



Author: Ningloreth

Title: **Shadowland**

Story Number: 8

Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: After an accident in the forest, Eowyn struggles home. Why is Legolas angry?

Author's note: A crossover!

Special note: I have deliberately used two different fonts in this story. I hope, as you read, that it will become clear why.

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, and created by RA Salvatore. No offence is intended and no profit is being made by borrowing them for use in this story.

Elvish

Eryn Laeg ... 'Fresh-green Wood'

Cuinon ... 'I live!'

Maer aur, Lessien Curufiniell ... 'Good day, Lessien, daughter of Curufin'

Baradorn ... 'Tree tower'

Faer Vara ... 'Fiery spirit'

Tithen Dúlinn ... 'Little nightingale'

No galu govad gen ... 'May blessings go with (each of) you'. From Thorsten Renk's Pedin Edhellen

Mae govannen, Thranduil Oropherion. Hentmirë i eneth nín. Aphado nín, hîr nín ... 'Well met, Thranduil, son of Oropher. My name is Hentmirë. (Please) follow me, my lord'

Aelvorn ... 'Black Lake'

Divor ... Not telling you!

Edhel daur ... 'huge elf'.

Im hervess chin, no hervenn nín. An-uir ... 'I am your wife, be my husband. Forever'.

Gwedhithon na, Legolas Thranduilion; le annon veleth nín ... 'I will bind to thee, Legolas son of Thranduil; I give you my love'.

Heniach nín? ... 'Do you understand me?'

Henion ... 'I understand.'

Man eneth lín? ... 'What is your name?'

Eowyn i eneth nín ... 'My name is Eowyn.'

Trenaro enni i vent o thelien hen ... 'Explain to me the point of this game.'

Nadithen ... 'Little thing.'

Ithildin nín ... 'My moonsparkle.' Ithildin is the magical metal that was used for the inscription on the West Gate of Moria.

Nadithen vaurui ... 'Needy little thing'. I hope! At least, Eowyn seems to understand him.

Suilad, gwador nín ... 'Greetings, my (sworn) brother'.

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

Telo, medo a sogo uin mereth ... 'Come, eat and drink of the feast'.

Maer aduial, híril nín ... 'Good evening, my lady'.

Avo 'osto, mellon nín ... 'Do not fear, my friend'.

Tolo ... 'Come'.

Noro! ... 'Run!'

Shadowland

No i Melain na le ... 'May the Valar be with you'.
Sílo Anor bo men lín ... 'May the sun shine on your road'.
Muindor nín ... 'my brother'.
Ortheritham hain ... We will defeat them.
Na-den pedim ad ... Until we speak again.
Criss ... cleft, cut. (Haldir is using the c-word ;-)

Fortifications

I had a lot of fun reading up about American Civil War fortifications!

A **barricade** is 'an obstruction positioned to block passage through a street, trail, or doorway. Barricades could be formed using whatever heavy materials were close at hand such as tipped over wagons, heavy casks, and sandbags'. Technically, a **redoubt** is an enclosed detached fortification, but colloquially the word is used to refer to any line of defence that's really successful, and that's how Captain Alfgar's using it. An **enceinte** is the outermost continuous line of fortification—in this case, a short wall across the mouth of the gorge. A **ditch** runs along the outside of a parapet and is intended for defence; a **trench** runs along the inside and its main function is to provide building materials, but it also serves as a base for offence. The disadvantage of a ditch is that, if the enemy can get inside it, he can take a rest—make a cup of tea—while he prepares for the next stage of the attack, and not only can you not see him over your parapet, you can't shoot him, either (though if you've had the foresight to collect them up beforehand, you can always drop rocks on him). **Obstacles** at the bottom of a ditch might include felled trees, a row of stakes, or nasty spiky things called cheveaux-de-frise.

Previously

Eleven months ago

By year 5 of the Fourth Age, Eryn Carantaur was thriving, and Legolas had decided that it was time to hold the colony's first Harvest Rite. His father, King Thranduil, anxious that his son should perform it successfully, sent his own Mistress of the Ceremony to prepare him. For three months the terrifying elleth lectured Legolas on the mysteries of the Rite, insisting that he remain 'pure in body and spirit' during his preparation...

...

"The Rite is a sacrifice to Yavanna, Lady of the Harvest," Arwen explained to Eowyn. "It takes place on the ceremonial threshing floor. When it is time, Legolas must choose a lady from the company and lead her onto the floor. Then the Mistress of the Ceremony,"—she pointed to the fierce-looking elleth sitting beside Legolas—"will join them, as if in marriage. And Legolas must consummate the marriage by making love to her."

"He takes her to his chambers?" asked Eowyn, thinking how painful it would be to sit waiting in the Banqueting Hall, knowing that Legolas and his lady were making love elsewhere, and then to see them return, the elleth flushed with pleasure—

"Oh no, sweeting," said Elrohir, "he *takes* her here."

Eowyn's blood ran cold. "And we must watch?"

"We must play our part," said Arwen. "The guests find themselves excited by the Rite. It has been known for them to spend the whole night making love, some of them giving pleasure to many partners. It is a beautiful festival."

...

A group of excited ellith, carefully selected by the colony's Chief Counsellor, were seated with their families at the far side of the ring-shaped table. When the time came, the Valar would help Legolas make his choice; he tried to remember the girls' names.

There was Idril, the daughter of Tathar, a highly respected sword smith. There was Nerwen, the daughter of Findecáno, one of the colony's healers. Then there was Angaráto's daughter, Alatóriël—Valar, she was a handful! The number of times he had tactfully had to repel her clumsy advances! And tonight she looked ridiculous, her bodice cut too low and her translucent skirts revealing her thighs...

Legolas sighed. The others, he simply could not remember and, although he supposed they were all nice enough, and could be considered attractive, they were not to *his* taste.

Not like her, he thought. *Not one of them can hold a candle to her.*

...

"My lord, it is time," said the Mistress of the Ceremony, placing a goblet in Legolas' hand.

The lord of Eryn Carantaur took a deep breath, lifted the goblet to his lips, drained it, and waited expectantly.

Nothing happened.

He looked slowly around the assembled company, examining each female face in turn, but

nothing was different; none of the eligible ellith had changed in any way.

Something is wrong, he thought. The Valar will not bless our Harvest Rite. By lusting after Eowyn when I should have been thinking chaste thoughts, I have doomed the entire colony to bad harvests...

But then he saw—out of the corner of his eye—a faint silvery glow surrounding one of his guests. And, as he turned to watch, the glow grew into an aura, shimmering and sparkling and completely surrounding her; and *she*, suddenly becoming aware of his attention, dropped her gaze and stared fixedly at the table.

No, thought Legolas, it is just your wishful thinking. She is mortal and already married. The Valar would never give her to you. And yet, when he looked once more at the rest of his female guests, he could see quite clearly that Eowyn was the only one who was glowing...

Yavanna had answered his prayer!

He rose clumsily to his feet and, with something less than elven grace, half-ran towards the radiant woman, holding out his hands: "My lady?"

A murmur of surprise—and some disapproval—rippled through his guests, but Legolas ignored it. *The Valar have answered my prayer, he thought, she is my heart's own choice.* "My lady?"

Slowly, the woman raised her eyes and studied his face.

And, for a long, heart-faltering moment, Legolas thought she might refuse him.

But then she rose to her feet and accepted his hand.

And, suddenly, Legolas could restrain himself no longer—he swept Eowyn into his arms and whirled her round and carried her—both of them laughing—to the centre of the threshing floor, where he lowered her to the ground and kissed her passionately.

Chapter 1: An ordinary day

Five o'clock in the morning

Last night a messenger arrived with the news that King Thranduil has already reached the Falls of Rauros and expects to be with us in less than a fortnight—almost three weeks earlier than expected and a good two weeks before the new wing of the Palace will be finished. Lord Caranthir assures us that the Elvenking can adequately be accommodated in the existing guest quarters. Caranthir does not know King Thranduil.

Lord Fingolfin laid down his pen with a sigh.

...

Six o'clock

Master Amdír, the chief craftsman-builder of Eryn Carantaur, his assistant Master Mablung, and his two young apprentices, had already been travelling for almost three hours when—as the sun rose above the mountains of Mordor—they approached the ancient cedar grove of Eryn Laeg, twenty miles east of the city.

Amdír scanned the woods around him. The forest was unusually sparse here—many trees had died in Sauron's time—and the undergrowth was dense and tangled. "This is the place," he called, raising a hand and bringing the others to a halt.

One of the apprentices immediately began to dismount, but Mablung turned in his saddle and stopped the younger elf with a warning look.

Amdír placed a hand over his heart, bowed his head, and recited a short prayer of thanks to Aulë and Yavanna. Then, after a moment's respectful silence, he dropped lightly from his mount, took from his travelling pack a bundle of markers—small, brightly coloured flags sewn onto slender wooden stakes—and handed them out to his companions. "We need five," he said, "at least three feet broad, straight and true, and well-seasoned."

Leaving their horses to graze along the trail, the four elves entered the woods and, using stout wooden staffs to part the undergrowth, cleared themselves a temporary path.

...

Eowyn smiled.

A very affectionate—and pleasantly well-endowed—elf had snuggled up behind her and, wrapping his arms around her and, was nuzzling her ear, and rubbing her buttocks with an eager erection.

Gods... Eowyn closed her eyes and pretended to sleep.

One of the elf's hands wandered upwards and cupped her breast, gently lifting and kneading it.

Dear gods. Eowyn's smile broadened, but she kept her eyes closed, and her body still.

Now the elf's soft mouth was biting her neck, and his other hand was kneading her belly, and his penis...

Oh, gods! Somehow, his penis had slipped between her legs and was firmly pressing against her most sensitive flesh.

