and hatred of Eowyn. And there was hatred of Lindë... Eowyn is convinced that the bear is a man—one of the Beornings who has learnt to skin-change. She thinks that we need to capture the creature, wait for it to change back into a man, and then confront him, whoever he is."

"That seems like a wise plan," said Haldir.

"But we must be discreet, Haldir. I do not want my father to know that the bear desires me—nor my fellow warriors—and certainly not the ellith I used to bed."

Haldir nodded, sympathetically. "If only we knew who it was," he said. "One of the Beornings is known as 'bear cub'... But—no—it cannot be him, because he was standing beside me, watching the drinking contest, when Lady Lindorië was attacked. In fact," he said, narrowing his eyes as he visualised the scene, "I think there were only two Beornings who were not in the hall at that moment. One was their Chieftain—"

"Bergthórr Horse-penis."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It is what his name—beytill—means, apparently. That is why all the Rohirrim snigger whenever he is nearby."

"Do you suppose it is considered an attractive name?" asked Haldir.

"A mighty name," said Legolas. "A chieftain's name. Who was the other?"

"The tall, arrogant one who thinks he is too good to mix with elves but would be more than happy to bed an elleth. Thorkell bogsveigir. What does his name mean? Horse-*arse*?"

It was strange to hear Haldir accuse someone else of being 'arrogant' and, despite the situation, Legolas smiled. "Bow-swayer," he said. "Apparently, he is considered something of an archer."

"Is he, indeed?"

"You do not suppose it is he? Some sort of rivalry?"

Haldir shrugged his shoulders. "Men are difficult to understand at the best of times."

"Yes; sometimes, they are," Legolas agreed.

"Would you like a drink?" asked Haldir, suddenly. "Your father has provided some excellent wine."

"It is a little early."

"I think we both need it." Haldir walked over to the sideboard. "It will take more than two of us to hunt this bear," he said. "I suggest that we take Gimli, Berryn and Dínendal with us, and that we—"

"*Dínendal*?"

"In case anyone is injured," Haldir explained, pouring out a large measure of fragrant red wine. "Both Dínendal and Berryn, though not warriors, have valuable skills. You, Gimli and I will supply the brawn."

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Legolas nodded, thoughtfully.

"And, in case we need reinforcements, I suggest that we talk to your father's March Warden." He handed Legolas a goblet. "He seems like a good elf. Do you know him?"

"Singollo? He was my best friend as an elfling. We were inseparable."

"So you can *trust* him?"

"Yes." Legolas smiled. "Yes, you are right, Haldir," he said. "Of course; I will talk to him."

"Good," said Haldir. "And—when we have captured the animal—I think we should do exactly as Lady Eowyn suggested: chain it to the wall and wait until it changes its skin. And then we will find out who it is..."

Extra scene: [The Goblin](#)

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Chapter 7: Singollo Greycloak

Fingolfin held up the next letter and pointed to the signature.

"Celeborn," said Eowyn.

"Correct," said Fingolfin. He handed her the parchment.

Eowyn placed it on the correct pile. "Next?" she asked, smiling.

Fingolfin selected another. "Ereinion. That elf must spend all his time writing," she added.

"He is certainly a very communicative fellow," Fingolfin agreed.

"My uncle had a name for men like that," said Eowyn, scanning the next letter, "—another from Celeborn—he called them *ealde cwéne*, 'old ladies', continually gossiping..."

"Why do men despise women so much?" asked Fingolfin, handing her the next letter. "I do not think you will have too much trouble recognising *that* signature."

"*Legolas!*" Eowyn found the correct pile. "It is partly fear," she said. "A man is expected to be strong—and most of them know they are not. Around them they see women running households and bearing children and tending the sick, without rest, without complaint, and it scares them. So they *pretend* that women are weak and foolish and peevish. And they chastise any man who does not act like a *real* man by calling him a woman..."

She placed the next letter on the appropriate pile.

"Is that why you fled from marriage to a man?" asked Fingolfin, gently.

"Oh, *Faramir* was not like that... No..." She looked up suddenly. "I do *love* Legolas," she said.

"I know you do."

"I could not bear to be parted from him."

She rubbed her aching back as she looked at the desk—they had been working for five hours, and she was already tired, but the pile of papers hardly seemed any smaller. "Do you think we will finish in time, my lord?" she asked, quietly.

"Trust the Valar, my lady," said Fingolfin. "Trust the Valar."

...

In the wake of the bear's attack, Thranduil had stationed guards at strategic points throughout the palace and had provided both Eomer and Bergthórr beytill with an escort.

Waste of time, thought Eomer, as he approached the Council Chamber accompanied by his Chief Counsellor and two guards. *That animal is not a man-eater. It just likes young girls and pretty elves.*

Firith, on the other hand, is almost certainly following me, and every elf in these gods-forsaken tunnels knows it—

"It is a pity Lord Fingolfin cannot be with us, your Majesty," said Counsellor Colgan, quietly.

"He cannot?"

"No, your Majesty. King Thranduil's advisor, Lord Astaldo, told me that Lord Fingolfin is helping

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Princess Eowyn complete her first task."

"Did he tell you how she is faring?"

"He did not know that, your Majesty. But he *did* say that the majority of King Thranduil's subjects wish her success, especially after the courage she displayed last night."

Eomer smiled. Much as he hated to see his sister taking risks—and he knew that finding her lying on Pelennor Field would haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life—he was, nevertheless, extremely proud of her.

"There is no help for it," he said, quietly, "we will have to do without Fingolfin. But we must be careful, Colgan. Thranduil claims he is our ally in this but I am not sure that we can trust him. He knows that we have malcontents in the north of Rohan; he claims that the Beornings are moving into East Lorien, and he"— Eomer tried to think of the right word—"he is *trying to make me believe* that Bergthórr beytill intends to ally with our potential rebels. But it seems to me that Rohan has precious little to gain from an alliance with either of them. We must take things slowly—and commit ourselves to nothing at this stage."

"I understand, your Majesty," said Colgan.

They entered the Council chamber.

"Welcome, Eomer King, Lord Colgan," said Thranduil. "Please, take your seats."

He has done this deliberately, thought Eomer, scowling. *He has called me here later than the others to put Rohan at a disadvantage.*

Eomer took his place beside Gimli and looked around the table. Thranduil was shuffling a pile of papers; everyone else was waiting expectantly. "Have I missed anything?" Eomer whispered.

"No lad," said Gimli, "just Master Horse-penis causing a fuss about the bear." He mimicked Bergthórr's deep voice, "*Just how is the Elvenking going to ensure my people's safety?*" And then he insisted that his son should be present at this meeting—"

"The boy on his right?" said Eomer. His memory of the previous night's introductions was, to say the least, hazy.

"Correct—Bjarni Bergthórsson—or Bjarni bjarki, as his friends call him—"

"Bjarni *bear-cub?*"

"Aye."

"And the Elder on Bergthórr's left?" Eomer nodded towards to a distinguished-looking man with a thick mane of white hair.

"That is Bergthórr's chief Advisor, Óttarr in spaka—Óttarr the wise," whispered Gimli.

"Gentlemen," called Thranduil, suddenly looking up from his papers, "let us begin."

"As you know," he continued, "at the end of the Ring War, the southernmost part of Eryn Galen—Greenwood the Great—was annexed by Lord Celeborn. Large numbers of Lorien elves moved into the forest and began tending the trees—reversing the damage caused by Sauron's presence at Dol Guldur." He paused. "I think that we would all agree," he said, looking pointedly at the Beorning Chieftain, "that the forest is now healthier than it has been for well over a thousand years."

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Bergthórr beytill shrugged his shoulders. "I—having lived somewhat less than sixty years—will have to be guided by you on that," he said.

Thranduil bowed his head, graciously. "Since Lord Celeborn departed for the Undying Lands, almost a year ago," he continued, "the elves of East Lorien have looked to the Woodland Realm for protection—"

"Protection from what?" asked Bergthórr beytill.

"From any number of things," replied Thranduil. "From anything or anyone that might threaten their way of life. They are few in number—"

"*Who* is threatening their way of life?"

"Anyone who invades the forest, delves into the ground, taints the water, or cuts down the trees."

Why is Thranduil behaving like a bull in a buttery? thought Eomer.

"The elves of East Lorien are isolated and understandably nervous," Thranduil continued, "and *I* am naturally concerned for them." He leaned forward, dramatically. "But what I *really* want to know, Chief Bergthórr beytill—and I am sure that Eomer King will support me in this—"

Oh horsepiss, thought Eomer, *here we go...*

"—is what, exactly, are *you* doing in East Lorien?"

...

"Lassui! You came!"

Lindë was lying, gracefully arranged, on one of the Healing Room beds, dressed in a frothy white night-gown that hid very few of her charms.

"Voronwë said that it was urgent," said Legolas. "Have you remembered something more about the bear?"

"The bear? No..."

"Then what is it?"

"Sit beside me," said Lindë, patting the bed.

"What?"

"Sit beside me. I have had an idea, Lassui."

Legolas perched uncomfortably on the very edge of the bed.

Lindë smiled. "You never could resist me, Lassui," she said.

"Lindë!" he chided. "We discussed the past last night. You know that I am bound to Eowyn. So if your 'idea'—"

"Your lady is very nice," said Lindë. "And Voronwë is very nice. And I thought that we could all get together... And be very nice together."

"Together."

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"Yes. I am sure that your lady and Voronwë would get on well. She could teach him—"

"No, Lindë," said Legolas firmly.

"But—"

"No."

"Oh, Lassui... *Please.*"

"No."

"I have not had a decent *cuildithen* since you left!"

"I am sorry, Lindë," said Legolas, "but you will just have to teach Himwë what to do."

"Could you not talk to him—"

"No!" Legolas shook his head. "No, Lindë I could not."

He patted the small patch of shoulder that was still covered by her night-gown. "I am glad to see that you have recovered so quickly," he said, "and I hope that you will join Gimli and me at supper. But you know, Lindë, that you and I will never again be anything more than friends." He rose to his feet. "Now, I must leave you, *mell nín*. I need to talk to Singollo about capturing the bear."

He walked towards the door.

"Thank your lady for saving me, Lassui," called Lindë, as he reached for the latch.

Legolas turned and smiled. *She is spoilt and she does not always think before she speaks*, he thought. *But she is so elfling-like...*

Perhaps I could have a word with Himwë.

...

Bergthórr beytill leaped to his feet and leaned over the Council table.

"How *dare* you insult me! How *dare* you insult the Beornings! How dare you speak thus of the men who, during the long reign of Sauron—and without the luxury of immortality—single-handedly kept open the High Pass and the Ford of Carrock, and secured the passage from Dale to Rivendell—the men who stood beside *you* at the final Battle, you—you—you arrogant *wood elf!*" he cried.

Since Bergthórr was a relatively small man, his fury was somewhat less than intimidating.

Thranduil remained completely unruffled. "I merely asked for clarification," he said.

"Clarify my arse—"

"My lord," said Eomer, rapping his knuckles on the table to draw the Beorning's attention, "King Thranduil—please—sit down, both of you." Eomer's manner was calm, but when Bergthórr made to protest, he added, "Sit!"

The elf and the man, still eyeing each other over the table, lowered themselves into their seats simultaneously.

"Now," said Eomer, "what evidence do you have, King Thranduil, of an incursion into East

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Lorien—and what makes you think that the culprits are men?"

And when, exactly, he wondered, did it fall to me to be the diplomat?

...

"Singollo?"

Thranduill's March Warden had just finished briefing a detachment of Forest Guards and was watching them file out through the Main Gates.

"Lassui! *Mae govannen, mellon nín!* Good to see you again! I am sorry I have not had time to greet you before—what with this bear business..." Singollo placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. Then he looked up, smiling. "But perhaps I should be doing *this*." He embraced his friend heartily, human-fashion. "Was that correct?"

Legolas smiled. "Yes," he said, "that was very good." He drew Singollo to one side. "Can we talk in private, Collo?"

"Of course. Now?"

Legolas nodded. "If you can."

"Your mother's garden?"

"Yes."

The two elves walked slowly, side by side, away from the well-guarded main thoroughfare and down the long, deserted passage that led to the garden cave. "I have a favour to ask of you," said Legolas.

"And you want to keep it secret from your father?"

"Yes."

"Does the favour have anything to do with your lady and the test your father has set her?"

"No."

"Good, because much as I want to see you happy—and she is a *cordof*, Lassui—I could not go directly against your father's wishes. But if it is not that, then—of course—what do you want me to do?"

Legolas smiled. "Come in," he said.

They stepped through the low, crumbling door to his mother's garden, crossed the meadow and sat beneath her beloved beeches.

Singollo looked out across the grass. "It is always delightful here," he said. "Does the Shire really look like this?"

"The Shire," said Legolas, thinking back to his and Gimli's visit to Bag End, just before Frodo left for the Undying Lands, "the Shire is even more beautiful, Collo. The hobbits love it, and tend it with simple, honest hearts, and the Shire loves them in return."

He sighed.

"What is wrong, Lassui? I mean, apart from..."

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Legolas turned to his friend and smiled. "Apart from the fear of losing *her*? It is the bear, Collo," he said. "On our way here, Eowyn and I were attacked by it. At least, *I* was attacked, and *she* saved me..."

"I know—"

"Yes; but what you do not know..." Legolas told his friend everything—of sensing the bear's desire for him; of sensing its hatred of Eowyn, and of Lindë; of Eowyn's theory; and of Haldir's plan.

"There is no shame in being desired by a man, Lassui," said Singollo, gently. "I have heard that *many* men find elves attractive." He patted Legolas' back. "So—you want to search the caves, and you want to use the dungeons—of course. I will help you in any way I can. And no one knows these tunnels better than I do."

"I could not possibly ask you to come hunting with us, Collo—"

"Do you remember Thorondir Eagle-gaze?"

"Of course I remember him," said Legolas. "What do you mean...? Oh, *that*. Yes, I remember *that*."

"Though not nearly so well as I do," said Singollo. "It was you who made him stop beating me. Even though you were the Crown Prince and I was just the son of your father's groom. And you were half his size. I do not want you to take this the wrong way, Legolas," he added, and a mischievous grin suddenly broke across his childlike face, "but I would do *anything* for you... Except give up archery. Or give up wine. Or, give up *care!* ellith, of course—"

"Collo, you idiot," said Legolas, laughing, "you make Gimli sound like Lord Elrond! It is good to be back with you, Collo," he admitted.

"When do you want to go on this bear hunt?" asked Singollo.

"As soon as possible."

"I understand that your lady will be occupied until dawn?"

"Yes."

"Let us do it tonight, then—we will search one tunnel at a time and, once we are sure it is clear, we will seal it."

"How?"

"We will give the guards at the entrance nice, simple orders: no bears, no Beornings—"

"We cannot do that—"

"Of course we can. Everyone has heard about the bear, and everyone is nervous—or should be. The Beornings are our honoured guests. It is only right that we offer them our protection."

"They will know that we suspect them."

"Perhaps. But we will be polite and helpful and they will have no grounds for complaint."

"You are good at this," said Legolas.

"Thank you," said Singollo. "Keeping your father happy all these years has meant learning to swim like a fish and fly like a bird..."

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Legolas smiled. "Tonight, then," he said. "And now I had better see how my father and Eomer have fared in their negotiations."

"And I had better get back to the guard room," said Singollo. He rose from the bench with a look of casual innocence on his childlike face. "Tell me, Lassui," he said, "is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"What they say about elves and women?"

"Is... Oh, *Collo!*"

"You can tell a friend."

Legolas shook his head in mock despair. "Find your own Shieldmaiden!" he said. "And that is all I am saying!"

...

"I have no doubt that you deliberately set out to provoke Bergthórr beytill," said Eomer to Thranduil after the Beorning Chieftain and his supporters had stormed out of the Council Chamber, "but what I do not understand is why. What could you have hoped to accomplish?"

"Exactly what I *did* accomplish," said Thranduil.

Eomer glanced at Gimli; the dwarf shrugged his shoulders. "Which is?" the man asked.

"First," said Thranduil, "I broke his self-control: a man reveals many secrets when he is angry."

"He revealed nothing," protested Eomer.

"You think not?" Thranduil smiled. "On the contrary—I heard him say that he knew nothing about any fires. But I had not mentioned that the ground had been burnt. I think he revealed that he knows exactly what is going on in East Lorien."

"Secondly, I may just have provoked him into trying to cover up his tracks. If that is the case, the elves I have assigned to watch his people will soon learn about it."

"Thirdly, I have shown him that—whilst *I* am thoroughly unreasonable—you are calm and diplomatic." He smiled, bewitchingly. "If Chief Horse-penis decides that he does want to negotiate, he will approach you first."

"And the benefit of that is?" asked Gimli.

"They are both men," said Thranduil, as though the answer was obvious. "Bergthórr will try to convince Eomer King to ally with him. And to do that he will have to explain what he is up to."

"So that interminable security report I studied this morning was a waste of time?" said Eomer.

"Some of the details may be useful—it remains to be seen."

Eomer was not pleased.

"What *is* going on in East Lorien?" asked Gimli, suddenly. "Why do you not just send in a scouting party to take a look?"

"Where would be the fun in that?" asked Thranduil.

"You have a strange idea of fun."

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Thranduil smiled. "I have tried sending scouts," he admitted, "but it is useless. Somehow, the Beornings always know when strangers are nearby and they immediately cover up whatever it is they are doing. My elves found nothing but raked soil—suspicious enough in the thick of the forest—and traces of burning."

...

Legolas closed the door behind him. He had decided that he would return to his quarters to bathe and change before joining his father, Eomer, and Gimli in the Great Hall.

But Eowyn will not be there, he thought, sadly.

He walked into the bedchamber, unhooking the fastenings on his pale green tunic. Eowyn's velvet riding gown was lying, freshly laundered, over the chair beside the bed. *She wore this on the ride from Edoras to Dunharrow,* he thought, running his fingers over its soft, russet pile, *after she had convinced Aragorn that she was simply going to 'farewell the men'!*

"I love you, Eowyn *nín*," he said aloud. "*Gerich faer vara!*"

He shrugged off his tunic and laid it on the bed, slipped out of his soft boots, then unlaced his leggings, slid them down over his thighs, and stepped out of them.

I must hurry if I am going to bathe, he thought, scratching his bare stomach—

"My lord?"

Legolas gasped. "Rothinzil! What are you doing here?" He quickly picked up his tunic and wrapped it around his waist.

"I am here to take care of you, my lord," she said and, smiling—almost shyly—she took a few graceful steps towards him.

"I beg your pardon?"

A few hundred years ago, those words would have brought out the animal in him. He would have scooped her up in his arms and carried her to his bed, laughing. But now...

Legolas stepped backwards.

"Your father asked me to see to your needs, my lord," said the Rothinzil, still trying to play their old game. She stretched out her hand and lightly ran her fingers over his bare chest.

"Rosui!" Legolas took another step.

"It has been a long time, my lord," she admitted. "But you cannot have forgotten what it was like..." She slid her hand down to his waist and pulled at his improvised loincloth.

Slowly, Legolas opened his arms and let the tunic fall to the ground. Then he took Rothinzil's hand and held her fingers against himself. "I love *Eowyn*," he said, simply. "I am bound to her. And you know what that means: see—nothing."

Rothinzil swallowed hard. The pain in her eyes was genuine.

Legolas let go of her hand. "I am sorry, Rosui," he said, picking up his leggings and slipping them on. "I do not blame *you*. I know that my father told you to do this—"

"He said—"

"I can imagine what he said—that I was infatuated with an *adaneth* and that you could save

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me. But now you know that what he said was untrue. I *love* Eowyn. And, Rosui, you and I—our affair—was over, *long* before I met her." He stroked her back in a brotherly fashion.

"Please, do not do that, my lord," she whispered.

"I am sorry," said Legolas, gently, "Come, Rosui, you must leave. I will speak to my father and have you appointed to another lady."

Rothinzil nodded, sadly, letting him escort her out of the chamber. "Please forgive me, my lord," she said, as he opened the door.

"There is nothing to forgive, Rosui," said Legolas. He kissed her forehead lightly. "Good night." He watched her walk along the passage, towards the Great Hall. Then, as he was turning back to his chamber door, he noticed a small, veiled figure standing further down the corridor.

"Lady Gunnhildr? You should not be walking about alone. Is anything amiss?"

The girl did not speak, but merely shook her head. Her veil made it impossible for Legolas to see her expression, or even to see exactly where she was looking, but her posture was awkward—uncomfortable—and he had the distinct impression that she was staring at his bare chest. *Poor little thing*, he thought. *She has never seen a male undressed before.*

Why do humans treat their daughters like this? Making them afraid of their own shadows? Making them think that the whole world wants only to steal their gweneth. They would say it is to protect the weak. But it seems to me that the prevention is worse than the disease...

He thought of Eowyn's courage and independence. *Thank the Valar!*

Then another thought struck him. *If the bear is a Beorning, who knows what intentions he may have towards his chieftain's daughter? Perhaps Bergthórr beytill is right!* "Allow me to escort you to your chambers, Lady Gunnhildr."

He held out his hand to her, elven fashion. She hesitated for a moment, her posture suggesting even greater discomfort; then she placed her hand on his, and allowed him to lead her down the corridor.

"Is this the first time you have accompanied your father on an official visit, my lady?" asked Legolas, turning to look at her. The angle of her head showed him that she was staring fixedly at the ground, but she replied with a nod. "Are you enjoying it?" She nodded again. "Is there anything you would like to do or see whilst you are here, my lady?" He felt her flinch slightly. "I meant," he explained, "that I could arrange for some of the ladies of the court to spend time with you. You would not have to wear your veil with them. And you could relax..."

Her voice was so soft that he almost missed her reply. "It is kind of you, Prince Legolas, to be concerned for me. But my father prefers me not to mix with other ladies."

Legolas' immediate impulse was to ask her why, but he curbed his tongue. It was not his place to openly criticise Bergthórr beytill's raising of his daughter. "Well, if you do need anything—if there is anything that I—or Lady Eowyn—can help you with, just send me a message. Ah—I believe we are here, my lady." He stopped outside her chamber door, and gently dropped her hand. "Until we meet again, my lady," he said.

And, to his surprise, Gunnhildr Bergthórsdottir came up on her tiptoes and, through her veil, gave his cheek the briefest of kisses.

...

"How is she faring, Ada?" asked Legolas, softly, as he took his place at the supper table beside

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his father.

"I have no idea," said Thranduil. "Eowyn has until dawn: I shall not disturb her until then."

...

"I obtained this information from the Library, March Warden," said Berryn to Singollo.

Eryn Carantaur's cartographer had carefully copied a plan of the palace and mounted it onto a thin piece of wood—and had already made several corrections, in red chalk, to the mapping of the main thoroughfare. "How accurate is *this* part?" He pointed to the northern ends of the various tunnels.

Singollo took the plan from him and studied it carefully. "Hmmm. There are some side-tunnels missing—here, here, and here—Master Berryn but, in essence, I think it is correct. We will start here, in Gath Loen: it is damp and deserted and would be the best place to hide," he added, holding up the plan so that the rest of the hunting party—Gimli, Legolas, Dínendal and Haldir—could see it. "I have already placed a detachment of five warriors, *here*, at its mouth. As the plan shows, there is no other way out of this area, so I suggest that we go straight to the furthest point, *here*, and work backwards, checking these side caverns as we advance. If the bear is hiding anywhere in this wing it will be driven towards the entrance where my elves will capture and hold it. If we have no success in Gath Loen, we will scour each of these in turn," he pointed to the various complexes of tunnels.

"Might I suggest," said Dínendal, diffidently, "that we try the tunnel in which Lady Lindorië was attacked, next? I have read that bears are territorial animals..."

"Yes; that makes sense," said Singollo.

"How did you explain to the guards why you are allowing *us* to do the hunting?" asked Legolas.

"That is the great advantage of living in a traditional kingdom instead of a forward-thinking colony, Lassui," said Singollo, smiling. "You are the King's son and your word is my command; your friends want to hunt. The guards see nothing strange in any of that."

Gimli drew his axe. "Let us get started then, lad!" he said.

The hunters checked their weapons, Dínendal shouldered his healing bag, and Berryn tucked his map under his arm and his piece of chalk behind his ear. Then everyone picked up a torch and followed Singollo.

"Gimli," said Legolas, softly, as they entered Gath Loen. "I need to return before dawn. I *must* be outside my father's study when she needs me."

"Of course lad," said Gimli, patting his arm, "I will send you back in time. Leave it to me."

...

Seven hours later

"You are tired, my lady," said Fingolfin.

Eowyn nodded. "I would rather gallop for three days along the Great West Road and face a hoard of Haradrim on armoured Mûmakil than sort one more letter," she said.

"All warriors—without exception—underestimate how demanding the simple day-to-day tasks of running a realm can be," said Fingolfin, smiling.

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"Well, *I* will not in future," said Eowyn.

She stretched herself up to her full height, rubbing the small of her back, and glanced around the chamber. The small garden cave in the corner of Thranduil's study was bathed in a soft rosy light...

"Look!" she cried. "Look, my lord! The sun has already risen!"

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Chapter 8: Clues

"Ada!" Legolas had been pacing up and down outside his father's study for almost ten minutes. "Ada, you are late—the sun has already risen."

"I seriously doubt that a few minutes will make any difference to the outcome, Lassui," said Thranduil. He motioned his son to step aside, then seized the door latch and threw open the double doors.

Legolas looked anxiously into the chamber. Eowyn was standing beside his father's desk, one hand rubbing her lower back—*She is tired*, he thought—the other pointing towards the garden cavern. "Look!" she was saying to Fingolfin. "Look, my lord! The sun has already risen!"

Then she turned towards him, recognised him, and smiled.

Legolas' heart leaped.

"Melmenya!" he cried, rushing past his father. He scooped Eowyn into his arms and whirled her round and round. "Melmenya, melmenya, melmenya!"

"Lassui," Thranduil chided, "calm down! I take it that you have finished the task?" he said, to Eowyn.

"With Lord Fingolfin's help," she replied, laughing as Legolas lifted her even higher. "Put me down," she said, grinning, "I need to speak to your father."

Legolas lowered her to the floor and kissed her forehead.

Eowyn straightened her gown and pushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Then, adopting a serious, business-like tone, she showed Thranduil the various piles of paper she and Fingolfin had assembled. "All the letters have been sorted according to sender, as you requested," she said, "or, rather, according to the sender's initial. Each of these rows represents a *Tengwar* character—starting with *tinco*, here. Within the rows, each sender has his or her own pile—and the piles are also arranged in *Tengwar* order. I have not had time to sort the correspondence in each pile by date, but I am sure that your secretary will have no trouble doing that."

Thranduil nodded.

He is trying not to show how impressed he is, thought Legolas.

"And I have been thinking," continued Eowyn—and Legolas recognised her tone: it was the one she used when talking about her orc map—"that what you need is a special set of shelves, with a separate compartment for each sender. My brother's secretary uses something similar. I am sure he would help me explain it to one of your craftsmen—"

"How much," said Thranduil, gesturing towards the piles of parchment, "of this did you do yourself and how much is Lord Fingolfin's work?"

Eowyn paused, open-mouthed.

"Perhaps *I* should answer that, your Majesty," said Fingolfin. "I have been teaching Lady Eowyn to speak Elvish since she first came to live in Eryn Carantaur, but we have spent very little time on the written language. When I arrived last night she had already decided how to sort the letters and was carefully spelling out each sender's name. All I did was give her another lesson—we worked on recognising the written characters, which merely helped her to sort the documents faster."

Thranduil seemed satisfied. "Very well," he said. "You have completed the first task, *mell nín*."

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Legolas hugged Eowyn tightly.

"But," Thranduil continued, "you still have two more to perform. So I suggest that you take some rest and return to me at four o'clock this afternoon."

Eowyn nodded solemnly, and turned to leave, but Legolas caught her around the waist. "That is *far* too soon, Ada," he protested. "You can see that Eowyn is tired. Surely you can allow her an extra day to recover?"

"Would *you* need a day to recover, Lassui?" Thranduil demanded.

"No..."

"No. And if Eowyn wants to marry you, she must show that she can keep pace with you."

"Sometimes," Legolas muttered, "I prefer to keep pace with *her*."

"I am sure you do," said Thranduil, dryly, "but the tasks are mine to set."

"I will be fine after a few hours' rest," said Eowyn, firmly. "If you will excuse us, King Thranduil—and, thank you, Lord Fingolfin"—she clasped his hands—"thank you, very much. I am forever in your debt."

Fingolfin lifted her hands to his mouth and kissed them. "No, my lady." He smiled; then he added, "*Caro naid dithin na veleth veleg.*"

"Do small things with great love," said Eowyn, smiling.

Fingolfin nodded.

"Come melmenya," said Legolas, nodding his own thanks to his Counsellor, "you need to rest. Until later, Ada..."

...

Eowyn refused to be carried.

"Did you talk to Haldir about the bear?" she asked.

"I did. And he and I—with a few of the others, and my old friend, Singollo—have spent the night searching the tunnels together. We even explored the dungeons."

"Did you find anything?" Eowyn yawned. Legolas placed his hand on her lower back, supportively, and guided her down the corridor.

"No. Not a trace."

"Strange..."

"But we will try again tonight. I wish you could be with us, *meleth nín*—but I am so proud of you, Eowyn. I do not think *I* could have done what you did last night." He began to hug her but suddenly stopped in mid embrace, turning his head to listen intently. "What was that?"

"I did not hear anything."

