

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...



Author: Ningloreth

Title: **To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...**

Story Number: 2

Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: After three months together, Legolas and Eowyn travel to Dol Amroth to take part in Prince Elfwine's Naming Ceremony. But someone is kidnapping elves—will Legolas be the next victim? Or will Eowyn lose him to the sea?

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.**

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Chapter 1: The invitation

"Stance?" asked Legolas.

"Feet comfortable, shoulder-width apart, body upright," said Eowyn.

"Good. Now nock your arrow—where are your drawing fingers?"

"At ninety degrees to the arrow, lightly touching the nock."

"Good. Raise your bow into the shooting position. Relax the fingers of your bow hand—*relax* them—how do you draw?"

"With your elbow, feeling your shoulder blade move towards your spine."

"Good," said Legolas. "Draw to your anchor, keeping your bow shoulder low and your drawing elbow level with your drawing hand."

Her stance is perfect, he thought. He had had a bow of the right size and weight made for her by one of his father's best bow makers. It lacked the power of a Galadhrim bow like his own, but was just right for an inexperienced archer. *And*, he thought, admiring the dark polished wood, *it is beautiful. Like her.*

"Do you feel bone-to-bone contact between your index finger and your cheek?" he asked.

"Yes," said Eowyn.

"Close your mouth!" he laughed. "Now, keep your eye focussed on the target—picture your arrow hitting it. The arrow should almost loose *itself* when it is ready. But do not relax until it hits the target!"

Eowyn held for a few moments longer, then loosed the arrow. It hit the target with a satisfying thud, piercing it cleanly, a fraction to the right of the centre.

Her technique is already good, thought Legolas. *And her aim is true.* "Again!"

Eowyn took another arrow from her quiver, nocked it, raised her bow, drew, and loosed. Her second arrow pierced the target less than half an inch to the left of the first.

"Melmenya!" cried Legolas and, forgetting the professional distance he tried to maintain when teaching her, he lifted her off her feet and whirled her round and round.

And then—because her laughter was intoxicating and her body was warm and soft under his hands—he lowered her to the ground and, kissing her mouth and neck, he unlaced her bodice. Eowyn normally tried—unsuccessfully—to avoid making love in places where they might be seen, but today he could feel her little hands working too, pulling at his lacings. And moments later he was inside her.

"Oh! Oh, my—*oh!*—my bow," she gasped.

"Shhhhhh, melmenya," he whispered, "just this once, I will—*ah*—I will let you leave it lying on the ground."

...

He carried her—and her bow—all the way from the practice field to the foot of the staircase that curled its way up the trunk of one of the mighty carantaur trees and into the very heart of the city of Eryn Carantaur. But there, Eowyn's protests became so colourful that he was forced

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to set her down and allow her to climb the stairs by herself.

Halfway up the staircase they were met by Legolas' secretary, hurrying down to find them. "A messenger has arrived from Edoras, my lord, my lady," he said.

"Eomer is a father!" cried Eowyn, clapping her hands together.

"And you have a nephew, or a niece, melmenya."

"We have a nephew or a niece," said Eowyn, and then she had to dodge his hands as he tried to lift her off her feet again.

There is nothing worse, she thought, than an affectionate elf in high spirits.

But she certainly did not mean it.

...

Eofred, the messenger from Rohan, was waiting uncomfortably in Legolas' private study.

He had visited Eryn Carantaur before, but only as an insignificant part of Eomer King's retinue—and not since Princess Eowyn had been bewitched into running away from her husband and living as the Elf King's paramour.

And she was such a nice, respectable lady before, he thought. But now, they say, she has relations with him in full view of his courtiers—gods, will I be expected to watch them, too?

He touched the folded parchment in the inside pocket of his greatcoat. Perhaps, if he could think of a good enough excuse, he could give them the letter and leave immediately. But, even as the thought occurred to him, he could hear their voices approaching the study door.

Eofred took a deep breath and prepared himself for the worst.

He was almost disappointed by what he saw. The Elf King was dressed respectably in leggings, boots and a suede jerkin, the lady in a simple forest green gown with a close-fitting bodice of green suede, and they had clearly been practising archery because they were both wearing leather bracers around their wrists.

"Good afternoon, Master Eofred," said the lady. "You have some good news, I hope?"

"Yes, indeed, my lady," Eofred replied and, taken aback by her use of his name, he clumsily withdrew Eomer King's letter from his pocket.

"Thank you," she said, graciously, and, taking the letter, she broke open the seal and read it excitedly. "A boy!" she cried. "They have called him Elfwine, and they want me to stand as one of his sponsors at his Naming Ceremony—"

"That is wonderful, *meleth nín*."

"—and Gimli is to be another, so we will be seeing him again sooner than we thought!" She smiled at Legolas. "The ceremony is to take place on the twenty-fifth day of *Hithui*—that is only one month's time—in—oh, in Dol Amroth..." Her voice trailed away and Eofred saw her look anxiously at Legolas.

The Elf King shook his head very slightly, and Eofred knew the meaning of the look he gave her: *We will talk later*.

Then he said, "Will you stay the night, Master Eofred? I believe there is some excellent game on the menu and, afterwards, we will be joined by members of my Inner Council, and their

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families, for a pleasant evening's entertainment."

An evening's entertainment? thought Eofred. *Oh gods, I am expected to watch!* But how could he possibly refuse such a gracious invitation? And from a king? "T-thank you my lord," he stammered.

"Good," said Legolas. "I will have my secretary show you to a guest chamber and my lady and I will collect you at seven thirty and take you down to dinner."

...

Eowyn waited until the secretary had ushered Eofred from the room, then turned to Legolas. "I can go to Dol Amroth alone," she said. "I would miss you terribly, but I would not mind being there alone."

Legolas gave her one of his most serene—*And, at this moment, she thought, most exasperating*—smiles, and said, "Let us bathe, melmenya. You were exerting yourself on the practice field this afternoon, especially when you were learning to extend your draw time. You need to relax your shoulder and back muscles."

"Legolas—"

"We will talk in the bath, *meleth nín*."

He was uncharacteristically distant while they were undressing—not touching her at all—and by the time he turned to help her climb into the water, Eowyn, who was used to being seduced in the bathing room, was beginning to panic.

He waited until she was sitting down in the warm, scented water, then he climbed in too, and sat beside her, still not touching her.

Eowyn waited.

And waited.

Then panic got the better of her.

She took his hand. *I simply will not let go of him*, she thought. *If I refuse to let go of his hand, what can he do?* And she started talking: "I have a confession to make my love: a while ago, I overheard something. And perhaps I should have asked you about it at the time, but—well, I thought I would wait until you were ready to tell me yourself. Because I *do* trust you, Legolas —"

"Oh Valar," whispered Legolas, "what did you hear?"

"—I heard you threatening Imrahil," she said. "You said that if he tried to turn me against you, you would kill him. How could he turn me against you, Legolas? He could not."

"Oh, Eowyn *nín*," Legolas whispered.

Eowyn looked up at him sharply. She had once accused him of calling her 'Eowyn *nín*' only when he was feeling guilty. "Legolas?"

He freed his hand, grabbed her waist and pulled her close, crushing her hard against him, and he buried his face in her shoulder. His body was shaking, and it took Eowyn a moment to realise that he was sobbing.

"My love," she whispered, "tell me what is wrong."

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"You will be disgusted—"

"Never." She began to stroke his hair, gently. "Tell me."

She waited patiently and, eventually, Legolas began to talk, haltingly. "When you and Faramir announced that you were to marry—and you were beyond my reach, *melmenya*—and the ache of sea-longing was new to me and too much to bear—I could not rest—and I would spend my nights roaming around Minas Tirith and the encampment outside."

Eowyn kept stroking his hair.

"I had met Imrahil shortly after you were injured, *melmenya*, and had recognised the elven blood in his veins. And although Gimli is the dearest friend an elf could wish for, I missed the company of my own kind. And, one night, I found myself entering Imrahil's tent..." His voice faltered.

Eowyn kissed the top of his head. "What happened?"

For a long while he did not answer and Eowyn continued to stroke his hair, soothingly. Then he said, "It began as two comrades-at-arms discussing past campaigns. He talked about—well, that is not important, *meleth nín*. I talked about Helm's Deep. And about you—oh, I did not tell him of my feelings for you. No one knew of those, save Gimli, who always seems to know more about me than I know about myself—"

Eowyn smiled into his hair.

"—though Gimli said nothing. And it was such a relief to talk to someone—I could not talk to Aragorn, not about you, nor about anything else close to my heart, for his concerns were so much greater than mine—so I told Imrahil about the sea longing, and my fears for my father and for Mirkwood, and my plans for Eryn Carantaur—though the colony was nothing but an idea then—and about you...

"And, gradually, I became more comfortable. I relaxed and I fell into reverie. And I must have been truly exhausted, for I passed from reverie into healing sleep, and I began to dream, like a mortal."

...

"Legolas?" she whispered, "Legolas..." and he awoke to find her poised over him, naked, her hair unbound and falling in golden waves over his shoulders and his chest.

And she leaned forward, pressing her body closer, and licked his ear, whispering his name, again and again, "Legolas, Legolas..." And the caress of her breath against his neck made his body ache with need. And, desperately, he pressed himself into her warmth...

...

"When I awoke, Imrahil was—touching me—comforting me, and although my heart and my spirit tried to stop him, *melmenya*, my body—he seemed to know what my body liked—and I lost control..." He sobbed. "I lied to you, Eowyn."

"When, my love?" asked Eowyn, tears running down her face.

"I said I had lain with no one since I met you, *meleth nín*; I am sorry."

"Shhhhhh. *Shhhhhh*, my love. You did not lie with him. He touched you and your body responded." She cradled him in her arms, rocking him, gently.

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"Melmenya?" He lifted his head from her shoulder and looked into her eyes. "Have you not suffered enough pain, having a husband who betrayed you with another man—"

"Legolas!" She pressed her fingers to his lips. "You must not torture yourself on *my* account! What happened between Faramir and me—and Berengar—was an entirely different matter. Faramir fell in love; it is part of his nature to prefer a man..." She sighed at the memory of the pain she had felt then. "*You* merely sought company and Imrahil misunderstood—all that is important to *me* is how you feel. How you feel in your heart and in your spirit."

Legolas hesitated. It was still a painful memory. "At the time I felt unclean," he said. "And I felt guilty. I felt that I was responsible for my own dishonour, because I had allowed him to get too close. But mostly I felt betrayed. I had trusted him as I would trust Aragorn, as I would trust Gimli. I had enjoyed talking to him. I had thought we were friends. But he must have thought that I wanted more because, afterwards, he expected me to—to do the same for him. But I would not. I *could* not..."

His voice faded away and he was silent for a few moments. Then he added, very softly, "It seemed to me that the whole world was different from what I had always thought it. And I began to doubt myself, and to doubt others."

Eowyn nodded. She had heard a woman who had been taken by force, by someone she knew well, describe very similar feelings. But she did not think that observation would comfort Legolas.

"How did your spirit recover, my love?"

"Time passed," said Legolas. "And I threw myself into building Eryn Carantaur. But I did not truly begin to heal until that evening at Caras Arnen, when I found you sitting in your garden, in the cold and dark. I had always loved you and, when I saw your pain... My heart, which had been frozen for so long, was shattered by your pain. And, after that, miraculously, both my heart and my spirit began to heal."

"I love you Legolas," said Eowyn. "I fell in love with you at that very same moment—when you put your arms around me, and sang to me, I felt happy for the first time in—well, perhaps for the first time in my life. We are meant to be together, Legolas, though mortal and immortal."

"Will you let me make love to you, melmenya?" he asked.

"Of course, my love; how can you ask?" she whispered. And she kissed him, tenderly.

...

Afterwards, lying side by side on the bathing room floor, they made several decisions.

First, Legolas would go with Eowyn to Dol Amroth.

Secondly, he would face Prince Imrahil. "I will talk to him, *meleth nín*. I will tell him how I felt at the time and how I feel now. I will apologise for my recent behaviour towards him, but I will make it clear that he did me a great wrong."

Thirdly, Legolas would face the sea. "I have been anxious for some time, melmenya, to confront my fear of it. *You* will be with me, and I have not forgotten your promise to me."

He kissed her hand, and Eowyn, too, remembered the promise she had given him the first time she had seen him truly in the grip of sea longing: "*I will not let you leave, Legolas! If the sea should seduce you, or force you against your will, I will sail after you and I will pull you back—even if you reach Valinor I will find my way there and bring you back. And if the gods turn me*"

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away from the undying lands, I will wait out to sea, calling to you, until your senses return and you swim back to me. I will not abandon you, Legolas. Not while there is breath still left in my body!"

...

Together, they wrote to Eomer, expressing their joy at the birth of his son, sending their best wishes to both mother and child, and accepting his invitation to the Naming Ceremony—they would send the letter to Edoras with Eofred on the morrow.

Then, as a courtesy, they also wrote to Imrahil, thanking him in advance for his hospitality.

...

The following morning, as Eofred set out for Edoras, a messenger arrived from Minas Tirith with a personal letter from Aragorn. After seeing that the messenger was well taken care of, Legolas opened the letter and began reading it aloud to Eowyn.

My friends,

How is 'married' life treating you, Legolas? Any regrets yet?

Legolas smiled at Eowyn and shook his head, then continued reading. There were various anecdotes and small items of news, but the main point of the letter came near the end:

I have a favour to ask of you, Legolas.

Arwen assures me that all is well with her and the unborn child, but I am concerned that the royal healer, though very skilled, has no experience of elves. Would your healer, Master Dínendal, be willing to travel to Dol Amroth with you to examine Arwen and to share his knowledge with her healer? He strikes me as a person who would welcome an adventure and the opportunity to learn from mannish healers.

I would be very grateful if you would arrange this for me, mellon nín.

"I am sure that Aragorn is right—Master Dínendal would be only too happy to come with us," said Legolas. "But I have some concerns about taking any elf who is not already hearing the sea's call so close to the sea. I will speak to him after the Council meeting this morning."

...

Ten days later, Eofred had caught up with Eomer King's cavalcade as it crossed Anorien on its way from Edoras to Dol Amroth, and was describing to his wife, Prince Elfwine's nurse, the magical evening he had spent in Eryn Carantaur.

"There is no formality there, my dear," he said. "The Elf King and his lady escorted me to the banqueting hall themselves."

"What were they wearing?" asked his wife.

"Oh, I cannot describe clothes, my dear!"

"Yes, you can. Imagine you are describing—well, describing a horse; what colours were they wearing?"

Eofred closed his eyes and tried to picture the couple. At the time, he had been unsure which of them was the more beautiful, though, of course, the lady had been more to his taste. "Lord Legolas' tunic and leggings were a very pale grey silk—like those pearls your father included in

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your dowry—and they were embroidered with a pattern of leaves in a darker grey. His boots were also dark grey and—shaped."

"Shaped?"

"Like someone had taken leather leaves and wrapped them round his legs."

"How strange! It must be an elvish fashion," said his wife; he nodded. "What about Lady Eowyn?"

Eofred was warming to the task. "Lady Eowyn was wearing an elven gown—soft and flowing—of deep blue velvet with autumn leaves—you know the colour leaves turn when they fall from the trees and dry out—part way between brown and pink? They were that colour. They were scattered all over it, as if they were blowing in a breeze. They looked almost real. The elves decorate everything with leaves," he added, "clothes, curtains, bedclothes, furniture. Or they carve it to look like flowing water. They love nature."

"Did Lady Eowyn seem happy?"

"Oh, yes—and *he* worships her. You can see it."

"Well—good. Though I did not hold with her leaving her husband, she is a good lady at heart, and I am glad she is happy. What is the city like?"

Eofred described the elegant wooden buildings nestling in the branches of the massive trees, the walkways and bridges connecting the flets, and the staircases spiralling down the tree trunks. "It is beautiful," he said.

"No wonder the lady is happy there."

"We had to climb down one of the trees to get to the Banqueting Hall—it is on the ground, in a clearing beneath the main city. The food was excellent—and the wine even better!—and I ate my fill of roast venison, though I noticed that many of the elves, including Lord Legolas and his lady, preferred to eat vegetables and fruit."

"Why was that?"

"It seems that some elves think it is wrong to kill an animal for food when there is fruit and vegetables available."

"Imagine that!" said his wife.

"I was sitting between Lady Eowyn and a very distinguished elf, called Lord Fingolfin. He asked me lots of questions about the Riders of the Mark. To the elves, my dear, we men seem strange—*fascinating!*"

His wife laughed.

"Then, after the meal, we all went back to Lord Legolas' chambers—the lord and his lady, Lord Fingolfin, Lord Caranthir and his wife, and me. And we drank more wine and ate sweetmeats and talked and had a merry time of it." The elves had been warm and open, and had made him feel like an honoured guest. It had been one of the best nights of his life.

He would hear no scurrilous talk of the Elf King and his lady in future.

"Lord Legolas sang—in the common tongue—in my honour," said Eofred.

"They say an elf will sooner sing than talk," said his wife. "What was his voice like?"

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"It was pure gold," said Eofred, smiling. "Pure gold."

...

Legolas smiled as he watched Eowyn and Haldir, leaning over his desk, pouring over Eowyn's orc map; at times like this, he was so proud of her!

Since the fall of Sauron, small bands of orcs had been roaming Middle-earth, attacking isolated settlements. When Eowyn had first heard of it—from the Guards of North Ithilien—she had realised that the orcs were following a pattern, and that—by tracking where they had *been*—it should be possible to predict where they were going. So, for the best part of two years, she had been seeking out information from border guards and messengers and transcribing it onto a large map of North and South Ithilien.

Her patient tracking had shown that, with no leader to direct them, the orcs normally behaved like packs of wild dogs—individual bands moved according to the season, staying within their own territories and preying on livestock and the odd hapless traveller but, occasionally, they would go marauding, sometimes joining up with other bands, and then their attacks would become more ambitious, and far more dangerous.

The trick was to spot the change of behaviour as soon as it started.

The Guards of North Ithilien had never taken Eowyn's orc map seriously, but both Legolas and Haldir had immediately seen its value and had encouraged her to maintain it. Their faith had been rewarded two weeks previously when, based on Eowyn's predictions, Haldir had quickly fortified one of the colony's more vulnerable settlements and successfully repelled an orc raid.

What was concerning Eowyn now was a large band of orcs that had spent the last two weeks slowly meandering along the Anduin towards Pelargir.

"They *look* like marauders, but they are taking their time," she said, "so if we leave tomorrow we should cross the Anduin safely without seeing them—"

"Yes," agreed Haldir, "but it would still be wise to have an additional escort—perhaps two extra guards."

"Do you have anyone suitable?" asked Legolas. "I do not want to expose anyone who is vulnerable to the call of the sea."

"I have several elves from Lorien and Imladris, all experienced soldiers," said Haldir.

"Explain the danger to them and ask for volunteers," said Legolas. "I will not use anyone who is not fully aware of the danger and willing to take the risk."

Haldir agreed.

"Is Master Dínendal happy to take the risk?" asked Eowyn.

"Yes," said Legolas. "He is descended from the Noldor. And, even if he were not, I get the impression that he would be willing to risk the fires of Mount Doom for the chance to travel to Dol Amroth and converse with all the healers he will meet there." He smiled, sadly.

"You cannot protect everyone, my love," said Eowyn.

...

The following day, six elves and one woman set off from Eryn Carantaur on the long journey to Dol Amroth. Haldir was in the vanguard with one of his most experienced warriors. Then came

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Legolas, Eowyn and the healer, Master Dínendal. Finally, at the rear, came the two volunteers from Imladris.

Let us hope they all return to the forest untainted by sea longing, thought Legolas, for even Eowyn would have a hard task dragging all six of us back from Valinor.

And, despite himself, Legolas laughed out loud.

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Chapter 2: Beauty and the beast

The young woman pushed her way through the crowd that was milling about in the market place, then turned right into Broad Street and hurried past the brightly painted shops. Normally, she might have stopped to admire the wares on display—the elven glassware, the tooled leatherwork from Rohan, and the fine fabrics imported from Near and Far Harad—but today she had no time for window-shopping.

Her friend had told her to go to the far end of Broad Street, where it joined Silk Mill Lane. "It is a strange, dark place, Senta," she had said. "Sometimes, you can walk right past it without even noticing it. But if you get as far as Broad Gate, you know you have missed it."

She was right, thought Senta.

She turned her back to Broad Gate, and scanned the houses lining both sides of the street, but could see no sign of an apothecary's shop. On her left, though, she could see the entrance to Silk Mill Lane, and she walked slowly towards it, looking carefully at each house and down the alleys between.

Nothing.

What am I going to do? she thought. *My lady will throw me out and my parents will not take me back. I wish I had died with him.*

As she started back towards the market place, her eyes filling with tears, something fluttered beside her, and she turned to take a better look.

It was a small, yellow bird in a wire cage, hanging over the door of one of the houses—

No, it was not a house. It had a window and a sign, like a shop, but the window was so grimy, and the sign of the Pestle and Mortar so faded, Senta had not noticed it before.

Poor little bird, she thought. Then, slowly, she walked to the shop door, opened it, and stepped inside.

The first thing she noticed was the smell—not unpleasant, exactly, but earthy, spicy, sharp and overpowering; the second thing she noticed was the shopkeeper.

He was standing behind the counter—tall and thin, with hair and eyes the colour of water—watching her, suspiciously.

He is a man who never sees the sunlight, Senta thought. *And he is dangerous; very dangerous.* She wondered for the hundredth time that day whether she was doing the right thing.

"Can I help you?" the apothecary asked. His voice was warm, rich and seductive, and completely at odds with his colourless eyes.

Senta licked her dry lips. *Just say it*, she thought. "I am told you sell herbs that will remove an unborn child," she said.

"Indeed."

"How much do they cost?"

"How much can you afford?"

Senta stared at him. "I—I—I have some savings..."

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"Very well. Four drams of the herbs—sufficient to do the trick for most women—will cost you ten gold pieces."

Senta nodded. "I will have four drams, then," she said.

The apothecary took a heavy key from around his neck, unlocked a small cupboard in the wall behind the counter, and took out a smoked glass jar. He removed the stopper and carefully weighed out a quantity of powdered herbs. Then he poured the powder onto a piece of waxed paper, twisted the ends together to form a pouch, and handed it to her.

"Stir the herbs into warm water and drink them before you go to bed. If you are lucky it will all be over by the morning. If not, stay in bed. Ten gold pieces."

Senta memorised the instructions, then took the gold pieces from her purse and paid.

"Good day," said the apothecary.

"Good day, sir," she replied, and turned to leave. But as she opened the door, the little bird fluttered in his cage.

"How much is the yellow bird?" she asked.

"Two gold pieces."

Senta sighed. It was a ridiculous price, and would use up the rest of her savings, but she was about to do a terrible thing and, perhaps, if she saved the little bird...

"Very well," she said, handing over two more gold pieces. "Will you lift him down for me?"

...

Eowyn was relieved to enter Dol Amroth.

They had been travelling for ten days, and she had been worried for most of the journey. They had ridden westwards through the forest of South Ithilien, and—finding no sign of the marauding orcs she had been tracking—had forded the Anduin at Pelargir, crossed the bleak, flat Anduin delta and, from then onwards, following the rugged coast road northwards through Belfalas, had never been more than a mile from the sea.

None of the others appeared troubled by the sea's call, but Eowyn knew that Legolas was hearing it—hearing it, seeing it, smelling it, feeling it—and *fighting* it. During the day he would ride beside her, talking incessantly about Mirkwood, about Gimli, about the hobbits, about everything—nothing—anything that would keep his mind off the sea.

At night he would lay out their bedroll as far from the water as possible and he would make love to her, desperately. *As if for the very last time*, she thought.

And, gods, if I thought I loved him before...

But Eowyn would sometimes catch him gazing at the sea, looking out beyond the water, beyond the horizon. And she would repeat to herself, over and over, as though chanting a spell, *I will not let you leave, Legolas! I will pull you back. I will!*

It was a comfort to reach the city at last, but her relief proved short-lived. As they rode through Broad Gate, Eowyn's eyes met those of a strange, colourless man, who was handing a caged bird to a pretty young woman in a yellow dress, and Eowyn shivered.

"Are you all right, *meleth nín*?" asked Legolas.

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"Someone just walked over my grave," said Eowyn.

"*Melmenya?*"

"I am sorry, my love," she said, "it is a saying we have in Rohan. It means that I have just had a feeling of foreboding."

And she thought, *Any mention of my mortality terrifies him.*

...

Herzog the apothecary handed the caged bird to the young woman who had just bought the abortifacient herbs, but he had already forgotten she existed.