Eowyn's body responded with a pool of moisture. *I could happily die like this...*

Then the hand on her belly reached down between her thighs, and the elf's body shifted, and the head of his penis found exactly the right spot, and "Ai," he whispered, and she smiled as he nudged inside her.

My love... She reached over her shoulder and pulled his head closer.

And the elf, pressing his cheek to hers, immediately slid both hands to her waist and entered her fully.

Dear, dear gods. Eowyn lay still—trapped between the wild wood elf above her and the rocking bed beneath her—and let him do what he would with her...

And soon—very soon—she was coming—helplessly *coming*—again and again, her multiple crises merging into one relentless orgasm that—though she feared she might die of it—she prayed would never stop—

...

"I think I have one," called Elemmakil, the older and more competent of Amdír's two apprentices, "over here." He used the end of his staff to clear away the tangle of brambles and showed his master the trunk of a fallen cedar, tall and straight, and a good five feet in diameter at the root.

"Yes," said Amdír. "It looks very suitable." He examined the trunk for signs of rot. "No—it is perfect. Mark it red."

Elemmakil selected a flag, drove the slender stake into the ground, and unfurled the piece of fabric. The red marker hung, plainly visible, about two feet above the highest patches of undergrowth.

"Now find me another," said Amdír, with a smile. He turned towards his other apprentice. "Annael?"

The younger elf was standing, some hundred feet ahead of him, one hand resting on the trunk of a living cedar, staring down at the ground beneath the tree.

"Annael! I shall not tell you again!" Using his staff to push back the brambles, Master Amdír hurried to his wayward apprentice's side. "I have warned you about going off into reverie when you should be—*Oh, by the Valar!*"

"There are more," said Annael. "At least two more. Over there."

...

Nine o'clock

Eowyn turned off the main walkway, crossed the broad market-flet, and slowly climbed one of the many staircases that spiralled up to the dwellings above. The house she was seeking was on the highest flet—small, but pretty, with pots of fragrant flowers clustered beneath its windows.

She paused before its pale green door. *Should I be doing this?* she wondered. *Do I have the right?* She sighed. *Probably not.*

But she knocked, and the door opened immediately.

Eowyn placed her hand upon her heart and bowed her head in a formal greeting. "*Maer aur, Lessien Curufiniell.*"

Eryn Carantaur's own Mistress of the Ceremony smiled. "Lady Eowyn," she replied, in the Common Tongue, "Please, come in. I have been expecting you." She stepped aside to allow Eowyn to enter, then gestured towards two chairs standing before the fireplace.

Eowyn took a seat, but her stiff back and her hands, clasped upon her lap, betrayed her nervousness.

"Can I offer you a drink, my lady?" asked Lessien.

"No—no, thank you, I would just..."

"Like to ask some questions. I understand." Lessien took the chair opposite. "You have concerns about the Rite."

Eowyn nodded.

"What is troubling you?"

The woman looked down at her hands. Then, flushing crimson, she said, "Legolas does not know I have come here... And he would probably wonder why I am not asking *him*. But I could not bear to hear the answer from *his* lips. Not if..." She sighed. "Is it possible, Lady Lessien—*might* the Valar give him someone else this time? And, if they do, will I have to watch?"

When the elleth did not reply, Eowyn looked up in alarm. But Lessien was smiling. "You are Lord Legolas' betrothed," she said. "He is bound to you. He could not perform the Rite with anyone else."

"Does that mean...? Does it mean that the Valar *will* choose me?"

Lessien thought carefully before replying. "As you know, my Lady, I am new to my office, and the Mistress who trained me was not, perhaps, the most reliable guide, but—whilst no one but the celebrant himself knows how Yavanna makes the Lady known to him—it is my belief that, ultimately, the choice lies with the celebrant himself. *I* believe that the vision—whatever it may be—is expression of his own heart."

"You are saying that every celebrant is given his heart's own choice," said Eowyn.

"Even if he is unsure who that choice might be," said Lessien. "Which, of course, Lord Legolas is not."

Tears sprang to Eowyn's eyes. "Thank you," she said, softly, "thank you so much..."

"Would you like that drink now, my lady?"

Eowyn smiled. "Yes. Yes, please."

Lessien rose and walked over to the sideboard. "Is there anything else you would like to ask?" She selected a particularly lovely goblet—glancing at Eowyn as she did so, as though matching the beauty of the design to the beauty of her guest.

"Two things," admitted Eowyn, "though one is just curiosity."

"Curiosity is gift of the Valar, my lady," said Lessien. She poured a measure of fruit cordial into the frosted glass, added bubbling water, then handed the drink to Eowyn.

"Thank you. Well," said Eowyn, "the serious question is—will Legolas need to observe a period

of celibacy before the Rite?"

"He will. But, since this is not his first time, the period is much reduced—to just three days."

"I see." Eowyn thought for a moment. "Then I can stay with Hentmirë..." She took a sip of cordial.

"What is your more curious question, my lady?" asked Lessien, returning to her seat.

"Well," said Eowyn, slowly, "Suppose, for some reason, I had not attended the Rite last year. Legolas would have chosen some other woman—or elleth, rather; would *she* now be his betrothed?"

"That is a good question, my lady. A very good question." Lessien sat back in her chair, and thought for a long moment. "Since the Lady of the harvest is, in some respect, chosen by Yavanna, and Yavanna chose *you*, had you *not* attended the Rite last year, Middle-earth would be a very different place. And, if Middle-earth *were* a different place, then I suppose that *anything* might happen in it... I am afraid I do not know the answer your question, my Lady."

...

Ten o'clock

The four craftsman-builders galloped into the clearing beneath the city. "March Warden Haldir," cried Amdír, as he dismounted and ran towards guards at the bottom of the main staircase, "where is he?"

"He should be with Lord Legolas and the Council," replied one of the guards. "In the Council Chamber—"

"Come, Annael!"

The two elves sprinted up the spiralling stairs, and along the walkway to the Palace buildings.

"We have important news for Lord Legolas and March Warden Haldir!" cried Amdír. The guard opened the Council Chamber door, and—without waiting for further permission—the master and his apprentice ran inside.

...

The meeting of the Inner Council, consisting of Legolas and Eowyn, Gimli, Lord Fingolfin, Lord Caranthir, and the treasurer, Lord Lenwë, March Warden Haldir, and Captain Golradir of the Palace Guard, had begun with a discussion of the current building works.

"As you can see," said Caranthir, gesturing towards the report he had prepared for Legolas, "with these changes, the new wing could be completed four—or perhaps five—days earlier than we had originally planned. But I would not recommend it."

"The time we would save is not sufficient in any case," agreed Fingolfin.

"Is there anything we could do to improve the *existing* accommodation, my lord?" asked Eowyn. "We do have two weeks—"

She was interrupted by a commotion at the door.

Legolas looked up from Caranthir's report. "Ah, Master Amdír—do come in and join us," he said, beckoning the craftsman-builder to approach the Council Table. "I understood that you had gone to Eryn Laeg to select more timber."

Amdír bowed nervously. "I did, my Lord, this very morning. But we,"—he glanced at his companion— "or, rather, Annael here, found something else, my Lord, lying amongst the trees. Dead bodies. *Human* bodies. Six of them."

"*Six?*" Legolas glanced around the table. The other members of his Inner Council were as shaken by the news as he was. "How did they die, Master Amdír?"

"I—er—I did not look, my Lord—"

"I did, my Lord," said Annael, stepping forward with a little bow. "They had sword wounds—at least, the ones I saw did."

"Are there any orcs in that area, *melmenya*?" asked Legolas.

"No. I do not think so..." For several years, Eowyn had been gathering information about the bands of orcs that—despite the fall of Sauron—still roamed Middle-earth, collating it onto a large map of Ithilien so that she could look for patterns in their migration, and predict where they might appear—and attack—next. She glanced at Lord Caranthir, who been maintaining the map whilst she had been in Far Harad, for confirmation.

The elf shook his head. "I have had no reports from that part of the forest, my Lady," he confirmed.

"How long have the men been dead?" asked Legolas.

"I do not know, my lord," said Annael. "But not long. They have not yet begun to..." He gestured. Then he added, in a low voice. "And at least one of them is a *woman*."

Several of the counsellors gasped.

"We must recover the bodies immediately," said Legolas, decisively. "We must identify these unfortunate people and inform their families. And we must catch their killers..." He turned to Haldir. "Which is the nearest guard post?"

"Baradorn."

"Triple the garrison there and set up a continuous patrol along the road." Legolas sighed. "That is the main route into the city..."

"And the way your father will be coming in less than two weeks' time," added Fingolfin.

"Yes..."

"I shall leave at once," said the Haldir. "Master Amdír—will you and your apprentice be willing to accompany me?"

"Oh. Yes... Of course, sir." Amdír bowed.

"Take a healer," said Legolas. "Take Master Dínendal with you."

"You think there may be survivors, my lord?" asked Fingolfin.

"It is possible," said Legolas. "Men are a hardy people. Perhaps *I* should come with you, Hal—"

"No," said Eowyn, firmly. "No, *you* have the Harvest Rite and your father's visit to prepare for. Haldir will send word if he needs our assistance."

...

Haldir went straight to the Guard House and selected the most reliable of his troops—including his brothers Rumil and Orophin, and Valandil, Orodreth and Camthalion—to retrieve the bodies and search the cedar glade, plus ten others to reinforce the garrison at Baradorn.

"You have half an hour," he told them, "to take leave of your loved ones."

Then, ignoring the smirks on his brothers' faces, he hurried to his own flet to break the news to Cyllien.

...

Valandil knew that he would find Wilawen in the Healing Room.

