

Season of Mists



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Title: **Season of Mists**

Story Number: 9

Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: It is Autumn: King Thranduil is visiting Eryn Carantaur for the first time; Legolas is nervous about the Harvest Rite; and a man is found dead in the new building works...

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

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

Elvish

Tithen Dúlinn ... Little Nightingale.

Buion len ... I serve you.

Thranduil Oropherion ... Thranduil, son of Oropher.

Êl síla or lû o govaded vîn ... A star shines on the hour of our meeting.

Hîr nîn ... My Lord.

Iell nîn ... My daughter.

Nen vaer a lalaith veren nanarad agevedim ... Sweet water and joyous laughter till next we meet.

Ion nîn ... My son.

Hûn velui ... 'Sweet heart'

Dúnedhil ... 'Elves of the west'

Maer aur, hiril vain ... 'Good morning, beautiful lady'

Eryn Dholt ... 'Dark Forest'

Gynd Vyrn ... 'Black Rocks'

Eryn Valen ... 'Yellow Forest'

Tad-dal (pl *tad-dail*) ... A 'two-legged animal'

Beriadir nîn ... my guardian

Ceber ... erection (wooden stake)

No i Melain na le, hiril nîn ... May the Valar be with you, my Lady

Gwanur ... Kinswoman ('Aunt')

Season of Mists

Prologue

The craftsmen-builders worked in four gangs.

The carpenters built the framework, sawing and shaping the massive beams, cutting the mortices and the tenons, hauling the timbers into place with ropes and pulleys, and climbing—with death-defying confidence—over the wooden skeleton to hammer home the joists. Next came the plankers, cladding the roofs, the floors, and the walls, planing them smooth ready for the carvers, who followed close behind, adding the decorative elements—the swirling window frames and the fretted canopies. Last of all came the decorators, who filled the windows with coloured glass, painted the woodwork, and built the canvas sun-shades.

Cyllien's lover belonged to the first gang, the carpenters—the *real* men.

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"How will I know when to step in?" asked Camthalion.

"You will see me pinned to a beam."

"Arinna!"

The woman smiled. "Use your judgement, Cami. But leave it as long as you can."

The elf was obviously unhappy with that arrangement; but Arinna reached up and stroked his face. Then she slipped out from behind the carantaur trunk, walked gracefully across the walkway, entered the building works, and—ignoring the stares and snide remarks—she picked her way, through the organised chaos, to where the planking came to an abrupt end, then walked out onto one of the bare beams.

"Hey, *lady!*" cried one of the men.

Her quarry was crouching, his back turned towards her, carefully trimming out a mortice with his hammer and chisel. "I think this," said Arinna, holding out a large carpet bag, "is yours."

The man swung round, his expression turning from surprise to derision as he eyed the flowered holdall. "What?"

"The dead cat," said Arinna, quietly, "is yours." She placed the bag on the beam between them. "When you left this, the situation turned from a foolish mistake to something altogether different—something quite nasty. I have not taken the matter any further as yet. But I shall, if you do it again. You have been warned." She turned to leave.

"What are you going on about, you old bat?"

"I have said my piece," said Arinna over her shoulder. "If you know what is good for you, you will dispose of the cat and that will be an end of it." And, raising her hands for balance, she walked back to the safety of the solid floor.

The carpenter flew after her.

"If *you* think you can come here, in front of all my mates..."

He grabbed her by the shoulder and jerked her round, and—as she turned—Arinna saw Camthalion emerge from behind the tree and come running across the walkway—but the carpenter had already raised his fist, and contempt made her reckless. "You can hit me all you like—I have ripped off bigger balls than yours and when I have them I will give them to *her*, on a plate—"

Season of Mists

"That's enough, Heral!" One of the other workmen caught the carpenter by the shoulders and pulled him back. "I have warned you before about threatening women. You had better go, lady."

Arinna stepped back and, with Camthalion standing guard behind her, looked the carpenter in the eye. "Remember what I said," she insisted. "It need go no further if it stops now."

And, as she let the elf lead her away, she saw the man angrily shrug off his colleague's restraining hands.

Season of Mists

Chapter 1: Repercussions

"Please, Tithen Dúlinn,"—Haldir looked up from the bow he was carefully re-stringing —"do not smoke in here."

Cyllien, who had just emerged from their bedchamber looking pale and sickly, threw up her hands in anger. "Am I smoking?" she demanded. "Am I?"

"No." Haldir smiled sympathetically. *But I know you*, he thought. *I know what you need when you look like that*. Still, he laid down the bow, and held out his arms to her. "Come here," he said, gently.

Cyllien hesitated, clearly surprised by his sudden show of affection. "Why?"

"I just want to hold you. You look so—"

"*What?*" The elleth ran a hand through her dishevelled hair. "*What* do I look?"

Broken, thought Haldir. "Fragile," he said. He held out his arms again—and, this time, Cyllien came to him, kneeling before him, and snuggling against his chest. Haldir stroked her damp, matted hair. "You need a change, Tithen Dúlinn," he said, gently. "We both do. I have been thinking that I might ask Legolas for a leave of absence."

"And then what?" Her voice sounded small, but hopeful.

"I would take you somewhere," said Haldir, "wherever you wanted to go. Just the two of us."

For a moment—a mere heartbeat—he saw her face light up. Then the glow vanished. "It's not that you want to be with *me*," she said, pulling away from him, angrily. "You just want to miss the Harvest Rite. You just don't want to see him fucking *her*!"

"Oh, Cyllien..." A profound weariness came over him. He let her go.

"Why didn't you stay with *her*?" she cried, stamping her foot. "With that other Eowyn?"

"She did not want me," replied Haldir, simply. He sighed. He could see that she was choking on the insults she wanted to yell at him, but she bottled them up and, pulling her sleeping robe closed, she staggered over to the dresser and began throwing things here and there, searching for her pipe. "Cyllien, *please*."

"I am going outside!" she shouted.

Haldir picked up his bow.

...

"Ah!"

Eowyn's hands gripped the bed head, and her hips rose to meet his thrusts—"ah, ah, oh, oh, Legolas, Leg-, Leg-, Le-, aaaah!"—and a million stars burst inside her head, sending shards of fire into every extremity—

But it was not over yet, for her elf had yet to come, and he thrust, and thrust, and thrust again (his lovely face, hovering above her, frowning with need). And she felt the promise of another climax, somewhere deep inside her, felt his penis—*His beautiful, wonderful, oh*—"Oh yes! YES!"—and he touched that secret part of her and, instantly, her vital spirits rushed down to him, and her body devoured him—grasping and holding, grasping and holding—

Season of Mists

"Oh," he sobbed, "oh, Valar, melmenya."

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He collapsed into her arms, and she felt his lips move against her cheek, and knew that he was smiling.

"My elf," she sighed, hugging him, "my own elf. Do you think—"

"No, Eowyn nín," he replied, tiredly. "I *know* that it will be you. When the moment comes, when the Mistress of the Ceremony asks me to choose, I shall choose *you*. There is no other possibility."

"Good. But that is not what I was going to say." She stroked his hair. "I was just wondering how we will bear the next three days." (Since the Harvest Rite required the Celebrant to observe a period of celibacy before the Ceremony, Eowyn was planning to stay with Hentmirë for three nights). "I will miss you so much."

Legolas raised his head. "You *could* stay here with me, melmenya," he said, "as long as we did not make love—"

"Legolas!" Smiling, she reached up and stroked his face. "We both know that that would not work, my darling."

The elf kissed her hand.

"I must pack a bag," she said. "I will need my nightdress and my dressing robe, my new gown and slippers—"

"Surely, you can come back here to change your clothes, melmenya?"

"No," said Eowyn firmly. "We must do this properly, Legolas."

The elf sighed. "As you command, my Harvest Queen." He kissed her mouth, gently. "We will do it properly."

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Haldir knocked on the bedchamber door. "I am about to leave for the Council Meeting," he said.

There was no answer.

"Cyllien?"

The door opened. "I heard you."

The transformation was breathtaking—she had brushed her hair until it shone, and caught it back in a jewelled headband, she had applied rouge to her lips, and subtly painted her dark eyes, and she had put on a close-fitting gown of midnight blue silk. *She looks*, thought Haldir, who had almost forgotten how beautiful she was, *absolutely entrancing*. "You have remembered, then," he said, "that King Thranduil is due to arrive this afternoon."

"I will be there."

"Good." He kissed her forehead. "You may even enjoy it, Tithen Dúlinn."

She nodded, stiffly, before closing the door on him.

With a sigh, Haldir picked up his ledger and—taking a final glance around the chamber to make

Season of Mists

sure that Cyllien had not left her pipe, or the splint she used to light it, smouldering somewhere amidst the chaos—he made his way to the door and opened it.

A square of parchment was lying on the threshold. Haldir picked it up, unfolded it, and read the words scrawled upon it:

Your elf-woman is fucking Heral the carpenter

Calmly, he re-folded the letter, and put it in his pocket.

...

"Good morning everyone," said Legolas, calling the meeting of the Inner Council to order—Eowyn and Gimli, Lords Fingolfin, Caranthir, and Lenwë, March Warden Haldir, and Captain Golradir of the Palace Guard, all turned to face him, expectantly.

"Before we finalise the arrangements for my father's visit," he said, "I have pleasant task to perform. At our last meeting we decided that, since the colony now has more than a hundred human citizens, we would invite them to elect a spokesman to sit on the Council. I am very pleased to be asking Master Bawden,"—he gestured towards a man waiting at the chamber door—"to take his seat."

Amidst the quiet applause of his fellow Council members, Master Bawden—a small, vigorous man in his late fifties—sat down in the empty place between Haldir and Golradir. "Thank you, my Lord, my Lady, sirs," said the man, diffidently. "I shall do my best to serve the colony well."

"Welcome Master Bawden," said Legolas. "Now, to *less* pleasant business."

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Two hours later

Legolas stood before the double doors of the new guest apartments, examining their intricate decoration—carvings of sleek, galloping horses interwoven with curving branches and curling leaves—in the style of Rohan. "Magnificent," he said. "My compliments, Master Bawden."

"Thank you, my Lord," said the man, shyly.

"Allow us to show you the interior, my Lord, my Lady," said Master Amdír, the chief craftsman-builder, lifting the ornate door latch and pushing the doors open.

Legolas and Eowyn stepped inside. The entrance hall was light and airy, panelled in pale, carved wood, its wide, frosted windows hung with gauzy drapes.

"It is lovely," said Eowyn.

"Beautiful," agreed Legolas, smiling, "my father will be very comfortable here."

"This is the main bedchamber, my Lord," said Amdír, opening a door leading off the hallway.

Like two inquisitive children, Legolas and Eowyn peeped inside. The bedchamber was darker than the hall, panelled in deep red rosewood, and hung with crimson velvet. "Since your father is used to dwelling in a cavern, my Lord," explained the craftsman-builder, "we thought that he would find these colours most comfortable."

Beside the canopied bed, an open door led to what appeared to be an indoor garden, filled with fresh greenery. "It is also the bathing room, my Lord," said Amdír.

Season of Mists

"I see that you have made a study of my father's palace."

"We have, my Lord." Master Bawden bowed.

"Well, melmenya, I think that you and I should move in here ourselves," said Legolas, "and put my father in our quarters."

Eowyn smiled.

"*This* chamber, my Lord," said Amdír, drawing them back into the hallway and opening a second door, "is for your father's personal bodyguard."

"His *bodyguard*?" Legolas frowned, looking from the elf to the man and back again. "Whatever made you think that my father had a bodyguard?"

"His Majesty requested the accommodation himself, my Lord," said Bawden, colouring slightly. "He was very specific." He opened his document case and began searching through a number of plans. "His letter is here, somewhere, my Lord—"

"That is not necessary, Master Bawden," said Legolas, laying a friendly hand on the flustered man's arm. "I am just surprised..."

"Well, whoever this bodyguard is," said Eowyn, looking around the chamber, which was decorated in a deep pine-green, "I am sure that he will be happy in here. Shall we see the rest?"

The sitting room was a large, curved chamber, with separate spaces for dining, studying, and sitting cosily by the fire—and the broad windows of each area combined to provide a magnificent, panoramic view of the aerial city.

"We used plain glass in here, my Lord," explained Bawden, "because we thought—well, *I* thought—that your guests would want to look out. You see, they can draw these curtains for privacy." He took hold of one of the velvet drapes. "At the moment, unfortunately, the window overlooks the building site, but we're stopping work for the duration of the Ceremony, and we've tidied everything up, so it doesn't look too—oh—*no!*"

Something in the site below had caught his eye.

He sighed. "Excuse me, my Lord, my Lady, Master Amdír."

He rushed from the chamber.

...

"Stop it! Stop it *now!*" cried Bawden, running out onto the wooden platform.

The two men ignored him—the big blond, holding his opponent by the collar of his jerkin, continued pounding his fist into the other's head, the smaller one, struggling to wriggle free, kept slapping helplessly at the big man's chest.

"For the gods' *sakes!*" Bawden forced his way between them and pushed them apart. "Lord Legolas and Lady Eowyn are up there in the top chambers—looking down on you—and the gods only know what they're thinking—I wouldn't be surprised if they threw both of you out on your ears." He gave the big blond a hard shove. "And good *riddance!*"

The blond snarled.

"Do you want the elves thinking we're all pond scum?" cried Bawden. "Do you want them to

Season of Mists

treat all of us like some of us deserve? Do you?" He turned to the smaller man. "Do you, Lyell?"

"N-no, Bawden."

"No. So get off home with you—not you, Heral: you finish your job." He pointed to a pile of rough-sawn planks. "Get them shifted."

With a loud sigh, Heral the carpenter swaggered forward, 'accidentally' barging into Lyell as he passed.

"Hey!" cried the smaller man, rubbing his shoulder. He turned to Bawden. "I swear, one day, I'll *k-kill* that bastard."

"You'll have to wait your turn," replied Bawden, making his way back up to the guest apartments. "There's half the colony ahead of you."

...

"Who is that?"

Master Amdír looked down into the building site. Eowyn pointed to the man carrying the planks.

"His name is Heral," he said. "He is a good workman, when he applies himself—fearless, out on the timber frames, and as sure footed as any elf, but—"

The man seemed to sense that someone was talking about him and—whether he could see them or not—he suddenly looked up, leering impudently.

Eowyn looked away.

"—I hope you will not think it unfair of me, my Lady," continued Amdír, "if I say that he is a troublemaker.."

Amdír went on to provide a long list Heral's shortcomings but Eowyn did not hear them. Her attention was focussed on the familiar figure of the March Warden who, all but concealed amidst the carantaur foliage, seemed to be watching Heral the carpenter's every move.

Eowyn frowned. *Strange.*

...

Two o'clock, precisely

In the clearing beneath the city's main staircase, an excited crowd had gathered to welcome Eryn Carantaur's distinguished visitor.

A low platform had been built at the bottom of the stairs and, beneath its canopy of green silk (embroidered with vivid red carantaur leaves), a small group of dignitaries waited patiently whilst the rest of the colonists milled about, chattering excitedly and enjoying the refreshments—ripe blackberries, rosy red apples and glasses of chilled fruit cordial—being served from the Banqueting Hall.

"You mean that he is waiting down the road?" whispered Eowyn.

Legolas nodded. "My father likes to make an entrance, melmenya. He will appear at the proper time." He smiled at her, standing beside him, tall and slender in her elegant ice-green gown.

"You look like a spring flower."

Season of Mists

She rewarded him with a radiant smile.

Suddenly, the trumpets sounded, and two elven warriors rode into view, mounted on milk-white steeds and carrying pennants bearing the arms of the Woodland Realm.

The crowd fell silent.

Behind them came Thranduil himself, handsome—several ladies in the crowd were heard to gasp—elegantly dressed in silver brocade, and wearing a simple coronet of green and white gems.

Beside the King, his chiselled features a picture of arrogance, rode *“Thorkell bogsveigir,”* whispered Eowyn.

As the remainder of the royal party filed into the clearing, the two Mirkwood guards turned and took up their positions flanking the dais, whilst Thranduil brought his horse to a halt. Immediately, Haldir stepped forward and, bowing briefly, placed a stool beneath the King’s feet. With great dignity, Thranduil dismounted and climbed the steps to where Legolas and Eowyn were waiting. Thorkell bogsveigir dropped lightly from his horse, and followed.

“Welcome, your Majesty,” said Legolas. Then, completely forgetting royal protocol, he threw his arms around his father and hugged him tightly—beckoning Eowyn to join them.

A scattering of sighs and quiet hand-claps went up from the crowd.

At last, Legolas released his father and began the introductions. “May I present Lady Hentmirë, Ada?” he said.

The little woman, looking anxious but surprisingly regal in a magnificent jewelled gown she had brought from Far Harad, stepped forward and curtsied. “Buion len, Thranduil Oropherion,” she said, pronouncing the words flawlessly. “Êl síla or lû o govaded vîn.” (Her tutor, Lord Fingolfin, breathed a sigh of relief).

“Mae govannen, Lady Hentmirë,” said Thranduil. “My son has told me all about you. I trust we shall be friends.”

“This, Ada,” said Legolas, “is Mistress Wilawen.”

Wilawen, almost beautiful in an elven gown made especially by Eowyn’s seamstress, curtsied. “Buion len, hîr nîn.”

“Enchanted,” said Thranduil, kissing her hand. “My son and I are in your debt, Mistress.”

“And this,” said Legolas, “is Master Arador.”

Arador, well-scrubbed, and with his long dark hair tamed by an elven braid, bowed solemnly. “Buion len, hîr nîn,” he said.

“Ah,” said Thranduil, “the young fire-starter. I hear that your father has given us permission to keep you for a year, Master Arador.” He leaned closer. “I look forward to learning more of your secrets, young man.”

“Now, father,” said Legolas, “if you are ready,”—he gestured towards the staircase—“I will show you and your,”—he smiled at Thorkell bogsveigir—“your bodyguard, to your quarters.”

“Thank you, Lassui.” Thranduil held out his arm to Eowyn—“Iell nîn?”—and, with his future daughter-in-law in tow, he swept past Gimli, Lord Fingolfin, Lord Caranthir and Lord Lenwë, giving each a curt nod—then came to an abrupt stop. “And who is this?”

Season of Mists

"This is Mistress Cyllien," said Eowyn.

The pair looked into each other's eyes. Thranduil bowed. Cyllien curtsied. "Nen vaer a lalaith veren nanarad agevedim," said the Elvenking, softly.

...

"He makes the others look like elflings," said Cyllien, watching Thranduil climb the stairs.

Haldir looked from her, to the King, and back again, but said nothing.

...

"You are looking well, Lassui," said Thranduil, standing in the window of his sitting room, gazing out across the colony, "despite your recent adventures—she is good for you, ion nín."

"Of course she is, Ada. I only wish that *you*—"

"And the colony is thriving." The Elvenking leaned forward to watch a group of young children—human and elven, and one tiny dwarf—playing knuckle bones together. "The races live in harmony."

"I hope so, Ada." Legolas walked over to the sitting area. There was a sideboard next to the fireplace, with a decanter of red wine and four tall glasses upon it. "Come," he said, "drink a toast with me."

"A toast?"

"It is a human custom I learned from Eomer King, Ada. This is a good vintage," he added, withdrawing the crystal stopper, "our first." He poured out two glasses of wine, and handed one to his father. "Just raise it, like this—yes. Now: to you, father, for permitting me to bring our folk hither, and to Eryn Carantaur, may it always be blessed." He touched his glass to Thranduil's.

"Now what?"

"Now, we drink."

"A very pleasant custom," said the Elvenking, with a twinkle in his eye.

The woman with hair like midday sun does not know that I watch over her.

I watch her when she rides her horse, chasing the wind; I watch her when she practises her war dance with her long, sharp blade; I watch her when she patiently draws her picture of the Great Red Forest.

I have watched her fight, as fierce as a warg.

I have watched her cry as though the Forest itself had died.

But today she is smiling—at the tall, dark man who arrived with the Elvenking.

"Good afternoon, my Lady." Thorkell bogsveigir bowed politely. "Prince Legolas has asked me to help you move your belongings."

Season of Mists

"Lady? *Prince*? I see that King Thranduil has taught you some manners, at last," she said, grinning, for the Beorning was not always so polite. She pointed to the clothes chest that she had been about to drag across the walkway to Hentmirë's house.

The man lifted it without protest. "His Majesty has taught me,"—he seemed to be considering his words—"many things."

"I am sure he has." Eowyn pushed Hentmirë's door open. "Just in here—thank you. I suspect that you and he were made for each other."

Thorkell set the chest down. "What do you mean, *made* for each other?" He eyed her, suspiciously.

"I mean," said Eowyn, "that *you* are clever, and loyal (when you want to be), and—yes—you can be ruthless, too. You are just what an Elvenking needs to do his bidding. And he must think highly of you," she added, "to have made you his personal bodyguard."

"That is just one of his jokes," said Thorkell bogsveigir, but he suddenly seemed uncomfortable. "Will that be all, my Lady?"

"It will. Thank you." Impulsively, Eowyn stretched out her hands. "It is good to see you again, blood brother."

Thorkell bogsveigir seized them, smiling. "And it is good to see you, too, blood sister," he said. "Very good to see you."

...

Later

"Well?" asked Thranduil.

Thorkell bogsveigir leaned back against the door, folding his arms across his chest. "She is not exactly popular with my Lady," he said, "but I did manage to learn a few things."

"Yes?"

"Her name is Cyllien."

"I know that." Thranduil crossed to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of wine. Thorkell bogsveigir cleared his throat but the Elvenking ignored him. "Go on."

"She lives with the March Warden—Haldir—he found her in Far Harad, singing in a tavern, and brought her home with him. Rumour has it that she... Now, how shall I put this,"—the Elvenking had returned to the window, so the Beorning took the opportunity to pour himself a drink—"rumour has it that their relationship is not all that it should be. Rumour has it that she sometimes seeks consolation elsewhere—"

"Eowyn did not tell you that!"

"No." Thorkell knocked back his wine. "Not bad—no, I just happened to hear one of the workmen boasting."

Thranduil nodded, thoughtfully. "I am going for a walk," he announced. "Make sure that you are here when I return."

...

The Elvenking took off his coronet and laid it carefully in its velvet-lined box, unhooked the

Season of Mists

fastenings of his heavy robe and shrugged it off, put on a simple suede jerkin and a mantle of dark green, raising the hood to cover his golden hair—then he set out to explore the city, just an ordinary wood elf, newly arrived from one of the rural settlements.

...

"Ten gold," said the trader.

"Ten?" Cyllien frowned.

"Bad weather, love," the man explained. "Bad 'arvest."

The elleth counted out the money. "Will you be here again next month?"

"Gods willing." He weighed out the pipe weed and carefully tipped it onto a piece of canvas, which he rolled up, tying off the ends with string. "Ang it from the ceiling, somewhere dry," he advised. "Or better still, keep it in a wooden barrel."

"I shall." Cyllien concealed the precious purchase under her mantle. "Thank you. Until next month, then."

She hurried back across the market-flet, and she was so intent upon avoiding the crowd before her that she did not notice the man behind her—until he grabbed her by the wrist.

...

The light was fading and the air, though still quite warm, was fresh, whispering promises of winter.

Lassui has done well, thought Thranduil, strolling down the main walkway, admiring the deep red foliage of the mighty carantaurs, and the elegant lines of the buildings nestling amongst their branches. *Though it is, perhaps, a little too much like Rivendell in places...*

He passed his son's own chambers and his sharp eyes, glancing—entirely by accident—through a frosted window, caught a brief glimpse of two shadows sharing a tender embrace.

Smiling, Thranduil walked on, past the Council Chamber and the residences of its elven members, past the headquarters of the Palace Guard, past the Library and the school for elflings, past the clusters of small apartments with their little balconies and their garden flets, past the broad market-flet, where a lively crowd of elves, humans, and a handful of dwarves, were buying and selling wares from all over Middle-earth—

Wait! Is that her?

...

"What are you *doing?*" hissed Cyllien, looking up into Heral's hard, blue eyes. "Let me *go!*"

The carpenter smiled—and Cyllien wondered how she could ever have allowed him to do the things he had done to her. She glanced around. Several people had noticed that something was going on—one, a stranger dressed in dark green, looked as though he might be about to come to her aid. "You cannot do anything to me here," she said, as bravely as she could, "so let me go."

In reply, Heral tightened the grip on her wrist until her body sagged beneath the pain. Then, grasping her at the waist, he propelled her onto one of the walkways, taking her under an arch, and through a gate, and into a secluded garden.

Season of Mists

"I will scream," warned Cyllien.

He pushed her against the flet wall. "Try it—and I'll stop you, one way or another."

She felt his hand reach down between them, and she knew that he was opening his breeches. And—as she struggled to break free—a chilling thought struck her for the first time: "You *killed* that cat," she cried. "You took its life, just to scare me. You have no conscience,"—she heard her skirt tear and felt his big phallus jab between her thighs—"no," she cried, fighting desperately now, "stop it!"

"You want it—you know you do."

"No! *Please!*"

"Step away from her," said a calm voice.

"Fuck off!" cried Heral.

"Move away from her," the voice insisted, "or I will make you move."

"*Make me?*"

Cyllien felt Heral's grip relax—then, suddenly, she was free because he was flying at the stranger, knife in hand. "Look out!" she cried.

But, with perfect timing, the hooded elf stepped aside, and the man's charge ended abruptly as he stumbled into the flet wall.

"Now, you have a simple choice," said the stranger, grasping the carpenter by the scruff of the neck and forcing his head down over the rail, "either leave this lady alone, or suffer the consequences."

"Who the *fuck* do you think you are?" roared the man, struggling wildly.

"I am someone," said the strange elf, pushing his head even lower, "who can make your life a misery." He gave Heral a final warning shove before hauling him to his feet. "Now go back to the hole you crawled from," he commanded, "and, for Varda's sake,"—he nodded at the man's groin—"make yourself decent."

Heral wrenched himself free—clearly intending to attack again—but the stranger, stepping back, calmly drew a long, white knife. "I *will* use it," he warned.

A look of utter contempt crossed the carpenter's face. "Elf turd," he spat, "you'll regret this!" And, with a dismissive gesture, he stamped towards the gate, pulling his breeches closed. "You've not seen the last of me! Either of you!"

"Now, Mistress Cyllien," said King Thranduil, lowering his hood, "will you permit me to escort you home?"

...

Evening

The Banqueting Hall sparkled with candlelight.

Eowyn, seated beside Legolas, sitting to the right of his father, glanced round the large, ring-shaped table, smiling. Their guests were clearly enjoying themselves—they had eaten well and now, over apple brandy, nuts and sweetmeats, they were talking with old friends and making new acquaintances: Thorkell bogsveigir, she noticed, was getting to know a particularly lovely

Season of Mists

elleth...

"Lassui," she asked, frowning, "where is Haldir?"

"The March Warden?" Legolas quickly scanned the Hall. "I do not know, melmenya."

"Cyllien is not here either."

"Perhaps," said Legolas, quietly, "they are having a disagreement."

Eowyn shook her head. "They are always having disagreements, Lassui, but it has never stopped Haldir doing his duty before."

"Then let us hope," said Legolas, taking her hand, "that they are making up." He smiled, and then his expression changed to something so full of love and happiness, it made her heart glow. "Have I told you how beautiful you look, melmenya?"

Eowyn smiled. "Five times, at least."

"Well..." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. "I shall miss you tonight, Eowyn nín."

The woman with hair like midday sun is safely asleep. It is time for me to return to the Forest.

I begin to climb, but a furtive movement catches my eye, and I stop to watch.

Eowyn awoke with a start and sat bolt upright—someone was tapping on her bedchamber window.

She peered through the frosted glass.

Then, smiling, she opened the window. "You should not be here, Lassui."

"I just wanted to say goodnight."

"Again?"

He smiled, ruefully. "I miss you, melmenya."

"I know. But it is only three nights, my darling,"—she thought for a moment—"why not go up onto the sea-flet? You can see so many stars up there."

"They would not be the same without you beside me."

"Oh, Lassui!" She leaned through the window and hugged him tightly. "I know: why not take your bow down to the practice field—perhaps you can persuade Haldir to join you."

Legolas kissed her temple. "Yes," he said, slowly, "yes, that is a good idea, melmenya. Thank you." Reluctantly he pulled away from her. "Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight, Lassui."

She watched him cross the walkway—shoulders hunched, head bowed, a picture of dejection—and disappear into their chambers.

Season of Mists

She closed the window.

Suddenly, through the blurry glass, she caught a glimpse of someone else—someone tall and lean—creeping quietly past, heading in the direction of the new guest chambers.

Quickly, she re-opened the window and peered out.

But whoever it was had vanished.

Season of Mists

Chapter 2: The body

Dawn

Master Bawden hurried down the main walkway, ducked behind the screen that concealed the building site from passers by and, glancing upwards, walked out onto the half-finished flet.

Thank the gods, he thought, the King's curtains are still closed—

He felt something sticky beneath his feet, and looked down.

The body was lying on the beautifully carved porch, surrounded by a splash of dark blood that had dripped from step to step and pooled on the flet beneath.

"Oh, *Béma!*" Bawden swallowed hard.

But he had seen far too many deaths, both at Helm's Deep and on Pelennor Field, to lose his stomach over this one and—quickly mastering himself—he stepped over the gore, crouched down beside the body, and touched its out-flung hand. "Stone cold," he muttered.

He looked up at King Thranduil's apartment.

Quickly, he rose, pulled a tarpaulin from the pile of planks stacked against the flet wall, and covered up the dead man, weighing down the cloth with blocks of wood at the feet, and at what was left of the head.

Now, he thought, to tell Captain Golradir. Oh, gods!

...

An hour later

Legolas climbed out of the warm, scented water, picked up his dressing robe and slipped it on. "Yes—what is it?"

"Captain Golradir to see you my Lord," called his servant, through the closed door. "I told him that you were bathing, but he says that the matter cannot wait."

Hearing the anxiety in the young elf's voice, Legolas opened the door. "Do not look so worried, Galathil," he said, smiling. "Show the Captain into the study, tell him that I will be with him in a few moments, and offer him a glass of cordial."

"Yes, my Lord."

...

Legolas entered his study to find the Captain of the Palace Guard pacing nervously to and fro. "It has happened again my Lord," he said, with barely-controlled anger, "and I can only offer my most sincere apologies—"

"Please, Captain, calm down. *What* has happened again?"

"A death, my Lord—a murder—on the very eve of the Harvest Rite."

Legolas swore softly. "Take a seat, Captain, and tell me everything you know." He crossed to the sideboard, poured himself a cordial, and offered to refill the other's glass. "Who is the victim?"

Season of Mists

"One of the craftsman-builders, my Lord," said Golradir, sitting down reluctantly. "Heral son of Eadfrid; a human. Master Bawden found him lying in the new building works—directly beneath his Majesty's window—fortunately, Bawden had the presence of mind to cover him up."