"It sounded like someone moaning." He led her back to the tunnel wall. "Stay here," he said.

"No," said Eowyn, "I am coming with you."

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"You are tired."

"Not any more!"

Conceding defeat, Legolas took her by the hand and, together, they moved slowly and silently—as silently as Eowyn was able—down the corridor, checking the side passages and the garden caverns and the deep, recessed doorways, as they went.

"I heard *that*," whispered Eowyn, suddenly. "You are right—it sounds like an elleth, in pain—"

"This way!"

Grasping her hand more tightly, Legolas led her quickly down one of the side passages. "This leads to the serving ellith's quarters," he said.

"You do not suppose..." Eowyn began, but she never finished her question. "Look!" She pointed to what looked like a pile of laundry, lying on the ground beside one of the chamber doors.

"Rothinzil!" cried Legolas. He let go of Eowyn's hand and rushed to the moaning elleth, dropping to his knees by her side.

"Is she injured?" asked Eowyn. Legolas did not answer. "Do not disturb her too much, Legolas, if she is—oh gods!"

Legolas had carefully lifted a piece of torn fabric from the elleth's face and neck to reveal several deep gouges in her shoulders.

"Claw marks," said Eowyn. She knelt beside the elleth. "Go and fetch Master Dínendal and someone from the healing room. She will have to be carried." She pressed the fabric to the wounds, trying to stem the flow of blood. "These need cleaning and dressing, and—*Legolas!*"

The elf seemed stunned. "This is because of *me*," he said.

Eowyn turned to look at him. "We will talk about that later, my darling—now, you must go and get help."

"I cannot leave you—"

"You *must*. And you must be quick. Leave me one of your knives and go."

Legolas tore his eyes from Rothinzil's wound and stared at Eowyn.

"Go," she said. "*Please*."

"I will be back soon," he said, squeezing her arm. Then he leaped to his feet, drew one of his white knives, handed it to her and, after one final apologetic smile, ran down the corridor towards the main thoroughfare.

Eowyn turned her attention back to Rothinzil and, still holding the cloth firmly against the wounds, spoke to her softly and reassuringly: "Legolas has gone to get help," she said. "You will soon be taken care of. And I will not let the bear hurt you again. *Estelio nin*, Rothinzil," she added. "*Trust* me."

...

Eomer stood before the mirror, examining his reflection.

Since arriving in Eryn Lasgalen he had become acutely aware of the value of appearances and,

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this morning, he had spent an unusually long time combing his freshly washed hair into some semblance of order and trimming his beard to a neat point.

He inspected his ceremonial leather cuirass—buffed to a rich tan by two industrious elven servants—and the intricate gold-and-silver braid on his deep green velvet surcoat.

"Do I look like a king?" he wondered aloud.

A now-familiar breeze brushed his cheek.

"Firith," he grumbled, "you must stop this."

He walked over to his desk to collect Thranduil's intelligence report—which he wanted to discuss with Gimli and Lord Colgan before the talks began in earnest that afternoon—but, as he reached towards the pile of parchments, his hand froze in mid air.

The neat stack he had left the night before had been disturbed.

Two sheets had been pulled out from the pile and placed side-by-side on the desk. A quill pen had been taken from the inkstand and laid across one of the sheets—a sketch map—and a stick of sealing wax had been placed on the other.

Eomer had no doubt who was responsible. "Firith," he asked, "why did you do this?"

Firith ruffled his hair.

Eomer sighed. "Am I supposed to look at these?" He reached for the map, but a cold gust stayed his hand. "No?"

The quill pen rolled back and forth.

"The pen? What do you want me to do with the pen?"

He reached for the quill but it immediately rolled away from his hand. "You do not want me to use it. What, then?" For a split second, the pen rose up, as if lifted by an invisible hand, and its nib jabbed at the map.

"What are you trying to show me?" Eomer asked, softly. He leaned over the map and looked closely at the area beneath the nib. "White Rocks," he read. "Why is that important?" He turned to the second sheet of parchment. A single sentence had been underlined by the stick of sealing wax, "*There is a noise like the striking of many hammers.*"

"A noise. What is making the noise, Firith?"

The wax stick moved. Eomer read another sentence, "*Nearby there are three rings of burnt earth and the tracks of a huge, clawed beast...*" Tracks? Is this something to do with the bear, Firith?" He looked around the chamber. "How do you know that this is important?"

The breeze rolled gently round the room, moving hangings and draperies, then disappeared through the foliage, into the garden cave. A few moments later, it returned.

"Because you left my chambers and paid the Beornings a visit," said Eomer.

Firith kissed his forehead.

"Gods," he said, "what *am* I going to do with you?"

...

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"Melmenya!" Legolas ran back down the corridor and fell to his knees beside her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes—there has been no more sign of the bear."

"Dínendal is on his way. How is she?"

"The bleeding has stopped"—she turned to him, smiling—"thanks to elven powers of healing, but the wounds need cleaning. And she is has been rambling—nothing I could understand, but she is still very frightened. *Ah...*"

Dínendal had appeared, hurrying down the corridor, with his healing bag, followed by two assistants carrying a stretcher.

"Allow me, my lady," he said, gently taking Rothinzil from Eowyn's arms and laying her down on the ground. "I will take care of her, now."

...

It took Dínendal some time to persuade Legolas and Eowyn to leave Rothinzil in his care but—eventually—Legolas was convinced by the argument that Eowyn would need to sleep before beginning her next task.

"What did you mean," asked Eowyn, yawning, as the couple entered their chambers, "when you said that Rothinzil had been attacked because of *you*?"

"I meant that the bear is attacking everyone I care about, or used to care about," said Legolas, closing the door.

"Yes, I agree. But how did it know?"

"Know what, melmenya?"

"About Rothinzil? *I* was an obvious target and Lindë was all over you at the banquet... But how did it know that you had tuppèd Rothinzil?"

"Melmenya!" Legolas was shocked by her coarse language. "I know that this must hurt," he said, taking her in his arms, "and I am sorry—I am *so* sorry"—he kissed her forehead—"but it is all in the past, melmenya... And, yes, it *was* tuppèd. Just tuppèd. It meant *nothing*—"

"I do not believe you," said Eowyn.

"What? How can you think—"

"*You* are not capable of mindless tuppèd, Legolas," said Eowyn. She broke away from him, walked into the bedchamber and began undressing. "You cared for every one of those ellith. You would not have bedded them otherwise."

"Oh, my love!"

He rushed to her and took her in his arms, and she buried her face in his chest. "And I would not have you any other way, Legolas," she said, "so I will just have to learn to live with it." She hugged him, tightly. "But none of this answers my question: how did it know?"

"I have no id—wait: it must have seen her leave."

"Leave here?"

"Yes, she..." He hesitated. "She came to see me, melmenya," he admitted, at last, "and I sent

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her away. But I did stand at the door with her and watch her leave." He decided not to mention the business with the tunic, or the brief, brotherly kiss that he had given her as she left.

"Did anyone else see you together?"

"No. Well, only little Lady Gunnhildr—"

"Gunnhildr?" Eowyn pulled herself out of his arms. "Gunnhildr! Of course," she said, "I am an idiot! How could I have been so foolish? It is *not* one of the men! It is Gunnhildr who wants you! She must have seen you, naked, in the stream near Lorien, and—"

Eowyn remembered how Legolas had looked that day, his taut, muscular body damp and glistening, his pale golden hair lifting in the breeze... Suddenly, the bear's behaviour was no mystery.

But Legolas was not convinced. "No, it cannot possibly be her, *melmenya*," he said, "she is far too timid—"

"She is only timid when she is a woman!" said Eowyn. "Perhaps it is *because* she is so timid as a woman that she changes..." She climbed back into her gown and began retying her lacings. "We need to speak to Berryn."

"What? Why Berryn, *melmenya*? No! Wait! No! You cannot! You must get some sleep!"

Eowyn stopped in mid stride. "I had forgotten," she muttered. Then, "Gods," she cried as she struggled to unlace herself again, "it is so *frustrating*!"

Legolas stilled her hands. "Here," he said, smiling at her outburst, "let me help you into bed. I have some cordial from Dínendal that will help you sleep—you can tell me exactly what you are thinking whilst I undress you." He started work on loosening the knot she had managed to turn into a tangle.

"Supposing it *is* Gunnhildr," said Eowyn, raising her arm for him, "and I am sure that it must be, we cannot just imprison her."

"No," Legolas agreed, "that would certainly not help my father's negotiations."

"So we need to know more about skin-changers; we need to know if there is any way to recognise a skin-changer when he—or she—is in human form."

"You are thinking of letting Berryn loose on my father's library?"

Eowyn nodded. "He did a good job last time."

"He had Maglor to help him."

"Your father must also have a librarian. And Berryn could get answers out of a stone." Eowyn lowered both arms and allowed Legolas to slide her gown down to her waist then over her hips. "I have another idea, as well."

"Whatever it is, *melmenya*," said Legolas, "NO."

"You have not heard it—"

"I do not need to hear it, Eowyn; I know that tone of voice. *No*."

"At least listen."

Legolas sighed. "Get into bed, then," he said, "and tell me."

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Eowyn smiled triumphantly. "You did not catch Gunnhildr last night," she said, "because she did not choose to skin change. So what we need to do is persuade her. We need bait." She watched as Legolas prepared a glass of Dínendal's cordial. "Me."

Legolas sighed. "I knew you were going to say that," he said.

"I could lead her into an ambush."

Legolas handed her the glass. "We can do nothing until you have completed my father's tasks, melmenya," he said. "Now drink. And I will wake you at half past three with a glass of miruvor."

...

"Ah, Collo, thank you for coming," said Legolas.

He had asked the hunting party from the previous night to gather in Haldir's chambers.

"Is there any news?" asked Singollo.

"Yes and no," replied Legolas. He perched on Haldir's desk. "As you have probably heard, Eowyn and I found another of the bear's victims this morning—a serving elleth. Master Dínendal has been treating her injuries."

He turned to Dínendal, inviting him to comment.

"Her physical wounds are surprisingly superficial," said the healer, "though there could be some scarring, across her breasts." Gimli grunted angrily. "But the main injury," continued the healer, "is to her spirit. She is very distressed and—I fear—there is little that I can do for her. It is up to her family and friends to help her."

Legolas thanked him with a nod of the head. "After this attack," he continued, "Eowyn is more convinced than ever that the bear is a Beorning. In fact, she thinks that it is Lady Gunnhildr—"

Gimli laughed. "That timid little thing?" he cried. "Never!"

"But why would she attack Rothinzil, Lassui?" asked Singollo. Then, as realisation dawned on him, he smiled broadly. "You sly *dog!*" he said. "Little Rothinzil! The sweetest *cordof* in the orchard!"

"What does he mean?" asked Gimli.

Legolas sighed. "Rothinzil and I, we—we have a past together," he said. "It was over a long time ago—*long* ago—but my father knew about it and he appointed Rothinzil as Eowyn's lady's maid."

"That elf wants *gelding*," grumbled Gimli. "No offence."

Haldir nodded in agreement.

"Lady Gunnhildr was the only person who saw Rothinzil leaving my chambers yesterday," said Legolas, "so Eowyn is convinced—"

"What happened?" asked Haldir, suddenly raising his head; there was a cold edge to his voice. "A servant leaving your chambers should have passed unnoticed," he said, "so what exactly did Gunnhildr see?"

"March Warden!" cried Dínendal.

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"Nothing," said Legolas, firmly. "She saw nothing because there was nothing to see, March Warden." Then he added, icily, "And I believe we have had this conversation before."

His final words seemed to bring Haldir back to his senses for, immediately, the larger elf backed down. "I am sorry," he said.

"Your apology is accepted."

Legolas turned to the others. "Eowyn has a plan. She wants to act as bait—she thinks that she can lead the bear into an ambush." There were groans of disapproval around the room.

"Exactly," agreed Legolas. "But you know how courageous she is..." He smiled, fondly.

"Fortunately, she is sleeping now, and she will be occupied with my father's tasks for at least two more nights, which gives us more than enough time to capture this creature without her—her plan is a good one," he added.

"A good one! Surely you do not intend to risk some other young lass's life?" said Gimli.

"No, of course not, *elvellon*," said Legolas. "No. I plan to use *myself* as bait."

...

Six hours later

Washed, dressed and fortified with miruvor, Eowyn hurried to Thranduil's study. She knocked lightly on the door, paused for a moment, then opened it.

"Ah, Eowyn *vell nín*, please come in, sit down. I trust you are well rested?"

"I am, your Majesty. Thank you."

Thranduil took a piece of parchment from his otherwise empty desk and handed it to her. Eowyn examined it carefully. It was a list of names.

"These are the Edair of Sad Glawar," Thranduil explained, "a settlement to the north east of here, on the very edge of Eryn Lasgalen."

Eowyn studied the list, silently spelling out the names—Thorondir Eagle gaze, Malbeth Goldword, Siriondil Riverlover, Lassemista Greyleaf... *Wood elves*, she thought, *wilder and less sophisticated than the elves I know, but still Good People*.

"For some years," Thranduil continued, "these elves have been refusing to pay their poll tax. You have until dawn tomorrow to persuade them to do so—I expect to see you back here, by mid morning, with a portion of their arrears as proof of their agreement. I will supply you with an escort of two guards, Angrod and Findaráto. You are not to take any additional warriors with you—you are there to persuade, not to threaten. And you are not to take that meddler, Fingolfin—"

"But, your Majesty," Eowyn protested, "if the Valar were to see fit—"

"They will not," said Thranduil firmly.

"Very well," said Eowyn, sighing inwardly. "But can you at least provide me with some information about these men—these elves—and the circumstances of their dispute with you?"

That assessment of the situation will not be welcome, she thought, and she carefully avoided looking the Elvenking in the eye. "Perhaps Lord Astaldo could speak with me..."

"Do you really want to waste the time?" said Thranduil.

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"My uncle, Theoden King, always maintained that time spent in sensible preparation was worth thrice the time spent in hasty execution, your Majesty," said Eowyn.

"How quaint," said Thranduil. "Very well; I will send Astaldo to the stables, and you can question him whilst you prepare for the journey. But he is *not* to accompany you," he added.

I am sure that the Valar appreciate all the guidance you are giving them, thought Eowyn.

...

"Melmenya? What are you doing?"

"I need to change," said Eowyn. "Quickly."

"What is the task?"

"I must travel to Sad Glawar and persuade the Edair of the benefits of paying poll tax," she said, pulling a dark blue gown out of her clothes chest.

"Valar!" exclaimed Legolas, softly.

Eowyn held up the gown before her and, critically, examined its effect in the mirror. "No," she said, throwing it down on the bed. She turned to Legolas, desperately. "I need to look like your father's representative. Like an *ambassador*."

"The Edair of Sad Glawar are rough and wild," said Legolas. "They are warriors. They would pay no heed to an ambassador." He reached into the clothes chest and drew out her woollen tunic and leggings. "Wear these," he said, "and your armour. And let me braid your hair. You must look like the Shieldmaiden you are."

He led her to the dressing table, sat her down before the mirror and, using his own comb, swept back the front of her hair and swiftly worked it into a single herringbone braid. Then he took the loose strands above each ear and carefully plaited them into small warrior's braids.

"There," he said. "They will not ignore The Lady of the Shield Arm."

"Thank you," said Eowyn. She smiled, nervously. "What more can you tell me about these people?" she asked.

Legolas thought for a moment. "Your task will not be easy, Eowyn *nín*," he admitted. "They are fierce and independent and they resent authority. But if you can win their hearts—and I know you will, melmenya—they will gladly pay their taxes." He helped her into her leather cuirass. "*Ai, Eowyn nín,*" he said, suddenly, "I wish you were staying here, with me!"

"Once I have succeeded, my darling, and your father has given us his permission," said Eowyn, "we will marry properly and be together forever. We will go back to Eryn Carantaur and we will spend every night making love before the fire..."

Legolas hugged her tightly. "I will hold you to that, Eowyn *nín*," he said, kissing the top of her head. "I will hold you to it."

...

"Lady Eowyn? Your Highness?"

Eowyn turned from checking Brightstar's girth. "Lord Astaldo, thank you for coming," she said, "I assume that King Thranduil has told you why I wish to speak with you?"

"Yes, my lady." He glanced around the stable, furtively, then took her by the arm and drew her

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into an empty stall. Legolas followed.

"I will answer any questions you have, of course," said Astaldo, "but it is a complicated situation and we have very little time. That is why"—he glanced out of the stall—"my *daughter* will be accompanying you."

"Aredhel?"

"Yes. She is waiting for you by the Forest River, just out of sight of the Gates. Aredhel's mother grew up in Sad Glawar and her uncle still lives there. I think you will find her assistance invaluable."

Eowyn grasped Astaldo's hand. "Thank you my lord," she said.

"Yes," said Legolas, "thank you. I will not forget the help that you and Aredhel are giving my lady."

Astaldo placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. "*No i Melain na le,*" he said to Eowyn. "*Sílo Anor bo men lín, hiril nín.*"

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Chapter 9: The Edair of Sad Glawar

They rode in single file—Angrod, Eowyn, Aredhel and Findaráto—following the north bank of the broad Forest River for several miles until, quite suddenly, the 'shores sank. The trees ended' and 'the lands opened wide.' Eowyn found herself on a broad plain 'filled with the waters of the river which broke up and wandered in a hundred winding courses, or halted in marshes and pools dotted with isles on every side.'

The riders turned north. 'Far away, its dark head in a torn cloud', a single, massive mountain broke the horizon. "You must have heard of the Lonely Mountain," said Aredhel, bringing her horse level with Brightstar.

"Yes," said Eowyn. "Gandalf described it to me. But it is far lonelier and even more forbidding than I had imagined."

"Though the dragon, Smaug, was killed more than eighty years ago," said the elleth, "the land around the mountain has still not recovered..."

"This is a cold, frightening place altogether," said Eowyn, looking across the marshes. "Where is Sad Glawar?"

"About five miles north of here," said Aredhel, "hidden just inside the forest."

...

"Come in, Gimli. Take a seat," said Eomer, gesturing towards the empty chair next to Lord Colgan.

Gimli sat down.

Eomer selected two sheets of parchment and handed them to the dwarf. "I would like you to look at these and tell me what you think is going on," he said.

Gimli studied the first sheet. It was a sketch map of East Lorien, and an area called 'White Rocks' had been circled in red ink. "What, exactly, do you want to know?" he asked. "There is very little detail here and, without seeing the land itself, there is not much I can tell you..."

"Read the report," said Eomer.

Gimli read the second parchment very carefully—twice—paying particular attention to the sentences underlined in red. "By Aulë!" he muttered, at length. "They are *mining*! They are mining The Lady's land! And smelting, too."

"You were right, Colgan!" said Eomer, slapping his advisor's back.

Colgan, who was a slender man, winced slightly. "Can you tell us *what* they are mining, Lord Gimli?"

The dwarf looked at the sketch map again. "No," he said, shaking his head, "no. White Rocks—that could describe many kinds of stone. And the ore could be copper, iron, even silver. If I could see the place..."

"It is a good three hundred miles away, Gimli," said Eomer. "Even on the plains of Rohan that would be six days' gallop. Through dense forest it could take several weeks."

"Pity," said Gimli, shaking his head. "I would teach them to mine The Lady's land!"

"Do you think that King Thranduil already knows of this, your Majesty?" asked Colgan.

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"No, Colgan. No, I do not," said Eomer. "And I think we should keep it to ourselves, just for the time being."

...

The forest track was dark and narrow, and overgrown with bracken and with sharp-thorned brambles that rose as high as Brightstar's flanks—several times Eowyn had to dismount and use her sword to cut out a safe path for him, and she could not help but wonder whether her guides had chosen the right track.

Gradually, however, the way began to clear.

And, then, to her surprise, Eowyn spotted a house.

It was such a strange thing and so much a part of its surroundings that, had she not been looking anxiously for any sign of a settlement, she would not have recognised it for what it was. It was lying on the ground, like an animal curled between a group of young trees, its broad, shallow-pitched roof covered in a drift of golden elm leaves, the rough timbers of its front wall stained green with moss and fungus.

Eowyn's elven escorts halted.

"Is this it?" she asked Aredhel, softly.

"No, we are not yet at the settlement," said the elleth. "Caras Glawar, as the green-elves call it, is still about a mile further west. But Garma, the elf who lives here, is my uncle. And I will ask him to escort us past the Glawarim guards and to introduce you to the Edair."

"Thank you," said Eowyn.

The woman and the elleth dismounted and Eowyn followed Aredhel towards the house...

Before they could knock, the door flew open and the strange inhabitant ran out and embraced Aredhel.

Eowyn suppressed a gasp. This creature—tall and lean and dressed in simple animal skins—was nothing like the elves she knew from Eryn Carantaur or, indeed, from Eryn Lasgalen. *He is at once more like a man and less like a man than they*, she thought. *He has none of the remote dignity of a high elf like Lord Fingolfin, nor the refined grace of Legolas and Haldir. But he is truly a part of Arda—in a way that no man could ever be.*

Aredhel extracted herself from the elf's embrace and, gesturing towards Eowyn, said something in Elvish, of which Eowyn recognised only her own name and Legolas' title.

The elf placed his hand upon his heart, and bowed.

"Lady Eowyn," said Aredhel, "may I introduce my father's dear *gwador*—and my second father—Garma Kindwolf."

With a warm smile, Eowyn returned his welcoming gesture, saying, "*Gîl síla erin lû e-govaded vîn.*"

Garma, also smiling broadly, replied in rapid Elvish.

"Oh, no, sir," cried Eowyn, laughing, "I know a few words only!"

Aredhel translated.

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The elf bowed again, apologetically. Then, with an exaggerated sweep of his arm, he invited the woman into his house.

"*Hannon le,*" she said, stooping low to enter. Aredhel followed; Angrod and Findaráto waited outside. Inside the strange dwelling, all was neat and clean—but there was none of the refined elegance that Eowyn had come to associate with elven homes.

Aredhel quickly explained Eowyn's task and translated Garma's reply. "He will help you all he can," she said. "He has never met an *adaneth* before, and he wishes you and Prince Legolas all the blessings of the Valar."

"Thank him for me," said Eowyn.

...

Quietly, Legolas opened the door of the Healing Room and stepped inside.

He had come intending to apologise to Rothinzil—for he considered himself responsible for the bear's aggression towards her—and he was also hoping that the elleth could tell him how the attack had begun, and perhaps provide him with details that would help him lay his own trap, later that night.

But the sight that greeted him, when he glanced around the room, made him stop short.

Rothinzil was lying in a bed by the window. Sitting beside her, holding her hand and talking earnestly, was Master Dínendal. The healer was behaving, as always, with complete propriety. But there was something more in his manner that made Legolas smile.

He is in love... he thought.

Dínendal is in love with Rothinzil!

He looked carefully at the elleth's face and his smile broadened. *And—though she does not realise it yet—she loves him, too. She has recognised in him a good, kind elf with whom she can have a future.*

Silently, Legolas backed out of the Healing Room and closed the door.

He would speak to Rothinzil later.

And, in the meantime, he would ask his father's healer to take over the elleth's treatment, then Dínendal would be free to follow his heart.

...

"Today's talks have been postponed, your Majesty," said Colgan. "Chief Bergthórr beytill is refusing to play any further part until King Thranduil apologises."

Eomer laughed, mirthlessly. "It will be freezing cold in the bowels of Mount Doom before *that* happens, Colgan. We could be stuck in this gods-forsaken place for months."

...

The forest path ended abruptly at a massive earthwork, a huge, dry moat surrounding a group of buildings similar to Garma's house—covered in leaves and moss and almost invisible amongst the trees.

The green-elf rode ahead, calling out in Elvish and, immediately, a narrow wooden drawbridge was lowered over the moat and two guards appeared at the far end. At the same time—to

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Eowyn's discomfort—several other guards emerged from the forest behind the visitors, their bows partially drawn.

Garma rode across the drawbridge. The others waited.

"The green-elves are wise in wood-lore and are deadly with the bow, but they have never learned to forge arms of steel," explained Aredhel, softly. "When Sauron loosed his orcs into Mirkwood many died, felled by the superior weapons of their foes. Those who survived did so by retreating deeper into the forest and learning to hide themselves in its arms."

A big, imposing elf, with a mane of light brown hair woven with feathers, appeared from amongst the buildings and began a heated argument with Garma.

"Thorondir Eaglegaze," whispered Aredhel.

The name was familiar. *Of course*, thought Eowyn, *Legolas' bowmaster. The bully.*

Guided by her instincts, the woman swung her leg over Brightstar's back, dropped lightly to the ground, and—after telling the horse not to stray: "*Avo visto*, Brightstar"—began crossing the drawbridge. The Glawarim guards raised their bows, but Eowyn—though inwardly nervous—ignored them and kept walking.

"My lord Thorondir," she said, loudly, in the Common Tongue, "I am Eowyn, The Lady of the Shield Arm, and I come with a message from King Thranduil for the Edair of Caras Glawar."

The elf replied in Elvish.

"I know that you speak Westron, my lord," said Eowyn, firmly, "because my betrothed—the most able of all your pupils—has told me so."

"The most able of my pupils?"

"Prince Legolas," said Eowyn.

"Prince Legolas," said Thorondir, "the *cwenda* who could never be controlled."

Eowyn smiled, "He is no longer your elfling pupil, my lord, but a hero of the Ring war."

"As are *you*, my lady," said Thorondir, "reputedly."

Eowyn bowed her head. "That is not for me to say," she said. "Nevertheless, King Thranduil has seen fit to entrust me with an important task."

"Which is?"

"I must speak to *all* the Edair," said Eowyn.

The elf sighed. "Very well," he said, at length. "This way."

...

Berryn wandered into King Thranduil's library looking for a librarian.

It is an impressive collection, he thought, *but it does not compare to the library back home*. He had already begun to think of Eryn Carantaur as home, and of himself as the colony's cartographer. *King Thranduil clearly does not share his son's love of the arts. He is a man of politics—*

Between two of the book stacks he glimpsed an elf carrying a large volume.

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"Sir," he cried, in a loud whisper, "sir—wait!—sir, do you speak Westron?" He hurried between the stacks and followed the elf to a table at the furthest corner of the library. "Sir?"

"I *do* speak Westron," said the elf, "though it is some years since I did so. What do you want, young *adan*?"

Berryn—never sure of the correct etiquette—placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. "I am Berryn, son of Hador," he said, "cartographer to Crown Prince Legolas, and..." He paused. "Are you one of the librarians, sir?"

"I have spent many years in this library," said the elf.

Berryn decided that that probably meant 'yes'. "May I know your name, sir?" he asked.

"My name?" The elf looked surprised. "Why do you want to know my name?"

"So that I may use it, sir," said Berryn.

"To do what?" asked the elf.

Gods preserve us! thought Berryn. He decided to change the subject. "Crown Prince Legolas has asked me to search the library for information about skin changers," he said. "But I do not read Elvish. So—will you help me, sir?"

"Skin changers?" The elf seemed even more perplexed. "I am not interested in skin changers. I never have been."

Berryn rubbed his hand across his mouth.

The elf sat down at the table. "Though there was," he continued, unexpectedly, "a skin changer who took part in the Battle of Five Armies—oh, some years ago."

"Eighty," Berryn supplied. "Did you see him?"

"Yes, indeed!" said the elf. "A bear one moment—a magnificent, black bear tossing 'wolves and goblins from his path like straws and feathers'—and then a man the next! I wonder how he did it? They *do* say that his ancestor, Beren, learnt the art from the Eldar..."

"Perhaps," said Berryn, quite casually, "if we could find a *book* about skin changers, we could find out."

...

The Meeting House of Caras Glawar was a low, round building at the centre of the settlement. Eowyn followed Thorondir through its doors, ducking under the lintel. Once inside, she stood upright and looked around, taking in the decorated pillars and the carved roof beams. *It is a less elegant version of the Banqueting Hall at Eryn Carantaur*, she thought. *Perhaps Legolas was inspired by it.* She immediately felt more at home.

Followed by Aredhel and the others, Eowyn approached the great ring-shaped table, where the people of Sad Glawar, including the other Edair, were already gathering. She waited until Thorondir had taken his place, then she stepped into the centre of the ring and—screwing up her courage—introduced herself, placing her hand over her heart and bowing her head respectfully. "I am Eowyn, The Lady of the Shield Arm," she said, "sent here by King Thranduil with an important message."

Keeping her hand in its place, she turned full circle, letting her gaze fall on every elf and elleth sitting at the table. Then she smiled at the Adar on Thorondir's right. "May I know whom I

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address, my lord?" she asked.

"Malbeth Goldword does not speak Westron," said Thorondir. He repeated his explanation in Elvish, for the elf's benefit.

Eowyn greeted Malbeth politely, then turned to the elf on Thorondir's left.

"I am Lassemista Greyleaf," said the elf, "and my neighbour, who does not speak Westron either, is Siriondil Riverlover."

Eowyn greeted both of them.

"Tell us, *adaneth dithen*," said Lassemista, "what is this important message you bring from Thranduil *hwarn*?"

Valar help me, thought Eowyn, but she chose to ignore the Adar's insults. "The King asks why you refuse to pay your taxes," she said. "You are four years in arrears."

To her surprise, Lassemista and Thorondir both laughed out loud and, when the latter translated her words, the rest of the company joined in the laughter.

"You are breaking the law," said Eowyn.

"We are green-elves," said Lassemista. "We have no need of an *edel*'s laws. The forest is our sovereign; we obey its law. We take nothing from Thranduil and we pay him nothing in return."