Shortly after coming to live with him in Eryn Carantaur, the woman had persuaded the Chief Healer, Master Dínendal, to let her assist him by preparing medicines and by tending to minor injuries.

Today she was working in the dispensary, carefully crushing dried herbs in a mortar. "How long will you be gone?" she asked.

"It will depend how long it takes us to move the bodies," he replied. "But I should be back tomorrow."

"I think I can keep myself busy until then." She smiled. "Be careful, Valandil."

"I shall..."

"Is there something you are not telling me?"

"No, not exactly... It is just..." Valandil sighed. "We will have to postpone our trip to Minas Tirith, Faer Vara," he said, lifting her from her seat and taking her in his arms, "until Haldir can spare me. I am sorry."

"That is just one of the *many* disadvantages of being betrothed to a elven *warrior*," said Wilawen, grinning against his chest.

The door opened behind them.

"Wilawen," said Master Dínendal, then, "—oh, I am sorry..." He averted his eyes. "Lord Legolas has asked me to accompany the March Warden to Eryn Laeg—Valandil has no doubt told you why—and I need an assistant."

"Me?"

Dínendal looked uncomfortably at Valandil. "She *is* the most able," he said, "given what we may have to do—especially since the bodies are human."

"Do you mind?" asked Wilawen, lightly squeezing Valandil's arm.

Valandil smiled. "Of course not, Faer Vara," he said. "I shall be there to protect you."

...

Haldir's flet lay under a cloud of misery. "What am *I* supposed to do while you are away?" asked Cyllien, sulkily.

The elf sighed. "It is only one night, Tithen Dúlinn. Two at the most. Perhaps you could spend some time with Eowyn..."

"I *hate* Eowyn—Mistress Perfect. Why can Legolas not go instead of you?"

"Because this is *my* responsibility," said Haldir, "as March Warden." He took her in his arms. "Just look forward to the time we will have together when I return."

Cyllien said nothing.

"I shall see you tomorrow." He tucked his fingers under her chin, and lifted it. But, as he went to kiss her mouth, she turned her head, and his lips brushed her cheek instead. "Good bye."

The elleth watched him hurry down the main staircase. "You will see me if I am still here," she said, quietly.

...

As usual, a small crowd had assembled to watch the Border Guards move out.

Legolas, standing before his mounted troops, placed his hand on his heart and bowed his head, "*No galu govad gen*," he said. "I expect you back tomorrow."

Eowyn stepped forward. "Take this," she said, reaching up to hand Haldir a wax tablet. "I have made some notes on it—questions..."

The March Warden smiled. "I shall make sure I answer them, my Lady." Then he added, softly, "Can I ask you both to take care of Cyllien for me?"

"Of course," said Legolas.

"Thank you." Haldir bid his Lord and Lady a formal farewell, then signalled to his troops to move off. Slowly, the warriors filed out of the clearing, forming themselves into pairs when they entered the narrow forest trail. As the Mirkwood elves passed the main staircase, with Wilawen and Master Dínendal riding between them, a shrill voice called out, in the Common Tongue, "Ori! Cami! Take care! I'll be waiting!"

Legolas glanced upwards to see Arinna, the woman from Far Harad, leaning over the rail, waving a white handkerchief at her two beloved elves.

He shook his head with a grin.

...

Midday

At midday, as was their custom, Legolas and Eowyn had lunch together.

On a large flet, just above their private chambers, the elf had made his lady a pretty garden, with a table and chairs at the centre, and pots of her favourite plants—brightly coloured daisies, small, sweet-scented cabbage roses, lavender, rosemary, and lemon sage—arranged all around. And, since the weather was fine, Eowyn had had lunch laid out there, and had invited Gimli and Hentmirë to join them.

"Hello, gwendithen," said Legolas, greeting his adopted aunt with a kiss on the forehead. "Have you had a good morning?" He pulled out a chair for her.

"No," said Hentmirë.

Smiling, Legolas took his place beside Eowyn. "Why not?"

"I cannot hold the bow right," she said, despondently. "And my arrows go *all over* the place."

She waved her plump little hand to illustrate the point.

"It just takes practice, gwendithen."

"I am not very patient," she admitted.

Eowyn passed her a plate of roasted vegetables. "Perhaps the bow is not your weapon," she said. "Perhaps you should try the sword. I could show you."

"I do not know," said Hentmirë. "I was no good with the axe..." Gimli, sitting beside her, blanched at the memory. "I do not seem to be any good at anything."

"You are good at *everything*," the dwarf said, firmly; he offered her some roasted chicken. "But perhaps you should try something less *martial*. Let me see... What about looking after the children?" He glanced at Legolas.

"Of course!" said the elf. "I should have thought of that before—you already spend a lot of time with Lord Lenwë's youngest sons. Why not help Maglor teach the other elflings? You can tell them all about Far Harad, gwendithen—about Carhiliwren and Kuri; about the desert and the oases. They will love it."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. And Maglor will be glad to have someone share the responsibility with him. Come to me after your Elvish lesson, and we will go and talk to him."

...

Two o'clock

My new pupil is proving exceedingly difficult to teach, wrote Lord Fingolfin. But, though her mind is easily distracted by trivialities, her spirit is sound—and she has a disarming way of seeing through to the truth, and of speaking it in all innocence...

...

"Me." said Fingolfin.

"Um..." Hentmirë bit her lip, and Fingolfin could see that she was screwing up her courage to ask him a question. "Is it true—what Gimli told me—about the Harvest Rite—"

"That depends on what he told you, híril nín," said Fingolfin. "Me."

"He said that Legolas and Eowyn will... Um..."

"The Lord chooses a Lady and makes love to her on the threshing floor, yes. Me."

"In *front* of everyone—"

"ME."

"Oh! Er... nin? Yes, *nin*."

"Correct. Now say, 'Follow me, my lord'."

The woman screwed up her face in concentration.

"A..." prompted Fingolfin, beckoning with his hand, as though trying to draw the words from her lips, "a..."

"A..."

"...phado..."

"Phado? Oh, yes! Aphado nin!" cried Hentmirë, with a clap of her plump little hands.

"Aphado nin, *hîr nín*," corrected Fingolfin. "Now put it all together."

"Mae govannen, King—"

"*King?*"

"Um..."

Fingolfin sighed. Today's effort was poor, even by Hentmirë's standards. "You do not *have* to learn Elvish, *híril nín*," he said. "Many of the colonists—especially the elflings—are quite proficient in the Common Tongue so, if you are finding it too difficult, it is really not essential —"

"Oh, yes, it is," insisted Hentmirë. "What sort of citizen would I be if I did not make the effort to learn the language?"

Fingolfin smiled. "That is an admirable attitude, *híril nín*. So what is holding you back?"

Hentmirë blushed, and cleared her throat. "Um... Do you think I could stay at home for the Harvest Rite?"

Ah. "Of course, if you do not feel able to attend. It is certainly not compulsory."

"But will Legolas be *offended?*"

"I do not think so, *híril nín*. Would you like me to speak to him about it?"

"Would you?" cried Hentmirë, "Oh, *thank* you!" Suddenly, her smile turned from relief to triumph, and she rose, and added, with a gracious bow, "*Mae govannen, Thranduil Oropherion. Hentmirë i eneth nín. Aphado nin, hîr nín.*"

...

Legolas followed Eowyn into the study. "When will you be back?" he asked, sitting down at his desk.

Eowyn collected a few items from amongst the clutter on her own desk. "Before dark," she said.

The elf looked up, one hand resting on the mountain of papers he had received from his father the previous day. He did not say anything, but Eowyn knew exactly what he was thinking.

"We will not be going anywhere near the Caras Arnen road, Lassui," she said. "In fact, we will be going in exactly the opposite direction. Berryn wants to survey the land around The Aelvorn." She came behind him, laid her hands on his shoulders and bent down, pressing her cheek to his, "*And* he is going to teach me to use his cross-staff!"

Legolas smiled at her excitement. "I do not suppose you would let me ask Gimli to go with you?"

"He would be bored, Lassui."

"Well... Perhaps I could leave these until tomorrow,"—he waved his hand over the papers,

—“and come with you.”

“You would be bored, too,” said Eowyn. “Besides, your father is waiting for a reply.”

“My father is *always* waiting for a reply.” Legolas sighed. “Be careful, then,” he said. “*Promise* me that you will be back by dusk. And do not go too near the water. The Aelvorn is deep and you do not swim so well.”

Eowyn laughed. “I promise.” She kissed the top of his head and turned to leave.

“Eowyn...”

“Mmm?”

“Give me a *proper* kiss.”

Laughing again, she sat down on his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck and, taking her time, kissed him *very* thoroughly.

...

Three o'clock

Amdír studied the trees on both sides of the road. “March Warden,” he called, “it was here.”

Haldir reined in his horse. “You are certain?”

“Yes.”

The March Warden raised his hand and brought his troops to a halt. “Show me where exactly.”

Amdír gestured to Annael. The apprentice dismounted and, taking his staff from his travelling pack, approached the woods to the east, carefully parting the tangled undergrowth, searching the ground for traces of their previous path through the trees.

“This way,” he said.

“Wait,” said Haldir, drawing his sword, “let me go first. Amras—stay here with the horses. Everyone else, follow us.” Passing Annael, he entered the woods, clearing a way with the flat of his blade. “How far are they?”

“No more than a quarter mile,” said Amdír, who, with his apprentice, was keeping close behind.

“And you say there are six?”

“We saw six; there may be more.”

“So far from the road...” Haldir looked to left and right. “I do not think they were ever *on* the road, Master Amdír. There is a human settlement a few miles east of here, on the far side of the Divor Rocks. I think they may have come from there.”