He had never seen so many elves in one place before!

Strange that they should have a woman with them, he thought. And such a beauty. But he had heard that elves did not breed well. Perhaps a woman is more fecund than a she-elf, being mortal. She clearly belongs to the handsome young buck riding beside her...

Now he is a fine specimen—a very fine specimen—and all the others seem to defer to him.

He walked back inside the shop, closed and locked the door, and, seating himself at a desk behind the counter, took out two small pieces of parchment.

On the first piece he wrote a quick note:

*I have a job for you. Be at the back door of the shop tonight at eleven-thirty sharp.
Herzog*

He folded and sealed the note, and wrote on the front, *To Master Wolfram at the sign of the Pyewype*. He would get his neighbour's boy to deliver it.

The second letter took some time to compose, and Herzog tried out a few different phrases on a spare piece of parchment. Finally, he wrote:

The commodity you have been seeking has recently arrived in Dol Amroth. If you are still interested, the price is one thousand gold pieces live, or eight hundred gold pieces for the dried equivalent. More than one can be supplied if required. Please advise by return.

He folded and sealed the parchment, addressed it, then he went to the window and looked out.

Good, it is already getting dark.

He closed the shop for the rest of the day, left the city through Dinham Gate, and went down to the docks. He knew a sea captain who would be willing to deliver the letter, and bring back the reply, for a gold piece.

...

Prince Imrahil had just finished welcoming the King and Queen of Reunified Kingdom, and was already standing in the outer bailey of the castle, when the travellers from Eryn Carantaur rode through the gatehouse. He greeted Legolas, Eowyn and their companions formally.

"Welcome to Dol Amroth, my lord, my lady, gentlemen," he said, with a sweeping bow. "My home is your home; may your stay here be all that you wish."

Legolas dismounted, bowed, and replied with equal formality, "On behalf of my lady and my

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company, Prince Imrahil, I accept your gracious welcome..." Then he flinched slightly as Imrahil embraced him like an old friend, but he forced himself to smile.

Eowyn, who had also dismounted, came swiftly to Legolas' rescue. "It is good to see you again, Prince Imrahil," she said, and—as she held out her hand—she felt, rather than heard, Legolas' sigh of relief when Imrahil turned to her and raised her hand to his lips, murmuring, "Princess Eowyn."

"Have my brother and Lord Gimli arrived yet, my lord?" she asked.

"They have not, my lady, but my lookouts have spotted Eomer King's cavalcade on the coast road and I expect him within an hour—two at most.

"I have assigned you the apartment next to Aragorn's," he continued. "March Warden Haldir and Master Dínendal will stay with you; your guards will be lodged in the guardhouse. Now I will leave you in the capable hands of my Steward, who will show you to your apartment, and I look forward to seeing you all at dinner." His gesture indicated that the invitation included Haldir and Dínendal.

"Thank you, Prince Imrahil," said Legolas, rather stiffly.

The party left their horses with their three guards—who would take them to the stables and rub them down before finding their own lodgings in the guardhouse—and followed Imrahil's Steward through the inner gate and into the castle ward.

Legolas and Haldir insisted on carrying their own packs, but Eowyn and Dínendal—who had a number of books, vials of tinctures, jars of salves, and other equipment in his baggage—allowed Imrahil's servants to help them.

The Steward led the small convoy to a doorway in the north west corner of the ward, up a broad, spiral staircase, and into a spacious apartment. The accommodations consisted of a large chamber on the first floor, with two small bedchambers overlooking the ward, and a main bedchamber on the floor above, with its own bathing room and a balcony looking out to sea.

The Steward installed Legolas and Eowyn in the main bedchamber, leaving Haldir and Dínendal to organise themselves.

...

Legolas had removed his dusty jerkin and his tunic, and was sitting, bare-chested, at the dressing table, whilst Eowyn unbraided and combed out his hair.

It was a ritual that often turned into something even more intimate, and Legolas could see Eowyn's smile in the mirror.

"What are you thinking, melmenya?" he asked.

"I was thinking of the first time I saw you with your hair loose," she answered. "It was just before the Harvest Rite, and I thought..." She laughed.

"What, *meleth nín*?" he asked, smiling.

"I thought you looked like a wild creature who carried defenceless women off into the woods and ravished them," she said. "And I was right!"

"I would not call *you* a defenceless woman, melmenya."

"What would you call me, then?" she asked, passing the comb through the full length of his

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hair.

"I would call you..." He thought for a moment. "I would call you a *wanton* woman!" he laughed, grabbing her round the waist and pulling her onto his knees, kissing her neck and making her scream with laughter.

They wrestled for a few moments, then both suddenly stilled and Eowyn, who had ended up straddling Legolas, bent forward to kiss him tenderly...

She was stopped by a loud pounding on the door.

"If I had a bow for every time we have been interrupted by a knock at the door," said Legolas, "I could arm a company of—oh, about six elves, by now."

Eowyn laughed, swatted his arm, and released him. Legolas threw on his tunic and stalked over to the door, taking care to pull the skirts of the tunic straight at the front.

"Yes?" he asked, opening the door.

"Humph! I have interrupted something..."

"No, no, Gimli," said Legolas, clasping his friend's shoulders, "Eowyn was only combing my hair—and we are both very pleased to see you. Come in, *Elvellon*, and tell us all your news."

He took Gimli out onto the balcony while Eowyn arranged for some refreshments.

"Is it safe here?" asked Gimli.

"Safe?"

"So near the sea?"

"To tell you the truth, *Elvellon*, I do not know. But I want to test myself with it..." His voice trailed off for a moment as he gazed at the sparkling water. "Whilst she is with me, Gimli, I am sure I am safe."

Gimli nodded and squeezed his arm, then—catching sight of Eowyn, hovering uncertainly at the balcony door, carrying a third chair—he asked, "And how are you, my lady? How is this crazy elf treating you?"

He was rewarded with a ravishing smile.

"He is treating me very well, my lord," she said, bringing her chair and sitting down beside him. "And how are things in the Glittering Caves?"

A servant brought out some wine, and some dwarven ale, and the three friends spent the next few minutes happily discussing the work Gimli's people were doing at Aglarond and their plans for the future.

Then Gimli put down his goblet and got to the main point of his visit. "I wanted to warn you," he said to Legolas, "that Eomer is very—shall we say—*concerned* about his sister." Eowyn sighed loudly. "He is not sure of your intentions, lad. He is worried about the—the *differences* between you. And about the effect your sea longing will have on Eowyn. He is worried you will one day abandon her—and any children the pair of you might have—and set off for Valinor."

"He seems to worry a lot," said Eowyn, tartly.

"I thought it would be wise if you knew, lad, before you meet up with him, so you can be prepared with a bit of tact—"

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"Oh no, Gimli!" said Eowyn, angrily. "Thank you for warning us, but *no!* I shall deal with Eomer! Just let me get my hands on him! He was never a match for me!"

Legolas laughed and caught her hands. "This is not a job for your sword, *melmenya!*" He kissed her fingers. "We will both go and talk to Eomer."

He turned to Gimli. "Thank you for the warning, *Elvellon,*" he said. "You are wise beyond your years."

And he ducked, laughing, as Gimli tried to swat him for his insolence.

...

Legolas and Eowyn were admitted to Eomer's apartment by a tall, handsome young man whom Eowyn recognised as Eomer's secretary, Florestan.

Eomer was standing in the middle of the main chamber, giving orders to his Captain of the Guard, whilst a nervous tailor was trying to alter his magnificent embroidered surcoat. He greeted Legolas and Eowyn cordially, and asked them to take a seat for a moment. Legolas and Eowyn were pleased to recognise Captain Eofred, the messenger who had visited Eryn Carantaur, and both nodded to him discreetly.

Between talking to Eofred and to Florestan, Eomer kept pulling at his cuffs and complaining that his collar was too tight. "Why can I not wear my *gold* coat for the Naming Ceremony?" he called to his wife, Queen Lothiriel, who could be seen through the door of the bedchamber, settling their son in a cradle with the help of the baby's nurse.

"Because Elfwine is your heir," she called back.

Eomer shrugged his shoulders at Legolas and Eowyn, giving his tailor another problem, and the couple smiled back, sympathetically.

Eomer's secretary—who, Eowyn noticed, had set a pen and parchment on the sideboard so that he could make notes whenever necessary—moved discreetly back and forth between the two rooms, trying to impose some order. *He is a good man,* thought Eowyn. *Eomer is a natural leader but not a natural king and he is lucky to have Florestan.*

At length, Eomer turned apologetically to Legolas. "Let us go out onto the balcony," he said. "We need to talk."

When Eowyn went to follow them, he stopped her. "No," he said "this is a conversation between *men*; go and meet your nephew."

Eowyn gave him a look that would have felled most men at thirty paces, but twenty-seven years of being her brother had left Eomer immune.

Almost.

"Very well," he relented, "join us in ten minutes. But let me talk to Legolas alone until then."

With a sigh, Eowyn walked into the bedchamber and, looking at Lothiriel and Elfwine, discovered that she had no natural liking for babies at all.

...

Legolas and Eomer stood on the balcony, both facing the sea but neither seeing it.

"Well," said Eomer.

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"Well?" Legolas prompted, after a few more moments had passed in silence.

"Why?" asked Eomer.

"I am sorry, Eomer, I am not sure I understand."

"Yes, you do. Why my sister? She had settled with Faramir. With him, she had a chance to make a good life for herself—to be a wife, and a mother, and a grandmother—then you came along, serviced her in front of half of Middle-earth, and next thing you know, she was running off into the forest to live with you, like some woodland sprite.

"That is not how she was raised to behave.

"Oh, you are not the first to want her. There was Theodred. And Wormtongue. And most of my Guard, at one time or another. But you are an elf—a member of a superior race—so why are you trifling with a woman?"

Legolas sighed. He had had this conversation far too many times. He decided to keep his answer short: "I love her, Eomer," he said.

"No." Eomer shook his head. "No, life is not about love—not for people like Eowyn and me—life is about marriages of alliance, and duty, and heirs, and—if you are lucky—very, very, lucky—you may just get yourself a decent man or woman into the bargain. Eowyn had a good man in Faramir—"

"Yes she did; but she was not happy, Eomer—"

"Did you hear nothing of what I just said?"

Legolas sighed. "Eomer, sit down. Sit down, please. I will explain—*please*."

Eomer looked at Legolas for a long moment, as if trying to decide whether he could trust him. Finally, he sat down. "Well," he said, "explain, then."

"I fell in love with Eowyn the moment I first saw her," said Legolas, "trying to protect Theoden King, in the Golden Hall at Edoras." He smiled at the memory. "But I said nothing to her," he continued, "because she had fallen in love with Aragorn, even though he was promised to another.

"When she was injured at Pelennor Field—"

"You sat with her in the House of Healing."

"Yes," said Legolas. "And I should have said something to her then, but after Aragorn had healed her, and she seemed to have lost the will to live, it was Faramir who gave her back her hope. So I walked away...

"And it was not until they had been married for some time, when I was working in her garden, and saw her often, that I realised all was not well between them. She was so unhappy, Eomer—they both were. It broke my heart. And we—she and I—we were in love, though neither of us knew that our love was returned by the other. It was Faramir who saw it. It was Faramir who sent her to me at Eryn Carantaur, hoping that we would find each other—"

Eomer snorted in disbelief.

"It is true, Eomer. Faramir did not love her as a wife, but she is still a dear friend to him, and he wants her to be happy. So he sent her to the Harvest Ceremony alone. I had prayed to the Valar that they would give her to me—and they did."

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And because it was important to Eowyn that her brother accept their relationship, Legolas decided to tell Eomer something that was really not *his* to reveal, and that he would never tell to another person on Middle-earth; he asked the Valar to forgive him: "At the appointed moment in the Harvest Rite, Eomer, the Valar make their choice known to the celebrant, and he may accept it or reject it. When I looked at the *ellith*—twelve of them—who had been chosen to attend the ceremony as potential consorts, there was no sign from the Valar. But when I looked at Eowyn, Eomer, she was radiant!"

He smiled. "She was surrounded by the most beautiful aura of silver light; she was sparkling and shimmering. She was *radiant*! The Valar were showing me her spirit." He closed his eyes, shaking his head, part of him still unable to believe that his prayer had been answered. "And my own spirit sang with joy, for I loved her more than my life. I *do*..."

His voice trailed away.

Eomer watched him, more moved than he would ever admit, and was silent for several moments. Then he said, "What about the sea?"

"I will not leave whilst she lives, Eomer."

"Can you be sure? Can you control it?"

"Truthfully? I do not know. But I swear to you, I will never *willingly* leave Eowyn. What mortal can say more than that?"

And Eomer, reluctantly, was forced to agree.

...

It had been far longer than ten minutes when Eowyn finally joined them on the balcony, and Legolas noticed that she had a damp patch on her shoulder that extended down her back and that she smelled strongly of soap.

"Do not ask," she said, shuddering fastidiously. "Well, are you happy, Eomer?"

"We have talked," said her brother, "and I understand the position now."

"Good," said Eowyn. "Then let that be the end of it."

But Eomer had one more thing to say and he waited until Eowyn had stepped back into the sitting room before he caught Legolas by the arm. "If you *do* leave for Valinor while she is still alive, my friend," he said, "I will follow you there and I will drag you back."

Legolas nodded.

"And then," Eomer added, cheerfully, "I will cut your balls off." And he clapped the elf heartily on the back and followed his sister back into the sitting room.

Well, thought Legolas, they say there is safety in numbers. And if the sister does not succeed in bringing me back, the brother surely will...

...

"Legolas," said Eowyn, thoughtfully, as they climbed the stairs back to their own bedchamber, "do you want children?"

"Do *you*, *melmenya*?"

"I asked first," said Eowyn.

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Legolas sighed. The answer was no. *No, no, no.*

No, because, for the brief time he would have her, he could not bear to share her with anyone, not even his own children. *No*, because he could not bear the fact that his children might be immortal even though their mother was not. And *no*, because he certainly could not bear to put her sweet little body through the terrifying business he had seen in the diagrams in Master Dínendal's new book, *The Anatomy of Men*. How women ever survived that he did not know. But he needed to be tactful. So he led her out onto their balcony and, as they both looked out to sea, he said, "We do not have to decide just yet, *meleth nín*."

"That is what you always say, Legolas—does it mean *no*? Because, if it does, I do not think I want them either."

"You do not, *melmenya*?"

"No," she said, and he could see that she was having difficulty finding the right words to explain it to him. "Living with you," she continued, at last, "is different from living with a man—you treat me as an equal, you expect me to play an equal part in everything we do. And that is what I have always wanted.

"If we were to have children, I would have to devote all of my time to them. I could no longer be your equal, unless I were to give the children to someone else to raise. And if I were to do that, why would I be having children in the first place? For *you* do not need an heir."

She shook her head. "I could not, in all conscience, not take care of them myself, but I would resent not being with you, my love. So no, I do not want children. I want us to stay as we are."

"So do I *melmenya*."

"Can we be sure?"

"Sure?"

"That I will not conceive."

"Yes, *meleth nín*, I can be sure."

"How? Yes, I know that elves can control their seed—but how? How do you do it?"

Legolas laughed, embarrassed by her directness. He cleared his throat. "It is different, *melmenya*, the—the climax. It is different."

"In what way?"

"It—it feels different."

"Better?"

"I—no, *melmenya*, not better. Not better, just different."

"How do you—"

"Eowyn!" said Legolas, laughing again.

"I am sorry," she whispered, and he could tell that she thought he was annoyed.

He wrapped his arms around her. "No, *meleth nín*, I am sorry for being foolish and evasive—it just feels *different*." He tried to put the feeling into words for her. "I must—I must reach for a

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different place."

She thought about his answer. "Have you ever tried to father a child, Legolas?"

Legolas stared down at her, taken aback by her question. She was thinking of him as old, as having lived many lifetimes before hers, and he hated any reminder of the gulf between them. "No, *melmenya*, of course not."

"If I were an *elleth*, would you—"

"Eowyn!" Legolas grabbed her upper arms quite roughly, and shook her a little. "I love you. I have loved you from the first moment I saw you. And though I had lovers before we met, I did not love them as I love you, and so making love with them was not what it is with you. I do not want *anyone* but you. I will *never* want anyone but you. And the reason I do not want children with you is that I could neither bear to risk your life nor to share you with them. Now, are you satisfied?"

And he crushed his mouth against hers before she could reply.

...

Later

Legolas surveyed the trail of devastation.

It started on the balcony, where two chairs had been turned over, and continued in the bathing room, where clothes had been torn and water had been splashed, and ended in the bedchamber, where the nightstand and parts of the bed had collapsed.

Eowyn smiled sleepily, curled against him like a little kitten.

Legolas kissed her forehead.

"We must get washed and dressed *melmenya*," he said. "Or would you prefer for me to tell Imrahil that you are indisposed, and ask him to have some food sent up to you?"

"Mmmmm," she replied.

Legolas laughed. "Is that mmm-yes or mmm-no?"

"It is mmm-you are dangerous," said Eowyn, rousing herself with an effort, "and should be kept under lock and key. But also mmm-I will get ready." She raised her head, looked around them and sighed. "And also, mmm-we must first do something about the damage."

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Chapter 3: The predator

The Great Hall of the castle had been hung with the standards of Gondor, Rohan and Ithilien, in honour of the illustrious guests, and three large tables had been laid out beneath them.

The King and Queen of Gondor and the King and Queen of Rohan were seated in state at the high table, and the other dignitaries—Faramir, Legolas and Eowyn, Gimli, the hobbits Merry and Pippin, Elladan and Elrohir and the host himself—were placed according to precedence, but once the formal part of the evening was over, the guests simply moved their seats and mingled, like the good friends they were.

Imrahil had spared no expense on food and, in addition to roast meats, potages of beans and vegetables, salads of sweet herbs, and various breads, there were many delicacies that Eowyn had never seen before. She and Legolas tried some small parcels of crisp pastry filled with highly spiced vegetables—which made them laugh when their mouths tingled—and a yellow-green pear-shaped fruit with fragrant, deep pink flesh, and—their joint favourite—some small pieces of sweet, rose-flavoured jelly covered in powdered sugar. "The people of Near Harad call it 'Delight'," said Imrahil.

Between the courses, there were musicians, jugglers and, finally, a troupe of dancers from Far Harad whose leader played a strangely shaped pipe whilst the rest, who were all women, gyrated to the erotic music, removing their clothing, piece by piece, and tossing it to the male guests. One of the dancers invited Legolas to untie a small scarf from around her breasts, but Legolas extricated himself gracefully, shaking his head with a charming smile and suggesting that the twins were far better qualified to help than he.

After that, the evening degenerated. The hobbits were soon dancing on the tables singing raucous drinking songs from the Shire. Merry invited Eowyn to join him and, together, they spun along the tables, jumping over bowls of fruit and flowers, while Legolas and Haldir clapped enthusiastically. Gimli, Eomer and Faramir took turns draining tankards of ale and stacking them in neat piles, whilst Aragorn laughed, and Arwen smiled, and Lothiriel watched them all, dismayed.

Then Elladan asked Legolas to sing, and the whole company fell silent to listen. Legolas chose a hauntingly beautiful song, in the common tongue:

*Black is the colour of my true love's hair,
Her face is something wondrous-fair,
The clearest eyes and the dearest hands:
I love the ground whereon she stands.*

*I love my love and well she knows,
I love the ground whereon she goes.
And still I hope the time will come
When she and I will be as one...*

The melody ended on an unexpected note, high and sad and full of longing. And, though he smiled, Legolas' close friends were in no doubt as to the song's meaning for an immortal whose true love was mortal.

...

At half past eleven, Herzog the apothecary opened the back door of his shop.

"You are lucky the boy found me," said his visitor, "for I have been busy of late, and my work has taken me far afield."

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"Come in, quickly," replied Herzog, glancing up and down the alleyway. "Did anyone see you coming here?"

"No, you need not concern yourself on that score—my livelihood depends on moving about unseen."

Satisfied, the apothecary locked the door and turned up the lamp. "Take a seat, Wolfram," he said, and sat down opposite.

At first glance, his visitor was unremarkable—of medium height and medium build, with dark eyes and a ready smile—no different from a thousand other men in Dol Amroth. But anyone who took the trouble to look more closely, as Herzog was doing now, would see something disturbing; he would see that Wolfram's smile was not a smile at all, and hid a heart that was not so much evil as empty.

He is the perfect man for this job, Herzog thought. "I need you to remove someone from the castle and bring them here," he said.

"I take it that this would be against the person's will?"

"Indeed."

"Who is it? The new grandchild? One of the Queens? That pretty thing that rode in with the elves this morning?"

"No. I require a male elf—any one of males that rode in with 'that pretty thing' will be adequate."

"A male *elf*? Are you mad? They are stronger than men, and faster—"

"Are you saying that you cannot do the job?"

"No," said Wolfram, guardedly, "but I *am* saying that it will cost you."

"You will be well paid for your services. Four hundred gold pieces if he is alive, two hundred if he is dead."

"Four hundred? For the risks I would be taking?" Wolfram protested.

"My client has already agreed a price," Herzog lied. "My hands are tied."

Wolfram rose and walked to the window. The blind was down but he gazed at it as though he were looking outside. "I will need a means of... *quieting* the elf."

"Naturally." Herzog indicated a small bottle sitting before him. "Three drops of this, on a cloth held to his nose and mouth, will put an elf to sleep. Do not use more than three drops." He handed the bottle to Wolfram.

"When do you want him?"

Herzog was still awaiting a reply from his buyer, but decided to take a chance. "As soon as possible."

"Tonight, then."

...

Wolfram slipped silently down the back streets of Dol Amroth, heading for Dinham Gate, just south of the castle. He knew that the gate would be locked at this hour, but the gatekeeper

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owed him a few favours, so it would not be difficult to get out of the city.

Once outside, keeping well out of sight, he would work his way along the castle wall to its north west corner. There, he would enter the castle drains. It would be unpleasant at first—*Part of the job*, he thought—and he would have to be careful not to get too soiled or he would draw attention to himself later but, once he was safely in the drainage system, he could climb up a disused privy shaft to the very top of the castle and, from there, go wherever he wanted. It was not the first time he had broken into the castle at night using that particular route.

And it will not be the last, he thought.

His main problem would be finding a lone elf in a situation that would give him the advantage he needed. Wolfram was an artist at his work but that did not mean he was complacent. He knew that an elf would be stronger, faster, have better eyesight, and better hearing, and might even—he had heard—have some sort of sixth sense, so he would have to be cunning.

And *absolutely* ruthless.

...

By one o'clock the guests were starting to go to bed—Lothiriel first; then Dínendal, who was not used to heavy drinking and needed some help from Faramir and his secretary; then Aragorn, who had decided he was far too old to watch drinking contests, and Arwen; and then Eomer, who had decided he should not leave his wife alone much longer.

Next came Legolas, Eowyn, Gimli, and the hobbits, who were all lodged on the same staircase.

And, finally, came Haldir and the twins—Elrohir and Elladan—the last, surprisingly, very much the worse for drink.

...

Wolfram had positioned himself on a first floor balcony, which gave him a clear view of the entire castle courtyard with no danger of being seen.

The climb up the privy shaft had taken rather longer than he had expected, and he was relieved to see that the banquet was only just ending. A group of five revellers was walking across the courtyard—a dwarf, two strange-looking children, the woman he had spotted that morning, and one of the male elves.

Wolfram watched intently, willing the group to separate and give him easier access to the elf, but all five crossed the courtyard together and entered the north western corner of the castle...

I will have to follow, and try to get closer to him, he thought, but then an alternative presented itself.

Three more elves walked out of the hall, stood talking in the courtyard for a moment, then split up, one crossing to the north west, the other two heading south west.

Wolfram hesitated.

The single elf was the obvious target, but he was powerfully built and looked unusually heavy for an elf and, moreover, he was heading in the same direction as the party of five that Wolfram had watched earlier. The pair of elves looked lighter, and were heading towards a quieter part of the castle...

He would follow the pair—he might get lucky.

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He slipped over the edge of the balcony and, keeping well in the shade, climbed down to the ground. Then he drew himself up straight, like a soldier, and marched across the courtyard as if he owned the castle.

...

Elladan was having trouble with the spiral staircase. *I should not have had those spirits*, he thought. *Mannish liquor is poison.*

"You go on," he said, sitting down heavily on one of the steps. "I will rest here a moment and join you shortly."

Elrohir shook his head. "I shall help you."

"No, brother. You are unsteady yourself. We would both break our necks—and how embarrassing would it be to be found dead at the bottom of a staircase? All I need is a moment's rest."