"Bawden is a good man." Legolas frowned. "Could the death have been an accident?"

"No." Golradir shook his head. "No, my Lord. I have examined the body myself. The man was stabbed through the heart, and would have fallen instantly, but there is no sign of the blade. Besides..."

Legolas waited.

The Captain sighed. "The body," he said, quietly, "has been mutilated."

"Mutilated? In what way?"

"His ears, my Lord. His ears have been cut from his head—and they are missing too."

...

Haldir's bedchamber

"Cyllien... Hûn velui."

Haldir had never known an elleth sleep as much as she—but he supposed that it was the effect of the pipe weed, acting upon her elven constitution, which seemed more susceptible to intoxication than that of a dwarf, or even that of a hobbit.

He shook her, very gently. "Cyllien?"

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, confused. "You don't—usually wake me..."

"No, but..." He indicated that he wanted to sit down, and she moved over to give him room. "There is something I need to say." He took hold of her hand. "I will always stand by you, Tithen Dúlinn. After all, I brought you here—"

"You did not force me."

"No. No, but perhaps I did mislead you..."

For an instant, he thought he saw something—*Jealousy? Anger?*—flicker in her dark eyes. Then she pulled her hand from his grasp and turned her back on him.

"Cyllien... I just want you to know that you can rely on me."

He waited, but the elleth did not reply and, after a few moments, he rose, and left the chamber.

...

Legolas stepped out onto the walkway.

The air was fresh—a strong breeze, carrying the scents of the Northern Forest, filled his lungs and, perversely, raised his spirits. *On a day like this*, he thought, crossing to Hentmirë's house, *it is hard to believe there can be such evil in the world.*

He knocked on the door. "Good morning, Donatiya," he said, greeting Hentmirë's faithful companion with a polite bow, "I need to speak with your mistress, and with Lady Eowyn."

Season of Mists

"They're both breaking their fast, Master Legolas," said the old woman. "Come with me."

He followed her into the breakfast room and, as he entered, he saw Eowyn look up from her honey cake, and smile at him. *Valar*, he thought, feeling his heart leap in response, *whoever decreed these nights apart knew exactly what he was doing.*

"Should you be in here, my dear?" asked Hentmirë, anxiously.

"Something is wrong," said Eowyn.

"Yes," replied Legolas. "I have bad news."

Eowyn indicated the empty chair beside her.

The elf glanced briefly at Hentmirë, wondering whether he should spare her the horrific details of the murder by sending her on an errand; but then he remembered that—despite appearances—she had already proved herself brave and capable, so he sat down, and recounted what Captain Golradir had told him.

"The poor man..." said Hentmirë.

"Melmenya," said Legolas, slowly, "Captain Golradir does not know how to proceed: the killer took the weapon, and cleaned up thoroughly. Golradir has asked whether you and I would be willing to oversee the investigation—he particularly asked for your help. Are you willing, Eowyn nín?"

"Of course, Lassui." Eowyn did not hesitate for a moment. "I saw Heral, yesterday, when we were up in your father's sitting room. He was fighting with one of the other workmen. Master Amdír called him a troublemaker; I wish I had paid more attention to the rest of what he was saying... Just let me fetch my wax tablet, and we will draw up a plan of action." She hurried from the breakfast room and Legolas heard her open Hentmirë's front door.

"Why do you think," said the little woman, suddenly, "that the killer cut his ears off? I mean, I can understand why a person might kill someone,"—and Legolas remembered, then, how Hentmirë had (more by accident than intention, it was true), caused the death of Baalhanno in the caves beneath Kuri—"and I can see why they might attack the body afterwards, in anger," she continued, "but why cut off his *ears*?"

Legolas shook his head.

"Unless..."

"Unless what, gwendithen?"

Hentmirë chewed her lip. "Well, elven ears are pointed, and so are dwarves', a little, but human ears are round," she said.

...

As Eowyn was crossing the walkway, she spotted a tall, dark figure approaching the main staircase, longbow in hand. "Good morning, blood brother," she called.

Thorkell bogsveigir turned, smiling. "And good morning to you, blood sister." He bowed theatrically. "May I trouble you for directions to the archery butts? I am told that they are somewhere—er—down *there*." He waved his hand in the direction of the ground, far below.

"Yes," said Eowyn. "When you reach the bottom of the stairs, turn left past the Banqueting Hall, follow the path through the rose gardens, and you will see the wall of the practice field

Season of Mists

straight ahead. You cannot miss it." She looked up into his handsome face—and the weight of the tablet in her hand reminded her of the murder, and of the mysterious figure she had seen through her window the night before. "Thorkell," she said, guardedly, "I noticed that you were making friends with Mistress Tóriel last night."

"*Lady Tóriel*," corrected the Beorning. "Her father was one of the *dúnedhil*, which makes him a prince among elves, apparently."

"And did you learn that," said Eowyn, "during the banquet—or after?"

"My Lady!"

"I was just—"

"A *gentleman*," said the Beorning, "does not discuss such things, and especially not with another Lady."

"Are you saying, then," she persisted, ignoring his banter, "that you *did* escort Tóriel home last night?"

"Are you warning me off?"

"No, of course not."

"Then what?" Suddenly, he smiled his infuriating, know-it-all smile. "Is this a little sister being possessive about her big brother?"

"Do not flatter yourself! Gods, Thorkell, how do you do you get away with this nonsense with King Thranduil?"

"I have a permanent pardon." He smiled at her look of disbelief. "It is true. When he asked me to join his household I insisted upon it. It is written upon parchment. If he threatens me with dismissal, I wave it at him."

Despite herself, Eowyn laughed, shaking her head. "Well," she said, knowing that she would get no more from him without revealing more than she should at present, "enjoy your practice."

"Thank you. I shall." He bowed. "My Lady."

For a few moments, Eowyn watched him descend the stairs—fervently praying that her 'blood brother' had played no part in the previous night's murder.

...

"Now," said Legolas, clearing a space on the breakfast table for Eowyn's wax tablet, "where do we start?"

"With the body," said Eowyn.

"Good. Golradir has left it in place, and set guards at the entrance to the building site, so nothing will have been disturbed. After we have seen everything for ourselves, *melmenya*, we will ask Master Dínendal to move the body to the Healing Rooms, and carry out a thorough examination."

Eowyn made notes: *Dínendal—time, weapon, wound, etc.*

"What then?" asked Legolas.

Season of Mists

"You should talk to Master Bawden," said Hentmirë.

"Yes," said Eowyn. "What was he doing there this morning—after he told us that the work had been suspended?"

"I do not know, melmenya," said Legolas. "I cannot believe he had anything to do with Heral's death, though I am sure that he will be able to tell us whether the man had any enemies."

"He had lots," said Eowyn, making more notes, "at least, according to Master Amdír—many of them husbands he had cuckolded. We should speak to Amdír third. And then, Legolas..." She looked up from the tablet. "I think we must also speak to Haldir."

"*Haldir?*" Legolas frowned. "What do you mean?"

Eowyn described how she had seen the big elf the day before, watching Heral from behind the foliage.

"Perhaps," said Hentmirë, "the March Warden was concerned for his safety." Legolas patted her hand.

"Even to me," said Eowyn, "it looked suspicious, so we must clear it up as quickly as possible. Did Haldir say anything last night, on the archery practice field?"

"No." Legolas shook his head. "No, in the end, I decided to go there alone, melmenya, so I did not see him."

"Pity." Eowyn made a note. "There is also Thorkell bogsveigir," she said. "I cannot be sure, but I think I saw him late last night, creeping past my window. He says—well, he implies—that he had been with Mistress Tóriel, but I—" She suddenly looked up from her wax tablet. "Lassui! You must tell your father what has happened!"

"I know." Legolas sighed. "I should do it by myself, melmenya—and the sooner the better. I will go straight away." He rose from the table.

"And I will fetch Master Dínendal," said Eowyn. "We will meet you at the building site." She carefully closed her tablet, sliding the stylus into its holder.

"Well," said Hentmirë, also rising, "whilst you two are doing that, I shall drive over to the stone quarry, and fetch Gimli back."

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged puzzled looks. "Why gwendithen?"

"Because a dwarf always sees things differently," she said.

"I cannot argue with that," said Legolas.

...

King Thranduil's apartment

"And that is the body?"

"Yes, Ada." Legolas joined his father beside the wide, curving window. Directly below them, the roofless chambers of the guest quarters, completely open to view, looked like the interlocking pieces of a puzzle—and Heral's body, still wrapped in Bawden's tarpaulin, lay like a stain upon their pale, carved wood.

"Ada," said Legolas, thoughtfully, "are you sure you did you not hear anything last night? Or see anything strange?"

Season of Mists

"Strange?" Thranduil shook his head. "No."

"At what time did you draw these curtains?"

"Am I a suspect?"

"No, of course not!"

"Good," said Thranduil. "Ah—there is Eowyn and that healer of yours."

Through the window, Legolas watched Eowyn and Master Dínendal carefully uncover the body. *I must join them.* He turned to his father. "Of course I am not accusing you of anything, Ada; but if you *had* been looking out of here last night—or if one of your servants had, perhaps—"

He was interrupted by a knock at the sitting room door.

"Come in," called Thranduil. "Mistress Cyllien! Maer aur, hiril vain." He swept across the room and, bowing slightly, offered the elleth his arm.

Cyllien, looking pale but seductive in a low-cut gown of vivid red, smiled up at him, and placed her hand in his.

Legolas frowned. "Ada..."

"A moment, Lassui." Thranduil guided Cyllien to the sitting area and waited until she was comfortably settled before returning to his son. "Was there anything else, ion nín?"

"What is she doing here?" asked Legolas quietly.

"Mistress Cyllien has promised to sing for me—*Nargothrond, Beren and Luthien, the Song of Nimrodel*—all the old lays."

"And since when have you been interested in music, Ada?"

"I have always loved music, Lassui. Did I not encourage your talent for singing?"

"No." Legolas glanced at Cyllien. She appeared to be examining the Rohirric carvings on the fireplace but he had no doubt that she was overhearing every word they said. "Haldir is a good elf, Ada," he said, raising his voice a little, "and a very good friend. Please do not forget that." He bowed, formally. "Until supper."

He was halfway to the building site before another thought occurred to him: when he had escorted his father back to his apartment at the end of the previous night's banquet, the Elvenking had hinted that he would like the opportunity to get to know Cyllien better—

"So when, exactly," sighed Legolas, "did she promise to sing for you, Ada?"

The woman with hair like midday sun holds the dead man's hand.

Does she grieve for him?

She would not, if she knew what I know.

"Good morning, Master Dínendal." Legolas crouched down beside the healer. "Thank you for agreeing to help us again—I know that this is an unpleasant task, but if you can tell us

Season of Mists

anything that might help us find the murderer..."

"Well," said the healer, gravely, "the unfortunate man was stabbed through the heart. I can examine the wound more thoroughly in the Healing Room but, at first sight, I would say that the blade was long and narrow with a trailing point, and that the bolster,"—he pulled back the man's torn shirt—"was angled—you can see how it has dug more deeply into the flesh at the lower edge of the wound..."

"Something like this?" asked Legolas, drawing one of his own white knives and handing it to the other elf.

Dínendal examined the blade. "Yes..." He held the point against the wound. "Yes, that is a good match." He gave the knife back to Legolas.

"Thank you."

"The attack," continued the healer, "does not appear frenzied. The killer struck once, withdrew the knife, and his victim's lifeblood flowed out from the hole in his heart. The killer then used the same blade to cut off the ears." Respectfully, he closed the dead man's shirt, smoothing the bloody cloth over the broad chest.

"He does seem to have fought, though," said Eowyn. "Look,"—she lifted Heral's left hand—"his knuckles are grazed and the blood is fresh, so the murderer may well have a black eye, or a swollen nose."

"Are there any footprints?" asked Legolas, glancing across the flet.

"One on the porch," said Eowyn, "but that is Heral's own: there is a crack across the sole,"—she looked up—"he slipped on his own blood, Lassui. There is another one, down there,"—she pointed to the floor of the flet—"but Master Bawden says that is *his*—he is waiting to speak to us in the workmen's pavilion. I cannot see any others."

Legolas nodded. "You and I will have another look before we question Bawden, melmenya," he said. "Master Dínendal, I think that now would be a good time for you to move the body to the Healing Room."

...

The stone quarry

Hentmirë's carriage (recently shipped from Carhivilven) glided into the clearing. "Whoa," called Rimush, and the horses drew to a halt.

Sitting on the driver's seat, beside her former slave, Hentmirë surveyed the scene. Directly ahead, a curving wall of rock, criss-crossed by sloping pathways and peppered with holes, swarmed with dwarves cutting, and men hauling, and elves carving the smooth, white stone to every shape and size.

"Look, there he is," cried Hentmirë. "Gimli!" She waved to the dwarf. "Gimli!"

By the time she had climbed down to the ground, Gimli, wearing a leather cap and apron, and covered from head to foot in stone dust, was there to meet her. Hentmirë explained what had happened. "And it is only two days until that dreadful Ceremony," she said.

Without a word, Gimli walked over to one of the barrels standing beside the supply tent, scooped up a large ladle of water, poured it over his head, and shook himself like a dog. Then he rejoined Hentmirë. "Let us go and help the lad," he said.

Season of Mists

...

Having found nothing further at the building site, Legolas and Eowyn crossed the main walkway, turned onto a narrow side path, and followed it, snaking between the tree trunks, until they came to a long, open-sided shelter where tables, chairs and a simple kitchen had been arranged to provide a place where the craftsmen-builders might rest.

As they approached the pavilion they could see Bawden, hunched over at one of the tables, staring at his hands but, the moment he became aware of them, he leapt to his feet—"My Lord, my Lady,"—and bowed, respectfully.

"Please sit down, Master Bawden," said Legolas. He pulled out a chair for Eowyn, then sat down beside her. "We just need to ask you a few questions."

"Of course, my Lord."

Eowyn began. "Why were you on the building site this morning?" she asked, opening up her wax tablet and extracting the stylus. "You told us that work had stopped."

"It has, my Lady. But I..." The man sighed. "The thing is, my Lady, I had a dream."

Eowyn looked up from her note-taking.

Legolas frowned. "A *dream*?"

"Yes, my Lord. It didn't make much sense—as is usually the case with dreams—but I woke up convinced that something was wrong." The man blushed. "I wouldn't normally have taken it seriously but, today, I just wanted to make sure that everything was sound before the servants opened the curtains and his Majesty saw—well—I was expecting to find something that needed repairing. Instead, I found..." His voice trailed away.

"A body," said Legolas.

"Yes, my Lord. Heral son of Eadfrid." The man sighed. "Luckily, his Majesty's curtains were still closed, so I covered up him up with a tarp and went to find Captain Golradir."

"Yesterday morning," said Eowyn, "I saw you break up a fight between Heral and another man."

"Lyell son of Aubour," said Bawden.

Eowyn noted the name. "What was it about?"

The man frowned. "To tell the truth, my Lady, I've no idea. Lyell's not married, so..." He stopped, mid-sentence.

"We already know that Heral had a reputation," said Legolas.

"That, he did, my Lord." The man glanced uneasily at Eowyn.

"You may speak freely in front of me, Master Bawden."

"Thank you, my Lady." Bawden cleared his throat. "They were always coming for him: the women would pester him—afterwards I mean, for *he* did all the chasing beforehand—and the men would threaten."

"Can you give us any names?" asked Legolas.

"I'd have to give it some thought, my Lord," said Bawden, "and ask some of the other men,

Season of Mists

but I could probably draw up a list... Heral couldn't walk from here to the privy without spotting some pretty girl and swaggering up to her, and then,"—he shrugged—"then he'd boast about it afterwards."

"Had he boasted about anyone recently?" asked Eowyn.

"An elf-lady," said Bawden. "He didn't mention her name—I don't think he knew their names half the time—he just said that her husband couldn't—well—make her happy. And I think he said that she had dark hair."

"She did not visit him on the site?" asked Legolas.

"No my Lord."

"Did her husband?" asked Eowyn.

"Not that I know of, my Lady. But there was a *woman*—who came recently, that is—walked right out onto the beams, brave as you please, handed him a bag, and—well, I didn't hear what she said, but it made him angry—he would have hit her if I hadn't stepped in."

"Can you describe her?" asked Legolas.

"Oh, she was beautiful, my Lord," said Bawden. "A real *womanly* woman, if you know what I mean—too worldly wise to have been taken in by Heral—lovely, long brown hair, coiled at the back of her neck,"—Bawden waved a hand behind his head as he described the elaborate hairstyle. "She was wearing a fur mantle. Oh—and she had an elf with her. One of the border guards."

"Arinna," said Eowyn. She made a note. "You say that Heral threatened her, Master Bawden. Why did you not report that to Captain Golradir?"

"Well, my Lady—it was something and nothing." He thought for a moment. "You see, we craftsman-builders," he said, "we're like soldiers—we deal with our own. Those of us who saw it, we got together, and we fined Heral half a day's pay. Anywhere else, the money would have gone to the poor but, here in the colony, where there are no poor, it went to Dunston's widow and children."

"Dunston. The man who fell from the flet wall?"

"Yes, my Lord. Terrible loss." Bawden turned back to Eowyn. "It's the way we've always done things, my Lady."

"I understand that," said Eowyn, "but you are no longer itinerant workers, Master Bawden, you are members of this colony and subject to its laws."

"And, if we'd judged that the law had been broken, my Lady, we would have reported it to Captain Golradir straight away. But when it's a matter of discipline, we have to deal with it ourselves. A foreman who calls out the Palace Guard to settle every little disturbance will soon lose the men's respect."

"We will discuss this again, Master Bawden," said Legolas, "at length, when we have the leisure to do so. In the meantime, do you have any more questions, melmenya?"

"I can think of none at present."

"Then we will bid you Good Morning, Master Bawden," said Legolas, rising. "Thank you for your time. That list of names you mentioned would be most helpful and, if you should remember anything else—"

Season of Mists

"There is one thing, my Lord," said the man. "It may not be anything to do with this, of course, but there's a plank missing—a short length, that's why I noticed it. When I took the tarpaulin off to cover up the body, it wasn't on the pile."

...

Legolas and Eowyn returned to the main walkway, lingering upon a small garden flet to gaze out across the city whilst they gathered their thoughts. A cool breeze was stirring the foliage around them. Legolas took a deep breath of fresh air. "What are you thinking, melmenya?" he asked.

"That Arinna did not kill Heral," said Eowyn.

"No," said Legolas. "No, I do not believe her capable of murder, either. But—"

"It is not that, Lassui." She turned to face him. "A woman like Arinna would not have cut off his ears. She would have cut off..." She waved a hand in front of the elf's groin.

"Ceryn Manwë," said Legolas, "of course she would! But why did she come to see him?"

Eowyn shrugged. "And what did she say, to make him so angry? What was in the bag?"

"We need to talk to her, melmenya."

"Yes. She is our first important witness. I think we should go and see her next."

Legolas gave Eowyn his arm and they walked back through the palace, then followed the winding thoroughfare, through the clusters of houses, to where Arinna lived with her two elves, Camthalion and Orodreth.

"It is such a lovely day," said Eowyn.

"Glorious."

"I feel guilty."

"Why?"

"Because you should be closeted in the study with Lady Lessien, preparing for the Rite. And, instead, we are using the murder as an excuse to spend time together."

"I sent Lessien a note this morning," said Legolas, "explaining what had happened, and she replied that, in her opinion, I am already fully prepared."

"That does not excuse the way I am feeling," said Eowyn. "Like a child who has been let out of her lessons early."

Legolas drew her over to the flet wall. "Do you know why the Rite calls for celibacy, melmenya?"

"So that you will be pure when—"

"No." Legolas raised her hands to his lips, and kissed them tenderly. "It is not that. When I saw you this morning, I understood—it is so that we have the opportunity to remember what it was like to be apart—the opportunity to appreciate what a gift we have been given." He smiled down at her. "The Valar will not condemn us for enjoying each other's company."

...

Season of Mists

"Legolas!"

The couple turned: Haldir was hurrying towards them.

"Eowyn!" He gave them each a hasty greeting, hand on heart. "I have just heard of the death—and Golradir tells me that you have decided to investigate it personally. What can I do?"

Eowyn gave Legolas' hand a warning squeeze. "Did you know him, Haldir?" she asked.

"The dead man?" The big elf shrugged. "Only by reputation," he said. "Why?"

"Eowyn thinks she saw you watching him," said Legolas, ignoring another squeeze, "yesterday morning."

"I *did* see you, Haldir. What were you doing?"

"Eowyn! You cannot think—"

"Of course not! But you were hiding in the branches, and you did look angry!"

Haldir hesitated for just a moment, then he thrust his hand into his pocket, pulled out a square of parchment, and handed it to her. "Read it."

Eowyn unfolded the note, scanned it, and handed it to Legolas.

"Valar," whispered Legolas.

"Please do not look at me like that," said Haldir. "I cannot pretend to be an innocent victim. But Cyllien and I, we are together in this, for better or for worse, and I wanted to see him. I wanted to understand. I did not kill him."

"Where were you last night," asked Eowyn, quietly, "during the banquet?"

"Walking," replied the big elf. "I had much to think about, so I went to Eryn Dholt, where the water cascades down the Gynd Vyrn, and I walked. All night—"

...

A sudden commotion erupted somewhere near the palace, and a young woman, part-dressed and with her hair in wild disarray, crying, "My Lady! My Lady!" came running along the the walkway pursued by Captain Golradir.

Eowyn reached out and caught the woman by the hands. "What is it?"

"She insists on speaking to you, my Lady," said Golradir. "She says that someone has stolen her baby."

"It was his father!" cried the woman. "His father took him, my Lady—Heral son of Eadfrid!"

"Son of an *Orc*," muttered Haldir.

"What is your name?" asked Eowyn, gently encouraging the distraught woman to sit down on the bench that ran along the flet wall.

"Godith," the woman sobbed. "I'm Godith."

"And how do you know that it was Heral who took your baby, Godith?"

"Because he said he would. He said that Little Godwin was his by law. He said a mother that's

Season of Mists

not married has no rights in this colony.”

Haldir swore under his breath. “He was lying to you, Mistress Godith.”

The woman looked up at him. “Are you sure, sir?”

“Quite sure.”

“When did you last see Little Godwin, Godith?” asked Eowyn.

“Yesterday afternoon, my Lady,”—the woman sniffed, trying hard to control her tears—“when I got back from hop picking—my mother gave him back to me, and I fed him, and put him to bed—and he waved to me, my Lady. And this morning, he was gone.” Tears ran freely down her cheeks. “Little Godwin waved to me!” She broke down.

Eowyn wrapped an arm around her.

“Where do you live, Mistress Godith?” asked Legolas.

“Eryn Valen,” she sobbed. “It’s a long way, my Lord. I just took a horse from Master Eral’s stable, because I needed to get here—he doesn’t know—but I’m sure he would have let me if he’d been there...”

“We will make it right with him,” said Eowyn.

Legolas beckoned Haldir aside. “There was no sign of a baby with Heral’s body,” he said, quietly, “and we have only Godith’s suspicion that he had anything to do with the child’s disappearance. I suggest that we go to Eryn Valen, search her house and the immediate neighbourhood and then, if we have not found the child, spread out into the surrounding forest.”

Haldir nodded. “I will have a search party ready in half an hour.”

Legolas knelt down before the weeping woman. “We are going to take you back home, Mistress Godith,” he said. “And then Lady Eowyn and I, and our Border Guards, will find your baby.”

Season of Mists

Chapter 3: Something in the woods

A thorough search of Godith's parents' house, and of the few buildings, clustered around a bend in the Heledir river, that comprised the village of Eryn Valen, yielded nothing—no sign of the missing baby, no clues as to who might have taken him, or why—so, leaving the distraught mother in Hentmirë's care, Legolas and Eowyn, Gimli, and Haldir and his Border Guards proceeded to search the surrounding forest.

...

Late afternoon

"Do not get lost," said Legolas—seriously, for the Woods were unfamiliar to him and something about them, a feeling they aroused in him, which he could not quite name, made him uneasy—"or I will never let you *go* by yourself again."

Eowyn walked a few paces down the narrow track, found a dense patch of undergrowth, and—after quickly arranging some twigs in an arrow that pointed back to where Legolas and Gimli were waiting—slipped behind it, unlaced her leggings and pushed them down.

Behind her, someone laughed.

Eowyn gasped. "Who is there?"

Whoever it was did not reply and, peering through the trees, Eowyn could see no one—but then, as she hurriedly re-laced herself, she heard him laugh again.

"Who *are* you?" she demanded. "And *what* are you?" she wondered aloud, for she was sure from his voice, and from his wayward laughter, that he was neither elf nor man—and nor was he the strange leaf-being who had once rescued her from Orcs.

I must get back to Legolas, she thought. And she stepped out onto the path, and looked for her sign.

It was gone. "No!"

Nervous now, Eowyn called out, "Legolas? *Legolas*, where are you?"

But all she heard was more laughter.

And then—

...

"Do you think the poor mite is still alive?" asked Gimli.

"I hope so, elvellon," said Legolas, distractedly, for he kept looking in Eowyn's direction.

"What kind of Orc steals a baby? And *why*?"

"That, I do not know, Gimli—Valar, what is taking her so *long*?"

"Give her a few more moments, lad," said the dwarf. "You know, women are not built like us."

...

The soft, haunting melody curled like scent upon a breeze, seeping into her, stirring her limbs, until—though a small, quiet voice within her told her that it was foolish—Eowyn raised her

Season of Mists

arms, and began to dance.

...

"She is lost again, Gimli," said Legolas, suddenly. "Stay here with the horses, elvillon. I will go and find her."

...

Slowly, she followed the music's ebb and flow—and the creature came out from his hiding place and joined her, lifting his double-flute high as he twisted and turned, weaving his magic around her.

Another appeared, with bells at his wrists, and he joined in the dance, trailing silvery notes behind him.

Then a third emerged, and silently beckoned Eowyn to follow.

And—though some lingering sense warned her of danger—when she tried to resist, her doubts simply floated away. And then it no longer seemed strange that her companions should have horns on their heads, nor hair on their legs, nor that, in place of feet, they should have little, cloven hooves.

...

Legolas strode along the path, following the traces of Eowyn's passage—a trampled leaf here, a handful of scattered twigs there—until, in a patch of soft mud, he found several of her small footprints, pointing in different directions...

...

Gimli's eyes flew open. "Wait!"

The young woman, whose stealthy footsteps had disturbed him, froze, mid-step. "I am sorry, my Lord," she said, raising her hands in surrender, "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I was just resting my eyes," said Gimli. "But you should not be here, all by yourself, lass. These woods are not safe."

"You're right, Lord Gimli,"—she lowered her hands—"they're not. But I know them well." She gestured towards the north. "I live nearby."

"How do you know my name?"

"Everyone's heard of Lord Legolas' friend." She looked about her. "Is Lord Legolas with you?"

"Yes," said Gimli, "somewhere."

"Do you think he'll help me, my Lord?"

...

Still weaving their enchantments, the three creatures led Eowyn further and further down the path—deeper and deeper into the Forest—until they came to a great mead hall, standing atop a platform of hewn stone (and it did not seem strange to Eowyn to find such a fine building in that remote part of the Forest).

Then one of them took her by the hand, and drew her up the steps, and through the carved wooden doors.

Season of Mists

...

With mounting anxiety, Legolas searched in every direction until, to the east, he found a single, pale hair snagged upon a bramble, glittering in the sunlight like a thread of pure gold.

He pulled his bow from its strap, and hurried on.

...

"But *why* have these creatures taken your sister, lass?" asked Gimli. "Is your family rich?"

The woman blushed. "They'll not ask for a ransom, my Lord. They just want to *bed* her. They have no women of their own."

...

Eowyn frowned.

The mead hall was dark, lit only by the fire and by a smoky shaft of sunlight falling through the hole in the roof, but there was no mistaking what stood beside the fire pit.

...

Legolas crouched and examined the ground—*More footprints*, he thought, *and fresh. But not hers—not even human.*

...

"Come on, lass," said Gimli, jumping from Arod's back. He drew his axe. "We will both look for her. *Avo visto, Arod; avo visto, Brightstar.*"

...

Eowyn approached the row of tiny cribs.

"Hello," she whispered to the first child—and he smiled up at her, waving his perfect little fists—and something about a baby stirred in Eowyn's memory, and she was about reach in, and lift him from his bed, when she heard a whimper.

The next child, a blond elfling, was fast asleep—though Eowyn gently touched his cheek with the back of her hand, to make sure that all was well, before moving on to the next cradle.

"Hush, little one," she whispered to the third infant. "What is wrong? You are quite safe here."

She had had no experience with babies, but instinct guided her, and she slipped her hands beneath him and, supporting his little head, she lifted him from his crib and laid him upon her shoulder, gently rubbing his back and—

"Oh!" she gasped, for the boy, like his father, had tiny cloven hooves—and a question suddenly occurred to her.

"Where is his mother?" she asked. "Where are *all* their mothers?"

The creature merely smiled.

And then Eowyn knew why she had been brought to this place.

"You want *me* to take care of them," she said, "you want *me* to be their mother. But *I* cannot stay here,"—and she knew it to be true, though she could not remember why—"no, no, I

Season of Mists

cannot, but I *will* fetch help." She laid the baby back in his crib, and moved towards the door—

The creature caught her by the arm.

"I must get help for the *children*," she insisted. "I must... I..." She was sure that there was someone she must find—someone who would know what to do—and she seemed to catch a glimpse of him in her mind's eye, but when she tried to remember his name, she could not.

...

"Melmenya!" A sudden impression of Eowyn, worried and confused, and looking for him, filled Legolas' mind. "I am coming, melmenya!"

He broke into a run.

...

"Eowyn!" Gimli charged down the path, following the sound of his friend's voice. "Stay with me, lassie! Stay with me!"

...

Eowyn wrenched herself free. "I am *going* to get help," she said, firmly. And, oblivious now to the seductive sound of the flute, she ran past the creatures, and through the doors, and out into the clearing—

"Melmenya? Where are you?"

I know that voice!

"Melmenya!"

Whose is it?

Then an elf—the fairest, most noble being she had ever seen—emerged from the trees and, suddenly, her heart leapt, and she cried out, "*Legolas! Yes, yes! Legolas!*"

"Oh, melmenya!" He gathered her into his arms and held her tightly.

But Eowyn sensed the creatures behind her, and she tensed—and then she felt Legolas raise his head, and look at them, and was surprised to hear him say, "Thank you for finding my lady."

She turned.

And she knew it was they, for she would have recognised their wicked faces anywhere, but now they were just three simple woodsmen, dressed in trousers, and tunics, and caps of drab grey-green—all sign of their horns, their goats' legs, their dainty cloven hooves, gone.