“Then this may simply be a matter between humans,” said Rumil, escorting Dínendal and Wilawen behind the craftsmen.

“There is no ‘simply’ about any death,” replied Haldir, firmly, “and, whatever happened, it happened on our land.”

“The bodies are lying in a clearing,” said Amdír, “not far from our—” He gasped. “Valar, March Warden, someone has taken our markers! We placed a red flag there, beside that trunk, and a

yellow one just beyond the beeches. And they have gone!"

"*They were here with us, Master Amdír,*" said Annael, softly. "When we found the bodies, the killers were still here..."

"And may be here now," said Haldir. He gave the order with a gesture, and his troops immediately formed a defensive circle around the civilians, and readied their weapons.

"If the attack took place this morning," insisted Dínendal, "there is a chance that some of the victims are still alive—we must hurry, Haldir—are you still willing to help, Wilawen?"

"Of course."

Haldir gave another signal and the elves advanced more quickly, cutting through the undergrowth with their swords, where necessary. They soon encountered the first body—a middle-aged man. Master Dínendal crouched and briefly examined him, then, shaking his head, rose and hurried on into the clearing, surrounded by a protective guard of warriors.

Amdír stared down at the body. "He has been moved, March Warden," he said, quietly. "When we left him, he was lying on his back. And he was wearing chains."

"Shackles?"

"No—around his neck. Like a badge of office."

Haldir examined the dead man. His clothes were well-made, but of a coarse, homespun cloth, and his hands, though clean, were calloused. "A farmer," he said. "It looks as though they *are* from the settlement; this man may have been their leader."

"But what were they doing *here*?" asked Amdír.

"I have no idea. But I suspect there will be more than six of them." He walked out into the clearing, calling, "Search the trees, but be careful—stay in pairs."

"There is food laid out over here," said Wilawen. "Around a fire. They were holding some sort of feast and—oh gods!" She looked away from the remains of a young woman, lying across the embers, her blackened body still wearing fragments of a fine white gown and a crown of flowers. "It was a *wedding* feast."

Haldir cursed.

"Wilawen! Master Dínendal! Over here!" cried Valandil. "There is something alive... Do not be afraid, little one," he added, softly. "We are here to help you—*oh!*"

A handful of dirt had flown up in his face and a tiny creature, covered from head to foot in dried blood, scrambled to its feet and ran, wailing in terror—zigzagging between the astonished elves. It slipped past Rumil, pushed past Orophin, ducked under Master Dínendal's outstretched hands...

And ran straight into Wilawen's arms. "Shhhh, shhhh," said the woman gently, cradling the terrified child against her chest. "You are safe now."

...

Four o'clock

"What a strange place this is," said Eowyn, standing on the lip of the massive rock funnel that formed The Aelvorn, and looking down into its inky water.

"It is part of a string of lakes and caverns," said Berryn, "running from the south,"—he stretched out his arm in a slicing motion, indicating the edge of the mountains of Mordor, then turned northwards and did the same again—"to the north, along a great crack in Middle-earth."

Eowyn turned to him in surprise. "A *crack*?"

"I do not know how else to describe it..."

"What has made it?"

"I have no idea, my lady. Perhaps it was there from creation..." He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps it happened as the result of Sauron's evil... All I know is that I have spent the last two years mapping it."

Eowyn turned back to The Aelvorn. "Why is the water so black?"

"It is very deep," said Berryn. "The rocks are dark and the water is filled with tiny fragments of *this*." He used the toe of his boot to dig a small hole in the rich, dark soil at the edge of the rock.

"How does—?"

Berryn laughed. "You are worse than I am, my Lady! The rains are heavy in this area, and the trees are small and sparse. The soil is easily washed down the rocky slopes and into the lake..."

Eowyn nodded, digesting the information. "We had better be setting off, Berryn," she said at last. "I promised Legolas I would be home before dark."

"Wait here, my Lady. I will fetch my equipment."

He jogged across the grass to where his cross-staff lay, carefully dismantled it and packed it in its velvet-lined box. Then he gathered up his square and his rule, his writing board, his pens and book of tables. "There," he said, turning back towards The Aelvorn.

But Eowyn was nowhere in sight. "My Lady?"

He sprinted to the edge of the funnel, desperately scanning the shore for any sign of the woman.

But, in his heart, he already knew that it was hopeless.

"Oh gods," he whispered, "what has happened to you?"

Chapter 2: It begins

Five o'clock

The Mistress of the Ceremony tapped lightly on the study door.

"Come in..."

"Lady Lessien! Is it that time already?" Legolas laid down the document he was reading. "Please, take a seat. Can I offer you a drink?"

"Yes—thank you."

Legolas rose from his desk, took a few steps towards the sideboard—and, without any warning, suddenly doubled up in pain. *"Oh!"*

"My lord?"

The elf stumbled, clutching his chest and gasping for breath, *"I—Ohhh..."*

Lessien caught him by the upper arms and guided him to the nearest chair. "Sit down, my lord." She knelt before him, holding his hands and staring up into his face—appalled to see his normally serene countenance twisted in a grimace of agony, and tears spilling from his tightly closed eyes.

"Guard!" she shouted, over her shoulder. "Guard, come here!"

She chafed Legolas' hands.

"What is it, my La—" The young guard, unused to seeing weakness or illness of any kind, stopped abruptly at the sight of his stricken lord.

"Find Master Dínendal," cried Lessien. "Quickly."

"No," gasped Legolas. "No, that will not be necessary, Galathil."

"But—"

"It is passing," said Legolas, more evenly. "She is not—she is safe now—and I feel it passing."

...

Eowyn opened her eyes. Her teeth were chattering.

Cold.

Instinctively, she curled up into a ball, rubbing her frozen limbs with her hands.

Cold and wet. She shivered. *And... scared.* "Legolas?"

With icy fingers she pushed her wet hair back from her face and wiped her eyes and nose. *Wet... Why am I so wet?*

Something nudged her back, gently demanding attention. Eowyn rolled over. *"Vanyasul?"*

The pretty mare was trying to coax her to her feet.

“Where is Brightstar, Vanyasul? Where is...”

Where is Legolas?

Where am I?

Eowyn pushed herself up on her arms and looked around. *The Aelvorn. How did I get here? Why am I alone?*

The strange, dark lake was still but, somehow, threatening, like a predator lying in ambush. Eowyn scanned its steeply sloping shores—barren, empty—then turned and crawled away, searching the grassy verge and the sparse forest beyond for any sign of Legolas.

Not here.

She was alone, except for Vanyasul, following beside her, impatiently bumping her shoulder.

The horse had no saddle nor bridle, but Eowyn had no qualms about riding bareback. She struggled to her feet. “Good girl,” she said, patting the mare’s neck. “Take me home, Vanyasul. Take me back to Legolas.”

...

Lessien looked up at the guard. “Fetch Lord Legolas some water,” she said, pointing to the sideboard. “Here, my lord, drink this...” She held the goblet to his lips, rubbing his back with her other hand.

Legolas took a few sips, and gradually regained his composure. “Thank you.”

“Perhaps I should leave you to rest,” said Lessien, “and come back tomorrow.”

“No,” said Legolas. “No, please stay. There is something I particularly want to ask you—that will be all, thank you, Galathil.”

He waited until the door had closed behind the young guard before he turned back to Lessien. “I have been having—well, I suppose a mortal would call them dreams,” he said, colouring slightly, “about the Harvest Rite. Dreams in which I—” He cleared his throat. “In which I choose another lady.” He looked down at his hands.

“Have you spoken about this to—”

“No!” He looked up in alarm. Then he studied her face, his eyes narrowing. “What is it?”

Lessien hesitated. The lady herself had deliberately consulted her, not her betrothed, and to tell him of their earlier meeting would be to betray a confidence. *But the Rite must always come first*, she thought. “Your lady came to see me this morning, my lord. She asked whether the Valar might lead you to choose someone else this time, and whether there was any way to *ensure* that you would choose *her* again—”

Legolas gasped. “What did you tell her?”

“I told her that she is your betrothed,” she said. “That you are bound to her and could not perform the Rite with anyone else.”

"I see," said Legolas, softly.

"My lord?" Something about his manner seemed strange, but Lessien decided that he simply needed further reassurance. "I honestly believe," she said, "that the choice ultimately lies with you. I believe that the vision—whatever it may be—is actually an expression of your own heart."

The elf leaned back in the chair, eyes closed, and considered her words. Then he said, "I think that perhaps it *would* be better if you came back tomorrow, Lady Lessien."

...

The more I watch them together, the more concerned I grow, wrote Lord Fingolfin. I have no doubt that he cares for her (beyond the obvious physical attraction) but where is the deep regard—the respect—that will turn, over time, into a lasting partnership? As for the lady, I confess I find her shallow and self-centred. If Lord Legolas were not a hero of the Ring War, nor the ruler of this colony, I sincerely doubt that she would still desire him (despite his fair face). Is this a fitting consort for the Lord of Eryn Lasgalen?

Lord Fingolfin sighed. Should he be expressing these misgivings? Even in his own private journal?

...

Legolas climbed the spiral stair to his garden; he desperately needed a few minutes' escape.

Lessien's words had done little to reassure him. In fact, he was now entirely convinced that both his dreams and this afternoon's 'attack' were warnings. *Something is coming*, he thought. *Something that will cause turmoil.*

He walked to the edge of the garden flet, to the secluded corner where, beneath the spreading boughs of one of the mighty carantaurs, he had built a swing. There, he sat down and, despite his sense of foreboding, suddenly smiled, reminded of the many hours of uninhibited pleasure he had enjoyed there.

With her...

A carantaur acorn fell from the branches above, narrowly missing his shoulder, and he watched it skip across the wooden boards...