"Very well," said Elrohir. "But if you are not up in five minutes I will come back for you, and carry you."

...

Wolfram climbed up the spiral staircase, trying to be silent without looking stealthy, and almost fell over a sleeping elf.

The gods help those that help themselves, he thought.

But I had better make sure.

He took Herzog's vial and a piece of cloth from his pocket, carefully tipped exactly three drops of the pungent liquid onto the cloth—*For I want the full four hundred gold pieces for a live one*—and held it over the elf's nose and mouth.

To Wolfram's surprise, the elf awoke and began to struggle, but Wolfram held him down with a knee on the chest, and he soon passed out again. Then the man shoved the cloth in his pocket and lifted the elf onto his shoulder. *I shall not be able to take him out the way I came in*, he thought, for his victim was tall, and surprisingly heavy. *I shall have to carry him to the gatehouse, in plain view, and think of a story that will get us out of the gate.*

After that, it would be a relatively simple matter to carry him to Herzog's shop.

...

Since elves do not normally experience illness of any kind, Elrohir was surprised to wake with his head aching, and even more surprised to find himself lying on the floor with his back against the door of his apartment.

I must have fallen asleep here, he thought; then he remembered his conversation with Elladan. *If I spent the night against the door*, he reasoned, *he cannot have come back. He must have fallen asleep on the stairs.*

Elrohir got up with some difficulty, opened the door and climbed carefully down the staircase to where he had last seen his brother.

But his brother was not there.

...

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Legolas and Eowyn had risen early, bathed and dressed, and were heading, with Haldir and Dínendal, towards the hall for breakfast when Elrohir came across the courtyard towards them.

"Have you seen Elladan?" he asked Haldir, anxiously.

"Not since I parted from you both last night," replied the March Warden. "Why?"

Elrohir described how he had left Elladan on the stairs and had woken up to find him missing.

"He has probably fallen asleep in a privy somewhere, Elrohir," said Legolas, "but—in case he has hurt himself—Haldir, go and inform the Captain of the Palace Guard, and ask him to request Prince Imrahil's permission to send a couple of guards to search for him—and take Master Dínendal with you; he may be needed."

The two elves hurried towards the guardhouse.

"Now," Legolas continued, "Eowyn and I will take you back to your apartment, Elrohir—you need to rest—no, I am sure the guards will soon find Elladan," he added, when Elrohir began to protest. And he ducked under Elrohir's arm and, supporting him across the shoulders, helped him walk back across the courtyard and up the staircase to his apartment.

Eowyn followed behind, staying well back as the two elves staggered up the spiralling stairs. *Arwen's brothers are so—so worldly, she thought, not at all like Legolas or the other elves of Eryn Carantaur.* She had just decided that she preferred elves *otherworldly* and was about to run upstairs and help her own elf, who was having trouble supporting Elrohir whilst opening the apartment door, when she spotted something lying on one of the steps.

It was only a small piece of cloth, and ordinarily she would have ignored it, but it seemed strangely out of place in a castle that was otherwise kept extremely clean and tidy. And, as she bent to examine it more closely, she noticed it was smeared with a red, oily substance.

What is that?

She carefully picked up the cloth, and sniffed the red oil.

Ugh! What a disgusting smell, she thought.

And, although she had no idea what it was, she had a sudden feeling that it might somehow be connected to Elladan's disappearance and that Legolas should see it. So, holding the cloth at arm's length, she hurried up the stairs to show it to him.

When she reached the apartment Legolas had already set Elrohir down and was fetching him a glass of water.

"This will teach me not to drink men's liquor," said Elrohir, holding his head. "This must be how it feels to die."

"Elrohir," Legolas chided, "do not say things like that! Here..." He handed him the glass of water. Then he spotted Eowyn standing in the doorway. "What is it, melmenya?"

"I am not sure," Eowyn replied. "I found this on the stairs near where Elladan must have been sitting. It has a red substance on it that smells—well, strange." And she handed him the cloth.

Legolas raised it to his nose and sniffed it, then—to Eowyn's horror—he swayed, and fell forward into her arms.

...

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...

Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods, thought Eowyn. "Elrohir! Elrohir—" but she already knew that the other elf was in no state to fetch help.

Legolas was unconscious, but his breathing was quite normal—in fact, had he been mortal, she would have assumed he was asleep—and she took comfort from that, but she knew that she needed to find Master Dínendal.

Quickly.

She looked around the room, trying frantically to form a plan. Elrohir had rolled off his chair and was crawling towards her on all fours. Eowyn made a decision. "Here, support his head," she said, allowing Elrohir to take Legolas in his arms. "Keep him on his side, in case he should vomit. I will be as quick as I can. *I am so sorry, my love,*" she whispered to Legolas.

The moment she was sure that Elrohir had Legolas safely supported, she sprang to her feet and was about to run downstairs when she thought of the window.

Please, gods, let there be someone in the castle ward—she looked out—yes, yes! Aragorn!

Aragorn and Arwen, and a large retinue, were crossing the courtyard, heading for the hall. Eowyn threw open the window and, ignoring protocol, cried out: "Aragorn, Aragorn! Something has happened to Legolas! Please help him! Please! We are in Elrohir's apartment! And—and somebody please fetch the healer, Master Dínendal. He is in the guardhouse!"

...

Legolas awoke to find himself in Elrohir's bed, with Eowyn on one side and Master Dínendal on the other, and Haldir, Elrohir, Aragorn and Gimli all standing around him looking anxious.

"Valar," he said. "What has happened here?"

"What has happened here, you crazy elf?" cried Gimli. "What has happened here is that you have just frightened ten years off our lives!"

"I am so sorry, my love," said Eowyn, with a sob in her voice, "but the oil had no effect on me, so I did not know it would harm you."

"Yes, the cloth," said Legolas. "I remember now. I smelled it." He squeezed Eowyn's hand gently. "Please do not cry, *meleth nín,*" he whispered. "I am fine."

Everyone carefully ignored the fact that Haldir had also placed a comforting hand on the lady's shoulder.

"It was hardly your fault, my lady," said Dínendal. "It is a substance known as *elfsbane*, which has no effect on men but makes elves sleep. Fortunately, most of the active ingredients had evaporated, so Lord Legolas was only slightly affected—"

"Slightly affected?" cried Gimli. "You call that slight? The elf was dead to the world!"

"Indeed, Master Gimli," replied Dínendal, "deeply asleep. But, at the right concentration, *elfsbane* will paralyse its victim and keep him asleep for as much as twenty-four hours. And at higher doses it can be fatal."

"Elladan!" cried Elrohir.

"It looks very much," said Aragorn, squeezing his brother's shoulder, "as if someone drugged Elladan and took him away last night. Let us pray they got the dose right," he added gravely. "I will ask Imrahil to extend the search to the entire city and I will join it—Gimli, Haldir, are you

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with me? Thank you. We will also ask Eomer and Faramir. No, Legolas, you need to rest—and you too, Elrohir.

"Let us pray that we find Elladan in time."

...

Both Aragorn and Dínendal had insisted that Legolas rest for several hours and—much to Legolas' embarrassment—had had him carried back to his own apartment and put to bed.

"He needs healing sleep," said Dínendal to Eowyn. "That is the best way to work the remainder of the poison out of his body."

Eowyn closed the curtains and, having washed her hands several times to ensure that all traces of the oil had gone from them, lay down beside him. "I am so sorry, my love," she whispered, taking him in her arms.

But Legolas was already asleep.

...

With Imrahil's palace guard and his visitors' guards of honour, including the three elves from Eryn Carantaur, there were more than fifty men available to search for Elladan.

Ten men were already working their way through the castle. Aragorn and Imrahil quickly divided the city into four, placed Gimli, Eomer, Faramir and Haldir in charge of the fourths, and assigned each of them ten men. Their orders were to search every building and to question every occupant. They were also to pay particular attention to empty properties.

Anything they uncovered was to be communicated back to Imrahil, at the castle, who would co-ordinate the operation by relaying information to Aragorn and the search leaders.

...

Eowyn had drifted off to sleep, so she did not hear the intruder open and close the door, quietly cross the room, and set something down on the dressing table. It was not until the intruder pulled back the curtains, flooding the bedchamber with bright sunlight, that both Legolas and Eowyn awoke with a cry of alarm, and Legolas leaped out of bed, pinning their assailant to the wall.

"Who are you?" he cried. "What are you doing in here?"

Eowyn looked at his prisoner. She was small and slender, wearing a pale yellow dress, and Legolas was holding her by the throat. "Legolas!" she cried, "Legolas, *look* at her!"

The elf hesitated for another moment, his senses still clouded with healing sleep, then he understood and released the girl.

But he remained suspicious: "Who are you," he asked again, "and what are you doing in our bedchamber?"

"I am sorry, my lord, my lady," said the girl, rubbing her neck. "I thought the apartment would be empty with all that is going on. My name is Senta, my lady. Prince Imrahil asked me to act as your maid—"

She was interrupted by a warbling sound from the direction of the dressing table.

"What are you doing with a bird in a cage?" Legolas demanded.

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"You bought him yesterday, did you not?" said Eowyn. "From that strange man. I saw you, when we arrived."

The girl was surprised. "Yes, my lady, I did. I was going to set him free, my lord."

Some of his usual gentleness returned to Legolas' manner. "That is an admirable intention, child," he said. "Let me see him." He picked up the cage and looked closely at the little bird. "But I am afraid I must ask you to reconsider."

"Why, my lord?"

"Because this poor little bird does not belong in Belfalas," he said. "If I am not mistaken, he comes from Far Harad. If you release him, the native birds will attack him, for his bright yellow plumage makes him a target. And even if he is lucky, and they do not kill him, he may still starve to death."

"Oh, my lord!"

"His only hope for a tolerable life is for you to take care of him."

"But I am not allowed... Will you let me to keep him here, my lord?"

"Of course we will, Senta," said Eowyn.

"Thank you, my lady," said Senta, curtsying. Then she remembered her duties. "Do you require any assistance, my lady?"

Eowyn sighed. *Why does Imrahil—why do all men—assume that I am incapable of tying my own laces?* "Later, Senta," she said. "Return at six."

Senta nodded and, after saying goodbye to the little bird, left the bedchamber.

Legolas, still holding the cage, whistled softly, and the bird whistled back.

"What does he say?" asked Eowyn.

"He says that his name is *Sweep*—it means 'Golden'—and that he loves Senta very much. Your mistress will be back at six, *Sweep*."

Tears filled Eowyn's eyes as she watched her beloved elf set the bird back on the dressing table.

"What is it, melmenya?" Legolas asked anxiously, taking her in his arms.

"I love you," she whispered.

"And that makes you cry?"

"I thought I had lost you..."

"Oh, Eowyn!" He kissed her tenderly.

"You should be resting," said Eowyn softly. "I am so sorry, Legolas."

"There is nothing to be sorry about, melmenya. If you had not found the cloth we would not have known what had happened to Elladan, and we would still be assuming he had fallen asleep somewhere. I am fine, truly," he said, stroking her hair. "And tonight," he murmured, placing several light kisses on her face and neck, "I will be very happy to prove it to you..."

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Eowyn managed a small smile.

"But in the meantime, *meleth nín*," he added, gently, "I think we should go and see if there is any news of Elladan."

...

Elladan was lying, still unconscious, on a makeshift bed in the back room of Herzog's shop. Herzog was pacing up and down, trying to think, whilst Wolfram dogged his every step—back and forth, back and forth.

"How will the buyer *know* that he is only *half*-elven?" Wolfram asked.

"It will be obvious, you imbecile! His se—he is inadequate for the purpose. Incomplete. Defective. It must be a full-blooded male elf. You must take him back and bring me another."

"What? No—I did as I was told. I brought you an elf. You owe me my money." Wolfram stepped in front of Herzog and stared at him, menacingly, and—although he was almost a foot taller than his accomplice—Herzog felt a brief chill of fear.

It was time to bargain.

"I will pay you *five* hundred gold pieces," he said, "half in advance, if you bring me a full-blooded male elf—one of the six you saw enter the city with that woman you admired so much. *They* were all full-blooded. And you can have her too, if you want."

Wolfram hesitated. Five hundred gold pieces. And maybe he *could* go back later for the woman.

"Will the—the *stuff* work on her?"

"No; but I will give you something else for her—once you have delivered the elf."

That decided it. "Agreed. But it will take time. The whole city is looking for him," he jerked his thumb at Elladan, "and the castle guards will be extra vigilant. I will take him back tonight and dump him outside the walls. Then I will return to the castle in a couple of days—after the ceremony, when everyone has relaxed—to take another."

Herzog considered Wolfram's plan. He had still not heard back from his buyer and could afford to wait two or three days. "Very well" he said, "I will give you the advance payment once you have disposed of *him*."

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Extra scene: Sweep's story

Leaves fall, branches whip back and forth, the ground shakes; a flock of birds bursts into the air, shouting, "Fly-fly! Fly-fly!"

Startled, *Sweep* cowers on his branch, his head bobbing this way and that, looking for the danger.

"Fly," cries a black-singer as he shoots past, "the no-wings are coming!"

But *Sweep* hesitates: he is too small to fly high like a white-swimmer, or fast like a black-singer, and he does not have the talons of a mouse-catcher—but, maybe, if he stays very still, the no-wings will overlook him. He huddles behind a palm frond.

Time passes.

The noises get louder.

Closer.

A no-wings passes by, less than a frog's-leap from his branch.

Sweep frets. Should he have gone with the others? Is it too late to go now? Could he—?

A big no-wings bumps into the branch beneath him and, without thinking, *Sweep* throws out his wings and flies towards the sun, like all the other birds.

...

He hears the cries of warning too late and crashes into the web, tangling his head, a wing, and—when he struggles to free himself—a foot, too, in its strange, thick strands.

"Keep still little yellow-bird," cries a red-singer, "keep still or you will break your wing!"

Sweep closes his eyes and lets himself hang—"Yes," says the red-singer, "stay just like that!"—but *Sweep's* heart still tells him that he must get free and, even though he is exhausted, he keeps kicking his legs, every now and then.

...

The no-wings smells of rotten meat, and its skin is rough, but it handles *Sweep* gently, freeing him from the web and dropping him quickly into a darkness that smells of dry grass and other birds.

Sweep immediately tries to fly, but his wings bump into rough walls and he falls to the bottom of the black hollow.

After a while, he pecks—the wall is dry grass and bits of it come away—and he pecks and pecks and pecks until his neck aches and his beak hurts, but he knows in his heart that he will never escape.

...

Days later

A shaft of blinding light wakes him a split-second before the no-wings reaches into the hollow and grabs him. *Sweep* is too frightened to struggle, but the no-wings does not hold him long—it sets him down inside a small wooden ribcage and clucks at him:

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"There. Do-you-like your-new-cage? Do-you? Do-you?"

Sweep does not understand; and, though he does not think this no-wings wants to hurt him, he waits until its back is turned before he flutters up to one of the thin wooden branches, and looks around.

There are no trees!

And at first he thinks there are no other birds. But then he hears one, down below, and he tilts his head and sees a strange brown bird, pecking at a shred of flesh lying in the dust. "Where am I?" *Sweep* cries. "Please, brown-bird—where am I?"

The stranger peers cautiously at the no-wings—but its back is still turned—then he flies up and perches on one of the bare, straight branches overhead. He leans down. "You are in a cage," he says, "on a stall, in the souk, in the great city of Carhilivren."

"Why?" asks *Sweep*.

"Because the no-wings wants to sell you." Brown-bird hops closer. "You do not know what 'sell' means, do you? No. Well, it means that this no-wings wants to give you to another no-wings in return for some shiny metal, and the other no-wings will take you home—oh, do not look so frightened! You are far too small to eat. But,"—he tilts his head—"can you sing?"

"Yes..."

"Good. Then start now. The better you can sing, the better the no-wings will take care of you."

...

Some time later, a small no-wings with bright, dark eyes pokes a finger through the ribs of *Sweep's* cage. "He-llo," it tweets, "he-llo!"

Then it turns to the big no-wings and twitters—"Five? No-one-will-pay *five*,"—and the other clucks back, and then the small one presses its soft beak against the ribs, and tweets again: "Can-you-say Ke-ret? Ke-ret? I'll come-back to-mo-rrow. If some-one-else tries to-buy-you before-then, bite-them. Bite-them."

...

It is almost dark when the no-wings sells him, for—*Sweep* counts the shiny metal: *beak, wing, wings, foot*—foot round pieces.

The new no-wings is tall and fair-skinned, with thick yellow feathers on its head and under its beak. It carries *Sweep* through its flock, gently swinging his cage as it walks, calling out to its friends, and to several of its mates until, suddenly, it lifts the cage up to its face, and booms, "HERE-WE-ARE YOUR-NEW-HOME."

And it carries him up a broad, sloping branch, into a vast nutshell, floating on water that stretches for as far as *Sweep* can see—and he has just time to wonder whether this can be the *Great Green* that the white-swimmers once told him about, when the no-wings plunges him into darkness.

...

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...

Months later

For as long as *Sweep* can remember, his days have been the same.

His no-wings wakes him at first light, tapping on his cage and clucking, softly—"He-llo, li-ttle *fe*-llow. How-are-you this mor-ning?"—and it gives him seed and water and, although *Sweep* is not sure whether it *does* expect anything in return, he sings it a song, just in case.

For a while, then, it settles down beneath his cage, and scratches marks, either onto a large white skin, which it carefully unrolls and smoothes out, or onto smaller skins, bound together in a block. But after an hour or so it goes away, leaving *Sweep* alone for the rest of the morning, and that is when he finds out what sort of day it is going to be.

On a good day, the nutshell floats calmly on the *Great Green*, and his cage sways gently, and *Sweep* can see the water, if he sits at the top of his cage and looks through the hole in the shell.

On a bad day, the nutshell pitches and tosses on the angry water, and *Sweep's* cage jumps, and jerks back and forth, and he is forced to huddle in a corner until the storm has passed.

On the *worst* days, the four-legs comes, and climbs up, and peers into his cage with its big yellow eyes, and scratches at the wood with its sharp claws, and *Sweep*, knowing exactly what it wants, wonders if this day will be his last.

But when the sun is at its highest his no-wings returns, and shoos away the four-legs, and goes back to making marks. Often it stays with him for the rest of the day, and then *Sweep* exhausts himself singing. Other times it goes away again, and does not return until late.

But every day, as the light begins to fade, the no-wings drapes a dark skin of night over him.

...

Sometimes, when *Sweep* sleeps, he dreams of a place outside his cage, where he can stretch his wings and fly from branch to branch, and the branches are covered with green leaves, and with flowers that smell of pink and yellow and white...

And when he wakes he wonders whether that place is real and, if it is, how he can find it.

...

One day, *Sweep's* no-wings carries him outside.

The blue overhead is paler than *Sweep* had expected, and the air is cooler, and, as they thread their way through the flocks of strange no-wings, leaving the nutshell and the *Great Green* far behind, he is suddenly afraid, and he drops to the bottom of his cage and cowers, as if a storm were blowing.

...

The first thing *Sweep* notices is the darkness—are they back inside the shell? He looks out through the ribs of his cage. No, this is somewhere else. It smells different: sharp and earthy.

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And there is another no-wings here, a male, with a soft voice—"Five *sil-ver*," it sings.

"TEN," booms *Sweep's* no-wings.

"Six," sings the other. "That-is my-*fi-nal* off-er."

"NO." His no-wings picks up the cage. *Sweep's* heart flutters—are they going home?

"*Eight*."

His no-wings sets the cage down again.

...

Some weeks later

Every day, the wicked no-wings hangs his cage outside; every night he brings it back inside.

The street—*Sweep* has learnt that word from the sparrows—is dusty. Every day his yellow feathers turn greyer; every night he does his best to clean them in the dirty sand at the bottom of his cage.

Sweep thinks he can remember a time when things were better than this.

He thinks he can remember a no-wings who spoke to him, and gave him seed when he sang...

But then he wonders whether that was just a dream.

...

Sweep sits at the top of his cage and watches the no-wings pass by. There is the small one, who is always running swiftly, leaping up to bat *Sweep's* cage as he passes; there is the old, four-legged one, that waits patiently every morning, snuffing in the dust for a few stalks of dry grass, until a two-legs appears and climbs upon its back; and—

Today, there is a new one, walking slowly by, looking anxiously this way and that, and she is what the sparrows call a 'girl'.

No-wings, *Sweep* has noticed, do not grow feathers on their bodies. Instead, they wear false plumage, made, he thinks, from big petals. This girl's plumage is yellow—not a rich gold, like his own (when it is clean), but a pale, soft, spring-flower yellow.

Sweep tilts his head to look at her more closely.

His heart tells him that the girl is kind and, at this moment, very sad.

He flaps his wings and she turns, and looks up at him, twittering, "Poor, *li-ttle*-bird,"—and *Sweep* sings back, hoping to cheer her, but she passes beneath him, and disappears into the wicked no-wings's 'shop'.

...

Sweep waits.

And waits.

And there is movement, further down the street, and he peers out, and sees a flock of

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...

no-wings riding past, and—

Sweep's heart leaps at the sight of them—their beautiful, shining faces, their soft voices, their pure spirits. He bursts into song and, for the first time ever (so far as he can remember), he longs to leave his cage, and he flutters against the wooden ribs, trying to find an opening—

But, at that moment, the girl and the wicked no-wings come outside.

And *Sweep* is lifted down and given to the girl.

...

His new home is sweet-smelling—the girl sets his cage beside a bowl of dry petals. Then she opens the ribs and tips some seed inside, singing, "*There-you-are. There-you-are.*"

Sweep does not know what her song might mean but he sings it back to her, and she seems pleased, because she repeats it—though she makes a few mistakes—and then she adds a new melody: "*What-am-I going to-do-with you? What-am-I going to-do?*"

And *Sweep* sings that back too.

...

It is dark but a small light is glowing, near Girl's face, and *Sweep*, sitting at the very top of his cage, watching her sleep, knows that he is happier now than he has ever been. And he does not want to sleep himself for fear that, when he wakes, he will find that Girl has gone.

...

Girl picks up his cage and warbles and, although he does not fully understand her song, *Sweep* knows that she wants him to be quiet. He settles down on his branch, and they leave their home, and climb down and down and out into the fresh air—but only for a minute—then inside again, and up and up, and once more into darkness.

Girl sets down his cage, and *Sweep* is filled with a strange excitement and, being careful to make no noise, he hops up and looks around—and his heart leaps, just as it did that other time—

A shining no-wings!

The no-wings is sleeping, but something is wrong, and *Sweep* does not have time to decide exactly what before Girl lets in the light, and the shining-one springs up, and catches her, and holds her too tight and *Sweep* flutters up and down in anguish, but Girl has told him to be quiet...

Then another shining-one—no, a gentle no-wings, like Girl—sings, and the shining-one lets Girl go.

And *then...*

Then the shining-one lifts *Sweep's* cage, and looks at him, and *Sweep* is wrapped in a soft, warm glow and held safe there, singing for joy. And the shining-one tells Girl that she must keep *Sweep* safe forever, and Girl leans in close, and sings that she will—and *Sweep* understands every note!

And then the shining-one says he will make sure that Girl can keep *Sweep* with her,

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wherever she goes; and he says, "Your mistress loves you very much, little *Sweep*, and she will always take good care of you."

And *Sweep* sings—"Thank you! Thank you!"—again and again, because he knows that what the shining-one promises is true.

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Chapter 4: The reject

The search parties returned at dusk, empty handed.

Aragorn called a meeting to discuss their progress, and was told that although they had covered a good two-thirds of the city, that still left some of the more unsavory neighbourhoods unsearched.

"We will continue tomorrow, at first light," he said.

"Eowyn and I will join you, *mellon nín*," said Legolas. "I would have expected a ransom demand by now," he added, quietly, "if money had been the motive. But since there has been no communication—"

"You are wondering what anyone would want with an elf. So am I," admitted Aragorn. "If we could work that out, it might also tell us where to look."

"Perhaps there is another way to narrow down the search," said Eowyn, thoughtfully.

"What are you thinking, *melmenya*?" asked Legolas.

"The *elfsbane*," said Eowyn. "I assume it is not common—then where did the kidnapper get it? Was it supplied by someone in Dol Amroth? If so, perhaps we can question *him* and—um—persuade him to reveal the buyer."

"Well reasoned," said Aragorn, and the others murmured in agreement. "We need someone with good local knowledge," he continued. "Your steward, perhaps, Prince Imrahil."

The steward was summoned.