Eowyn sighed inwardly. *This is not going well*, she thought. "Your way of life was shaped by dangerous times," she said, "But in the Fourth Age a different kind of life is possible. In the Fourth Age you are free to live as you have always desired."

Aredhel began translating her words for her as she spoke.

"In this new age, my betrothed," said Eowyn, "King Thranduil's son, Prince Legolas, has founded a new colony, in South Ithilien, close to the Mountains of Mordor." She smiled. "There we live with elves and men and dwarves, tending the forest together, in daily contact with our friends from Gondor and Rohan and the Shire. We do not hide in a moated fortress but travel freely, throughout all Middle-earth. *I* have seen Imladris; I have walked in the Forests of Fangorn and Lorien. Prince Legolas has galloped across the plains of Rohan. He and I have explored the glittering caves of Aglarond together; we have walked along the streets of Minas Tirith; and we have sailed in the Bay of Belfalas..."

Eowyn heard murmurs behind her. She was beginning to reach the ordinary elves and ellith—she could feel it. "What you have told me was wise, my lords; *most* wise in time of danger. But is it necessary, in time of peace, to confine yourselves inside this settlement?"

...

"Come in," called Legolas, swinging his legs off the bed and standing.

The sight of Dínendal with Rothinzil, though charming, had made him miss Eowyn desperately and, although he had spent the last hour lying on his back, trying to plan the night's bear hunt, his thoughts kept wandering back to her.

The door opened and Haldir entered.

"March Warden! What is it?"

Haldir looked uncomfortable. "It is nothing, really," he said. "It is just... Lady Eowyn..."

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"You are worried for her?"

Haldir nodded.

"And you do not know what to do with yourself. Nor do I, *mellon nín*. Come, sit down." Legolas, pointed to two chairs by the fire. "It is my turn to offer you the strong wine of Dorwinion." He walked to the sideboard, took the stopper from a glass decanter, and filled two large goblets. "Here," he said, handing one of the glasses to Haldir.

The elves stared into the empty fireplace.

"What are you going to do, Haldir?" asked Legolas, softly.

"Do?"

"You cannot go on like this, *mellon nín*."

"I have no choice," said Haldir.

"No," said Legolas. "No; I can understand that. But, perhaps, if you were to look for an elleth—there are many in Eryn Carantaur who admire the March Warden—"

"Did *you* ever consider that?" asked Haldir. "When she was married to Prince Faramir, did *you* look for an elleth?"

"No," said Legolas.

"And if the Valar had not granted you your wish, would you be looking for an elleth now?"

"No."

"It is painful," agreed Haldir, "but it is less painful than living a lie with an elleth for whom I have no feelings. And I *do* have her friendship."

"Yes, you do," said Legolas, sincerely.

...

"The story of your travels is interesting," said Thorondir, "but it does not explain why we must pay Thranduil's taxes."

"To be part of the world is to share responsibility for it," said Eowyn. "A man—or an elf—pays taxes not just for his own benefit but for the benefit of all his fellows. A wise, honourable king—like wise, honourable Elders—distributes the money he has collected wherever it is needed. Next year, it may be you, yourselves, who suffer flood or famine and need assistance."

"Green-elves do not accept charity," said Lassemista.

"It is *not* charity, my lord; it is yours by right if you have paid taxes. All pay taxes for the good of all. Sometimes the money goes to help your friends, other times it helps your former enemies. In time of war, it is diverted to the manufacture of armour and weapons... I would never claim that Middle-earth is a perfect world, my lords," Eowyn continued, "for the time of the Eldar has passed. But the rulers of men—and of the elves who have stayed behind—are trying to make it a place where the strong are encouraged to meet their responsibilities and the weak are never forsaken."

The Adar called Siriondil Riverlover said something in Elvish.

There were more murmurs from the elves sitting behind her, and Eowyn looked to Aredhel. But

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it was Thorondir who translated the words for her: "He says that you are arguing that, by raising taxes, men try to make the Fourth Age more like the world of the Edil, the High Elves."

Eowyn turned to Siriondil and bowed her head. "Yes, my lord," she said. "I suppose I am."

The four Edair held a brief discussion.

Then Thorondir addressed Eowyn. "We will give our people the opportunity to consider your words, then we will ask them to cast their votes," he said. "Aredhel and Garma may remain here. You and your escorts must wait in the Eating Hall. You are probably in need of refreshment."

...

"How am I to use Eowyn's plan?" asked Legolas, looking deeply into his wine. "I suppose that—if I were not concerned about hurting Gunnhildr—or about hurting Eowyn—I could pay court to her all night and then slight her—make her angry with me. But I cannot do that..."

"No," agreed Haldir. "You cannot. But perhaps you should pay her *some* attention—be kind to her but not too encouraging—and then just happen to mention that you are in the habit of walking along the tunnels at night."

"Do you think that would work?"

"It might encourage her join you," said Haldir, "but whether as a woman or as a bear..." He shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not want Eowyn to act as bait."

"Certainly not," said Haldir. "If we do not solve this before she completes your father's tasks we will have to"—he thought for a moment—"lock her in *here* until it is safe."

"She would escape, *mellon nín*," said Legolas, shaking his head.

The two elves looked at each other for a long moment, silently agreeing that to protect Eowyn was their first concern.

Then Haldir said, softly, "You really have no choice but to be a little cruel. Collect the girl from her chambers and take her into dinner. Be polite and attentive, and tell her that you will be walking along the tunnels tonight—say that you are missing Lady Eowyn. We will be waiting in the side tunnel just beyond your chambers. If she follows you, we will capture her."

...

The elf in the library—whose name, Berryn discovered, after much questioning, was Ornendil—was not, in fact, a librarian and knew very little about the arrangement of the library except in his own quiet corner.

"What are you studying?" asked Berryn, guiding him towards another book stack.

"Fungus," said Ornendil.

"Ah," said Berryn. "And what are these books about?" He pointed to one of the shelves.

"The history of the eldar," said Ornendil.

"And these?"

"Literature. There *is*," he said, turning to Berryn, "a story about a brother, abandoned in the

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forest, who was raised by bears..."

Berryn sighed.

...

The door to Gunnhildr Bergthórsdottir's chambers was opened by a lady's maid, modestly dressed but not, Legolas noticed, veiled like her mistress.

"Good evening," said the elf, stepping inside, unbidden. "Would you inform Lady Gunnhildr that I have come to escort her to the Great hall for dinner?"

The lady's maid looked surprised, but she curtseyed and then disappeared into the bedchamber. Legolas heard her deliver his message and heard the two women argue briefly—their voices were low and he could not be sure exactly what was being said, though he heard his own name used more than once—then Gunnhildr emerged into the main chamber.

Legolas realised that he was staring.

The girl had borrowed an elven gown and had had her hair arranged by an elleth, and—although the gown was a trifle long—she looked...

Legolas could not find the right word.

The previous night, in her shapeless, modest dress, she had seemed heavy, and the harsh green cloth of her veil had robbed her skin of all its colour. Tonight, the softly draped folds and the low, scooped neckline of her gown showed her figure to be slender and graceful, and its pale orange silk made her flawless skin glow.

Sweet Eru, she looks radiant, thought Legolas. *How could she ever have seemed plain?* "My lady," he said, holding out his hand and smiling with genuine pleasure at the girl's transformation, "my father's Court awaits you."

Gunnhildr bowed her head, gracefully, and placed her hand on his.

Eowyn nín is wrong about her, he thought, as they left the chambers. *She must be. But, then, who is the bear?*

...

"Lady Eowyn," said Angrod, "will you not sit down and have something to eat?"

Eowyn stopped pacing and turned towards him. "Thank you," she said, "but I could not eat anything." She sighed; her mouth was dry. "Perhaps, though, I *will* have a drink..."

Angrod poured her a glass of water. "Here, my lady," he said. "And *please* try to eat something."

Eowyn sat down heavily. "What do you think they will decide?" she asked. "How would *you* vote?"

"If I were a green-elf?" Angrod shrugged his elegant shoulders. "It is hard to imagine, my lady. They are a very primitive people. They deliberately shun the customs that have grown up amongst the more developed races. But the ordinary elves and elleth were listening to you. I think—"

"Lady of the Shield Arm!" Thorondir Eagle-gaze's sudden arrival cut Angrod's answer short. "We have one more question for you," he said. "Come with me."

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...

Eowyn stood before the four Edair like a prisoner awaiting her sentence.

"Our people have voted," said Lassemistra Greyleaf, "and the result is in your favour."

Eowyn sighed with relief.

"But you have not won yet, lady," he continued, "for their decision must be approved by the Edair. And what we want to know is why Thranduil *hwarn* has sent *you* as his emissary?"

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Chapter 10: Firith

Bergthórr beytill leaped to his feet. "What is the meaning of this?" he cried, as Legolas led Lady Gunnhildr, unveiled, into the Great Hall. "Go back to your chambers at once—and do not return until you are properly dressed!" He turned to Thranduil. "Is one woman not enough for your son? You tell him to keep his 'thing' to himself—"

"My son has no interest in your daughter's body," said Thranduil, coldly. "But if he is, in any way, responsible for her miraculous transformation, you should be thanking him. Come, my dear," he said to Gunnhildr, "come and sit beside *me*. And, please, Bergthórr beytill," he added, to the speechless chieftain, "sit down, too, and enjoy your food. You and I can argue again tomorrow."

...

Eowyn removed her betrothal ring and set it on the table before Lassemistá Greyleaf.

"I am Prince Legolas' chosen," she said, "given to him by the Valar in his first harvest rite. But King Thranduil does not accept me. He insists that I must prove my worth by completing three tasks set by him. This is my second task—to succeed I must return to him tomorrow with a portion of your arrears as proof that you have agreed to pay your taxes. If I fail, I am to leave Eryn Lasgalen and never see Prince Legolas again..."

There was a murmur of surprise from the elves and ellith behind her.

"So your motives are selfish," said Lassemistá.

Eowyn thought for a moment. "My motives for being in Caras Glawar *are* selfish, my lord, yes," she admitted, "but my argument—that, in a just society, each pays taxes according to his means so that the strong may help the weak and the weak need feel no shame in accepting help—is always valid, and is in no way affected by my motives."

The Adar called Siriondil Riverlover suddenly spoke out in Elvish.

"She has my vote, too," said Lassemistá. "Malbeth?"

Malbeth Goldword nodded.

Thorondir sighed. "And mine too."

Eowyn smiled broadly. "Thank you, my lords."

Siriondil leaned towards his neighbour and asked him a question. Then, after a brief discussion, he turned back to Eowyn and said, in a mixture of broken Westron and Elvish, "*Cuio mae*, little *adaneth* brave. I wish you *cuil 'lassui* with Prince Legolas."

Eowyn placed her hand over her heart and bowed her head in thanks.

...

"May I have your permission to escort your daughter back to her chambers, Chief Bergthórr?" asked Legolas.

The chieftain's sharp eyes narrowed. "Why?" he asked. "Why are you paying my daughter so much attention, when you already have a woman?"

"She is my father's guest," said Legolas. "And it is our custom," he lied.

The Beorning sighed. "Very well," he said. He glanced towards his daughter, who was talking

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animatedly with King Thranduil. "But," he added, shrewdly, "make sure you tell her that *you* would prefer to see her dressed more modestly tomorrow."

...

"Did you enjoy your evening, Lady Gunnhildr?" asked Legolas as they walked slowly down the passage towards the Beornings' chambers. "I believe you made a great impression on my father, and on the rest of his Court."

"Thank you, Prince Legolas," said Gunnhildr quietly. She stopped walking and, taking her hand from his, turned to face him. "I did enjoy tonight—your father's company is delightful and *you*—you have been very kind to me. I must thank you—and Lord Gimli—for showing me that it is not shameful for a woman to enjoy the attention of men"—she smiled—"or, rather, of elves and dwarves..." She held out her hand. "I will leave you, now, your Highness, for I see we are at your door, and I can make my own way back to my chambers from here."

"But I must insist," said Legolas, sincerely, because he was now more certain than ever that Gunnhildr was not the bear, "on seeing you to safety, my lady. Besides," he added, remembering his plan, "with Lady Eowyn so far away I will not rest in my chambers tonight. I will pass the time walking through the Halls, visiting the garden caverns. The sight of growing things will give my spirit all the rest it needs."

...

Eomer awoke, a sixth sense telling him that someone was about to knock on his door.

"A moment," he called. He threw back the bed covers, and —recognising the soft, warm, breeze he felt as his hand brushed the pillow beside him—climbed out of bed and put on his dressing robe. "Go into the garden," he said as he walked towards the door. "I do not want them to know you are here."

He waited a moment before opening the door.

"Your Majesty," said Valandil, bowing, "we have it." He handed Eomer a small flask.

Eomer stared at the object lying in his hand, then looked up at the two elves. "Come in a moment," he said, "I will not keep you long, but—by the gods, you must have ridden non-stop." He gestured towards the chairs by the fire.

"We rode swiftly," said Valandil, as he and Orodreth stepped inside, "because we thought it was urgent."

"Thank you," said Eomer. "May I offer you a drink?"

"No, thank you," said Valandil.

"We shall sup once we have bathed, your Majesty," explained Orodreth.

"If you are sure..." Eomer smiled. "I just wanted to thank you properly," he said, clasping each elf's hand and slapping him on the back in turn. "Thank you, both. I will be sure to impress on Prince Legolas what a valuable service you have rendered me."

...

Legolas turned at the end of the passage and slowly retraced his steps—past the various storage chambers; past two garden caverns filled with cherry blossom; past Bergthórr beytill's chamber; past Bjarni Bjarki's; past the dormitory shared by the rest of the Beorning men; past Lady Gunnhildr's door...

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He paused and listened carefully for any sounds of movement.

Nothing.

He carried on; past two more garden caverns; past two more chambers...

He ducked into a side tunnel.

"Anything?" whispered Gimli.

Legolas shook his head. "Where is Dínendal?" he asked, softly.

"He has been summoned to a patient," said Haldir. "He will return as soon as he is able. What do you plan to do next?"

"I will walk the tunnel one more time," said Legolas. "And then..."

"Then I am not sure."

...

"You asked for me, your Majesty?" said Dínendal.

"Yes, Master Healer," said Eomer. "I am sorry to have disturbed you in the middle of the night but—the truth is—it is an urgent matter and one that I would prefer to keep"—he cleared his throat—"confidential."

Dínendal looked around the room as if expecting to see a drugged elleth lying deflowered upon the bed. "Your Majesty?"

Eomer picked up the flask of enchanted water. "Please sit down, Master Dínendal, and I will explain." He gestured towards a chair and waited until the elf was seated. "When I helped Legolas carry my sister out of the enchanted river," he said, "I think I must have swallowed a tiny amount of water—"

"Yes, your Majesty, I believe you did. The tiredness..."

"Yes. And, in that state, it seems that I can see—and speak to—the woodland sprite. So I have obtained a small quantity of enchanted water." He handed the flask to Dínendal. "But I am unsure how much to take..."

"I see," said Dínendal. He turned the flask around in his hand, looking at it intently. "Do you want to try some now?"

"Yes, I do. But I must be well enough to attend the talks tomorrow."

"I understand," said the healer. "I will do what I can, your Majesty—please sit on the bed." Dínendal placed his healing bag on the night stand, opened it, and took out a tiny spoon. "Good. Now prop yourself up on the pillows, your Majesty—"

"Wait! Are you sure that she is here?" asked Eomer.

"She is lying beside you," said Dínendal.

Eomer cursed under his breath.

Dínendal uncorked the flask and carefully tipped a single drop of water onto the spoon. "Take this, your Majesty," he said, holding the spoon to Eomer's lips. The man swallowed the water like a child taking a dose of cod liver oil from his mother.

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"We will wait for a quarter of an hour," said Dínendal, turning a small hourglass and placing it on the nightstand. "If you have not begun to see the sprite by then, your Majesty, I will give you some more water."

...

Legolas paced the tunnel. *There can only be—what?—three, four hours until dawn*, he thought. *Oh, Eowyn nín, if only I could have gone with you...*

He paused once more outside Gunnhildr's door. *Still nothing. It is not her, I am sure of it—
Danger!*

All his senses were suddenly alert. *Danger!* And he knew exactly where the bear was.

"Ada!" he cried, running past the side tunnel—"Come with me! It is attacking my father!"—then out into the main thoroughfare, with Gimli, Haldir and Berryn following.

...

Eomer watched as the last grain of sand fell through the neck of the hourglass.

"*More*," he said.

Dínendal fed him another drop.

...

Legolas ran into Thranduil's study, followed by his friends and by the two guards from outside the door. "Ada? Ada, where are you?" He looked around for a weapon. "Give me your bow," he said to one of the guards.

"We are in the garden!" cried his father. "But stay outside, Lassui! All of you, stay outside."

"Ada—"

"Wait!"

"Please do as he says," said a quiet voice.

Legolas turned towards the study door. A slender figure, dressed in a white night-gown, stood framed beneath its arch.

"Leave this to me, Prince Legolas," she said, "and no one will be hurt." Then she walked over to the garden cavern and stood in the doorway. "Stop it," she said, firmly. "Please, stop it."

...

"*More*," said Eomer.

...

The bear howled.

"I do not *need* protection," said Gunnhildr, "not from King Thranduil. Please leave his chambers. Go back to you own room."

There was a sound of scuffling.

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Then a huge, golden creature bounded past Gunnhildr, past Legolas and his companions, and out through the study door. "Do not hurt her—let her go!" cried the girl. "She will not harm anyone now!"

Legolas ran into the garden. "Ada?" His father was standing with his back pressed against the cavern wall. "Are you hurt?"

"No..." said Thranduil, "No. I think she was just giving me a warning."

"A warning? About what?"

Thranduil did not answer. Instead, motioning Legolas to go before him, he walked out into the study. "Return to your posts," he said to the guards, "I will deal with the bear, later, myself."

He turned to Gunnhildr. "Now: I think you owe my son and me an explanation, young lady."

...

"By the gods, Firith," said Eomer. "Get some clothes on!"

...

"Her name is Osðryd," said Gunnhildr. "She is my nurse."

"The woman I saw earlier tonight?" said Legolas.

"Yes." Gunnhildr smiled, shyly. "When my mother died, my father made Osðryd swear on her own life that she would always protect me." Gunnhildr bit her lip. "The first time I saw her change we were travelling. One of Sauron's wolves had managed to slip into our camp unseen and had entered my tent. When I awoke its head was in my crib and its saliva was dripping on my face." Gunnhildr shuddered. "Suddenly, it was knocked aside—killed instantly by a single blow from the bear's paw. I watched the bear as it changed back—I saw it become smaller, slighter; saw the fur disappear from its arms and face; saw its fangs and claws turn to teeth and nails. I watched the bear slip back into the form of a woman—Osðryd.

"Then she lifted me from my crib and rocked me, cooing over me as if nothing had happened.

"I was too shy to tell my father what I had seen—for I was only four—but I told my brother, Bjarni, and he told father. Father had me brought to his tent, sat me on his knee, and told me that what I had seen was a dream and that, although I might well have similar dreams again, I was never to talk of them. And I never have, until now. Except to Bjarni."

"So your nurse thought that King Thranduil intended to"—Gimli shot the Elvenking a slightly false look of apology—"seduce you and she came here to warn him off?"

"Yes."

"And she slipped past the guards unnoticed," said Legolas, "because she is a woman and a servant."

"It was my fault. I told her that you had asked me to sit beside you at dinner, your Majesty," said Gunnhildr. "I am sorry."

Thranduil waved a hand. "Pray, do not mention it, my dear," he said. "It is forgotten. The only thing *I* want to know is why she attacked my son."

Gunnhildr blushed deeply. "We saw Prince Legolas," she said, "Osðryd and I, paddling in a stream in East Lorien. We both thought"—she cleared her throat, her eyes fixed on the floor

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—"that he looked very nice."

Legolas' fair skin turned slightly rosy.

"I think that she *likes* you," she said, very quietly.

...

"I will leave you now," said Dínendal. "Do not take any more water tonight. If you want to see her again tomorrow," he held up the tiny spoon to emphasise his point, "take three drops, a quarter of an hour apart." He placed the spoon beside the flask. "I will see myself out," he said.

"Thank you," said Eomer.

Dínendal gave him a brief bow, then left.

Eomer turned to Firith. She had wrapped herself in a bed sheet, but—somehow—that only made her look more alluring.

"Beloved..." she whispered.

Eomer bit his lip. "We need to talk," he said.

"Later..." whispered Firith.

"No—*No*, Firith!" He pushed her hands away.

"But you are so beautiful, *E-o-mer*..." she protested, in her musical voice. She touched his face. "Let me show you how beautiful..."

...

"You are saying that her intentions towards my son are amorous?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"And so she dislikes Eowyn," continued Thranduil. "But how did she know about Lindorië? And about Rothinzil?"

"I told her, your Majesty. Every night, I tell her stories of what I have seen. I did not realise that she would be jealous."

"What, *exactly*, did you see happening between my son and Rothinzil to make her jealous?" asked Thranduil.

"Ada!"

Gunnhildr looked from father to son and back again. "Nothing, your Majesty. Nothing. I just saw him kiss her good night. It was nothing. He did the same to me, later."

Thranduil turned to his son triumphantly. Legolas scowled back.

"Well," said Berryn, suddenly, "at least now we know how to stop the bear's attacks."

Thranduil lost the staring contest. "We do?"

"Yes, your Majesty. From what little I managed to learn in the library this afternoon, it all comes down to the oath. Whether he knew it or not, when Bergthórr beytill made the nurse

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swear to protect Lady Gunnhildr, he took away her self-control. He condemned her to changing skin whenever her charge was threatened—so when Lady Gunnhildr grew up so lovely—the girl rewarded him with a dazzling smile—the bear became obsessed with protecting her honour. And now that the woman has, herself, become infatuated with Prince Legolas, the bear is expressing her jealousy. You must persuade Bergthórr beytill to release the skin changer from her oath, your Majesty. Oh! And," he added, almost as an afterthought, "Lord Legolas must speak to her about—well—the *other thing*."

...

"I am *married*," Eomer insisted. "I have told you before—I am not free."

"And nor am I, *E-o-mer*... I am bound... To you..." She brushed her fingers across his lips.

Eomer shivered.

"Let me show you love... Just once..."

"I cannot," whispered Eomer. "My wife—"

"Do you love her, *E-o-mer*?"

"I—no." It was less than a whisper. "But, in time—"

"I can *help* you fall in love with her..."

"How?"

Firith smiled. "Let me show you..." Slowly, she untied the sash of his dressing robe. Then, moving smoothly, light as air, she slipped between his legs and, kneeling before him, raised his night shirt...

...

"I shall speak to Bergthórr beytill today, before the talks," said Thranduil. "And I would be very grateful, Lady Gunnhildr, if—assuming that you have any sway with your father—you would persuade him to hear me out."

Gunnhildr shook her head. "I am his favourite, your Majesty, but he would never listen to me in a matter of state. Unless, that is, I can tell him something you 'let slip' at dinner last night—that you are intending to *apologise* to him, for example."

Legolas laughed.

Gunnhildr smiled.

"Are all *edenith* brighter than their men folk?" asked Thranduil. "Very well, my dear, you may tell him that if you think it will get him to speak to me."

"My father," said Legolas, with a wink, "is particularly adept at seeming to apologise whilst actually deepening the insult. *I shall speak to your nurse when Lady Eowyn is sleeping.*"

"Please do not hurt her, Prince Legolas," said Gunnhildr, "she cannot help what she is—nor what falling in love with you has made her become."

"I have no intention of harming her, my lady," said Legolas, "provided she does not attack me."

"I meant her *feelings*," said Gunnhildr, biting her lip.

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"That," said Legolas, softly, "may be more difficult. But I will do what I can." He glanced at his father's hourglass. "Now I must leave you, for I want to meet Eowyn on her journey home. Will you come with me, Gimli?"

"Of course," said the dwarf.

"Good Day, Lady Gunnhildr," said Legolas, bowing. "Haldir, Berryn; Good Day, Ada."

"Be sure to bring Eowyn straight to me, Lassui," called Thranduil after his son. "*With the money.*"

...

"Come on Gimli," cried Legolas, "it is almost dawn!"

He reached down from Arod's back and—displaying a strength entirely at odds with his slender frame—lifted the dwarf up behind him.

"Are you sure that you want an audience, lad?" asked Gimli.

"If she has failed, Gimli, you must take her back to Aglarond. She will be safe with you—and she loves you very much."

Gimli said nothing but Legolas could hear him swallowing hard.

...

They galloped along the river until they reached the forest edge.

Scanning the strange, marshy plain to the west of the Long Lake, Legolas could see, coming from the north, a small group of riders working their way along the raised track. Gradually, his elven eyes distinguished their forms—first Angrod, Findaráto and Aredhel; then, some way behind them, Eowyn riding beside a green-elf he recognised as—

"By the Valar, Gimli, she is leading a pack horse!"

...

Heedless of the danger presented by the marshy ground, Legolas galloped past Angrod, Findaráto and Aredhel, brought Arod to a sudden halt, and—ignoring Gimli's colourful protests—jumped down and ran to Eowyn's side. She had already dismounted, laughing, and he lifted her into his arms and whirled her round, kissing her neck noisily.

"You weigh a ton in your armour, melmenya," he laughed. Then he whispered, "You did it! You did it, brave Eowyn *nín!*"

"Yes, I did it," she replied. And then, remembering her manners, she added, "One of the Edair decided to accompany me back to your father's Halls. He wants to talk to him." She turned to the Adar. "Legolas, this is—"

"*Mae govannen*, Siriondil," said Legolas. The two elves greeted each other formally.

"Siriondil is the best fletcher in the whole of Middle Earth, Lorien not excepted," said Legolas to Eowyn as they rode back towards the forest. "He taught me everything I know about arrows. And he says that *you*"—he grinned at her—"are the bravest, most eloquent, most beautiful creature he has ever seen. I believe I shall have to guard you very well in future, melmenya!"

...

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"Let me see it," said Thranduil.

Eowyn opened one of the panniers.

Legolas gasped.

"This is one year's tax," she said. "There is another year's money in the other bag. The people of Caras Glawar ask for time to raise the remainder of the arrears. One of the Edair has returned with me to treat with you."

"Has he indeed," said Thranduil. "Tell me: how did they come by so much silver?"

"They trade with the men of Laketown," said Eowyn. "I thought you would prefer metal to payment in kind—however well the bows and arrows are made."

Thranduil looked up sharply. "You are shrewd, Eowyn *vell nín*."

Eowyn nodded, her face impassive.

"Good," said Thranduil. "Very good. Return to me at four o'clock and I will set you your final task. Now go and get some rest—you look mortal."

...

"You must be very tired, *melmenya*, let me put you to bed."

Eowyn, sitting on the floor by his feet, shook her head. "No, I want to watch you again," she said.

"Watch me?"

She nodded, laying her hands on his thighs and smiling wickedly.

"Oh! *Watch* me..." Legolas returned her smile. "Fortunately, *you* could raise a dead elf, *melmenya*..." Taking his time, he removed his sash, unfastened the front of his silver tunic and opened it. He was wearing nothing but a pair of fine silken leggings and he raised his eyebrows slightly—*Well?*—clearly expecting her to be impressed—and, indeed, the thin fabric was hiding nothing.

"Go on," said Eowyn, still smiling.

Legolas pulled at his laces, let the leggings fall open and then, still watching Eowyn's face, reached inside and lifted himself out, already full size—long and thick—but still soft.

"Oh..." Eowyn reached for it, longingly, but did not touch it.

Legolas wrapped his fingers around its root and fondled it. The shaft began to stiffen, first straightening, then rising slowly, until it stood upright against his belly. Leaning forwards now but still looking at her, Legolas began to move his fingers in a light, circular motion, teasing it and making it jump.

Eowyn groaned; her fingers moved closer.

Grasping the arm of the chair with his left hand, Legolas began to use his right in earnest, wrapping it around his shaft and stroking up and down, from root to head and back again.

"What does it *fee/* like?" asked Eowyn, hoarsely.

"It is pleasant," he admitted, "but it is not like being inside *you*." He closed his eyes and leaned

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back in the chair. "You are wet," he whispered, smiling, "and your body holds me, all of me, sometimes tightly, sometimes like a gentle caress. Inside you, I feel safe, even when you grip me hard and milk me without mercy." His hips had begun to move on the chair, thrusting himself into his hand. It was obvious that he was imagining his hand as her body. He moaned —

"No! No! Not yet!" she cried, breaking his rhythm.

Legolas opened his eyes and stared at her with all the agony of a male on the very brink suddenly denied release. "Oh, Valar," he gasped; "oh, Manwë and Varda..."

"I am sorry, my love!" Lifting her shift, Eowyn scrambled onto the chair, straddling him. "It hurts to watch you—I need you inside me."

With a gasp of pure relief Legolas pulled her down onto his lap.

...

Eowyn moaned as she felt his smooth, hard flesh fill her, stretch her, pushing up against her womb. Raking back his loose, soft hair and grasping his shoulders, she began to ride him.

"Do you have any idea," she moaned, "how much I love you, *edhel nín*?"

"I love you too," he answered. Then he took hold of her hips and, despite her protests, gently slowed her movements to an almost imperceptible rise and fall.

...

There was nothing left of Middle-earth—nothing but *his* penis stretching up inside *her*. And she—his glorious woman—was holding him in her soft, sweet body—holding them both on the very edge of completion—

"Legolas!"