And the mead hall, too, had vanished.

"The *babies*," roared Eowyn, pulling away from Legolas, "where are the *babies*? What have you *done* with them?"

The woodsmen fell back, as if startled by her fury.

"Come with me," she cried, dragging Legolas by the hand, past the three men and deeper into the clearing. "I found the missing baby, Lassui, and some others too! They are here, somewhere! They *must* be here! One of them is an elf, and the other—the other is one of

Season of Mists

them."

"One of what, melmenya?"

But Eowyn was too busy pulling aside the bracken and the brambles, and searching the ground beneath, to answer him. "I saw them, Lassui!" she kept repeating. "I saw them! I held one of them in my arms..."

"Wait, melmenya. I can hear something—over there."

Hand in hand they waded through the greenery, step by cautious step, until Legolas squeezed Eowyn's hand signalling her to stop, and he leaned forwards, and drew back the curtain of ferns.

And lying on the ground, in a small hollow, were three tiny babies.

"Gods, Lassui!" Eowyn fell to her knees and scooped up one of the children.

Legolas knelt beside her. "Are they all right, melmenya?"

"Yes, I think so." She turned to him, fierce with anger. "You must punish them, Legolas. They *stole* these children. They may look like men now, but,"—she turned and, holding the baby safe, she frantically scanned the clearing—"where are they? Where have they gone?"

"We will find them, melmenya, and they will be punished, I promise. But the important thing, now, is to get the children back to safety."

"But one of them,"—Eowyn examined the infants' feet—"gods, Lassui," she whispered, "one of the babies is theirs, but I cannot tell which!"

...

By the time Gimli rushed into the clearing, followed by the young woman brandishing a heavy stick, Legolas had thoroughly searched the undergrowth, and found no more children, nor any trace of the woodsmen.

"Is Eowyn safe?" asked the dwarf, sheathing his axe.

"Yes, elvallon."

"Is that the missing babe—"

"Have you found my sister, my Lord?" cried the woman. "Is she here with them? Annis? *Annis*, where are you?"

Gimli glanced at Legolas. The elf shook his head.

"She is not here, lass," said the dwarf, laying a comforting hand on the young woman's arm. "But we will find her. We will come back, with men and elves, and we will find her."

...

"Melmenya," said Legolas, as they slowly made their way back to the horses, "do not worry. The mother will recognise her own baby." He hugged the elfling in his arms. "And *your* parents will know *you*, nadithen."

"But what will we do with the other one,"—Eowyn nodded towards the infant that Gimli was carrying—"with *their* child?"

Season of Mists

"We will bring him back here."

"And *leave* him?"

"They will be waiting for him, melmenya."

"No," said Eowyn, shaking her head. "You do not know them, Lassui. They do not care. They are feckless—completely selfish."

And, as she said it, she heard the creatures' laughter, ringing out behind them.

Season of Mists

Chapter 4: The charm

Night was falling as the noisy procession filed into Eryn Valen—Eowyn on Brightstar, carrying one of the howling babies; Legolas, walking beside her, carrying another; the girl, Myldreth, riding Arod; and Gimli, seated behind her, carrying the third.

When they reached the village green, Godith ran out to meet them and, as Legolas had predicted, immediately recognised her own son. Gimli handed Little Godwin to his mother with a weary smile. "Here he is, lass—none the worse for his adventure, and with his fine little pair of lungs well-exercised..."

"Oh sir—oh, my Lady—oh, Little Godwin!" Godith's knees gave way, and she sank to the ground, cradling the child in her arms, laughing and sobbing with joy and relief. "Oh, he is so hungry..." She fumbled with the buttons on her bodice.

"Take them inside," said Gimli, turning to a woman he took to be Godith's mother, "and make them both comfortable."

Meanwhile, Legolas had handed 'his' baby to Hentmirë, and he and Eowyn were deep in discussion with Master Eral, the village head man. "You are absolutely sure that you can keep the child safe from now on?" he asked.

Eowyn, jogging 'her' crying baby up and down on her shoulder, hissed, "Shhh, *shhh*, now."

"I am certain, my Lord. We'll just keep him and his mother indoors. The tad-dail won't cross a threshold—it's not their way. They prey on the unprotected—on babies left outside in the sunshine, on foolish maids wandering by the river when they should be doing their chores—"

"Like my sister," said Myldreth.

"Tad-dail?"

"That is what we call them, my Lord."

"Do you know what it means?"

The man shrugged. "Does a name have to mean anything, my Lord?"

"It means *animals*," said Legolas. "This cannot go on, Master Eral. How long have these animals been *preying* on the villagers?"

The head man shrugged again. "The tad-dail are as old as the Forest, my Lord—they were here long before *we* came." He glanced uneasily at the women; then, moving closer to Legolas, and leaning forward, he added, man-to-man, "They are lusty creatures, my Lord, driven to spread their seed, and they have no women of their own but, as I say, they only take the foolish..."

Legolas glanced at Eowyn. "Well, we will protect these foolish victims, Master Eral," he said. "Your people cannot live under constant threat." He scanned the village, noting the neat, wooden dwellings, the stables, the animal sheds with their little pens, and the various storehouses. "We will move you west, closer to the city."

"Oh no, my Lord!" Then the head man, remembering his place, bowed respectfully. "That is: we are very grateful for your concern, my Lord, but—"

"I am responsible for your people's safety, Master Eral."

"Yes, and I thank you... But, my Lord, our *lives* are here. We make our living from this land. The girl there,"—he gestured towards Myldreth—"she is from the flash lock—aren't you?" She

Season of Mists

nodded. "One of Master Elmer's daughters, my Lord—and Elmer feeds his family by working the lock..."

"We will find you somewhere where you can live in safety," said Legolas firmly. "We will move your houses, we will build you new farms; and we will build you another lock."

"And how would the river traffic reach it, my Lord," asked Eral, unhappily, "if *this* lock were left unmanned?"

Legolas sighed. "We must discuss this further, Master Eral, with all your people, and soon. Your situation is urgent; but, at present, I have even more pressing demands—"

"*Lad...*" Gimli, who had been listening closely to the discussion, stepped forward. "Let *me* sort it. Let me stay here, with the March Warden (if he is willing) and his warriors. We will search the Forest—as I promised Mistress Myldreth—we will find her sister, and we will *stop* these buggers—"

"We cannot simply kill them, Gimli."

The dwarf growled.

"They have a right to be here," Legolas insisted. "A prior right. That is the problem."

Gimli grabbed his arm and pulled him closer. "Would you say that if they were Orcs?" he hissed.

"Orcs are an abomination," said Legolas, quietly. "Orcs were created by evil."

"And who is to say that these *things* were not?"

"Find them," said Legolas, "rescue their captives, and take the tad-dail prisoner if you can. I will return after the Harvest Rite—"

"We will both return," said Eowyn. She had been silent all through Legolas' talk with the head man, distracted by the baby; and now, at the sound of her voice, the child began to cry again. "Oh, no! Oh shhh. *Shhhhhhh.*"

"This place is too dangerous for women, mel—"

"Well *I* will help Gimli," said Hentmirë, suddenly. "They are hardly going to kidnap *me*, are they, my dear? I will come back with you now, to pack a few things, and stay with Eowyn tonight, and then I will return tomorrow with Rimush, and anyone else who is willing to come."

...

They sent word to Haldir—who was still searching the Forest for Little Godwin—and waited until he had returned and agreed to stay with Gimli before they prepared to set off for home.

"We had better put the babies in my carriage," said Hentmirë.

"No," said Eowyn, "we should leave them here."

Frowning, Hentmirë turned to Legolas for clarification. The elf, who had been growing more and more concerned for Eowyn, laid a gentle hand on her back. "Why *melmenya*?"

"Because the human has cloven hooves," said Eowyn. "Oh, it is no use looking now, Hentmirë, you will not see them; but *I* saw them, in the mead hall. Goat's feet. And I will wager the elfling has them too. We must leave them here so that, when Gimli captures their fathers, he can get rid—he can give them back."

Season of Mists

"Melmenya..."

"But they are hungry," said Hentmirë, unconvinced, "and,"—she lowered her voice to a whisper—"I think this one needs changing."

"Gwendithen," said Legolas, "if Eowyn thinks it best, I am sure that Godith and her mother will take care of them—they do know far more about babies than we—and I will give them something for their trouble. Come, let us arrange it."

...

Godith's parents were reluctant to keep the babies, fearing that it might draw further misfortune down upon their daughter and grandson but, eventually, they agreed to take care of them for two gold pieces a day.

As she left their house, Eowyn fell silent, and did not argue when Legolas suggested that she ride home in the carriage with Hentmirë. By the time they reached the city, she seemed to have withdrawn into herself completely, and both the elf and the woman were watching her anxiously.

"Let me have a few moments alone with her," whispered Legolas, as the trio made their way up the spiralling staircase to the Palace. "I will bring her to you before midnight,"—he smiled at Hentmirë's worried frown—"with our honour intact, I promise."

Gently, he led Eowyn into their sitting room, and sat her down before the fire; then he poured out a measure of apple brandy, and offered it to her. "Melmenya?"

When she did not take the glass, he crouched down beside her and held the drink to her lips. "Take a sip, melmenya; and another; good." He set the glass down. "You have not told me everything that happened this afternoon, have you, Eowyn nín? What did these tad-dail do to you? Why could you not bear to bring the children home? Eowyn?"

She laid her head on his shoulder and he hugged her close. "They did not do anything to me, Lassui. They wanted me for a servant. I am not a comely young girl to be bedded; I am an old woman who must serve their offspring."

"Melmenya! What are you...?" Legolas was genuinely shocked. "*You are upset because they did not rape you?*"

"Oh, Lassui!" She began to cry, in great, heart-wrenching sobs. "I cannot remember anything else, Lassui, only that! That I was not good enough for them!"

"Melmenya!" He shook her: gently at first, and then harder. "They ensorcelled you with their music; they made you see things that were not there to be seen—the great mead hall, remember?—and they have left you haunted by this foolish fear."

"*Foolish?*"

"You are immortal, Eowyn,"—his anger vanished at the sight of her tear-stained face—"you will be young and beautiful—you will be *enchanted*, melmenya—when the Mistress Godiths and the Mistress Myldreths of this world are old and shrivelled. You are the most desirable woman—the most desirable *lady*—I have ever seen. And I am not alone. Haldir, Fingolfin, Thorkell bogsveigir—they would all throw themselves at your feet and beg for your favours, if you were to give them the slightest encouragement..."

Eowyn sniffed.

"It is the Harvest Rite, my darling. Somehow, those animals sensed your fear of rejection, and

Season of Mists

they played upon it, using it to weaken and confuse you. But you must be strong, melmenya, and put these false thoughts behind you."

"You still want me?"

"Oh, Eowyn nín, of course I do!" He raised her hands to his lips, and kissed them tenderly. "Now," he said, gently placing them back in her lap, "I want you to make me a promise. I want you to promise that, if any of these black thoughts come back to you, you will say to them, out loud, 'Get out of my head!' And you will keep saying it until they stop plaguing you. Do you promise?"

Eowyn smiled.

"I will assume that means yes."

"I love you, Lassui."

"Good."

"Can I stay here with you tonight?"

"No, melmenya." He drew back from her. "I am sorry; but I must take you over to Hentmirë's house before we both do something we will regret." He rose to his feet, and held out his hands. "Come, she is worried about you—and *you* need to rest, my darling. We still have a murder to solve and, preferably, before the Harvest Rite begins."

The woman with hair like midday sun crosses the wooden pathway with her elf. I merge into the leaves, and watch her. She leans upon his arm, her head bowed with sorrow.

All the light has gone from her.

What has happened since this morning?

Her elf hands her to another woman, and returns to his own shelter.

I creep along the branches and climb up into the tree overlooking her nest. Tonight I shall not trust others to protect her; tonight, I shall watch over her myself...

Sitting at the dressing table in the quiet sanctuary of Hentmirë's guest room, Eowyn combed and braided her hair.

At first, the miserable thoughts kept coming back to her. But she remembered her promise to Legolas and, muttering, angrily, "Get out of my head!" whenever they surfaced, she gradually found that they were disturbing her less and less.

At length, when her candle had burned low and she was finding it hard to keep her eyes open, she laid down her comb, and rose; but, as she was turning back the bedclothes, she suddenly felt a presence, outside the window, watching over her.

Legolas, she thought; and, smiling, she opened the window and leaned out. She could see no sign of him, but that did not surprise her, for she had long since learned that a human will never see an elf who does not want to be seen.

"It is working, Lassui," she called.

Season of Mists

And, as she pushed the window shut, she heard the branches, high above her, rustle in reply.

...

Next morning

When Legolas arrived for breakfast, he found Hentmirë's house in chaos.

"Hentmirë has already eaten," said Eowyn, taking him by the arm, and leading him through the crowd of men, elves and dwarves thronging the lobby, "but I waited for you."

"What is going on?"

"Word has got out—and do not ask me how—that Gimli has asked for volunteers to help track down the tad-dail and, for some reason, they have all decided to congregate here—I think most of them are hoping for a ride in Hentmirë's carriage."

"And who put Thorkell bogsveigir in charge?" Legolas nodded a brief greeting to the tall, saturnine man, who was valiantly trying to impose some order on the enthusiastic recruits.

"Your father," said Eowyn. "He is to escort Hentmirë to Eryn Valen, and then return."

They escaped into the breakfast room and pushed the door closed behind them. "You seem so much better this morning, melmenya," said Legolas, pulling out a chair for her. "How are you feeling—truthfully?" He sat down beside her.

"I am fine." She gave him a grateful smile. "As I told you last night, your method worked."

"Last night?"

"When you were sitting up in the trees."

Legolas shook his head.

"You were not?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I did not leave our bedchamber, melmenya."

"Then who was it?"

"What did you see of him?"

"I did not see anything, Lassui; that is why I was so sure it was you." Eowyn frowned. "But I did *feel* you—at least, I thought I did. And I heard the leaves rustle... Oh gods, you do not think—"

"No." Legolas caught hold of her hands. "No, from your description of their feet I am quite sure that the tad-dail are no climbers, melmenya. But I will have a look up there, myself, as soon as we have spoken to Cyllien—and I will ask Captain Golradir to double his night patrols."

...

Later

After waving goodbye to Hentmirë and her motley army—"Do not forget, Legolas—Donatiya

Season of Mists

will be watching over Eowyn tonight,"—they climbed back up to their chambers to find a man waiting to speak to them.

"Captain Golradir says I should come to you, sir," he said.

Legolas noted the man's warm clothing and his leather money apron. "You must be one of the market traders," he said.

"That I am sir. I comes 'ere regular, every month, and stays for two or three days. I 'as a regular clientele."

"And what can we do for you, Master...?"

"Osborn, sir. I 'eard about the murder and, well, I think I seen something."

"Come in," said Legolas. They took him into the study.

"Are you saying that you were near the building works that night, Master Osborn?" asked Eowyn.

"No miss—er, ma'am—no, I seen this earlier, in the afternoon."

"Go on," said Legolas.

"I 'ave a regular customer, sir, a lady, and that afternoon she comes to me to buy. Then I sees 'im, 'Eral the carpenter, dragging 'er into an alleyway—well I was all set to go after 'em, sir—'er bein a good customer, and 'im bein'—well you wouldn't wish *'im* on the wife of your worst enemy...

"Anyway, I was about to go after 'em, like I says, when someone else beats me to it—an elf, like, all dressed in green with 'is 'ood up over 'is 'air. 'E follows 'em, and then I 'ears a scuffle, and then 'Eral comes out, doin' up 'is breeches and cursin', and then the lady and the stranger come out, arm in arm, and 'e leads 'er off towards the palace."

"*Doing up his breeches?*"

"Yes, miss."

"Can you tell us anything more about this elf?" asked Legolas.

The man shook his head. "'E was 'ooded, sir. I couldn't see 'is face."

"Then how did you know he was an elf?"

"Oh, 'is bearing sir. 'E was—well, 'e was like you, sir. Tall, and royal-lookin'"

"What about the lady?" asked Eowyn. "You say that she is a regular customer. Do you know her name?"

"I don't ask questions, miss."

"Can you describe her?"

"Just a lady, miss."

Eowyn glanced at Legolas. "What is it you sell, Master Osborn?"

The man grinned, understanding her question. "Pipeweed, miss."

Season of Mists

...

They gave the man a small reward and, after he had gone, Eowyn took out her wax tablet and they settled down to discuss what they had learned so far.

Galathil brought them a tray of cakes and bubbling water.

"The pipe-smoking 'lady' *must* be Cyllien," said Eowyn, making a note. "If Heral was 'doing up his breeches' as the man said, he must have raped her, or tried to—which would certainly give Haldir a motive—but this strange elf is our most likely suspect, and the sooner we speak to Cyllien, and find out who he is, the better."

"There is a slight complication there, *melmenya*," said Legolas. He poured two glasses of water and handed one to Eowyn.

"And are you going to tell me what it is?"

He cut her a slice of cake. "When I went to see my father, to tell him about the murder, Cyllien was there—all painted and perfumed and wearing the flimsiest of gowns."

"And *he* was laying on the charm, no doubt," said Eowyn, licking lavender icing from her thumb.

"He told me that she had come to sing for him—"

"Oh gods! You are saying that *he* is the strange elf!"

"It is entirely possible, *melmenya*. *Probable*."

"But—could he have killed Heral?"

"He is more than capable in a fight, Eowyn *nin*; but Heral was *murdered*, stabbed through the heart and left to die—"

"And then mutilated," said Eowyn. "Yes." She took another bite of cake. "You know, *Lassui*—perhaps it is unkind of me—but the only person I can think of, unhappy enough to have done something like that, is Cyllien herself."

...

They decided that they must speak to Cyllien immediately; but, before they could leave, Galathil announced that Master Bawden was asking to see them.

"Show him in," said Legolas.

"I have found the missing plank my Lord, my Lady," said the craftsman builder, taking the seat that Legolas offered him. "And I think it does have a bearing on Heral's death." He drew a cloth-wrapped package from his pocket and set it down on the low table between them. "No, please do not open it, my Lord; not until I have left."

Legolas glanced at Eowyn. She frowned. "What is it, Master Bawden?"

"An abomination, my Lady." The man leaned back in his chair. "You see, when a building is erected, it's right and proper for the builders to leave the odd offering for the wights who might come to inhabit it. We wall them up, in the frame of the building, where only the spirits can find them. And that is what Heral had done, using the missing plank—only the thing he walled up wasn't an offering, my Lady, it—well, you'll see. Just, please, be very careful when you open it, my Lord. Now, if you would be so kind as to excuse me..."

Season of Mists

"Yes," said Legolas, staring down at the package, "of course—thank you, Master Bawden."

"Thank *you*, my Lord. And I will have that list of names you asked for by tomorrow."

...

"What do you suppose that was about?" asked Eowyn, as Bawden closed the door behind him. Then, "You had better open it."

Legolas picked up the object, untied its cloth wrapping, and held it out for Eowyn to see.

"*Gods*," she gasped.

It was the figure of a man, about six inches tall, and modelled in beeswax. His head was smallish, and wrapped in a strand of coarse blond hair, his body sturdy, and his limbs thick, save for his tapered ankles and tiny feet. But what had surprised Eowyn, what had provoked her oath, was his phallus, longer than his legs and fully four times as thick, rising proudly from between his powerful thighs. A braid of darker hair had been bound round its root, as though to maintain its magnificent erection.

"Well..." said Eowyn. "Now we know why Heral was in the building works that night—he was trying to cast some sort of spell. This must be his own hair,"—she touched the blond lock, and it slipped from the beeswax scalp and fell to the floor—"and I wonder if this,"—she fingered the braided ring—"could be Cyllien's?"

"From everything we have heard, *melmenya*," said Legolas, hoarsely, "I would not have thought that Heral needed magical help."

"No. But perhaps,"—Eowyn frowned, thinking aloud—"perhaps he was afraid of losing his potency and intended this as an investment for the future. Or perhaps he was just greedy and wanted more." She stroked the braided ring again...

Then her finger strayed, up the thick beeswax shaft and around the big, beautifully shaped head, until her fingertip came to rest in its carefully-modelled opening, and she caressed it.

"Oh!" Legolas dropped the figurine.

They stared at one another.

"I have no idea why I did that, *Lassui*," said Eowyn. "I just—"

"Oh,"—Legolas' eyes opened wide—"oh *Valar!*" And he leaped up and fled from the chamber.

...

Through the lobby Legolas ran, angrily waving Galathil aside, and he plunged into the bed chamber, and wrenched open the bathing room door, and scrambled into the bath tub fully clothed; then he pulled on the chain to release water from the tank above, and cried out in shock as the cold stream hit his body, which was burning with desire in every pore.

His phallus was a red hot weight between his thighs.

"Legolas?" Eowyn had followed him.

"No!" he shouted. "No! Stay away!" He grasped the handle of the water pump and, working it wildly, knelt in the gushing flow. "Ah!"

"Legolas," cried Eowyn, frantically, "*p/lease*: tell me what is wrong!"

Season of Mists

"I—oh no! Valar, please, no!" He scooped up handfuls of cold water and threw them into his groin, wailing in agony.

But nothing he tried would quench the terrible fire and, finally submitting to his basest instincts, he tore open his leggings and took himself in both hands and—"Sweet *Eru*," he sobbed—the unbearable pain immediately gave way to an overwhelming pleasure as, rocking back and forth, he stroked himself desperately.

"Lassui, let me help you!"

"No—ah—no—*no!*"

But she climbed into the bath beside him, and he was too far gone to stop her; and her warm little hands took hold of him, and her soft, wet mouth engulfed him, and suddenly every particle of his body—of his belly, his thighs, his penis and testicles—was bursting apart as, clinging to her in a futile attempt to keep himself whole, he came and came and came.

...

"Well," whispered Eowyn.

"*Mmmm.*" Legolas held her close.

"Technically, we did not make love, so no one else need ever know,"—she craned her head back to look at the elf, and his expression of pure, satisfied bliss brought a smile to her own face—"as long as they do not see you like this." She kissed his forehead. "Come, Lassui—we must dry you and put you to bed."

...

It was hard work—for the elf was boneless in the aftermath of his orgasm—but, eventually, Eowyn managed to get him undressed and into bed, and he immediately fell into reverie.

Exhausted—and not a little frustrated—she sat down at the dressing table. *The wax figure is a charm, she thought, there can be no doubt of that—a frighteningly powerful charm intended to give Herat limitless sexual potency.*

Unconsciously, she opened her jewel box.

Somehow, its effect has been transferred to Legolas. But how?

She tipped her jewels out onto the table.

A sudden vision of her elf, driven mad by magical need, thrusting inside her, hard and deep, turned her belly to water. She closed her eyes and rode out the wave of perverse desire. *No*, she thought. *No, this is all wrong.*

She rose and, quickly making sure that Legolas was settled, she returned to the study determined to destroy the figurine—still unaware that she was holding her jewel box.

The thing was lying where Legolas had dropped it, miraculously intact despite the fragility of the beeswax, its huge phallus still standing, proudly erect. Eowyn crouched down beside it; and the very sight of it seemed to feed her frustration, kindling within her a raging hunger, an obsessive need to touch it—to stroke it—to *feel* that enormous member—

NO.

Dragging her eyes from the figure, she leaned her head against the leg of the desk. *It is evil,*

Season of Mists

she thought, *created to ruin women. So I must destroy it, crush it underfoot. Yes—*

No!

No, what would that do to Legolas?

Suddenly, she was panting with fear. *No. No, but I must conceal it—yes, hide it somewhere completely safe, where Lassui cannot see or touch it—*

And that, she realised, is exactly what Heral was doing when he was killed!

She scrambled to her feet. The cloth that Master Bawden had used to conceal the thing—very sensibly, she now understood—was lying on the desk, and beside it—inexplicably—was her own empty jewel box. She scooped them up and, taking a deep breath and holding it, she knelt down, dropped the cloth over the figurine, lifted it into the jewellery box—it fitted perfectly—and shut the lid. She set the box on the desk.

Good!

Desire was still teasing her vitals, but now the feeling was nowhere near so urgent. *And, anyway, she thought, what do you expect after pleasuring Lassui in the bathing room?* Sitting on the floor, she leaned back against the desk, and tried to think.

Somehow, the charm that Heral had intended for himself had become attached to Legolas. *How?*

She thought back to what had happened. *Lassui was holding the figurine, and I was stroking it...* She blushed. *But—oh gods, before that—the hair—the hair was Heral's, and I pulled it off—when the hair was in place, the figure was Heral; the moment it had gone, Legolas' touch was enough to transform it into him.*

Thank the gods I did not destroy it!

But... What if I were to replace the hair?

She hunted for the tiny blond coil and, eventually, found it lying on the floor, beside her favourite chair.

She reached for the jewel box. *There is no way to replace it without unwrapping the figurine,* she thought. *But I must be very careful.* Gingerly, she opened the lid and lifted up the flap of fabric.

For a long moment she simply stared at the figurine, captivated by the beauty of its phallus; then she stretched out her forefinger and stroked the wax. Hot desire pooled between her legs and, through their bond, she knew that Legolas, though in reverie, was hardening in response to her touch.

Somehow, she pulled her hand away.

I must get someone else to do it, she thought, slamming the lid shut. *But whom can I trust?*

...

Hours later

"My Lady?"

Eowyn opened her eyes. Galathil was standing at the study door, looking down at her with undisguised alarm.

Season of Mists

How long had she been asleep? Was she *decent*? "I... I dropped something," she lied, "on the floor. I was looking for it." Then, "Yes. What is it?"

"The March Warden, my Lady, wishes to speak to Lord Legolas. He says it is urgent."

"Lord Legolas is resting." Carefully arranging her skirt, Eowyn drew her legs up beneath her and rose as elegantly as she could, smoothing her gown over her waist and hips. "Tell him I will—"

"Eowyn,"—Haldir pushed his way into the chamber—"it is urgent."

He was standing so close—tall, broad, heavy, and smelling of musk—why had she never noticed his scent before? Eowyn swallowed hard. "That will be all Galathil." Her voice sounded surprisingly even. "Take a seat Haldir." She turned her back on him. "As I said, Legolas is resting. But you can speak to me." She walked over to the sideboard. "Would you like a drink?"

"No. *Eowyn...*" Something in his voice made her turn to face him, despite her acute discomfort.

"I did it," said the big elf. "I killed the carpenter."

Season of Mists

Chapter 5: The rite

"That is not," said Eowyn, "what you told me yesterday."

"I *lied* to you yesterday," said Haldir.

Eowyn sighed. "Sit down. We need to talk—"

"About what?" The haughty mask had fallen; the elf's anxiety was obvious, written upon his face and signalled by the redundant movements of his hands. "I have *confessed*. Please. Eowyn—"

"Sit DOWN." She made it an order, knowing instinctively that Haldir, the soldier, would obey.

He sat.

"Thank you." Eowyn took the seat opposite and studied him through narrowed eyes, trying to remember exactly how much she and Legolas had already revealed to him about the murder. "How did it happen?" she asked.

The elf shrugged. "I showed you what the note said. He—*Heral*—was fucking Cyllien. So I killed him."

"But tell me how it happened," Eowyn persisted. "In detail. Were you alone with him?"

"Yes."

"And how did you arrange that?"

She saw him shift on his seat slightly, and draw the smallest of sharp breaths, before replying, "I waited beside his flet until he came out, and then I followed him to the building works."

"Go on."

"I confronted him, and he laughed at me. He said—he called me names."

Eowyn remembered what Bawden had told her and Legolas the day before: *He said that her husband couldn't make her happy*. "Go on."

"I lost my temper," said Haldir, "and stabbed him."

"Where?"

"In the chest."

"And then?"

"I... I ran away."

"Where is the knife?"

"I threw it into the waters of the Gynd Vyrn."

Superficially his story fitted the facts. And Eowyn herself had seen him following *Heral* earlier in the day. *But he has said nothing about the ears*, she thought. "So," she said, "you stabbed him in the chest. Tell me exactly what happened next."

"I ran away."

Season of Mists

"With the knife?"

"I told you. Yes."

"And you cut him only once?"

"I..." He spread his hands in badly-acted confusion. "I think so."

Gods damn you, Haldir!

"Very well," said Eowyn, angrily, rising from her chair. "Despite the fact that you should be helping Gimli in Eryn Valen, I am placing you under house arrest. Galathil will escort you home; Captain Golradir will send warriors to guard you. But Legolas will want to talk to you soon."

And she swept out of the study.

...

Half an hour later

Legolas opened his eyes, saw her sitting beside him, and stretched out his arms. Eowyn did not hesitate.

"I love you melmenya," he whispered, gathering her close. "You are my heart."

"Oh, Lassui." They snuggled together, he beneath the covers, she above—

"Melmenya," he cried, suddenly, "I broke our celibacy!"

"No." She lifted her head. "No, Lassui. We did not make love."

"But I *came*. In your mouth!"

"Because the figurine is a charm," said Eowyn, hugging him fiercely, "and because *I* made it work on you." She explained what she had deduced about the coil of Heral's hair. "And I am so sorry, my darling, but—"

"What about you melmenya? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I am fine." She laid her head back on his chest. "I did have a few moments of madness earlier, but it is amazing what a little responsibility can do. *So* much has happened since you fell asleep, Lassui. I hardly know where to begin. First, I had to deal with the figurine—it is safe, for now, in my jewel box—then Haldir came back from Eryn Valen, and..." She told him about the March Warden's confession.

"But he is lying," said Legolas.

"Yes, of course. Even if I did not know him so well, I would be suspicious. His story is weak; it does not fit the facts. If he had followed Heral from his flet, as he claims, and if Heral hid the figurine that night—which he must have done, because that was when the plank went missing—Haldir would hardly have waited until the man had finished before approaching him, would he?—oh, I have worked out why Heral hid the figurine, by the way."

"Why melmenya?"

"To control it. I went into the study intending to destroy it, Lassui, but then I realised I had no idea what that would do to *you*. And I understood why Heral had walled it up: like me, he needed to control it but was afraid to harm it."

Season of Mists

"Do you think a man like Heral would *want* to control it, Eowyn nín?"

Eowyn frowned, remembering how Legolas had doused himself with water. "I thought it was painful?"

"Not painful, *melmenya*. *Excruciating*—like having your penis in a red hot vise." He leaned back against the pillows. "It is agony—unbearable—but only whilst you try to resist. The moment you give in... The moment I touched myself, the moment I was in your mouth,"—he sighed—"then it was like returning to the stars."

Eowyn found his hand and squeezed it. "And how do you feel now, Lassui?"

"Normal." He gathered her close. "But, believe me, *melmenya*, a better elf than I—a better man than Heral—would want to feel that pleasure again. I do not think that Heral would have tried to control it. I think he would have used it often, taking women by force whenever he wanted them."