"As you know, Master Reimar," said Imrahil, "one of my guests has disappeared. We believe he was overpowered using a rare substance called *elfsbane*—a poison that affects only elves. With your knowledge of the merchants of Dol Amroth, can you think of anyone who could—and would—supply *elfsbane* to the kidnapper?"

Master Reimar thought for a moment. "There are more than twenty apothecaries operating in the city, my lord, and—though I have not used all of them—I have no reason to suspect that any of them are other than honest, respectable men and women. But I will make some enquiries."

He turned to address the company more generally. "Dol Amroth is a crossroads, my lords, my lady. The sea brings merchandise here from all over Middle-earth, so it might be worth searching the docks. There is a merchant there who specialises in rare and exotic elixirs, but most of them come from Far Harad and beyond, where elves are unknown, so I doubt that he was the supplier. But, still, he may be able to direct you elsewhere.

"I am sorry to be of so little help, my lords," he added.

"No, no, Master Reimar," said Imrahil. "You have been most helpful. Please let me know the results of your enquiries as soon as possible."

The Steward bowed to the company, and turned to leave but, as his hand touched the door, he suddenly turned back. "My lords," he said, "I *have* heard talk amongst the kitchen maids—fanciful-sounding talk, my lords, but there *may* be some grain of truth in it—of a shop hidden in the southern region of the city where a girl may obtain,"—he glanced apologetically at Eowyn—"herbs that will dispose of her unborn child. They say that the shop can only be found by those who already know where it is..."

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"Talk to the girls, Master Reimar," said Imrahil. "Find out where that shop is, as quickly as possible. And, Master Reimar, tell them that—in future—if any girl should find herself in that *condition*, she is to go straight to the palace healer, instead of taking the-gods-know-what poisons!"

Imrahil shook his head. "Why do they do it?"

"Because they have been abandoned by the father, are afraid their families will disown them, and are desperate, my lord," said Eowyn, quietly.

Legolas squeezed her hand.

Imrahil nodded, thoughtfully. "Well," he said, "it stops here."

He turned to Aragorn. "We can do no more today, your Majesty. May I suggest we eat, and retire early, so we that can move immediately tomorrow, once we have more information."

...

Wolfram had slipped out at dusk and 'borrowed' a handcart, complete with two boxes of vegetables, that some unfortunate farmer's boy had left for a moment outside the greengrocer's on Raven Lane.

Early in life, Wolfram had discovered that the way to do things unseen was to do them openly, so he had pushed the handcart confidently, straight to the market place, then down Broad Street and into the alley at the back of Herzog's shop.

Herzog was waiting for him, with Elladan already wrapped in an old blanket.

Wolfram placed the elf on the cart and covered him with vegetables. "I will return tomorrow for my advance," he said.

Then he wheeled the cart back down Broad Street, back through the market place, and right up to the castle gatehouse. A few casual glances told him that no one was paying him any particular attention, so he dumped the handcart beside the gates and, keeping close to the castle wall, left the city through Dinham Gate.

He would enter the castle by his usual route, through the drains and the privy shaft, and spend the night choosing his next victim and learning as much about him as possible.

And who knows, he thought, I may even get another look at the woman.

...

The handcart had been standing outside the castle gates for at least half an hour.

The problem was that Torul was not sure how or when it had got there. It had certainly not been there before he slipped out to use the privy, but whether it had appeared then, or later, when he was making himself a pot of tea, he could not be sure. What he *did* know was that if the Captain of the Guard found out about it, he would be in real trouble. Especially if he happened to get flustered whilst trying to explain himself and accidentally mention the words 'privy' or 'tea'...

His only hope was his comrade, Konrad, who should be coming in to relieve him at any moment. Once Konrad was on watch, he could slip out, examine the handcart and, if it seemed harmless—which he was sure it was—push it further away into the market place...

Problem solved.

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...

As he was formulating this plan, his relief arrived. "What on Middle-earth is that handcart doing out there?" Konrad asked.

He misses nothing, thought Torul. "That is what I am just about to find out," he said, bristling with efficiency.

"Do you want a hand?"

"No, it is probably just an empty cart. I will push it away."

"How did it get there..." Konrad asked, but Torul had already stepped outside, and could pretend that he had not heard.

A pleasant night, but a bit chilly—no clouds, he thought, rubbing his hands together as he approached the handcart. *Now why would someone leave a load of potherbs outside the castle?* He looked more closely at the back of the cart.

The moon was bright in the cloudless sky and he could see quite clearly that there was something under the vegetables—something wrapped in an old blanket.

He leaned over and prodded the something, thinking, *What in Mordor...?*

Then he pulled his hand back as if he had been burned.

The something had groaned.

...

Elladan, still only semi-conscious, was carried to his apartment and laid on the bed.

Aragorn and Elrohir waited anxiously in the adjoining sitting room, with Legolas and Eowyn, whilst Master Dínendal gave Elladan a thorough examination.

At length, the healer came out of the bedchamber, closing the door quietly behind him.

"He is in healing sleep at the moment, my lords, and should remain so for perhaps another twenty-four hours. It will help clear the remainder of the poison from his body."

"How is he?" asked Aragorn.

"In remarkably good health, your Majesty, considering what he has endured. Whoever administered the poison knew exactly what he was doing. When he wakes he should be fully recovered—from the poisoning, at least."

"What do you mean, Master Dínendal? Has he said something?"

"He remained unconscious throughout the ordeal, your Majesty," said Dínendal, "but he does have two memories—it might be better to call them impressions. First, he remembers being overpowered, with a knee pressing down upon his chest—and he has a large bruise, just below the breast bone, to confirm it. Secondly..." Dínendal glanced uncomfortably at Eowyn.

"Perhaps you would rather not hear this, my lady," he said, softly.

"You know you can speak openly in front of Lady Eowyn, Dínendal," said Legolas, sternly.

Dínendal blushed. "Yes, my lord, it is just that—very well, my lord. Lord Elladan has the impression that he was... molested."

"Molested?" said Aragorn. He looked at Elrohir.

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"Yes, your Majesty; he believes that someone," Dínendal cleared his throat, and glanced at Eowyn again, "someone—er—stole his seed. And his leggings were unlaced, my lords, when I came to examine him and there is indeed some abrasion, quite severe in places..."

"Dear gods," whispered Eowyn.

The friends sat in silence for a moment, stunned by Dínendal's revelation.

Then Aragorn said, "The healing sleep will help him. Elrohir, you stay with him, in case he wakes during the night. Master Dínendal, do you have any powdered *alfirin* root with you?" Dínendal shook his head. "Perhaps you can obtain some tomorrow. Mix it in white wine, one part to ten, and have it ready when Elladan wakes.

"I will ask Imrahil for the information his steward promised. I want to have a long talk with our friend who preys on unfortunate young women. Perhaps he also preys on unconscious elves. We will make finding his shop tomorrow our first priority.

"In the meantime I will go and tell Arwen the good news that her brother is sleeping peacefully and is expected to make a full recovery from the poison. I shall not mention the other thing—and I trust it will go no further than the people in this room."

...

Eowyn was leaning over the balcony, looking out to sea, thinking about what Master Dínendal had told them. It was a calm, cloudless night, and the reflected moon and stars shimmered on the water. The scene was magical, but Eowyn hardly noticed it.

"Legolas!" she called, unaware that he was already standing behind her until he took hold of her waist and gently bent her over the balcony wall.

"No, my love," she said, trying to turn to face him.

She had never said no to him before, and she felt his whole body tense with surprise.

"Melmenya?"

He stepped back and she managed to turn. "I want you to go home," she said. "I want you to take Haldir and Dínendal and the others—and the twins, if they will go with you—back to Eryn Carantaur where you will all be safe—"

"Eowyn—"

"What does he *want*? Why would he have—have done that thing to Elladan? I cannot bear to think of him doing anything to you, my love—please, Legolas; please go home!"

"*Shhhhh*, melmenya," said Legolas softly, taking her in his arms and pressing his lips to her temple, "*Shhhhh*. I know you are worried, but it is out of the question. I am not leaving you here alone."

"I would not be alone! Eomer, Gimli, Faramir, Aragorn are all here. Any one of them would bring me back to Eryn Carantaur when the Naming Ceremony is over. And *I* am safe; *I* am not the target."

"How do we know that?"

"He wants an elf!"

"He returned Elladan; so we do not know for certain that he wanted an elf—"

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"He used *elfsbane*! He stole *elven* seed! He wants an *elf*. And he wants to..." She shuddered. "Who knows what *else* he wants to do to you?"

"I am not leaving you, *melmenya*. And neither Haldir nor Dínendal would leave you, either," he whispered. "*Shhhhh, shhhhh*, my love." And he kissed her, and caressed her, and stroked her hair, until she was calm. And then he bent her once more over the balcony wall, raised her skirts and, holding her hips steady, he entered her gently, filling her body.

"Oh, Legolas!" she whimpered.

"*Shhhhhh*, *melmenya*."

He kissed the back of her neck, making her squirm beneath him, then he withdrew, almost fully, and slowly filled her again.

"Oh," she whimpered.

"I love you so much, *melmenya*," he whispered. "I would risk anything to be with you. To be able to love you like this..." He withdrew once more and slowly filled her again, and again, and again. Then he suddenly gripped the wall, shuddering, and sobbing, "Oh, Eowyn! Oh, *melmenya*..." He braced himself against the balcony, pushing himself even deeper inside her, and held himself there, and Eowyn felt his warm seed flooding her body.

Then he collapsed over her. "I am sorry, *meleth nín*," he whispered, sliding his hand under her and caressing her, gently. "I will make it up to you, I promise."

And Eowyn—lying over the balcony wall, part of her still terrified at what might happen to Legolas, part of her aware of nothing but his penis still inside her, and his hands performing the sweetest torture—thought she might die. Then Legolas raised himself on his arms and, slowly and deeply, began to thrust again.

Oh gods, she thought, *dear gods, dear gods, dear gods!*

And she felt herself approaching her first climax.

...

Wolfram had six full-blooded elves to choose from.

Three were lodged in the guardhouse, and virtually inaccessible; he rejected them.

One was unnaturally big, and Wolfram had had enough trouble carrying the last one; he rejected him.

That left two—the quiet, studious one, who seemed to be a healer, and the pretty elf-boy. Neither of them looked as though they would give him much trouble, even if elf-boy did prance around wearing a bow and a couple of very nice knives...

What decided it was the woman. She belonged to elf-boy. And it seemed fitting to Wolfram that he should take *him* first then come back and take her.

He had followed elf-boy to his apartment and climbed out onto a gargoyle, just below the castle battlements, that gave him a safe view into his bedchamber. He had been planning to watch him, to learn more about him so that it would be easier to catch him alone. But, as the hours passed, he had seen rather more than he had expected.

He had seen elf-boy and the woman come out onto the balcony. He had seen the elf bend her over the wall and take her from behind—*By the gods!* he had thought, as the elf freed himself

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from his leggings, *he may only be a boy but that is no child's toy!*

And then he had seen the woman turn the tables on the elf, mounting him and riding him, hard and fast. And Wolfram had been forced to attend to his own needs as he watched her bring elf-boy to a spectacular climax.

Gods, I was right about that woman, he thought. *She has ridden elf-boy into the ground. And I will have her!*

...

Senta had swallowed the apothecary's powdered herbs before she had gone to bed, but they had had no effect.

What am I to do now? she thought, her eyes filling with tears. *The problem is still here—she placed her hand upon her stomach—and all my savings are gone...*

But she took a deep breath and pulled herself together, ran up the stairs to Lady Eowyn's bedchamber, and tapped on the door.

There was no answer, so she slowly pushed the door open and looked inside. Lady Eowyn lay alone in bed, still asleep. The elf was nowhere to be seen.

Senta entered the bedchamber and closed the door quietly behind her.

"My lady?" she said softly. The woman stirred. "My lady?" she repeated, more loudly.

Lady Eowyn suddenly sat bolt upright, fully awake.

"Senta!" she cried. "What are you doing here? Where is Legolas? Oh—" She picked up a piece of parchment lying on the pillow beside her, read it, grinned, and coloured.

Senta cleared her throat.

"I do not need any assistance, Senta," said Lady Eowyn. "Why not sit down and tell me about yourself, and we can *pretend* that you have dressed me?"

Senta sat down and watched as the lady took a clean shift, a dark blue gown, and matching boots from a clothes chest and laid them out on the bed, then walked into the bathing room to wash.

"How long have you been in service, Senta?"

"Almost two years." Senta looked at the gown. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen—a deep, deep, blue velvet, embroidered with pale red-gold autumn leaves. The leaves looked almost real...

"And do you have a young man?"

"I—I—no my lady, not now—" Senta rose and walked towards the bed, intending to look more closely at the gown. But the moment she stood, an intense pain pierced the small of her back and travelled right down through her belly and between her legs. She clutched the bedpost. *Oh! Oh Gods!* she thought. The pain eased slightly and she pressed her hand to her stomach. *Is this it? Is this why he said to stay in bed?*

"Senta?"

Another pain wracked the girl's body. "Oh gods," she cried, "Oh, gods! Oh, my lady!" And Lady Eowyn—half-naked—was beside her instantly, supporting her, lowering her gently onto the bed.

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"Your—your gown," gasped Senta, as another pain crippled her.

"*Shhhhhh*," said Lady Eowyn. "Are you with child, Senta?"

"I—yes, my lady—oh!"

"I will be back in a moment." She ran into the bathing room and reappeared with a towel. "Trust me," she said, gently, and Senta felt the lady raise her skirts, carefully place the towel between her legs, and smooth the skirts back down.

Then she disappeared again.

Senta panicked. "My lady?"

"I am here," she said. "I am going to dress and then I will fetch a healer." Moments later she was crouching before Senta, wearing the beautiful blue gown. "I will be as quick as I can," she said.

"Thank you, my lady. I am so sorry—*ohhhhh*!"

Lady Eowyn stroked her hair. "*Shhhhhh*," she said, soothingly.

Senta closed her eyes and tried to master the pain. She heard Lady Eowyn open the bedchamber door, but she did not leave. Instead, Senta heard quiet voices, and she kept her eyes tightly closed. A moment later Lady Eowyn was beside her again, taking hold of her hand. "I have sent someone else to fetch the healer, Senta, so I will stay with you," she said.

"Thank you, my lady—oh!—oh!—he did not tell me it would hurt so much!" Senta cried.

"Who did not tell you?"

"The—oh—the apothecary, my lady—"

"An apothecary! Did he give you something to take, Senta? To kill the child?"

Senta sobbed, "Yes! Yes! I did not want to, but—"

"*Shhhhh*. I know. I understand. But he is a wicked man, Senta. You should have gone to the palace healer."

"He would not have helped me, my lady."

She heard Lady Eowyn sigh. "No. No, you are right, of course. Men are very good at making women pay for being the victims of other men. How did you find the apothecary, Senta?"

"My friend Romilde told me, my lady. It was very hard to find—*ohhhhh*!" Senta sobbed in pain and misery, "I wish it would stop."

"It will stop, Senta, but not for a while. I am sorry; I should not be troubling you with all of these questions." She took Senta's hand, and held it through the contractions.

At length, there was a knock on the door. "Come in," she called.

...

Eowyn was shooed from the bedchamber by Prince Imrahil's healer, Master Hagen. "You have done very well so far, but you know nothing of midwifery, my lady," he said. "Leave it to us."

At least, she thought, as she promised to return later, *if Hagen turns out to be an insensitive*

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dolt, Dínendal will be gentle with her.

She found Florestan, Eomer's secretary—who had arrived with a message when she had been leaving earlier, and whom she had sent to fetch the healer—hovering outside the door.

"Will she be all right, my lady?"

"Yes, I believe so, but it will have to take its course." She had a thought, and stared at him. "Do you know her, Florestan?"

"We sat together at dinner yesterday, my lady. I did not know she was your maid."

"You had never met her before that?"

"No, my lady—

"Oh! You think the child is mine? Nay, my lady, it is not. I had never met her before yesterday. She told me..." His voice trailed away.

"What?"

"It was private, my lady."

Eowyn continued to look at him expectantly; he did not resist her long.

"She told me that her betrothed had been killed in a hunting accident, my lady."

"Oh." *That would explain it*, thought Eowyn. *Poor Senta. And poor Florestan, too, for he is clearly besotted with a girl whose heart already belongs to a dead man. Still, people's feelings change—who at Helm's Deep would have thought Legolas the love of my life?*

"Do you want to wait in the sitting room downstairs?"

"I would rather wait here, my lady, if you do not mind," said Florestan.

Eowyn nodded. Then she ran downstairs to find Legolas and Aragorn, leaving the lovesick secretary leaning against the doorjamb.

...

Legolas' note had told Eowyn—amongst other, more intimate, things—that the leaders of the previous day's search parties would be meeting in Aragorn's apartment to discuss how best to find the apothecary. She needed to catch them before they left to start the search. She ran across the courtyard, up the staircase to Aragorn's apartment and burst in through the door.

Seven pairs of eyes—Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, Haldir, Faramir, Eomer and Imrahil—stared at her.

"What is it, melmenya?" asked Legolas.

"I have news of the apothecary," she said, a little breathlessly. "The girl you appointed as my lady's maid, Prince Imrahil, is his latest victim—she has taken some of his foul herbs and even now is miscarrying her child."

"Then should we not be with her, meleth nín?" said Legolas getting up from his chair.

"No, my love, Master Dínendal and Prince Imrahil's healer are with her. She will be fine." She squeezed his arm, then turned to speak to the entire company. "She told me that she learned about the apothecary from a scullery maid called Romilde. The shop is apparently very hard to

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find, but is somewhere in the region of Broad Gate." She turned back to Legolas. "I think it was the apothecary that I saw with Senta when we first arrived—"

"The man who 'walked over your grave'," said Legolas.

"Yes. It seems I was right to distrust him. And I think I remember where he was standing, but it might be wise to question the girl, Romilde, too."

Imrahil sent a servant to fetch her.

"We must find the father of Senta's child," said Legolas, softly, to Eowyn, as they waited. "He must face what he has done."

"I think the father is dead, my love," said Eowyn. "*Shhhhhh*. I will explain later."

...

Romilde arrived with the steward, Master Reimar, who had already spent most of the night trying to get information from her; the girl was very reluctant to tell a bunch of interfering old men anything about the apothecary.

"He is the only person a girl can turn to when she is in trouble, your Highness," she said to Imrahil and curtseyed, impudently.

"Romilde!" cried Reimar, in warning, and Eowyn saw anger flare in Imrahil's normally calm, worldly eyes. But she liked the girl's spirit, so she decided to intervene.

"Romilde," she said, "this man is not helping you. He is selling you a poison that may leave you barren, or even kill you—your friend Senta is lying upstairs in agony at this very moment. And he supplies other poisons, too, to kidnappers and murderers. He supplied a poison that was used to harm one of our friends—King Elessar's brother." She pointed to Aragorn. "Will you not tell us where to find this terrible man?"

Romilde looked at Aragorn. He had a kind, gentle face and she imagined that his brother must look the same... So why would anyone want to hurt him? But then, she had only this woman's word to go on, and how could she be sure she could trust *her*? *What does she know about anything that affects a girl like me?* she thought. *Look at her—rich, beautiful: just look at that gown! And she has a highborn man—thing—who thinks that the sun shines out of her arse. Why should I listen to her?*

"If you are worried that you or your friends might need—um—*help* in the future," continued Eowyn, "Prince Imrahil has said that, from now on, girls in need will be treated by the palace healer. There will be no questions, no accusations; they will be treated in complete confidence. They will be safe with the healer, Romilde, and he will not force them to hand over their life savings for the treatment."

"Do you swear it?" asked Romilde.

Eowyn looked at Imrahil, questioningly. After a moment, he nodded his assent. "Yes," said Eowyn. "On Prince Imrahil's behalf, I swear it."

"What if they want to keep their babies?" asked Romilde.

"Then they can come to live with us, in Eryn Carantaur—with Prince Imrahil's permission," said Legolas. "We will find them a place to live and light work to do, and they can stay with us until they have had their babies and are ready to return here."

Romilde thought for a moment. "Very well," she said, with a conspicuous lack of gratitude. "I

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shall take you to within sight of the shop. But I will not go too close, for I do not want to be seen by the apothecary."

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Chapter 5: Immortality

Even with Romilde's help, and her own memory of seeing the apothecary standing outside it, the shop proved difficult to find, though once they had found it, Eowyn could not say exactly why it had been so elusive.

The apothecary must be using some sort of spell, she thought, I to hide it from all but his customers' eyes.

Though drab and grimy, the outside of the shop was unremarkable, except for the thick wooden planks that had been tacked over the door and the windows. *It looks as if they have been there forever, thought Eowyn, yet Senta was here only two days ago.*

Gimli drew his axe and made short work of the planks on the door, then set about clearing the windows, and letting in some light, whilst Aragorn, Legolas and Eowyn ventured inside to look for any traces of the shop's owner, or clues to his whereabouts.

Even with the planks removed, the shop was dark and gloomy but as Eowyn's eyes adjusted to the light—and the overpoweringly sharp smell—she stared in amazement. Every available space—the walls, the heavy wooden counter, the desk, the chairs, the floor, the ceiling beams—everything was covered with bottles and jars and pots and twists and bundles of strange and exotic substances.

There were bottles of liquid, some of it thick and dark, like treacle, some of it thin and brightly coloured. There were jars of powder—white, bright yellow, rusty red, and green, like dried herbs. There were jars of ointment, some of them marked with a skull—were they poison? There were bundles of twigs and dried plants and tree bark. There was the articulated jaw of some terrifying creature with a wide pointed mouth and several rows of cruel, triangular teeth. There was a strange dried fish, round like a ball, its body covered in spikes. There were—

Eowyn heard Legolas cry out in horror, and she hurried to his side.

Standing on the floor behind the counter was a large glass jar containing a pickled baby.

"Dear gods," she whispered.

"I will kill this vile orc," said Legolas. He knelt before the jar, placed his hand over his heart and, bowing his head, whispered elvish words of comfort to the spirit of the little victim. Eowyn's eyes filled with tears. She placed her hand on his shoulder.

"In here," called Aragorn from the room at the back of the shop.

Eowyn hesitated for a moment, then squeezed Legolas' shoulder and left to join Aragorn.

"This is where Elladan was kept," he said, pointing to a makeshift bed in the corner of the room. "That is Elladan's glove."

"We need to search the apothecary's papers," said Eowyn. "We need to know where he is and what he intends to do next."

Aragorn agreed, and began searching the back room. Eowyn returned to the shop and looked around. *The most likely places, she thought, are the desk and that small strong box mounted in the wall.*

"Gimli," she said, "can you open this?"

Two blows of Gimli's axe left its door hanging off its hinges, but the strong box contained only

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jars of powder.

"This stuff must be truly vile—or valuable—or both—to be kept under lock and key," said Gimli.

Eowyn moved on to the desk. To her surprise, the apothecary seemed to keep his records in the common tongue, though most of the language was technical. She looked through the untidy pile of papers, but could see nothing relevant to Elladan. Then she pulled out each of the desk drawers in turn, checking their contents.

Nothing.

Wait a minute—she thought, *what is this?* She picked up an open book lying beside the stack of papers and read the title:

*THE ELIXIR OF LIFE
and how it may be used
to achieve immortality.
Together with a description
of all the ingredients required,
where they may be obtained,
and how they must be combined.*

"Have you found anything, melmenya?" asked Legolas.

"I am not sure," she answered, and she tucked the book under her arm, intending to have a better look at it later.

...

After searching the shop thoroughly, the four friends left—closing the door behind them, but not restoring the planks—and began walking slowly back towards the castle. Once they had reached the market place, Legolas stopped them.

"He was there, Aragorn."

"What?"

"Our eyes were cheated by some spell, *mellon nín*, but I could feel him there. He was in the shop with us. I did not say anything then because I thought it better that he did not know we knew. I suggest you keep a guard posted beside the shop—sooner or later, that Balrog will reappear and the guard can take him."

Aragorn nodded. "We will need several people to maintain a watch," he said, thinking aloud; "we must disguise them, perhaps as carpenters, or as stonemasons repairing one of the buildings opposite; and they must all have some knowledge of spells, for our friend must be properly restrained once they have captured him. I have one of my own guards in mind—and I will talk to Imrahil, Eomer and Faramir to see if we can use any of their men."

...

"Curse the woman," cried Herzog, emerging from the shadow he had cast around himself. "Those dolts had seen nothing. But *she* is sharp. Too sharp for her own good. It will be a pleasure to help Wolfram have his way with her."

...

On the way back to their apartment, Legolas and Eowyn stopped at the castle healing rooms to enquire after Senta.