He heard her cry and, too exhausted to hold her back this time, instinctively followed. And his seed, multiplied by denied release, burst forth, again and again, leaving him weak and trembling.

"*Ai!*" he sobbed, "*Cuinion! Cuinam... Ai...*"

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Chapter 11: Osðryd

Eomer awoke smiling. "Firith?"

The bed beside him seemed empty but a reassuring breeze stirred his hair and, without thinking, he reached for his flask of enchanted water.

A cold blast stayed his hand and brought him back to his senses.

"You are right, Firith," he said, "I forgot. Thank you." He stroked the pillow beside him. "Thank you for everything. I will wait until tonight, then take some more, and we will talk—just talk."

The breeze caressed his cheek.

"Gods," he whispered, "I can *never* thank you enough for last night."

...

Legolas walked noiselessly across the chamber and opened the door. "Eomer," he whispered, "what is it? Eowyn is sleeping."

"Good," said Eomer, "for I do not want her to hear what I am about to say. Can we go elsewhere?"

"Your chambers?"

"No, Firith is there."

Legolas nodded. "Very well; come this way." He led Eomer to his mother's garden and bade him sit on the seat beneath the trees.

"It is lovely here," said Eomer. "Firith would like it. And so, of course, would Lothíriel..."

"You made love to the sprite," said Legolas.

Eomer stared at him, dumbfounded.

"You were not made to have affairs, Eomer," said Legolas, gently.

"It is obvious?"

"Yes."

"To an elf."

"To men also, I think."

"It will not happen again," said Eomer, softly. "And, by the time I return home..."

"The joy will not be so fresh," said Legolas. "What do you want to ask, Eomer?"

"Is that obvious, too?"

"Yes."

Eomer rose and walked towards one of the trees. "We do not have these in Rohan," he said, smelling the blossom.

Legolas waited.

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"I was not a virgin when I married Lothíriel," said Eomer, "but I had never been with any women but whores—women whose only aim was to get the job done quickly. Lothíriel was a virgin and she was afraid. So it was some months before we..."

Legolas nodded, even though Eomer's back was turned.

"And then, almost immediately, she grew big with child," Eomer continued. "And since Elfwine's birth..." He shook his head. "That night, in Minas Tirith, when I saw you and Eowyn"—he turned slightly further away—"gods! I did not know if you were making love to her or killing her." He shrugged his shoulders. "Had her words not made it plain that she was enjoying it, I might have run you through."

Legolas, unsure of what to say, used a tactic he had learnt from Gimli: he cleared his throat. And it worked—*Good old Gimli!*—for Eomer suddenly drew himself upright and turned to face him.

"Last night," he said, "Fíriath showed me how to please a woman. But Lothíriel would *never* allow me to do that... Sometimes, I think she was born without desire."

Legolas thought for a moment. "But imagine, Eomer," he said, "a girl kept a virtual prisoner, told that if she so much as raises her veil she is as good as inviting some rogue to steal her precious honour—suddenly, she is married off to a stranger and expected to be intimate with him. No wonder she is afraid."

"What can I do?"

"You must earn her trust."

"How? How did *you* ever persuade Eowyn to do?"—he shrugged his shoulders, uncomfortably—"what she does with you?"

"Eowyn and I have always had the same desires," said Legolas.

Eomer smiled, wistfully. "You are lucky," he said.

"With others... There was one elleth who lived in a settlement to the north. I suppose men would call her a whore. My father used to send me to the settlement regularly, to inspect the guard. I was no more than an elfling, really, and Serindë... Serindë was like no one else I had ever met. There was a time when I honestly believed that Serindë was destined to be my *hervess*."

"Your *wife*?" said Eomer, sitting down beside him. "Your father would not have liked that!"

"That is why I had to stop seeing her," said Legolas.

"Does Eowyn know about her?"

"No," Legolas admitted. "Serindë is the one part of my past life that I have not been able to share with her."

"Why?"

"For the same reason that you will never tell Lothíriel about Fíriath."

"You still love her?"

"No! No, of course not!" said Legolas. "I love *Eowyn*. I always have." He smiled. "Even before I knew her—before she was born—whatever I loved in an elleth was always a pale shadow of

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something I now find—bright and clear—in her. No; it is because Serindë taught me about lovemaking. And I wish I had learnt that with Eowyn."

"What did Serindë teach you?"

"She taught me that all ellith are different and that you have to learn what they like. She taught me that sometimes you have to forego your own pleasure to satisfy *her*. But if you are patient, and really do satisfy her, she will be only too eager to satisfy you in return. And," he added, with a smile, "that is the surest way for you and Lothíriel to cement your love, Eomer."

...

Some time later, Legolas tapped lightly on Gunnhildr's door.

The nurse was surprised to see him. "Prince Legolas! Lady Gunnhildr is with her father."

"I know, Mistress Osðryd," Legolas replied, "it is *you* I wish to speak to. May I come in?"

Blushing, the woman stepped aside to allow him to enter, then closed the door and turned to face him. "What do you want with me, your Highness?" she asked.

This, thought Legolas, is no mere servant. This is a proud, strong, well-born woman who has sacrificed her own happiness to take care of another's child.

"I am here," he said, "because I can sense your feelings."

"I see."

"But I cannot return them," he added, gently.

"Of course you cannot," said Osðryd, quietly. "I would not expect it. You are an elf—beautiful, perpetually young. How could you love an ageing woman—a woman who was never much to look at, even as a girl? Never in my wildest dreams—"

"You are *wrong* mistress," said Legolas, sincerely. "It has nothing to do with age, or looks, or with anything lacking in your spirit—for that shines with a beauty I have seldom seen—it is because I already love another. And an elf loves only once."

Osðryd nodded. "So I have heard," she whispered, and she turned to walk away but Legolas caught her arm.

"Why did you attack them, mistress?" he asked. "Yours is a *noble* spirit. The bear threatened my father because you are bound to protect Lady Gunnhildr. But why did it attack Eowyn *nín*?"

Osðryd's eyes filled with tears. "Because I cannot control it," she answered, simply. "I can no longer control the bear..."

Then she lifted her chin and looked up at him, bravely. "I am ready to face any punishment that you and your father decree, your Highness. And, though I have a terror of confinement—being locked away, far from the air and the light and from growing things"—she shook her head—"if *you* command it, Prince Legolas, I believe that even the bear will accept it."

Legolas was taken aback. "No, Mistress Osðryd," he said, gently, "no—an elf would never punish you for something over which you have no control. But we must stop you harming others in future... Please sit, and hear me out." He waited until she was seated, then he continued, "One of my friends believes that the reason you can no longer control the changing is that by taking the oath before Bergthórr beytill—"

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"To protect Gunnhildr—"

"Yes," said Legolas. "By taking that oath you, in effect, gave away your control." The woman seemed surprised; he could see a tiny ray of hope beginning to lighten her face. "My father intends to ask Chief Bergthórr to release you from your oath. When that is done, we think that you may regain complete control of your powers—"

"Oh! Your Highness!" The woman suddenly threw herself at his feet and, lifting his hands from his lap, showered them with kisses. "Thank you! Thank you!" she said, again and again.

Gently, Legolas withdrew a hand and laid it on her head. "Please, Mistress Osðryd," he said, "do not place *too* much hope in this. If Bergthórr beytill refuses to release you, then confining you for the remainder of your stay will be the only option."

"He will not refuse," said Osðryd, firmly. "I will beg him. And, when he releases me, I swear that I will make amends to you for harming those you love." She placed his left hand—which he had not had the heart to withdraw from her—back on his lap. Then she added, very softly, "But if this does not work then I will willingly be confined at your command, my love."

...

"My daughter tells me that you want to apologise, King Thranduil," said Bergthórr beytill, "in private—presumably to save face."

"Er—yes," said Thranduil. "Please, Chief Hor—Chief Bergthórr, take a seat. Can I offer you some wine? Or perhaps a refreshing cordial?"

"Just get to the point."

"Of course." With feline grace, Thranduil seated himself opposite the small man. "There are two points I want to address, in fact," he said, "and the first is simple: I unreservedly apologise, Chief Bergthórr, for any insult you imagine I—"

"*Imagine?*"

Thranduil decided to lose the battle for the sake of winning the war. "For any insult I may have given you. And—before you demand it—I agree to say so when the talks resume." *But that does not, he thought, mean that I will overlook any opportunity to interrogate you about your behaviour in East Lorien.* "The second point," he continued, "is much more important. And may prove more difficult to resolve."

"Go on."

"Last night I was attacked by the bear."

"What does that have to do with me?" asked Bergthórr beytill.

Thranduil smiled. "It was your daughter who saved me," he said; his smile broadened at the man's surprise. "Your daughter ordered the bear to leave my study." He waved his hand as if to show Bergthórr exactly where the incident had taken place. "And your daughter was able to do this," he continued, "because the skin changer is her nurse—a fact which *you* well know."

"Now, wait a minute—"

Thranduil held up his hands. "I did not ask you here to accuse you of anything, Chief Bergthórr," he said, and his voice was all warm sincerity underpinned with steel. "Had *I* had such a creature at my disposal when my son was an elfling I would, without doubt, have done what you did—appointed her to protect my child. And I would, without doubt, have required

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her to take an oath to that effect—"

"Where is this going?" asked Bergthórr beytill.

"To put it quite simply, Chief Bergthórr," said Thranduil, "when you obtained the woman's oath, you destroyed the delicate balance between her powers and her conscience. You took away her responsibility for the bear's behaviour and now it is out of control. And it seems that the only way to stop the creature attacking innocent elves"—he unconsciously straightened his sash—"is for you to release the woman from her obligation."

"Release her!" Bergthórr beytill's face was red with anger. "Release her so that you and your ne'er-do-well son can get your hands on my girl? Do you think me a fool?"

Thranduil sighed. *Believe me, Chief Horse-penis, he thought, if I wanted your daughter I would have had her by now. And she would be following me around like a puppy...*

"If you will not release the nurse, Chief Bergthórr," he said, firmly, "I shall be forced to imprison her for the remainder of your stay."

"Just you try it!" cried Bergthórr beytill, angrily.

And he slammed the study door behind him.

...

"Legolas?"

"*Shhhhh*. Go back to sleep, melmenya," said Legolas, gently, "it is not yet time for you to wake."

"What time *is* it?"

"Five and twenty to twelve," said Legolas, kissing her forehead, gently, "and I am meeting Eomer and Gimli for lunch at one o'clock—"

"Can I come? I have not seen Eomer in days."

"It is only *two* days, *meleth nín*," said Legolas, "and you need to rest."

"But I feel so cut off. Please let me come."

Legolas sighed; he could seldom deny her anything, even in her own best interests. "Can you be ready in less than an hour?"

"Yes."

"Then I will ask them to eat here. In the meantime, I have already drawn the water." He lifted her out of bed, carried her into the bathing room and set her down on the edge of the bath.

"Lift your arms."

"What is that smell?" She raised her arms.

"*Iârloth* leaves," said Legolas, removing her night-dress. "They are said to be invigorating." He helped her into the sharply scented water, and climbed in beside her.

"*Mmmm*," said Eowyn, leaning back in the water. She stifled a yawn. "Did you speak with the nurse?"

"Yes."

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"And?"

"And she has agreed that if my father cannot persuade Bergthórr beytill to release her from her oath, she will allow herself to be locked up for the remainder of her stay."

"It is so sad," said Eowyn. Then she asked, very softly, "Did she admit to being in love with you, Lassui?"

"Yes..." Legolas bit his lip. "When she is a woman, *melmenya*, she is the most noble of creatures; she expects nothing from me in return."

"It must have been very painful for you."

Legolas said nothing for a few moments. Then he asked, "Do all women think as she does?"

"About what?"

"Age. 'You are an elf,' she said, 'perpetually young. How could you love an ageing woman?'"

"Yes," replied Eowyn, softly. "We all think like that." She took Legolas' hand and wove her fingers through his.

"Does it still worry you?" he asked.

"Yes. But I try not to think about it."

"I do not see age as a man does," said Legolas.

"I know." She kissed his hand. "I had better get dressed, my darling."

...

After lunch, when the four friends were sitting before the fire, eating a dessert of fruited bread and honey cakes, and drinking raspberry-leaf tea, Legolas turned to Eomer. "Where are the documents you wanted to show me?" he asked.

Eomer put down his plate, licked his fingers, and pulled two sheets of parchment from inside his tunic. "Here," he said, "Firith drew my attention to them—"

"Who is Firith?" asked Eowyn.

"She is the woodland sprite I told you about, *melmenya*," said Legolas. "The being that was following Eomer. She"—Eomer caught his eye with the tiniest shake of the head—"er..."

"She is as concerned to protect The Lady's forest as we are, lass," said Gimli, helpfully.

"I see," said Eowyn. "Where is she now?"

"She has promised to stay in my chambers," said Eomer. He spread out the parchments on the low table. "These are pages taken from a report drawn up by March Warden Singollo. From what he describes, both Colgan and Gimli have deduced that the Beornings are *mining* in East Lorien, at a place called White Rocks."

"White Rocks," said Eowyn, quietly. "*Gynd 'lyss*. That sounds familiar..."

"Mining is forbidden on elven lands," said Legolas. "By the terms of the treaty drawn up at the end of the Ring war, my father can demand reparations from anyone mining in East Lorien—on behalf of the elves who live there, of course."

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"Of course," said Eomer. "He could. If he knew about it, that is."

"*White Rocks. Where did I hear it... White Rocks?*"

"You have not told him?" asked Legolas.

Eomer hesitated. "No," he said. "Not yet. I will, of course. And I realise that this puts you in a difficult position—"

Eowyn suddenly rose and walked into the garden cavern.

"Melmenya?"

"I am thinking."

Legolas turned back to Eomer and Gimli and shrugged his shoulders.

"I realise that this puts you in a difficult position, Legolas," Eomer repeated, "but hear me out. My only concern is to keep Rohan intact. As you know, my Court and most of my forces are concentrated in the south, at Edoras and Helm's Deep. The north is a wild, lawless place, and my uncle, under Wormtongue's influence, was content to allow several great families to rule it almost as a group of independent principalities—"

"A very dangerous tactic," said Legolas.

"Especially if what your father tells me is true," said Eomer. "He says he has proof that Bergthórr beytill has formed an alliance with the most powerful of the families."

"That would certainly upset the balance of power," said Legolas.

"With the Beornings behind them, the House of Æðelbert could rule the north as a separate kingdom," Eomer agreed. "And if the people of East Emnet joined them, they could even threaten Edoras."

"You want to know whether my father is telling you the truth," said Legolas.

Eomer nodded.

"I do not know, Eomer. I can honestly tell you that he has not discussed the matter with me. And I have no idea how he could possibly know—"

"Ereinion!" cried Eowyn, running back into the main chamber, "*Ereinion!*"

...

"Just what have you been telling that arrogant cur, Thranduil?" asked Bergthórr beytill, angrily.

"My lord?"

"He *knows* you are a skin changer. He *knows* about the oath—"

"Nothing, my lord," cried Osðryd, "I told him nothing but, somehow—"

"I told him, father," said Gunnhildr, bravely, stepping between her nurse and the irate chieftain; "I told him because Osðryd attacked him thinking that she was protecting me! She needs help, father. And he and Prince Legolas have promised—"

"Prince Legolas! Prince Legolas! *He* is the cause of all this trouble. If the pair of you had been in your tent, doing your mending, like proper women, instead of lurking in the undergrowth

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watching him wash his privates—"

"Father!"

"—none of this would have happened. From now on, Osðryd is confined to this chamber. In fact, you are both confined," said Bergthórr. "I will send Heðinn and Snorri to make sure that you behave yourselves. And as for *you*"—he turned to Osðryd—"you can forget this nonsense about being released from your oath. You are bound for life!"

...

"There are *hundreds* of letters," said Eowyn, "all from one writer, a green-elf called Ereinion. He lives on the very southern tip of Eryn Lasgalen. I looked closely at only one of them, but he mentioned a secret mine"—she turned to Legolas—"sabar thurin."

Legolas nodded. "Secret mine."

"It is at a place called White Rocks." she added

"Did he say what they were mining?" asked Gimli.

"I do not know," said Eowyn. "But I did see the word 'mithril'."

"Mithril? In East Lorien?" said Gimli. He thought for a moment, "Aye, there could be..."

"That would explain why the Beornings are willing to take such a risk," said Eomer. "You say there are hundreds of letters?"

"Yes."

"I think it is time to speak to your father," said Eomer to Legolas.

...

"Quickly, Osðryd, this way," said Gunnhildr, running down the corridor towards Legolas' chambers. "Here!" She tapped lightly at the door.

There was no answer.

She knocked harder.

There was still no answer.

Gunnhildr pounded on the door.

"My lady!" said Osðryd, anxiously, "I can hear them coming!"

Gunnhildr took a deep breath, lifted the door latch and, together, the two women stumbled into Legolas' sitting room.

...

"Let *me* do the talking," said Legolas, softly, as they entered his father's study.

Thranduil looked up from his desk. "Lassui?"

"Ada—Eomer, Gimli and Eowyn have uncovered some important information; we think we know what the Beornings are doing in East Lorien."

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Thranduil gestured towards the cluster of chairs by the fire. "Make yourselves at home," he said. "Now—just what are our friends up to?"

"When Eowyn was sorting your correspondence," said Legolas, "she noticed a large number of letters from a wood elf called Ereinion—"

"That fool," said Thranduil. He writes me a 'despatch' almost every day. *'There are men doing this, there are men doing that; there are not enough elves to guard the borders; if you do not send us an army we shall be overrun...'* I no longer read his nonsense." He looked up, sharply. "What have I missed?"

"How do you know that the Beornings have formed an alliance with..." Legolas turned to Eomer.

"The House of Æðelbert," said Eomer.

"What?" Thranduil looked from his son to the King of Rohan and back again.

"Eomer is here to trade with you, Ada," said Legolas. "You give him proof that the Beornings are active in the north of Rohan, and he will tell you what you have—er—overlooked in Ereinion's letters."

"I have taught you *too* well, Lassui," said Thranduil, with a sigh. "Very well, since we do not have much time... I have a spy in Rohan."

"You..." Eomer was speechless.

"A man—one Daelhard, son of Daelhart. He is a very reliable source—and he just happens to be Lord Æðelbert's secretary." Eomer was shaking his head, a mixture of anger and admiration on his face. "Daelhard helped Æðelbert draw up the treaty." Thranduil paused for a moment, then he turned to Eomer. "Tell me what the Beornings are doing and I will show you Daelhard's letter—it is written in the Common Tongue so you should have no trouble reading it."

Legolas' arm shot out to restrain Eomer. "Collo's report describes traces of mining, Ada—if you know how to recognise them—in the region of Gynd 'lyss," he said. "And Eowyn saw mention of a secret mine in one of Ereinion's letters. She also noticed the word—"

"Mith-ril," said Eowyn, lingering over its second syllable.

"Of course," said Legolas, "by the terms of the treaty that ended the Ring war, mining is forbidden on elven lands—even mining by elves." He examined his fingernails.

"Yes," said Thranduil, "but there *was* some provision made for future agreements between elves and men, provided all parties were in accord. *Something* might be done..."

"Indeed, Ada," said Legolas. "Now—where is Eomer's proof?"

...

An hour later

"Good luck, *meleth nín*," Legolas whispered, kissing Eowyn's forehead, "I will be waiting in our chambers. Do not make it too hard, Ada," he added, "for my sake."

"Of course not!" said Thranduil. "This will be the easiest task of the three, Lassui, believe me. Now—go." He made a shoing motion. "Go on, go! Let me talk to Eowyn alone."

Reluctantly, Legolas left his father's study, closing the door behind him.

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Thranduil waited for a moment, as if afraid that his son might still be lurking outside the door. Then, "As I said, Eowyn *vell nín*," he began, "this is the easiest task of all. A friend of mine—a beautiful elleth—was badly scarred during the Ring war." He handed Eowyn a map. "I have heard of an elleth living here"—he pointed to a small settlement to the north—"who is skilled in herbal lore."

Eowyn looked carefully at the map. "Eryn Aras," she read.

"Yes, that is the place. Angrod and Findaráto will take you there. It is said that this elleth makes a salve that removes blemishes and restores beauty. But she is very particular whom she gives it to. You will have to *persuade* her, *mell nín*."

Eowyn thought for a moment. "May I speak to the elleth? The one who was injured?"

"She has become a recluse." said Thranduil.

"I understand," said Eowyn. "But I do not ask to see her face—just to hear her words. If I can explain to the healer how much she is suffering..."

"Very well," said Thranduil. "I will arrange it."

"One more thing," said Eowyn, as she rose to leave, "what is the name of the other elleth? The healer of Eryn Aras?"

"Serindë," replied Thranduil. "Her name is Serindë."

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Chapter 12: The third task

Legolas closed the chamber door behind him. *There is someone in here, he thought. A woman—no, two women...* He walked silently to the entrance of the garden cavern. "Lady Gunnhildr? Mistress Osðryd? Please come out."

Gunnhildr appeared in the doorway. "Prince Legolas," she said, softly, "I am sorry to impose on you like this but, please, do not give us away. My father has refused to release Osðryd from her oath; he says that she is bound by it for life. And Osðryd is afraid of what might happen if —"

"Come out, Mistress Osðryd," said Legolas. He smiled at the blushing woman. "You are safe here—both of you—you may stay as long as you wish. And, if you desire it, Mistress," he said to Osðryd, "I can restrain you with chains."

...

Eowyn stepped into total darkness. "Hello?"

"I am over here, child," said a quiet voice.

"I am sorry, my lady," said Eowyn, "but I can neither see nor hear as well as an elf. Will you allow me some light?" She heard the sound of a flint striking, then a candle flared to reveal one of the saddest sights she had ever seen—the disfigured elleth, small and frail-looking, sitting beside an empty fireplace, her face covered with a thick veil.

"Thranduil has told me of his plan," said the elleth. "Tell me, child, why are you prepared to do so much for me?"

"The king did not mention the reason?" asked Eowyn. *How like him*, she thought. "I am Prince Legolas' betrothed, his chosen—"

"Legolas' chosen!" said the elleth. "Come into the light, child, where I can see you better."

Stepping carefully, Eowyn walked over to the fireplace.

"Sit down."

Eowyn sat before the elleth but, uncomfortable at being scrutinised, kept her eyes fixed on the ground.

"Look at me."

Reluctantly, Eowyn raised her face.

"You are lovely," said the elleth. "An *adaneth*—yes, I always knew that Lassui's destiny lay outside this forest. And I can see that he has chosen well—you have a brave and loving spirit, *adaneth dithen*."

"My lady," said Eowyn, softly, "may I ask your name?"

"My name is Beruthiël," said the elleth.

"And, can I ask..." Eowyn bit her lip. "You are not—I mean—you speak of him with such tender concern—you are not Legolas' *mother*?"

"His *mother*!" The elleth laughed, and it was a strange sound, as if she had not done so in many, many years. "No child, I am not his mother." She leant forward and touched Eowyn's hand. "I am *Beruthiël*," she said, "the elleth who had the honour of introducing Legolas to the

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pleasures of the bedchamber"—she leaned back in her chair and, despite the veil, Eowyn had the impression that she was smiling at the memory—"when he came of age. He was so shy, so loving... It was long before *this*." She gestured towards her face.

Eowyn supposed that she should be angry—certainly at Thranduil—even at Beruthiël. But all she could feel was sympathy. "I shall fetch the salve, my lady," she said, firmly. "You will soon be free of this prison."

...

"Legolas," called Eowyn, already halfway to the bedchamber, "I must hurry; I need to go to the settlement at Eryn Aras and—"

Legolas caught her in his arms. "Melmenya," he whispered, burying his face in her hair, "we have guests..."

"Guests?"

"Lady Gunnhildr and her nurse. I found them hiding in here."

"Where are they now?" Eowyn whispered.

"In the garden."

Gently, Eowyn disentangled herself. "Will you help me change?"

"Of course. They have nowhere else to go, melmenya, so I said they could stay here. It is only until my father comes to an arrangement with Bergthórr beytill."

Eowyn threw open her clothes chest and pulled out her riding gown and leggings. "The mithril mine for the woman's freedom?"

Legolas unlaced her day gown and helped her step out of it. "Something like that," he said.

"Of course they can stay," she said, pulling on her leggings, "but what happens if it is not settled when I return tomorrow morning?"

"Melmenya?"

"We will need," she said, standing on tiptoe and licking his ear, "*privacy*."

"Ah..." Legolas' entire body shivered and he caught her round the waist. "I will think of something, melmenya."

"Good," said Eowyn, pushing him away. "Now, did you hear where I am going?"

"No." Legolas shook his head.

"Eryn Aras."

"Oh..."

"I must persuade the healer to give me a jar of salve." Eowyn looked up from lacing her riding boots. "It is for Beruthiël," she said.

"Melmenya..."

"Yes, I know about Beruthiël, Lassui; I have spoken to her." She slipped on her riding gown and carefully buttoned up the bodice. Then she picked up her cloak. "And I *like* her. But I

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swear to you, Legolas, that when all this is over I shall..." She thought for a moment. "I shall *cut off your father's hair*. Yes! I shall! He will be the only bald elf in Middle-earth."

...

"Ah, Bergthórr beytill," said Thranduil, "please, take your place at the table—"

"Where is my daughter?" demanded the chieftain.

"I am sorry?" Thranduil was all smooth innocence.

"My daughter is *missing*," said Bergthórr, as if speaking to a child, "and I want to know where she is." He looked around the table accusingly—first at Thranduil, then at Gimli, and then at Eomer.

"I can swear to you, Chief Bergthórr," said Thranduil, calmly, "that she cannot have left this place without my knowing." He motioned to one of the guards. "Have the Halls searched for Lady Gunnhildr and her nurse," he said. "And be careful. If you should come across the bear, *avo dhago den*. I want it alive."

Thranduil turned back to Bergthórr beytill. "Satisfied, Chief Bergthórr? Good. *Then let us talk about your mithril mine.*"

...

The three riders were travelling north, picking their way through the massive birches, following the faintest of tracks.

"You know the way well," said Eowyn to Angrod.

"Yes, my lady. The settlement in Eryn Aras is where we stay when we are patrolling the northern border," he replied.

"I need to speak to a healer called Serindë," said Eowyn, "do you know her?"

Angrod looked uneasy. "Yes, my lady."

"Good," said Eowyn. "That will make things much easier."

...

"So," said Thranduil, reading from the sheet of parchment he was holding in his hand, "*We, the undersigned, agree that Chief Bergthórr beytill may continue to work the mithril mine at White Rocks under the close observation of King Thranduil's designated agent, the green-elf known as Ereinion.*"

He glanced around the table. Eomer and Gimli were both smiling at the thought of Ereinion and 'close observation', but neither said anything.

"*Secondly, we agree that twenty-five percent of all pure mithril obtained from the said mine is the property of King Thranduil—and,*" he said to the Beorning, "we will work out the details of delivery later.

"*Thirdly, we agree that Chief Bergthórr beytill will release the nurse, Osðryd, from the oath he obtained from her some eighteen years ago and which compels her to defend the said chieftain's daughter at any cost.*

"*And finally, we agree that Chief Bergthórr beytill will write immediately to Æðelbert of Rohan, dissolving the alliance recently made between them.*"

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He placed the parchment in front of Bergthórr beytill. "Sign here, Chief Bergthórr."

The Beorning chieftain picked up the quill. "You are an arrogant *bastard*," he muttered, under his breath, "but mithril is mithril." He signed with a flourish.

Thranduil passed the parchment to Eomer. The King of Rohan took the quill and signed, with a smile, 'Eomer Eadig', then passed the parchment back to Thranduil.

The Elvenking read the wording through one last time then added his own signature, 'Thranduil Oropherion'. "Good," he said, in his most imperious manner. "Eomer King, Lord Gimli—I look forward to seeing you both at dinner. Chief Bergthórr, I suggest that you and I go to my son's chambers, where you will release that poor *adaneth* from her oath."

...

The settlement was beautiful.

It is like a tiny Eryn Carantaur, thought Eowyn, looking up the spiralling staircase to the flets above. "I need to speak with Serindë as soon as possible," she said to Angrod, "but I do not want to offend anybody. Does Eryn Aras have a leader?"

"A Viceroy," said Angrod. "I will take you to him."

...

Thranduil knocked loudly. "Let us come in, Lassui, I have good news for your guest."

Legolas opened the door. "Come in Ada, Chief Bergthórr—Mistress Osðryd has been waiting for you." He led the man through the elegant, columned sitting room to a group of chairs laid out before the fire. "Please sit, Chief Bergthórr," he said. "Am I correct in thinking that you are here to release Mistress Osðryd from her oath?"

"You know I am," said Bergthórr.

"Very well. Mistress Osðryd," he called, "please come here."

The woman emerged from the garden cavern and walked slowly towards her chieftain.

"I have no idea what to do," said Bergthórr.

"What did you do when the oath was taken?" asked Thranduil.

"She knelt before me, as is our custom, with her hand on her heart, and swore," said Bergthórr.

"Then I think you must do the reverse," said Thranduil. "Sit down mistress... Now, Chief Bergthórr, kneel before her—come now, Chief, *think of the mithril*—kneel before her. Good. Now, place your hand on your heart and"—Thranduil shrugged—"release her."

"I release you from the oath you took to protect my daughter," said Bergthórr. "From now on, the bear is entirely at your own command."