"But, had he actually raped anyone," said Eowyn, "we would surely have heard of it from Golradir."

"We know he attacked Cyllien."

"Perhaps she was the first... And your father stopped him before he got what he wanted."

"No wonder he was cursing," said Legolas. "I almost feel sorry for him."

"Lassui," said Eowyn, "I think I know how to stop the charm affecting you."

"How?"

"Put Heral's hair back. I could not do it earlier because, when I looked at the figurine, I could not control myself. But we could ask someone else to do it—someone who would not be affected by the charm. I thought of asking Hentmirë—"

"Oh, no!" Legolas was genuinely shocked. "No, absolutely not, *melmenya*! Hentmirë knows nothing about sex! It would be like asking a child to do it!"

"But that is *why*,"—Eowyn bit her lip—"no, you are right, Lassui. Then what about Lord Fingolfin?"

"Fingolfin? *Melmenya*, suppose the charm proved too strong?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean: suppose Lord Fingolfin and I found ourselves in bed together?"

"Legolas! That is not funny!"

"It is not meant to be funny, Eowyn. I have felt the power of this thing. I know just how strong it is."

"Then what are we going to do?"

Legolas pressed his lips to her temple. "For now, nothing—no, *melmenya*, listen to me—we cannot risk doing anything that might leave me impotent—shhhh, *shhhh*,"—he kissed away her protests—"we will keep it safe, but hidden away, just as you say. When the Rite is over, we will replace Heral's hair—you will do it, *melmenya*, and I will be there to help you."

"Now," he added, gently releasing her, "I must bathe and dress because tonight,"—he threw

Season of Mists

back the covers and swung his feet down to the floor—"you and I have some serious merrymaking to do."

...

The banquet, held to welcome colonists from the outer settlements, who had travelled to the city to attend the Harvest Rite, proved very merry and ended very late.

The following morning, Eowyn awoke with a headache and an upset stomach—or, rather, with the feeling that a headache and an upset stomach were lurking just around a corner, which was the way that her newly immortal body seemed to deal with illness.

She dressed quickly and, excusing herself from Donatiya's fussy care, she crossed the walkway to join Legolas in their garden.

There was something she desperately needed to ask him.

When she reached the flet she found that breakfast had already been laid out on the table, and immediately her phantom queasiness stepped out from the shadows. "I cannot eat this morning," she said, sitting down beside the elf. "But there is something I need to know, Lassui, and please do not say, 'It will not happen, melmenya'—tell me, truthfully: what will you do if the Valar do not choose me?"

"I will ask my father to take my place."

Eowyn let out a long sigh of relief. She had no idea what consequences that might have, politically, socially, or mystically, but it did not matter: his answer made her heart soar. "Thank you," she said, smiling. "That is all I needed to hear."

...

Eowyn was finishing her second slice of toast when Master Bawden appeared at the top of the garden staircase, with a companion in tow.

"My Lord, my Lady," said the craftsman-builder, bowing deeply—and reaching out, with his right hand, to push his colleague into a similar position—"we are sorry to disturb you, but your servant told us to come straight up. This is Lyell, son of Aubour, and he has one or two things to tell you. And I have brought that list of names you asked for, my Lord."

"Thank you Master Bawden," said Legolas. "Please, join us, gentlemen."

The men sat down at the breakfast table—Bawden calm and courteous; Lyell perching uneasily on the edge of his seat. Bawden handed Legolas a piece of folded parchment. "You'll find ten names here, my Lord," he said. "Five couples."

"Thank you." Legolas scanned the list—which included, he noticed, Haldir and Cyllien—then handed it to Eowyn and turned back to the men. "What do you have to tell us, Master Lyell?"

Bawden gave the man a prod. "Go on, Lyell..." When his companion still hesitated, Bawden looked up at Legolas. "You asked about the lady who came to see Heral, my Lord. Well Lyell, here, heard what she said."

Eowyn laid down the list of names. "Please tell us, Master Lyell—would you like some cordial?" She poured him a glass.

"T-thank you, my Lady." Lyell took the goblet from her, carefully set it upon the table and, blushing, spoke directly to *her*. "She w-walked out onto the beam, and she gave Heral a b-bag, and she said—she said, begging your p-pardon my Lady, that she'd cut his b-balls off and put

Season of Mists

them on a plate.”

Eowyn smiled. “And what did Heral say to that?” she asked, making a note of the threat on her wax tablet.

“He c-called her an old bat, ma’am, though she wasn’t, and then he w-went for her.”

“And you pulled him away,” said Eowyn.

“Me and B-bawden, my Lady.”

“Do you know what was inside the bag, Master Lyell?” asked Legolas.

“N-no, my Lord. But I heard her say that it n-needn’t go no further if he stopped it now, something like that.”

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances—both already knew that the ‘lady’ was Arinna, and both knew that they must speak to her soon.

“Master Lyell,” said Eowyn, gently, “on the day that Heral died, I saw you arguing with him. Can you tell us what that was about?”

Lyell looked down at his hands. “It was about H-heryeth, ma’am,” he mumbled.

“Heryeth.” Eowyn made a note. “Is she your sweetheart?”

Lyell shook his head. “No, my Lady... She works in the pavilion, making the t-teas and so on.” He looked up at Eowyn. “I *did* threaten him, my Lady, it’s true, but it didn’t mean nothing. Everybody threatened him. Even the March Warden.”

Bawden turned to Lyell, frowning. “What are you talking about?”

The man’s blush deepened and his stammer got worse. “I t-t-told the March Warden that Heral was s-s-seeing his elf-lady, Bawden. I wrote him a l-l-letter.”

Legolas glanced at Eowyn. She made another note before asking, “Did you *hear* the March Warden threaten him, Master Lyell?”

“Yes, my Lady. At least... I w-w-went back for my tool bag, and saw them in the b-building works, arguing. I couldn’t hear exactly what they were saying, but the M-m-march Warden was angry—leaning in close, like, so I could guess—and who could b-blame him, my Lady?”

“Master Lyell,” said Eowyn, looking again at the list of names, “did you write to any of the other husbands?”

“N-no, my Lady.”

“Are you sure? It is very important.”

“H-h-honest, my Lady.”

“Then why did you write to the March Warden, Master Lyell?” asked Legolas.

“Because Heral was always b-boasting, my Lord,”—the man’s voice dropped to the faintest whisper—“about how he could k-k-keep it up all night, and all—in front of Heryeth. I just thought that if the March Warden knew what was g-going on with his missus, maybe he’d do something—lock Heral up or s-send him away, or s-something.”

“Does Heryeth know how much you care for her, Master Lyell?” asked Eowyn.

Season of Mists

The man shook his head.

"I think you should tell her."

...

"Strange," said Eowyn, after the two men had left.

"Melmenya?"

"Lyell seems so sweet, the way he talks about the girl, yet in his letter to Haldir, he used the word 'fucking'."

"I doubt that any of the builders would say 'making love', Eowyn nín," said Legolas, "not to another male. Besides, he needed to be sure that Haldir understood exactly what he meant. Do you think he is the killer?"

Eowyn thought for a long moment. "No," she said. "He was very nervous, but that was because he was shy of us, I think, not because of a guilty conscience."

"Then *I* think we must go and speak to Haldir, melmenya."

...

Haldir's house

The guards, bowing their heads respectfully, stepped aside. Legolas opened Haldir's door without knocking, and he and Eowyn went in. The big elf was sitting in the darkness, quiet as a stone; but when he became aware of them he roused himself, and lit some candles.

Eowyn moved a gown aside, and sat down. "Where is Cyllien?" she asked.

"I wanted to keep her out of this," said Haldir. "She is staying with Arinna."

"I did not know that she and Arinna were friends."

"They are not not, but Arinna seems to have taken Cyllien under her wing." Haldir turned to Legolas. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Sit down, mellon nín." Legolas waited for the March Warden to lower himself, wearily, back into his chair, before asking, "Tell us, Haldir: who *did* kill Heral?"

The big elf seemed genuinely puzzled. "I did."

"No." Legolas shook his head. "Eowyn and I both know that that is a lie. If you had killed him, you would have confessed immediately." Legolas leaned forward. "I *know* that you are lying to protect the killer."

"My Lord, I..." For a moment it seemed that Haldir might cooperate. But then, "I killed Heral," he repeated.

"Then we have no choice but to leave you here," replied Legolas, sharply, "hiding in the dark until you to come to your senses. Let us go, melmenya."

As they left, Eowyn glanced back at Haldir.

The big elf was sitting, quiet as a stone, gazing into empty space.

...

Season of Mists

"He is protecting Cyllien," said Eowyn, as they walked back towards their chambers.

"Yes."

"But, surely, she cannot have done it?"

"Why not? You said yourself that she was the only person you could think of who might have cut his ears off."

"Yes, Lassui, but I cannot believe she killed him! For all her prickliness, when it comes to standing up for herself, she is weak—easily cowed."

"Those are the dangerous ones," said Legolas.

Eowyn sighed. "On the other hand," she admitted, "Cyllien is the only person I can imagine Haldir protecting like this."

"Her and you," said Legolas. He grinned. "I do not suppose that *you* did it, melmenya?"

Eowyn laughed. "But the real question is: did Cyllien tell Haldir that she had killed Heral, or has he just put two and two together—"

"And made five. We must question Cyllien."

"Yes. Straight away."

"Eowyn..." Legolas took her hand, and drew her, off the main walkway, onto one of the little garden flets that provided a secluded refuge from passers by. "There is something I want to ask you first."

"Go on."

"I have been thinking. We *will* destroy the charm, I promise, but I would like us to do something else, first—let me show you." He took her into his arms. "Close your eyes, my darling, and let me..." He pressed his forehead to hers, and reached out with his mind; and when he found her, it was as though she were standing in darkness; and he took her by the hand and led her out into the sunlight; and then he opened himself to her.

"Oh Lassui..."

"Do you see, my darling?"

"Yes."

"Do you agree?"

"Will it be safe?"

"Would you want to live for eternity without ever knowing?"

"No."

"Thank you." He kissed her forehead.

They stood in silence for some minutes, clasped in each other's arms. Then, remembering the task ahead of them, they continued, along the walkway, to Arinna's house.

...

Season of Mists

The door was opened by Camthalion. "Good morning, my Lord, my Lady..." He placed his hand upon his heart—

"Show them in, Cami," cried Arinna, from inside the dwelling. "I have been waiting for you, Lord Legolas,"—she curtsied—"Lady Eowyn. Please, sit down. Can I offer you some refreshment?"

"You were *expecting* us?" Eowyn took a seat. Arinna had crossed to the sideboard and was holding up a decanter of apple brandy, tilting her head in a silent question. "No, thank you. Why were you expecting us?"

"Well, I am sure that *someone* must have told you about the row I had with the murdered man."

"They have," said Legolas. "What was it about?" He politely declined a glass of brandy.

Arinna poured herself a large one, carried it to her daybed, and settled herself elegantly; Camthalion came and stood behind her. "It was about his atrocious behaviour," she said, "towards the young women of the colony." She sipped her drink.

"And what was in the bag?" asked Eowyn, bluntly.

Arinna hesitated. But Camthalion reached down and laid his hand upon her shoulder. "Yes, yes, I know Cami—it was a dead cat," she said.

"I do not understand," said Legolas.

"I doubt that many people would," replied Arinna. "But that was the sort of man Heral was—if a woman rejected him, things got nasty."

"You seem to know a lot about him," said Eowyn.

"I hear things."

"It is a gift," said Camthalion.

Legolas smiled. "Mistress Arinna—"

"Oh, please, my dear, just Arinna. You make me sound like a matron."

"*Arinna*," said Legolas, "would you be so kind as to look at this list, and tell us if you have heard anything about anyone on it?" He gestured to Eowyn, and she handed the other woman Bawden's parchment.

Arinna scanned the names. "If I *had* heard anything," she said, cautiously, "would the information be treated in confidence?"

"We would do our best," said Legolas, "though if it led us to the murderer, it might be necessary to reveal it at the trial."

"Tell them Arinna," said Camthalion.

The woman shook her head, smiling. "Elves," she said, to Eowyn. "Who can resist them? Very well: Heral and Cyllien were having an affair and when she tried to call a halt, he broke into her house and left the dead cat. She was badly shaken."

"But she did not report it to Captain Golradir," said Eowyn.

"No. We were anxious to spare the March Warden's feelings."

Season of Mists

Legolas glanced at Camthalion but the elf's face revealed nothing. "So, instead," he said to Arinna, "you decided to go to Heral yourself, and warn him off."

"Yes. It was a little reckless, perhaps," she admitted. "In Carhivilvren I had a certain authority but, here, things are different."

"Arinna," said Legolas, "where were you on the night that Heral was killed?"

"Oh, my Lord!" Camthalion stepped forward to protect his lady.

"No, Cami, it is quite all right. Naturally, I am a suspect."

"It is just a formality," said Eowyn.

"Yes," said Arinna, "well, let me see. That night, Cami, Ori and I dined with Lord Caranthir and his wife. We left at about midnight, joined the revellers in the Banqueting Hall, and were there until dawn."

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances. They would need to confirm what she had told them, but it seemed that Arinna and her elves were in the clear.

"May we speak with Cyllien?" asked Legolas.

"I am afraid that she has gone out for the afternoon, my dear. I believe she is singing,"—the woman raised an immaculate eyebrow—"for your father."

...

Outside, Eowyn slipped the list of names back inside her wax tablet and put the tablet in her pocket. "Now," she said, looking up at the elf, "since it is well past midday and neither of us wants to see Cyllien 'singing' with your father,"—Legolas shuddered—"I suggest that you put this whole business out of your mind, take a long, soothing bath, and spend the afternoon resting."

"And what will you be doing, Eowyn nín?"

"I shall go back to Hentmirë's house, and write up my notes."

They strolled back to the palace, walking hand-in-hand in the cool autumnal air. As they parted, Eowyn came up on tip-toe to kiss her elf's cheek. "I shall see you later, my darling," she whispered. She crossed the walkway to Hentmirë's door then turned back, one hand resting on the latch. "Oh, Lassui—you had better send a discreet message to your father. It is only fair to warn him that he might have a Harvest Rite to perform tonight."

"And no prizes for guessing with whom," muttered Legolas.

The woman with hair like midday sun is making careful marks on a thin piece of skin. I climb down through the branches until I am close enough to touch the transparent wall that separates us.

There are things she must know; things that only I can tell her.

I reach out...

But I have dallied too long. Another appears, old and gnarled, and summons her away.

I withdraw to the safety of the foliage, and disappear.

Season of Mists

Evening

Almost time!

Superstitiously, Eowyn had decided to wear the gown that Arwen had given her when, as an unexpected guest, she had attended the previous year's Harvest Rite, and been chosen as Legolas' Harvest Queen; and—though she was not a vain woman—when she studied herself in the mirror, she could not help smiling.

Made from the creamiest of elven silk, embroidered with leaves and encrusted with tiny beads of mithril, the gown, with its shaped and stiffened bodice, emphasised her slender waist and lifted and displayed her bosom to perfection.

Gods! Her entire body was glowing with anticipation. She wanted—*needed*—Legolas!

After their abstinence—was it really only three nights?—and then the frustrating episode with the charm, and now the vivid memory of the previous year's—*Bliss*, she thought. *Shuddering, toe-curling, bone-melting, heart-stopping, BLISS.*

And now everything was going to be all right! If the Valar chose *her*, then, fortified by the Mistress of the Ceremony's potions, she and Legolas would perform the Harvest Rite; if the Valar did not choose her, then, the moment the Rite was over, she would drag Legolas under the table and tup him senseless.

She smiled. *My stallion!*

She gave her long, waving hair one final inspection, rose from the dressing table, and went into Hentmirë's sitting room to join Lord Caranthir and his wife, who were waiting to escort her downstairs.

...

Legolas took a deep, calming breath. He was well-prepared (having spent the afternoon thinking of Eowyn), and his body was more than ready.

He looked in the mirror. As custom required, he was wearing nothing but a pair of thin silken leggings, and his hair fell loose about his bare shoulders. He reached for his comb—

And, somehow, without his realising what was happening, his hand found Eowyn's jewel box and lifted the lid.

He looked down at the figurine.

It was lying on its back, eyes closed, head slightly turned, a slave to its massive phallus. *Existing for nothing*, thought Legolas, *except to plant its seed.*

Instantly, an image of Eowyn, curling her fingers around the wax, filled his mind; and he felt the blood boiling in his groin, and pictured his own seed bursting from him—

"*No!*" he cried, rising and clutching at the dressing table so hard his fingers hurt, "not yet! Not yet!" And, holding on with one hand, shaking violently, he lifted the other hand and, keeping his eyes firmly averted, he somehow managed to close the jewel box lid.

Slowly, the red-hot pain subsided, leaving his body tingling with the delicious aftershocks of delayed orgasm.

Season of Mists

Legolas waited, bent over the dressing table, panting, until he was sure that the crisis was past. Then, quickly, he put on his embroidered surcoat and tied the sash, and went downstairs to do his duty.

...

Eowyn looked around the Banqueting Hall.

It was strange to be seated as an ordinary guest—well away from Legolas, who was sitting with his father at the head of the table—but it did not matter. Everything about the evening, from the garlands of corn and apples that draped the hall, and the dried flowers that decorated its ring-shaped table, and the ceremonial threshing floor laid out at its centre, to the dozen young ellith, all of them potential Harvest Queens, whose bubbling excitement filled the domed roof—everything reminded her of that moment, exactly one year ago, when Legolas had asked her to join him, and changed her life forever. Everything fuelled her urgent desire.

When she had first arrived in Eryn Carantaur she had thought the elves reserved. Now, her practised eye could see that the assembled guests were almost as aroused as she was.

We are all ready, she thought.

She took a sip of wine, hoping that it would calm her; and she felt its warmth fill her chest and spread, teasing her sweetly-aching breasts, her belly, and her most intimate parts.

Oh, Legolas, please, please hurry!

Suddenly, she felt his eyes upon her, and she looked up, and met his gaze; and the hunger she saw there took her breath away.

...

The Rite

"My Lord," said the Mistress of the Ceremony, "it is time." She offered him a frosted glass, filled to the brim with dark green liquid.

Legolas' eyes held Eowyn's for a moment longer.

Then he broke away, took the goblet—"Thank you,"—and, banishing all doubts from his mind, he raised it to his lips, and drank. The potion was dark and peppery, and spread through his veins like molten metal, filling his every extremity, making his heart pound and his already-roused body respond with violent need. Trembling, he drained the goblet to the very last drop and set it down, and his eyes immediately sought Eowyn.

She was sitting, head bowed, staring fixedly at the table, *Looking*, he thought, *exactly as she did a year ago. All flushed, and beautiful.*

He watched her, almost sick with fear and desire.

Moments passed; the guests began to fidget.

Suddenly, with no warning, *there* it was: the tell-tale silvery glow, spiking and shimmering, spreading and flowing...

"Melmenya!" he cried. "Yes! *Melmenya!*" And, forgetting his rank, his dignity, and the solemnity of the occasion, forgetting everything but his love for Eowyn, he vaulted over the table, ran across the threshing floor, and pulled her into his arms.

Season of Mists

...

Bare-chested, and openly aroused, he carried his Harvest Queen onto the threshing floor, smothering her in passionate kisses.

His guests were murmuring their congratulations.

Gently, the Mistress of the Ceremony tried to part them—

But Legolas could not wait—the charm, the potion, were *seething* within him—he stumbled, and they fell to the floor; Eowyn spread her legs for him, and he tore open his leggings—

And neither of them heard the Mistress of the Ceremony, hastily reciting the words of the Harvest Rite above them.

...

"May the union of the Lord and Lady of Eryn Carantaur be fruitful; may the womb of the lady be filled; may the woods and the fields and the gardens of Eryn Carantaur be blessed."

Season of Mists

Chapter 6: Complications

"Oh..." Every deep, sharp thrust made Eowyn greedier for the next.

She arched her back, chasing the pleasure, and dug her fingers into the threshing floor, moaning, "Oh; oh yes; *OH...*" And, turning her head aside, she ripped up handfuls of earth and corn, riding out a storm of sensation that left her helpless, but wanting more.

And Legolas was still thrusting; and the tiny sparks that lingered in her head, her breasts, her arms, her legs, quickly glowed bright again, and burst into a flame that consumed her entire body. This time the climax was violent and, as she cried out her full-throated joy, a wave of warm, wet seed filled her, overwhelming her spirit with pure, animal pleasure.

...

Just in time, Legolas withdrew from Eowyn's body and, with a ragged *moan*, spilled the last of himself upon the threshing floor, a tribute to Yavanna, the Lady of Harvests.

His guests applauded.

Then Eowyn reached up and, smiling, drew him into her arms, and he sank down upon her bosom, exhausted.

It was done.

But, even as the Mistress of the Ceremony was covering him with the velvet blanket, he felt himself growing hard again.

"They chose *me*," murmured Eowyn.

Legolas raised his head.

She was wild and wanton like a woodland sprite and he wanted her again. Pressing his erection against her, he whispered, "I took you before you could drink the potion, *melmenya*, but I—oh! *Oh Valar!*"—he was trembling, trying to hold himself in check—"oh, Yavanna, I—oh!"

"Do not fight it, *Lassui*," she whispered, reaching down between them, and grasping him tightly. Instantly, the ache turned to sweet relief, bringing a sob of gratitude to the elf's lips. Eowyn shifted beneath him, drawing his penis between her thighs. "Just—*oh*,"—he drove himself inside her—"yes, my darling," she cried, "yes!" And, though he needed no further encouragement, she slid her hands down his back and, clutching his buttocks, she urged him on. "Take me, *Lassui*; *take me...*"

Legolas rose up and, arms shaking, thrust and held himself deep, ground hard, and withdrew, savouring the tight velvety grasp of her body; and, immediately, he felt the delicious ripples of release building in his testicles. "Oh," he moaned, "I am coming..."

But the potion—or Heral's charm—decided otherwise.

And Legolas kept thrusting, riding the edge of orgasm, something deep inside him pulsing in exquisite waves; then Eowyn grabbed his shoulders and he realised that she wanted him to change position; and, as the blanket fell from his back, he found himself sitting up, with Eowyn straddling his lap, and his erection grew bigger and harder; and Eowyn, impaled upon him, leaned in and kissed his mouth; and he clasped her close, burying his face in her golden hair, his heart bursting with love for her; and, at that same moment, he climaxed—not explosively,

Season of Mists

but in a long series of intense, dry spasms, whilst his beloved—sobbing “Legolas! Oh, Legolas, my *Legolas*,”—writhed upon him.

...

All around him, his guests—their shadows dancing—were groaning and straining, and crying out in satisfaction, as they made their own sacrifices.

Legolas, surrounded by sex, smiled triumphantly.

His testicles were heavy with unspilled seed but he was too tired to go on. With the last of his strength, he laid his head upon Eowyn’s shoulder. She slid her arms around his waist and, hugging him fiercely, tightened herself around his still-hard penis—

And, to his complete astonishment, with a deep shudder, he burst inside her.

...

Morning

Legolas felt Eowyn stir and, kissing the top of her head, whispered, “Maer aur, híril nín.”

“Mmmm.” She snuggled closer, murmuring, “You are lively this morning, Lassui.”

The elf smiled. “I am happy, melmenya.” He kissed her again. “But I think we should go up to our chambers as soon as you are ready. I have been thinking—”

“You *are* lively!” She sat up and, stretching, glanced around the Banqueting Hall. The ring-shaped table was still scattered with the remains of the previous night’s banquet. Beneath it, couples and triples of every combination—and in every state of undress—lay sleeping. “Any dead bodies?”

“Melmenya!” Legolas chuckled.

Eowyn noticed a familiar blond elf, already beginning to stir, and, curled up beside him, a dark-haired elleth. *Poor Haldir*, she thought. “Yes, I think we should go up straight away.” She scrambled to her hands and knees—and her efforts snapped the last few threads of lace holding her bodice together. “Oh! You have ruined my gown, Lassui.”

“Ruined?” Legolas smiled. “It looks very nice from where I am sitting, melmenya.”

Eowyn blushed, pulling the stiffened fabric closed across her breasts, and grinned at him.

“Valaina will mend it for you, my darling,” said Legolas. “Come...”

She took his hands, and he helped her to her feet.

...

Eryn Valen, Godith’s parents’ house

Hentmirë hovered anxiously upon the stairs.

Godith’s mother had carried a large bowl of warm water up to the sleeping room and was preparing to bathe the two babies Legolas had left in her care. Hentmirë watched her strip a soiled napkin from the tiny elfling. “How is he?” she asked.

The woman looked up from her charge. “I can’t see nothing wrong with either of them, my Lady,” she said.

Season of Mists

"Are babies usually so *loud*?"

The woman laughed. "Yes, my Lady."

"Are you ready, lass?" called Gimli from below.

"Excuse me," said Hentmirë, leaving Godith's mother to her work.

"We have set up a table for you by the door," said the dwarf. He led the little woman to her station. "And Berryn has finished the map."

Frowning, Hentmirë examined the bed sheet spread across the tabletop.

"It is as accurate as I can make it," said the cartographer, "given the information we have." He pointed to the features he had inked onto the fabric. "This is the village," he said, indicating a cluster of rectangular shapes, "and the river,"—a thick black line winding from right to left—"the Eryn Carantaur and Caras Arnen roads,"—two narrower, straighter lines, intersecting at the village—"and these are forest trails. We have divided the Forest,"—a scatter of tiny fir trees—"into twelve areas."

"As the search parties report back to you," said Gimli, "you must cross off the bit they have just searched, and give them another."

"How will I know that they have looked in the right place?" asked Hentmirë.

"These areas are well known to the locals," said Berryn, "and they will be acting as guides."

"What shall I do if they find something?"

"Mark it on the map, and send one of the young lads to fetch me," said the dwarf.

"I shall do my best, Gimli."

...

Eowyn lowered herself into the scented water, sinking into Legolas' arms with a contented sigh. "What were you thinking?"

"Mmmm?"

"In the Banqueting Hall,"—she reached for the cake of soap—"you said that you had been thinking. What about?" She worked the soap into a lather.

"The missing baby," said Legolas.

"Little Godwin?" Eowyn smoothed the creamy foam along her arm.

The elf watched her appreciatively. "Yes," he said. "I was wondering if it was just coincidence that Heral was his father."

He leaned in, intending to nuzzle her neck, but Eowyn pulled away in surprise, and she turned to face him, water spilling from her luscious curves. "What do you mean?"

"Mean? I am not sure..." He stretched out a hand and gently brushed a strand of damp hair from her shoulder. "It just seems strange."

"I think that Heral gave the baby away."

"Yes. Or traded him," said Legolas. His fingers slid over her damp skin; he cupped her breast.

Season of Mists

"But for what?"

"Mmm?"

"What could the creatures have given him in return?"

"I have no idea, melmenya. Unless..." He leaned forward, and kissed her mouth, slipping his other hand around her waist. "What did Heral and they have in common?"

"Seducing women," said Eowyn.

"Mmm." He kissed her again.

"But..."

"Later, melmenya." With smooth, elven grace, he leant back against the side of the bathtub and slid beneath the water, drawing Eowyn down upon him, her knees either side of his hips. He grasped her buttocks and pulled her against him; he was rock hard.

"You should not," said Eowyn.

"I know."

...

Eryn Valen

"I thought you were going back to the City this morning, lad," said Gimli, drawing his axe to check its edge.

"I have *no* desire to watch—to attend—that Ceremony," replied Thorkell bogsveigir.

Around them, on the village green, three search parties, made up of men and elves, and a handful of dwarves, were waiting for the order to move out.

"Well, we can use every pair of eyes we can get," said the dwarf. "As long as it does not land you in trouble with the King."

"I have a pardon."

"Eh?" Gimli looked up at the Beorning, but the man—tall and dark as a raven—was already stalking across the grass to join the searchers.

The dwarf shook his head. Then, "Right," he cried, sheathing his axe and clapping his hands together, "let us get going!"

...

"Ahhh..." Sighing contentedly, Legolas drew Eowyn down into his arms and cuddled her. "Last night was wonderful, melmenya," he murmured, "but I needed to make love to you in private."

"It *was* nice." She snuggled close.

Legolas smiled; but he knew they could not afford to spend the day in idleness. "We must talk to Cyllien, melmenya," he said, "as soon as possible. It has been two days."

"You know that she spent last night with your father?"

"Yes."

Season of Mists

"Do you think he will *let* us talk to her?"

"He will certainly bluster," said Legolas.

"Poor Haldir." Eowyn raised her head. "I wonder... Would it be cruel, Lassui, after we have spoken to Cyllien, to visit Haldir again, and tell him about her and your father? Perhaps it would convince him to tell us the truth."

...

North of Eryn Valen

Thorkell bogsveigir's search party had been assigned the area in which Eowyn had already found the three babies. The Beorning had struck out alone, following an almost invisible trail that wound through the scrub on the western bank of the river—*Their main hunting ground, if the stories are true*, he reasoned.

He dismounted, and examined the ground. There were no obvious tracks, but—he sniffed the grass—there was certainly an odour. "Goat's piss," he muttered, though its scent had an unfamiliar tang.

He took a few more steps and, eyes watering, clamped a hand over his nose and mouth. "I am standing in their bloody latrine," he grumbled, scanning the forest to his left, "they must surely be somewhere nearby—oh, *yes...*"

The shelter was hidden amidst the bushes—shaped like a beehive, woven from living branches, thatched with grass, and decorated—Thorkell's lip curled at the incongruity of it—with garlands of dried flowers.

"A *nest*."

...

The King's servant—looking slightly harassed—showed Legolas and Eowyn into the sitting room of Thranduil's apartment.

"Good morning, Ada." Legolas glanced around the chamber.

"Lost something, Lassui?"

Legolas shook his head.

"Then to what do I owe this great pleasure?" Thranduil gestured towards the chairs arranged beside the fire. "Good morning, Eowyn."

The couple sat down. "We would like to speak to Cyllien," said Eowyn.

Thranduil raised an eyebrow.

"We know that she celebrated the Rite with you, Ada," said Legolas. "And she did not return to Arinna's this morning. So we assume that she is still here with you."

"Very astute, Lassui. She is bathing," said Thranduil.

"Then we will wait."

"Would you like a drink?"

"Thank you."

Season of Mists

"Eowyn—would you be so kind?"

"No,"—Eowyn grinned—"Ada."

With an exaggerated sigh—"Wherever did you find her, Lassui?"—Thranduil walked over to the sideboard, took the stopper from the decanter, and poured three glasses of apple brandy.

"She is one of a kind," said Legolas, as Thranduil handed him a drink. "Thank you."

Eowyn took the second glass. "Thank you, Ada."