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They were greeted by Master Dínenal, who was sitting in Master Hagen's study, reading a book about the diseases of old age. When Legolas asked about Senta, Dínenal held his finger to his lips, then led them to the women's healing room and pointed to the bed in the corner.

Eowyn smiled at the sight before her. Senta lay in the bed, sleeping peacefully. On a chair beside her, also asleep, sat Florestan, holding her hand. And on the nightstand beside the bed, at the top of his cage, sat *Sweep*, his little head tucked under his wing.

Eowyn turned to Legolas and he put his arm around her waist and led her out into the corridor.

"It seems that we no longer need to worry about her, *melmenya*. She and *Sweep* have found themselves a protector. He is not the father, though, is he?"

"No, my love. She told him that her betrothed had been killed in a hunting accident. And it may be a little early for us to assume that all will be well with them. But Florestan is certainly in love with her and he is a patient, resourceful man. I think we can be optimistic."

...

Legolas had been quiet since they had returned from the healing room.

He was troubled by the dead baby in the shop, thought Eowyn, and by Senta's abortion. He has seen death on the battlefield but he is not used to the everyday fragility of mortal lives.

"My love," she said softly, kneeling beside him. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Legolas raised his hand and, smiling sadly, stroked her hair. "It is time, *melmenya*," he said. "Time to talk to Imrahil."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

He slipped his hand behind her neck and gently pulled her forward. "Eowyn *nín*," he whispered, kissing her lips, "given the choice I would never be parted from you, not for one instant. But this is something I must do alone."

"I understand, my love; but if you should need me, Legolas, I will be here. You need only send for me."

He placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. And Eowyn found the formality of his gesture even more moving than a smile or a kiss.

He rose, and walked to the door but, as his hand touched the latch, he suddenly stopped.

A moment later he had swept her off the floor and was devouring her mouth, crushing her body against his. Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. He laid her gently on the bed, and went out of the door, leaving Eowyn sprawling on her back, panting for breath.

...

Wolfram had entered the castle by his usual route and was now perching upon his gargoyle, watching the woman.

He had seen the elf kiss her and leave her lying—provocatively open-legged—on the bed. And, after some minutes, he had seen her struggle to her feet and walk to the full-length mirror by the window.

She was wearing a deep blue gown that clung to every curve of her body. Wolfram watched her raise each arm in turn and undo the lacings down the sides, then slip her arms out of the

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sleeves and let the gown drop to the floor. Now she was wearing nothing but a short white shift and a pair of blue boots.

Wolfram imagined using his knees to force those long slim legs apart...

The woman examined her face in the mirror, then—unexpectedly—drew the shift off over her head. Completely naked now, apart from the boots, she looked like one of the high class whores from the brothel in Bell Lane. *Gods, thought Wolfram, a man could make a mint selling her favours. And still have enough left to enjoy himself...*

The woman moved away from the mirror and Wolfram's eyes followed her from the bedchamber to the bathing room. This, he had to see. He swung his leg off the gargoyle and, keeping in shadow, climbed swiftly across the castle wall, dropping lightly onto the balcony. If he stayed slightly back from the bathing room window he could still see her without risk of being seen.

She had pinned her hair up and was washing herself with a large, yellow sponge, dipping it in the soapy water and drawing it lightly over the curves and planes of her body, leaving the skin damp and taut and glistening. She ran the sponge over her breasts and Wolfram held his breath as a moan tried to escape his throat.

He reached into his breeches...

...

Legolas nodded to the two guards standing outside Prince Imrahil's private chambers then knocked briskly on the door, displaying a confidence he did not feel. For a moment, he wished he had accepted Eowyn's offer of support. *But we shall be discussing things I would not want her to hear, he thought. And, besides, I have already burdened her with my sea longing; this is a demon I must face by myself.*

Imrahil opened the door and Legolas, in his nervousness, almost laughed out loud at the look of surprise on his face.

But he controlled himself. "We need to talk," he said.

Imrahil glanced at the guards, then motioned Legolas to step inside. He closed and locked the door.

"About what?" he asked.

"You know about what," said Legolas, "or you would not have locked the door."

...

Eowyn dried herself, slipped on a comfortable old gown, picked up the book she had taken from the apothecary's shop and curled up in a chair by the fire to wait for Legolas.

She opened the book. *THE ELIXIR OF LIFE*, she read, *and how it may be used to achieve immortality. Together with a description of all the ingredients required, where they may be obtained, and how they must be combined...*

She turned to the list of ingredients.

Dried hellebore.....10 grains

Corpse powder.....3 grains

Mûmak gall.....3 ounces

Fresh elf seed.....2 drams

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Eowyn leaped from her chair.

Fresh elf seed!

She paced back and forth across the room. She needed to show this to Legolas, but she could not interrupt him now.

Should she go to Aragorn?

No, she thought. I promised him I would be here if he needed me. This will wait a while. The guards are watching for the apothecary—he will not escape. Legolas is safe for now. I will show him this when he returns.

...

Imrahil sighed. "Sit down," he said. "Do you want a drink? Wine? Water? A cordial?"

Legolas was about to refuse, but his mouth suddenly felt very dry. "Water—please."

Imrahil handed him a glass. Legolas sat silently for a moment, examining the exquisite pattern cut into the crystal. Then, without raising his eyes, he said, "I am sorry, Imrahil, if my recent behaviour has been like a spoilt child. But the truth is, when you touched me in your tent outside Minas Tirith, you abused my trust—and it has taken me three years to come to terms with it."

"I abused your trust?" said Imrahil, incredulously. "You came to me and lay on my bed, half-naked and very obviously aroused, and then acted like a virgin girl when I tried to give you the comfort you so plainly wanted—"

Legolas stared at him. "From Eowyn! How could you think—how could you *possibly* think—that I wanted it from you? I was in love with Eowyn! Eomer had just announced her betrothal to Faramir. I needed to talk. I needed to open my heart to someone. I thought you were my friend. I thought I could trust you. I opened my heart to you—"

"You told me nothing of your feelings!" cried Imrahil. "You talked of some—some remote being—some ideal of perfection, not a woman of flesh and blood that you wanted to bed..." His voice trailed off. Then he added, "Your true tastes seemed otherwise."

After a long silence Legolas said, "I was dreaming of her, when you—when I awoke with your hands on me." Tears filled his eyes, but he swallowed hard, and tried to control the burning in his throat.

"But now Eowyn knows," he said, "I have told her what happened."

"And?"

"And she still loves me," he whispered.

"Did you really doubt that she would?"

"You do not know the circumstances..."

Imrahil sighed. "What do you want, Legolas?"

"I want for it never to have happened, but I cannot have that. So I want to forget that it happened," he said. "And I have tried, but I cannot. You made me feel unclean. You made me feel guilty. You made me feel that I had misunderstood everything, everyone, throughout my whole life. You made me doubt myself, and doubt others. It was only when I grew closer to

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Eowyn that my heart and my spirit began to heal. But I will always be diminished by what you did—"

"I thought you wanted it!"

"I KNOW YOU DID!"

Legolas calmed himself, and repeated, more quietly, "I know you did, Imrahil."

"So where does that leave us? What do you want me to do? What do you want me to say?"

"Eowyn says that you did not mean to harm me—"

"She is right."

"Make me believe it."

"Oh, Legolas!" Imrahil sighed. "You came to me distressed and I had no idea why. I had never seen you show interest in anyone, male or female, but I do not exaggerate when I say that it was very obvious that you were aroused. I touched you and you responded. You did not say nay. Not until afterwards. If I diminished you—as you say I did—then I am sorry, but my intention was only to comfort you."

"Tell me, Legolas, if it had been Eowyn that had touched you—if you had woken to find Eowyn making love to you—would you have been upset?"

Legolas stared at him.

"At the time, I thought—old fool that I was—I thought that I might be to you as Eowyn is now..."

"Oh gods," Legolas whispered. "*Why?*"

"What do you mean, why?"

"Why do men think of me in that way? Is it something I do?"

"You are an elf! You are beautiful! Surely you know that? The way you look, the way you behave—all the grace and beauty of a woman with more than the strength of a man..."

"It gets worse," whispered Legolas, his voice cracking. He rose from the chair, walked to one of the bay windows and, grasping the mullions, pressed his forehead against the cool pane of glass.

...

Wolfram stayed on the balcony, watching, until the woman had fallen asleep in the chair. Then he approached the door and carefully tested the latch. It lifted easily, but made a loud clicking noise, so he stepped quickly back into the shadows and waited.

But the woman did not wake and, after a moment, Wolfram pulled the door open, stepped silently into the bedchamber, and approached her, stretching out his hand and drawing it, less than an inch above her skin, over her cheek, her throat and the shadowy cleft between her breasts. Then he lifted a single tendril of golden hair and let it slide between his fingers and fall back upon her bare shoulder.

The woman stirred, but still did not wake.

This was easier than Wolfram had expected and he was sorely tempted to take her now,

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bound, gagged and struggling.

Gods, yes!

But he needed to deal with the elf first, because without the elf there would be no five hundred gold pieces—and very probably no more work from Herzog.

And Herzog was one of his best customers.

So he would have to be patient.

"Goodnight, my lady," he whispered. "You do not know what you are missing. But you shall—and soon." And he left, closing the balcony door behind him.

...

Legolas was standing with his back to Imrahil, his forehead still pressed against the glass, but Imrahil was not about to let him hide from reality much longer.

"Legolas," he cried, joining the elf at the window, but careful not to touch him, "you are fair, even among your own kind. Men will always find you attractive; women will always find you attractive. That is your curse!

"But you have chosen Eowyn and she has accepted you. And if you are happy with her, if she is all you want in life, what do the desires of anyone else matter? What do I matter? What does something I did, by mistake, three years ago, matter, if you have *her*?"

Legolas was silent for a very long time. "You are right," he sighed, at last. "She *is* all I want in life and I do have her. And when I am with her I am so happy." He turned to face Imrahil. "But I came to you tonight because I am afraid. I have seen things here—death, horrors—that have made me fear losing her. I would die if I lost her, Imrahil—nay, I *will* die, for I *will* lose her, sooner or later. And I am afraid of anything that might taint the short time that we do have together.

"That is why I do not want *us* to be enemies, Imrahil." He took a step towards the prince, intending to close the distance between them, but lost his nerve. "Perhaps, if we were to behave as friends, we would become so again. You have been patient with me tonight," he continued. "And my request is entirely selfish, but—"

"Legolas—I cannot make you any promises. I sympathise. I do. But I did not want to be your friend that night in Minas Tirith, and I am not sure I could be your friend now."

"Can we at least be civil?" asked Legolas.

"Have I ever been anything else to you, since that night?" asked Imrahil.

"No," Legolas admitted, softly. "No, you have not." He sighed. "It is I who have been uncivil. It is *I* who must mend my ways."

...

Legolas needed Eowyn—he needed to hold her and to be held by her. He ran across the castle courtyard, took the stairs two at a time, and threw open the door to his bedchamber.

Eowyn was curled up in a chair by the fire, sleeping peacefully, but Legolas was overwhelmed by an aura of menace in the room, as if something had recently threatened her.

Oh Valar, he thought, *I am so afraid of losing her that I am sensing danger in every shadow.*

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He carefully took a book from her hands, and laid it on the dressing table, then lifted her into his arms, carried her to their bed, and gently laid her down.

"Mmmmmmm," she sighed, "Legolas?"

"Shhhhh, melmenya. Go back to sleep."

"But I have been waiting for you," she said. "I wanted to tell you something."

"What, melmenya?"

"I," she whispered, confused, "I—I have—I have missed you."

"Oh, Eowyn nín..." He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tightly.

"You are still dressed," she said. And she opened his tunic and snuggled against his chest. Then he felt her unlacing his leggings.

"You are too tired, melmenya," he said, catching her hand.

"I want to feel you inside me," she answered.

"Oh, Eowyn," he whispered, "I need you, too, *meleth nín*, but you really are too tired—"

"No," she said in a small voice, "Just lie with me, inside me, and let us sleep together."

...

Legolas lay awake, singing softly to the stars, with Eowyn sleeping in his arms.

How could an elf be happier? he thought.

She could be immortal, came the reply.

Legolas stopped singing. *That was a wicked thought. Immortality and mortality are gifts Ilúvatar. Whether a true immortal seeks mortality or a mortal seeks immortality—both rebel against the one.*

He must not think it. And he most certainly must not plant the desire for immortality in *her*.

The Valar gave her to you, he thought. *Trust them.*

But I want her. I want her forever, came the reply.

And he buried his face in her hair and wept.

...

Eowyn awoke to find herself crushed against Legolas' chest, his arms locked around her like iron bands.

"Legolas," she whispered.

He stirred but did not wake.

His talk with Imrahil clearly did not go well, thought Eowyn. *And I was no support—I was asleep when he returned. And—gods!—I did not tell him about the book.*

"Legolas," she said, more loudly.

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She felt him wake, his body becoming alert, but his grip on her did not relax.

"What is wrong, my love?" she asked, softly.

"I am sorry," he said, and released her, kissing the top of her head.

She hesitated. Then, "How did you fare with Imrahil?" she asked.

"We have agreed to be civil."

"Did talking to him help?"

Legolas sighed. "I do not know, *melmenya*. Only time will tell."

She hugged him sympathetically. "I found something last night—the book I took from the apothecary's shop describes a recipe—some foolish stuff about an elixir that confers immortality—that contains *elven seed*! That must be why that *warg* used Elladan as he did..."

"Immortality?" said Legolas, softly.

"Yes." Eowyn raised her head to look at him. "It is terrible, Legolas. Terrible. The recipe requires a large quantity of—of seed, and it must either be fresh or,"—she bit her lip—"or both testicles must be dried and ground up. And the victim must be a full-blooded elf. I suppose that is why he returned Elladan. We must tell Aragorn and Prince Imrahil—and decide how we are going to protect you and Haldir, and the others."

"Immortality..." said Legolas.

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...

Chapter 6: The next victim

Eowyn looked in the mirror and smiled.

Her gown, though hastily finished for Elfwine's Naming Ceremony, had been made by her own elven seamstress at Eryn Carantaur, and was magnificent—rich, pale rose velvet with deep bands of exotic flowers, in wine red and rose gold, embroidered across the bodice and sleeves. *And I look quite exotic myself*, she thought. *I look almost elven.*

Since Senta was still recovering in the healing rooms, Arwen had insisted on sending one of her own ladies to dress Eowyn's hair. The girl, Richardis, a close friend of Elladan and Elrohir, combed through Eowyn's long, golden tresses and began to twist them into an elaborate chignon.

"No..." said a gentle voice behind them. "Do not bind it."

Eowyn laughed. "I cannot take part in Elfwine's Naming Ceremony with my hair loose, my love."

"Why not, melmenya? It is beautiful."

"I could pin just the front part, like this, and leave the back loose, my lady," said Richardis. "And then put the circlet on like this..."

Eowyn looked to Legolas for his approval.

"Yes, melmenya," he said, with one of his radiant smiles, "you look lovely." He disappeared into the bathing room.

Eowyn caught Richardis' eye in the mirror. "Elves," she said, "are nothing like men."

And the two women exchanged knowing smiles.

...

The ceiling of the Great Hall was supported by thick wooden beams that provided a perfect vantage point from which Wolfram could observe the Naming Ceremony and track his prey.

Beneath the standards of Belfalas and Rohan mounted on the north wall of the hall, stood the proud parents—the King and Queen of Rohan—and their young heir, in the arms of a nurse. Behind them stood the child's three sponsors, Prince Imrahil, a dwarf, and the woman.

Wolfram took a good look at the woman. Now that he knew she was a princess in her own right—the King of Rohan's sister, the laundry woman had said—he wondered why he had not realised it before—normally he had a good nose for the value of a thing. Would not the King of Rohan be willing to pay more than five hundred gold pieces to get his sister back—perhaps as much as a thousand? And elf-boy was apparently a prince, too, and ruler of his own elven kingdom—surely he would pay the same—*Do elves use money?*—to get his woman back.

So perhaps he should just kidnap *her*.

Especially since the elves were being extremely cautious today.

He had followed elf-boy all over the castle—first to the King of Gondor's apartment, then to Prince Imrahil's study, then to the guardhouse, and finally back to his own apartment—and at no time had he been alone. And now all six full-bloods had started moving around in threes and—Wolfram was fairly sure—with a discreet escort of men.

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It would be much easier to take the woman. When she was not with the elf she had no guards and it would be a simple task to overpower her, even without the potion Herzog had promised him.

He watched the woman step forward and take the baby in her arms, reciting the words of the ceremony—Wolfram was too far away to hear, but he knew it was something about her being ready to protect the runt should any harm befall his parents.

I wonder how elf-boy would like that? Raising a man's baby? Wolfram wondered.

Strange that the woman is wearing a sword. It must be part of the ceremony, though he could not remember ever having seen a female sponsor wear a sword before.

He leaned back against the wall and weighed his options.

If I take the elf, all I will get is four hundred gold pieces, though Herzog is a good customer, and I can always have the woman afterwards. If I take the woman as a hostage, I might get as much as two thousand gold pieces if I handle it right—but only if I keep her in reasonable condition.

He decided to wait and see.

...

"You are cold, melmenya," said Legolas.

"It is just the sea breeze," said Eowyn, smiling up at him. "It is damp."

They were walking, with the others who had taken part in the Naming Ceremony, across the castle courtyard to Prince Imrahil's private garden, where they could relax together for a few minutes whilst the Great Hall was prepared for the banquet in honour of little Prince Elfwine.

"I will fetch you your cloak," said Legolas.

"No!" cried Eowyn. "No—you must not go anywhere alone."

"Melmenya!" He laughed.

"I mean it Legolas. It is far too dangerous. At least let Haldir and Eofred go with you—"

But Legolas was already frustrated by the constant presence of his elven and human escorts. "I cannot endure being treated like an elfling, melmenya," he said, "He will not try anything today. Trust me—the castle is far too busy and too well guarded. And I will only be a moment..." And he ran across the courtyard and up the stairs to their apartment.

...

"Foolish elf-boy," said Wolfram, watching Legolas from the rooftop of the Great Hall.

He swung himself over the ridge and ran—crouching low—along the outer edge of the roof, to the north west corner of the castle, where he climbed down onto his usual gargoyle and, from there, onto the elf's balcony.

...

Eowyn's cloak lay on the bed. But, as Legolas reached for it, he was suddenly aware of the same overpowering sense of menace he had felt the night before.

He looked around the bedchamber—where there was nothing out of place—then, through the

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windows, at the balcony.

Yes, the threat was on the balcony.

All his senses fully alert, Legolas drew one of his white knives, moved quietly to the balcony door, and pushed it open.

The odour of something familiar reached his nostrils.

What is that smell? he wondered, his mind feeling strangely sluggish. *Gods, my head hurts.*

He took a single step forward, his vision already clouded, his knees already giving way. Then a hand clamped itself over his nose and mouth, and his body disappeared.

...

Eowyn was panic-stricken, her mind racing. She had no idea how long Legolas had been gone.

I should not have let him go alone, she thought. *Why did I let him go alone?*

"Haldir," she cried. "I am going to look for Legolas. Find Eofred and come up to our apartment." Then she ran across the courtyard and up the spiral staircase, leaving Haldir staring after her, open-mouthed.

The moment she reached the bedchamber she knew something was wrong. Her cloak was still lying on the bed. "Legolas?" she called. "Legolas?"

The door to the balcony was open. *Why would he go out there?* Eowyn ran to the door and wrenched it fully open and, for a split second, she froze at the sight before her.

A small, shadow of a man in a dark cloak had somehow overpowered Legolas and was holding a cloth over his nose and mouth. Legolas was already unconscious, hanging limply in his arms. The man did not appear to be carrying any weapons other than his cowardly oil-soaked rag.

Eowyn drew her sword. "Release him. *Now,*" she said.

The man smiled—the coldest, most chilling smile she had ever seen. "I am sorry my lady," he said, with mock courtesy, "but I cannot do that—this elf is worth money to me. But do not worry. You will see him again when I come back for *you.*" Then he lifted Legolas over his shoulder and—not taking her sword seriously—turned to make his escape off the balcony.

For Eowyn, the world seemed to come to a standstill as she planned her attack. She knew she could not risk a cut to the fiend's upper body, for Legolas' head and shoulders were shielding his back and arms. She would have to strike at his legs and hope that she could bring him down. And she would have to do it before he reached the balcony wall.

Eowyn sprang forward—bringing her left hand to her right in a two handed grip—and slashed downwards. The man screamed in pain and staggered, but he kept his hold on Legolas. Eowyn brought her sword back along the same arc, and the man sank to one knee.

"I have underestimated you, my lady," he gasped through clenched teeth, twisting his upper body towards her. "You are a worthy opponent. I will be back for you." He dropped the elf, scuttled to the balcony wall, and disappeared over the side.

...

"No Haldir! Stay well back!" cried Eowyn, cradling Legolas in her arms. "Eofred, please, come and help me!"

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The man slipped out onto the balcony and knelt beside her. "I should follow him, my lady," he said.

"The other guards will catch him," said Eowyn. "Please help me carry Legolas..."

"Of course, my lady. Here, let me take him." He slipped his arms around Legolas' shoulders and under his knees. "I saw your sword-work, my lady. That was a tidy wound you gave the wretch. He will not be walking straight again."

"Oh—*oh!*" cried Eowyn, trying to catch Legolas' head as Eofred lifted him.

"I will be careful with him, my lady," said Eofred, settling the elf against his chest. "He weighs hardly anything."

Haldir was hovering inside the door, his eyes wild with anger and frustration. Eofred waited until he had stepped well back, then carried Legolas inside and laid him on the bed.

"Haldir," said Eowyn, running to Legolas' side, "please fetch Master Dínendal. Quickly."

"Of course, my lady."

"And Haldir—Aragorn; fetch Aragorn, too." Haldir nodded, and hurried off down the stairs.

"Help will soon be here, my love," she said to Legolas, smoothing his hair. "Eofred, take my jewellery box from the dressing table—yes—unlock it and tip out the jewellery—now take it outside, and shut the cloth inside it and leave it out there. We will dispose of it later. Then make sure you wash all traces of that vile oil off your hands."

...

"Although he appears lifeless," said Master Dínendal, "his breathing and his heartbeat are both normal, and—from the way his eyes respond to light—I suspect that he is still, to some extent, aware of what is going on around him. I do not think the poison will do him any lasting harm, though I do expect him to sleep for at least another twenty hours, and then to fall into a natural, healing sleep almost immediately after he recovers."

"That is good news," said Aragorn.

"But that creature is still on the loose," said Eowyn, resuming her place beside Legolas and taking his hand, "and could come back for him—or for one of the others. If only I had finished him off, but I could not—not without fear of injuring Legolas."

"No one could have done more than you did, my lady," said Haldir. "Legolas owes you his life." He placed his hand upon her shoulder.

"Who is he?" said Aragorn. "How is he getting in and out of the castle? How is it that he can move about unseen?" He looked questioningly at Imrahil, but the prince shook his head. "Describe him again, Eowyn."

"He was—he was nothing. No one. Medium height, medium build, ordinary face, wearing a dark cloak. He was very agile—though not, please gods, any more."

"Perhaps that is your answer, Aragorn," said Imrahil. "He looks unremarkable so no one gives him a second look."

Eofred cleared his throat. "My lady," he said, diffidently, "I believe I heard him say something to you."

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"Did you?" Eowyn frowned. "I cannot remember."

"I believe he said he would back for *you*, my lady."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Aragorn.

Eofred hesitated. "Well, I—I could not swear to it, your Majesty." He looked to Haldir for confirmation, but Haldir shook his head.

"I did not hear anything," said Haldir, "but would it not be wise to keep Lady Eowyn under guard as well, as a precaution?"

"I will be staying here, with Legolas," said Eowyn firmly.

"Very well, then," said Aragorn. "We will guard you both, here, until the villain has been caught."

...

It had taken every ounce of Wolfram's determination and cunning to get out of the castle.

His normal routes had been impossible—he could not climb far and there was no chance of his walking out through the gate unnoticed—not this time. But there was a third route, which Wolfram had spotted the first time he had found his way into the castle drains. It was dirty and disgusting but, physically, it was easy, and he had kept it in reserve for an emergency.

Wolfram's legs were almost dead, but his arms were still strong and he had managed to slip off the balcony and climb into the next apartment. There he had spent a few moments tearing a shirt into strips and binding his legs—if he was going to escape he had to avoid bleeding to death.

And he must not leave a bloody trail.

Then he had found a clean pair of breeches, pulled them on, picked up a quarterstaff to use as a walking stick, and made his way out of the apartment and slowly down the spiral staircase.