Then a second acorn fell in his lap.

Legolas looked up.

A third acorn hit him squarely on the forehead. "Ow!"

His attacker was perching amongst the branches, knees drawn up under her chin, like some woodland sprite, laughing merrily.

Legolas laughed back. "Come down!" he said.

"Make me!"

"If I have to, you will regret it."

She shook her lovely head. "I have suffered your punishments before, Legolas Greenleaf, and you

do not scare me!”

“Suppose I were to offer you a *reward* for coming down?”

“What would that be?”

“The thing you like best...”

Laughing wickedly now, she dropped gracefully to the floor. Legolas shook his head; she had dressed herself exactly like him—in leggings and boots and a practical suede jerkin—except...

Some elf-tormenting demon must have made the translucent leggings and the knee-high boots—of softest leather—that so closely fitted her slender legs; and the dark lord’s own seamstress, intent on robbing him of his immortality, must have created the dark green jerkin—of most supple suede—that hugged her delicious body.

Legolas felt a familiar warmth spreading from deep in his groin—quickenning both his body and his spirit. “You are sunlight,” he whispered.

“And you,” she said, “are the fairest, the bravest, the most famous elf in all of Middle-earth. And I *love* you!” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Do you like me disguised as a wood elf?”

Gently, Legolas took one of her hands, kissed it lightly, and lowered it to the evidence.

“Edhel *daur*!” she giggled.

Legolas laughed, nuzzling her cheek. “Would you like me to give you your reward *now*, minx?”

...

Seven o’clock

Eowyn walked Vanyasul right up to the door of the Palace stables. The ride had helped revive her, and the sunshine had partially dried her clothes, but she still needed one of the grooms to help her dismount.

“Are you new here?” she asked.

“No, my lady.”

“I do not think I have seen you before...” She smiled wearily, patting the horse’s neck. “Take good care of her for me—*she* has taken very good care of me today. I shall be back to see her, and Brightstar, after supper.”

Then she turned, and walked back to the main clearing, not noticing the look of confusion that passed over the elf’s face.

...

“Oh *yes*...” Legolas groaned, deep in his chest. “Oh. Sweet. Eru.”

Kneeling between his open legs, a hand on each thigh, his lover moved rhythmically, her sudden laughter sending teasing vibrations down into his groin and provoking tell-tale ripples in his testicles.

“Oh, ceryn Manwë,” he cursed, grasping the ropes and crushing them in his fists. “Oh, you *minx*!” And he arched his back and let her greedy mouth finish its work.

...

Eowyn walked past the Banqueting Hall and, nodding to the unfamiliar guards at the foot of the main staircase, began the slow climb up to the Palace. Every step was exhausting—weighed down as she was by her wet jerkin, and chafed by her damp leggings.

At the top of the stair she paused and looked out across the city...

Something about that, too, seemed slightly unfamiliar, but she was too tired to decide exactly what. She dragged herself across the walkway and pushed open the door of her home.

“Hello, Galathil,” she said to the guard, “is Lord Legolas still in his study?”

“Er—no, my lady.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“*No, my lady.*”

Eowyn had the distinct impression that Galathil was lying to her. *But that is ridiculous*, she thought. “Very well. When you see him, tell him that I am home.” She walked across the lobby and pushed open the bedroom door.

“No, my lady,” hissed the young elf, “no—you cannot—*please*—that is the Prince’s bed chamber...”

But the door had already closed behind her.

...

“Are you going home?” murmured Legolas, gathering her close, and kissing her temple.

“I must,” she said, her tone teasing. “Father is expecting me. He has guests—business acquaintances—from the south and he will want me to entertain them.”

“I am not sure I *approve* of the way your father uses you.”

“I am not sure Father would approve of the way *you* use me.”

Legolas, whose concern had been quite serious, suddenly grinned. “*Minx!*”

“But you love me.”

He did not reply as she expected; instead, he gently caught her chin, lifted it upwards, and gazed down at her, searching her face intently.

“What?” she asked, still smiling.

“Shall I see you tomorrow?”

“*Tomorrow?* I do not know...”

“You like to keep me guessing.”

"I like to keep you *interested*," she said.

...

Eowyn took several handfuls of iârlóth leaves and scattered them into the bath, inhaling their sharp aroma and feeling its cleansing glow travel through her body, driving out the last of the cold from her limbs and lifting some of her exhaustion. *If ever I needed reviving herbs*, she thought, *it is now*.

She stripped off her damp clothes and climbed into the scented water, sinking back into its warmth with a sigh of relief.

Ah... That is better...

She picked up a cake of soap and began working it into lather. *Where can Legolas be?* she wondered. *He said that he would be in his study all day, reading his father's papers, and—Oh gods! Has something else happened in Eryn Laeg? Has Haldir sent for him?*

The feeling of anxiety—of something's being not quite right—that had been haunting her since she had awoken beside The Aelvorn suddenly overwhelmed her.

Was Legolas in danger?

Was she sensing it through their strange bond?

She must find out.

She must find out *now*!

She climbed from the bath, quickly dried herself, and reached for her dressing robe.

It was not there.

She went into the bedroom and opened the wardrobe.

What is going on? Where are my clothes—

The bedroom door opened behind her.

She turned, crying out in relief—"Lassui! Oh, Lassui! I was so worried about you!"—and flew to him, arms outstretched.

Legolas pushed her away. "Princess Eowyn," he said, coldly, "these are my *private* chambers."

"Lassui?" She stared up at his angry face. "What is wrong?"

"Please," he said, "make yourself decent." He pulled the coverlet from the bed and handed it to her, disdainfully averting his eyes. "And stop using that *ridiculous* nickname."

Eowyn clutched the fabric to her chest. "Why are you acting as though you hardly know me, Lass—Legolas?" she asked, staring at his rigid back. "*And where are my clothes?*"

"Your *clothes*?" He turned to face her. "What are you talking about?"

"My clothes are not in the wardrobe," she said, plaintively, "my robe is not in the bathing room."

Where have you put them? *Why are you treating me like this?*”

The elf frowned, momentarily confused. Then he shouted, “Galathil? *Galathil*, come here!”

“Lassui!” Eowyn hastily wrapped the coverlet around her. “I am not *dressed*.”

“That did not worry you a moment ago,” said Legolas, coldly. “Galathil, why did you allow this woman to enter my private chambers?”

“I could not stop her, my lord,” said the nervous elf. “She acted as though she belonged here—”

“I *do* belong here!” cried Eowyn. “I have belonged here for almost a year! Have you forgotten how you chose me at the Harvest Rite, Lassui? Have you forgotten the vows we made behind the waterfall?—‘*Im hervess chin, no hervenn nín. An-uir,*’” she sobbed. “Have you forgotten the vows we made before your *father*?—‘*Gwedhithon na, Legolas Thranduilion; le annon veleth nín*’!”

The young guard gasped.

“Leave us, Galathil,” said Legolas, quietly. “Leave us *now*!” He grabbed Eowyn’s arms. “Very well—you have your way—I am listening. Now tell me what you have done to me.”

“Done to you?”

“Tell me why I am dreaming of you at night? Tell me why your face and your body haunt me? Tell me why some part of me feels I am betraying *you* when I make love to my betrothed—”

“*LEGOLAS!*”

The sudden bellow of anger, from the direction of the door, startled both of them. Still holding Eowyn by the arms, Legolas whirled around.

But the bedchamber door was already swinging shut.

“Alatáriël!” he cried. “Alatáriël! Come back!”

Chapter 3: Darkness

Eryn Laeg
Five o'clock

It had taken almost two hours to find all of the dead—sixteen men, fourteen women including the bride, and seven children, some of them only toddlers. Master Dínendal was still moving from body to body looking for signs of life, but the other elves knew that his search was hopeless.

"This is an entire village," said Haldir. "All dead, except the child. And I do not understand how *she* survived."

"She was hidden beneath a headless corpse," said Valandil. "Of her mother, I think."

"*Valar!*"

The two elves walked to the edge of the clearing, where Wilawen was tending the tiny girl. The child shrieked the moment their shadows fell upon her, and struggled in the woman's arms, desperate to get away.

"She seems to be afraid of elves," said Wilawen. "Or, perhaps, of *males*."

"Is she badly injured?" asked Haldir, stepping well back.

"No. The blood is not hers." Wilawen looked up from the child. "That is the strange thing; there is not a mark on her. Somebody sliced through her clothing and rubbed the blood on her—you can see the marks of his hands on her shoulders." Gently, she pulled back the remains of the child's dress to show him.

"That," said Haldir, looking at the fingerprints, "is a very small hand—"

"Haldir!" cried Rumil. "Look! Over here!"

"Stay with them, Valandil." He crossed the clearing to join his brothers, crouching beside one of the bodies.

"Have you ever seen anything like this before?" Rumil held up a fragment of silvery metal. "We pulled it from one of the wounds."

Haldir took the bloodstained object—the tip of a finely-wrought blade—and examined it closely. "No," he said, "it does not look human—nor elven—and these runes..."

"It is no language *I* have ever seen before," agreed Rumil. "It was a beautiful blade, though."

"Fragile," corrected Haldir. He dropped it into the leather pouch at his waist. "Lord Fingolfin may know where it comes from—he may recognise the runes. Anything else?"

"Yes," said Orophin, stretching out his hand, palm up. "A good many of these—*careful*—we think they are poisoned."

"They are too small to do much damage in themselves," said Rumil. "And a fast-acting poison would explain why none of the men seems to have fought back."

Haldir looked at the tiny black object. "A crossbow quarrel," he said.

"Yes."

"This does not make sense."

"No."