Thranduil sat down. "What do you want with Cyllien?" he asked, suddenly serious.

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances. "It is in connection with the murder, Ada," said Legolas.

"I thought that your March Warden had confessed to that."

"He has; but we believe—"

"Did you know, Ada," Eowyn interrupted, "that the man who attacked Cyllien at the market—the man *you* stopped—was the same man who was murdered?"

"*You* have been listening to tales—"

The door opened, and Thranduil looked up at the newcomer, and smiled. "Ah, my dear, you have visitors."

Cyllien, pale and nervous—*But*, thought Eowyn, *looking more lovely than ever*—crossed the room and sat down beside the Elvenking.

They looked like a couple, Cyllien like a queen, and Eowyn sensed Legolas flinch, though, outwardly, he seemed perfectly calm. "Ada," he said, "perhaps you—"

"I shall *stay*, Lassui."

"Very well," said Eowyn, patting Legolas' hand. She took out her wax tablet. "Cyllien," she began, watching the elleth closely, "why has Haldir confessed to a crime he did not commit?"

If Cyllien had seemed nervous before, now she was positively trembling, and Eowyn noticed that she glanced at Thranduil before replying, "I—I do not understand what you mean."

"I think you do," the woman persisted. "Haldir did not kill Heral. His story does not fit the facts in several important details. He is lying to protect someone. I think he is lying to protect *you*."

"Thoron?" wailed Cyllien.

Legolas leapt to his feet with a cry of horror. "Ada, how *could* you?"

"Sit down, Lassui."

"Sleep with her if you must—I understand that—I have always understood your need for that—but to tell her—to *allow* her..."

Eowyn had stood up and, although she did not fully understand what was happening, she tried to calm him.

"Listen to your Harvest Queen, Lassui," said Thranduil—and there was a hint of warning in his voice that Eowyn did not like.

Season of Mists

"Come, my darling," she said, softly. "We will speak to Cyllien another time." She drew Legolas away from his father, guiding him towards the door.

"You should not have given it to her, Ada," said Legolas.

Eowyn bundled him into the lobby, and closed the door behind them.

...

Outside, in the cool, fresh air, Legolas grasped the rail of the flet wall, and took a deep breath.

"What just happened, Lassui?" Eowyn came up beside him.

"You heard what she called him?"

"Yes," said Eowyn. "Thoron. *Eagle*."

"It was my mother's name for him," said Legolas. "It was a private thing—between the two of them."

"And your father—"

"Gave it to *her*." Legolas turned to face her. "This is not one of his fancies, melmenya. This is serious. But it is not that—truly it is not. It is just,"—a great, gasping sigh escaped him—"he should not have allowed her to use my mother's name for him."

Eowyn reached up and laid her hand upon his cheek. "I know, Lassui; I know."

Legolas covered it with his own; then he turned his head and, closing his eyes, he kissed her palm.

"*Oh, Lassui...*" She glanced across the walkway. "Come; come with me."

She led him behind the wooden screen that hid the building site from passers by, and onto the unfinished flet. The wood, she noticed, had been scrubbed clean, or else the stained planks had been replaced—at any rate, no trace of Heral's lifeblood remained on them—so she took Legolas up into the roofless apartment, and they sat down on a flight of steps.

There was no point in deceiving him. "I think that Cyllien did it," she said, "and I think—Lassui, I think that your father *knows* it."

For a long time Legolas was silent. Then he replied, very softly, "So do I."

...

North of Eryn Valen

Thorkell bogsveigir fitted an arrow to his bow.

He had tethered his horse a good quarter mile down river and had returned stealthily, keeping to the trees. He had found himself a perch, high up in one of the young carantaurs, and now he was sitting amidst its branches, well-screened, and downwind of the creature's nest.

He would get one shot—two if he was quick and very lucky—and he must be accurate: he must disable, not kill.

The Beorning waited.

...

Season of Mists

"What are we going to do?" asked Eowyn.

A light breeze stirred the branches above her; she looked up at the wide, curving window of the King's apartment, which overlooked the steps on which she and Legolas were sitting, but could see no sign of King Thranduil or Cyllien.

"We must separate them," said Legolas, decisively. "I will talk to him; you talk to her."

"Is it not a little late for talking?"

Legolas sighed. "We still need to know what happened, *melmenya*; and we need to know how far my father is involved."

"Do you think he will tell you?"

"Eventually."

"Lassui... " Eowyn took hold of his hand. "I do not think that it can have been self defence. Cyllien had no reason to come here,"—she indicated the building site—"unless she followed him. With a knife."

"A *white* knife," said Legolas. "Which probably belonged to my father."

The woman with hair like midday sun bids her mate farewell, crosses the wooden path, slips into the trees, and waits.

I climb down, from branch to branch, until I am almost close enough to touch her. Her hair sparkles like falling water; she smells like spring rain.

Every now and then she turns, and searches for me, her face clouded. She suspects that I am near; but my body becomes bark and leaves, and she does not see me.

Watching from her uncomfortable vantage point deep in the trees beside Thranduil's apartment, Eowyn saw Cyllien leave and, keeping well back and taking full advantage of the route's twists and turns, she followed.

Cyllien was walking slowly, head bowed, far too preoccupied to notice her; Eowyn risked closing the gap. *There is a garden flet, she thought, not far from Arinna's house. Perhaps I can persuade her to come in there with me—*

But, to her surprise, Cyllien, having reached the crossroads, turned left, and climbed the spiralling stairs up to the next level.

She is not going back to Arinna's, thought Eowyn. She is going home to Haldir! And a clever if somewhat dishonourable idea popped into her head. She held back, watching Cyllien cross the pretty flet and approach the first house. The Guards, standing either side of the door, had been ordered to stop Haldir leaving but not to prevent anyone else from entering, and they stepped aside to let her pass.

Taking full advantage of the Guards' distraction, Eowyn passed behind a line of potted bay trees, and slipped down the side of the building.

A row of unglazed arched windows ran along the narrow path, placed high in the wall to prevent the occasional passer by seeing into the house. *But not high enough, thought Eowyn,*

Season of Mists

to stop me overhearing.

She stood beneath the windows, and listened.

...

Cyllien closed the door behind her.

The room was in semi-darkness, some of its silken drapes drawn, others pulled carelessly aside. Haldir, still wearing his field cloak and jerkin, sat amidst the chaos of dirty plates and discarded clothing.

"You look terrible," she said.

"I told you to stay away."

"I can't." She crossed the room and sank to the floor at his knees. "They *know* you did not kill him, Haldir—Mistress Perfect knows, and she will not let you do this." She grasped his hand. "I will always be grateful to you, *beridir nín*, for taking care of me: for doing *this* for me. But we both know that we were never meant to be together, Haldir. It is time to end it."

"I gave you my word."

"And I release you."

For the first time he turned to face her, and his eyes met hers. "Why, Cyllien? Why, with that... That *animal*?"

The elleth sighed, settling back on her heels. "He was not the first."

"Who else?"

"There was Calemir the goldsmith. Caranthir's brother, Baimeldir, just once, before he travelled West. There was Coru—"

"Manwë and Varda!"

"Oh," cried the elleth, angrily, "*this* is from the elf who calls out *E-o-wyn* when we make love—who came back from Eryn Laeg *reeking* of her!"

"Cyllien..." Haldir tried to grab her wrist, but she pulled away from him.

"Heral was different, if you want to know. Heral was *big*, he was tireless, and he knew more than one position—"

"You *whore*."

Cyllien laughed. "He had this thing—this little wax man with a huge ceber—and he made me touch it."

"What are you talking about?"

"When I touched its cock, he felt it—we both did—and we fucked, Haldir. He fucked me in every room of this house, front and back and between the tits; he fucked me out there on the walkway; he fucked me on Mistress Perfect's own doorstep. We could not stop fucking, Haldir: we fucked in the building works; we fucked..." She suddenly came to her senses and, closing her eyes, she whispered, "We fucked in the King's apartment."

"If this man was such a fucking *uruk hai*," said Haldir, bitterly, "why did you kill him, Cyllien?"

Season of Mists

"You are so quick to assume it was me." She scrambled to her feet.

"Where are you going?"

"To see Legolas and Mistress Perfect." She made for the door.

"CYLLIEN! TELL ME *WHY!*"

"HE DID NOT *LOVE ME!*" she screamed. "And he called me a whore, Haldir, so I ended it."

...

Eowyn heard Cyllien close the door, and sighed inwardly.

We have been chasing her for two days, she thought. And now that she is ready to speak to us, I cannot approach her without admitting that I have been eavesdropping—and losing the advantage.

She had no choice but to wait until Cyllien was safely clear of the flet, then return to her chambers, and let the elleth come to her.

...

North of Eryn Valen

Thorkell bogsveigir raised his bow, curling his long fingers around the bowstring in a deep hook.

In all his life he had never seen anything like the creature—half man, half goat—that was dancing down the river bank trailing a long garland of purple daisies behind it.

Just asking for it.

The Beorning set up his shot—fixing his eyes upon the entrance to the shelter, he drew, aimed at empty space, and waited.

Suddenly, the creature broke his line of sight as it ducked into its nest, its haunches presenting a perfect target. The Beorning loosed, keeping still until his arrow hit home.

Yes!

The creature howled once, fell on its face, and lay unmoving.

Thorkell bogsveigir scrambled to the ground and, pulling a coil of elven rope from his belt as he ran, raced to secure his prisoner.

...

Eowyn pushed open the door to her and Legolas' private chambers and stepped inside.

The servant, Galathil, bowed his head in greeting.

"Lord Legolas?" she asked.

"He is in the sitting room, my Lady; he asks not to be disturbed."

Poor darling, thought Eowyn, trying to prepare himself for tonight. "Have there been any callers?"

Season of Mists

"No my Lady."

"If a Lady should come, show her into the study and ask her to wait."

"Very good, my Lady."

Eowyn went into the bedchamber, closed the door behind her, and leaned against it with a heavy sigh.

Had she heard Cyllien confess to murder? She tried to remember exactly what the elleth had said to Haldir.

'You are so quick to assume...' No, that was not an unambiguous confession, though it would not be the first time that Cyllien had taken offence when she was in the wrong.

'He called me a whore so I ended it.' Ended it how? Might that be a threat? After all, Haldir had called her a whore, too.

'This is from the elf who calls out E-o-wyn when we make love...'

"Oh, Haldir," she sighed. "It is true: people who eavesdrop never hear anything good about themselves." She felt unclean. "I need to bathe..."

She unlaced her bodice, slipped it off, and laid it on the chair beside the dressing table; then, reaching for the buttons of her under dress, she noticed her jewel box, lying upon the table.

A great, physical surge of lust shook her body, and she could not stop herself lifting the lid, just to take a look.

The figurine lay beside her hand, its penis straining up at her, erect but strangely passive. *Waiting*, she thought.

Longing.

This is what it is all about.

Grasping the tabletop, and ignoring the ache stabbing her vitals, she examined the charm.

Its face (which she had thought featureless) had a slight suggestion of high cheekbones and dark brows about it; its body (which she had thought broad) was willowy but muscular; its arms and legs (which she had thought thick) were long and slender; its phallus (which she had thought curved) was straight, and rather thick...

Oh gods, she thought. *It has changed. It has grown more like Lassui!*

She reached out, and touched the braid of hair strapped around its massive erection. She had assumed that the hair was Cyllien's, and that its being immortal hair might explain why the charm was so powerful.

But, she thought now, with a sudden flash of insight, *suppose it is not Cyllien's. Suppose—*

The door flew open behind her.

"Melmenya," gasped Legolas, staggering into the bedchamber, "what are you *doing?*"

...

They came together with a great crash, like two forces of nature. He was inside her before she realised what was happening—irresistible, unstoppable.

Season of Mists

Somehow, her outstretched hand found the wax figurine, and her fingers curled around its massive erection, holding it as though her life—as though both their lives—depended on it.

Nothing else mattered—nothing existed—only the relentless pounding of his phallus, filling her body with unbearable pleasure, and their impending climax, terrifying her with its promise of oblivion.

Season of Mists

Chapter 7: More lies

"I am sorry, melmenya."

"It was my fault." Eowyn turned her head and gazed into the elf's blue eyes. "I should not have looked at the figurine, Lassui, I should not have touched it, but I was—"

"No." He raised her hand to his lips. "I wanted to know what it would be like if we were both aroused by the charm; I insisted on keeping the thing here."

"It was exciting," said Eowyn.

"But it was not love," said Legolas.

"No..."

"I did sense your love for me, melmenya, still there, beneath the appetite, but—"

"I felt your hunger," said Eowyn, stroking his face. "Ravenous hunger." She smiled, sadly. "And I felt your penis, as though it were mine; felt its power as it entered my body and thrust into the warmth and the wetness, just as though it were mine, and my body were yours." Her smile became radiant. "That was wonderful, my love."

"I know." Legolas kissed her hands, again and again, though he did not admit what *he* had felt. "But is it worth risking the love that we already share," he asked, at last, "for that?"

Eowyn frowned.

"Melmenya?"

"No..." She tucked a loose strand of hair behind his pointed ear. "But, whatever we do, my darling, we must not be hasty. It is growing more like you." She described the changes she had noticed. Then she added, "And I examined the braid ring more closely, Lassui, and I think I know now what the creatures gave Heral in return for the baby."

...

North of Eryn Valen

"Elven rope," muttered Thorkell bogsveigir, unconsciously addressing the knots securing his horse, a quarter mile away, "do not let me down." He raised his fingers to his mouth and whistled. Beneath his other hand, the tad-dal began to struggle. "Stop that!" he growled, cuffing its ear.

Moments later, the horse trotted into view.

With a sigh of relief, Thorkell grasped his prisoner by the scruff of its neck and—dragging it to its cloven feet with a few oaths and another well-placed blow—he bundled it, face down, over his saddle, securing it with the rope hanging from the horse's bridle.

Then, taking the reins, he began the long walk back to Eryn Valen.

...

Legolas clutched the arms of his chair, riding out the deep shiver that twisted his body, as Eowyn, behind his back, carefully wrapped the magical figurine in its cloth.

"I cannot be certain, of course," she said, "but the hair in the braid seems too coarse to be

Season of Mists

Cyllien's. And it does make sense—the tad-dail are known for their potency." She laid the wax charm in her jewel box and closed the lid. "There."

Legolas sighed, and fell back in his seat, though his hands remained tense.

"Whether he deliberately got Godith with child," Eowyn continued, "or whether it was just a lucky accident, we may never know." She shrugged. "If he did, he and the tad-dail must have made their bargain some time ago." She crouched down beside Legolas, smiling up at him.

"Do not touch me, melmenya," said the elf, softly.

Eowyn frowned. "You cannot still—"

"My whole body is aroused."

"Oh, Lassui!" She pulled away from him. "It is less than two hours until the Rite, my darling. Bathe now, and I will go to Hentmirë's house, and dress there."

...

North of Eryn Valen

Thorkell bogsveigir scanned the Forest to left and right.

He could see nothing, but he was certain that he was being stalked by the tad-dail. *They are unlikely*, he thought, glancing at the creature sprawled across his saddle, *to give me much trouble, but—*

His prisoner let out a sudden, piercing cry—and, in response, a storm of tiny stones rained down on the Beorning, stinging his hands and face and forcing him to close his eyes. "*Bastards!*" he yelled, struggling to control his startled horse. "Damn you!"

Through narrowed eyes he saw a tad-dal dart into the open, whirling a slingshot around its head.

"Oh no, you do not!" And—forgetting, in his haste, the elven rope—Thorkell pulled out his knife and, ducking down behind his horse's shoulder, he cut through the binding at his prisoner's ankles and dragged the creature to the ground. "Let us see how fast you can run—"

Another hail of stones stung the Beorning's face. "Gods *damn* you!" he roared, swinging up into the saddle. He dug his heels into the horse's sides, and the terrified creature galloped off, dragging the wailing tad-dal behind it.

...

King Thranduil's apartment

"My dear," said the Elvenking, gazing up at Cyllien, "Luthien herself would fade in your company." His eyes shifted to her bosom, and rested upon the soft curves revealed by her low-cut gown of pale elven lace. "You are *perfection*."

"Thoron!"

Smiling, he patted the seat beside him. "Come!"

Cyllien bit her lip. "I have another favour to ask of you—your Majesty..."

"I have told you not to call me that, remember?" Thranduil studied her face. "Hmm. I think a tonic is called for—sit down."

Season of Mists

He had dismissed the servants, so he rose, crossed to the sideboard, took up the decanter, and poured out a large measure of cherry brandy himself. "Here, drink this,"—he handed her the glass—"then tell me what I can do."

He sat down beside her.

The elleth took a sip. "I was aout to tell Mistress Perfect everything, Thoron," she said, staring into her drink, "I really was—my hand was upon the door—"

"Mistress *Perfect*?"

Cyllien blushed. "Princess Eowyn."

Thranduil laughed. "She is not bad, you know—for a human. She would die for Lassui."

"I know."

"You did *not* speak to her?"

"I—no, I was too afraid."

"Good. Come here." The Elvenking wrapped an arm around her slender shoulders, and drew her close. "Just tell me what you want me to do, mell nín." His lips brushed her temple.

"Save Haldir," said Cyllien.

...

Later: in the Banqueting Hall

Eowyn smiled nervously at Legolas.

His hand was trembling, but he gave hers a brief squeeze before they stepped into the Banqueting Hall.

They worked their way around the ring-shaped table, greeting each of their guests in turn, before crossing to the centre of the Threshing Floor, where Legolas seated Eowyn on one of a pair of elegant thrones.

The guests fell silent.

"I call upon all those present," announced Lady Lessien, "to witness that Legolas Thranduilion, Lord of Eryn Carantaur, takes Eowyn Eomundiell, Lady of Eryn Carantaur, as his Harvest Queen."

As the crowd applauded with genuine affection, the Mistress, turning back to the couple and joining their hands, continued, "Repeat after me, my lord: *My heart is your heart...*"

...

Eryn Valen

Hentmirë, sitting in the doorway of Godith's parents' house, scanned the line of trees beyond the village green.

Godith, her parents, and the three babies were upstairs in the sleeping room, where—Hentmirë had assured everyone—the children would be safest should the tad-dail attempt to recapture them.

Season of Mists

Rimush was in the storeroom, carefully packing up parcels of provisions to be handed out to the search parties when they returned for fresh instructions.

That left the little woman on watch alone—and with plenty of time to appreciate just how boring a very important job could be.

Berryn's search party had returned at dusk to report that the region to the north west—labelled *tinco* on Hentmirë's map—was clear. Hentmirë had crossed it off, allocated them *ando*—a large, featureless tract of Forest to the west—and, as they moved out again, had watched them light their torches and snake away in single file, like a huge fire-worm.

Now she was expecting Gimli's party, back from the south west. *The dwarves will be hungry*, she thought; and she was about to ask Rimush whether the food would be ready when she saw a movement—*Yes, there it is again...*

The little woman leaned forward, peering into the dark Forest. The disturbance did not have the telltale rhythm of marching men; the Forest was rippling to right and left, *Like a pack of hounds closing in on their prey*, she thought.

Quickly, Hentmirë rose to her feet, moved her chair aside, and began to shut the door—

...

Thorkell bogsveigir burst out of the Forest and thundered across the village green, dragging the tad-dail behind him.

As he reached the house he leaped from his horse—slapping its flank to drive it away—and, with his prisoner still in tow, he dashed for the part-closed door, crying, "Stand back!"

Hentmirë disappeared—and the Beorning dived through the gap.

The creature, having no choice but to follow, hit the door jamb, howling.

Thorkell hauled it inside.

...

"Rimush," cried Hentmirë, pushing the door, "Rimush, come quickly!"

The huge man flew from the storeroom and, together, they shut and barred the door, barricading it with the map table for good measure. "See to the shutters, my dear—hurry," said Hentmirë.

Thorkell bogsveigir, meanwhile, had lashed the tad-dal to a wooden post and silenced its wails with a blow to the head.

"Leave that one open," he called to Rimush, as the latter approached the window beside the door. "We will need to see what they are doing."

"Would it not be better," said Hentmirë, fetching some hot water and a cloth, "to watch from upstairs? There are three windows in the sleeping room—let me clean your wounds, Master Thorkell."

The Beorning rewarded her with one of his rare smiles—which quickly turned into a wince. "Very good thinking, my Lady." He nodded to Rimush and the big man, having secured the window, helped him drag his prisoner up the wooden stairs.

"Do take care not to wake the babies," muttered Hentmirë, following them, anxiously. "They

Season of Mists

are very loud when woken."

...

The Banqueting Hall

Too excited and too nervous to eat, Eowyn watched restlessly as King Thranduil selected a peach from the silver charger before him, took a bite, and offered the rest to Cyllien.

He is such an old rake, she thought. And she cannot take her eyes off him.

Poor Haldir...

She remembered the conversation she had overheard earlier.

Gods, she thought, we have still not spoken to Cyllien! Lassui and I have become so obsessed with sex we are in danger of forgetting that a man has been murdered!

She turned to Legolas.

The elf smiled, but looked so ill that her heart faltered in her chest.

If only I could take him in my arms!

At last, a trumpet fanfare signalled the end of the feast, and Lady Lessien, rising from her seat, took the couple by the hands and led them out to the centre of the Threshing Floor.

"The King and Queen of the Harvest stand before you," she cried; and, as the guests cheered, she added, softly, "Repeat after me, my lord: *As my seed fills the Queen's womb...*"

...

Eryn Valen

The tad-dal had been gagged, but not before its cries had woken the babies. Now Godith, her mother and the long-suffering Rimush were doing their best to quieten the infants, walking them back and forth, rubbing their little backs.

"It is no wonder," muttered Thorkell bogsveigir, drawing an arrow from his quiver and fitting it to his bowstring, "that my father did not like children." He peered out of the window.

Hentmirë crept up beside him. "Can you see them?"

"Do not cramp my bow arm,"—the woman quickly stepped back—"yes, they are over by the goat pens. At least two dozen of them."

"What are they doing?"

"They have set the beasts free," said the Beorning, "and now they are watching. And waiting."

"For what?"

"They want *him* back,"—he nodded towards the captive tad-dal—"and I daresay they will take as many women as they can find."

"But how?" asked Hentmirë. "If we all stay indoors, how can they..." But the rest of the question died on her lips, for it suddenly became very clear how the tad-dail intended to drive everyone outside.

Season of Mists

...

"Melmenya,"—*kiss*—"oh, melmenya,"—*kiss*—"mmm, melmenya..."

His mouth and his hands were everywhere at once—devouring her lips, kissing her throat, cupping her breasts, nuzzling her neck; and then his penis was thrusting and filling her, thrusting and filling, and every heart-stopping stroke was making her body arch and twist with joy.

"Oh—Lassui, my—my Lassui..."

After the savagery of the afternoon and the torture of the banquet, she had expected him to cover her like a stallion—and she would have welcomed it—but this was tenderness; this was *marriage*; and, as she basked in its sunshine, she sensed the emotions of their guests, deeply moved by the love they were seeing expressed before them.

...

"Water," said Hentmirë; "we need water!"

"*Hush!*" Thorkell bogsveigir raised his bow. One of the tad-dail had darted from the shadows, and was whirling its slingshot—loaded with burning straw—around its head.

The Beorning drew, took aim, and loosed.

His arrow sliced through the darkness with a menacing hiss and pierced the creature between the eyes; it fell, and the burning missile rolled from its dead hand.

"Well done, Master Thorkell," said Hentmirë, watching from the next window.

"Keep back!" cried the Beorning, drawing another arrow. "You are a big target!" He steadied himself, loosed, and dropped the next tad-dal just a split-second too late—but the straw fell short, landing upon the road, and its plume of flame spread harmlessly across the dirt.

"They are using oil," said Rimush, beside Hentmirë. He turned away, using a hand to shield the baby's eyes from the glare.

Now two tad-dail were running forward; Thorkell drew and loosed—hit the first—drew and loosed again—narrowly missed the second—

"*Oh!*" cried Hentmirë, as the straw projectile shot through the window and landed upon the wooden floorboards behind her. Fire spilled across the floor. The little woman blundered over to the bed, pulled off a blanket, and tried to beat out the flames.

"Here, sir!" Rimush pushed the baby into Godith's father's arms. "Take everyone downstairs," he said, "quickly." And, grabbing another blanket, he attacked the fire with powerful blows. "Keep back, my Lady."

But the flames were spreading out along the floor, and they caught the coverlet of the nearest bed, ran up the bed frame, leapt up the wall and, in a sudden burst, exploded across the ceiling, dropping burning thatch upon the tad-dal, which squealed behind its gag, writhing in its bonds as its fur caught light.

Dodging the flames, Hentmirë rushed to the nightstand, seized a jug of water and dumped it in the creature's lap.

Thorkell bogsveigir, ignoring the commotion behind him, was still shooting steadily. But the tad-dail were attacking in greater and greater numbers—two missiles had fallen on the roof

Season of Mists

and another on the porch—and he was running out of arrows. “Get downstairs,” he shouted to the others, “we will have to take our chances outside...”

...

Smiling fondly, Eowyn snuggled up beside her elf.

The hum of activity all around them—muffled by the blanket the Mistress of the Ceremony had draped over them once the Rite was complete—was pleasantly soothing.

Eowyn closed her eyes, and drifted off to sleep.

...

“*Rimush*,” barked Thorkell, pulling out his knife, “I said: take her downstairs!”

The big man stopped beating back the fire reluctantly—but, when he saw how Hentmirë was risking the smoke and flames in her attempts to release the *tad-dal*, he immediately dropped his blanket and, opening the way by kicking back the burning bed, he grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her clear.

Thorkell, meanwhile, had drawn his knife, and he rushed in, cut the terrified prisoner free and—grasping it by the hair—he dragged it past the searing flames, but Hentmirë and *Rimush*, still hesitating at the top of the stairs, were blocking his way out.

“*Move!*” he shouted.

The steps were alight, and burning thatch was raining down into the stairwell. The little woman took a few faltering steps.

“Pull your jerkin over your head, my Lady,” said *Rimush*, “like this.” And, grasping her around the waist—“Forgive me,”—he plunged down the stairs.

Thorkell followed, shielding his face with one hand, and dragging the *tad-dal* with the other.

Downstairs, Godith and her parents—with the flames raging behind them—were frantically trying to open the door. “We have to get out,” cried the father, handing a baby to Hentmirë, “help me, sir!”

Rimush dragged the map table aside.

“Will they *kill* us, Master Thorkell?” asked Hentmirë, rocking the baby anxiously. “Shhh, *shhh!*”

“Who knows?” The *Beorning* shoved the *tad-dal* at Godith’s father. “Here, hold it tight.” He opened the shutters and peered through the window—“Stay back!”—quickly scanning the scene.

“The bastards may prance along the riverbank with garlands in their hair,” he muttered, “but they are bloody fierce warriors...” And, just as he feared, the *tad-dal* had closed in, dragging a cart, a bench and a line of barrels across the village green to give them cover. Ahead and to the right the way was completely barred, but to the left Thorkell’s practised eye detected a possible route—through a narrow alley—to one of the barns. “Another wooden building. Wonderful.”

He glanced at his companions. *Lady Hentmirë is a game old bird*, he thought, *and the servant is handy in a fight, but the others are just one big pain in the arse...*

He made a decision.

Season of Mists

"We will give them *him*," he said, jerking his thumb towards the tad-dal, "and the two changelings,"—he fitted an arrow to his bow—"and maybe that will be enough. Rimush, get ready to open—"

"They can have their friend back," Hentmirë interrupted, "but this baby is an elf, and the other one is human."

"They have us *surrounded*."

A flaming beam crashed to the floor behind them.

"But we would have to live with it afterwards," Hentmirë persisted.

"There will not *be* an afterwards—"

"*Just do it, my Lady*," shrieked Godith. "*Do it for Little Godwin!*"

Hentmirë hugged the baby tightly. "But—"

Another beam came tumbling down, bringing part of the upper floor with it.

"Shit! Open the door!" cried Thorkell. "*Go! Go! Go!*"

...

Eowyn awoke suddenly and, wrestling herself out from under the blanket, sat upright, pushing her hair from her eyes and looking around the Banqueting Hall in confusion.

Towards the entrance, a naked woman, on hands and knees, was rocking back and forth, moaning encouragement to the elf behind her, who was thrusting steadily.

The Rite! Of course...

Eowyn's gaze travelled around the Hall, over the sleeping couples and back to the lovers, then rose up above their heads.

"Oh!" she gasped, pulling the blanket over her breasts. "What are *you* doing here?"

...

"Give it the baby," shouted Thorkell to Godith's mother. "Go on!" He stepped forward, bow raised, placing himself between the attacking tad-dail and the humans, his gaze sweeping back and forth along the enemy line.

The woman—needing little urging—dumped the infant into the prisoner's arms.

"Release it," Thorkell called to Godith's father, "push it right out, past me! Yes! Now, everyone —"

The thatched roof behind him suddenly caved in, and flames leaped up above the eaves.

Shrieking in terror, Godith ran for safety, and the others followed, stumbling in their haste.

"Make for the alley," yelled Thorkell, backing after them, still protecting them as best he could. As he had hoped, his former prisoner was providing additional cover, staggering towards its comrades, bleating something in its own language.

"Keep going," yelled the Beorning, "go on, keep—oh, *fuck!*"

Season of Mists

A handful of the tad-dail had leaped over the barrier and, whirling their slingshots around their heads, sent fiery missiles hurtling into the alley, cutting off the humans' retreat.

"Shit!" Thorkell loosed his arrow. One of the creatures fell. The Beorning reached into his quiver, and muttering, "This is bad—this is bad—this is very bad," he drew his last arrow, loosed, and brought down a second. "Rimush," he shouted, casting his bow aside and reaching for his knife, "find us another way out! Fast!"

More creatures came over the barricade, and ran at the humans, attacking with spinning kicks.

Godith dropped to the ground, instinctively shielding her child with her own body; her mother, kicked in the head, collapsed in her husband's arms.

"Nooo," cried Hentmirë, turning this way and that as the creatures closed in on her from all sides, "he is not yours—he is not *yours!*" In desperation, she scooped up something from the ground, and protecting the baby as best she could, she poked at the attackers, trying to keep them back.

...

Eowyn watched, fascinated, as the strange green man—his tall, spare figure wrapped head to foot in foliage—raised a branch-like hand and beckoned.

She remembered her fear when, months earlier, cornered by a band of Orcs, she had sensed his presence behind her, and turned, and had seen his golden eyes burning in what she had assumed was a pile of fallen leaves...

But she remembered how quickly that fear had turned to trust when he had pulled her to safety.

The green man beckoned again.

I have no reason to fear him now.

She glanced at Legolas.