And luck had been on his side.

He had emerged exactly where he needed to be, at the north east corner of the castle courtyard, next to the surface drain, and a convenient commotion in the far corner—Prince Imrahil giving orders to a handful of guards and the big elf urging the King of Gondor across the courtyard—had drawn all eyes away from him.

Wolfram had slipped into the drain unseen and had immediately been engulfed by the filth beneath.

Once out of the castle, he had dragged himself to the village of hovels and taverns and stews that stood by the docks and sought out the small boy he often used as a messenger.

And whilst the boy's mother helped him clean himself—as best she could—he had sent the boy, who was bright and quick and more than a match for any guards that might be watching the apothecary, to fetch Herzog.

...

Brenal had been peering out of the window for almost eight hours.

He had taken his eyes off the back door of the apothecary's shop only twice—to relieve himself—and, even then, he had made sure that the lady of the house, who had insisted on keeping

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watch with him, had covered for him.

It had been eight hours of nothing.

No comings. No goings. No lights. No smoke from the chimney. Not even a twitching of the curtain—if you could call that filthy rag a curtain.

Nothing.

Actually, less than nothing, thought Brenal.

King Elessar had warned them that the apothecary might use a spell to cloud their vision. *And I think he has. It is as if some invisible smoke is shrouding the door and windows. Even the stonework is—hazy...*

By the gods, what is that?

Brenal pressed his face to the windowpane and craned his neck to get a better view down into the alley.

"Can you see something?" asked the lady, excitedly.

"I am not sure," replied Brenal. "No, I cannot believe—"

"What is it?"

"A small boy! He is knocking on the door of the shop."

"But the shop is empty. We have seen no sign of life in all the time we have been watching."

"No. But he—he—the door is still closed but he appears to be talking to someone. He is pointing down the alley. Now he is waiting..."

"Let me see!"

Brenal moved aside to give her better access to the window.

"Yes, you are right. How strange... Look!"

The boy was now walking quickly down the alley.

"It is as though," said the woman, thoughtfully, "he is plucking at someone's sleeve, trying to hurry him along, but there is no one there."

"There is a shadow there," said Brenal. "Keep a watch on that door for me, Mistress. I am going to report this to King Elessar. Right away."

...

"Gods!" said Herzog pulling out his handkerchief and holding it to his nose. "I expect to be well paid for this. This is not part of our business."

"You will get your money; I know a way to make several thousand gold pieces," said Wolfram. "Now fix me up. I need to be able to walk."

Herzog stripped the bindings from Wolfram's legs shaking his head.

"Ílúvatar! Who did this to you?" he asked. "Boiling water! And clean rags," he called to the

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woman.

"She did—the elf's woman—she protected him like a she-warg defending its cubs—*agh!*"

"Keep still!" said Herzog, sponging away the caked blood. "I will have to excise this; it is filthy and already beginning to fester—bring me something he can bite on—a leather strap," he called to the woman.

Herzog held the blade of his long, thin knife in the flames of the fire for a few moments. "Put the strap in his mouth," he instructed, "and hold his arms behind his head. I need more light," he added, turning to the boy. "Bring that lamp over here, and hold it over his legs."

Working quickly and efficiently, one wound at a time, Herzog sliced away the infected flesh, ignoring Wolfram's stifled cries—"Hold him still!"—drawing the raw edges together, stitching up the wounds and covering them with a thick layer of cleansing paste.

Finally, he bound each leg tightly with clean rags.

"I will leave you some of the ointment. You will need to clean the wounds and renew the dressings every twelve hours. Do not forget—otherwise, the wounds will fester."

"Give me something for the pain—I need to walk," Wolfram gasped, between harsh, ragged breaths.

"Do not walk for at least a week if you want these wounds to heal well."

"I need to go back for the woman."

"Do not be foolish—"

"She is the King of Rohan's sister, and they say she was the King of Gondor's mistress before he married, and now she belongs to the elf prince... They will all pay a fortune to get her back... And the elves may try to rescue her... If I bring her here, we will have everything we want."

"Wait until your wounds have healed—"

"No! The Naming Ceremony is over. They will leave as soon as the elf prince recovers—maybe even sooner... I must strike now—*gods!* Give me something for the pain! I will pay you!"

Herzog reluctantly opened his bag, sorted amongst its contents, and removed a small, brown glass vial.

"This is the most powerful anodyne known to man. Used properly, it will give you up to twelve hours free of pain—you will be able to walk and climb as if you had never been injured. But, if I give it to you, there are rules you must follow.

"First, the dosage—you can take up to five drops every four hours. But never take more than five drops, and do not take more than three doses, or the anodyne will deaden your heart and stop it beating. Secondly, take *care*—do not injure yourself whilst your body feels no pain or you may sustain a fatal wound and not know until sensation returns and it is too late. Thirdly, remember that this is only buying you time—it is an anodyne, not a cure—and when sensation does return, the pain will be intense.

"Finally, if you want it, you must pay me now." Herzog thought for a moment. *He is desperate.* "Forty gold pieces."

"Gods!" gasped Wolfram, but whether from pain or outrage Herzog could not tell. "Very well...

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...

I will send the boy to fetch the money. And then, when I am on my feet again, I will take my beautiful lady—once and for all."

...

"Varin—you remember him, a handy boy—he will be coming with me to Minas Tirith and we will be repairing the mechanical waterfall in the Queen's garden. But we may need a labourer to help us with the plants. Can you think of anyone? If not, we will just have to get rid of all that *niphredil*-stuff ourselves..."

Legolas had been sleeping for almost five hours. But, because Master Dínendal had told her that he was probably aware of his surroundings, Eowyn was insisting that all his visitors talk to him as though he were awake.

Senta had slipped across from the women's healing room to see him and had told him of *Sweep's* latest adventure—flying out of the window, around the courtyard, and back onto the balcony. She had been afraid, she said, that he might fly away, but *Sweep* had returned to her when she called him and had hopped back into his cage by himself.

Merry and Pippin had told to him about winter in the Shire, describing the icicles hanging from the thatch of Hobbiton, and reliving the joys of drinking mugs of mulled ale around the fire at Bag End with Sam and Rosie. And Merry had invited him and Eowyn to spend their next Yuletide at Crickhollow.

Haldir had described his recent visit to Lorien—how he had rambled despondently through the great mallorn trees and climbed up to the decayed flets, remembering happier times—and how the thought of his future in Eryn Carantaur, with Legolas and Eowyn, had cheered him.

And now Gimli was trying to goad the elf into waking.

Or perhaps he is just enjoying being able to say whatever he likes, with no fear of a witty retort, Eowyn thought. "Pray to the Valar that he will recover, Haldir," she whispered.

"Of course he will recover, my lady. He is a fighter—and he has something to fight for..." Haldir was tentatively reaching for her hand when Aragorn burst through the door, followed by a tall, dark man Eowyn recognised as one of Faramir's soldiers.

"The apothecary has been spotted, we believe," said Aragorn. "Tell them, Brenal."

Brenal described what he had seen—the clouding of his vision whenever he looked directly at the shop, the strange behaviour of the boy, and his impression that a shape or shadow was walking down the alley beside the child.

"It is a pity you did not follow the boy, Brenal," said Aragorn.

"I am sorry, your Majesty. I realise that now but, at the time, I did not trust my eyes. However, the lady of the house is still watching the shop, your Majesty. And if the apothecary returns I am sure she will see him—at least, see something—for that woman misses nothing, believe me."

"Might I make a suggestion, your Majesty?" said Haldir. "You have four elves at your disposal. Set us to watch beside your men. Keep us in pairs, if you fear for our safety, but make use of our eyes and our ears—maybe we can penetrate the shadow this villain has cast, when your own men cannot." He smiled apologetically at Brenal, but Brenal was too good-natured a man to bear any grudge.

Aragorn considered Haldir's suggestion. "It is true," he said, "that Legolas could sense the apothecary's presence when we were in the shop, and I think that Haldir may be right. Will you

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...

permit me to use the March Warden and his men, Eowyn?"

Eowyn thought for a moment. "The danger they would face is not honourable battle but something hidden and altogether more sinister. I do not believe that Legolas would order them to do that—I think he would explain the risks and ask them to volunteer. I am sure that every one of them will agree to help, Aragorn, but please ask them—as he would." She squeezed Legolas' hand.

"Very well. I will leave you and Legolas in Gimli's capable hands. There are guards outside the door, and more at the foot of the staircase. You should be safe. Haldir—let us go to the guardhouse and speak to your men. Come, Brenal."

...

It was not for a good hour after taking the anodyne that Wolfram was able to stand and walk without showing any outward sign of his injuries, but he had spent that hour devising a strategy, such as it was.

I have less than eleven hours, he thought, for I must make sure I am somewhere safe when the pain returns.

I have no idea what I am walking into—where the woman is, whether she is guarded, whether she has been able to describe me to her guards...

I have only one option left.

The moment he could walk, Wolfram paid the woman two gold pieces for her help and her silence—I *must be getting soft*, he thought—and entered Dol Amroth by Dinham Gate. Then he made his way to the castle gatehouse, pausing only to buy two jugs of good, strong ale at *The Pyewyfe* tavern on Camp Lane.

Wolfram had always made a point of being friendly towards the men who guarded the gates of both the city and the castle—*You never know when the effort will pay off*—and he had a feeling that his diligence would be rewarded now.

Luckily there was only one guard on duty in the castle gatehouse, and it was a man he knew well.

"Good evening Torul!" he said, heartily. "I hear you have had some fun and games today! I thought you might welcome a quart..." He slammed a jug of ale down on the table.

Torul looked around furtively, but there was no sign of the Captain of the Guard, so he picked it up. "Cheers!" he said, and took a long draught. "Gods, I needed that!" He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You have no idea what it has been like today."

"They are saying someone attacked one of the elves."

"They are? Gods, news travels fast..." Torul looked around again, but there was still no sign of the Captain, so it was safe to talk. "Yes. Someone attacked one of the elves and knocked him out with some sort of oil. He is still asleep, and will be until tomorrow, they say." Torul took another draught. "The elf's lady caught the villain just in time and sliced off one of his legs—or very nearly."

"So you guards all have extra work?" Wolfram prompted.

"Oh, yes; there are two pairs of guards on every staircase, there are guards following the rest of the elves wherever they go, and there are guards disguised as the-gods-know-what, lurking around the town, looking for one of the suspects."

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"They have a suspect?"

"Some apothecary that has been supplying the kitchen girls with too much spirits and mustard,"—Torul winked—"if you know what I mean. They think he supplied the oil. He may even have designs on parts of the elf, to use in some witchcraft, or so they say."

"That lady must be really something," Wolfram prompted again.

"Face like a goddess, temper like an orc—Princess Eowyn of Rohan, Prince Elf's lady. She is the woman who slew the Witch King of Angmar at Pelennor Field. She is still guarding Prince Elf up in the healing rooms..." Torul drained his jug of ale.

"I would certainly like to get a look at *her*," said Wolfram.

"Forget it, friend," said Torul. "That lady is better guarded than this end of the Harad Road."

But Wolfram, at that very moment, had noticed a jerkin hanging on one of the coat hooks by the gatehouse door...

...

About half an hour later, Wolfram put on the Gondorian guardsman's jerkin and slipped out of the gatehouse, leaving Torul—who had also drained most of Wolfram's jug of ale as well as his own—dozing beside the window.

I have two hours before I need the next dose, thought Wolfram. I must not waste any more time.

He walked purposefully to the south east corner of the courtyard, nodded to the two palace guards at the door, and started down the stairs.

"Wait a minute!" cried one of the guards. "Where are *you* going?"

"The Queen of Gondor wants something from the kitchen," replied Wolfram, calmly.

The palace guards exchanged glances; the second guard shrugged. "Very well," he said, "but you should have told us what you were doing without having to be asked."

Wolfram bowed graciously then ran down the stairs, heading straight for the kitchen. *That stuff of Herzog's is certainly working, he thought. The gods only know what will happen when it wears off.*

The kitchen was busy. Most of the staff was clearing up after the banquet that had been held earlier in the day, but some of the cooks were already preparing a light evening meal. Wolfram made straight for the most important looking man in the kitchen. "Master cook," he said, bowing deeply, "my sovereign lady, the Queen of Gondor, requests a dainty dish for her friend, the Princess Eowyn."

"What are you taking about?" asked the cook.

"You must have heard what happened earlier today—how Princess Eowyn routed the villain who tried to kidnap her elven lord? But the lady is now out of sorts and her Majesty wishes to tempt her appetite with something light but nourishing. Surely you have something for the gallant lady. A delicious syllabub, perhaps? I am sure the Queen—and the *King* of Gondor—will be most grateful."

Ten minutes later, Wolfram emerged into the courtyard carrying a tray.

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...

So far, so good, he thought.

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...

Chapter 7: Kidnapped

Talking his way into the healing rooms proved surprisingly easy.

The guards at the bottom of the staircase were no problem: they waved Wolfram past, wishing Lady Eowyn well. The two men outside the door were more cautious, but even they were convinced by the emblem of the White Tree on his breast. Wolfram opened the door to the men's healing room, stepped inside and looked around.

The room was quite dark. The elf lay sleeping on the bed, with the woman beside him, holding his hand and talking softly. Wolfram had never really looked at them before—never noticed their beauty, never witnessed their love for each other.

But, looking at them now...

Who do they think they are? he thought. *Beautiful, powerful, rich beyond belief—the gold on that bloody gown alone would keep me in food for a year.*

They deserve everything that is coming to them.

...

Legolas had tried again and again to let her know that he could hear her.

He knew what she had done, his brave Shieldmaiden, to protect him and, in his mind's eye, he smiled proudly—though his mouth would not move—and he tried once more to squeeze her hand.

She was telling him about an idea she had had for their garden: a canopied bed where they could sleep beneath the stars during the warmer months, and even, perhaps, during the colder months if she had warm bedclothes. She laughed. "You should have chosen yourself a wife who does not feel the cold," she said, knowing full well how he would have replied to that if he could have spoken.

Oh! How he longed to hold her, kiss her, make love to her! *The moment I can move again*, he thought, *I shall ravish her!* And it was while Legolas was planning this adventure that he heard the door open and was immediately struck by the same malevolence he had felt just before he had been attacked.

Eowyn, he tried to shout, *Eowyn nín, take care!* But his lips could not form the words. He tried to squeeze her hand—tried so hard that he would have crushed her bones if he could have moved—but his body would not respond.

"The Queen of Gondor has sent you a syllabub, my lady," he heard someone say.

"Thank you," said Eowyn, still smiling down at Legolas. "Please put it over there."

Eowyn, Eowyn, meleth nín! Legolas screamed.

But he was forced to watch helplessly as a figure suddenly loomed behind his beloved, and struck her, and she fell forward, senseless, onto his chest.

...

She was far lighter than the half-elf, but she would still be a burden.

Wolfram opened the healing room window and looked out. *The gods do favour the brave!* he thought, for there was a broad ledge running from beneath the window to one of the corner

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towers. *What are these idiots thinking of when they build a castle?*

All Wolfram would have to do was climb up the tower onto the roof and enter through one of the skylights, then he could use his normal route, through the privy shaft, to get out! Yes, the woman would be a burden, especially climbing up the tower, but she was worth at least two thousand gold pieces—and if it became a matter of life or death, he would simply drop her.

Wolfram walked over to the bed, and—taking a short length of rope from his pocket—tied the woman's wrists together. Then he ducked his head between her arms and stood, hauling her up onto his back, like a sack. *Not as heavy as I feared*, he thought.

I may yet see my two thousand in gold...

He turned to climb out of the window, and felt an intense wave of anger, coming from the sleeping elf!

"It seems you know I am here, elf-boy!" he said. "Well, let me tell you: I have your woman and I want two thousand gold pieces for her. I will send you instructions tomorrow. But in the meantime, I think I will have some fun with her myself. I have seen her riding you—what a passionate bitch she is!—and, who knows, she may appreciate being ridden by a *man*."

...

Gimli had only slipped out for a moment.

He had told Eowyn that he needed to 'answer nature's call' but once outside the men's healing room, he had searched for Master Dínendal.

"That elf has changed colour," he said to the healer, when he found him at Senta's bedside. "I do not know if it is good or bad, but I have never seen the lad so flushed, so I thought you ought to give him a look. I did not want to worry the lady," he added.

Dínendal took a few minutes to ensure that Senta was comfortable before following Gimli to the men's room.

But, as the dwarf reached for the door latch, a terrifying scream burst from the room beyond, freezing his hand in mid air.

...

"...who knows, she may appreciate being ridden by a *man*," said the wretch, and he disappeared from Legolas' line of vision, taking Eowyn with him.

Do not touch her! shouted Legolas, silently. *Bring her back! Bring her back to me! If you hurt her I will kill you! If you frighten her I will kill you! There is nothing I will not do to you! I will rip off your ballocks and burn them in front of you! I will saw off your member and make you swallow it! I will cut off your head and piss in your skull! There is nothing I will not do to you if you hurt her, nothing! I hunt you down with the last of my life and I WILL SHOW YOU NO MERCY!*

"I WILL SLAY YOU, YOU GODLESS BALROG! I WILL SLAY YOU!" he screamed, forcing his way back into wakefulness.

...

"I do not know how you have beaten the *elfsbane*," said Dínendal to Legolas. "It is a miracle. But I cannot allow you to leave the healing room. You must get some healing sleep—"

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"Aragorn! Faramir!" cried Legolas, entreating their support. "Imrahil! I must find her! I must! I must bring her back. She will be so scared..."

"Legolas—" began Aragorn, soothingly.

"I WANT HER BACK!"

His four friends stared at him, speechless. None of them had ever seen the elf so out of control, not even before the Gates of Mordor.

"Calm down, lad, you do not want a relapse," said Gimli, patting his hand. "She is a brave lady —"

"This is not a battle, Gimli. This is something far worse. This is all her deepest fears coming to pass. She will be so frightened." He climbed out of bed and shrugged on his jerkin. Only Dínendal made any move to stop him, and even the healer quickly thought better of it. "I cannot bear to think of how frightened she must be—tell them, Faramir; tell them what Wormtongue tried to do to her; tell them how he scared her. And this—this *orc* plans to do the same. It would tear her spirit from her body. We *must* get her away from him!"

"Legolas is right," said Faramir, gravely, "we cannot risk leaving her with this fiend. Wormtongue—"

The healing room door flew open. "Is it true? IS IT TRUE?"

"Yes, Eomer," sighed Imrahil. "I am afraid the villain has taken your sister."

"Then what are you all waiting for?"

"They have been trying to keep me in the healing room," said Legolas, strapping on his quiver and white knives. "But now you are here, Eomer, I want to use your dogs to follow Eowyn's trail."

...

Wolfram was ecstatic. He had emerged from the castle drain in less than an hour, with the woman, still in a swoon, on his back.

He dumped her on the ground and squatted beside her, thinking.

In this painless state he could carry more, climb better, run faster—all with no extra effort. The anodyne had given him more than a respite from pain. It had virtually turned him into an elf!

He needed to take his next dose in about three quarters of an hour, and he could think of only one place to go. He lifted the woman into his arms and, carrying her like a lover so as not to draw too much attention to himself, he set off for Herzog's shop.

...

"You should return to the castle," said Haldir. "You must have been on watch for twelve hours."

"Nearer thirteen," said Brenal, "and not for the first time, I might add! I can stay a while longer. This is a job for two people—one to watch, the other to make sure the watcher stays awake."

"Elves do not need as much sleep as humans," said Haldir, frostily.

"No, I am sure you do not," said Brenal, a hint of laughter in his voice.

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Haldir looked at him sharply. "Men never cease to surprise me—"

Brenal pointed through the window. "Look!"

Haldir peered through the distorted glass. A smallish man, carrying a woman in his arms, was walking down the alley. He stopped outside the apothecary's door and knocked.

"I think I know that woman," said Brenal, leaning forward to get a better look. "She used to be married to Prince Faramir. It is Princess—"

"Eowyn!" cried Haldir. "By the gods I will kill that orc! If he has harmed one single hair on her head I will rip his throat out—go and fetch help, Master Brenal. Quickly."

Haldir leaped to his feet and ran downstairs, into the alley, leaving Brenal wondering whether to follow him.

...

Herzog was not pleased.

"What *possessed* you to bring her here, you fool? I told you they are watching the shop—"

As if on cue, someone began pounding loudly at the back door.

"Take her upstairs and out through the skylight," said Herzog. "My spell will hide you whilst you are on the roof. If you are lucky, you will slip past them while they are watching the doors. Get as far away from the shop as possible—take her down to the docks."

Wolfram hesitated.

"*Now!*" said Herzog. "I cannot hide all three of us!"

Wolfram lifted Eowyn onto his back and ran up the stairs.

...

Eomer's dogs had found no trace of Eowyn's scent in the castle courtyard, nor at the Main Gate, and the guard on duty swore that he had seen no one leave with a woman—nor with a cart, a chest, a rolled up tapestry, or any other object that a woman might be concealed in.

"How is he getting out of the castle?" said Aragorn. "He comes and goes as he pleases—how is he doing it? Are there any other gates or doors?"

"No," said Imrahil. "There is no other way in or out, not even from my own private apartment."

"What about fresh water?" asked Gimli. "Remember Helm's Deep? Saruman used the culvert to get his powder under the Deeping Wall—is there is some similar weakness here?"

"The well shaft is cut through solid rock. The water beneath cannot be reached from outside the castle. It is part of our defences—it cannot be tainted by an enemy..."

"*Tainted*," Imrahil repeated, thoughtfully.

"The drains!" cried Gimli. "He has taken her through the drains!"

"Oh Valar!" said Legolas.

"The main outflow is at the north west corner of the castle," said Imrahil. "Come!"

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...

Haldir threw all his weight at the door.

It creaked but did not move.

Ignoring the pain, he threw himself at it again. And again. He was sure it was starting to give. He stepped back a few feet and ran at it.

This time the lock gave way. The door swung open and Haldir staggered into the back room of the apothecary's shop and, rubbing his shoulder, looked around. The room was empty. But he could not shake the feeling that there was someone else in the building with him.

"Eowyn!" he cried, "Eowyn!" There was no response. "Oh Valar, where is she?"

He opened the inner door and looked into the shop. Nothing.

He rushed towards the stairs, praying to the Valar, "Please let me find her alive. I will never be jealous of her and Legolas again if you let me find her alive..."

There was something on the stairs—a shape, a shadow—he could not see it clearly.

"Eowyn!" he cried, climbing the stairs. "Eowyn!"

The shape was clearer now and—too late—Haldir realised what he was seeing. Instinctively, he lifted his hands to protect himself as the shape raised its arm, but the metal bar still found its target, and Haldir fell down the stairs.

...

Prince Imrahil led his friends, plus Eofred, and Master Dínendal, who had insisted on accompanying Legolas, outside the city walls to the mouth of the drain, but the dogs could not pick up a scent.

"It is no use," said Eomer. "The smell of filth is overpowering."

"Where would he take her?" said Legolas, retreating from the muck, and squatting down upon the grass. "He cannot take her to the apothecary's shop. Where else could he hide her? Where does the orc live? Where do we look? Someone must know!" One of Eomer's dogs began sniffing around him; Legolas patted it absently. "I swear that when I get my hands on that Balrog he will wish his mother had taken the apothecary's herbs. I will make him eat his own —"

"*Mellon nin*," said Aragorn, soothingly; he and Gimli were exchanging worried looks...

But Legolas had noticed something. "Look!" he cried, pointing to the dog.

"He has picked up Eowyn's scent!" said Eomer. "Come on!"

They followed it back through Dinham Gate, past the castle gatehouse, through the market place, and into Broad Street.

...

"Your Majesty!" cried Brenal, jogging towards the search party. "Your Majesties, my lords, someone brought a woman to the apothecary's shop—Haldir said it was Princess Eowyn—he sent me to get help. He has gone into the shop—"

Legolas ran past him. The planks were back in place, barring the shop's front door; the elf

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pounded his fists against them.

"Round the back," cried Brenal. "This way, my lord!" He led Legolas down the alley.

The back door of the shop was wide open, its lock broken, but a quick search told them there was no one inside—not Eowyn, not Haldir, not the kidnapping fiend, not even the shadow.

Legolas sank to his knees and sobbed.

"My lord, you are not yourself," said Dínendal, gently. "The poison is still working on you. Let me take you back to the castle. Their Majesties and Lord Gimli will find Lady Eowyn."

Legolas shook his head. "It would kill me Dínendal. I could not bear it."

"It is the poison, my lord, you need to sleep—"

"No!" Legolas wailed.