"Finely-crafted blades that snap in human flesh, tiny crossbows firing poison darts..." He shook his head. "These animals were not men, not elves, not orcs."

"A new enemy, then," said Rumil. "But from where?"

"And what do we do about them?" asked Orophin.

Haldir sighed. Taking the bodies back to Eryn Carantaur had been a sensible plan when they had thought they might be dealing with six merchants from Minas Tirith, killed by outlaws.

But now...

He had fourteen warriors. "Valandil," he cried, "Orodreth, Camthalion!" He showed the Mirkwood elves the strange weapons.

"Take Wilawen and the child, and the rest of the civilians, and set up camp with your back to the Divor Rocks," he said to Valandil. "Find somewhere sheltered and defensible. We do not know where they are coming from, but they seem to attack in the dark and at close range." He held up the quarrel to make his point.

Valandil acknowledged his orders with a hand on the heart and a bow of the head.

Haldir turned to Camthalion and Orodreth. "Leave the bodies where they are, but light fires around the clearing and patrol the perimeter—I do not want these people violated by scavengers. Is that clear?"

"Yes, March Warden."

"In the meantime, Rumil, Orophin and I will ride to the nearest settlement and see if we can trace any relatives—they will surely want to claim their dead and perform the appropriate rites—and the child may have family still living. With luck, we will be back with help later tonight."

...

Seven o'clock

Eryn Laeg ended abruptly, just east of the Divor Rocks. From the edge of the trees to the slopes of the mountains of Mordor, some hundred miles further to the east, the landscape lay like a piece of parchment—a flat expanse of pale, bleached grass, divided into a pattern of squares by human homesteads, widely spaced to the north, tightly clustered around the tiny town of Newhome to the south.

"Humans are an industrious people," said Rumil. "But they *will* fight the land."

Haldir led the way along the dirt road between two sets of fences, slowly approaching the closest of the wooden houses, where an elderly couple was sitting outside in the evening sun, the man smoking a pipe, the woman shelling peas into a bowl on her lap.

"Good evening," said Haldir with a polite salute.

"Evening," replied the old man—and if he was surprised to see three elves on his land, he did not show it.

Haldir dismounted. "We come with bad news," he said, quietly.

The woman looked up from her work. "Take a seat—you and your companions—can I fetch you a drink?"

Haldir shook his head. "No—thank you." He introduced himself and his brothers formally, and explained, as tactfully as he could, what they had found in Eryn Laeg.

"It'll be the Mayor's daughter," said the woman. "It was her wedding..."

"All *dead*, you say?" asked the man.

The elf nodded. "Except the child. We are looking for their families."

"Was it Orcs?"

"No, we do not think so." He carefully removed the crossbow quarrel from his pouch and showed it to the old couple. "We found these... We believe they are poisoned."

"*The dark people...*" muttered the woman, and she made a gesture with her hand which Haldir instinctively recognised as a charm intended to ward off evil.

"Now, Mother," chided her husband, "you know the dark people are nothing but an old women's tale. Wait here, sir, while I fetch my horse," he said to Haldir. "I'll take you into town."

"Who are these dark people?" asked Haldir quietly, once the man was inside the barn.

The woman had retreated into herself, rhythmically dipping her hand into her bowl and letting the peas run through her fingers but, at length, she answered, "They come out at night, into the forest, killing anything they find. The last time they came I was just a girl, but I still remember the bodies. So many funerals..." She glanced over her shoulder, making sure that her husband was still out of earshot, then leaned forward and whispered, "They say they live *inside* the Divor rocks."

...

Valandil approached slowly, one hand raised as if in surrender.

Wilawen smiled. "She is sleeping."

The elf lowered his hand and, taking care not to disturb the child, joined his betrothed on the ground. "I have brought you some food," he said, handing her piece of lembas.

"Thank you."

Valandil settled his back against the rock wall. "Has she said anything?"

"Nothing I can make sense of," said Wilawen. "Just 'purple'."

"*Purple?*"

"Yes. She said it over and over, getting more and more distressed. And then she struggled, and tried to get away from me."

"Purple... Perhaps it is what the raiders were wearing? Purple cloaks?"

Wilawen shrugged her shoulders.

"What will become of her," Valandil asked, "if Haldir cannot find her family?"

"*Someone* will take her in."

"Do you think..." He waved his hand.

"What?—*Us*?"

"If you want to."

Wilawen turned onto her side and smiled up at him. "You are *truly* a sweet elf," she said, smiling. "But no. I will care for her for as long as I must, but I have no burning desire to be her mother."

Valandil took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"Do you think they will come back?" she asked.

He glanced round the camp. They had found themselves a natural fortification—a broad alcove in the rock wall, with a long, narrow, barbican-like entrance and high craggy walls providing various emplacements for archers. "It seems secure," he said.

"But?" Wilawen touched his cheek. "What are your instincts telling you?"

"It sounds foolish."

"Go on."

"Can we trust the rock?"

"What does that mean?"

"I do not know." He smiled at her. "I did tell you that it was foolish."

...

Nine o'clock Legolas' study

"Will he be all right?" asked Hentmirë, anxiously. She had come into Legolas' study and found him lying on the floor, and had immediately sent for help. "I could not wake him, so I asked Galathil to fetch *you*," she said, "with Master Dínendal being away."

Lord Fingolfin searched for a pulse. "Did you move him?"

"Um... I may have *shaken* him a bit. *Will* he be all right?"

"I do not—" Fingolfin remembered to whom he was speaking. "Of course he will, híril nín. Galathil—go and fetch Master Findecáno, as quickly as you can."

"Can *I* do anything, my lord?" asked Hentmirë, watching the young elf hurry away.

"Where is Lady Eowyn?"

"She went map-making with Master Berryn—they should be back at any moment..."

"Good," said Fingolfin. He smiled at the little woman. "Help is on its way. All you and I need do is watch over him until it arrives."

...

Findecáno opened his healing bag. "Has this ever happened before?"

"No," said Hentmirë. "At least, I do not think so. What is that?"

"This," said the healer, removing the stopper from a small brown bottle, "is smelling salts. I can find nothing physically wrong with Lord Legolas, so I think we can afford to give him a little help. If you will support his shoulders, my Lady—yes, like that."

Findecáno gently waved the open bottle under Legolas' nose, letting the pungent odour of the salts enter his nostrils. For a moment nothing happened. Then the elf's eyes and mouth flew open and he took a great, gasping breath. "*Eowyn!*"

Hentmirë struggled to hold him fast.

"Eowyn!" he cried, "Let me go gwendithen! I must go to her!"

"No, my dear, *no*," said Hentmirë, hugging him tightly. "You have been ill. And Eowyn will be back at any moment—"

"No!" cried Legolas, "No! She will not! She thinks that I hate her! That I have *betrayed* her with... With..."

Findecáno grasped the distraught elf's face, caught his gaze and held it. "Breathe deeply my lord," he said, staring into Legolas' eyes, "*deeply*... In... And out... And in... And out... That is right..." Slowly, he removed his hands. "That is better. Now I will give you something to help soothe your nerves..."

But, even as he was reaching for his healing bag, the study door flew open, and Berryn ran in.

"Lord Legolas," he cried, "it is Lady Eowyn!" He bent forwards, hands on knees, gasping for breath. "Lady Eowyn," he panted, "has gone! I cannot find her! I think she must have—have fallen into The Aelvorn!"

Chapter 4: Three's a crowd

“Alatáriël!” cried Legolas. “Alatáriël, come back!” He released Eowyn and ran out into the lobby, catching his betrothed and pulling her into his arms.

“Come back to me, *meleth nín*,” he whispered, cradling her against his chest and, rocking her like a child, he stroked her hair until he felt her body relax...

Then Eowyn appeared in the doorway, wearing nothing but the coverlet.

“*NO!*” shrieked Alatáriël, “NO! *NO!* Look at her! *Look at her!* I heard what you said to her, Legolas Greenleaf! I *heard* you!” And she started to struggle again, beating her fists against his chest, and sobbing, “Let me go! Let me go!”

Legolas dragged her back into his bedchamber, forcing Eowyn to retreat before them. “Tell her,” he cried, “tell *both* of us what you are doing here! Tell us what you have done to *me!*”

“What am *I* doing here?” said Eowyn, coldly. “*You tell me* what *she* is doing here! When I left you this afternoon, you made me promise that I would return before dusk; you *insisted* on a proper kiss before you would let me leave—”

Alatáriël roared, lashing out with her little fists. Eowyn promptly seized a jug of water from the nightstand and splashed it in her face. The elleth froze, mid scream, gulping for air.

Legolas, also dripping wet, scowled at Eowyn.

“To calm her,” she said, “so that we can talk like adults.”

Legolas guided Alatáriël to the bed, sat her down, and crouched before her. “I am going to send Galathil to fetch your father, *nadithen*,” he said, gently. “Then *he* can take you—”

“You want to be rid of me!”

“No—”

“You want to be alone with *her!*”

Legolas looked up at Eowyn. “Will you leave us please? Wait in my sitting room—I will join you in a moment.”

Eowyn gave him a look that said, *You will if you know what is good for you*, rearranged her coverlet, and walked out of the door, head held high.

“Lie down, *nadithen*,” said Legolas, helping Alatáriël lift her legs onto the bed. “I will be back soon.” He kissed her forehead.

“I am your *betrothed*,” she sniffed.

“I know, *meleth nín*, I know.”

“Send her away.”

“I will.” He smiled reassuringly.

But in his heart he knew that things would not be so simple.

...

Eight o'clock

Eowyn stood, tall and straight, in the centre of the sitting room, tears welling up in her eyes. Not since Aragorn had abandoned her at Dunharrow had she felt so helpless—so *hopeless*...