"Good!" said Thranduil. "Now that was not so difficult, was it?"

He grasped Bergthórr's forearm and, practically lifting him to his feet, guided him from the chamber, fully aware that, behind him, Osðryd had thrown herself down before Legolas and was covering his hands in grateful kisses.

...

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The Viceroy of Eryn Aras watched Eowyn as she wound her way, along the aerial walks, towards Serindë's flet.

He had not had the heart to warn her...

Such a sweet little thing, he thought. So earnest. Sometimes I am ashamed to serve Thranduil. But, with any luck, she will never know.

...

"Have they gone?" asked Thranduil.

"Yes, Ada," said Legolas. "Come in. And—before you say anything—though I admire both Mistress Osðryd and Lady Gunnhildr for their loyalty to each other, Eowyn has no rivals there."

Thranduil nodded, absently. "You know where I have sent her?"

"To Eryn Aras," said Legolas, walking over to the sideboard, "to speak with the healer—she told me. Did you have to take such a risk, Ada? You know who lives there—"

"Yes. And I know that there have been some changes since *you* last visited her, Lassui," said Thranduil softly.

Something in Thranduil's voice made Legolas freeze, one hand still on the decanter. "Ada? What have you done?"

"Serindë—"

"No!" cried Legolas, "No! She is not the healer! Ada! Tell me she is not the healer!" But his father's face only confirmed his fears. "Why, Ada? *Why?* Do you really hate Eowyn—hate *me*—so much?"

"Calm down, Lassui!" Thranduil caught his son in a fierce embrace. "You could not be more wrong, *ion nín!* I *like* Eowyn, very much. And I love *you*—love you, Lassui—and that is why I am determined to make sure. I want you to have the best, Lassui, and that means—"

"*Hervess orchal,*" said Legolas, bitterly. "A super-wife."

"No! It means someone who *loves* you, Lassui. Loves you enough to face death for you—"

"Eowyn has already done that many times—"

"—loves you more than anything—more than her anger, more than her pride—someone who can come face to face with your biggest mistake and still love you, Lassui. Yes, I *do* think that you have found that someone in Eowyn... But we have to be sure. That is why I have sent her to see Serindë, the elleth you almost eloped with." Thranduil smiled at his son's obvious surprise. "Did you think I did not know, *ion nín?* Of course I did! But I could see that it was just an elfling's crush so I left you alone and, in the end, you put your duty first." He released Legolas. "Eowyn is an entirely different matter, Lasdithen. This is no crush."

He smiled. "And that is why we have to be absolutely sure. I admit that the task I have set may be unpleasant for her. But, from what I have seen so far, I expect her to return, tomorrow, triumphant! And then I shall hold a proper betrothal ceremony for my heir apparent and his chosen."

"But what if something goes wrong, Ada?" said Legolas. "What if something bad happens to Eowyn?"

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"What could possibly happen to her in Eryn Aras?" said Thranduil.

...

"Mistress Serindë?"

The elleth nodded.

"I am Eowyn, daughter of Eomund; I am Prince Legolas' betrothed."

The elleth looked her over, curiously. "I see," she said.

"King Thranduil sent me here to obtain a small amount of the healing salve you make," Eowyn continued, unsure why she was feeling so uncomfortable in the elleth's presence. "The salve that removes scars..." *I can almost sense hostility*, she thought, *but that is ridiculous*. "May I come inside and explain?"

The elleth stepped aside. Eowyn entered the house and looked around; with its broad workbench, running the full length of one wall, and its shelves stocked with bottles and jars and delicate equipment, it reminded her of Master Dínendal's healing room.

Eowyn turned to the elleth and smiled. "One of the ladies at King Thranduil's Court was injured in the Ring war and left terribly disfigured," she said. "The Elvenking has heard of your salve and has sent me here hoping that I might obtain some for her."

Since the salve did not seem forthcoming, Eowyn continued: "I have not, myself, seen the lady's face but I can tell you that she lives entirely alone and in the dark. It is a terrible existence and—unlike a mortal life—there is no prospect of its ending. It would break your heart to see her, madam, truly it would—"

The elleth laughed. "Do you know who it is that you are pitying, *madam*?" she asked.

Eowyn swallowed hard. *Surely she cannot be alluding to Beruthiël's relationship with Legolas*, she thought. *And, if she is, she cannot expect me to be so indelicate as to talk about it...* But the elleth's eyes were stony. "Yes," said Eowyn, "I know of the lady's association with Prince Legolas, if that is what you mean. But that does not prevent me from sympathising with her present situation."

"And do you know who it is you are asking to help her?" asked the elleth.

Eowyn stared at her...

And all the pieces suddenly came together in her mind: *'An elleth I knew in one of the settlements to the north of Mirkwood', Legolas said. And he was upset when I told him where I was going...* She drew herself up to her full height. "I am aware," she said, "of your own past relationship with Prince Legolas, yes—"

The elleth laughed again. "Did he tell you that he wanted to elope with me? Yes—he begged me! Said he would die without me! But *I* would never have come between him and his father."

Eowyn ignored the jibe. "I understood," she said, coldly, "that a healer's only concern was for her patient."

The elleth was taken aback. For a long moment she simply stared at the woman. Then she said, "Lasfain always did have taste. And you are right, *adaneth*, I *am* a healer. And I do know my duty. Come over to my dispensary."

She lifted a large jar from one of the shelves behind the workbench and began to spoon a

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quantity of its contents into a smaller jar. "Stay well back," she said. "The salve is made from concentrated dead-wood mushroom. It will remove any blemish from the skin of an immortal and restore her face to its smooth, youthful beauty. But do not be tempted to use it on your own skin, *adaneth*, for—though those marks around your eyes would benefit from a restorative—this mixture is deadly poison to a mortal."

...

Eomer swallowed a third and final spoonful of enchanted water and turned towards the bed. The sprite was lying, naked except for a bed sheet, upon the coverlet. "Firith?"

She smiled and stretched out her arms. "*E-o-mer...*" she whispered.

Eomer shook his head. "Tonight," he said, "we talk. And we must say goodbye."

Firith smiled, sadly, and patted the coverlet beside her.

Eomer sat on the edge of the bed. "*Why* did you follow me, Firith?" he asked. "Why did you leave your home in Lorien?"

"I fell in love with you..."

He took her hand in both of his. "I am not worthy of your love, Firith," he said, stroking her fingers. "What are we going to do?"

"I must stay here, amongst the trees... With the wood elves..." she said, sadly. "Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you permit me to go home with you, *E-o-mer...*"

"There are no trees in my country," said Eomer. "Just grass and rocks and a few stunted bushes. You would not be happy there."

"But I would be with *you...*"

"I am married," said Eomer. "And although last night was..."

He shook his head. "We both know that it must never happen again." He looked down at her hand. "I love you Firith; but I cannot have you with me."

Firith laid her other hand on his arm. "Do not be sad, *E-o-mer*," she said.

"Oh, Firith, how can I not be sad? *Using* you; then leaving you here *alone*—"

"You did not use me, *E-o-mer...* You made me very happy..."

"I will be leaving part of my heart with you, Firith. And yet I have a wife—and Lothíriel deserves to be loved."

"Of course..."

"Could you"—he looked into her face, his eyes suddenly filled with hope—"could you travel back to Eryn Carantaur with Legolas? You could live amongst the trees there, with the elves, and I could visit you."

"If that is what you want, *E-o-mer...*"

"What *I* want?" For a moment he was taken aback. But—yes—she was right, he was thinking of

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himself—at least as much as he was thinking of her. He kissed her hand. "Yes," he said, "that is what I want. To be able to see you, occasionally."

She smiled. "Then I shall, beloved..."

"Will you let me sleep with you tonight?" he asked. "Just sleep, nothing more."

"Of course, *E-o-mer...*" She opened her arms to him; he laid his head on her shoulder and she gathered him close. "I am strong, *E-o-mer...*" she whispered, as he closed his eyes, "I will protect you, beloved, and those you love... Call my name, and the wind will carry your voice to me, however far I may be, my love..."

...

Haldir opened his chamber door. "Legolas! What is wrong?"

"I have the most terrible feeling, Haldir—Eowyn—I am afraid for Eowyn. I am riding out to meet her. Gimli and Collo are coming with me. Will you join us?"

"Of course." Haldir closed the door behind him.

...

Why, thought Eowyn, as Brightstar slowly wound his way along the forest track, nose to tail with the horse in front, did he not tell me about her? When he knew that I was coming to Eryn Aras? Leaving me to find out like that! Oh, Legolas, how could you?

She swallowed hard. Her throat ached but—by the gods!—she was not going to cry.

And what a horrible nag she was! How could he possibly have loved her? Have wanted to elope with her, she said!

Perhaps she was lying...

Or perhaps that is what losing Legolas does to a person. Perhaps I will be like that one day. When I am old and wrinkled and he can no longer bear to look at me—

'You are my chosen, Eowyn; and an elf loves only once.'

Eowyn looked about her in surprise—Legolas' voice was as clear as if he had been riding beside her.

Get out of my head! she stormed. *This is all your fault! You should have told me about her! I should have been warned!*

'I did not want to hurt you, melmenya.'

That is no excuse!

...

"Hurry, Arod," cried Legolas, urging the horse through the trees.

"What has got you so spooked, lad?" asked Gimli.

"I do not know, *elvellon*," said Legolas. "It was when my father talked about Eowyn coming home in triumph... I began to worry. I do not know why. And the feeling has grown worse and worse as the night has worn on."

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"I can hear three riders," said Haldir, in a low voice, "up ahead. Two elves and... And a woman?"

"Yes! A woman!" said Singollo. "It is Lady Eowyn! This way!"

The three elves quickened their pace, Legolas and Haldir following close behind Singollo. Suddenly, three riders emerged from forest ahead.

"Eowyn!" cried Legolas. "Eowyn! Are you all right?"

The third rider raised her head, bewildered. "Legolas!" she said. "What are *you* doing here?"

"We have come to meet you, melmenya."

"He has been having premonitions, lass," said Gimli. "He was convinced that something had happened to you."

"Something *did* happen to me," said Eowyn, looking Legolas in the eye. "I met another one of your lovers. Unprepared. But apart from that," she added, rather coldly, "I am fine."

"I am sorry, melmenya," said Legolas, quietly. "I did not realise that Serindë had become a healer."

"That is hardly an excuse, Legolas. You should have told me about her anyway. Why did you not—"

"Let us discuss this later, melmenya," said Legolas, suddenly very aware of the elven ears surrounding them. "Do you have the salve?"

"Yes."

"Then you have completed all three tasks!"

His smile was so beautiful that, despite her best efforts, Eowyn could not stay angry with him. "No," she said, and her tone was almost playful, "not until I have presented this jar"—she reached down into her saddlebag—"to your father"—she held it out to him—"and I must do that before dawn."

Legolas stretched out his hand to take the jar from her and Eowyn—misjudging the distance—let go of it.

The precious jar began to fall.

"No!" she cried, making a grab for it, "no!" And—by some terrible quirk of fate—as her hand closed around the jar, its stopper flew out, and three drops of pearly liquid spilled upon her wrist.

Eowyn screamed.

"Melmenya?"

"Dead-wood mushrooms... are poison... to mortals," she gasped, and she slumped forward over Brightstar's neck.

Extra scene: [The first time](#)

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Chapter 13 Mortality

"Hold on, melmenya," cried Legolas as Brightstar thundered up the broad stone steps and plunged through the Elvenking's gates, "we are almost there, Eowyn *nín!* Breathe for me, my darling..." Two guards ran forward to meet him. "Take her from me, Elerossë—be careful—support her head!" He dropped to the ground. "Now, give her back to me..."

Cradling Eowyn in his arms, Legolas ran towards the healing room.

Moments later, Gimli and Haldir burst through the gates.

"I shall fetch Master Dínendal," shouted Gimli as he rolled from Arod's back. "He will know what to do, lad," he called after Legolas, "do not worry!"

Haldir dismounted quickly. "Let me pass; *please*," he said, pushing his way through the chaos. Then, clutching the jar of salve to his chest, he hurried down the main thoroughfare towards King Thranduil's study.

...

"Hold on, melmenya," said Legolas, carefully laying Eowyn on one of the healing room beds. He took her hand. "Stay with me!"

...

Gimli pounded on Dínendal's door. "Master Healer!" he cried, through the wood, "you have an urgent case of poisoning to deal with. Come! Please *hurry!*"

...

"Your Majesty—"

"What has happened?" asked Thranduil.

"A terrible accident, your Majesty," said Haldir, bowing. He held up the jar. "Lady Eowyn obtained the salve, but has been poisoned by it—"

"*Poisoned?*"

"Yes, your Majesty. Prince Legolas has taken her straight to the healing room. He asked me to show you this—to prove that she completed her task successfully—then to take it to the healer as quickly as possible, in case he needs to examine it."

"Of course," said Thranduil. "I shall come with you."

...

"Tell me *exactly* what happened," said Dínendal.

"It was so fast," said Legolas. "Some of the salve dripped onto her wrist"—he was still holding Eowyn's hand and he lifted it for the healer to see—"no more than a few tiny drops, but she told me that it was poisonous to mortals—and then she fell into this—this swoon—almost immediately."

Dínendal examined the woman's wrist. There were none of the tell-tale signs of poisoning, no discoloration, no raised welts. "Did she say anything more about the poison?" he asked.

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"Dead-wood mushroom," said Legolas. "She said it was dead-wood mushroom."

"I see... In that case, I will need to speak to your father's healer," said Dínendal, "and to the elleth who made the salve."

"I sent Singollo to fetch her," said Legolas. "She should be here in—I am not sure—three, four hours? Will that be soon enough?"

Dínendal did not reply immediately. He lifted Eowyn's other hand and carefully measured her pulse. Then he said, "Do you have any more of the salve?"

"Yes, Haldir is bringing it."

"Good."

...

Singollo ran up the spiralling staircase, along the walkway to the familiar door, and rapped on the wood.

"Serindë!" he cried, "Serindë, open up!"

The elleth opened the door a tiny crack. "What is it, Collo?" she asked. "I no longer entertain gentlemen callers."

"This is no time for games, Serindë," said Singollo pushing the door back. "Lady Eowyn has been poisoned by the stuff you gave her. Get dressed—we need you to come to King Thranduill's Halls and help the healer revive her."

"The foolish *adaneth*," said the elleth, softly, "I told her not to use it on herself—"

"She did not use it," said Singollo, impatiently. "It spilled. You had not sealed the jar properly. Come on, get dressed; we must hurry."

Serindë looked him in the eye. "This is nothing to do with me, Collo," she said. "I gave her the proper warning. I am going nowhere."

"Prince Legolas *begs* you," said Singollo, quietly.

"Then he should have come himself," said Serindë. "And *begged*. He is *so* beautiful when he begs."

"Look, you whore," said Singollo, grasping her arms, "I have never understood what Lassui saw in you—never—no one is *that* good in bed—and I will not think twice about using force! So you will come with me, now, or I will knock you out and take you there strapped to my saddle."

"Just you try it! Help!" screamed Serindë. "Ra—"

But Singollo had already clamped his hand over her mouth. "No one would believe you, anyway, Serindë," he said.

...

"Your Majesty." Dínendal bowed briefly to Thranduill then turned to Haldir. "Do you have the salve, March Warden?"

"Here," said Haldir, handing him the jar. "Will it help her? Is she...?"

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"She is very weak," said Dínendal, gently. He pulled out the stopper and sniffed the jar's contents. "Lady Eowyn was right—dead-wood mushroom; once smelled never forgotten." He sat down beside Eowyn, dipped his forefinger into the jar and examined the substance on his fingertip. "Desperate circumstances," he said, placing the jar on the side table, "call for desperate measures. I am sorry, my lady." He lifted Eowyn's hand—

"Stop!" cried Legolas, and Haldir rushed forward. But Thranduil had already caught the healer by the arm.

"Please, your Majesty, Lord Legolas," said Dínendal, "she is too weak to fight it. We no longer have a choice. We must let the dead-wood mushroom complete its work."

"Which is?" asked Thranduil.

"Lady Eowyn, being mortal, must pass through death."

Legolas fell across Eowyn's body.

"Are you *mad*?" asked Thranduil, hoarsely.

"This will buy us some time, your Majesty," said Dínendal, softly.

"Let him do it, Ada," sobbed Legolas. "I trust him."

Thranduil released Dínendal, and the healer rubbed the salve into the woman's wrist.

...

"Gimli," said Haldir, his voice catching in his throat, "someone must tell her brother."

...

Thranduil drew Dínendal out of his son's earshot. "How long?" he asked, quietly.

"It is hard to say," said Dínendal, "but she is sinking fast."

"What happens then?"

"Once she is dead, we can, in principle, revive her," said Dínendal.

"What does 'in principle' mean?" demanded Thranduil.

Dínendal sighed. "It means that although I know we must administer the extract of another fungus, I do not know which fungus. It means that although I know, once she passes, that time is limited, I do not know how limited. I—"

"You do not know much," said Thranduil.

"And your own healer," said Dínendal, "knows less than I. Our only hope is that the elleth from Eryn Aras will be able to tell us—"

"Valar," said Thranduil. "We are entirely in the hands of Serindë." *And, knowing her, he thought, I shall have to marry her and make her my queen before she agrees to help.* He looked at his distraught son, holding the dying woman in his arms. *Still, that would be a small price to pay...*

He took Dínendal's arm and pulled him further from the bed. "If time is so precious," he asked, "why on Middle-earth are you hastening her death?"

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"To limit the damage, your Majesty," Dínendal whispered. "The quicker the death, the quicker the revival, the less the damage—that much I do know."

Thranduil walked to the healing room door and spoke quietly to the guard. "Make haste to Captain Voronwë," he said. "Tell him to take a troop of horse to Eryn Aras, find March Warden Singollo and escort him, and his prisoner, back here. Tell him that the life of Prince Legolas' betrothed—no, the life of Prince Legolas himself—depends on it. Tell him that there is not a moment to lose."

He watched the guard leave. Then he returned to his son's side and, gently squeezing Legolas' shoulder, he whispered, "Courage, Lassui. She needs you to be strong, *ion nín*."

...

Eomer and Colgan had dissected Daelhard's letter, listed all the Rohirrim implicated in the Æðelbert plot—plus their dependants, allies and known associates—and were now, with the help of Berryn and Lord Fingolfin, attempting to assess the scale of the problem by marking all the disaffected parties on a map of Rohan.

"Eowyn is right," said Eomer. "You *can* see things better when you use a map—come in!" He turned to greet his visitor. "By the gods, Gimli, what is it?"

"I am so sorry, lad," said Gimli, wiping his wet face with his hand.

"Eowyn..." said Eomer.

"They are doing all they can—"

"Where is she?"

"In the healing room."

"What—?"

"She has been poisoned. Dead-wood mushroom."

Eomer, unnaturally calm, looked down at Fingolfin. "Come my lord," he said, squeezing the stricken elf's shoulder. "Let us see if we can help."

...

Singollo had ransacked Serindë's home looking for anything that might help save Eowyn and, at length, had found—buried deep in a notebook—the composition of the salve and a description of its properties. After that he had managed—with a mixture of threats and ridiculously generous promises—to extract something approaching the elleth's word that she would help revive the woman.

Together, they had packed up the notebook, several bottles of coloured liquids, and a pouch full of dried fungus, and had set off for the palace at the gallop.

Now he was riding recklessly through the trees with Serindë clinging to his back.

I shall never forget the look in Lassui's eyes when he ordered—no begged—me to fetch help, Singollo thought. "Dear Valar," he prayed, "That woman is Lassui's life. Do not let me be too late!"

...

"She has passed away," said Dínendal, softly, placing Eowyn's hand back on her chest.

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"No," sobbed Legolas.

"Are you *sure*?" asked Eomer, "she is strong..."

"I am sorry, your Majesty," said Dínendal. "The healer, Serindë, is her only hope now."

...

Berryn rushed into the library.

"Ornendil!" he cried. "Ornendil! Are you here?"

"Why, young *adan*, what a noise you are mak—"

"Please concentrate—just this once," said Berryn, breathlessly. "What do you know—about dead-wood mushrooms?"

"They are not my *chief* field of study—"

"*Anything or nothing?*" asked Berryn, sharply.

"It is said that they can be used to enhance beauty—but I believe that to be an old ellith's tale —"

"Anything else?"

"No."

Berryn threw himself into a chair. "*Shit*," he muttered.

"In fact, as far as I know," said the elf, "the ancient authorities mention the dead-wood mushroom only once..." He walked towards one of the book cases.

"Ornendil," said Berryn, "*be quiet*."

"All I was about to say," said Ornendil, with dignity, as he pulled out one of the books, "is that I think I have read that dead-wood mushroom can be used to send a mortal into the Halls of Mandos—or the mortal equivalent, that is—prior to reviving him—"

Berryn sat upright. "Reviving him how?" he asked.

Ornendil was clearly taken aback. "It is all in *here*," he said, waving the book; "one must use an infusion of oak mushroom..." as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Berryn leaped from his chair, grabbed the elf—still clutching his book—and pushed him bodily towards the library door. "Come on," he cried, "come *on!*"

...

"What is wrong?" asked Serindë.

"The horse is lame," said Singollo. "We shall have to run the rest of the way."

"Run? Are you mad? It must be twenty miles—"

"Start running," said Singollo, menacingly. "*Now!*"

...

"Lord Legolas! Oh, my lady. *Oh*—"

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Berryn stared at the dead woman lying peacefully on the bed, surrounded by mourners.

"Do not disturb him now, Berryn," said Fingolfin, softly, trying to guide the cartographer back through the door.

"But I think I may have found a cure, my lord..." said Berryn.

He was speaking softly, but not so softly that elven ears could miss those words. Legolas raised his head. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"This is Ornendil," said Berryn. "Go on: tell Lord Legolas what you told me."

"Er," said Ornendil, nervously, "I—er—"

"He showed me this," said Berryn, holding up the ancient volume, "which says that another fungus can be used to revive Lady Eowyn."

"Let me see..." Dínendal took the book and scanned the page. "Yes, this describes Lady Eowyn's condition exactly," he said, "and it prescribes oak mushroom." He turned to the palace healer.

"We do not keep it, Master Dínendal," said the healer. "As you know, it has no medicinal value amongst elves. Do you have a specimen, Master Ornendil?"

"No, I have never seen a real one."

"Where is it found?" asked Eomer. "I will go and fetch it."

"According to this," said Dínendal, consulting the book, "it grows only on decaying oak boughs."

"Where is the nearest oak forest?" asked Eomer.

"Some fifty miles to the north west," said Thranduil, "I will send troops."

"That will take at least a day, Ada," said Legolas, softly. "And she does not have a day..." He stroked Eowyn's hand, helplessly. A profound silence descended as each person—elf, man and dwarf—tried to think of a way to obtain the fungus in time.

Suddenly Eomer cried out, "*Firith! FIRITH, HELP ME!*"

...

"Is this the cure?" asked Singollo, dragging Serindë through the trees. "In this pouch?"

"If it is administered in time, yes," said the elleth, panting for breath, "it should revive her. But she will never be the *adaneth* she was..."

...

"Calm down, Eomer King," said Thranduil, sharply, "this is no time to lose your nerve—"

He was cut short by a violent gust of wind that blew through the healing room, rattling the furniture and forcing all but the King of Rohan to take cover.

"My sister is dying, Firith," Eomer cried into the whirlwind. "Will you help me? I need to find..."

But the swirling column had already enveloped his body and whisked him away.

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...

At the eye of the storm all was calm and silent; and it seemed to Eomer that he was looking down on Middle-earth from a great height. He could feel the sprite's arms holding him safe, and could hear her song, but he could not see her.

"Firth," he said, in awe, "what is happening?"

"I have called upon the north wind, beloved..." she said. "He will help us... Look! Look down there... Can you see her? That elleth holds your sister's future in her hands..."

...

Singollo threw himself on top of Serindë, using his body to shield her from the whirlwind.

"March Warden!"

The voice was strangely familiar. Singollo lifted his head and peered into the maelstrom.

"Reach out," it said, "both of you. Reach out to me."

...

"Is she his daughter?" asked Legolas, quietly.

"She is his niece," said Gandalf. "But, more than that, she has been Theoden's nurse for many years, coping with every indignity that Saruman, in his malice, has inflicted upon his body."

"Where are her parents?" asked Legolas

"Dead."

The elf shook his head. "What sadness you must have endured, hiril nín..." he whispered. But, even as he spoke, he saw the years melt from the aged man: saw his crusted skin become smooth and rosy, his white hair turn golden brown and his filmed eyes grow clear and alert.

"I know your face," said the king, "Eowyn..."

The woman smiled up at her uncle through her tears. And the elf smiled at her happiness.

"She is mortal, Legolas," Gandalf warned, sensing the flutter of his companion's heart. "And the love between mortal and immortal seldom ends well..."

"Dínendal," Legolas whispered. "I need to know—the moment it is too late—I need to know."

"My lord?"

"I cannot let her face this alone. You must tell me as soon as it is too late, then I can join her." He kissed Eowyn's hand. "Wait for me, melmenya. If Eomer does not return in time, remember what you promised—stay close by, and I will come to you."

...

Cautiously, Singollo opened his eyes.

He was lying, quite unharmed, before the Elvenking's great gates. Beside him, Eomer King was pulling Serindë to her feet.

"Where are the mushrooms?" he was asking.

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"Here," said Singollo, reaching into his tunic. "I have them."

"Come with me!" cried Eomer.

...

"We have brought the cure," cried Eomer, pushing Serindë through the door; "the March Warden has the mushrooms—give them to Dínendal—"

Dínendal took the pouch. "What must I do with them?" he asked Serindë.

The elleth shook her head. "I do not know; I—*oh!*"

Legolas had drawn his white knives. "Tell him Serindë; tell him now or—by the Valar—you will wake to find yourself waiting in the Halls of Mandos—"

"I am not sure, Lasfain," said Serindë, "*truly*. I have tried using them on elven wounds; but I have never administered them to a man or woman."

"Then tell me what you *do* know," said Dínendal.

Serindë turned to Singollo. "Do you have the book?"

Singollo reached inside his jerkin and pulled out a small notebook. "The dried fungus must be infused in wine," he read, "the decoction must be introduced directly into the *adan's*—*adaneth's*—heart—"

"How is that possible?" said Legolas.

"Leave it to me, my lord," said Dínendal. "Give me the notes, March Warden."

...

"Your Majesty," said Dínendal to Thranduil, "all is ready. But I think it would be best if everyone were to leave the room except for myself, your healer, Lord Legolas and Eomer King."

"I understand, Master Healer," said Thranduil, gravely, "Leave it to me." Then he added, "You will be sure to call me should Lassui need me..."

"Of course, your Majesty."

Thranduil squeezed his shoulder. "Thank you."

Dínendal waited until the Elvenking had ushered the others through the door, then turned to Legolas. "My lord," he said, "I am ready."

Legolas looked at the silvery coil in the healer's hand. "What is that?" he asked.

"It is a very fine tube of mithril, my lord," said Dínendal, "attached to a jar of the decoction. Eomer King will lift the jar aloft until the fluid is running freely; then I will push the tube through the lady's breast, into her heart; I will allow the decoction to run for ten seconds; then I will pull the tube out."

"Can I hold her whilst you do it?" asked Legolas.

"Of course, my lord; just move your arms a little lower."

Dínendal bent over Eowyn, unbuttoned her riding gown, and carefully cut open her shift to expose her left breast. Using his fingertips he gently located her heart. Then, keeping his hand

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in place, he turned to Eomer. "Raise the jar, your Majesty."

Eomer lifted the jar above his head. Dínendal waited until the fluid was running freely then plunged the end of the tube into Eowyn's breast. Slowly, he counted the seconds, "One... Two... Three..."

Legolas kissed the top of Eowyn's head. "Come back to me, melmenya," he whispered.

"Seven... Eight... Nine... Ten..." Dínendal pulled out the tube.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then Eowyn screamed.

...

"*Legolas*," she cried, "*Legolas! I will not leave you!*"

...

"Thank you, Dínendal," said Legolas, holding Eowyn, weak but conscious, in his arms. "I shall not forget this."

"Nor shall I," said Thranduil.

"And you, too, Eomer," said Legolas. He reached out towards his brother-in-law and the two friends clasped hands, human fashion. "Will you tell Haldir and Gimli what has happened, *mellon nín*? They will be frantic with worry. And Berryn and Collo, too... And thank the sprite. Thank them *all*—"

"I shall," said Eomer but, he turned to leave the healing room, Dínendal caught him by the arm.

"Forgive my boldness, your Majesties," he said, drawing Eomer and Thranduil away from the happy prince, "but there is something that you should know, something that you, your Majesty," he said to Eomer, "may find distressing."

"Her recovery is only temporary," said Eomer.

"No, your Majesty. No! Quite the opposite—what I was going to say is that Lady Eowyn is no longer, in point of fact, fully *mortal*."

Eomer and Thranduil stared at each other. "Explain," said Thranduil.

...

"I have lost her," said Eomer, softly.

"What do you mean?" asked Thranduil.

"I shall die and she will live forever. She will forget me."

"Never, Eomer King," said Thranduil, patting his arm. "She loves you dearly, that much is plain. And she will carry you in her heart for as long as she lives. The memory of her brother will cause her great sadness, but even greater happiness... She will *never* forget you. Trust me, I know."

Eomer willed back the tears. "Which of us is going to tell her?" he asked. "And Legolas?"

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Thranduil thought for a moment. "We shall let the healer tell them. He will be gentle."