"Your Majesty," said Dínendal to Aragorn, "Lord Gimli, please help me—"

At that moment, Eofred came through the door. "Your Majesty, my lords," he cried, "Eomer King's dog has picked up the lady's scent again. His Majesty asks that you follow him out of the city..."

...

Wolfram had reached the docks with only moments to spare. A wisp of pain was already beginning to crawl up his leg.

He propped the woman against a wall, took out the vial of anodyne and swallowed five drops. *The maximum dose.* He was sorely tempted to take more, but he remembered Herzog's warning about stopping his heart. *He may have been lying to me,* he thought, *but I am better safe than sorry.*

The woman moaned. Wolfram crouched before her and prodded her shoulder. She was still in a swoon, but he could see that she would not be so for much longer, and he did not want to risk hitting her again—*People pay less for damaged goods,* he thought—so he needed to get her safely bound and gagged, and somewhere her friends would not find her.

He scanned the ships, moored along the wharves. *Or somewhere they cannot reach her.*

The pain had already gone. Wolfram suddenly felt wonderful—strong, fleet of foot, like an acrobat! He lifted the woman onto his shoulders and approached the nearest ship.

...

Herzog was not a physical man—even as a child, he had never run or played with a ball or bowled a hoop—and he had no idea how he had managed to drag the big elf out of the front door of the shop and along the street to Broad Gate, all the while keeping them both shrouded by the spell.

Terror had given him strength, he supposed.

Broad Gate was not yet locked and he had no problem leaving the city, but he knew he could not drag the elf as far as the docks.

A thousand gold pieces, he thought, *I have a thousand gold pieces in my hands. All I have to do is get us on a ship bound for Far Harad. But how?*

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He looked around, desperately. Just outside the gate, a group of beggars sat huddled around a small fire, drinking rot-gut.

Stinking, worthless creatures, he thought.

Then an idea occurred to him: *With a couple of simple spells, I could persuade two of them to carry the elf for me... And in the morning, they would wake up on the docks remembering nothing.*

He dragged the big elf towards the fire.

...

The first ship Wolfram had tried was not due to sail for seven days.

He carried the woman—still a-swoon, but struggling, as if by instinct—towards the gangplank of the next ship—

"Wolfram! *Wolfram!* Bring her over here!"

Wolfram turned towards the voice. There, in the shadow of some lifting gear, was the strangest sight he had ever seen—Herzog leading two filthy beggars on leashes, like dogs, with an unconscious elf, in full armour, supported between them.

Ye gods! How did I ever get myself into this? Wolfram wondered, as he carried the woman over to his accomplice.

"I know the captain of the *Sea Maiden*—the galley over there," said Herzog. "He will take anyone or anything to Far Harad provided you have the money to pay him."

"How much?" asked Wolfram.

"Twenty gold pieces for you and thirty for her. Give it to me and I will negotiate our passage."

Wolfram sighed. He was investing a lot of money in this woman.

What if elf-boy does not want her back?

But the men of Far Harad might pay well for the novelty of a golden-haired whore. And, that way, I can keep her, and have her myself on the voyage...

"Very well," he said, handing over the money. "Get us on the ship."

...

The dog had lost Eowyn's scent.

Eomer and Brenal were leading him round in increasing circles, hoping to pick it up again. Legolas was sitting on the ground, rocking back and forth, moaning.

"Your Majesty," said Dínendal to Aragorn, quietly but forcefully. "The poison is acting on his mind. He needs to sleep, to work it out of his body. Otherwise—otherwise, the Valar only know whether this will do him permanent harm. Lord Gimli, perhaps you could persuade him—"

"Nay lad," said Gimli, "short of hitting him over the head with my axe and carrying him, I do not see there is any chance of getting him back to the healing rooms."

When Dínendal looked as though he might seriously be considering this course of treatment, the dwarf added: "In truth, lad, you cannot blame him. He *needs* to be here. If it was your

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lady that had been carried off, I wager you would be the same."

"But he is not *rational*, my lords," said Dínendal, looking across at the rocking, moaning elf.

Aragorn put his hand on Dínendal's arm. "We will take care of him," he said.

"And he will do fine when it comes to the crunch, laddie," added Gimli. "Just wait and see."

"We have got her scent back!" cried Eomer suddenly. "The docks! He is heading for the docks!"

...

As the search party approached the docks they could see a galley pulling slowly out of the bay, its two tiers of oars moving in perfect time, its three triangular sails just beginning to catch the wind.

"Please, Valar," cried Legolas, "let her not be on that!"

The dog dragged them down to an empty wharf and then refused to go any further, scuttling around in circles, snuffling and whimpering.

"He has lost the scent again," said Eomer, despondently. "I will try to find it, but it looks very much as if she *was* taken on board that ship."

Aragorn and Gimli dragged Legolas back from the water's edge and sat him down on a mooring post. Gimli grasped one of the elf's slender hands and rubbed it soothingly.

"Come on lad," he said, "do not give up hope."

Brenal looked around the docks. The wharves were almost deserted—he could hear the sailors carousing in nearby taverns—but there were still a few men keeping watch on the various ships, and there were two men lying asleep by a piece of lifting gear. "Perhaps someone saw the lady," he said. "I will ask around."

"I will come with you," said Aragorn. "Take care of him, Gimli."

...

Having had no success trying to rouse the sleeping beggars, the king and the warrior approached a sailor, who was enjoying a pipe on the deck of a small sailing vessel moored close to the empty wharf.

"You looking for the elf or for the woman?" he asked.

Aragorn and Brenal exchanged glances. "Both," said Aragorn.

The sailor nodded. "Captain o't' *Sea Maiden*," he jerked his head towards the galley pulling out of the bay, "i'n't too particular what or who he carries, if you know what I mean—provided the price is right. I thought the woman'd soon be missed. You looking for a vessel?"

"Can you catch him?" asked Aragorn.

"He won't be expecting you, so he won't be in any hurry. Once he gets out to sea he'll rely on his sails—needs to save his slaves for the other end. With any luck we'll catch him in a matter of hours, while it's still dark. That's where you're lucky—most ships couldn't get anywhere near a Corsair galley. But with the right man steering 'er, the *Starlight's* small enough to avoid the ram—and the crossbows, if he thinks to use 'em. Your main problem'll be boarding—the *Sea Maiden* has a row of wooden shields running down both sides o't' deck..."

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"We will manage," said Aragorn, grimly. "How much?"

"Five hundred gold pieces."

Aragorn took a heavy gold ring, set with a diamond and two rubies, from his finger. "This is worth fifty," he said, handing it to the sailor. "Bring us back safely and I will give you another thousand. If we rescue the woman and the elf I will give you fifteen hundred."

"Who are you?" asked the sailor.

Aragorn shook his head. "That does not matter. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes, your Majesty, we do," said the sailor, bowing his head, respectfully. "But, just so's you know: once we're on board ship, I'm the Captain and what I say goes. If I tell you to pull a rope, you pull the rope."

Aragorn smiled. "Agreed," he said.

...

Cautiously, Haldir opened his eyes. He was lying on a narrow bunk, in a strange wooden room with curving walls and a very low ceiling...

But none of that mattered because, sitting beside him, holding a damp rag to his forehead, was his guardian spirit. And, without thinking, Haldir reached up and pulled her down into his arms.

A small pair of hands, pushing against his chest, brought him back to his senses.

"I am sorry, my lady," he whispered, releasing her.

Eowyn cleared her throat. "I—er—I am glad to see that you have recovered, March Warden," she said.

She stood and smoothed the skirt of her gown, and Haldir noticed she was biting her lip, nervously. "We appear to be on a ship," she said. "I can see water through the window. The door is locked, the window is too small to crawl through, and there are no obvious weapons—unless we can break a leg off a chair, that is..."

"I am sorry, my lady," he said, again.

"It is forgotten," said Eowyn. "Completely forgotten, March Warden."

To the Sea, to the Sea! the white gulls are crying...

Chapter 8: To the Sea! To the Sea!

The rescuers, consisting of Aragorn and Eomer, Imrahil (who had experience of sailing), Gimli, Legolas, Dínendal (who refused to be parted from his patient, and insisted that they would need him if Lady Eowyn or the March Warden had been injured), Eofred and Brenal—boarded the Starlight without further delay.

"Are we really going to risk taking *him* out to sea?" asked Eomer, quietly, indicating the distraught Legolas with a jerk of the head.

"Do we have a choice?" replied Aragorn. "Would *you* like to try to stop him?"

Eomer looked back at the elf, this time taking in the bow and the white knives strapped to his back, and reluctantly shook his head.

"Besides," continued Aragorn, "if anything has—er—*happened* to Eowyn, we will need him there to take care of her."

"Béma," muttered Eomer. "Let us pray she can keep that animal at bay until we catch up with them."

...

They had been sitting, side-by-side, on the bunk, holding improvised weapons—a chair leg and a broom handle—for what seemed like hours.

Haldir raised his head. "Someone is coming," he said. He stood up. "Get behind me."

"Haldir!" said Eowyn, exasperated. "We are in this together."

"Please, my lady—"

Eowyn aimed low: "*Legolas* would not make me hide behind him, like a little girl," she said, though she knew it was not strictly true.

Haldir sighed and motioned her to stand beside him.

They raised their makeshift clubs just as the door swung open. Herzog was standing between two archers, with arrows trained on Eowyn's breast.

"Drop the weapon, Master Elf," he said, "unless you want to watch her die. You, too, my lady! That is better. Now," he said to Haldir, "you are going to come with me and we are going to have a little talk, whilst my comrade here,"—he jerked his head towards Wolfram, who had suddenly appeared behind him—"entertains the lady."

...

The *Starlight* was gaining on the galley.

"The wind's dropped, which is in our favour," said Captain Fafner. "We're faster and more manoeuvrable than he is. But if it drops much more he'll run out his oars again, and if we don't catch him before he gets those slaves rowing, we'll lose him."

The rescuers, squeezed into the captain's cabin, were holding a council of war.

"Can you tell us anything about the layout of a ship like that, Captain?" asked Aragorn.

Fafner took up a piece of chalk and drew a crude diagram on the wooden wall. "On deck there

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should be a helmsman, here, the officer on watch, here, and lookouts here, here and here," he said. He pointed to the quarterdeck. "The captain's cabin's in here and, at this time of night, he'll probably be drinking with his First Mate and three or four of his men. The main companionway is here, leading down to the rowing deck—you're looking at two tiers of slaves, about 250 in all. They'll be chained to their oars, but there should be two, maybe three, guards and they'll be well armed. The galley's *here*, but I wouldn't think the cook'll give you any trouble; he's not much more than a slave himself. The hold, down here, is where you'll find the crew's quarters, the armoury, and storage rooms for swag—all off a single gangway running from stem to stern. And that's where you'll need to look for your woman."

"How close can you get to him," asked Aragorn, "without his seeing us?"

"If we douse all our lights we can probably get within quarter of a mile," answered Fafner.

Aragorn nodded. "Good. Then I will need a small boat, to take us right up beside him."

"What is your plan, Aragorn?" asked Eomer.

"We get Legolas close enough to board." He turned to the elf. "I need you to deal with anyone on deck, fast and silent."

Legolas nodded.

"Once the deck is clear," Aragorn continued, "the rest of us will board and take the ship. Imrahil, you and I will make straight for the Captain's quarters,"—he pointed to the diagram—"and Brenal will back us up. Gimli and Eofred will go down to the rowing deck, deal with the guards, and set some of the slaves free—I wager they will be only too happy to join us. Eomer and Legolas will head straight for the hold, find Eowyn and Haldir, and get them back to the boat. Master Dínendal will stay here and prepare some sort of healing room, just in case."

He turned to Captain Fafner. "I will need one of your men to steer the boat—we can row ourselves. Any advice, Captain?"

"Other than the obvious—do not underestimate them—no your Majesty."

...

Once we are in the gangway, thought Haldir, they will not have room to draw those bows. With my speed and strength...

"Do not think about escaping, Master Elf," said Herzog, holding up a small vial. "Three drops of this and you will sleep for twenty four hours, and *then* who would keep Wolfram away from your pretty lady? More than three drops and you will be waiting in the Halls of Mandos," he added.

He motioned Haldir towards another small cabin. "In here. Take a seat, Master Elf."

Haldir shot him an ugly look, "I prefer to stand," he said.

Herzog shrugged his shoulders. He took a seat himself and, head tilted, looked Haldir up and down. "I have a business proposition for you, Master Elf."

Haldir gave him another withering look.

"It will be worth your while to hear me out," said Herzog, in his rich, seductive voice, "for I will use you whether you will or no. But if you are inclined to co-operate, I will reward you well—"

"You poisonous orc! There is nothing you can tempt *me* with!"

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Herzog smiled broadly. "Now we both know that *that* is not true, Master Elf," he said. "As you no doubt know—since your light-fingered lady-friend stole my book—I require a quantity of seed from a full-blooded elf." Haldir sneered. "But I started thinking: why limit myself to one client when I can supply—oh!—an infinite number? You give me seed regularly, I make up the Elixir and sell it to the wealthy citizens of Far Harad; we both benefit." Herzog smiled again.

"There is not enough money in the whole of Middle Earth to persuade me to—to—to do that, you filthy warg's member!"

"I was not thinking of money, Master Elf," said Herzog, his infuriating smile growing broader. "I was thinking of the thing you want more than anything else in the world."

Haldir stared at him.

"The woman!" said Herzog. "A simple love potion, and she would forget that this—what is that name? Leg-ah-lass?—ever existed. You could do whatever you wanted to her and she would love it—she would beg you for more—*uh*—"

Haldir wrapped his hands around Herzog's throat, and he throttled the apothecary until one of the archers beat him senseless.

...

Wolfram locked the door.

"Well, my lady, he said, "it is time for you to pay for your fun and games with the sword." He advanced on her, menacingly.

The cabin was small, and Eowyn was forced to take a step back, but she was determined not to be intimidated by this little man.

"I have already crippled you," she said. "And however it may be that you are walking now, it will not take much to stop you again."

Laughing derisively, Wolfram took a small bottle from his pocket and shook it in her face. "A little help from the apothecary soon repaired your handiwork," he said. He put the bottle away and advanced another step.

Eowyn tried to step backwards, but found herself trapped against the bunk.

Triumphantly, Wolfram pressed himself into her, moving his hips suggestively, trying to push her down onto the bed.

Eowyn ducked sideways and dropped to the floor, but Wolfram responded fast, dropping on top of her and pinning her down with his full weight.

Eowyn struggled, trying to roll out from under him, but Wolfram held her steady with a knee either side of her thighs.

Suddenly, Eowyn became aware of something hard pressing into her back and—still struggling, so as not to alert Wolfram—she reached with her right hand and carefully examined the object...

It was the chair leg, her makeshift weapon. Eowyn smiled inwardly; it felt good as she closed her hand around it. *I must make the first blow count*, she thought. *I have only one chance to take him by surprise.*

She forced herself to go limp.

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Wolfram laughed. "Not so dangerous without your sword, are you, my lady?" he gloated. "You will enjoy this—being ridden by a real man instead of a pretty-boy elf!" He lifted himself up, taking all his weight onto his knees, freeing his hands to unlace his breeches. "The apothecary's potion works wonders on pain, but it does have an unfortunate effect on the prick," he said. "Luckily for you, it is just beginning to wear off or I would not be able to get a proper rise. But we will need to be quick. I must not miss my next dose."

He bent to pull his breeches open and Eowyn seized her chance; with all the strength of a Shieldmaiden's sword arm she smashed the table leg into the side of his head and, at the same time, drove a fist deep into his groin.

Wolfram was taken by surprise; the pain was crippling, in his groin, his head, and his wounded leg. "You *bitch*," he screamed, "you elf-riding bitch!" He rolled onto his side and curled up in a ball, pressing both hands to his groin.

Eowyn scrambled to her feet and lifted the club. *Wham!* Once. *Wham!* Twice. *Wham!* Three times. *Wham!* "This is for Legolas!" *Wham!* "This is for me!" *Wham!*

When she finally regained control of herself, the man was no longer moving, and his face was a bloody mess. Eowyn pulled a filthy sheet off the bunk, twisted it into a rope, and tied his hands together, looping the sheet tightly round the bedpost.

Then, taking a deep breath to control her revulsion, she reached into the pocket of his breeches and retrieved the key to the cabin door.

...

"Are you sure we should be relying so much on Legolas?" asked Imrahil, pulling on his oar.

"In truth," said Aragorn, pulling beside him, "I do not know. But we do not have much choice—none of *us* could board a galley without being seen, nor shoot men up in the rigging. I just pray that his love for Eowyn and his determination to rescue her are strong enough to keep his mind clear of both the poison and the sea longing..."

...

Strange, thought Legolas, how much calmer I feel now that I have a job to do. And, as for the sea longing—he looked out across the sparkling water—I can see that it is beautiful, but it is as though I had never heard its call; my only desire is to get Eowyn back.

I will get her back, I know I will.

And if that animal has already hurt her, then I will be there to support and comfort her. Because I, too, know something of what it means to be taken against your will. So she will not have to cope alone.

...

Eowyn had no idea how much time had passed since the fiend had dragged her away from Legolas' bedside. She had no idea whether the elf would still be sleeping or whether, by now, he would be fully recovered. But what she did know—what she was absolutely certain of—was that Legolas would rescue her as soon as he could.

So all I have to do is hold out until Legolas arrives, she thought.

But I cannot stay in the cabin with this animal. I must find a better weapon—a sword or a bow—find Haldir, and get us both to somewhere defensible.

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Cautiously, she opened the cabin door and checked the gangway.

It was empty.

Gripping her chair leg, she crept out of the cabin, opened the door opposite and was momentarily stunned by what she saw inside.

I have little use for gold and jewellery in my present situation, she thought.

Four doors later, she found the armoury. She tried several swords, testing their weight and balance, before she found one that suited her and strapped it around her waist; then she selected a bow and a quiver full of arrows.

This is far inferior to an elven bow, she thought. *I will have to use it carefully.*

Then, because she had no idea where they had taken Haldir, but some instinct was telling her she should be up on deck, she crept cautiously back to the companionway and began climbing up the stairs.

...

The tiny boat bobbed silently beside the galley.

Legolas slipped out of his borrowed cloak and gloves, stood up and, balancing effortlessly as the boat rose and fell, pulled his bow from its strap and, holding it ready in his left hand, jumped lightly onto the deck of the galley without making a sound.

The rescue party held its collective breath, but it was not necessary. The elf's right hand moved so fast it was barely visible: his first arrow took out the helmsman, his second the officer on watch, his third, fourth and fifth, the three lookouts.

The deck was clear.

Aragorn threw Legolas a rope and the elf tied it securely to a cleat; Eomer threw a second rope and Legolas secured it to another. Aragorn and Eomer began to climb aboard, but as the elf leaned down to help, his keen senses alerted him to danger behind him, and he turned and simultaneously ducked, narrowly avoiding a knife blade.

Another sailor had come out on deck!

Legolas reached for one of his own white knives, but the man was quick—and very lucky—slashing at him again, slicing through his leather bracer and biting into the flesh of his forearm. The pain was intense. Legolas' knife dropped from his fingers and he automatically raised his bow to ward off another slash, but—to his surprise—it never came. Instead, the man stumbled towards him and fell, an arrow protruding from his back.

Legolas scanned the deck, looking for his protector.

She was standing by the companionway door, her bow still raised.

Eowyn!

Legolas managed to stifle his cry of joy but could not stop himself running across the deck and using his good arm to pull her against him. "Are you all right, Eowyn *nín*?" he whispered.

She smiled up at him. "Yes," she whispered back, "I knew you would come for me."

"Did he *hurt* you—"

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"No, my love. No, he did not—and he must be regretting now that he ever tried. I left him tied up in a cabin. But they took Haldir away and I could not find him; I do not know where he is."

"We will find him," whispered Aragorn. "Legolas, Eomer, get Eowyn down into the boat. Imrahil, Brenal, with me; Gimli, Eofred—you know what to do."

...

Aragorn, Imrahil and Brenal silently entered the captain's cabin, and took the Captain and his officers prisoner without incident. Gimli and Eofred, meanwhile, crept down to the rowing deck, knocked out the two guards, and released ten of the most trustworthy-looking slaves. Then the entire rescue party quietly made its way down to the hold and the crew's quarters.

Taken by surprise, the crew put up little fight, most of the sailors surrendering without even rising to their feet. Imrahil put the slaves in charge of the prisoners, giving them strict orders that no one was to be harmed. "When we return to Dol Amroth," he said to the slaves, "I will set you free and reward each of you with fifty pieces of silver—and there is a place in the army of Belfalas for any man that wants it. But only if you behave honourably."

"Come, we must search the storerooms," said Aragorn; "Haldir is still in danger."

The first storeroom was filled with chests of gold and silver jewellery, plate, works of art, and rich fabrics from Far Harad. "Gods," said Imrahil, "they must have been operating in these waters for years, posing as traders but looting the merchantmen!"

In the second storeroom, a broken chair, a jagged strip of rose-coloured velvet, and a twisted sheet tied to the bedpost told a worrying story. "This must be where they held Eowyn," said Aragorn. He fingered the improvised rope. "This is where she left the fiend tied up. But he has escaped us again!"

"He must be hiding amongst the sailors," said Imrahil. "But why would they protect him?"

Aragorn shook his head. "I do not know," he said, thoughtfully. "Unless—unless he found a bolt hole somewhere in the fabric of the ship..." He began tapping the cabin walls, searching for a hiding place.

"Aragorn!" Gimli's gruff voice called from further down the gangway, "Aragorn! We have found the elf!"

Abandoning his search, Aragorn ran down the gangway and into another small cabin. Eofred was kneeling over Haldir, carefully supporting his head. "He has been badly beaten, your Majesty," he said, "but I think he will recover."

"Get him back to the boat, Eofred—Brenal, help him," said Aragorn. "Master Dínendal will take good care of him." Then, as the two men lifted the elf and carried him out of the cabin, he added, "Well, at least we have one prize!" And, with the toe of his boot, he poked the dazed apothecary, who had been lying trapped beneath the elf.

...

Eowyn had removed Legolas' bracer, rolled back the sleeve of his tunic and was carefully binding his forearm with a strip of cloth cut from her shift. "This will help until Master Dínendal can dress it properly," she said.

"Thank you, Eowyn *nín*," said Legolas, softly, drawing her closer with his good arm and burying his face in the crook of her neck. "Eowyn," he whispered, "my brave Shieldmaiden."

Eomer cleared his throat. "There *are* other people in this boat, you know."

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...

As dawn broke, the *Starlight* and the *Sea Maiden* returned to Dol Amroth together, the galley crewed by a handful of men provided by Captain Fafner.

Herzog the apothecary was immediately transferred to the castle dungeon to await trial. The Captain and crew of the *Sea Maiden* were imprisoned in the city gaol, and the Corsairs' gold and other valuables were moved to the castle treasury.

Keeping his promise, Aragorn rewarded Captain Fafner with fifteen hundred gold pieces plus another five hundred for the extra assistance he had provided. Imrahil set all 250 galley slaves free, rewarding each man with fifty pieces of silver and the opportunity to join the army of Belfalas. But he also, discreetly, limited their access to the taverns, and stipulated that each man must either find paid employment within three months or leave the city. Thus, he hoped, he would avoid setting 250 sturdy beggars loose on the streets of Dol Amroth.

Once the galley was completely empty, Imrahil's palace guard searched it repeatedly, from stem to stern. But no trace of Wolfram was found.

...

"Keep still," whispered Eowyn.

They had finally reached their bedchamber by mid-morning, but Eowyn had insisted on replacing the dressing on Legolas' arm, which had meant her removing his jerkin, and his tunic, and then one thing had led to another..

And now Legolas lay naked on the bed—his limbs outstretched, his hair loose—with Eowyn, fully clothed, straddling him.

"Melmenya..."

"Shhhhh. Keep still."

Using the lightest of pressure, Eowyn brushed her fingertips up the insides of his thighs, over his testicles, upwards along the hard length of his penis, and gently explored the curves and hollows of its head. "You are so beautiful," she whispered.

Legolas' outstretched hands gripped the bedclothes.

"Keep still..." Eowyn leaned forward—her hair spilling over Legolas' belly and thighs—and slowly licked him from root to tip. Then, slipping her hands beneath his buttocks and squeezing him firmly, she took the head of his penis in her mouth and sucked, very, very, gently.

"Oh Valar!" cried Legolas, his back arching off the bed. "Please, melmenya," he begged, "do not torture me!"