Her beloved elf was sleeping peacefully, eyes closed, like a mortal. *It would be a crime, she thought, to wake him after all that he has suffered today...*

So she rose, and put on her gown and slippers, and picked her way through the sleeping couples (carefully skirting the now-sated lovers), and joined the green man outside the Banqueting Hall.

"*What do you want?*" she whispered.

He slowly lifted a long, gnarled finger, and pointed northwards, indicating that Eowyn should walk.

"*Why?*"

He pointed again.

"*Do you want to show me something?*"

He nodded.

"*Very well...*"

...

Season of Mists

Hentmirë, already on her knees, slumped over the baby as a vicious kick, to the middle of her back, drove the air from her lungs.

Beside her, Rimush was still fighting like a lion; across the village green, shouts and screams, strangely muffled by the ringing in her ears, told her that the villagers—old men and vulnerable women—had come out to help.

"I am sorry," she panted, bracing herself for the final blow, "I... I tried..."

She waited, cringing.

But the attack did not come.

Instead, a familiar sound, slowly penetrating her consciousness, made the little woman open her eyes, and try to lift her head, and—through pain and tears—she smiled, shakily.

The sound was a dwarven battle cry, coming from a small, ferocious, axe-wielding figure, charging into the *melée*.

"Gimli," groaned Hentmirë, in disbelief. "*Gimli* has come to save us."

...

Hand-in-hand, Eowyn and the green man left the clearing and entered the rose gardens, crossing each grassy courtyard, with its carved stone terraces overflowing with fragrant blooms—until they reached, at the gardens' centre, a rocky pool, gleaming in the moonlight.

Eowyn's strange companion released her hand.

"*You want me to wait here?*"

He bowed and, when he raised his head, Eowyn thought she glimpsed the ghost of a smile in his vivid eyes. Then he waded out into the water and, stooping, retrieved a long, narrow package.

"*What is that?*"

He brought it back to her and, setting it on the grass, carefully unravelled its cloth wrapping.

"*Oh, gods!*"

Eowyn crouched down to examine the parcel's gruesome contents—two pale shells of waxy flesh and the elegant white knife that had sliced them from Heral the carpenter's dead body. "*How did they come to be here?*" She looked up into her companion's burning eyes. "*Did you see who put them here?*"

The green man's eyes seemed to dull with sadness. He slipped his gnarled hand into a crevice in the pool's rocky bank and withdrew a small object, which he held out to her.

Eowyn stared at the damning evidence. "*Oh no...*"

...

"*Melmenya?*"

A sudden vision of Eowyn in distress jolted Legolas from his sleep. He sat up and, instantly alert, looked around the Banqueting Hall.

She is in the rose gardens, he thought, frowning, with... Thorkell bogsveigir?

Season of Mists

He rose to his feet and, picking up his robe, quickly slipped it on. Eowyn was upset, he realised, but not in any immediate danger. Nevertheless, he was anxious to find her.

"Legolas,"—his father's voice, quiet but imperious, stopped him in his tracks—"we need to talk, ion nín."

Legolas looked back across the sea of sleeping lovers. "Later, Ada," he said, softly. "I need to find Eowyn nín."

"Then I shall come with you," said the Elvenking. "I am sure that Eowyn will not mind."

Legolas suppressed a sigh. "Very well, Ada."

Deftly, King Thranduil retrieved his clothing from beneath the sleeping Cyllien, donned the silver robe, and tied its embroidered sash. Then father and son left the Banqueting Hall, crossed the clearing, and entered the rose gardens, following the route that Eowyn and the green man had earlier taken through the maze of courtyards.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about, Ada?" asked Legolas, once he was sure that they would not be overheard.

"Your March Warden."

"Haldir? What about him?"

The Elvenking paused to admire a cascade of ruby-red roses. "He is innocent," he said, bending to sniff the blooms. "Release him."

"I *know* that he is innocent," said Legolas, waiting impatiently. "I *know* that he is shielding Cyllien, out of some misguided sense of honour, whilst she is openly betraying him—"

"The Harvest Rite does not count, Lassui."

"I am not talking about the Rite, Ada," said Legolas, "as you well know. I am talking about all the 'singing'!"

"Cyllien has a beautiful voice."

Legolas raised his hands in frustration.

"Come Lassui," said Thranduil, suddenly setting off again. "I thought you were worried about Eowyn."

"*Ada!*" Legolas followed and, rushing to catch up with his father, suddenly felt like an elfling once more. "The moment the Rite is over, Ada, Eowyn and I will be concentrating all our time on solving this murder—and we will not be swayed—"

"It is nice to see that my son has at last grown a pair—"

"*Ada!*" Legolas grasped his father's arm. "Tell me—and, for once in your life, speak plainly—do you love her? Do you?"

The Elvenking hesitated. Then, "No," he admitted.

"Thank the Valar," said Legolas. "Because, I will speak plainly to you, Ada, she is not worthy to be your consort."

"You wrong her, Lassui," said Thranduil, seriously. "She has suffered—"

Season of Mists

"We *all* suffer! But the best grow stronger as a result."

"The true heart," said Thranduil, softly, "loves its beloved's weaknesses as well as her strengths; the true heart loves more when more is needed."

Legolas turned to his father in horror. "Oh Ada," he said. "You *do* love her."

Chapter 8: Dilemmas

"Do stop behaving like a spoilt elfling, Lassui," said Thranduil, impatiently.

"A spoilt... Meaning *what* Ada?" Legolas hurried after his father. "Meaning that I *do* have cause to be jealous—which, of course, I am not, but—"

The Elvenking stopped abruptly, and turned to face his son.

"Please do not lie to me, Ada," Legolas persisted. "You have just revealed your true feelings."

"When I spoke of love, I was thinking of your mother."

Taken by surprise, Legolas began to stammer out an apology—then, suddenly raising his head, eyes narrowed, he scrutinised his father's face, trying to decipher the emotions hidden behind the smooth mask.

Thranduil stood his ground. "Shall we continue?"

Legolas nodded.

They had reached a fork in the rose-lined path and, hearing light footsteps ahead, they entered a canopied walkway, rounded a corner, and found themselves face to face with Eowyn.

"Melmenya!" Legolas stepped forward, hands outstretched.

But King Thranduil, grasping his son's arm and holding him back, placed his free hand upon his heart, and bowed his head, in a greeting of profound respect, to the woman's strange companion.

...

Eryn Valen

Gimli patted Hentmirë's hand. "Just take it easy, lass."

He nodded to the stretcher-bearers, and they lifted the little woman—still cradling the baby, and protesting that she was too heavy to be carried—and took her into the barn that was serving as a healing room.

The dwarf surveyed what was left of Eryn Valen.

Fire had gutted the houses at the centre of the village, and three more dwellings had been hastily pulled down to prevent its spreading. Two of the villagers—one of them Godith's mother—lay dead upon the scorched grass, together with four of the tad-dail; three other villagers, badly injured, were being tended in the barn. Hentmirë's wounds appeared superficial (but Gimli was not inclined to take risks where the little woman was concerned); Rimush was scratched and bruised; Thorkell bogsveigir, unharmed, was herding the tad-dail prisoners into one of the goat pens.

What do we do now? the dwarf wondered.

Season of Mists

...

Eowyn stared at Thranduil in astonishment.

She had seen the Elvenking with elves of lesser rank, like Lord Fingolfin, and with men of high standing, like Bergthórr beytill, and with Aragorn—a man he truly seemed to admire—but she had never seen him show genuine respect before.

Beside him, Legolas—though obviously as surprised as she was by his father's behaviour—slowly bowed his own head.

Eowyn glanced at the green man, a broad smile spreading across her face. Her strange friend was graciously receiving the elves' greeting, one gnarled hand upon his leafy chest.

He was clearly a being of some importance!

She placed her own hand on her heart in a formal gesture of thanks. "You have been watching over me since we met in the Forest," she said. "I have felt your presence. Thank you."

The green man returned her bow. Then he turned to Legolas with a gesture that seemed to say, *I leave her in your care*, and stepped backwards, and merged into the roses.

Eowyn gasped.

She searched the prickly foliage, and the trellis that stood behind it, but only a faint, reassuring scent, of new leaves and lemons, told her heart that, like the creatures of the forest, she remained under the green man's special protection, and that he would re-emerge from the leaves, if ever she needed him.

...

Eryn Valen

"How is she?" asked Gimli.

The elven healer, Master Findecáno, finished securing the bandage on Hentmirë's arm before answering. "Lady Hentmirë has a serious burn," he said, "which I have treated with an ash poultice—the dressing must be renewed every five hours. Otherwise, she is in good health, my Lord."

"Good." Gimli leaned his axe against the wall and sat down beside his friend. "We are sending the villagers to safety," he said. "And I want you and Rimush to go with them."

"But do you not need me, Gimli? To mark the map?"

The dwarf smiled. "Aye, lass, you were doing a fine job there. But the search was a waste of time—all those men, out in the Forest, and the buggers just slipped behind us, and attacked here! The only one who found anything was the Beorning, and that was *one* hut. But we have prisoners now and, if we lean on them—"

"*Lean* on them, Gimli?"

"Frighten them a bit."

"We will threaten them, my Lady," said Thorkell bogsveigir, who had just entered the barn in search of the dwarf, "and make them talk."

"But they do not talk," said Hentmirë. "Not that I have heard. They... *Bleat*."

Season of Mists

...

Eowyn glanced at the Elvenking.

She had hoped to show the evidence to Legolas in private, and to decide with him the best way to proceed, but Thranduil was looking at the parcel, and was bound to ask what it contained.

And, although she was more convinced than ever that Legolas' father, if not actually responsible for the death, had been closely involved in its aftermath, she realised that there might be advantages to taking him into their confidence sooner rather than later. *We are dealing with ancient lore*, she thought. *Even Legolas knows nothing about the tad-dail and the green man...*

And, though Thranduil is wily, he is not wicked. When he chooses to deceive—well, perhaps, on those occasions, deception is what is called for.

What was Dernhelm but a lie?

"I have something to discuss with you," she said, "both of you. But we must go somewhere where we cannot be overheard."

"My quarters," said Thranduil. "Allow me first to wake Cyllien, and take her to Arinna's, then I will meet you there in half an hour."

...

"In *my* country," said Hentmirë, thoughtfully, "my *old* country, that is, when a man needs water, he finds a monkey."

"Does he really?" said Gimli, politely. He and Thorkell bogsveigir were trying to revise their plan.

"Yes," said the little woman. "He scatters lumps of salt on the ground—salt is scarce in the desert—and lets the monkey eat it. Then, when the monkey gets thirsty, he follows." Hentmirë frowned. "If you set the creatures free, Gimli, would they not return home? And then you could follow them."

The dwarf and the man exchanged glances. "It is a clever idea, lass," the dwarf admitted, "very clever—but these goat-things know the Forest better than anyone and, according to Eowyn, they can disguise themselves as men. If we let them go, the chances are we would never see them—"

"No, you are forgetting the salt," interrupted Thorkell bogsveigir. "We can track them easily with a dog. The problem is that the creatures are canny, and will know exactly what we are up to, unless—as Lady Hentmirë says—we give them salt and let nature take its course."

"Salt?"

"Girls, Lord Gimli," replied the Beorning. "Give them *girls*."

...

"Well, melmenya," asked Legolas, as Thranduil disappeared into the Banqueting Hall, "what is it that you are so anxious to show me beforehand?"

"Let us climb," said Eowyn.

She waited until they were halfway up the main staircase before quietly describing the

Season of Mists

contents of the parcel. "The green man saw who threw it into the pool," she said, "and—and saw him drop *this*." She fished down the front of her bodice, brought out the tip of a deer antler (drilled through its centre), and showed it to Legolas.

"Oh..." The elf laid a comforting arm about her shoulders and pulled her close. "I am so sorry melmenya." He kissed the top of her head.

"I am sure that he was just following orders."

"Of course." Legolas sighed. "How are we going to handle this, my darling?"

"I think we must simply tell your father all we know."

"And then?"

"And then, I really have no idea, Lassui."

...

"No," said Gimli.

"One girl."

"NO."

"A volunteer."

"Who in her right mind would volunteer to be—*ravished* by a goat?"

"First," said the Beorning, "there will be no ravishing—we will see to that. Secondly, someone who is so afraid for her sister, she has already been into the Forest to search for her, *alone*."

...

King Thranduil's apartment

The Elvenking arrived late.

Legolas and Eowyn had been waiting anxiously beside the great curved window, watching the dawn light, filtering through the red carantaurs, gild the roofs of their beloved city, bringing the colony to life.

For a few moments, father and son faced each other in uneasy silence. Then Eowyn took the lead: "Please sit down, Ada—Lassui." She set the damp parcel on the table between them, pulled it open, and placed the deer horn button beside it.

King Thranduil uttered a quiet oath.

Eowyn sat down next to her elf.

"We believe, Ada," said Legolas, "that it happened like this: the day you arrived, you went for one of your secret walks, saw Heral dragging Cyllien from the marketplace, followed them, and rescued her."

Thranduil's eyes were fixed upon the murder weapon, and Legolas noticed that his hands, which would normally have been toying with his sash, or with the buttons at his cuff, were resting in his lap, perfectly still. "You escorted Cyllien home," he continued, glancing at Eowyn, "and, we assume, gave her one of your white knives to defend herself with." He picked up the knife, and examined its handle. "Master Cammiron's craftsmanship is as distinctive as a

Season of Mists

scholar's hand, Ada," he said, "and, as you know, he never uses the same decoration twice. This pattern is based on the arms of the Woodland Realm—the blade is yours."

The Elvenking said nothing.

Legolas went on: "That same night, Cyllien and Heral met in the building works. We know why Heral was there—we will not go into it now—but we have no idea what Cyllien was doing."

"And that is important," said Eowyn, "because it determines the nature of the crime."

"Exactly. We believe that it was Cyllien who stabbed Heral, and cut off his ears, but..." Legolas searched his father's face. "Did you see her Ada—were you looking down into the building works? Did you take pity on her and send your lackey out to help her? Or did *she* come to *you*?"

"She came to me," said Thranduil, softly.

"So you ordered Thorkell to cover up the crime," said Eowyn. "He could not do much with the body—the blood had already stained the untreated wood, so it would have been pointless to move it—but he made sure that there was nothing left to incriminate Cyllien, and disposed of the weapon. Unfortunately, the green man saw him, and picked up the button that fell off his jerkin."

"And gave it to you." The Elvenking sighed. "What do you intend to do, Lassui?"

"Do? Ada, you have put me in an impossible position!" Legolas rose to his feet and began to pace. "My father has covered up a murder!"

"Your *King*," said Thranduil, quietly, "has taken matters in hand."

...

Eryn Valen

"You do not have to do it, lass."

"I want to." Myldreth smiled reassuringly at the dwarf, and then at the anxious little woman sitting beside him. "I need to, Lady Hentmirë—I *must* find Annis and bring her home. And I trust Lord Gimli and Master Thorkell to keep me safe."

"Good," said Thorkell bogsveigir. "Then this is the plan..."

...

"We must question Cyllien," said Legolas. His anger having quickly spent itself, he had resumed his place beside Eowyn. She, having borrowed a wax tablet from the Elvenking, was making notes.

"We must establish, beyond any doubt," the elf continued, "that it was self defence."

"The man was a brute," said Thranduil. "What else could it have been?"

"Premeditated murder, Ada, as you well know—revenge for the humiliations she had already suffered; a desperate measure to ensure that he would never touch her again." Legolas leaned towards his father. "I would like you to be present when we talk to her, Ada—as a sort of advocate, if you will—to give her support and to encourage her to be frank with us. We know that she did it, so anything she can tell us in mitigation—"

"And then what? A public trial?"

Season of Mists

"There will have to be an inquiry. But if it was self defence and if she gives us a full confession, it will be as brief and as painless as we can make it," said Legolas.

"And the punishment?"

Legolas turned to Eowyn. "She will be asked to serve the colony," said the woman, "for a fixed number of hours, doing something that makes use of her particular skills—something not too onerous."

"And what of my bodyguard?"

Legolas sighed. "Since he was acting on your orders, Ada, and since, as King of the Woodland Realm, you are technically above the law, so is he. We cannot touch him."

...

Eryn Valen

"You have fifteen minutes," announced Thorkell bogsveigir. "Bring your wives, your children, your weapons, and water for the journey—leave everything else."

Several of the villagers muttered, angrily.

"Space is limited." The Beorning gestured towards the vehicles—two hand carts, a haywain, a box wagon, and Hentmirë's carriage—assembled on the patch of burnt ground that had once been the village green. "We will load the injured first; then the old and the young; and then, if there is room left, the women. The rest will have to walk. Everything you need will be provided when you reach the city—"

"What about our dead?" cried one of the men.

"We can't leave them lying here!" agreed another.

Thorkell sighed. "Does anyone have a cellar? Somewhere cool that can be made secure?"

The village head man raised a hand.

"Lay them out in there. Tomorrow morning, when the Harvest Rite is complete, Lord Legolas himself will meet with your representatives to decide the future of Eryn Valen. The dead can be given a proper burial on your return."

He turned to Gimli. "Can you think of anything else?"

The dwarf shook his head.

"Then we leave in a quarter of an hour."

...

Walking the short distance from the Royal guest apartments to Arinna's house (where Cyllien was staying), accompanied by his father and Eowyn, Legolas was relieved to encounter none of the colony's more prominent citizens.

It is still quite early, he thought. They are no doubt resting after last night's revels.

Thank the Valar.

To his surprise, however, Arinna was not only up and about, but appeared—with the aid of Camthalion—to be cleaning the house. Legolas greeted her formally, explaining that he and his

Season of Mists

companions were there in an official capacity, and asked that they might be allowed to speak to Cyllien in private.

Arinna graciously agreed, settling her visitors in the dining chamber, and fetching Cyllien for them herself. "They are good people," he heard her say as the pair approached the chamber door, "and they will treat you fairly. Tell them everything."

"Please sit down," said Legolas, indicating the seat beside King Thranduil. "My father is here to give you advice, should you need it."

The elleth smiled shyly at the Elvenking but, at the same time, Legolas noticed, her expression was tinged with familiarity. "Thank you—Thoron." She looked so pale, so vulnerable, that—for the briefest of moments—he felt sure that he and Eowyn must be mistaken. Then he remembered what a consummate performer she was. "Mistress Cyllien," he said, formally, "you know why we are here."

The elleth nodded.

"Tell us what happened on the night that Heral died."

Cyllien—head bowed, eyes fixed upon the table—took a great, sighing breath, but did not answer.

King Thranduil poured out a glass of water, and pushed it towards her.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Begin," Legolas insisted, "by telling us how you became involved with Heral."

The elleth glanced at Thranduil. Almost imperceptibly, the Elvenking nodded.

"I first saw him in the marketplace," she said. A delicate flush spread across her cheeks. "I could not miss him. He was so big, so handsome; so—*vital*. And he made it absolutely clear what he wanted." Her colour deepened. "He could not wait until we got home—he had me in somebody's garden, up against a tree. And it was good at first—*so* exciting—he was never considerate, but that did not seem to matter." She tucked a strand of dark hair behind her pointed ear. "Then, one day, he brought a little wax figure with him, and made me touch it, and—you may think me crazy but, I swear, I felt things—things I had never felt before."

Under the table, Legolas grasped Eowyn's hand. "Go on," he said.

"That was when it all went wrong," said Cyllien. "I began to feel,"—she bit her lip—"guilty. I let Arinna talk me into ending things with Heral, and making another effort with Haldir, but Heral would not leave me alone, and Haldir could not make love, and—"

"Tell us what happened on the day of the murder," said Legolas, brusquely.

Cyllien sighed. "I went to the market. Heral must have followed me. He dragged me off into one of the gardens, and pinned me against the flet wall—he would have,"—she sobbed—"would have *forced* me, if not for King Thranduil."

Legolas watched his father reach out, and gently pat the elleth's hand. "Tell us how you came to be on the building site with Heral that night," he insisted.

For the first time, Cyllien looked him in the eye. "I do not know," she said.

"What do you mean?" Legolas frowned. "Tell us why you went there."

Season of Mists

"I do not know."

"Did Heral take you there?" asked Eowyn, suddenly.

"I do not know."

"Take your time, my dear," said Thranduil, laying a gentle hand upon her arm. "Have another sip of water." He shot Legolas a warning look.

Refusing to be intimidated, Legolas ploughed on: "We *must* be clear on this point: are you saying that you were on the flet, but you do not remember how you came to be there?"

"Yes."

"What *do* you remember?" asked Eowyn. "What is the last thing you remember before you found yourself in the building works?"

"Opening the door," said Cyllien. Her voice wavered. "When Thoron brought me home, we said goodbye, and I opened the door."

Eowyn glanced at Legolas. He nodded, encouraging her to continue. "Did you go inside?" she asked.

"I..."

"Yes," said Thranduil. "She did. I saw her close the door behind her."

"What time was that?"

"Late afternoon," said the Elvenking.

"Well," said Eowyn, trying to jog the elleth's memory, "did you change your gown?"

Cyllien frowned.

"She must have," said Thranduil. "Later, she was wearing red. Do you remember, Cyllien?"

The elleth shook her head.

"Perhaps you bathed?" said Eowyn.

"I do not know..."

"You have several hours to account for," said Legolas.

"I know!"

Eowyn laid her hand on the elf's arm. "When you 'woke up'," she said, "on the flet, was Heral already there?"

"Yes."

"Was he still alive?"

"No..."

"Where was the knife?"

"I... I was holding it."

Season of Mists

"Did you kill him, Cyllien?" asked Eowyn, softly. "Did you cut off his human ears?"

"I..." The elleth shuddered. The Elvenking squeezed her hand. "Yes," she whispered. "I... Yes, I think I must have."

...

Eryn Valen

Hidden amidst the smoking ruins, Myldreth watched the last of the villagers disappear from view. Over in the goat pens, the tad-dail were stirring—for, just before the cavalcade had moved out, one of the older village boys, a reliable little fellow, had been sent over to 'accidentally' loosen one prisoner's bonds.

Through the fabric of her skirts, Myldreth checked the hunting knife, strapped to her thigh, that the Beorning had given her.

"Know how to use this?"

"I shall when the time comes."

She waited until she was sure that at least one of the creatures was completely free, then she slipped out from behind the charred beams and—trying to look as foolish as she imagined her sister had done, with her hair loosened and her bodice unlaced—she sashayed towards them.

A ripple of interest ran through the herd, and Myldreth caught a waft of pungent scent as one of them, openly aroused, turned to look at her. For a split second her heart faltered in her chest, but—like every good country girl—she knew that it was not the creatures' way to force their victims.

The tad-dail *seduced*.

Well, good luck to you, she thought.

Then one of the creatures raised a long, branched flute to its lips, and began to play.

...

King Thranduil insisted that Cyllien should be left in Arinna's care. "Two of your most trusted warriors," he said, referring to Orodreth and Camthalion, "will be on hand to watch her. And that woman seems reliable enough."

Legolas and Eowyn walked back to their chambers.

"Are we any the wiser?" asked Legolas.

"We know the knife was in Cyllien's hand," said Eowyn, "and she says there was no one else on the flet with her and Heral. But as to her motive..." She paused beside the walkway wall and, leaning over the handrail, looked down at the ground, far below.

"Be careful, melmenya."

Eowyn turned to her elf, smiling. "Have I told you how much I love you, Lassui?"

"Not today."

She took hold of his hands, and raised them to her lips. "If Cyllien were lying to us, I think she would have made up a more convincing story."

Season of Mists

"So, when she says that she cannot remember—"

"I believe her."

"But why would she forget?"

"Fear, perhaps. The horror of what happened. Many of the Rohirrim have scant memory of Pelennor Field, Lassui."

Legolas sighed. "In the absence of any real evidence, we must presume that she is innocent—or, at least, that she acted in self defence."

"Which does seem entirely reasonable," said Eowyn, "given what we know of Heral, and his behaviour earlier that day—"

"Were it not for the fact that she had *no reason* to be on that flet."

"And the fact that Heral had already walled up the figurine," said Eowyn, "and so, presumably, was no longer driven by unreasoning lust." She suddenly grinned at the elf.

"You can put *that* thought *right* out of your mind, melmenya," said Legolas, with mock sternness. "Go back to our chambers and write up your notes. I will release poor Haldir."

...

Eryn Valen

The moment the cavalcade was out of sight of the village, Thorkell bogsveigir gave the signal.

Two pairs of elves immediately left the main column, one pair cutting west towards Brethildor to intercept Berryn's search party and bring it back to Eryn Valen, the second heading north to find the rest of the men and guide them back to the column, to protect the fleeing villagers.

At the same time, Gimli's dwarves and their human comrades followed the Beorning back down the trail, accompanied by the village head man—leading his prize bloodhound, and carrying, in a leather satchel, a strip of fabric torn from Myldreth's shift.

At the edge of the clearing, Thorkell bogsveigir gave a second signal, and his troops crouched down amongst the trees, and waited, whilst the dwarf and the Beorning watched the girl's progress with keen-eyed interest.

"What in Aulë's name is she *doing*?" muttered Gimli.

...

Legolas nodded to the elves outside the March Warden's house. "My compliments to Captain Golradir," he said, "and tell him that a guard is no longer required here." He pushed the door open, and went inside.

The place was unnaturally dark, and smelled strange—*Musty*, he thought. He crossed to one of the windows, pulled back the drapes, and threw open the shutters.

Haldir, hunched over the table, was a shapeless bundle of hair and woollen tunic.

"March Warden," said Legolas, briskly, "you are free to go." He approached his friend. "Did you hear me, Haldir? Cyllien has confessed."

Slowly, the big elf raised his head.

Season of Mists

"Ai, mellon nín," gasped Legolas. "You look *ill*. I shall send for Master Dínendal."

"No!" Haldir grasped Legolas' arm. "A healer cannot help me, my Lord," he said, smiling bleakly. "I am cursed."

"*Cursed?* I do not understand." Legolas sat down beside him.

"I found it—found *them*—on the day of the murder."

"Found what?"

"I have no idea how they got there."

"Haldir, *what* did you find?"

"Three wax figures."

"Oh..." Legolas sighed. "Did you touch them?"

"I picked them up."

"Describe them."

"Two of them..." Haldir looked away, his face flushed. "If I were to say that they were making love, Legolas, it would give you no idea of the depravity—they were *fucking* , like beasts. The one underneath—the female—was obviously meant to be Cyllien, with big, pointed ears and a foolish grin; the one on top was human."

"Where are these figures now?" asked Legolas, gently.

"I left the couple here,"—Haldir gestured vaguely—"but I kept this one." He reached into the pocket of his tunic and drew out a wax figurine. "I think it is meant to be me." He set it down on the tabletop.

Legolas' breath caught in his throat. The figure was identical to the one in his own chambers—though rubbed and scratched from its time in Haldir's pocket—but where the other sported a vast erection, this had only a ragged scar, where its penis and testicles had been broken away.

"Was it like that when you found it," asked Legolas, "with its ceber missing?"

"Yes."

"Listen carefully, Haldir: take hold of that coil of hair on its head, and lift it off. Try not to touch the wax."

Haldir frowned. "Why?"

"Trust me; just do it."

The big elf hesitated for a moment longer; then, hand trembling, he did as Legolas had instructed, placing the silvery lock on the table.

Legolas glanced round the chamber. Several items of Cyllien's discarded clothing were draped, here and there, over the furniture. "Take up that red gown and wrap it around the figure—make sure that the wax is completely covered. Good. Now lock the thing away somewhere secure."

"*Lock?*"

Season of Mists

"Please, Haldir; do exactly as I say."

...

Eowyn slipped behind the carved wooden wall that screened off the building works, and stepped out onto the flet.

She smiled.

Work had officially been suspended for the duration of the Harvest Rite, but she had known that she would find Master Bawden there—standing on the porch of the unfinished apartment, conscientiously oiling the carved door jambs—for, "Wood," he had once told her, "*does not observe human—or even elven—feast days.*"

She greeted the craftsman-builder with a mixture of affection and respect.

The man bowed. "What can I do for you, my Lady?"

The subject was a difficult one, but she could see no sense in being coy. "The figurine," she said. "Where, exactly, did you find it?"

Bawden led her through the empty doorway, across the high-ceilinged sitting room with its wide, curved windows, through the study, and into the main bedchamber. "There." He pointed to a section of panelling, built to protect the carantaur trunk that stood, like a living pillar, at the centre of the room. A small section of the planking had been prised off, exposing a tiny, cupboard-like recess.

Eowyn touched the tree trunk. "This is at the very *heart* of the house..."

Bawden smiled—and Eowyn felt like an apprentice whose master had just praised her for a particularly fine piece of workmanship. "Indeed, my Lady. That is exactly what it is. And,"—he coloured deeply—"in the chamber where that particular object would be at its most potent."

"But this is not Heral's home."

"No, my Lady. But guest apartments are empty for much of the time. And few doors are locked in Eryn Carantaur."

"I see..." Eowyn chewed her lip, thoughtfully. Then she said, "What do you know of the tad-dail, Master Bawden?"

The man gestured towards a wooden window seat. Eowyn sat down. "Like the elves, my Lady," he said, "we craftsman-builders are people of the Forest. But, unlike the elves, we must cut down the trees, and that puts us amongst its darker inhabitants. We know the tad-dail, and they know us. If we chance upon them we give them their due, and they leave us in peace."

"Their due?"

"Respect, my Lady," said Bawden. "We doff our caps and give them the proper greeting."

"I think," said Eowyn, "that Heral gave them rather more than that." She told Bawden about Little Godwin. "In return, I think the tad-dail gave him some of their hair. It is wound around the figure's—well—it is wound around the figure."

"Ah."

"Can you tell me more about its magic?"

Bawden shook his head. "I have always stayed clear of that business."

Season of Mists

"But the others—could you make some discreet enquiries amongst the other men for me?"

"Of course, my Lady."

"Thank you." Eowyn rose to her feet. "And can I ask another favour of you, Master Bawden?"

...

"You look better," said Legolas.

"I *feel* better. Better than I have since,"—Haldir shrugged—"since we first returned from the shadowland."

"Good."

"How did you know what to do?"

"I have seen one of the figures before—but it was Eowyn who worked out how to deal with it." Legolas smiled. "You were telling me about Eryn Dholt."

"Yes." The big elf shrugged. "I stood beneath the waters of the Gynd Vyrn, hoping that the cascade would wash me clean. But then I started thinking: what if the figures were a *threat*? I had seen the sort of man Heral was. Suppose Cyllien had angered him in some way?" He looked up at Legolas. "She can be very provocative."

"I know."

"So I rushed back."

"What did you find?"

"Nothing. She was in bed. Asleep."

"But then you heard about the murder."

"I was sure she must have done it. I thought it was my fault."