...

"The active principle of the oak mushroom, as it circulates through Lady Eowyn's veins," explained Dínendal, "will renew every particle of her body. Over the next few days, she will become immune to disease; after that, all but the most grievous injuries will spontaneously heal and she will cease to age."

"Dear Valar," whispered Legolas, "you are saying that Eowyn is immortal."

"Barring a fatal injury, yes."

"But," said Eowyn, "it is forbidden. For a mortal to seek immortality is forbidden."

"The change was hardly of your choosing," said Thranduil. "In fact—in fact, it could be construed a sign."

"A sign?"

"Of the Valar's approval. By setting you three tasks I asked them to show me whether you were indeed their choice for my son. I can think of no clearer answer."

...

Later that night

Eomer swallowed his final dose and looked around his chambers. Firith was standing in the doorway of the garden cavern. Eomer stretched out his arms and she flew to him.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you." He buried his face in her hair. "What can I ever do to repay you?"

"Whatever I did, I did for you *E-o-mer*," she replied. "And I have made you happy... That is payment enough..."

"If only..." Eomer sighed. "Come over to the bed, Firith," he said. "I want to tell you something." He lifted her into his arms—she was lighter than a feather—and carried her across the room, laying her gently on the embroidered coverlet. Then he knelt down beside her and took her hand.

"If I had not already pledged myself to my wife," he said, "I would take you back to Rohan with me and marry you. And we... But what happiness could you find in the cold, bleak, empty plains? You would be trapped, Firith; trapped within four wooden walls far from the trees and flowers you love so much. And, in your unhappiness"—he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear—"you would grow to resent me. So perhaps it is best that I am not free. Go home with my sister," he said. "Go to Eryn Carantaur where you can live as you were meant to live—"

"I shall, *E-o-mer*..."

"And I shall go back to my wife. But I will often think of you, Firith, amongst the red leaves, safe and happy. And I shall visit you there, sometimes, I promise."

"We shall *both* be happy, *E-o-mer*..." said the sprite, kissing his cheek.

...

"How do you feel, melmenya?"

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Eowyn smiled. "No different from when you last asked me—all of a minute ago," she said. They were lying in bed together, her head resting on Legolas' chest. "Something is troubling you, my love."

Legolas sighed. "I had a dream," he said, "at Yuletide."

"The one you told me about? The one you thought foretold the future?"

"Yes."

"And this was not a part of it?"

"Yes, it was; but it happened differently."

"In what way?"

"I do not remember the exact words, *melmenya*, but the being of light said that I must choose the right path. And I thought... I thought that this was to be my reward."

"For being noble?"

"I am conceited," said Legolas.

Eowyn grinned. "About your looks you are conceited—*very* conceited!" She rolled onto her stomach and looked down at him. "But then"—she kissed his mouth—"you have something to be conceited about. As for the rest, my love—no. You are not conceited. You are a brave, noble elf who freely gives whatever is asked of him. And you have risked everything for me, many times. So, if what Dínendal has told us is true"—and she shook her head, for she could still not believe it—"who is to say that it is *not* a reward for something you have done in the past, or will do in the future?"

Legolas smiled. "You are so much wiser than I," he said.

"Now: ask me," said Eowyn.

"Melmenya?"

"Ask me what you have been wanting to ask all night but are too gentle to mention," she said. "I do not mind."

Legolas still hesitated. But then he asked: "What was it like, *melmenya*?"

Eowyn thought carefully. "There was a light," she said. "A beautiful, beautiful light, and beyond it everything was wonderful—the trees were greener than any green I have ever seen—and fresh and fragrant—and the sky was bluer, and the clouds whiter..." She shook her head. "I cannot describe it adequately, Legolas. But my mother and father and my uncle were there, and they were beckoning me towards them. And a part of me wanted to walk right through the light and live forever in that beautiful world, with my ancestors. But something held me back."

"What?"

Eowyn smiled. "*You*. You were holding my hand." She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed his palm. "And, as much as I wanted to pass through the light, I wanted to stay with you so much more, *edhel nín*."

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Chapter 14: Misrule in Mirkwood

The servants had been working for most of the night to transform the vast, glittering cavern of the Great Hall into an intimate lovers' bower.

They had strung a delicate canopy of spring greenery—garlands of ruby-red *iârloth*, and fragrant *mithorn*, and clouds of creamy-white *gilgwaloth*—between the rugged stone pillars. Beneath this low ceiling, they had arranged three long tables, draped with runners of apple-green silk and arrayed with hundreds of tiny silver lanterns. They had set each place with richly-enamelled tableware and tall crystal goblets. And they had placed a small, tastefully wrapped gift from the Crown Prince of Eryn Lasgalen on each plate.

The effect was one of elegant opulence.

Now the Steward, Arafinwë, who had master-minded the transformation, was waiting for his king's verdict.

...

"Good morning, *meleth nîn*," Legolas whispered. He scooped her into his arms and kissed her neck, and one of his hands slipped downwards, found the hem of her night-gown and pulled the fabric up above her waist. Gently, he turned her onto her back, and eased himself on top of her, moving his hips until he found his home.

"Oh yes," Eowyn whispered, still half asleep.

Slipping both hands beneath her, Legolas pushed himself deep, deep inside her.

"Oh..." Eowyn's body arched.

Rising up on his hands, Legolas began to thrust, slowly but firmly. "Stay still, *melmenya*," he murmured, "stay still for me, *hervess nîn*..."

...

"Oh!" cried Eowyn, writhing in sweet agony, "you wonderful, wonderful, WONDERFUL ELF!"

"Not yet, *melmenya*! Wait—wait, *meleth nîn*—no!—oh sweet—ah!"

...

Thranduil stood at the centre of the Great Hall and looked sadly at the two intricately carved thrones at the head of the high table. *You are no longer my elfling, Lassui, he thought, but a grown edhel.*

"Yes," he said to Arafinwë, "it is just what I asked for. A lovers' bower."

He heard the steward begin to breathe again and, despite his sadness, he could not help smiling. "And the menu?" he asked.

"Exactly as you requested, your Majesty. A chilled soup of tomato and basil flowers, then grilled fish and roasted fowls, and tarts of spring vegetables, followed by apple snow and sweetmeats. And then, of course, the bean cake."

"Ah, yes," said Thranduil. "The bean cake."

...

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"Will I do?" asked Eowyn.

Legolas laid down his *mûmak* comb and turned to look at her.

She was standing between two carved pillars, dressed in a close-fitting elven gown of pale golden silk that her seamstress had wittily embroidered, at the neckline, sleeves and hem, with a border of tiny prancing horses. Her long, thick, waving hair was covered by a fine, transparent veil, held in place by a golden coronet.

Legolas smiled. "You look"—he shook his head, slowly—"like the sun, *melmenya*," he said. "*Beautiful.*"

Eowyn bit her lip. "Legolas..."

He knew that tone. "Come here, Eowyn *nín*," he said, gently, holding out his arms to her. He pulled her down onto his lap. "Something is worrying you. Is it the ceremony?"

"The ceremony? No—"

"Because my father meant what he said, *melmenya*. And even before this happened, he had accepted you."

"It must have been the Edair's silver," said Eowyn.

"*Melmenya!*"

Eowyn smiled. "You do love him so very much," she said, stroking back a strand of his still-loose hair, "you will miss him when we go home. And *I* shall miss him too; though I am not sure why..."

"I am so glad, *melmenya*."

"I shall miss Aredhel and Singollo, too. No, it is not the ceremony, *Lassui*, it is that everything has changed," she said.

"What do you mean, *meleth nín?*"

"I mean"—she leaned her forehead against his—"me."

"You keep telling me that you feel no different."

"No—no, I feel no different at all. But it *is* a big change," she said, closing her eyes. "You always said that you loved me exactly as I was—do you still love me now?"

"Oh, *melmenya!* Of course I do! Did I not show you this morning?" He took her hand and kissed her fingers. "You still *glow*, *melmenya*. I do not know if your body can sustain its mortal brightness for eternity—we shall have to see—but," he whispered, nuzzling her neck, "if it does fade, I shall love the new, mysterious Eowyn just as much." He hugged her close.

"I shall miss them," she said.

"I know you will, *melmenya*. It will be hard for you to watch Eomer and Gimli, Aragorn and Faramir grow old and die; hard to lose their children; and then their children's children; and never, yourself, change—"

"Is this how you felt about losing me?"

Legolas nodded.

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"How did you bear it?"

"By making up my mind to join you in death, *melmenya*," he said. "But, now, we shall both live—together—for you will always have me, *meleth nín*."

"Yes, I shall always have you," she said. And she raised her head from his shoulder and smiled at him, radiantly.

...

When they had finished dressing they waited, nervously, until a page knocked on the chamber door to tell them that the King was ready for them. Legolas offered Eowyn his arm but she suddenly hesitated.

"Melmenya?"

"You *swear* that there are no others?" she whispered.

Legolas smiled. "I swear, *melmenya*; and except for the dancer from Imladris and the bathing attendants from Lorien, you have met all of them."

"I am just..."

"You are nervous. I know. So am I. We never wanted any fuss. And worse—this ceremony questions the commitment we have already made. This ceremony gives you the opportunity to change your mind and leave me, *melmenya*—"

"I would *never* leave you!"

"Then why are you nervous?"

Eowyn smiled. "Because I am being silly," she said. "I am ready."

Smiling too, Legolas took her hand upon his and led her, out of the chamber and, swiftly, down the tunnel to the double doors of the Great Hall, where they both listened for their cue.

"Honoured guests," the Elvenking was saying, "we are about to witness the solemn betrothal of my son, Crown Prince Legolas, and his chosen bride, Princess Eowyn. Please join me in wishing the couple joy."

The guests applauded and someone thumped the table. "That will be Gimli," whispered Legolas, grinning. "Come, *melmenya*."

...

"Make your vow," said Thranduil.

Legolas raised Eowyn's hand to his lips. "*Gwedhithon na, Eowyn Eomundiell; le annon veleth nín*," he said. Then he repeated the words in Westron, "I will bind to thee, Eowyn, daughter of Eomund; I give my love to thee." He kissed her hand.

Thranduil turned to Eowyn. "Make your vow," he said.

Smiling radiantly, Eowyn raised Legolas' hand to her lips. "*Gwedhithon na, Legolas Thranduilion; le annon veleth nín*: I will bind to thee, Legolas, son of Thranduil; I give my love to thee." She kissed his hand.

"Exchange your rings," said Thranduil.

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Legolas took the betrothal ring that he had already given Eowyn, months earlier, from his little finger and placed it on Eowyn's ring finger; Eowyn took the betrothal ring, which she had had made by Thranduil's own jeweller, from her thumb and placed it on Legolas' ring finger.

Then Thranduil took their joined hands in his own. "You have my blessing, *ion nín, iell nín*," he said, "may your union be all that you wish for."

And then, as the guests cheered and the palace musicians played a joyful fanfare, Eomer and Gimli tossed handfuls of white rose petals, like fragrant snow, over the happy couple.

...

"Congratulations, Eowyn," said Eomer, softly, as they sat down to dinner. "You could not have made a better choice."

Eowyn smiled at her brother. "It means a great deal to me to hear you say that, Eomer."

"I am not always the brightest sword in the armoury," Eomer admitted, "and it has taken me some time to come to terms with what you did. But Legolas will make you a good husband. And now that you are *both*—"

"Eomer—it will not change anything between us," said Eowyn. "My marriage, my—the change that has happened to me—none of that will make any difference to us. You are my big brother and I love you." She took Eomer's hand. "You were always there when I needed you. And I know that you always will be. And I will always be there for you. I swear it."

Eomer swallowed hard. "What is it about a ceremony that makes a man melancholy, thinking only of change and loss?"

"I believe it is called a 'rite of passage', Eomer," said Eowyn smiling. "And I know that Lord Fingolfin would be only too happy to explain it to us. But, as you said, we are neither of us particularly bright swords in the armoury..."

...

As the guests were making short work of the apple snow and the dainty sweetmeats, Thranduil called for silence—tapping his knife on his crystal goblet—then rose to his feet.

"My son has insisted," he said, "that we follow the ancient custom and elect a King of the Bean to preside over the evening's merry-making—I trust that he will not regret it. Master Arafinwë—the bean cake, if you please."

The Steward came forward, carrying a rich fruit cake, already cut into thick slices, on a golden platter. "Every elf, man—and dwarf," continued Thranduil, "must take a slice. One of the slices—one only—contains a dried bean. Whoever finds it must choose himself a Queen"—the guests cheered—"and then our newly elected King and Queen of Misrule must decide on our evening's entertainment."

One by one, each of the male guests selected a piece of cake.

Legolas broke his into small pieces. "No bean!" he said.

Eomer did the same. "Nor one in mine," he said, with obvious relief.

Sighs of disappointment echoed all around the hall. Gimli picked up his slice. It was a rich golden brown, filled with dried fruits, and it smelled of exotic spices. "'Twould be a pity to waste it," he said, taking a large bite.

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"Oh," he roared, holding up the remainder of the slice, "what is this? I think I have it! Yes! I have it!"

"Choose a Queen, Gimli," cried Legolas.

The dwarf jumped down from his chair and walked over to Gunnhildr. "My lady," he said, with a sweeping bow, "will you do me the honour?"

The girl's hands flew up to her mouth. "Oh! The honour would be mine, Lord Gimli," she said, happily.

"Come on, then, lass," said Gimli and, ignoring Chief Bergthórr's apoplectic expression, the dwarf proffered his arm. Amidst cheers and applause, the couple made their way to the head of the table where Legolas and Eowyn rose and respectfully offered them their own seats. Eowyn scooped up a handful of rose petals and scattered them over the new 'Queen'.

"Now Gimli," said Legolas, "what games shall we play?"

"I know one," said Gunnhildr. She leaned over to Gimli and whispered in his ear.

"That is a good one," said Gimli, "though I think we will need to lay down some special rules. My Queen," he said, loudly, "suggests a game of Hide and Seek. You have until I count to one hundred to hide yourselves, and the winner is the last person to be found." He paused, "But, to make it harder, you must confine yourselves to the main thoroughfare and its public chambers—you cannot hide in your own chambers. And," he added, looking pointedly at Legolas and Eowyn, "each person must hide by him or herself—no couples. Are you ready? (Close your eyes, my dear)."

...

Eowyn gave Legolas one final kiss and slipped into the Library. She skirted round the massive book stacks and ducked beneath the desk at the farthest end of the chamber.

"Your Majesty!" she gasped.

"I think it is time that you started calling me *Ada*."

"*Ada*," said Eowyn, "we are not supposed to be hiding together."

"I was here first," Thranduil began. "Oh, very well—since you are a lady, I will do the gentlemanly thing and leave," he said, "in a moment. But first, I am glad to have this opportunity to"—he cleared his throat—"apologise, *mell nín*, for sending you into so much danger. Though it was never my intention—"

"What, exactly, *was* your intention?" said Eowyn, boldly. "Making me find out about Serindë like that—was *that* your intention?"

"No—well, yes—in a manner of speaking—"

"What does that mean?"

"I just wanted to be sure—and for *you* to be sure—"

"Of what?"

Thranduil sighed. "Legolas is almost three thousand years old. How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven," said Eowyn.

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"Twenty-seven. There are bound to be things in Lassui's past that he has not mentioned to you —perhaps because he is ashamed or embarrassed by them, perhaps because they have slipped his memory—whatever. I just wanted to be sure that, if such a thing did come to light, your love would be strong enough to cope with it."

"The test," said Eowyn, coolly, though it was very hard to give her rebuke the proper edge when crouching beneath a desk with the object of her scorn, "was supposed to show whether I was acceptable to the Valar. What gave you the right to include a little learning exercise of your own?"

"He is my *son*," said Thranduil, simply.

"Your son." Eowyn shook her head as a new understanding of her future father-in-law dawned upon her. "You love him far too much," she said, softly.

"Is that possible?"

"Yes—if your love is possessive and prevents him from growing—then, yes, it is."

"Nothing I have done has ever stopped Lassui having his own way," said Thranduil. "Going on the Quest, meeting you..."

"I think you would be surprised just how much he tries to please you, Ada," said Eowyn, softly. She held out her hand to him. "We both love him more than our own lives," she said, "and we must make peace with each other, or we will tear him in two."

Thranduil took her hand and shook it, firmly, human fashion. "You will make a fine Crown Princess, *iell nín*," he said. Then, "*Shhhh...* Was that the Library door?"

...

Legolas waited until the King and Queen of Misrule had closed the Library door behind them, then slipped into the large garden cavern opposite. *It is not empty*, he thought, as he hid himself behind the dense foliage. *Someone stealthy, but not an elf, I think. Nor one of the clumsy Beornings...*

"Eomer?" he said, softly.

He heard a sigh. "Over here."

Legolas followed the wall of the cavern to a hollow screened by ferns and falling water. "This is a good place," he said.

"Firth found it," said Eomer.

Legolas grinned.

"Can I ask you a favour?" the man asked.

"Of course," said Legolas. "I *shall*."

"Shall what?"

"Look after Eowyn."

Eomer smiled. "I know you will. That is not what I was going to ask."

"What then?"

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"Will you take Firith home with you? She cannot come with me—there are precious few trees in Rohan—and Fangorn is—"

"Oppressive—for one as light and airy as she—"

"Exactly. But with you she would be safe," said Eomer. "In a forest that is wholesome and full of new life—"

"And where you could visit her."

"Sometimes—yes."

"Of course, Eomer. Eowyn and I will be honoured to have her as our guest—"

"I do not want Eowyn to know too much about her."

"Why?" asked Legolas. "She would not condemn you—"

"I know," said Eomer. "But there are some things a man does not tell his sister."

"Really?"

"Someone is coming."

"No need to worry," said Legolas, "I know who it is—Collo, over here!"

...

Thranduil winked at Eowyn. "Stay," he mouthed. Then he ducked out from under the desk and raised his hands. "I am here; you have found me," he cried. And he let Gunnhildr tie his hands together with a ribbon and lead him back to the Great Hall.

...

Eowyn had just decided that enough was enough—that it was time to crawl out from under the desk and go looking for Legolas—when she heard the Library door open and instinctively crept back into her hiding place.

A few moments later a large elf joined her beneath the desk.

"Lady Eowyn!"

"March Warden..."

"Are you still playing this foolish game?"

"Yes—and so, it seems, are you," said Eowyn smiling.

"I should find somewhere else to hide," said Haldir.

"No," said Eowyn. "No—to tell you the truth, I was about to give myself up. They have broken me."

"With tedium," said Haldir. "They should have let loose a few orcs, to give us something to do."

Eowyn laughed.

With some difficulty, because there was very little space, Haldir manoeuvred himself into a sitting position. "I cannot tell you how glad I am," he said, "that things have turned out as

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they have."

"I am sorry?"

"That you will not be taken from us," he said. Then he added, softly, "I think that Legolas is the luckiest elf in the world." He turned to face her. "I will not say it, Eowyn, because I made you a promise. But I do not need to say it, for you and Legolas both know how I feel. I am your servant, my lady. If you, or he, ever need anything—*anything* I have to give—you have only to ask."

"Thank you Haldir," said Eowyn, softly. She looked down at the floor. "Shall we give ourselves up?"

"I think that would be a very good idea."

...

"Caught you, Master Berryn!" cried Gunnhildr, pulling the cartographer out from behind one of the pillars of the Great Hall, "Hold out your hands!"

Berryn allowed the girl to bind his wrists with a ribbon.

"There," she said, tying off the bow, "now you are my prisoner."

She raised her eyes to his, and they both smiled, shyly.

...

In the end it was Legolas, Eomer and Singollo who jointly won the game. Gimli flushed them out of their stronghold—by having Gunnhildr pretend to be an elleth looking for a place to hide—and brought them back to the Great Hall in triumph.

Then there was much more feasting and playing of games until, at last, when everyone was exhausted, and the royal timekeeper had chimed the bells for midnight, Thranduil rose to his feet and made an important announcement.

"It is the custom for an elven betrothal to last one year," he said. "But my son—who, as you all know, has never been one to abide by custom—has decided that he and his lady will marry at Yuletide. The ceremony will take place at Eryn Carantaur, in South Ithilien and, on behalf of the happy couple, I invite you all to join us there for the celebrations."

...

"Will the King of Rohan be at your wedding?" asked Thranduil, as they waited for the last of their guests to leave the Great Hall.

"Eomer? Of course, Ada. He will act as Eowyn's Guardian at the ceremony. Why do you ask?"

Thranduil shrugged. "I just thought," he said, casually, "that it would be pleasant to spend more time with him."

"I knew that you would like him, Ada."

"Well... He is sharp. And he speaks his mind. Yes, I think I shall miss him."

Legolas grinned.

"That meddler, Fingolfin, on the other hand, I shall not miss."

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"You are just piqued because he is not afraid of you, Ada. He used to serve Lord Elrond—"

"Another meddler."

"He is my most able advisor. And Eowyn is very fond of him."

"Well, she would be. Speaking of fond, Lassui, you do realise that your March Warden—"

"Yes, Ada. I do. But he is an honourable elf and I trust him."

"Good."

"By the way, would you allow Rothinzil to come back to Eryn Carantaur with us?"

"Rothinzil? Why?"

"Not for my benefit, Ada, I assure you!" said Legolas, laughing. "But I think that she and Dínendal have taken a liking to each other."

"Your healer? Then, of course, I have no objection—but what about your cartographer?"

"Berryn?"

"Yes—why not give him a proper situation, with a stipend, so that he can make the girl a formal offer of marriage?"

"Berryn! Who—"

Thranduil laughed. "You have not noticed him with Chief Horse-penis's daughter? Now *that* could be a useful alliance, if handled carefully, Lassui."

"Chief Bergthórr would never agree to it," said Legolas. "Berryn is far too lowly born."

"Then watch them carefully, Lasdithen. Make sure that the girl does not follow him home—you do not want the Beornings to declare war on South Ithilien." Thranduil smiled, sadly. "You are still planning to leave tomorrow?"

Legolas sighed. "I love Eryn Carantaur, Ada—especially since Eowyn came there to live with me. It stands for everything I believe in—everything that I learned on the Quest—and I have been away from it for far too long. But a part of me does not want to go home. I shall miss you so very much."

"I shall miss you, too, Lassui," said Thranduil, softly.

"I do not suppose you could come and live with us..."

"You and I are both doing important work, *ion nín*. I could not leave Greenwood the Great in the hands of men."

"Astaldo and Collo would take good care of it."

"Are you telling me that you would not want Collo to live in Eryn Carantaur, too? And then he would want Aredhel... And she would want her father... And, very soon, every elf in Middle-earth would be living in South Ithilien."

"I should like that."

"You have lived far too much with *edain*, Lassui—"

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Legolas began to protest but Thranduil cut him off, gently. "I only meant, Lasdithen, that *edain* want everything today because they know they will not see tomorrow. An elf has the time to reflect, to choose, to make sacrifices. It may be painful to be parted but—in the end—what does it matter to an elf if he has to wait a year, a century, or a thousand years to see those he loves again?" He laid his hand on his son's arm. "Lassui," he continued, gently, "that is a lesson that Eowyn will have to learn—that *you* will have to teach her—or she will burn herself out."

"I know," said Legolas.

"Your healer was right to be circumspect, Lassui. Her body is now immortal. But we do not know what effect the change will have on her mind. Especially when her loved ones begin to age and die around her. Her brother—"

"She has already begun to worry about that, Ada."

Thranduil nodded. "I will help you both all I can, Lassui," he said, sincerely.

"Thank you," said Legolas. Then he added, "Eowyn would like you to join us for breakfast in our chambers tomorrow morning."

"Eowyn would?"

"Yes. She wants us to spend as much time as possible together before we part. Will you?"

"Well, if that is what Eowyn wants... Of course I will."

"And can I ask a favour for myself, Ada?"

"You know you can."

"Do not wait until Yuletide to come to us. Come sooner. Much sooner. And bring Collo with you."

...

A little later...

"Wait, melmenya," said Legolas as they reached the door of their chambers. "There is an old elven custom we must perform."

"What custom?" Eowyn looked up at him. Then she smiled, shrewdly. "Oh, I *recognise* that expression," she said, "I do not trust you, Leg—*oh!*"

He had lifted her into his arms.

"A newly betrothed elf," he said, "must carry his love over the threshold"—he opened the door with some difficulty—"and then"—he kicked the door closed behind them—"he must lay her down on the bed, and strip off all her clothes, until she is wearing nothing but her little boots, and then..."

THE END!

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A final author's note

From *The Letters of JRR Tolkien*, letter No. 154, On journeying to Elvenhome:

But in this story it is supposed that there may be certain rare exceptions or accommodations ... and so certain 'mortals', who have played some great part in Elvish affairs, may pass with the Elves to Elvenhome. Thus Frodo (by the express gift of Arwen) and Bilbo, and eventually Sam (as adumbrated by Frodo); and as a unique exception Gimli the Dwarf, as friend of Legolas and 'servant' of Galadriel.

I have said nothing about it in this book, but the mythical idea underlying is that for mortals, since their 'kind' cannot be changed forever, this is strictly only a temporary reward: a healing and redress of suffering. They cannot abide forever, and though they cannot return to mortal earth, they can and will 'die'—of free will, and leave the world.

This suggests that, one day, Eowyn might earn the chance to sail West with Legolas and that, since her body is no longer fully mortal, she might then live with him there for as long as they both wish to be together...

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Extra scene: The butterfly

Ada ... 'daddy'
Nana ... 'mummy'
Lasdithen ... 'Little Leaf'
Tithen Lassui ... 'Little Leafy'
Gwaloth thlhûn ... 'blue blossom' (buddleia or butterfly bush)
Faen ... 'radiant' (I had in mind a Cabbage White butterfly)
Mír ... 'jewel' (Painted Lady).

"Ada!" Legolas raced through the trees, holding out a tiny hand. "Look!"

Thranduil, seeing the splash of red and black in his son's cupped palm, sighed. "A butterfly... Legolas, you should have left it wherever you found it."

"It was in the *sky*, Ada." Legolas peered at the insect, his little fingers hovering over its jewelled wings but carefully not touching them. "I just held out my hand and it came down to me. Can I take it home?"

Thranduil shook his head, but the elfling was far too engrossed to see him. "Come with me. Legolas—*come*." He grasped the child's shoulder and gently guided him to a fallen oak, lying beside the path they had been following. "Sit down, *ion nín*."

Keeping his eyes on the butterfly, and his hand steady, Legolas slowly lowered his bottom.

Thranduil could not help smiling. "It *is* beautiful," he said, "and I can understand why you want to keep it, but it would be cruel, Legolas."

The child looked up from the insect at last—a puzzled frown on his little face. "Why would it be cruel, Ada? He could have all of my garden to fly in."

The Elvenking wrapped his arm around his son's slight shoulders. "But a butterfly is mortal, Lasdithen. Do you know what 'mortal' means?"

Legolas shook his head.

"Do you remember what I told you about your nana? Why she does not live with us?"

"Because she died."

Thranduil nodded. "Your nana grew so tired that she fell asleep and could not wake up. That is why she cannot be with us. And it makes us both sad."

"Yes."

Thranduil gave his son a little squeeze. "You and I will never tire like that, Legolas. We are made to live until the end of days. But *mortals* are made to die when they have lived for their allotted time, and a butterfly tires and dies after having lived for just a few days."

Legolas stared down at the insect. "Days?"

"It does not seem possible, does it? Not now, when it is young and healthy, fluttering

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from flower to flower. But a butterfly has work to do, Lasdithen, and only a short time in which to do it."

"What work, Ada?"

"It must find another butterfly so that they can have children together."

Slowly, Legolas lifted his hand and looked at the butterfly's delicate legs, whilst he gave that idea some consideration. "Where do they *find* their children, Ada?"

"Well... Each creature—butterfly, elf, horse, *adan*—carries the seeds of new life inside him—or her. But those seeds must be mingled with the seeds of another before they can grow. One day," he added, quickly, "I will explain to you how the mingling takes place, Legolas, but not today. Today, all I shall say is that you must set the butterfly free so that it can find its mate, as Eru intended."

"But *I* am not keeping him here, Ada, *he* is staying—"

"It is staying because it knows that you want it to stay, Lasdithen. It can feel your love, *ion nín*." Thranduil squeezed his son again. "You must tell it that you want it to go."

"But..."

"You want it to be happy, do you not?"

"What if I found another one, Ada? Then they could *both* live in my garden, and their children, too."

"No, Legolas. A butterfly must choose its own mate. And remember how little time it has—every moment is precious. Set it free." He leaned down and kissed the top of his son's head. "Hold up your hand, *ion nín*, and say, 'Fly away, butterfly, and find your mate.'"

The elfling hesitated.

"Go on, Tithen Lassui," said Thranduil.

Legolas raised his hand. "Fly away, butterfly," he said, bravely. "Fly away and find your mate—and bring her to live in my garden, if you like."

"Good boy," said the Elvenking, proudly.

And father and son watched the butterfly flutter away.

...

"Butterflies," said Thranduil.

"Your Majesty?"

"I want butterflies, Gwindor. In my garden, and in my son's. You must make a home for them—I have heard that there are plants to which they are particularly attracted."

"Yes, your Majesty," said the head gardener. "There is *gwaloth thlhûn*—I believe the *edain* call it the butterfly bush. And the young of the *Faen* butterfly live on cabbages, and the *Mîr* on thistles. But whether they can be lured underground by planting—"

"You must find eggs, Gwindor, and bring them to hatch here; you must keep bringing them until the butterflies are established."