But Eowyn had never had much taste for foreplay and, with one final lick, and a wicked, wicked smile, she lifted and held his penis and sank down upon him, sighing with pleasure. And then she began to ride him, slowly and luxuriously, rising and falling and circling her hips. "Keep still," she whispered. "Keep still, my love... keep still... *Gods!*"

Legolas had reached up and torn open the remains of her velvet dress and had enfolded her breasts in his hands.

...

"There were moments when I did not think we would ever share this again, melmenya," said

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Legolas, kissing Eowyn's hand. "I thought you were gone forever. Master Dínendal wanted to lock me up—he tried to force me to sleep, to stop me going mad..."

Eowyn brought their joined hands to her lips and kissed Legolas' hand.

"And," he continued, "I was afraid that, if I did get you back, you would be..." He hesitated, trying to find the right words, "Broken, *meleth nín*, raped and broken... And I swore that whatever had happened, I would help you cope. But, in truth, I had no idea how I was going to do it."

"*Shhhhh*, my love," said Eowyn, rolling over and lying on top of him. "Do not torture yourself. It was he who was broken."

"Yes. I should have known he could not conquer your spirit," said Legolas, slipping his arms around her waist. "But there is still a part of my mind that cannot stop imagining you hurt beyond hope—and if I could get my hands on that man, *melmenya*, I would kill him for what he tried to do to you."

...

Legolas crossed the castle courtyard.

He had lied to Eowyn, telling her that he was going to the palace armouries to check that his bracer was being repaired properly. Instead, with Imrahil's permission, he was going to the palace dungeon.

"I have a written order from Prince Imrahil," he told the Head Gaoler, showing him the parchment. "I want to talk to the apothecary."

Herzog, manacled hand and foot, was dragged out of his cell, and thrown into a small room furnished with a table and two stools.

"Sit down," said Legolas, coldly.

Herzog, sensing that the elf's simmering anger was out of character, decided to do as he was told, for now. *He is dangerous in this state, he thought, but he is not used to feeling anger and that makes him vulnerable... Perhaps I can use it to my advantage.*

"I want to know where your accomplice is," said Legolas. "I want him to stand trial for the kidnapping and attempted rape of my wife. If you give me the information I need, I will use such influence as I have to see that your sentence is commuted from death to life imprisonment—"

Herzog laughed. "Perhap an immortal, Master Elf, does not realise what life imprisonment would be like for a mortal man such as me," he said. "But let me enlighten you—what you offer is no incentive!"

"I want that orc brought to justice!" said Legolas, fuming.

"And I cannot help you," answered Herzog. It was the truth, for he had no idea where Wolfram was, but he deliberately made it sound like a lie. "So we are at an impasse, Master Elf. Though there is something else I might be willing to trade with you..."

"What are you talking about?" asked Legolas, impatiently.

"Set me free—it would be easy for you to arrange it, and make it look like an escape—and I will give you the thing you most desire."

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Legolas sneered. "You are insane if you think I would do something so dishonourable—and there is nothing I desire that I do not already have!"

"No?" Herzog taunted. "An immortal married to a mortal—what might *he* desire? Desire so much that he would be willing to rebel against the gods to get it? Hmmm? Something that *I* could provide? All I would require is access to my workshop and some fresh elven seed—and you are already in the habit of giving *her* some of that every day."

"You filthy animal," cried Legolas, his heart breaking.

He rose to leave, but Herzog caught him by the elbow.

"Think about it, Master Elf. You are seeing it in her already—the start of wrinkles, the sagging breasts and belly. Set me free and, like you, she will never age! You will have her forever!"

Legolas raised his hand to strike the apothecary but, mastering himself just in time, he placed it on Herzog's arm and coldly pushed him away. "My offer still stands," he said. "Tell me where to find this Wolfram and I will try to get your sentence commuted to life imprisonment. But do not ever speak to me about the other thing again." He turned his back.

But, as he reached the door, he suddenly felt Herzog's hands, cold and heavy, pressing down on his head. He immediately spun round to defend himself, but his fist struck nothing—Herzog was still sitting at the table.

Disoriented, Legolas banged on the door to summon the guard.

Oh dear, Master Elf, thought Herzog, as he watched him leave. You will live to rue the day you turned down my offer.

...

I must get back to Eowyn, thought Legolas, or she will suspect...

She will suspect...

He paused at the bottom of the staircase, trying to remember the excuse he had given Eowyn.

"I hope the dog co-operated, my lord," said a voice behind him. "If you need me to persuade him a little..."

Dog? What dog? Legolas turned, smiled politely at the gaoler, and shook his head.

I must get back... Get back... Where?

He climbed the spiral staircase. *Someone is waiting for me... Someone...*

He stepped out into the courtyard and looked up at the glorious blue sky. Three white birds were circling above the castle, crying plaintively.

Gulls, he thought, turning round and round, watching them swoop and glide. Look at the gulls! How lonely they sound, calling to the sea...

The sea.

Of course, how could I have forgotten?

The sea is waiting for me.

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Chapter 9: I will bring you back, Legolas!

"I had in mind some sort of grating," said Prince Imrahil to the palace blacksmith, "something that will not affect the outflow, but will prevent anyone using the drains to enter the castle."

"I see no difficulty with that, your Highness," replied the blacksmith. "I suggest that we rivet an iron framework to the rock, here, here, and here, then attach a locked gate to the frame. I will draw up some plans for your approval—I take it you will want this work done as quickly as possible, sir?"

"Indeed. This business with the apothecary has made a major weakness in the castle's defences public knowledge..."

"Legolas?" Imrahil narrowed his eyes against the light of the setting sun.

Was that really Legolas wading out into the sea?

"I look forward to seeing your plans shortly, Master Bandivan," he said, "but now I must speak with Prince Legolas."

He dismissed the blacksmith with a curt nod, and ran over the shingle to where the elf was standing, knee deep in the water, reaching out towards the horizon.

"Legolas, what are you doing?"

Imrahil put a hand on the elf's arm. Legolas, unaware of him until then, spun round and stared at him wildly.

Gods, thought Imrahil, those eyes!

"Come," he said, reaching again for the elf's arm, "come with me. Eowyn is waiting. She will be worried." He tried to pull Legolas back to the shore, but the elf lashed out, sending him reeling full length into the sea.

Imrahil lifted himself onto his elbows and spat out a mouthful of seawater.

Legolas was wading still deeper.

By the gods, thought Imrahil, his mind is completely gone. I must get help.

...

Eowyn awoke, smiling, and rolled over to hug Legolas.

He was not there, but she vaguely remembered his saying something about getting his bracer repaired, so she was not worried.

But it is almost dark, she thought. I had better get dressed, and go and find him.

...

By the time Imrahil returned, with Aragorn, Gimli and Eomer, Legolas was submerged up to his shoulders in seawater.

"I knew it," hissed Eomer. "'I love her, Eomer,' he said. 'I will never leave her,' he said. But I knew an elf could not be trusted. So what do we do now?"

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"He cannot be reasoned with," said Imrahil. "I have tried. I suggest that we three wade out to him and drag him back by force. Then we take him to his chambers and let Eowyn deal with him."

"Carry me out to him," said Gimli.

"Gimli..."

"Carry me out to him, Aragorn, or I will drown myself."

Aragorn lifted Gimli onto his back, and the four friends waded out towards Legolas.

"Do not get too close," said Gimli "or you will startle him. Can you take me in front of him?"

"No," said Aragorn, spitting out some water, "he is taller than I am, and it will be deeper in front of him."

"Very well," said the dwarf, "then let us stay here."

Gimli gathered his thoughts: "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING YOU CRAZY ELF?" he bellowed, "YOU HAVE TERRIFIED YOUR BEST FRIENDS WITH THIS NONSENSE AND IF YOUR LADY COULD SEE YOU HER HEART WOULD BREAK IN TWO!"

Something in the elf's posture changed and, briefly lucid, he turned to stare at the dwarf.

"Gimli?" he asked, in a small, frightened voice. Then his eyes glazed over once more, and he turned back towards the horizon.

"Carry me closer," said Gimli.

Taking a deep breath and holding it, Aragorn took two more steps.

Gimli drew his axe, and struck Legolas hard with the flat of the blade.

The elf sagged.

Eomer threw himself forward, catching the elf's shoulders before he could slide beneath the water, and Imrahil ducked beneath the surface, grabbing his feet. Together the two men rushed the stunned elf back to the shore and dumped him on the shingle.

"You might have given us some warning," gasped Eomer.

"And risk warning the elf?"

But although Legolas was stunned, he was still conscious and he immediately tried to get to his feet.

"Stay there," yelled Eomer, throwing himself bodily on top of his friend, trying to pin him down.

The elf was stronger, and easily pushed Eomer off his back, then rose to his hands and knees and began crawling towards the sea. Simultaneously, all four friends jumped on him and held him down and, although Legolas continued to struggle, even an elf was no match for four sturdy warriors.

"Now that we have him, let us get him back to Eowyn," panted Imrahil, "quickly."

...

It was no easy task to carry an angry, struggling elf back through the city gate, through the

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city streets, into the castle, and up the spiral staircase to his own bedchamber.

Several times, a well-aimed kick or punch sent one of the friends staggering. Then there was the shrieking to contend with. And, on top of that, as they passed by *The Pyewype* tavern, a few of the citizens of Dol Amroth, imagining that the elf was being murdered, attempted to rescue him—until they realised that the blackguards they were thumping were in fact the kings of Gondor and Rohan, and their own prince.

"If you do not stop that noise, elf," warned Gimli, finally losing all patience, "I will be forced to use the *blade* of my axe on you." He scowled, murderously.

After that, Legolas quietened down slightly, but that did not stop him landing the odd blow, here and there, when the opportunity arose. The most difficult part of the journey proved to be the staircase, because Legolas soon found that by stretching out his arms and legs he could wedge himself in the stairwell. Luckily, Haldir, who was recovering well from his ordeal on the galley, and Master Dínendal joined the fray and, eventually, the three men, the two elves and the one dwarf succeeded in propelling the screeching, struggling elf through the door and into his bedchamber.

Then everything stopped—even the elf stopped struggling and stared, for Eowyn, dressed in a gown of the purest white silk and looking like a spirit in human form, was standing before them.

"Legolas?" she said, and stretched out her hand towards his face.

The elf leaned towards her, pressing his cheek into the palm of her hand.

"What has happened?" she asked.

"We do not know, Eowyn," said Aragorn. "We found him up to his neck in the sea. He does not know us... He does not know himself. He is like a wild animal." He shook his head. "It is as if his sea longing has turned into something wholly destructive. It is almost as if he has been bewitched—"

"Oh gods," cried Imrahil. "I gave him permission to question the apothecary. Perhaps he..." Imrahil could not voice what they were all now thinking.

"Master Dínendal," said Aragorn, "can you do anything to restore his wits?"

Carefully, as if dealing with a nervous horse, Dínendal approached the subdued elf but, the moment he got close, Legolas lashed out at him.

"No, no, my love," said Eowyn, catching his hand. Legolas stared at her, not recognising her but clearly fascinated by her.

Eowyn pointed to a heavy chair. "Sit him down there," she said.

"It is not safe, my lady," said Haldir. "We must take him somewhere where he can be properly restrained—"

"No," said Eowyn, "I will not permit that. Sit him down there."

"Very well, Eowyn," said Aragorn, "but we must tie him down."

Biting her lip, Eowyn reluctantly agreed. The elf began to struggle again as Imrahil and Eomer held him down on the chair, but Aragorn used two leather belts to secure his wrists.

"Is that really necessary, your Majesty?" asked Dínendal.

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"Until you can find some way to cure him, Master Dínendal, yes, I am afraid it is."

"Leave me alone with him," said Eowyn.

"Are you mad?" cried Eomer.

"You have seen how gentle he is with me," said Eowyn, wrenching herself free of her brother.

"Leave me alone with him."

"My lady..." began Haldir

"I *promised* him, Haldir. I promised I would bring him back from the sea."

"This is not just the sea, my lady," he said, gently.

"I promised him!"

"But what if you cannot?" said Aragorn.

"Then I will take him to the Undying Lands—Haldir will help me."

"My lady!" Even her champion, Haldir, was astonished by Eowyn's temerity.

"Yes Haldir," she said, stroking Legolas' hair. "If he does not recover we will not let him suffer like this. We will take him to Valinor and then we will wait offshore, in case he should come to his senses. Now, please, all of you, leave me alone with him."

"This is madness!" cried Eomer, "*Eowyn*—"

"My mind is made up, Eomer! Leave me alone with him."

Aragorn sighed. "He is calmer, and more lucid, now that he is with her. We will leave them. But we will stay nearby, in the sitting room below," he said to Eowyn. "And if you need us, you have only to call."

"Thank you, Aragorn."

The men, the elves and the dwarf all filed out reluctantly—Eomer giving his sister a pointed look. Then Eowyn locked the door behind them, walked over to Legolas, and began to free his hands.

"Can you speak to me, my love?"

Legolas tipped his head to one side and looked at her intently, like a bird.

"Do you know me?" she asked, softly.

"Have we met before?" he asked.

"You can speak," she said. "Yes, my love, we have met before. We know each other intimately." She unstrapped his hands and knelt before him, placing her own hands lightly on his knees, and looked up into his stormy blue eyes.

He had once told her that the sea longing was like desire, and she could see the lust in his eyes now—he had been denied the sea and instead he wanted her. *Perhaps this is where I can defeat the enemy*, she thought, *perhaps this is my battlefield*. She slid her hands up his thighs.

Gods, she thought, *he is so hard!* "You need release, my love," she said.

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"Yes," he whispered, mesmerised by her touch.

"Then let me help you find it." Quickly, she unhooked the fastenings of his jerkin, pushed aside the skirts of his tunic, unlaced his leggings and pulled them open, freeing his erect penis. "You are beautiful," she said, softly, "so thick and straight." She kissed the tip of his penis, and let her fingers slip down inside his leggings to stroke his testicles.

"*Hiril nín!*" he gasped.

"Do you still not know me?"

"No," he sighed, pressing himself into her hand. "But—but do not stop—"

"What do you want me to do, my love?"

"Ride me," he whispered.

She nodded and, lifting her skirts, she clambered onto the chair, placing her knees either side of his thighs.

He stopped her. "I want to see your breasts, *hiril nín*," he said.

"Then unlace me, my love," she replied.

He pulled at her lacings but, in his haste, he snagged the knot and cried out in frustration, seizing the front of her bodice and pulling hard until the lace gave way, exposing her chest and shoulders.

"You are beautiful!" he cried. "Please, hurry!"

Eowyn raised herself on her knees and, with his help, sank down upon him, gasping as he filled her. The moment she started to move, she felt him tense, his fingers digging into her flesh, and he bucked his hips violently, spilling himself inside her, crying "Oh gods! Oh sweet gods! Oh *hiril nín!*"

"There, my love," said Eowyn, smiling. "Do you remember me now?"

He raised his head from her shoulder and looked into her eyes. But—although she could see that their brief union had almost restored him to himself again—his memory of her had not returned, and the distress on his face broke her heart.

"Oh, my love," she whispered, "come back to me. Please, please come back to me."

"I am sorry, *hiril nín*," he said, brushing away her tears, "I still do not know you. I do not know if I will ever remember you. But I feel that I could—that I *do*—love you. Will you let me pleasure you as you have pleased me?"

And he took hold of her waist and rose to his feet, carrying her to the bed, their bodies still joined, and he laid her down and kissed her tenderly. "Will you let me make love to you, *hiril nín*?" he asked.

"Yes, my love," she whispered.

He began to thrust, gently at first, then harder, and harder still. "Ah! *Hiril nín*," he suddenly moaned, "I am sorry. I am already too close. I am coming, I cannot stop it—"

"Then we shall both come together," cried Eowyn; "both together, my love. Oh! Oh, my Legolas!" She writhed beneath him, sobbing his name, as her love for him somehow took physical form and flowed through every part of her body.

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She collapsed onto the bed, shaking, and only gradually did she realise that he was saying something to her.

"Eowyn? Eowyn, melmenya, did I hurt you? Please do not cry, Eowyn *nín*."

But tears continued to stream down Eowyn's face and, smiling through them, she said, "No, my love, you did not hurt me. The sea had claimed you; the sea thought she had finally won you. But you have come back. You have come back to *me*."

...

Despite the events of the previous few days, the final banquet was joyful. The guests were entertained with more strange and exotic foods from Near and Far Harad, and with dancing from another group of energetic girls, who took a particular liking to Gimli and the hobbits—and coaxed all three of them out onto the dance floor.

Once the formal part of the banquet was over, Legolas drew Aragorn, Gimli, Eomer and Imrahil together, and apologised to them in turn.

"Do you remember how it happened?" asked Aragorn.

"I remember talking to the apothecary," said Legolas. "I remember trying to persuade him to tell me where we could find Wolfram. He tried to bribe me—he wanted me to help him escape. I refused. And then—and then I felt something..."

"What?" asked Imrahil.

"It felt as though his hands were on my head," said Legolas, "though he was nowhere near me."

"I will be dealing with that wretch, first thing tomorrow," said Imrahil.

"After that," continued Legolas, "most of it is a blur, though I do remember Gimli hitting me with his axe—and, later, threatening to kill me." He turned to the dwarf.

"The mildest hobbit maid who tends the lambs would have killed you, the fuss you were making, elf," said Gimli.

Legolas laughed and slapped him on the back. "Come sit with us, Gimli," he said. "Eowyn and I have need of your uplifting company!"

By bedtime even Queen Lothiriel seemed to think that the evening had been a fitting end to her son's naming celebrations—though her verdict might have been very different had Aragorn not tactfully intervened when her drunken husband challenged Gimli to an axe-throwing contest...

...

"Are you *never* satisfied?" asked Eowyn, struggling playfully.

"Do you not want to, *meleth nín*?"

"I *always* want to with you, my love," she said.

...

The servants had loaded the visitors' carriages at dawn, and the various retinues had been assembled for over an hour. The King of Gondor's personal guard, shining in their dress armour, were jostling with the Prince of Ithilien's rugged soldiers who, in turn, were crowding

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out the King of Rohan's mail-clad Riders. Everyone was growing impatient—even the quiet, dignified elves of Eryn Carantaur were getting restive and their horses were stamping and champing at the bit.

But the friends of the Ring were still taking leave of one another, even though, for most of them, the separation would be short: Eomer, Faramir, the hobbits, Gimli, Legolas and Eowyn had all agreed to spend Yuletide with Aragorn and Arwen at Minas Tirith.

As Faramir finished saying his formal goodbyes to his host, Eowyn drew him to one side.

"You are looking well," she said. She glanced around her, making sure that they could not be overheard. "And you look happy, my dear—happier than I have seen you in a long time. *Are* you happy, Faramir? Have you found a way to be—to share your life with him? At least some of the time?"

Faramir smiled, and hugged her like a favourite sister. "Yes, Eowyn," he whispered in her ear, "things are better than a man in my position could ever have hoped for. Partly thanks to you, my dear. And I am glad to see that you are happy, too, with Legolas. I do miss you, Eowyn. I miss your gentle support and your wise counsel. You will always be in my heart, my dearest friend." He kissed her forehead, tenderly, before swinging himself up onto his horse and saluting her as he set off at the head of his retinue.

Eomer and Legolas, calming Eomer's horse whilst the king waited for his wife and son to settle themselves in their carriage, had both watched the exchange between the Prince of Ithilien and his former wife with interest.

"I will never understand why he let her go," said Eomer. "And I must say that the events of the last few days have not entirely allayed the worries I have about you and my sister. But I admit that she looks better than I have ever seen her."

He examined his horse's bridle, intently. "Maybe it is worth taking a risk and following your heart to have the chance of that sort of happiness, however brief it may be..." His eyes wandered to his own wife before he added, softly, "Make sure you take care of her, Legolas."

He slapped the elf on the back and swung himself up into the saddle. "I will see you in Minas Tirith, a month hence, my friend," he said. And he rode out through the great castle gates at the head of his cavalcade, narrowly missing Master Dínendal who was saying goodbye to the King and Queen of Gondor and the Royal Healer.

"Thank you Master Dínendal," Aragorn said, "for everything—for examining the Queen, for sharing your knowledge with her healer, and for taking care of our brothers. With your permission, my wife and I would like to ask Lord Legolas to bring you with him when he comes to Minas Tirith for Yuletide."

"I would be honoured, your Majesty," replied Dínendal, bowing low.

He turned to the Queen and bowed again, but Arwen, who had already grown fond of the diffident healer, held out her hand to him, and Dínendal, though he was almost entirely innocent of the ways of Court, took it with a natural grace, and lifted it to his lips, placing a feather-light kiss on the flawless skin.

"I will speak to Legolas now, *meleth nín*," said Aragorn to his wife, but as he started towards the elf, he noticed that Legolas was already talking to Prince Imrahil. He was not sure why relations between the two former friends had recently been so strained, but he was pleased to see that some sort of reconciliation was apparently taking place—so he quickly turned away and busied himself with a short inspection of his men.

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"I want to thank you, Imrahil," said Legolas, hesitantly, "for helping us rescue Eowyn—especially as I can remember lashing out at you afterwards, and knocking you to your knees in the sea..."

"I did nothing out of the ordinary, my friend—she is a dear lady. And as for the other—I did come close to retaliating," he admitted, "but fortunately I remembered in time that a man—even with traces of elven blood in his veins—is no match for an elf. Besides, I had seen your eyes, and I knew you were not yourself." He paused. "In truth, it is I who should be apologising, Legolas. When you arrived I greeted you with the wish that your stay might be everything you desired. Little did I know that two of my citizens were planning to kidnap you and use you in the most cynical way. The apothecary had customers in Far Harad, and he planned to—"

"Yes, he told me," said Legolas, cutting him off sharply. Then he added, "Do not trouble yourself on that account, Imrahil. There are dishonest citizens in every realm—I know only too well how difficult it is for a ruler to keep control of his people, and how responsible he feels when one of them strays. As you know, one of my own people committed murder at the harvest ceremony..." He hesitated. "And maybe these events have had one positive result..."

"You are an honourable man, Imrahil, a very honourable man."

"But our friendship took a wrong turn, and our desires remain opposed, so we can never again be true friends," Imrahil supplied.

"No."

"Then let us agree to be civil," said Imrahil, deliberately echoing Legolas' words of a few nights earlier. He held out his hand to the elf, who accepted it, and shook it, human-fashion, with genuine warmth.

...

Another person, besides Aragorn, had been pleased to witness the exchange between Legolas and Imrahil. After talking to Faramir, and saying goodbye to the hobbits, Eowyn had joined Haldir and the four guards from Eryn Carantaur, deliberately leaving Legolas free to build his bridges.

"I have been thinking," said a gruff voice behind her, "that the moving target I made for the elf's conception day may require a little adjustment—it is some time since I checked it. And since Eryn Carantaur is on the way to Minas Tirith, this would be a convenient time for me to take a detour and just make sure that it is working properly. I would not want those elves to think that dwarven inventions are not reliable."

Eowyn smiled. "You can ride with me, if you would like, Gimli."

"But Gimli," she added, putting her hands on his shoulders, "whatever you may like to pretend to Legolas,"—she winked, conspiratorially—"I know why you want to travel with him along the coast road. You need never use an excuse with me, because I know how much you care for him. And nothing makes me happier than to see the two of you playing together." She grinned mischievously at the dwarf's expression. "You bring him something special, Gimli. You bring him joy. You bring out the elfling in him."

She bent, and kissed Gimli's forehead.

Gimli blushed deeply.

"Should I be jealous?" asked Legolas, walking over to join them.

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"Yes indeed," said Gimli, wiping something from his eye, "you should; for I shall be riding with your lady all the way to Eryn Carantaur."

THE END

Epilogue

Crowds of people had gathered round the city gates to watch the prince's visitors leave.

A particularly large group, many of them women, had congregated around Broad Gate to see the elves pass by—especially Prince Legolas, whose looks had become the talk of every tavern, shop and parlour in Dol Amroth.

As Legolas' party finally rode out through the gate—and a loud cheer went up from the crowd—a smallish man lying in a handcart, his head and legs swathed in bandages, turned to the woman beside him. "Help me sit up," he said. "I want to see her."

His companion wrapped her strong arms around his torso and lifted him into a sitting position. He clamped both hands on the sides of the cart to keep himself upright and fixed his eyes on the woman on horseback. As she rode past him—smiling at the crowd and at the handsome elf beside her—the man whispered, "You have not yet seen the last of me, my lady, and I have not yet seen the last of you."

And he kept watching her, long after the rest of the crowd had dispersed, as she wound her way along the rugged coast road, and disappeared beyond the horizon.