The door opened and closed behind her, and she knew that Legolas had entered, but she could not bring herself to face him.

Not yet.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"I live here."

"*Galathil!*"

Eowyn whirled round. "What are you—"

"Give my complements to Master Dínendal," said Legolas to the young guard, "and ask him to come here immediately—tell him it is an emergency. Then ask Lord Fingolfín if he will be so kind as to join us."

"Why are you sending for Dínendal?" demanded Eowyn.

"To find out what is wrong with you."

"Wrong with *me*? There is nothing wrong with *me*. It is *you* who have changed. How long has she been your mistress, Lassui?"

"*Mistress!* What are you talking about—"

Eowyn's hands suddenly flew to her mouth.

"*What?*" Legolas demanded.

"You said you would send for her father."

"So?"

"Her father is *dead*," said Eowyn. "He died by his own hand, soon after you passed sentence on him. And Alatórië has not spoken since. How *can* she be here with you? How *could* you send for Angaráto?"

Legolas ran his hand through his hair. "Sit down."

"I do not want—"

"*Please.*"

Eowyn could not refuse him, but she perched on the very edge of her seat, nervously wringing her hands. Legolas crossed to the sideboard, poured two glasses of strong red wine, handed one to her

—“Here, drink this,”—and downed the other himself.

“Will this make everything all right?” she asked, bitterly.

Legolas sat down beside her. “I knew you were coming,” he said. “I have been dreaming of you—of sharing my life with you. I knew you would cause trouble. But this fantasy of yours—”

“It is not a *fantasy*,” cried Eowyn. “You *do* share your life with me, Lassui. You have done so for almost a year.”

“How do you know that nickname? Lassui?”

“It is what I always call you. It is what your father calls you. And your friend, Singollo. And Lindorië...”

“How can you possibly know Collo and Lindë?”

“I met them in Mirkwood, when we went to ask for your father’s permission to marry.”

Legolas shook his head. “No. You are confused, *híril nín*—or lying—I do not know which—but—” There was a knock at the door. “*Come in!*”

Eowyn turned towards the newcomer—a dark, strikingly handsome elf—and sighed with relief. “Oh, Lord Fingolfin,” she said, “I am so pleased to see you!”

Fingolfin gave Legolas a courteous nod before turning his full attention to her. “Have we met before, *híril nín*?”

“*Oh...*” Eowyn sank back in her chair. “You have been my tutor, and my friend, my Lord, for almost a year,” she said, “teaching me to speak and read Elvish, and advising me on Elven custom.”

“Princess Eowyn claims to be my betrothed,” explained Legolas, “and the co-ruler of the colony.”

“I did not claim the latter,” said Eowyn, firmly, “though it is true—I have a seat on the Inner Council, as does Gimli, when he is staying with us—”

“Gimli!” cried Legolas. “Gimli, son of Gloin—the *dwarf*?”

“Your best friend.”

“You *do* seem to be confused, madam,” said Fingolfin, gently. He sat down beside her. “*Heniach nín*?”

“*Henion*,” replied Eowyn, without hesitation.

Fingolfin glanced at Legolas.

“*Man eneth lín*?”

“*Eowyn i eneth nín*,” replied Eowyn, adding, “*trenaro enni i vent o thelien hen*.”

“Your pronunciation is excellent, my lady,” said Fingolfin, thoughtfully. “You say you have lived here for almost a year, but are you not married to Prince Faramir?”

“Of course, I *was*,” said Eowyn, “but Aragorn—King Elessar—dissolved our marriage by royal decree.”

“When?”

“You *know* when. Both of you...” Sighing, she made a rapid calculation. “Almost ten months ago.” She turned to Legolas. “After you chose me at the Harvest Rite—”

“No,” said Legolas, firmly, “I chose Alatóriël.”

“Alatóriël’s father bribed the Mistress of the Ceremony,” said Eowyn, “to give her a potion that would make her attractive to you. But, somehow, the potion was given to me—and you and Lord Fingolfin both thought that it was the work of Yavanna. You chose *me*, Lassui. You said...” She stopped, abruptly.

“What, my lady?” prompted Fingolfin, gently. “What did he say?”

“He told me something.” She looked at Legolas. “But it is a secret...”

The younger elf shrugged his shoulders.

“He said that the Valar made me glow like Ithil,” said Eowyn.

Legolas jumped to his feet. “No!”

“Sometimes, when we are alone, you call me ‘ithildin nín’.”

“I have never told that to *anyone*, Lord Fingolfin!” cried Legolas. “Not even—especially not—to Alatóriël!”

“Then how do *I* know it?” demanded Eowyn, watching him as he prowled about the room, venting his frustration in mumbled curses. Then, “What is happening, my lord?” she asked Fingolfin. “Why does he not remember any of this?”

“I think a more pertinent question, *híril nín*, would be: why are *your* memories so different from ours?” He rubbed his chin. “When did things first begin to seem strange?”

“When I could not find my clothes in our bedroom.”

“What were you doing immediately before that?”

“I was bathing—I was so wet, I—” She turned to Fingolfin, suddenly excited. “It started *before* that! It started when I woke up beside The Aelvorn.”

“The Aelvorn!” cried Legolas. “What in Arda were you doing out there?”

“I do not re—”

She was interrupted by a second tap at the door. “That will be Dínendal,” said Legolas to Fingolfin. “I have asked him here to examine her. Come in!”

“I am not ‘her’,” Eowyn insisted. “You call me ‘melmenya’, or your wife, or ‘Eowyn *nín*’...”

...

Dínendal did not recognise her, either.

But he treated Eowyn with all the kindness and respect she had always loved in him, insisting that Legolas and Fingolfin leave the room whilst he examine her, and that an elleth be present as a chaperone.

“Míriel,” said Eowyn, to the elleth who had been her lady’s maid for almost a year, “Míriel—surely *you* recognise me?”

The elleth shook her bowed head. “No, my lady. I am sorry—I have never seen an adaneth before.”

When his examination was complete, Dínendal called Legolas and Fingolfin back into the room. “As far as I can tell, my Lady, your mind is perfectly clear,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Eowyn.

“But I *have* found something...” He hesitated. “Something most unexpected.”

“What?” asked Legolas.

“Princess Eowyn is no longer mortal.”

“No longer...” Legolas turned to Eowyn. “Explain, lady!”

Eowyn gave him a withering look. “*Why* are you behaving like such an orc? Are you like this with your mistress? You *know* that I was poisoned by the salve your—your *other* mistress—Serindë—gave me. You know that I died. But *you*, Master Dínendal, administered a decoction that revived me, and...” She shrugged her shoulders. “And made me as I am.”

She turned to Legolas. “Your father believes that the change is a sign from the Valar—a sign that he should accept me as your wife.”

...

After saying good bye to Dínendal and Fingolfin, Legolas slipped across the lobby and carefully opened his bedchamber door. Alatóriël, thankfully, was asleep, stretched across the bed with almost wanton abandon...

He shook the lascivious thoughts from his head, closed the door, and returned to the sitting room.

Eowyn was sitting exactly where he had left her, beside the fire, still wrapped in her ridiculous coverlet, and hunched forward, gazing into the empty grate.

A strange tenderness filled his heart.

“What am I to do with you?” he asked, sitting down beside her.

“Do you love her, Lassui?” she asked.

“She is my betrothed.”

The woman shook her head. “No. *I* am your betrothed,” she said, “but even if your answer were true, it would still be very strange.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was not ‘yes’.”

...

Ten o'clock

“You can stay in here,” said Legolas, opening the door to the guest house opposite his own chambers. Despite Eowyn’s vehement protests, he had insisted on dispatching a messenger to Faramir. “Until, that is, your husband sends someone to collect you.”

“There is just no reasoning with you, is there?” Eowyn sighed, temporarily defeated. “Can I at *least* have some clothes to wear?”

“I will send Míriel.” Legolas placed his hand on his heart and bowed his head. “Good night.” He turned to go.

Eowyn panicked. “No! Legolas—wait!” She caught his arm.

“What?”

“Please do not leave me alone like this, wondering what has happened to us.” Tears began to run down her cheeks. “I will go mad!”

“I will send Dínendal—”

“No! *You* stay with me! *Please!*” She tried to pull him into the room.

“I cannot.”

“Of course you can—”

“No. I must get back to Alatóriël.”

“You are afraid of me!” she cried. “Afraid to let me get too close! You feared me the moment you saw me! Tell me about your dreams, Legolas! Tell me!”

The elf shook off her hand. “NO.”

“Legolas! *Please!*”

“Tomorrow. Perhaps...”

“*Arrgggh!*” Eowyn hurled a chair at the closing door.

...

Lord Fingolfin sat down at his desk, uncorked his inkwell, and opened his leather-bound journal.

Other elves might sing to the stars, or walk beneath the trees, but Fingolfin preferred to think with his pen.

- *Dínendal asserts that her mind is clear*, he wrote.

- *I do not sense that she is telling deliberate untruths.*

- *Her knowledge of the colony and of the individuals who live here—including myself—is highly detailed and, in many respects, accurate.*
- *So why are her memories so different from ours?*

He drew a vertical line down the centre of the page. To the left he listed,

Princess Eowyn's claims

1 E attended last year's Harvest Rite.

2 Alataríel's father bribed the Mistress of the Ceremony.

3 The love potion was given to E at the intervention of the Valar.

To the right of the line, he added,

Reality

1 E did not attend the Harvest Rite.

2

If the rumours he had heard about Angaráto were true—and his own suspicions were correct—then Princess Eowyn's claim that he had perverted the Rite was entirely credible.

And Alataríel's strange hold over Legolas—which had always seemed to Fingolfin worryingly physical—would suddenly make sense.