"Haldir..." Legolas waited until the other elf's eyes met his. "You thought *that*," he said, "because Heral had emasculated you—magically—by mutilating the wax figurine. Now you are yourself again, as long as you keep the thing locked away." He rose from the table. "When Eowyn and I find a more permanent solution, I will let you know. In the meantime, come with me. I have a job for the March Warden of Eryn Carantaur."

...

Eowyn went straight to the bedchamber, and set Master Bawden's bag on the dressing table.

The layout of her and Legolas' home was very different from that of the unfinished guest apartment, and she spent some time—turning round and round—scanning the walls for a suitable place before deciding on the corner nearest the sitting room door, which was towards the centre of the house (though not at its heart), and a good distance from the bed.

She opened the tool bag, and took out a small chisel and a wooden mallet.

The wall was lined with wooden panels. Eowyn examined their construction. The planks were pegged to the wall frame with tiny wooden dowels. At about waist height a line of swirling curves formed a slight lip. Perfect! Doing exactly as Bawden had shown her, she placed the tip of the chisel behind the carved edge, and tapped the handle with the mallet.

Season of Mists

The plank moved, very slightly. She repositioned the chisel.

"Melmenya? What are you doing?"

Eowyn frowned, concentrating on her work. "Solving our problem." She tapped again.

"Can I help?"

"Well..." She moved the chisel along the plank. "Yes, I suppose this part is safe enough." She tapped again.

"You never cease to amaze me, Shieldmaiden." He leaned over her shoulder. "You are doing a good job."

"Master Bawden showed me how."

"One more will do it, I think," said Legolas.

Eowyn tapped.

The elf grasped the edge of the panel and pulled. The wood came away in his hands. "*There.*" The couple looked into the narrow alcove formed by the framework behind the panelling. "Will it fit?"

"If I take it out of the jewel box." Eowyn smiled up at him. "You had better go into the sitting room now."

Legolas kissed her forehead. "Mmm. Will you be able to replace the panel by yourself?"

"Yes—all I need to do is knock the pegs back through the plank," she said, seriously, "so that only the tips are protruding. Then, when I position the panel, I must fit the pegs into these,"—she touched one of the peg-holes in the framework—"and hammer them home."

"Master Bawden is a good teacher." He kissed her again. "I shall have breakfast waiting for you when you have finished, Shieldmaiden."

Season of Mists

Chapter 9: The rescue

Eowyn climbed the stairs to the garden flet.

Legolas, who had been waiting impatiently, rushed over to her and, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, drew her to the breakfast table. "All done, melmenya?"

"Yes. It was harder than I expected, Lassui, but I have replaced the panel. How do you feel now?" Legolas pulled out a chair; she sat down.

"Fine, melmenya," said the elf, sitting opposite. "But, then, the charm does not seem to affect me unless I am already,"—he smiled—"a little excited..."

"And you are not now?"

They both grinned.

"Good," said Eowyn, "because there are things we must do before the Rite tonight. I have been thinking—"

"I have something to tell *you* first." He cut a slice of bread and laid it on her plate.

"Go on." She spread the bread with butter.

"I have found out why Haldir has seemed so—so *spineless* lately." He told her about the other figurines, and how Haldir had been carrying the dismembered image of himself in his pocket. "We wrapped it in one of Cyllien's gowns and locked it in the weapons chest, and he immediately began to improve."

"What a terrible, terrible thing to do to someone," said Eowyn. She poured two glasses of cordial. "Heral must have thought that, with Haldir impotent, Cyllien would be forced to turn to him—oh gods, Lassui! That is it!" She thumped her little fist on the table.

"Melmenya?" Legolas could not help smiling.

"That is why she was on the building site!"

"For sex? But she had already rejected him earlier in the day."

"But the figurine, Lassui! The *couple*. Haldir told you that he left it on the table. And the last thing Cyllien says she remembers is going into the house. She must have found the figurine, and picked it up—*handled* it..."

"Of course..." Legolas took a bite of bread, and chewed it, thoughtfully. "And it drew her to the building site."

"Well, it drew her to Heral."

"But the charm must have somehow been broken," said Legolas, "because she quickly came to her senses, and defended herself."

"Yes."

"Using the knife that my father had given her earlier."

"Exactly. Had she not had the knife, he could easily have overpowered her—*raped* her—but she lashed out at him, stabbed him... And then she vented her anger on his ears. We need to find that figurine, Lassui. And,"—she picked up her napkin, and wiped her fingers—"we need to do

Season of Mists

all the other things that we have neglected whilst in thrall to Heral's charm—we must search Heral's chambers—we should have done that at the very beginning—and I want to speak to Lady Tóriel."

"Tóriel? Why, melmenya?"

"Because I want to know whether Thorkell really was with her that night—and, if so, exactly when he left."

...

Surrounded by dancing tad-dail, Myldreth raised her arms above her head, and—she hoped—spun gracefully, her sharp eyes scanning the Forest for any sign of her friends. *Gods! Either they're very well hidden, she thought, or I am on my own;* and she closed her eyes, trying to master her nerves. *Come on, Myldreth! You do not want these bastards sensing—*

Something touched her shoulder and she turned, instantly recognising the young buck who had so openly desired her back at the village.

She pirouetted away.

The tad-dal followed.

Myldreth moved faster, working her way deeper into the pack.

The tad-dal bleated plaintively.

Some of the others closed in on her, guiding her back towards him—for it seemed that *he* was to have first use of her.

Shit, thought Myldreth, trying to stay just beyond his grasp. *Do not let me down, Lord Gimli, Master Thorkell!*

...

"Can you see the lassie?" whispered Gimli.

"No..." Thorkell bogsveigir peered through the scrub. "No. But, from the way they are behaving, she is certainly in there, somewhere near the middle."

A fragment of melody, long and lush and haunting, wound its way past them on the breeze.

"That music," grumbled the dwarf, "makes my flesh crawl."

"That is because," said the Beorning, "your flesh is of the wrong sort. A woman—ah—here we go." The tad-dail had increased their pace; Thorkell signalled his men to do the same. "A woman cannot resist it."

"Hmm." Gimli weighed his axe. "Let us pray that *our* lass is the exception."

...

Legolas and Eowyn had made another thorough search of the building site, but found nothing.

Eowyn sat down on the steps of the unfinished apartment. "I was so sure that we *would* find it, Lassui, now that we know what we are looking for." A gentle breeze wafted across the flet and, closing her eyes, she turned to face to its scented freshness, sighing, "I wanted to show it to Cyllien."

Season of Mists

"To see if it jogged her memory?" Legolas sat down beside her, and took hold of her hand. Then, after a few moments, he said, "You know, melmenya, something must have broken its spell. Perhaps it fell..."

They scrambled to their feet and, together, peered over the flet walls.

On three sides, there was nothing but a dizzying drop, to the ground hundreds of feet below; on the fourth side, however, the platform overlooked a small public garden.

"Melmenya..." Legolas pointed to a group of young children, clustered around a bench. One of the elflings was holding a little wheeled horse, and was racing it along the seat closely pursued by a tiny dwarf, who was pushing a wax model of a couple, making love.

"Oh, gods," said Eowyn.

...

Myldreth had no idea how long she had been 'dancing' down the trail.

An hour? Two?

To her poor, tired arms and legs it felt like two *days*.

So far, with a few big steps here, and an over-enthusiastic twirl—connecting her fist with a sparsely-bearded chin—there, she had managed to keep the young tad-dal at a distance. And it seemed that, as long as she made *him* wait, the others were content to leave her be. *Thank the gods.*

But a subtle change in the creature's manner told her that they were getting close to his lair, and she knew that this was the moment of greatest danger, and she prayed (again) that Lord Gimli and Master Thorkell were close behind—though in her heart she was sure that she could trust the dwarf.

And besides, she thought, I have a knife...

They turned off the main trail, and climbed a steep rise—*Still bloody dancing*—and entered a clearing atop the hill, and at last she saw their stronghold—a vast stone ruin, its stunted walls roofed with woven branches, its fallen masonry serving as beds and chairs, the whole edifice covered with dark green moss and skirted with fronds of amber bracken.

Gods, it smells!

Of piss, thought Myldreth, as the odour caught in her throat. *Goat's piss*. And she spun slowly round, and saw that most of the creatures were making water at the edges of the clearing, *Marking it afresh, like dogs!*

She gagged.

But she had come here for a purpose and, swallowing hard, she let her young swain draw her, still dancing, through an open postern, and into the dank interior of the ruined keep.

"Myldreth! *Myldreth!* They've brought you, too!"

It was the very voice she had been hoping to hear, but its sudden sound took Myldreth by surprise, and she forgot to dance and, instead, peering into the gloom, she searched for its owner, whispering, "Annis? Annis, is that you?"

"Of course it's me!" Her sister was sitting on a mossy stone, cradling a baby in her arms; and

Season of Mists

as Myldreth moved closer, and her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she could scarcely believe the girl's transformation—her filthy rags, her matted hair, the dirt smeared across her face, and neck, and arms, and the putrid colour of her teeth...

But her sister's eyes were shining with joy. "Isn't it wonderful?" she cried, hugging the baby to her breast. "They treat me like a princess, Myldreth! Look at my fine chamber; look at my velvet gown!"

"Oh Annis..." Myldreth reached out—and, instantly, a pair of hands (with long, sharp nails) grasped her by the waist, and dragged her back, and she felt an impatient phallus, rising up behind her.

NO! she thought. And slipping her hand through the split in her skirts, she pulled out the Beorning's knife and spun round—ignoring the nails that scraped her skin as she broke free—and lashed out at the young tad-dal, driving him away.

Oh gods, oh gods!

She thrust, and thrust again, but somehow could not connect; and she took deep breath and bellowed, "LORD GIMLI; MASTER THORKELL; COME NOW, COME NOW, COME NOW!"

...

Eowyn grasped Legolas' arm. "We must not let them think that it is something bad, Lassui," she whispered. "I mean, we do not want them thinking that sex is bad."

"Leave it to me, melmenya." The elf walked out onto the flet. "Hello."

The children looked up from their game, surprised by the sudden interruption. Then one little fellow, bolder than the rest, drew himself up straight and, placing his hand upon his heart, bowed his golden head and said, "Mae govannen, Lord Legolas."

Legolas smiled. "Mae govannen, mellyn nín. I see that you have found my statue."

"*Fili* found it..." Almost imperceptibly, the three elflings drew back, leaving the dwarf to face Legolas alone.

"It was just lying on the floor, sir," said the tiny boy, "and it was already broken. That is the truth." He thrust a small, broad hand into his pocket and drew out a battered lump of wax, still recognisable as an elleth's head.

"Well," said Legolas, sitting down on the bench, "it just so happens that there is a reward for finding that sculpture—two rewards, in fact. The dwarf who finds it gets taken to Master Aerandir's workshop, and can choose any toy he likes. And then he—and all his friends—get taken to the market, for apple pie and cream."

...

"*Come now, come now, come now,*" cried the voice, and Gimli and his dwarves were out into the open and charging up the hill—felling any creature foolish enough to step in their way—before Thorkell bogsveigir had even had time to raise a hand and signal his men.

Then the humans were running, too, battling through a ragged wall of tad-dail, the Beorning scanning the field for any sign of a focus, a point that the creatures seemed particularly anxious to defend. He could see nothing promising, but the knot of dwarves was already at the foot of the revetment, and Thorkell saw Gimli disappear through a small doorway in the masonry.

Season of Mists

Barking a few quick orders, telling his men to round up the tad-dail and drive them into the isolated remains of the gatehouse, Thorkell followed.

Inside the keep, it was dark and damp, and nauseating, and the greenish light, filtering down through the high, woven roof, gave him glimpses of a gaggle of grubby women—looking more animal than human—squatting on the piss-sodden ground, or lolling, open-legged, upon stone beds covered with filthy straw.

The Beorning shouldered his bow, drew his elven knife, and strode on. The noise up ahead told him that he was close to the action and, peering cautiously through another gap in the stonework, he spotted Gimli knocking tad-dail down like skittles, whilst Myldreth, despite the hysterical woman hammering her back with tiny fists, was holding off a particularly amorous creature, using the knife he had given her.

Sighing, the Beorning waded in and, dropping the tad-dal with a quick, well-placed stab, he grasped Myldreth's arm and pulled her—and her wailing sister with her—back to the postern and out into the sunlight.

Thank the fucking gods, he thought. Fresh air.

...

Eowyn examined the wax figures.

The female, on her hands and knees, was turning her missing head—which, separately, still smiled at some imaginary spectator—as the male figure entered her from behind. "I see what Haldir meant," she said, thoughtfully. "There is something very distasteful about it. Do you think the children understood what was happening?"

"They did not seem at all upset by it, melmenya."

"I wonder when the head came off—whether that *was* what broke the spell, and whether..." She gasped. "Lassui! I have an idea!"

...

"How many women are there?" asked Thorkell bogsveigir, dragging Myldreth and her sister over the grass.

"I saw two," said Myldreth, "not including Annis; and three babies."

"And I saw three. That gives us at least five women, and the gods only know how many babies. Can *she* tell us how many tad-dail?" He looked across the clearing, relieved to find that his men, with help from Gimli's dwarves, had rounded up most of the stray creatures, and corralled them inside the gatehouse. *Which only leaves those in the keep itself*, he thought, *unless more arrive...* "You," he roared at two of the dwarves, "go inside and get Lord Gimli out; drag him by the beard if you have to!"

"No," said Myldreth, "she doesn't know. But *I* can tell you that there were about thirty with me by the time we got here, and I know there were already more inside."

"And we cannot smoke them out because of the bloody women and children... "

...

Arinna was surprised to see Legolas and Eowyn back so soon, and calmly insisted on being present whilst they questioned Cyllien again.

Season of Mists

"Thank you," said Legolas. "I am sure that she will be more at ease with you sitting beside her, giving her support."

The woman led them back into the dining chamber, sending Camthalion to fetch the elleth. Cyllien arrived after a brief interval, looking—Legolas thought—quite strange: *Like Eowyn sometimes looks when she has been roused from a deep sleep...*

Cyllien, aware of his scrutiny, ran a hand through her messy hair.

"Thank you for agreeing to speak with us again." Legolas gestured towards an empty chair. "We have something to show you."

The elleth sat down; Eowyn set the wax statuette, its head still missing, in front of her.

"Well, it is a while since I saw one of those," murmured Arinna.

"Do you recognise it, Cyllien?" asked Legolas.

The elleth frowned. "I—um—no..." She shook her head.

"Why should she?" asked Arinna, clearly taking her role as Cyllien's advocate seriously.

"Because we know," said Legolas, "from what Haldir has told us, that it appeared, mysteriously, in his house on the day that Heral was murdered. We believe that it was still there when my father brought Cyllien home that afternoon, but we *know* that it had gone by the time Haldir returned the following morning. And we have just found it on the flet directly beneath the building site where Heral was killed." He studied Cyllien's face. "Does no part of what I have said stir any memories?"

The elleth shook her head.

"Then *I* would like to try something," said Eowyn. She took the wax head from the pouch at her waist, and re-attached it to the body, carefully smoothing over the join. "There," she said, holding the statuette out to Cyllien, "take hold of it."

The elleth stretched out her hand.

Eowyn placed it on her palm.

Suddenly—"Oh," cried Cyllien, "oh, valar!"—she dropped the wax couple and tried to stand up, but knocked her chair over, and fell over it, landing awkwardly; then—panicking—she crawled away frantically, until she hit the wall and cried out—

"What is it, Cyllien?" Everyone was trying to help her—Camthalion, too, had appeared in the doorway—but Legolas reached her first, and knelt down beside her. "What have you remembered?" He laid a comforting hand upon her shoulder.

"No," she screamed—"No! No!"—shying away from him like a frightened animal.

"Cami," said Arinna, calmly, "bring me my vial of poppy juice, and a glass of wine; and then fetch a blanket. She turned to Legolas and Eowyn. "Please, my Lord, my Lady, leave her to me. I will send you word when she is ready to talk."

...

From the comparative safety of the ruined gatehouse, with his prisoners safely trussed up in one corner, and his men repairing their weapons in another, and the women being fussed over by a healer, and the dwarf at his elbow—muttering that, had he not been interrupted, he would

Season of Mists

have killed at least twice the number—Thorkell bogsveigir surveyed the tad-dail's stronghold.

It was time to decide their next move. "How many *did* you kill?" he asked.

"Three out here," said Gimli, "and five inside."

And they had taken eight prisoners. *Which leaves at least fifteen, not counting the ones who were already inside—so maybe twice that—plus the bloody women, who may fight either way—to our twelve,* thought the Beorning.

"And you?" asked the dwarf.

"Mm? Oh, one." Thorkell noticed the expression on Gimli's face, and added, "The one that *counted*."

The dwarf growled.

Sighing, Thorkell looked up at the sky. "It will soon be dark." *And dark is to be avoided.* He made a decision. "We must keep them contained until dawn."

"Dawn? What about the lassies?" The dwarf climbed up beside him, and gazed out of the broken window.

"We will get them out in the morning."

"But they are grubbing about on the floor in there, just skin and bone—and dirt, and fleas..."

"But *safe* until the morning. Look: you saw how *she*,"—he jerked his head towards Annis—"defended those things. If we attack in the dark, and the women fight us, the chances are that some will get killed; if we leave it until morning, when we can at least see what we are doing, their odds have got to be better. What is the worst that can happen to them overnight? Mmm? The creatures will ravish them again—something these women seem quite happy to allow."

"Because," said Gimli, as though speaking to an idiot, "they are *enchanted*."

"And one more night will make no difference to that, either. Remember, we have the babies to get out in one piece, as well."

Gimli sighed heavily. Then, "At first light," he conceded.

"Good," said Thorkell. "In the meantime, there seem to be two ways into the place, so we will station guards at both doors; we will send Otkel harthfari to Eryn Valen to fetch more men; and in the morning, as soon as the sun is over the roof, we will go in mob-handed."

...

"Oh gods, Lassui! What have I done?" sobbed Eowyn.

They had fled to the walkway, just outside Arinna's house. Legolas drew her close. "You have reversed whatever damage that thing was doing to her, melmenya."

"But she was *terrified*!" Eowyn raised her head, and tears were streaming down her face. "I made her remember the murder."

"No, melmenya. No..." Legolas raised a hand and gently brushed the tears from her cheeks. "It was *I* who frightened her—*touching* her. I think she was remembering Heral's attack."

"I should never have done it, Lassui."

Season of Mists

Legolas pulled her into his arms and held her tight. "Think of Haldir, my darling," he said. "Think of how he was fading. That would have happened to Cyllien, too, I am sure of it. This fear of hers will pass. What Heral did to her—what she did to him—those are things that she must come to terms with, one way or another, and the sooner she does, the better. She is in good hands. I have the feeling that Arinna has dealt with this sort of thing before." He lifted Eowyn's chin, and added, quite sternly, "The blame in this, *melmenya*, lies with *Heral*: it was he who created the figures; it was he who used them to have his way with Cyllien. Not you. You—"

"I wanted to know what had happened between them."

"To prove that Cyllien had acted in self defence."

Eowyn shook her head, and fresh tears ran down her cheeks.

"Melmenya?"

"To prove that *Thorkell* acted honourably, Lassui. To protect Thorkell. Not Cyllien."

"Oh, *melmenya*..." He kissed her forehead. "Whatever your motive, Eowyn *nín*, you did *not* harm Cyllien. Trust me." He kissed her again. "And the best thing to do now is keep looking for the truth. Come, my darling; you wanted to search Heral's lodgings, and there is just time."

...

"Did you mean it?" asked Myldreth. She had refused the draught that the dwarven healer had used to calm her sister, and had joined Thorkell *bogsveigir*, who was overseeing his men as they took up their positions for the night.

"Mean what?—Ligulf, you should be with Kenard's lot." He jogged along the wall, to the other band of men.

The girl followed. "That the women will be safer left in there overnight," she persisted.

"Why should I not mean it?"

Myldreth shrugged. "I do not think you care two silver pieces about the women."

The Beorning peered in through the doorway. "Any sign of them?"

"No, sir. And not a sound, either."

"Carry on then—you are right," he said to Myldreth, "I do not care. But Lord Legolas—and his Lady—care very much, and it is my duty to deliver what my Elvenlord's son desires, even if it means locking horns with his best friend."

The girl nodded, thoughtfully. "I have never met anyone like you, Master Thorkell."

"No?" He stepped back from the castle wall, and surveyed the entire ruin, critically. "Tell me,"—he gestured towards the *tad-dail*, hidden within—"how did you resist them?"

The girl chuckled. "My stone ear."

"Your stone what?"

"It is what my father calls it—a stone *ear*. My sisters are all musical; they play the cittern, they sing, they dance. All *I* hear is noise. Mostly, a very annoying noise."

"So their enchantment had no effect on you."

Season of Mists

"None at all."

"I see. Still, it was bravely done."

"Thank you." Myldreth edged closer. "You know—Thorkell—when this is over, you and I..." She turned, suddenly, staring at the warriors crowding around the holes in the castle walls. "My gods," she gasped, "what are they doing?"

"Peeing," said the Beorning. "Sealing the doors with their human scent. Well, you never know. It might deter them."

"It might," said Myldreth. "Yes, that is clever, Master Thorkell. Very clever indeed."

...

"What are we looking for?" asked Legolas. He lifted the latch and pushed the door open.

Eowyn followed him into Heral's dwelling. The room was small, and dark, and—

"I have smelled that strange mustiness before," said Legolas.

Eowyn sniffed. "It is just the smell of a man's chambers, Lassui, when he is not too particular about cleanliness."

"I will open the windows."

He pushed the shutters apart, admitting a flood of evening sunlight, and the couple exchanged glances for, although Heral's home was reasonably tidy, the plates stacked in the sink were dirty, and the clothing piled upon the table was grubby, and the sheets on the unmade bed were soiled.

"He and Cyllien," said Legolas, "were a pair in some respects."

Eowyn crossed to the dresser. "I hoped that we might learn more about the wax figurines here," she said, pulling out one of the drawers. "I have asked Master Bawden to question the other craftsmen, to see if anyone knows how to make the things safe, but Heral was obviously a master of the lore."

"I wonder where he learned it." Legolas searched the night stand.

"Bawden says that it is handed down, from father to son." Eowyn opened a cupboard door. "Oh, Lassui, look! Beeswax and,"—she picked up an intricately carved wooden hairbrush—"I will wager that this is Cyllien's—and that *this* is her hair."

"And that," said Legolas, pointing to a fine bone comb, "is probably Haldir's."

Eowyn opened another cupboard. "Do you think these are love potions?"

Legolas selected a brown glass bottle, drew out its cork, and—"Careful, Lassui,"—sniffed its contents. He shook his head. "It smells like an anodyne." He handed it to Eowyn.

She sniffed deeply. "Perhaps he gave this to his victims, to keep them quiet," she said. "It would explain why there were no reports of rape—if the women were drugged, they might not have known what had happened."

"But Cyllien knew, *melmenya*," said Legolas, picking up a small vial. "He hounded her. No, I still think that he enjoyed scaring them and making them struggle—well, look at this." He showed her a monogram moulded into the glass. "This is Master Findecáno's mark."

Season of Mists

"Findecáno? But he would never dispense anything that was not—"

"Medicinal," said Legolas. "No. So Heral must have been sick, melmenya." He replaced the vial.

"If it was serious," said Eowyn, thinking aloud, "that might explain why he seemed to be growing more and more reckless."

"And," said Legolas, "why he suddenly felt the need for a charm to help arouse him."

...

Later, in the Banqueting Hall

The final feast of the Harvest Rite was well under way.

On the ceremonial threshing floor, a lovely elleth and a handsome elf gyrated to the sensuous strains of a flute, acting out in dance the fertility rite that Legolas and Eowyn would soon be performing to seal the colony's future. The honoured guests, seated around the large, ring-shaped table, were enjoying the spectacle, their spirits clearly rising in anticipation of the revels that would follow.

Smiling happily, Eowyn turned to Legolas—and was shocked to see him looking pale, and drawn. "Lassui! Whatever is wrong?"

The elf leaned towards her, taking hold of her hand. "You are so beautiful," he whispered, hoarsely, "so very, very desirable, and my loins are *aching* for you, but,"—swallowing hard, he drew her hand down into his groin, and pressed her fingers to his limp flesh—"I have a problem, melmenya."

Season of Mists

Chapter 10: Peace at last

Eowyn grasped Legolas' hand and, as their eyes met, her heart lurched at the expression on his face.

Her mind was racing: *Has Lassui grown to need the charm? Was I wrong to hide it? Or is this because of the medicine he sniffed in Heral's chamber?*

She felt his fingers, strong and sure, press hers, and some of her fear subsided.

Perhaps it is just the strain of the last few days...

She raised his hand to her lips, and kissed it. Then, leaning forward, across the table, she beckoned Lady Lessien.

...

Eryn Valen

Haldir brought his horse to a halt, and dismounted. Across the scorched remains of the village green, Berryn and another man—whom the elf vaguely recognised as one of the Beornings attached to King Thranduil's household—came running towards him.

"Thank the gods you are here, March Warden," cried the cartographer. "The tad-dail have been tracked to a disused fortification, about four miles to the north. Lord Gimli and Master Thorkell have them surrounded, but need reinforcements. We are to join them without delay."

...

"There is a potion, my Lord," whispered the Mistress of the Ceremony, "specially blended for this problem."

"And you have it *ready*?" asked Legolas.

"It is a part of my duties."

"Oh... I did not know."

Eowyn gave his hand a supportive squeeze.

"It is swift to act, my Lord," Lessien assured him, "and we can delay the Rite some moments, if necessary."

"Well," he sighed, "I cannot see that we have a choice. Please bring me the potion, *hiril nín*." He received her curtsey with a bow of his head, and watched her return to her place at the table. "What if it does not work, *melmenya*? My father is not here to take over."

"If it does not work, *Lassui*," said Eowyn, decisively, "I will slip away, and fetch the figurine."

"Oh, no..." He turned to face her. "You are so clever, and so sensible, my darling, but I do not want to taint the Harvest Rite with Heral's foul magic."

"Then, if the potion does not work," said Eowyn, kissing his hand again, "we will simply find some other way to honour the gods."

...

Gimli jogged back to the gatehouse.

Season of Mists

Thorkell bogsveigir, standing guard over the captured tad-dail and the two sleeping women, stepped aside to admit him. "Anything?"

"No." The dwarf sheathed his axe. "I have been right round the castle. There is no other way out that I can find, and the guards at the doors have seen and heard nothing, but..."

"Warriors' instinct," said Thorkell. "Yes. *Something* is happening—or is about to." He climbed up to one of the broken loopholes, and looked out across the clearing. "But what? And where?"

"*Look!*" hissed Gimli.

The man turned; the dwarf was pointing at the head man's hound, which had suddenly lifted its head, ears pricked.

"It seems," said the Beorning, "that our friend here agrees with us."

...

The banquet was finished, and the entertainment over, and the guests had begun to murmur expectantly.

Eowyn turned to Legolas; the elf shook his head.

"Could it be," she whispered, "that you are trying too hard?" She saw the despair in his eyes and apologised immediately; and, suddenly, she knew what she had to do. "We must trust in the Valar, my darling. Even if you cannot give them your seed tonight, we can still give them something very precious. Come with me, my love..."

She rose from the table, holding out her hands, and when the elf—after a moment's hesitation—took them, she drew him up and led him out onto the Threshing Floor.

The musicians, seated on the balcony above the Hall's main entrance, began playing a soft, repetitive melody; serving elves, stationed by the wall-sconces, started snuffing out the candles. The crowd fell silent, their eyes fixed upon the couple standing in the remaining pool of light.

"I love you, Lassui." Eowyn reached up and, taking his face in her hands, drew him close, and kissed him.

Around the Hall, surprised gasps and soft mutterings protested that this was a departure from the ancient practice of the Rite. But Eowyn felt Legolas respond to her kiss and, as it deepened, her confidence grew. Gently, she withdrew from his arms, and stepped back, and—smiling at his surprise—she reached out, grasped the ends of his embroidered sash, and pulled. The elven knot unravelled, and the robe fell open. No longer concerned by his lack of arousal, Eowyn pushed the fabric from his shoulders, and let the garment fall.

She heard the sighs of admiration that greeted her bare-chested elf (his muscular arms lightly tensed, his powerful loins clearly visible through his thin silk leggings), and she smiled. But her own attention had been caught by a wayward strand of pale hair, disturbed when she had removed his robe, and she carefully brushed it over his shoulder, letting its silky length run through her fingers.

Then her fingertips grazed his skin, and she heard his breath catch.

Her hands dropped to his lacings, and she pulled them loose, and lowered the sheer fabric over his hips and down his thighs. He was still not quite aroused but Eowyn, knowing his body so well, saw signs for hope, and—sure of her own skills—she looked about her and, seeing exactly what she needed, ran to the table, seized a flask of olive oil, and brought it back to him.

Season of Mists

"Lie down my darling."

The guests shifted in their seats, leaning forward to see their Lady gently push their Lord to the ground and straddle him, her mithril skirts gathered up around her hips.

Eowyn withdrew the stopper, and poured a little of the oil, scented with lemon and thyme, into her palm, rubbed her hands together and, leaning down, slid them up Legolas' arms and across his shoulders.

Gods, he was beautiful!

Slowly, her hands explored his muscle—the strong curves of his upper arms and the hard swell of his chest—then she leaned down, and kissed a patch of the finest, softest, most golden hair —

She felt him stir beneath her and, smiling, brought her hands down lower—massaging him in long, slow circles—lower, and lower, down to his stomach, pressing a little harder, lower and lower—

She felt him stir again, and shifted—still caressing his belly—and felt his hands push her skirts aside, and she came up on her knees, and reached down to guide him, and—yes, he was growing in her hand, rising up, hardening; yes, he was almost ready! And, suddenly, he grasped her hips, and pulled her down, and she was impaled upon him, and his size was almost unbearable, but she rode him, slowly at first, then faster, and wilder—taking him deeper as she leaned in to kiss him—and—

Oh, gods, she was *tired*!

But his hands were holding her, his strong arms were carrying her, and she raced on, and on, crying out with urgency, and need, and then with triumph, as she brought her elf to a sharp and sudden climax, and the world turned black as she followed him there.

...

She came to her senses lying upon her elf, surrounded by quiet applause, and the soft, joyful singing of the assembled company. Guests were rising from the table, and pairing up, and falling eagerly to coupling, their passions inflamed by the lovemaking they had just witnessed.

Tired but happy, Eowyn lifted her head, and smiled at Legolas.

"You did it, melmenya," he whispered, hoarsely. "You performed the Rite, my darling, and,"—he gathered her close, and kissed her mouth with lingering tenderness—"you cured me, Eowyn nín." He moved inside her, teasing the most delicious echoes of release from her core, and Eowyn's body shivered with pleasure.

...

"Well?"