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"As you wish, your Majesty." The gardener bowed low. "Will there be anything else, sire?"

"Oh, I am sure there will be—*much* more," said Thranduil. "My son has a questing spirit, Gwindor. Just give him time."

THE END

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Extra scenes: The (mis)Adventures of Little Legolas

The Little Prince

The guard standing beside the great double doors shifted uncomfortably.

Lord Astaldo, King Thranduil's Chief Counsellor for many centuries, noted the movement and paused, his knuckles a mere inch from the wood. "It is *that* day," he said, softly.

"Yes, my lord," replied the guard.

The counsellor should, of course, have reprimanded the soldier for his breach of etiquette, but—*CRASH*—something heavy hit the study wall—the guard's expression was one of honest sympathy, for Thranduil, so difficult, so prickly in character, had nevertheless a gift for inspiring love in his exasperated people.

"I had better return later," said Astaldo.

The guard nodded in agreement.

...

The tiny creature tottered along the corridor, cautiously raising each foot high before slowly placing it down, unable to see the floor over the two bows—one of them full-sized—and the quiver he was carrying in his little arms.

"Will you open the door for me, please, Maeglin?"

"I do not think your Adar wishes to be disturbed, just now, your Highness," said the guard, gently.

"He will not mind, if it is me," said Legolas. "*Please*, Maeglin." He smiled.

Give him a century or so and no elleth in the Greenwood will be safe, the guard thought. "Promise me that if your Adar tells you to leave, you will come straight back to the door, your Highness," he said, cautiously.

"I promise!"

Maeglin resisted the temptation to ruffle the little imp's golden hair. "Perhaps you should leave the bows outside."

"Oh no! These are for Ada!"

"Bows?"

The elfling nodded vehemently.

Valar help me if I ever have a son of my own. Very quietly, Maeglin lifted the latch of the great door and pushed it open. Legolas toddled through the gap, miraculously manoeuvring the full-size bow to avoid knocking its arms as he did so.

Maeglin waited for a moment or two.

But there was no immediate outburst, so he closed the door behind the little prince.

...

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Legolas stepped carefully over the candlestand lying just inside the door, and entered his father's study. "Hello Ada."

"Not now, Legolas." The Elvenking was hunched over his desk.

"You are sad, I know," said the tiny elfling, "but—"

"Legolas! I said not *now*."

"—it is *because* you are sad that I—"

"I shall not tell you again, Legolas!" Thranduil swung round, giving his tiny son one of his fabled glares.

Undeterred, the elfling carefully laid the bows and quiver on a nearby chair and approached his father. "I am here to cheer you up," he said, smiling.

"Cheer..." Thranduil shook his head. "Do you know what day it is today?"

The child nodded. "It is the day that I was born on."

"The day that you...? Yes," the Elvenking admitted, softly, "it is the day that you were born on."

"The day that Nana left us," said Legolas.

Thranduil sighed, creasing his brows in his effort to control his emotions. "Yes."

"And that is why you need cheering up," the elfling persisted. He toddled back to the chair, picked up the larger of the two bows and held it out to his father.

"What have you brought that for?"

"So that you can learn to use it. I will teach you, Ada. Master Galdor says that I am already an excellent archer."

Thranduil raised his hand to hide an unexpected smile. "Does he now? And what makes you think that *I* need to learn archery?"

"It will make you happy."

"Hap—what are you talking about, Legolas?"

"It makes *me* happy, Ada. More than anything."

"Archery."

The child nodded.

"Show me," said Thranduil. "Put that big bow down and let me see how you draw your own bow."

With great respect for both weapons, Legolas laid the longbow back on the chair and took up his own quarter-size bow. He walked into the open space before the fireplace.

"Stand tall," he said, drawing himself up to his full three feet nothing, and adopting a voice that sounded suspiciously like a certain bow master's, "with one foot either side of your shooting line." He shifted his little hips from side to side to illustrate the point. "Do not lock your knees." He bounced up and down a few times. "Check that your shoulders

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are *square*." He raised the bow to his waist. "Curl your fingers around the bowstring in a deep hook." He exaggerated the movement of his hand. "Raise your bow arm and your drawing arm together." With childish grace, he brought his bow into the shooting position. "Draw to your anchor, picturing your target, then let the arrow loose itself..." The bowstring slipped from his little fingers with a twang.

Thranduil stretched out his arms. "Come here, Lasdithen," he cried, tears running down his normally impassive face, "Come here, my Little Leaf."

...

"I am sorry Ada, I have only made you sadder," mumbled Legolas, smothered in his father's embrace.

The Elvenking said nothing.

But, without releasing his son, he slid down to his knees and, for the first time since the day of his terrible loss, he let the mask fall, and sobbed like an elfling.

THE END

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The King

IN A GREAT HALL WITH PILLARS HEWN OUT OF THE LIVING STONE SAT
THE ELVENKING ON A CHAIR OF CARVEN WOOD. ON HIS HEAD WAS A CROWN
OF BERRIES AND RED LEAVES, FOR THE AUTUMN WAS COME AGAIN.
IN THE SPRING HE WORE A CROWN OF WOODLAND FLOWERS.
IN HIS HAND HE HELD A CARVEN STAFF OF OAK.

BARRELS OUT OF BOND. THE HOBBIT

"Where are we going Ada?" asked Legolas, scampering along beside his father.

"To the vaults," replied Thranduil, taking his son's little hand and guiding him into a dimly-lit side-passage.

Legolas considered his father's answer. "Ada—what *is* the vaults?"

"A safe place in which to keep things," replied Thranduil.

"Oh." Legolas frowned. "What sort of things?"

"You will see when we get there."

The Elvenking hurried down the corridor—making no concessions for the elfling's tiny stride—to a simple doorway cut in the living rock and, with a curt nod to the guards standing either side, ducked under the lintel, pulling Legolas—"Ada is teaching me how to be King!"—behind him.

"Keep a hold of my hand," said Thranduil; "these steps are very steep."

Moving more slowly now, the pair descended to the cellars, then kept going downwards, until the stairs ended in a single narrow corridor, lit by a few scattered torches.

Legolas looked about him. "Is this the dungeons?" he asked.

"What do *you* know about dungeons?" said Thranduil.

"Gwanur Nerdanel told me that the dungeons are where you keep elflings who have been bad," said Legolas.

"Did she now," said Thranduil. "And *had* you been bad?"

"No Ada..."

"Good."

After many twists and turns, passing several stout wooden doors secured with heavy padlocks—"Is *this* where you put the naughty elflings, Ada?"—they came to the remains of a doorway, walled up with massive stone blocks. Thranduil removed a torch from the sconce beside the sealed arch, seized the empty bracket, and pulled it downwards. With a deep groan, the false blocking swung away and the Elvenking, holding the light aloft, led Legolas into the vault.

...

"Oh, *Ada!*"

Misrule in Mirkwood

The room was filled with wooden chests, each about the size of Legolas' own toy box, and some—like his toy box—had been crammed too full, so that their lids could not be closed and the elfling could see what lay inside.

Some of the chests held pieces of green—dark, like the rind of a melon, or bright, like new leaves in spring, or pale, like the waters of the forest river—and all of them flashed and sparkled in the torchlight.

Legolas had never seen anything so fascinating.

He slipped from his father's grasp and approached the nearest chest, inclining his head this way and that to make the sparks fly. The other boxes were piled with chunks of red—warm and rich, like his ada's favourite wine—or chips of white—cold, like the ice that had hung from the Great Gates last Yuletide—or pieces of blue—pale, like a fine winter sky.

Legolas took up a handful and let them fall back into the box... "What are these, Ada?"

"Our wealth," said Thranduil.

"Oh." Legolas seized another tiny fistful. "Ada, what—"

"Come over here." Thranduil held out his hand. Legolas dropped the sapphires and toddled, between the chests, to where his father was standing beside a long, narrow box decorated with gold. "Do you recognise *this*?" asked the Elvenking, pointing to the inlay.

"They are beech leaves, Ada," said Legolas. "And that is your sword."

Thranduil smiled. "These are the arms of the Woodland Realm," he said. "They tell us that there is something important in this box, something that belongs to me as King, and to you as Prince, of this kingdom. Whenever you see this sword"—he traced it with his finger—"surrounded by these leaves, you must remember your duty as Crown Prince. Do you understand?"

"Yes Ada."

"Good. Now open the chest."

Obediently, Legolas pushed up the heavy lid. Hand-in-hand, father and son gazed down at three elaborate circlets, intricately wrought in silver and studded with diamonds and pale, watery emeralds.

"Do you know what those are?" asked Thranduil.

"Crowns..." said Legolas.

"The Crown Jewels of the Woodland Realm," said Thranduil. "This one"—he pointed to the largest—"is the King's; this one, the Queen's; and this"—he pointed to the smallest—"belongs to the Crown Prince."

"Me," said Legolas.

"You."

"But..." The elfling stretched out his free hand and tentatively touched the princely circlet. "This is made of metal, Ada. And a *real* crown is made of flowers and leaves."

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"A *real* crown?" Gently, Thranduil drew Legolas' hand from inside the chest and closed the lid. "Come, Lasdithen—let us go outside and I will explain."

...

The Greenwood was sparkling with light summer rain.

Thranduil led his son through the Great Gates, across the terrace, and lifted him onto the parapet at the side of the stone steps. "Can you see the houses, Legolas? Up in the trees?" The Elvenking pointed, across the Forest River, to various dwellings nestling amongst the branches.

"Yes, Ada."

"And do you know who lives in them?"

"Our people."

"Our people—yes—very good. *I* am their King and *you* are their Prince. And do you know why kings wear crowns, Lasdithen?"

"So that their people know who they are," said Legolas.

"Very good." Thranduil smiled. "And what *is* a king? What does he—what do *I*—do?"

"You work in your study," said Legolas.

"Yes, sometimes. Doing what?"

"Writing letters."

"Letters?" Thranduil began to suspect that the conversation might be going awry. "What sort of letters?"

"Letters about wine," said Legolas, confidently, "when it tastes like vinegar. And about deerskins, when the Beornings have not paid for them."

"Hmm." The Elvenking wrapped a strong arm around his son. *How do I explain this, he wondered, to a child?*

"A king," he said, "takes care of his people, just as an Ada takes care of his son. A king makes sure that his people have food to eat, and a safe place to sleep, and can live without fear. Sometimes he can do it by talking or by writing letters; sometimes by giving gifts or by making payments; sometimes he has no choice but to stand up for his people—the way I would stand up for *you* if somebody threatened you, the way "*—*he gave his son a proud little hug—"you stood up for Collo when Saelbeth was bullying him.

"*That* is what a king is. He is his people's ada."

Legolas nodded, but said nothing.

Thranduil continued. "To be an ada to so many people, a king must be rich. The jewels you saw in the vault—the green and red and white gems—will buy many bows and arrows to protect them."

The Elvenking frowned; Legolas did not seem as interested as he had expected, but he decided to persevere: "When I am here, in the Palace, I wear a crown of leaves or flowers—a *real* crown, as you put it"—he gave the child another little squeeze

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—“because my people already know that I am their *ada*. But when I meet with other kings, I wear a crown of metal...”

Thranduil realised that his son’s head had begun to droop. “Are you listening, Legolas?”

“Yes,” said the elfling, his little lip quivering.

“What is wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Do not tell me ‘nothing,’” said Thranduil. “Tell me what is troubling you.” He leaned closer—a trifle impatiently—to hear his son’s mumbled reply.

“I thought you were just *my ada*, not *everybody’s*.”

...

“Oh Little Leaf!”

Thranduil—so seldom openly demonstrative—folded his arms about his tiny son and held him against his chest, rocking him back and forth. “Of course I am *your ada*! I am your *real ada*—not a *pretend ada*, as I am to *them*!”

He kissed the crown of the child’s head. “I love *you* more than anything in Middle-earth, Legolas Thranduilion,” he said.

And though his heart had always known it, it seemed to Thranduil that his mind was only now recognising the truth of it: “No *ada* ever loved his elfling more than I love *you*, my precious, precious son.”

THE END

Misrule in Mirkwood

The artist

King Thranduil looked up from particularly vexing paragraph in Elrond's latest letter with a sudden alarming thought: *Legolas is very quiet...*

The Elvenking rose from his desk, stepped over the sea of papers that always seemed to accumulate when he was working, and prowled around his study in search of his small son.

Legolas was not—as Thranduil had feared—'being a spider' on top of one of the bookcases.

Nor, this time, was he—*Eru be praised*—attempting to light a fire in his 'goblin cave' beneath the map table.

No—this time, Thranduil found him in the garden cavern, kneeling by the low stone bench that ran the full length of one wall, drawing on a piece of parchment.

A red sausage.

Thranduil paused to brush a few crumbs of colour from the seat before sitting down. "Where did the chinks come from, Legolas?"

"Lord Astaldo *gave* them to me, Ada," said the elfling, looking up from his picture and beaming—giving Thranduil the opportunity to note that his hands, his nose and, for some reason, his teeth and tongue, all needed a good scrub. "And *these* as well." He patted a pile of parchment trimmings—odd-shaped fragments cut from the edges of the skins—and left a smudge of small, greenish finger marks on the top piece.

I must repay the Counsellor's kindness, thought Thranduil, watching his son wipe a chalky hand down the front of his velvet tunic. *Perhaps his daughter would like a lump of clay to play with. Or a pail of whitewash...*

"And what are you drawing?"

"A snake," said the elfling, seriously.

"A *snake*. May I see it?"

The child leaned back; Thranduil leaned forward and, looking more closely, saw that the red sausage did, in fact, have two small yellow eyes.

"Have you drawn anything else?"

"Yes."

"May I see what?"

His son laid down his piece of chalk—"No, put it in the box, Legolas"—gathered up several drawings from the floor, and handed them over.

"Thank you." Thranduil looked at the first picture—a bright orange creature with a big sunflower of a head, two short, sturdy legs and a long, wavy tail.

Legolas had never actually seen a lion—nor, for that matter, had his father—but a passing Haradin merchant, telling him tales of 'the king of beasts', had so captivated the child that the Elvenking had spent an entire morning searching his library for a woodcut, which father and son had then studied in detail.

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The elfling had, Thranduil thought, made a reasonable job of putting the image and the description together, though, with its round eyes and lopsided grin, the creature was not, perhaps, as fierce as it might have been. He glanced at his son as he laid the picture down. Legolas had taken up a stick of green and, biting his lip in concentration, was carefully adding spots to the sausage-snake.

Thranduil took up the next picture—a drawing of a short, round-bodied, yellow-haired fellow with strong dark brows and piercing blue eyes (arranged in a strangely familiar scowl). “Who is this?”

Legolas peered at the parchment in his father’s hands. “That is *you*, Ada!”

Me...? The Elvenking looked again. Yes, the little figure was wearing a crown—wide and white and balanced upon the tips of his ears. Thranduil considered his expression. *Am I really more ferocious than a lion?*

He laid down his portrait and picked up his son’s final drawing. “Legolas...?”

The elfling added some finishing touches to the sausage-snake’s forked tongue before looking up.

“Did you come into my bedchamber this morning?”

Legolas nodded.

“Why?”

“I wanted to go to the stables, Ada—to see the baby horse.”

Thranduil took another long look at his son’s drawing. *Elrond’s letter can wait*, he thought. “Would you like to see the baby horse now?”

Legolas’ smile was like the sun emerging from the clouds.

“Go and wash your hands and face first,” said Thranduil. “There is a good boy.”

...

The Elvenking waited until his son had left the garden, then gathered up the child’s drawings and returned to his study. His own portrait, the smiling lion and the jolly sausage-snake he carefully pinned to the carved wooden screen beside his desk. The other picture he studied for a few moments more, then—with a sigh of regret—he crossed to the fireplace, laid the parchment in the grate and, taking up his tinderbox and striking a spark, he quickly burned the evidence.

...

“Hello, baby horse...”

All elves had an affinity with horses, *But Legolas*, thought Thranduil proudly, *is exceptionally gifted*.

The Elvenking watched his small son approach the little grey foal, slowly and calmly, murmuring reassuring words. *It will do the boy good to help raise it*, he thought; *to have a few small responsibilities of his own*. “What will you call him, Lasdithen?”

Legolas patted the foal’s neck, laughing happily when the horse nuzzled his shoulder, and pushed unexpectedly hard. “Silverwings,” he said.

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"*Silverwings.*" Thranduil smiled.

Then, as if suddenly making up his mind—though, in reality, the decision had been made the moment he had seen Legolas' drawing—"Maeglin," he said, "see that my son gets back to my study. Legolas, when you have finished making friends with Silverwings, go with Maeglin. I will be there soon."

...

"Your Majesty! *Thranduil...*"

"May I come in?"

"Of course." The beautiful elleth stepped aside and—clearly uncertain how she should behave, given their recent intimacy—bent in a half-curtsey before closing the door.

"You left these." Thranduil handed her a pair white silk drawers.

"Thank you..."

She must already know why I am here, he thought. "I do not regret last night," he said, "it was an unexpected joy—but there is my son to think of."

The elleth frowned up at him, uncomprehending.

"My son came to my bedchamber this morning. Fortunately, you had already left, and when he saw these"—he pointed to the drawers—"lying on my bed he assumed that they were mine. But, had he come in just a half hour earlier, he would have seen *us.*"

"We can be more careful—you can come here—*your Majesty...*" She suddenly remembered her place, and curtsied again, awkwardly.

"I will not hide from my son," said Thranduil, shaking his head. "Legolas must always know that he can come to me whenever he needs me. When he is older, perhaps—when he can understand—it will be different. But he will *always* come first."

"I love you," said the elleth, forlornly.

"No," said Thranduil, gently. "But I thank you for saying so."

...

Back in his study, the Elvenking found Legolas on his hands and knees, beside his father's desk, vigorously colouring another drawing. "What is it this time, *ion nín?*"

"The baby horse."

"Let me see."

Legolas held up his picture.

He had drawn the foal—for some reason in pale green—with a large triangular head and a big round body. But there was something about the way he had tried to convey the animal's long, gangly legs, with their overlarge knees and awkward feet, and—especially—about the way he had added a pair of feathered wings to the horse's back, that made Thranduil think: *If he is still enthusiastic in a year or so's time, I will find him a drawing teacher...*

"When you have finished," he said, "we will write his name at the bottom, and pin him

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up with your other pictures." He gave his son a hug. "But do *try* not to get any more chalk on your tunic, Legolas."

...

Seated at his desk, the Elvenking looked, over his son's head, at the ashes in the grate.

Legolas seemed to have forgotten his other drawing.

But Thranduil did not believe that *he* would ever recover from the shock of seeing his son's picture—of a small, round-bodied Elvenking wearing nothing—besides his huge crown—but a knee-length pair of lacy, beribboned, white silk drawers.

THE END

Misrule in Mirkwood

The gyngerbrede

örðigskeggi is a real Viking byname, which means 'bristlebeard'.

Take a quart of hony, & sethe it, & skeme it clene; take Safroun, pouder Pepir, & brow ther-on; take gratyd Brede, & make it so chargeaunt þat it wol be y-leched; þen take pouder Canelle, & straw þer-on y-now; þen make yt square, lyke as þou wolt leche it; take when þou lechyst hyt, an caste Box leaves a-bouyn, y-stkyd þer-on, on clowys. And if þou wolt haue it Red, coloure it with Saunderys y-now. Harleian MS. 279, England, 15th century.

Take a quart of honey, & boil it, and skim it clean; take saffron, powder pepper, and throw thereon; take grated bread, & make (the mixture) so stiff that it can be sliced; then take powder cinnamon, & strew thereon enough; then make it square, like as thou wouldst slice it; take when thou slicest it, and cast box leaves over it, stuck thereon with cloves. And if thou wouldst have it red, colour it with sandalwood enough.

It had snowed again during the night and Greenwood the Great looked like the tiny Forest inside the snow globe that Legolas' *ada* had given him on his last conception day. Standing upon the terrace, just outside the Gates of Thranduil's Halls, the elfling watched curiously as his friend, Aredhel, holding on to her father's hand, sat down upon the white ground.

"Would *you* like to play with us, your Highness?" asked his father's Chief Counsellor.

"No, thank you, Lord Astaldo," replied Legolas, politely. "Ada said that I must wait for him here—and that I must not get dirty."

Smiling, Lord Astaldo bowed his head, then he, too, sat down, a little way away from his daughter. "Ready?"

Aredhel laughed. "Yes, Ada."

"Lie back..."

Wide-eyed, Legolas watched the pair sink onto their backs.

"Now," said Lord Astaldo, "use your arms and legs as I showed you."

Despite his father's instructions, Legolas moved a little closer. Aredhel was flapping her arms up and down like a bird's wings, and sliding her legs back and forth like a pair of shears.

The elfling frowned—

"Legolas?"

...

Thranduil approached his small son. "Legolas!"

The boy turned, and the wistful look on his little face took the Elvenking by surprise. "Whatever is happening out there?" He strode outside—and sighed. "Are you not several thousand years too old to be doing that, Astaldo?"

The Counsellor pushed himself up on his elbows and smiled at his king. "Children are

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only this age once, your Majesty," he said.

"Fortunately," Thranduil agreed.

...

Legolas slipped past his father.

"Look, Lassui," said Aredhel. She rolled over onto her side and scrambled to her feet and both elflings, standing side-by-side, stared down at the marks she had left on the snow.

"What is it?" asked Legolas.

"A snow Varda," said Aredhel. "See—here is her head, and there is her gown, and this is the starlight around her."

Legolas grinned. "Ada, look—"

"Come, Legolas," called his father. "We have important things to do this morning."

...

The King and the Crown Prince of the Woodland Realm mounted their horses and, escorted by a company of lightly-armed warriors, crossed the Forest River and trotted along the imposing, tree-lined avenue to meet their guests—a ragged-looking band of men, muffled in wool and swathed in furs, slowly ploughing their way through the deep snow, leading their exhausted horses behind them.

Thranduil greeted the men formally, welcoming them to his home for the Yuletide celebrations, and introducing his small son to their leader.

"It is an honour, your Highness," said the chieftain, bowing low. The man was shorter than an elf, and much broader, and his hair and beard were white and unruly, but his smile was kind.

Beaming, Legolas placed his hand upon his heart, and bowed his little head, and said, in Westron, as his father had taught him, "I am pleased to meet you, Chief Bóðvarr örðigskeggi." Then, all by himself, he added, "Would you like me to show you how to walk *on* the snow?"

To the elfling's surprise, the Beorning did not say yes.

Instead, he threw back his head and laughed—"Ho, ho, ho!"—and all his men laughed with him.

"Ada?"

"Hush now, *ion nín*," said Thranduil, "I will explain later."

...

For the rest of the day, King Thranduil plied the Beornings with mulled ale and with roasted meats; then, early the following morning, he lured Chief Bóðvarr into his study to discuss matters of mutual advantage.

The Elvenking had planned that Legolas should be present at the discussions—*For that is how I learned statecraft, by listening to my father*—but, at the last moment, he changed his mind. *Lassui has taken a liking to the man*, he thought, *and the man to*

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him. He would be a distraction.

He beckoned one of his guards. "My compliments to Mistress Nerdanel, Maeglin," he said. "Tell her I wish her to take care of my son for the rest of the day. Go with Maeglin, Lasdithen."

...

Gwanur Nerdanel received her orders with a cheerful smile. "I was just going to the kitchens, little prince," she said, "to make some gyngerbrede for my nephews. Shall we go together?"

She held out her hand.

"I did not know that you could *make* gyngerbrede," said Legolas, scampering along beside her.

"Goodness, child! Where did you think it came from?"

Legolas thought for a moment. "*Esgaroth*," he said.

...

The kitchens (which Legolas was usually forbidden to enter) were an exciting place, full of elves slicing, stirring, beating and baking—all cheerfully making the exotic and delicious-smelling dishes that would be served at that evening's Yuletide Feast.

The head cook, though surprised to receive a royal visit, made the little prince welcome, finding him a starched white cloth—which Gwanur Nerdanel tied around his middle—and a high stool, and setting him up in a quiet corner with various strange-looking objects and some interesting-looking jars.

"And there are some fine loaves in the pantry," he said.

"I will go and fetch one," said Nerdanel. "Wait here, little prince."

Legolas nodded.

From his stool, he watched the elleth cross the kitchen and disappear through a door; he watched her emerge, moments later, carrying a long loaf of white bread; and he watched her stop to speak to one of the elves, who was sprinkling something into a bowl...

Legolas waited.

And waited.

Then he examined the utensils, one by one, experimentally running his fingers over the sharp teeth of the grater, pulling a few funny faces in the shiny saucepan, tapping a song on the table with the wooden spoon...

He put the spoon down.

Gwanur Nerdanel was still talking.

Legolas waited.

And waited.

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Then he picked up each of the jars in turn, and read its label out aloud. "Sa-ffron. Sandal-wood. Cin... Cin-na-mon. Pep-per."

Pepper? He pulled out the cork and peered inside—the pepper was a fine, grey powder. He sniffed. "Oh!" he gasped, "Ah!" He screwed up his little face, and—and—and—

"A-choo!"

Legolas looked around, guiltily.

But, luckily, no one had seen what had happened. He jammed the stopper back in the jar, and put the jar with the others.

"Are we ready, little prince?" asked Gwanur Nerdanel, moments later.

"Yes," said Legolas, hiding behind a huge smile.

...

They boiled the honey, and added some sandalwood to make it red, and sprinkled in the spices, though Legolas did *try* to persuade Gwanur Nerdanel that the gyngerbrede might taste better without the pepper—"That is what makes your tongue tingle, little prince!"

Then Legolas added the breadcrumbs, a small handful at a time, and Nerdanel stirred, until the mixture was stiff enough, and they tipped it out, and patted it square, and Nerdanel cut it into thin slices.

"Now for the best part," she said, smiling down at the elfling. She laid one of the slices on a wooden board and, using the point of a knife, she cut it into the shape of an elf—head, arms, body and legs—trimming away the extra paste. "There."

"Can *I* make one?"

"Of course, little prince." Nerdanel carefully lifted the biscuit, laid it on a wooden rack to harden, and put another slice of gyngerbrede on the cutting board.

Legolas rose up on the rung of his stool and, leaning on the table, (and being very careful with the knife, as instructed), he scratched a figure into the paste.

"He looks happy," said the elleth, cutting round the outline for him. "Wherever is he running, in such a hurry?"

"Outside," said Legolas, "to play in the snow."

...

Later

The Elvenking's Great Hall was decked with boughs of holly and with garlands of evergreens for the Yuletide feast. Legolas, wearing his very best tunic and his princely coronet, sat at the High Table, between his father and Chief Bóðvarr, who loved children (but, sadly, had none of his own) and was in his element, teaching the elfling to hang a spoon on the tip of his nose, to burp at will, and to drain his little tankard of spiced apple juice in a single draught.

"Well done!" he roared.

Legolas grinned.

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The chieftain picked a chunk of roasted fowl from a serving platter. "Ah," he said, "I have found a wishbone, your Highness!" He stripped off the meat and held out the bone. "Pull," he said.

Legolas, though he had never heard of a wishbone before, grasped one end, and pulled.

There was a quiet *snap*.

"You have won, your Highness," said the Beorning. "Look!"

Legolas looked, but could not see how the man could tell.

"Now," said Chief Bóðvarr, "you must make a wish."

"What sort of wish?"

"Any sort of wish—wish for something you want more than anything else in the world."

Legolas looked dubiously at the broken bone.

"*Anything*," said the Beorning.

"I wish..." said Legolas.

"No, no!" Bóðvarr laughed. "You must not say it out loud, your Highness. It must be secret."

"But how will he know what I want?"

"How will who know?"

"Ada."

The Beorning laughed again. "It is the gods who grant your wish, your Highness, not... Oh, I see." He leaned in closer to the elfling. "Tell *me* what you want," he said. "*Whisper*."

...

The main courses were cleared away, and the serving elves and ellith brought in the dessert trays, laden with cider-soaked caraway cakes and dishes of spiced syllabub, with plates of gyngerbrede and fruited biscuits, and with boards of fine cheeses. To the High Table one of the elves carried a special platter and, with a deep bow, laid it before King Thranduil.

"Look Ada," cried Legolas, bouncing up and down with excitement.

Over his head, his father and the Beorning chieftain were deep in conversation. Legolas tugged at the man's sleeve. "Look, Chief Bóðvarr!"

"Lassui!" cried Thranduil.

The chieftain shook his head, smiling. "What is it your Highness? Oh, yes! *Look*, your Majesty!"

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Frowning, the Elvenking followed the man's pointing finger—and even his irritation immediately vanished. On the oval wooden plate, two gyngerbrede elves, one large, one small, were running excitedly across a snowy Forest of rosemary and bay leaves sprinkled with fine white sugar.

"Did you make these yourself, Lassui?" he asked.

"Yes," said Legolas, proudly. "Well, Gwanur Nerdanel helped with the mixing and the cutting, but *I* drew them, and *I* made the trees, and—*oh*," he squeaked, remembering the pepper incident as his father picked up the the larger of the gyngerbrede elves and bit off its head, "does it—does it taste all right, Ada?"

"It tastes very good," said Thranduil. "Clever boy."

...

Next morning

Stifling a yawn—for the room was warm and he had already been listening to the Elvenking's proposals for some hours—Chief Bóðvarr örðigskeggi set his tankard on the table and settled back in his chair, stretching his legs out towards the fire.