Gimli led the dog back into the gatehouse. "*Sit*—they are somewhere in that knot of trees, to the south."

"So we are squeezed between them and the herd in the ruins—if, that is, any of the buggers are still inside the ruins."

"If they have us trapped, why are they waiting?"

The Beorning shrugged. "It is what they did at Eryn Valen. Then they sent out one or two

Season of Mists

warriors with sling shots and burning missiles, and tried to smoke us out.”

Gimli stroked his beard. “What about throwing caution to the winds?”

...

Haldir held up his hand; his men froze.

From somewhere up ahead, the sounds of battle—the clash of steel, the thud of arrows, wails of pain, and the roar of dwarven battle cries—echoed faintly through the Forest.

“We are too late,” said a quiet voice.

“It is never too late to aid *someone*, Master Berryn.”

Haldir gave the signal, and his men surged forward, the Beorning messenger leading the charge with blasts of his hunting horn.

...

Dropping a tad-dal with his elven knives, Thorkell bogsveigir spun them back into line, and moved on.

Behind him, Gimli whirled past, felling creatures to right and left.

Thorkell sliced neatly through another throat, and turned to tackle a third tad-dal, coming at him from behind. It was dark in the Forest, and the Beorning suspected that the creatures could see better than men, but they were timid at heart, with no real taste for close combat.

He finished off another.

Some were fleeing and, once they had got a few yards behind them, there was nothing he could do to stop them. But his men were fighting well, and taking few casualties. If no more came it would soon be over and, when everything had stopped moving—he ducked, turned, and stabbed—they would pick up the bits, carry them out into the open, and gauge the damage—

Tat-ta-raaaaaa! Tat-ta-raaaaaa!

That’s a Beorning horn, thought Thorkell. Otkel harthfari, with reinforcements!

From the corner of his eye he saw more warriors joining the fight, and Gimli charging another of the creatures, and something—he was not sure what—made him turn, and look, and—

“NO!” he bellowed. “NOT THAT ONE!”

The dwarf’s blow fell short.

Thorkell barged in, seized the tad-dal by its scrawny neck, and pushed it into a shaft of moonlight.

“By Aulë!”

Metal leaves, woven into the creature’s coarse, goatly hair, glinted in the pale light—the thing was wearing some sort of *crown*.

“We want *this* bastard alive.”

...

Season of Mists

Morning

At daybreak, Legolas awoke to find that Waning had arrived early, in the form of a fine, soft drizzle.

He took Eowyn by the hand and led her outside and, together, they crossed the clearing—she in her pale mithril gown, he naked as the day he was born—and they climbed up the main staircase, pausing now and then to look out across the city, enjoying the cool, refreshing rain, and marvelling at the beauty of all they were building together.

They bathed, and had a light breakfast in the big, bay window of their sitting room. Then Legolas left for his brief daily meeting with Captain Golradir, and Eowyn retired to the study, to collate her notes.

...

"And now," said Thorkell bogsveigir, looking up at the sky, "it *pisses* down."

"Does it matter?" Haldir, leading the tad-dal king on a rope, approached the castle ruins.

"You have not been inside," said the Beorning. "Believe me, more wet will not help."

Cautiously, they entered the postern—Gimli and the dog, Thorkell, Haldir and the tad-dal, and eight hand-picked men, elves and dwarves, all heavily armed.

"Last night, they were here," said Gimli. "Lying on that filthy straw." He turned to Haldir. "Can you hear anything?"

"No. But the stone is thick. If they are deep inside..."

The dwarf put his ear to the inner wall. "Nothing." He brought the dog back to the straw beds and let it snuffle about in the mess. Then he led it around the chamber, urging it to explore the various gaps in the walls.

Suddenly, its head came up, and it whined, as though asking for permission to follow the scent.

"Through there," said the Beorning, "is where we found Myldreth."

They climbed into the next chamber and, following the dog, crossed the filthy floor and passed through an open doorway. Three chambers later, the hound stopped at flight of muddy steps.

"Down *there*?" asked Gimli.

The animal whimpered.

"Wonderful," said Thorkell. "Well, we will need some light."

...

Hearing a tap upon the study door, Eowyn looked up from her notebook. "Come in."

"Master Bawden to see you, my Lady," said Galathil.

"Good—please send him in." Eowyn greeted the craftsman-builder with a smile. "Good morning, Master Bawden. I have your hammer and chisel, here, safe..." She picked up the leather tool bag, adding, softly, "Do you have any news for me?"

"Thank you, my Lady. Yes, I know how to break the charm. But I had to swear—um—that I

Season of Mists

would share the secret with no one but Lord Legolas himself."

"I do not understand."

"The knowledge, as I explained before, my Lady, is traditionally passed down from father to son. It is not,"—he hesitated again —"it has *never* been told to a woman, my Lady."

"I see." A part of Eowyn was annoyed. But she was grateful, and had far too much respect for the craftsman-builder to consider trying to persuade him to break his word. "I will send him to you," she said, crossing to the door. Then, turning back, she added, "Master Bawden, is it common for the men to use this magic to seduce women?"

"Oh no, my Lady. No. Its proper use is to encourage the friendly spirits to bestow good fortune upon a building and those who dwell in it. Every craftsman I spoke to was appalled that Heral had used it for his own—um—satisfaction."

"Thank goodness. Well—please make yourself comfortable, Master Bawden. Legolas will not keep you long."

...

Gimli and the dog went down the stairs first, followed by two men carrying improvised torches.

Haldir pushed the tad-dal king to the top step. "Go on..." The creature descended.

Thorkell bogsveigir gestured to the remaining warriors, and they climbed down, one at a time; the Beorning, carrying another torch, brought up the rear.

The narrow space reeked of piss and worse. Thorkell grasped the kerchief at his throat and pulled it up, over his nose and mouth.

...

Rain had given way to pale sunshine.

Eowyn was waiting in the garden; Legolas came running up the stairs.

"Do you know what to do, Lassui?"

Legolas smiled. "Yes. It is quite straightforward."

"But is it *safe*?"

"Master Bawden assures me that it is, melmenya." He took her in his arms, and kissed her, apologetically. "Poor Eowyn nín," he said. "I cannot tell you what must be done, for I have given my word, but Master Bawden has agreed that you might help me—in fact, I think I will *need* your help."

...

"This tunnel is well-used," said Haldir, quietly, "but the air is not moving. I do not think that this is a way out. I think that they are still down here."

...

"There,"—Eowyn held out her jewel box—"it is safely inside. But I am afraid we will need the wall repaired—I did not do it so well the second time. How do you feel, Lassui?"

"Fine." The elf shrugged.

Season of Mists

"Then what do we do next?"

"Next, we need a dish, and some sunlight."

"Sunlight?" Eowyn frowned. "You mean, to *melt* it?"

Legolas gave her a little half-nod.

"Are you sure, Lassui? Once it has gone we cannot re-make it. You will have to live with—well—whatever you are left with."

Chuckling, the elf wrapped his arm around her waist. "My wonderful, practical Shieldmaiden! Sunlight, my darling, is older and more potent than any human magic. Besides," he added, very softly, "what happened in the Banqueting Hall, when I finally—you know... It was not because of the charm, and it was not because of Lady Lessien's potion. It was because of you, *melmenya*—because of your smile, your touch, your fragrance... In the end, I did not need any help but yours."

"Well," said Eowyn, blushing happily. "I hope you are right."

...

The tad-dal king let out a sudden screech, and sticks, and stones, and handfuls of filth suddenly rained down upon the warriors at the front of the column.

One of the men drew his sword, and rushed forwards.

"No," shouted Gimli, holding back the excited dog, "no, no! It is the women! Just the women!"

But the warrior had already struck.

Too late, he realised his mistake and, for a long moment, simply stared at the woman's lifeless body. Then he bent down, and scooped her screaming infant into his arms.

The others, meanwhile, had flowed past him and, shielding their faces with their hands, they backed the spitting, clawing captives against the walls, and gradually overwhelmed them.

...

Legolas and Eowyn climbed up to the 'sea flet'—the tiny platform, high above the trees, that the elf had built (once upon a time) so that he might gaze upon the sea, far to the south west—for there the late autumn sun fell in its full strength, unhindered by leafy branches.

Legolas set a silver dish upon one of the benches; Eowyn placed her jewel box beside it. "I do not know if I dare do it."

"Come here." Legolas put his arm around her shoulders. "I *know* that all I will ever need is you, *melmenya*," he murmured, kissing her temple. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course I trust you, Lassui."

"Then do it, my darling. Do it now." He released her, and—still a little reluctantly—she knelt down to the bench and, very carefully, took the wrapped figurine out of the box. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then." She opened the cloth. The wax figure lay upon its back, its huge phallus rearing up in the sunlight.

Season of Mists

"Oh," said the elf. "Um..."

"Legolas?" She looked up at him, anxiously. "What is it?"

"It..." His own voice sounded strange. "It is just—very *warm*, *melmenya*."

"I am going to pick it up."

He nodded, gritting his teeth.

Carefully avoiding its erection, Eowyn grasped the figure by its legs, and lifted it into the silver dish. "There."

Legolas sighed.

"Lassui?"

"It—it is just,"—he was breathing heavily now—"the sun is so hot, *melmenya*..." His groin was burning, his testicles were aflame.

And Eowyn was kneeling before him.

He reached for her—her name spilling from his lips—and drew her close. She pressed her cheek against him, and his penis responded, hard and eager!

Eowyn reached up, and opened his leggings, and wrapped her fingers around his shaft, and took the rest of him in her mouth—

"Ah!" Legolas cried out, in surprise and gratitude, for her mouth felt cool; and, hands tangled in her hair, he urged her on, "Yes... Oh, yes, yes! Oh! oh! Oh no! No! Wait! Wait! I want—I want—to come inside you—*melmenya*!"

He fell to his knees; and Eowyn—smiling up at him—lay back on the sun-drenched flet, and stretched out her arms.

And the last shred of his control burned up in the sun's brightness, and he threw himself upon her, devouring her mouth, her neck, and her bosom, tearing away her skirts and exposing her pale, flawless flesh to his need; and she opened her legs for him, and—*Oh sweet Eru!*—he was between them, driving himself deep into her wetness, just in time.

...

"Ligulf, Kenard, Otkel harthfari," barked Thorkell bogsveigir, seizing one of the trussed up women and shoving her at his men, "take them back to the gatehouse."

He waited just long enough to make sure that everything was under control, then he followed Haldir, Gimli, and the rest, deeper underground.

...

"Shieldmaiden?"

"Mmm?"

"We cannot stay here forever."

He raised himself up on his elbow, and smiled down at her, his expression both loving and mischievous.

Season of Mists

"You," she said, "are definitely cured."

His smile broke into a grin; and he leapt to his feet, and held out his hands, and helped her up with effortless strength.

Eowyn yawned. "The figurine?"

He looked into the dish. "Completely melted."

"Already?" She came up beside him. "I thought that it would take days. I was afraid that we would have to sit here with it, to fend off the birds, and the squirrels."

"The sun's magic is swift, melmenya."

"Do you feel anything?" She trailed her fingertips over the formless wax.

"No."

"We must do the same to Cyllien's, Lassui. And to Haldir's. As soon as we can."

She smoothed her skirts over her hips, straightened and re-laced her bodice, and then ran her fingers through her tousled hair. "How do I look?"

Legolas smiled. "Beautiful. And *reasonably* respectable."

"It will have to do. I shall bathe again as soon as we get home."

They took one brief look at the sea, glittering in the distance, then they descended—Legolas carrying the bowl of wax—following the spiralling stairs, down through the deep red foliage, until they reached the main walkway.

"My Lord!" An elleth rushed forward to meet them.

"Lady Tóriel." Legolas greeted her formally.

"I have been waiting here for you," she said, hurriedly returning his greeting, "for Camthalion told me that he had seen you go aloft—and I must speak with you, my Lord, urgently. I have just heard the most vicious rumour!"

...

The elleth refused to speak to them on the main walkway, fearing that she might be overheard, so Legolas and Eowyn took her up to their own garden.

"Please sit down, Lady Tóriel," said Legolas.

Flushed and breathless, she sat, pressing a hand to her bosom, as though in pain.

"Would you like a drink, Lady Tóriel?" asked Eowyn, gently. "Some brandy, perhaps?"

"No," said the elleth. "It is just... A rumour is circulating, my Lord, that I have—*dallied*—with your father's bodyguard, the man, Thorkell bogsveigir."

Legolas glanced at Eowyn. "I see."

"And it is not true! I am a daughter of Dúnedhil, my Lord. My parents raised me in the old ways, instilled in me the strictest standards. For me, an act of bodily union is marriage undissoluable, and I would never join myself with a mere mortal!" She realised, just a moment too late, what a terrible thing she had said, and turned to Eowyn.

Season of Mists

"I understand your position, Lady Tóriel," said the woman, quietly.

"My Lady,"—her voice faltered—"I thank you. But if this man is saying—"

"He is not," said Eowyn. "Others must have seen you leave the banquet together, and leaped to that conclusion."

"Then what am I to do? My reputation is ruined!"

"No, no," said Legolas. "In my experience, Lady Tóriel, the best way to quash a rumour is to ignore it."

"Do *nothing*?"

"We humans, Lady Tóriel," said Eowyn, helpfully, "have a saying, 'the Lady doth protest too much,' meaning that the more a person denies something, the more others think it true."

"But..." The elleth shook her head. "That is ridiculous! And most unfair."

"My Lady," said Eowyn, "there *is* something you can do—something that will help Lord Legolas and me to put things right, for it has a bearing upon the death of one of the craftsman-builders—you may have heard about him."

The elleth shook her head.

"Well, that is not important now. But: we know that Thorkell bogsveigir left the Banqueting Hall with you that night. Did he accompany you all the way home?"

"He insisted."

"And did you invite him inside?"

"I have already said not!"

"You have said that you were not—*intimate*—with him," said Eowyn, carefully. "But that does not mean you did not spend time with him—offer him a drink, perhaps, or talk with him for a while."

"I did not!"

"So he left you at your door?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Lady Tóriel," said Legolas. "You have been most helpful." He exchanged a glance with Eowyn. "We will leave you now, but please do stay here for as long as you wish. I will have some refreshments brought up to you." He bowed his head. "No i Melain na le, hiril nín. And remember—this rumour will soon vanish, like mist in the sun."

Eowyn took his arm, and they turned to leave but, as they reached the staircase, the elleth suddenly called after them: "My Lord! Camthalion asked me to give you a message."

...

They were shown into Cyllien's bedchamber, where the elleth was waiting for them, sitting up in bed, looking pale and beautiful in one of Arinna's frothy night gowns.

Eowyn took the bedside chair; Legolas stood behind her. "We came as soon as we received your message," he said.

Season of Mists

"Thank you."

"What happened that night, Cyllien?"

The elleth frowned. "I remember your father taking me home," she said, "and I remember his giving me the knife; I remember that it was early evening—it was still light when he left—and I remember, as I closed the door, how the sun glinted on his hair.."

Legolas cleared his throat.

"But I still do not remember how I came to be on the building site. The only thing I do know, is that when I woke up, it was dark, and Heral was heavy, holding me down. And his thighs—his thighs were forcing my legs apart—it hurt—and his—his *thing*..." She broke down, sobbing.

Eowyn leaned forward, and touched her hand. Cyllien flinched. Then, "I am sorry," she whispered. "I am just not used to having friends."

Eowyn gave her hand a brief, reassuring squeeze, then sat back in her chair.

"Cyllien, we have to ask," said Legolas. "Did Heral rape you?"

"No." She wiped the tears from her cheeks. "At least, not then. But maybe earlier—maybe when I can't remember—I do not know."

"Did you have any injuries," asked Eowyn, gently, "down there?"

"I am not sure. I was already bruised, from earlier."

"When we talked before," said Legolas, "you said that, when you woke up, Heral was dead. But now you are saying that he was still alive."

"Because I have remembered more."

"Tell us everything you have remembered, Cyllien," said Eowyn.

The elleth ran a hand through her hair. "He was holding me down," she said, "and shouting—horrible things—saying that I—that I was a prick teaser, and that it was no wonder that Haldir couldn't do me. Then—then one of the trees—I swear it—came to life, and grabbed him—I swear on Erkenbaud's grave, Eowyn—it had hands, and eyes, and it grabbed him, and pulled him away."

She reached over to the night stand and, hands shaking, picked up her pipe, though she made no attempt to light it. "Heral must have wrenched himself free, because he came at me again, and he got his hands round my throat. But I had pulled out Thoron's knife..."

"And I stabbed him."

There was a moment of deafening silence.

Then Eowyn said, "What did the green man do?"

"Green man?"

"I have seen him, too, Cyllien."

"You mean the tree? I—I don't know. I did not see it again. It disappeared."

"Back into the foliage," said Eowyn. "He never meant to be party to a killing."

Season of Mists

"I did not mean to kill Heral," cried Cyllien. "I just wanted to stop him, Eowyn. Just to stop him!"

...

"They are up ahead," murmured Haldir, and the dog whimpered in agreement. "I cannot tell how many."

Gimli drew his axe.

"No," said Thorkell bogsveigir. "Give me the prisoner."

"Why?"

"Because the trouble with elves—and dwarves," said the Beorning, pulling out one of his knives, "is that neither of you can think dirty." He grasped the bound (and now gagged) tad-dal king by its spangled hair and set his blade to its throat. "Just make sure that we are well-lit."

And, forcing the creature forwards, one step at a time, he advanced towards the rest of the creatures, shouting, "Come on! Come out and give yourselves up! Surrender, or I'll *kill* him!"

...

Arinna poured out a glass of apple brandy. "Here," she said, handing it to Cyllien, "get this down you."

The elleth took a large gulp, and coughed, covering her mouth with an elegant hand.

"Do you want me to send them away?"

"No..." Cyllien took another gulp of brandy. "I want it over with."

Arinna patted her arm. "Shout if you need me." She left the room, adding, to Legolas and Eowyn who were waiting just outside, "Go easy on her." Legolas bowed his head, gravely.

Eowyn returned to her seat. "Are you feeling any better?"

The elleth nodded.

"Well enough to tell us what happened next?" asked Legolas.

"I cut his ears off," said Cyllien.

"Why?"

"Because he was dead."

Eowyn looked up at Legolas. "We do not understand," he said. "What do you mean?"

"I *mean* that he bullied me," said the elleth. "He bullied me, and bullied me, and made me think that he was so much better than me—so much bigger and stronger—and that I couldn't fight back. And yet there he was, dead! Just like anyone else! He'd made me so afraid of him, and he was just—*dead!*"

"So you punished him for lying to you," said Legolas. He sighed. "And my father saw you, and sent his bodyguard to clean up after you."

"Thoron?" Cyllien frowned. "No, it was Thorkell. Thorkell told me to go to Thoron; Thorkell said he would help me." She looked up at Legolas, suddenly very frightened. "What is going to

Season of Mists

happen to me?"

"Oh, Cyllien!" The elf drew up a chair, and sat down. "If you had not mutilated his body, there would be no question that you acted in self defence..." He looked at Eowyn. She seemed scarcely less frightened than Cyllien, and he reached out and touched her arm. "But, even so, you have convinced *me*." He heard Eowyn's sigh of relief. "When you are fully recovered, you will be asked to pay for taking a life by serving the colony. The length of your service, and the exact nature of the tasks you will perform, will be decided by the Inner Council."

"Are you saying that I will be free?"

"You will not be imprisoned."

"Oh,"—Cyllien burst into tears—"thank you, thank you," she sobbed. "You will not regret it. I promise you."

...

"So," said Eowyn, as she and Legolas walked back to their chambers, "it seems that Thorkell was not acting on your father's orders."

"Oh, I suspect, *melmenya*, that Master Bowsweyer had standing orders to protect Cyllien whenever the need arose. And, for all his cynicism, I know he takes his duties seriously, and is genuinely loyal to my father—and, Eru knows, he would wade through the fires of Mount Doom for *you*. The problem is that he is always so sure he knows best."

"So he will not be punished for trying to destroy the evidence?"

Legolas wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I have heard of a certain fish, *melmenya*, that swims along the sea bed,"—he mimed its motion with his other hand—"eating the carrion that falls down from above. It is a poor sort of creature, but it does keep the waters clean."

"You sound just like your father's son!" Eowyn shook her head. "Thorkell would not be flattered by that comparison."

"You think not? I think he would find it quite amusing."

They had reached their chambers, and Eowyn glanced up the stairs to the garden. "Do you think that Lady Tóriel could still be hiding up there?"

Legolas laughed. "Perhaps you should go and find out, *melmenya*—and escort her home if need be. I want to speak to my father, and I think that things will go better if I do it alone."

"Hmm," said Eowyn. "I am not sure which is the harder task, *Lassui*, but—if you insist—I shall go and see if the daughter of Dúnedhil's reputation can stand being seen in public with a mere woman. Do not be too long, my darling. We are dining in our own chambers tonight—alone."

Legolas kissed her cheek. "Do you know, *melmenya*, I feel... Free. Yes, *free*! Better than I have felt in a long while."

...

Thorkell bogsveigir shoved the tad-dal king into the gatehouse.

It had not taken long to round up the others, once they had surrendered, and the makeshift prison was filled with the creatures, bound and gagged with every piece of cord, leather, and stout fabric the warriors had managed to lay their hands on.

Season of Mists

"Where are the women?"

"Over there," said Berryn, pointing to a series of small shelters, built from branches and blankets, along the foot of the castle wall. "It is cleaner out here than inside. The healer and Myldreth are washing them, and some are showing signs of coming back to their senses—though, if poor Annis is anything to go by, when that happens, we are in for a lot of weeping and wailing."

"Eighty-four heads, at the third count," said Gimli, jogging up to them, "though we do not have all of them."

"I do not think we need all of them when we have their king," said Thorkell. "I wasn't sure, down there, how the young bucks would react—whether they would be happy to see him die. But it seems they respect him."

"And if Legolas can make peace with him," agreed Haldir, "they may just keep it."

"Legolas, or the Elvenking."

"Well," said Gimli, "I cannot see any sense in trying to drag them all the way back to Eryn Carantaur. I say we dig in here, and send a messenger to fetch Legolas and his father."

"I will go," said Haldir.

...

"I have been expecting you," said Thranduil. "Was the Rite concluded successfully?" He crossed to the sideboard and poured out two large glasses of elderberry spirits.

"I noticed that *you* were not there, Ada," said Legolas, taking a seat.

"No." Thranduil handed him a drink. "It did not seem appropriate, with Cyllien indisposed."

"She has confessed, Ada." Legolas took a sip of spirits. Under the full force of his father's scrutiny, he found himself hesitating. "The mutilation aside," he said, at last, "I am convinced that she acted in self defence. So she will not be punished, though she will be asked to make amends by serving the colony—"

"That is as I expected. But you are working up to something else."

Legolas set down his glass, rose from the couch and, turning his back on his father, walked over to the broad, curving window. Beneath him, the unfinished guest apartment lay empty. Only Master Bawden was at work, quietly polishing a carved window frame.

Legolas smiled. *That is a good man. He understands what matters in life.*

"You told me that you did not love her, Ada," he said, "but we both know that you—"

"Lied?"

He turned to face his father. "Told me what I wanted to hear."

"And are you going to warn me to stay away from her, Lassui?"

"No! Of course not! Because I want you to be happy, Ada." Legolas smiled, sadly. "I just wish that you could have chosen someone less—damaged."

"But these are damaged times, Lassui," said Thranduil, gently. "And you and I have elected to stay here, in Middle-earth, to help make them better. I have asked you before: is Cyllien any

Season of Mists

less deserving of our care than the Forests of South Ithilien?"

Legolas said nothing.

"Lasdithen?"

"I do not always give you credit for such wisdom," Legolas admitted.

"Do you trust me to do what is right?"

Legolas could not meet his father's gaze.

"Of course not," said the Elvenking, and he sounded more amused than angry. "That is a father's lot in life. But, in this case, Lassui, I am asking you to trust me." He joined his son at the window and, drawing him into his arms, gave him a fatherly hug. "Now go back to Eowyn, ion nín. I know what she did for you last night—yes, I know all about it. Go on. Go and show her how much you appreciate her."

...

Less than half an hour into his journey, Haldir slowed his horse and, leaning over its neck, struggled to control his breathing.

An image of Eowyn, her lovely face frowning, had suddenly formed in his mind, and with it had come the most disturbing sensations—of her strong fingers curling around his penis, and her warm hand engulfing his testicles.

"Oh, Valar," he moaned, clenching his fists, "please, no. *No!*" Somehow, he managed to deny himself the pleasure of release.

Then, just as abruptly as they had come, the feelings vanished, leaving behind not the discomfort he had expected, but an unnatural sense of well-being, as though he were now under Eowyn's personal protection.

The elf waited for his heart to stop pounding. Then he urged his horse forward, and was soon galloping west again.

...

Eowyn hurried along the walkway.

She had escorted Lady Tóriel home, doggedly ignoring the elleth's endless complaints; but soon as Tóriel had closed the door on her, she had been struck by a terrible thought, and had rushed to Heral's chambers.

Who knows what charms that man might have created and then discarded, she thought, without properly lifting the magic? Somewhere amongst those lumps and flakes and rolls of wax must be the remains of the phallus he tore from his figure of Haldir. Who knows if it still has power?

Eowyn blushed.

She had not looked too closely at the fragments, simply gathered them up and wrapped them in her handkerchief. But when she and Legolas came to melt the other figurines, she would add the extra wax to the dish, and Haldir would be safe.

She turned onto the main walkway.

Up ahead, a long line of stretcher bearers was bringing casualties to the Healing Rooms.

Season of Mists

Eowyn broke into a run, crying, "Whatever has happened?"

"Hello, Eowyn!" Hentmirë—her singed hair standing on end, her face black with soot, her right arm strapped up across her chest—stepped out from behind Master Dínendal, and waved a plump hand, cheerily. "The village was attacked!"

...

Two days later

Having delivered his message, Haldir was immediately sent back to the tad-dail stronghold with orders—initially resisted by both Gimli and Thorkell bogsveigir—to release the creatures, and allow them to re-enter the ruins, where they were to be kept under a respectful house arrest.

The same afternoon, an army of functionaries, under Lord Fingolfin's personal supervision, set out from Eryn Carantaur with tents and other necessities, which they quickly assembled beside the tad-dail castle. By the time the Elvenking and his son arrived, in state, on the evening of the first day, the clearing had been thoroughly cleaned, and transformed into a silk-and-canvas city.

The following morning, the tad-dal king, his eldest son, and two of his followers, met with King Thranduil, Legolas, and Eowyn—who had insisted on accompanying her beloved, despite Legolas' fears for her safety. "I know what they are, now, Lassui, and how they ensnare their victims," she had said. "I shall not be tricked by them again."

Surmounting the language difficulties with the help of Lord Fingolfin, and with Berryn's maps to guide them, the parties had gradually come to an agreement: the defeated tad-dail would leave Eryn Valen, and re-settle in the forests to the south-east of the Doro Lanthron hills, where the River Poros, meandering down from the Mountains of Mordor, would provide them with a homeland very similar to the banks of the Heledir.

Only one problem remained—the tad-dal King insisted on keeping the women and babies. They were, he explained, using bleats and gestures, his wives and children.

In the end, it was Eowyn who suggested that the captives should be allowed to choose for themselves.

To everyone's astonishment, of the eight women (now washed, and dressed in elven gowns), seven wanted to stay with the creatures. "Maybe, as you say, it isn't 'real,'" said one, when Eowyn asked her why, "and maybe they *will* throw me out when I'm old and wrinkled but, as long as it lasts, it's the best I'm going to get. Because they aren't half *men*, my Lady,"—she winked—"so they never miss, if you know what I mean. And there's none of that rolling over and snoring afterwards—they either do you again, or one of the others does."

Annis, however, had chosen to leave—though had been too afraid to go home until Gimli had gallantly volunteered to see her and her sister safely back, and to deal with any qualms her parents might have in taking her in.

"But I cannot help feeling," said Legolas to his father, as they rode back to Eryn Carantaur, "that we have simply passed on the problem to others. We have sacrificed the women on the banks of the Poros to keep our own folk safe."

"And that," said Thranduil, "is what it means to be a ruler. You begin—as one always must—by aiming for the common good. But what choices did you have today? You could have drawn your knives and killed every last one of them, but the tad-dail, though the losers in this skirmish, have as much right to live as you do and must follow their natures. Should you, then,

Season of Mists

allow them stay in Eryn Carantaur, and to take your women whenever they desire? Clearly not. All you can do, Lassui, is find a compromise. And then everything becomes a matter of priorities: if you put the welfare of your own people first, ion nín, everything else will follow."

"I still think," said Legolas, "that there should have been a better way."

"Well, when you find it, Lassui, be sure to tell me what it is."

...

The next day

"In here, your Majesty," said Arinna, showing King Thranduil into Cyllien's bedchamber.

"And,"—she curtsied—"if I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to send your man to fetch me."

The Elvenking placed his hand upon his heart and bowed his head. "Thank you, Mistress." He waited until he was sure that the woman was out of earshot, dismissed Thorkell bogsveigir with a jerk of the head, then turned back to Cyllien. "I hear that you told my son the truth."

"I did, Thoron."

"Good." He sat down on the edge of the bed and took up her hand, gently stroking it with his thumb. "I am glad."

"Is this the end?" she asked.

"For now, melethril nín." He lifted her hand to his lips. "Yes, we must part now. But, you know, there will be another time. We have until the End of Days, hiril nín."

...

Later

"But why the market?" asked Eowyn.

"Do you not remember?"

"No..."

"Then it will be a surprise, melmenya."

They turned a corner, and found themselves upon a busy flet, crammed with stalls selling foodstuffs from all over Middle-earth, some serving bowls of soup, and platters of bread and cheese with pickles, and tankards of hot punch.

A hoarde of children—led by a tiny dwarf—surged towards them.

"Do you remember now, melmenya? My promise to Master Fili?"

"Oh, yes!" Eowyn held out her hands, and several of the boys took hold of them. "Goodness," she said, "there are so many of you!"

"Lord Legolas said I could bring *all* of my friends, my Lady," said the little dwarf.

"Of course I did," said Legolas, laughing. "Gwanur Eowyn, will you take Master Fili and *all* of his friends over to the tables, and get them seated, whilst I order some apple pie and—I think—some iced cordial to go with it?"

Season of Mists

Eowyn thanked him with a radiant smile.

...

For a few moments, Legolas lingered, watching Eowyn, amidst gales of laughter, lift each child onto his chair. And, just as he was about to turn away, a slight movement caught his eye, and he looked more closely at the tree behind her, and smiled.

The green man was still watching over his beloved.

Legolas placed his hand upon his heart and, though the ancient creature had already merged back into the foliage, the elf bowed his head, in a greeting of respect and gratitude.

THE END