"That is enough, for now, I think," he said. "It is time you took your son for a walk in the snow."

King Thranduil scowled. "*What?*"

"The *snow*," said the Beorning. "I know that an elfling grows more slowly than a man child, but even Legolas will not be young for ever. Do not waste these precious days of Yuletide buttering up a crusty old warrior. Your son wants to play in the snow. Go and take him outside."

"Legolas is a sensible child," said Thranduil. "*He* understands—"

"*He wants to play in the snow*," said the Beorning, firmly. "He told me so himself—he wants to play with *you*. Go and take him out." He folded his arms across his chest. "You will not get another word out of me on any other subject."

"Do not be childish!" said Thranduil.

"Go and *be* childish!" said the Beorning.

The Elvenking gasped.

The man laughed. "I will still be here," he added, diplomatically, "when Legolas has tired himself out."

"Elfings do not tire so easily, Chief Bóðvarr," replied Thranduil.

"But a man," said the Beorning, yawning openly now, "can take a nap, King Thranduil, and will awaken much more inclined to talk."

...

"Look Ada," said Legolas, excitedly. as they passed, hand-in-hand, through the Enchanted Gates, "it is snowing again!"

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Thranduil, remembering the days when, as an elfling, he had played in the snow with his own father, pointed to the far bank of the Forest River. "Last one across the bridge is a goblin!" he cried.

Laughing, Legolas dashed off, with his ada at his heels.

And the Beorning chieftain, taking a little fresh air on the terrace, watched them, smiling.

THE END

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Extra scene: The sisters

"You slept with two *sisters*?" whispered Eowyn as they walked back to their seats. "They must have made your life a misery—" She had a sudden thought. "Not *together*?"

"Well..." Legolas hesitated. "Only once."

"Legolas!"

"It was during a harvest ceremony. They ambushed me."

A thousand years earlier

The Elvenking's Great Hall was hung with garlands of corn and rosy red apples; its tables, arranged in a single ring, were decked with offerings of fruit and dried flowers; at its centre, a circular patch of beaten earth, strewn with ears of wheat and barley, formed a ceremonial threshing floor..

Legolas leaned back in his chair and watched the Mistress of the Ceremony cover his father and the Harvest Queen in a thick velvet blanket. The rite had been celebrated and the assembled guests were more than ready to make their own offerings to the Valar—but *his* lover (of just a few years), the Lady Tindomerel, had disappeared before the Choosing, and was still nowhere to be seen.

Legolas sighed. What would he do if she did not return? He could certainly not abstain—it was his duty as Crown Prince to participate.

But neither could he make love to another elleth...

Could he?

"Would you care for some wine, your Highness?"

Legolas turned towards the voice. "Lady Culurien—yes—thank you." He accepted the jewelled goblet with a polite smile, bowing his head before raising the wine to his lips and drinking deeply.

A delicious glow immediately filled his chest, instantly soothing his nerves, and he smiled again. "Thank you, *híril nín*. I—*oh*—" The warmth was still spreading, travelling down through his belly and into his groin, lapping pleasantly around his *ceryn*. "My lady"—his smile broadened—"what *have* you given me?"

"Just wine, your Highness," she answered, demurely. "Are you looking for my sister?"

"Yes..."

"She did not want to join with you in public—she awaits you somewhere private," Culurien explained. "Shall I take you there?"

"Please." Legolas rose to his feet—the combined effects of the heady wine and a sudden, urgent arousal making him sway uncharacteristically—and followed the alluring elleth between the piles of coupling elves, out through the great double doors, and across the main thoroughfare to one of the most spectacular of the many garden caverns that graced his father's palace.

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"In here, your Highness." Lady Culurien took him by the hand and drew him inside.

The night sky, visible through shafts cut in the cavern roof, was moonless, but someone had filled the garden with hundreds of tiny lanterns that sparkled like golden stars amongst the dark foliage of the *égvor* and the *mithorn*, and beside the surging torrent of the ornamental waterfall.

Legolas inhaled the scents of leaf and water—and felt himself respond eagerly to their vital essence.

He bit back a moan—"Where is Tindu?"—for she was not in the garden.

"I do not know, your Highness," said Culurien. "She *should* be here..."

She turned towards him with a dazzling smile. "But perhaps you will accept me as a substitute—for a little while, at least." And she drew back the ends of his sash until his robe fell open, slid the heavy brocade from his shoulders, and let it fall.

Legolas stumbled away, retreating until his bare back touched the rough stone wall.

"Ah..." He closed his eyes and leaned against the cold, damp rock, hoping that the shock would help him regain some self control. But the insistent song of running water only fed his arousal, and although some still-functioning part of his mind told him that it was wrong, he was finding it harder and harder to resist Culurien's skilful hands.

"What would your sister say, *híril nín*, if she were to find us—*oh!*"

The elleth had wrapped her arms around his waist and was sliding down to her knees, stroking every inch of her body against his *ceber*.

And then he *broke*, laying his hands upon her head to encourage her—but she needed no persuading to press her cheek to the solid ridge of his confined *ceber* and to rub him through the sheer silk of his leggings.

"Tindu..."

"Tindu will not mind if we start without her."

Clinging to the wall—for he was shaking violently now—he watched her undoing his lacings.

"Sweet Eru," she gasped, setting him free, "Tindu did not exaggerate—and it is as beautiful as the rest of you!" She wrapped both hands around his thick, straight shaft, breathing endearments against his sensitive flesh. Then she slid her hands down between his thighs and gathered up his *ceryn*.

Legolas moaned, brushing himself against her lips. "Please..."

"Poor elf..." Culurien kissed the head of his *ceber*. "Come here, your Highness." Taking him by the hand, she rose, and led him to a low stone bench, running the full length of the cavern, and gently sat him down. "Just leave everything to me..."

Holding her skirts in one hand, she straddled him, sinking down upon him with a satisfied sigh. "Yes. Stay still, *melethron nín*," she whispered. "Leave every—"

But Legolas—though on the verge of ejaculation since they had entered the cavern—knew instinctively that he would never come in that position and—with a cry like a rutting warg—he wrestled Culurien to the ground.

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...

Despite his desperate state, Legolas had to work hard to spill his seed—pleasuring Culurien several times whilst striving for a release of his own. And when it finally happened—far from satisfying him—it seemed only to leave him more aroused than before.

Still painfully hard, he raised himself up on his hands and gazed down at the elleth beneath him.

Culurien was already drifting off into reverie, her mouth curved in a grateful smile. Gently, Legolas withdrew and, still leaning over her, took himself in his hand.

“Lasdithen?”

Ceryn Manwë! Tindomerel!

Guiltily, Legolas turned to face his lover’s anger—but the elleth was smiling.

“You were magnificent, Lasdithen,” she said. “I watched you—like a bull with an entire herd to service, my love...” Already naked, she crouched beside him. “Take *me*, Lasdithen. Take *me* as you took *her*.”

...

Lying on his back with his knees drawn up, Legolas held Tindomerel by the waist, helping her to ride him without the pain of taking him too deeply.

“What—*ah*—what did Culurien—give me—in that wine?” he gasped.

“Just—oh—*ohhh!*—just a love potion—*oh*—Lasdithen!”

“When—when will it—*ah*—wear off?”

“By—by morning...”

“And—*ahhh*—” He gritted his teeth and held her still, struggling to catch his breath, still unable to reach his goal. “You—you planned this—*together?*”

She leaned forward and brushed her bare breasts back and forth over his face. “Culurien and I share—oh Legolas—*Legolas!*” S he arched her back as an orgasm rushed though her, twisting her body. “Everything, my love—*everything—OH! OH! EVERYTHING!*”

...

“Now my sister again,” sighed Tindomerel, stretching luxuriously.

Legolas, tired but still unsatisfied, turned back to Culurien who, fully recovered from their earlier coupling, rolled onto her belly and came up on her hands and knees, presenting him with her perfect rump.

Laying his hands on its delicious curves and bending slightly, Legolas slid himself between her thighs and, grasping her hips, entered her from behind, sinking deep with a murmured, “Thank you, *híril nín*.” Then, leaning in close—cupping her breasts and nuzzling her neck—he began the long, exhausting task of bringing them both to a climax.

...

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"*Ai! Ceryn Manwë!*"

Legolas froze in mid-thrust, sobbing with anticipation, then drove himself deeper and held himself there, body rigid, whilst Culurien, pinned on her belly beneath him, writhed in ecstasy.

Legolas waited until she had stilled; then he withdrew, rolled over and lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling, panting.

"Me again," said Tindomerel, giving him a long, lingering kiss before swinging her leg over him and rubbing herself up and down his still-straining penis.

Legolas shook his head weakly. "I cannot Tindu. You are killing me, *meleth nín.*"

But, moments later, he seized her waist and turned her onto her back.

...

Tindomerel shuddered in a fit of pleasure.

Lying on his side behind her, Legolas—in his exhaustion—was repeatedly misjudging his withdrawals, letting his penis slip from inside her only to re-enter her with an almighty lunge, which thrust *her* into another orgasm, whilst *he* remained unsatisfied...

The potion had been expensive, but—Tindomerel smiled blissfully—the Mistress of the Ceremony had earned her money.

...

Beyond exhaustion now, Legolas sat motionless on the rock bench whilst Culurien, impaled upon his never-ending *ceber*, stretched down his legs to grasp his ankles, and rocked her hips backwards and forwards, moaning...

Idly, he stroked her beautiful buttocks.

Suddenly, Tindomerel rose and, straddling her sister's body, offered him her breast, pressing the hard nipple between his lips.

Legolas sucked.

And—whether it was the unexpected intimacy with Tindu, or whether the potion had at last run its course, he could not tell, but —as his mouth worked hungrily, he felt his spirit rush down into his ceryn, felt the delicious ripples begin and the longed-for wave build, and he arched his back and prayed for release until, screaming, "Na vedui!"—long and loud—*Na vedui! At last!*—he *came*, emptying the whole night's frustration into his lover's sister.

Eowyn smiled wickedly. "Were you *very* badly hurt?"

Legolas grinned.

"Can we go back to our chambers?" she asked, suddenly serious.

"Melmenya!" He stooped to whisper in her ear. "*I thought you were never going to get jealous...*"

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Extra scene: The goblin

A small face peered over the edge of King Thranduil's desk.

"I am sorry, Legolas," said the Elvenking, without looking up. "It cannot be helped."

"But..."

"We will go another time."

"Could we not," the elfling persisted, "go *afterwards*."

"Afterwards will be too late."

"But—"

"No."

King Thranduil sighed—an Elvenking was a poor match for a small, determined elfling.

"No, Legolas," he repeated. "As I have already explained"—he gave the child a little hug—"the messenger arrived unexpectedly, and must be dealt with today. That means that I have to cancel our excursion. We will still spend tomorrow together, *ion nín*, but we will not be able to see the sun rise over Erebor, as we planned. However, we *will* do that another time." The King looked down at his son—and the disappointment on the boy's little face suddenly wrung his heart. "Well... Suppose we open one of your presents a day early?"

Legolas' smile could have melted ice.

...

At the heart of King Thranduil's cavernous study, a couch, some chairs, and a low table (standing upon a beautiful Haradin rug) formed a comfortable sitting area, where the Elvenking entertained his more important guests—and drove some of his harder bargains.

Today, a pile of presents lay beneath the table, sent by the King's various allies in celebration of his son's conception day.

Thranduil watched Legolas run over to the parcels, his little arms flailing. "Just *one*, Lassui!"

...

There was a large one, wrapped in scarlet velvet; there was a long, thin one, wrapped in royal blue; there was a round one, wrapped in rich green brocade; and there was a wooden-box one, inlaid with figures—a bird, a foot, and a strange, staring eye—fashioned in ebony and in tinted ivory.

"Choose," said Thranduil.

Legolas considered the different shapes, sizes, and colours, and decided he liked the red one best. "This one, Ada."

"Very well. Open it."

Excitedly, Legolas untied the cord and pulled the wrapping away. Inside was a jerkin of

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smooth, brown leather—rich, like a ripe chestnut—decorated down the front with swirly patterns, and around the bottom with shiny metal points.

The elfling sat back on his heels with a puzzled frown. "A *goblin* coat..."

"Mannish armour, Legolas," said his father. He picked up the tiny cuirass and examined the tooling of its boiled leather, and the casting of its brass studs. "And very fine armour it is. Later, we will write to Chief Bóðvarr, thanking him for his generosity, and telling him how much you appreciate his gift." He laid the cuirass on the table. "Now, *ion nín*, did you bring your Primer?"

"Yes..." Legolas toddled back to his father's desk and picked up a small book, which he held up for Thranduil to see.

"Good," said the Elvenking. "I must go to the Great Hall, to receive the messenger—"

"Can I come too, Ada?"

"No; not today, Legolas." The Elvenking lifted his son onto the couch. "Today, I want you to stay here, like a good boy, and learn your *tengwar*. I will send Gwanur Nerdanel to sit with you."

...

Feet dangling and lips pursed, Legolas watched his father leave the study. *Why do messengers always come when Ada is supposed to be taking me out into the Forest?*

He sighed heavily and, opening his Primer, turned to the table of *tengwar*, and carefully unfolded it. He placed his little hand over the caption beside the first character, and stared at the black squiggle for a moment or two.

"*Tinco*," he said, decisively, and lifted his hand. The answer was there, but Legolas could not decipher it.

Undeterred, he carried on. "*Palma*." He raised his hand. "Or... *Calma*?"

It was far too hard without his Ada or his Gwanur Nerdanel there to tell him when he was right. Legolas looked at the goblin coat lying on the table and wondered whether goblins had to learn to read.

"Only *goblin* words," he thought. "Like 'gurrrr'—growling, deep in his throat—"and 'gaarrh'."

Not hard words.

Not Elvish.

He laid down his Primer—carefully, because his Ada had told him that a book was the most valuable thing in the world—scrambled to the floor, and picked up his goblin coat.

It was stiff, and quite heavy, but he slipped his hand through one of the armholes, and shrugged it on—

"*Gurrrr!*"

The little goblin raised his arms and, stamping his feet, shook his fists at one of the stone Ladies standing beside the fireplace. "Gah! Gaarrh!"

The stone Lady was not impressed.

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The goblin sighed. "Where is my goblin sword?"

Legolas thought of the silver paper knife on his Ada's desk. But his Ada had told him that he must never, ever touch it...

The goblin wondered whether goblins really needed to do what their Adas had told them.

Legolas decided that it would probably be best if they did.

"Gaarrh!"

The goblin dropped to the ground, his head darting this way and that, his beady eyes surveying the Haradin landscape. Directly ahead, a huge pile of treasure lay glittering in the mouth of a cave.

Legolas crawled forwards on his hands and knees, his little behind high in the air.

There was a long, thin sapphire, blue as the sky; a big round emerald, green as the Forest; and a wooden box, no doubt filled to the brim with coins of silver and gold...

Legolas could not help noticing that the wrapping on the blue parcel was loose, and—once he had seen it—it was hard not to stretch out his hand, and poke it with a finger.

The goblin caught a glimpse of gnarled wood, polished smooth—not a goblin sword, but a goblin club!

Legolas looked over his shoulder. The door was closed. No one could see him.

The goblin crawled closer.

But Legolas' Ada had said that he could only open *one* present.

The elfling chewed his lip. The wrapping had been tied with a golden cord, and the bow had slipped, allowing the edges of the fabric to fall apart. And Legolas was good at tying bows, so if he unwrapped the goblin club, he could wrap it up again, properly.

That would not be naughty. He pulled the end of the cord.

"Gurrrr!"

The goblin seized the weapon and jumped to his feet, waving it in the air. "Gah! Gaarrh!"

The stone Lady looked a bit frightened.

"I—want—your—gold!" The goblin threw himself at the wooden chest.

The box lid flew open.

"Oh!" squeaked Legolas.

Inside, the box was divided into compartments, each lined with dark red silk, and sitting in each of the holes was a little statue—six shiny black and six frosty white.

Curious, Legolas lifted out one of the black pieces. It was cold, and very heavy and, when he looked at it closely, he smiled, for it was a lion—which he recognised from a picture in one of his Ada's books—sitting on its haunches, its curly head held high, its broad, velvety muzzle wrinkled in a fierce snarl.

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Legolas set the lion on the table and pulled out a white piece. This one was a deer, tall and slender, hiding behind a tree stump.

The goblin grabbed both animals.

"I am going to EAT you," he threatened, in a deep, dark voice, making the lion loom over the deer.

"No, no," he piped, making the deer back away.

"Raaaaa," he roared, making the lion pounce.

"Aagh," he squealed, making the deer struggle, "aaaagh!"

But, safe in Legolas' little hand, the deer suddenly broke free and, leaping high, it alighted on the Forest green brocade, and slipped into hiding between its folds.

"YES," cried the goblin, spotting a flash of curved metal beneath the green fabric. "A goblin helmet!"

...

Legolas stared thoughtfully at the last of his presents.

"Go on," said the goblin. "We are already in trouble, so opening that one will not make any difference."

"No," said the elfling, firmly. He slid his hand under the green fabric and pulled out the deer.

"What are you doing?" asked the goblin.

"I am putting them back," said Legolas, fitting the piece into its little compartment. He picked up the lion. "And then I am going to wrap everything up again."

"Just try the helmet."

"No." Legolas closed the box lid, and fastened the catch.

"Only for a moment. Look." The goblin pulled aside the wrapping. The helmet was a funny shape—wide and shallow, with a tall crest that ended in three clawed feet—but it was the right size.

Legolas looked down at the silver drinking cup. "Well..." he said.

"Go on."

"I have to learn my tengwar."

"Learning tengwar is boring," said the goblin.

"I know."

"Being a goblin is fun."

"I know," Legolas admitted. "But Ada said—"

"Ada said! Ada said!" cried the goblin. "Ada said that he would take you out into the Forest! Ada said that you would spend the night under the stars. Ada said that you

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would watch the sun rise over Erebor on your conception day—”

“But a messenger came—”

“If you put that helmet on,” said the goblin, “we can go out.”

“By ourselves?”

“Why not? You want to go.”

“Yes,” said Legolas. “But... But I want to go with Ada.”

“You are scared!”

“I am NOT!”

“Then why not put the helmet on, and go?”

“Because,” said Legolas, his little face screwed up in misery, “because... *Ohhhh!*” He grasped the green fabric in frustration.

...

Half an hour later

“Oh! Your Majesty.” Mistress Nerdanel, almost colliding with the Elvenking as she hurried towards his study, dropped into a low curtsy.

King Thranduil frowned. “Why are you out here?” he demanded.

“I received your message only moments ago, sire. I... I am sorry, I—”

“Are you saying that Legolas has been on his own all this time?”

“He has, sire.”

The Elvenking sighed. “Well—he is a responsible boy. Yes”—he dismissed the elleth with a wave of his hand—“you may go, Nerdanel.”

“Thank you, your Majesty.” She curtsied again.

King Thranduil opened his study door—

Legolas, looking like a little blond beetle in his stiff leather cuirass, glanced up from his Primer and, greeting his father with a radiant smile, said excitedly, “I know them, Ada! I know *all* of them!”

“Do you,” replied Thranduil, quickly scanning the room for any signs of the trouble—vague, but unmistakable—that his parental sixth sense was detecting.

“Yes,” said the elfling. “I have *learnt* them!”

Thranduil eyed the pile of presents beneath the table. Nothing seemed amiss—unless the pile was just a little too tidy. *The boy, he thought, has probably been poking at them.* He sat down beside his son. “Show me what you know.”

Legolas took a deep breath and, pointing to each character in turn, recited, “*Tinco,*

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palma, calma, quesse; ando, umbar, anga, ungwe; sùle, formen, harma, hwesta; anto, ampa, anca, unque; númen, malta, noldo, nwalme; óre, vala, anna, vilya; rómen, arda, lambe, alda."

"Good," said the Elvenking. "Now, give the book to me—thank you." He pointed to one of the characters at random. "What is this?"

"*Nwalme*," said Legolas.

"And this?"

"*Hwesta*."

"And this one?"

"*Palma*."

"Very good..." Thranduil closed the Primer, impressed with his son's progress. "I am pleased, Lasdithen."

The elfling smiled proudly. "Have you finished talking to the messenger, Ada?"

"I have," said the King, setting the book on the table.

"So..." The elfling hesitated; then he said, "Well... Can we... I mean... Can we go for a ride tomorrow? Can we go to the black caves?"

"The black caves? The black caves are dangerous, Lasdithen," said the Elvenking, "full of spiders, and *gaurhoth*, and goodness knows what else. Why would you want to go to the black caves, *ion nín*?"

"To kill *goblins*," said Legolas, vehemently.

THE END

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Extra scene: The first time

Legolas turned the key, lifted the latch, and pushed the door open.

"Good evening, your Highness. Come in."

The young elf hesitated for a long moment, then—unconsciously clearing his throat—he stepped inside, dropped the latch and re-locked the door.

He turned towards the centre of the room.

Beruthiël's chambers—situated, as he was trying hard to forget, next to his father's bedchamber—were richly furnished, hung with figured silks, carpeted with darkly patterned rugs, and scented with the heady spices of Far Harad...

But if the perfume, simmering in a small bowl set over a candle, was—as he suspected—a love potion, he had no need of it tonight—not since the moment his tutor had bade him a happy Conception Day and given him the key to the courtesan's door—

"Are you *ever* going to look at me?" Her words were filled with laughter.

Legolas raised his eyes.

"Am I really so frightening?"

"No—" His voice cracked; he took a breath. "No," he repeated, firmly.

"Good." She smiled. "Then come closer."

When he did not move, she beckoned, coquettishly. "Come on!"

She was beautiful—small for an elleth and as slender as a young girl (though he knew that she was older than his father), with a flawless, heart-shaped face, huge grey eyes and a mane of rippling golden hair—dressed in a filmy silk shift that lifted her bosom high.

Legolas shuffled forward.

"Happy Conception Day, your Highness." Her voice was like warm honey.

"Thank you."

"That colour suits you."

Legolas glanced down at the long, full skirts of his first formal robe, of silver-green brocade, given to him by his father to wear at his Coming of Age ceremony. "Thank you."

Beruthiël smiled. "It would be wicked of us to spoil it. Take it off."

"I—er—"

"Go on. Untie the sash."

"Yes... Yes, of course." He pulled the embroidered silk from around his waist and draped it over the back of a chair.

"Now the robe," said the elleth.

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Biting his lip, Legolas unhooked each delicate mithril clasp in turn, then—after another moment's hesitation—pulled the garment open, shrugged it off, and stood, head bowed, wearing only his sleeveless undershirt, his fine silk leggings and his doeskin boots.

"Oh my," said Beruthiël, softly.

Legolas raised his eyes.

She was staring at his groin with undisguised admiration, and he realised that, though confined within the fabric, he must be plainly visible to her. Embarrassed, he dropped his gaze—only to find himself transfixed by her cleavage.

"Come here."

He moved a little closer.

She reached for his waistband, and Legolas was forced to close his eyes to block out the teasing bounce of her breasts as she loosened his laces.

His *ceber* broke free.

"There," she said, curling her hand around him, "does that not feel better?" She trailed her fingers upwards and, using her thumb, gently explored the broad length of his shaft. Then she leaned forward, and kissed his very tip.

Swallowing hard, Legolas nodded.

She smiled up at him mischievously. "Take off your undershirt—good—and now your boots..."

She leaned back to give him space. "Now, what shall we do with you?"

She had moistened her hands with some oily substance and she was stroking his hard flesh with a shameless motion that almost pulled his legs out from under him. "You are beautiful, your Highness—like a mighty mallorn tree..."

Legolas, hands on hips, gritted his teeth.

The elleth laughed. "A fine young tree with plenty of sap in him—but not, I think, quite ready for this." She released him so suddenly that, having braced himself against her vigorous caresses, he almost lost his balance. "Let us be rid of your leggings." She grasped the ends of his laces and pulled until the knots unravelled. "There—slip them off—and put them with the rest—that is right..."

He turned back to her, completely naked.

Beruthiël stroked his straining flesh. "Is this your first time, your Highness?"

He nodded.

"Then shall we get down to it without further ado?"

"Yes. I mean. *Please...*"

"Take me to the bench, over there."

Legolas frowned. "Not the bed?"

"No, for your first time the bench will be better—trust me."

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He scooped her into his arms, and carried her to the strange contraption—a high stool with four sturdy legs and a long, padded seat—and gently set her down.

“Do you want to take me from the front—face to face, like this—or,” —she turned over—“ from behind, on all fours, like this?”

Legolas blushed. His mouth was dry. “Which do *you* like better?”

“Oh, *meleth!*” Turning back to him, Beruthiël caressed his cheek. “I doubt that it will last long enough to matter to me, your High—”

She caught the flash of disappointment in his eyes and relented. “Face to face,” she said, “so that I can see your lovely smile. Come—put your feet beside mine—now take hold of my knees and lift my legs onto your hips—good. Now I am going to take you in my hand”—she smiled, reassuringly—“and just—*there,*” she said, “hold my thighs and drive yourself home—*ah*—yes! That is right! That feels—oh, that feels *good...*”

“You are so *warm!*” Legolas whispered, hunching over her and, panting hard, he instinctively drew himself almost fully out, and thrust again. “*Oh!*” His face was transformed with joy.

Beruthiël suddenly grasped his shoulders and held him still. “You do understand, your Highness, the difference between coming for pure pleasure and spilling your seed in earnest?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then stand up.” She pushed his shoulders. “Arch your back a little—does that feel good? Now, take me.” She sank back on the bench, letting her head loll over the edge of the seat.

“But...” Legolas frowned. “What must I do, my Lady?—I mean, to satisfy you.”

Beruthiël smiled. “Do not worry about *me*, your Highness. Tonight is all about you. It will be my *honour* to satisfy *you*. ”

The bench was sprung so that the seat rocked crazily with his every thrust. He was lasting well—and showing a gentleness and sensitivity she had not expected in one so inexperienced. Beruthiël waited until he had settled into a rhythm he seemed to like, then she raised her hips and used her inner muscles to pleasure him to the utmost.

Valar, it had been such a long time since she had felt anything so good! The Prince was obviously gifted—

“*Come, your Highness,*” she cried, suddenly, “*come now, Legolas. Come for me!*”

And immediately she felt his body jerk, and his warm, wet seed splash deep inside her.

...

He was ready again in moments.

Beruthiël took his face in her hands. “You must understand that, under normal circumstances, I would require another payment now,”—he began to withdraw—“no—not tonight!”

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She smiled. "Tonight you may have me as many times as you wish—it is my gift for your Coming of Age."

"Thank you,"—he bowed his head, shyly—"thank you, my Lady." Then he turned his head and, taken by surprise, Beruthiël had no time to remove her hand before he pressed his lips to her palm.

"That is something else I would not normally permit," she said, softly.

He frowned.

"Kissing." She lay back on the rocking bench. "But, tonight, as I have said, belongs to you so, tonight, you may do exactly as you wish, your Highness."

...

Gazing up at his beautiful face, she watched him experiment with different lengths and depths and speeds of stroke, thrusting and grinding and pounding hard (though always considerably) and—frequently at first—*coming* with a cry of almost pained surprise.

It must be his size, she thought, and the vigour of his youth, that—oh! OHHH! She gripped the edges of the seat and silently rode out another orgasm.

It was entirely unprofessional, so he must never know what he was doing to her.

No one must ever know.

It must remain her own guilty secret.

She smiled. But, Valar willing, he would become one of her regular patrons.

And then it would be a *wonderful* guilty secret.

Postscript

"Your father says that Beruthiël will make a full recovery," said Eowyn. "And, with her face restored, she will be able to mix with people again, and live normally."

"That is good."

"Legolas..." Eowyn came up on one elbow and, leaning over him, gazed down, thoughtfully.

"Why does that expression fill me with foreboding, melmenya? What have you done—you have *not* invited her to come and live with us?"

"No—but that is a very good idea—why not?"

"Because she is a courtesan. And we have no Court."

"Is that the only reason?"

When he did not reply, she shook him, lightly. "Legolas? You told me that you made love to her only once, because she wanted more money. But when I spoke to her I got the impression that you had spent the entire night with her—and even visited her again..."

Legolas sighed, turning away slightly.

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"It is true! You *lied* to me."

"I did not want to upset you, melmenya—"

"You did not mind telling me—amongst other things—that you slept with Arwen, but you thought that this would upset me? I would always rather hear the truth."

"Are you sure?"

"From you, yes."

"Very well." Legolas turned to face her. "Beruthiël, out of the kindness of her heart, allowed a callow elfling to stay with her the entire night. She let me learn from her. There was nothing more to it than that."

Eowyn burst out laughing.

"What is so funny? It was kind of her."

"Oh yes." She laughed heartily, shaking her head. "It was selfless! You foolish elf!"

"What have I done now?"

"Poor Beruthiël gritted her teeth and let the fairest, the most,"—she raised her eyebrows—"gifted, most vigorous young elf in all of Mirkwood—its *Prince!*—pleasure her for an entire night. It must have been torture!" She lay back on her pillows. "She should have paid *you*, Legolas."

"Nonsense, melmenya."

"Well that," said Eowyn, almost crossly, "is where you are wrong. And *I* know, because I have spoken to her."

"And she told you that *she* should have paid *me*?"

"Not in so many words. But a woman can tell these things."

"So you keep saying." Legolas rolled onto his side, thumped his pillow a few times and settled down with his back to her.

There was a long silence. Then Eowyn said, "You could make a fortune out of *me*."