Princess Eowyn has considerable intelligence and self-possession, he wrote, and is known throughout Middle Earth as a brave warrior. She is a worthy consort for the Lord of Eryn Carantaur.

He laid down his pen.

It is time, he thought, that I made some discreet enquiries about Angaráto and his daughter. And I must speak to the Princess again.

Privately.

Chapter 5: Fears

Nine o'clock

"Where are you *going*, my dear?" asked Hentmirë, trotting across the lobby behind Legolas. **"You are still shaky."**

"She has not drowned, gwendithen," said the elf. "She may have fallen into the water, but I *know* that she is still alive. And I am going to summon the djinn."

Hentmirë caught Galathil by the arm. "Go and fetch Gimli," she whispered, "quickly—*Legolas*..." She followed her friend into the bedchamber. "The djinn will not obey you, my dear."

The elf turned to face her, his blue eyes enormous, and smiled. "No," he said. "Not if Eowyn is still alive."

"Oh..."

He opened the wardrobe door. "If he will not obey me, we will know for certain. But I will tell him that she is in danger, and he will go and look for her anyway." He reached into the shelf, above Eowyn's clothes, lifted down the brass lamp—"Stand back,"—and rubbed it vigorously.

A curl of smoke rose from its long spout.

Legolas rubbed harder.

"WHO HAS DISTURBED MY SLEEP?" roared the djinn, bursting into the room fully-formed and bumping his massive head on the low ceiling. **"OW!"**

He peered down at Legolas. **"You are not my pretty little mistress!"** he cried, flowing towards the elf menacingly. **"I will crush you where you stand!"**

"No!" wailed Hentmirë, trying to catch his wispy tail.

But Legolas was overjoyed. "See, gwendithen—see! She is still alive!" He ducked under the huge fist and jumped up onto the bed. "Your mistress is lost," he shouted, trying to look the djinn in the eye, "and she needs you! Go to her! Now!"

"Lost?" The djinn cocked his head to one side. **"You are her little husband..."**

"Yes," said Legolas. "Please! Go and help her. Now!"

"I shall."

The djinn coiled his body into a ball and, both arms whirling, shot out of the bedroom, bounced off the lobby wall—"OW!"—veered left, and streaked through the main door, knocking Gimli to the floor as he went.

...

Newhome

The sun was already setting by the time Haldir, his brothers, and their human guide reached the outskirts of Newhome.

"That is the Mayor's house," said the old man, pointing to a large, two-storey building set some way back from the road. "Gods rest his spirit and the spirits of his family." The elves bowed their heads and uttered a similar blessing.

The road turned into a street, slicing its way through the centre of the small town, passing a tavern, a blacksmith's forge, several stables, a tiny House of Healing and, tucked away down a side street, what Haldir suspected was a brothel.

"The Reeve's house is at the better end of town," said the old man.

"Let us hope he was not a guest at the wedding," said Haldir.

"No." The old man shook his head. "He will not have been invited. He and the Mayor fight—*fought*—like cat and dog. The Reeve is the King's man, you see, newly appointed, and the Mayor always stood up for the locals..."

"Are King Elessar's edicts not in the locals' interests?" asked Haldir, puzzled.

"That depends," said the old man, "on which of the locals you happen to be."

They turned a corner and rode up to a wooden gatehouse, which ran the full width of the side street.

"Masters Haldir, Rumil, and Orophin from The Colony, with important news for the King's Reeve," announced the old man.

"It is late, Master Damrod," said the guard, "come back tomorrow."

"Brand, son of Bain," snapped Damrod, "I have known you since you were no more than a glimmer in your *grandpa's* eye—open the blessed gate for us!"

"The Reeve has guests, sir," said the guard, "and cannot be disturbed."

"I fear that this news will not wait," said Haldir, firmly.

The young guard looked from the old man to the impressive elf, and back again. "Very well," he said, unlocking the gates and swinging them open. "But be sure to leave your horses beside the trough. Do *not* trample Lady Morwen's garden."

...

The Divor Rocks

Camthalion settled back against the rock and took a bite of Lembas.

There is something strange about this place, he thought. *Something about the rocks...*

On impulse, he pressed his ear to the stone, closing his eyes and, letting himself become one with the sounds around him, listened to the complex, interwoven song of Arda's children—and found, *there*, slicing through it, a lone female voice, dark and guttural, *chanting*.

He beckoned to Orodreth, pointing, and mouthing, *Listen*.

His friend lowered his head to the cliff face—and immediately pulled away, his eyes wide with surprise. "I will fetch Valandil," he whispered.

...

The door to the Reeve's house was opened by teenage boy—a tall young man, but slight, with a girlish face and long, dark hair that fell forward over his eyes. "What is it, Master Damrod?"

"These gentlemen have brought bad news, Master Arador," said Damrod, "and need to speak to

your father." He stepped aside, so that the boy could see the elves.

"Oh... Good evening, sirs," said Arador, smiling at Haldir and his brothers with a mixture of excitement and curiosity, "*please*, come in." He showed them to a reception room just off the entrance hall. "I will fetch my father."

"That is the Reeve's *son*," explained the old man, quietly. "Do not mind his staring—he means no harm—his mother's got it into her head that he's delicate, and doesn't allow him out much. But he's a good enough lad—a friend of my grandson."

The Reeve did not keep the elves waiting long. "Welcome to my home, gentlemen," he said, "have you come from the King?"

"No, sir," said Haldir, with a polite bow. "From Prince Legolas, with bad news." He described the massacre at Eryn Laeg.

"Dear gods... And you have no idea who did this terrible thing?"

Haldir shook his head. "Master Damrod's wife mentioned the dark people—"

"Mere superstition, sir."

"I see... Well—though there is evidence that the killers have taken trophies, the object does not appear to have been robbery. My main concern is to protect the victims from further violation; my elves are doing what they can, but the bodies are scattered and vulnerable to scavengers. And I am anxious to trace the child's family—she is frightened amongst strangers."

"Of course—of course. I will call up the Night Watch, sir. They will accompany you to the Forest, recover the bodies, and carry out a thorough search..."

...

The moment the Reeve had left the room, his son, who had been hovering outside the door, approached Haldir. "Did you find any weapons, sir?" he asked.

The elf hesitated.

"Tiny black darts?" the boy prompted.

His voice had a strange timbre, neither high nor low but a mixture of both, which made each utterance sound like a groan, but his mind seemed quick enough. Haldir drew the crossbow quarrel from his pouch.

"Yes..." Arador took a handkerchief from his pocket and used it to lift the dart from Haldir's palm. "I once nicked myself with one of these," he explained, "and slept for twelve hours." He handed it back. "Did you find anything else, sir?"

"Just this." Curious, now, to learn what the boy might know, Haldir showed him the sword tip. "It had broken off in one of the wounds."

The boy examined it carefully. "Hm... I have never seen one of their blades before," he said, "though they use these same runes on—"

"Do not trouble the gentleman, Arador," said the Reeve, coming back into the room. "I must apologise for my son's behaviour, sir—he is something of a dreamer." He shooed the boy away. "The Night Watch are assembling at the gate; they will follow your orders. Now, on behalf of King Elessar, sirs, I thank you for your kindness to his unfortunate subjects. Rest assured that I shall commend you—and your Elven Lord—to the King in my next report." He bowed, deeply.

As the elves filed out into the entrance hall, the Reeve's son caught Haldir's sleeve. "We must talk more," he said. "I will join you outside. Wait for me..."

...

"It *sounds*," whispered Camthalion, "as though it is coming from inside the rocks. But it cannot be..."

Valandil raised his hand for silence and, for a few moments, listened intently. "It should not be, but I think it *is*," he said, quietly, "and I think it is approaching a climax. I do not think we have much time."

"To do what?" asked Wilawen.

"To prepare our defences, *Faer Vara*." He turned to his comrades. "Bring the guards in from the clearing—the dead must fend for themselves now. Wilawen—get the little girl and the other civilians into the centre of the camp. Camthalion—surround them with archers. Orodreth—we do not know where these animals will emerge, but you and I will build fires all along the back wall."

As they set about their appointed tasks, Wilawen caught Valandil's hand. "I love you," she whispered.

...

"All ready, sir," said the Captain of the Night Watch.

Haldir scanned the assembled crowd. There was no sign of the Reeve's son. *I will give him a little longer*, he decided. "Five minutes, Captain," he said, "and then we depart."

"Very good, sir."

A moment later, the boy emerged from the shadows, leading a sturdy pony and carrying a large travelling pack.

Haldir sighed. "I cannot allow you to come with us, Master Arador," he said, quietly. "Your father will—"

"But you *must*," the boy insisted. "I know more about the dark people than anyone else in Middle-earth—half the people here still pretend they do not exist." He frowned. "You *do* intend to strike back, sir?"

Haldir shook his head. "I am here to see that the victims' bodies are recovered by their families. Nothing more." He turned away, but the boy grabbed his arm.

"You have left your own people in that clearing," he said. "I pray to the gods that they will still be there, alive, when you reach them. But, if they are not, you will need a guide to take you into the Divor Rocks—an expert in the ways of the dark people—and that is me..." He shrugged. "Think about it, sir—if nothing bad has happened, you can send me home, tomorrow, with the Night Watch. And you need not worry about my parents. They will blame me, not you."

Haldir shook his head. "No."

The boy bit his lip. "Let me show you something," he said, opening his pack, "that will change your mind. This cost me most of my grandfather's legacy..."

Keeping the top of the bag almost closed, he held it so that Haldir could peer inside. "Their

world is so dark, sir, that even *you* would be blind in it without something like this."

"Valar," muttered the elf. "What makes it glow like that?"

"*Their* magic," said the boy, smiling. "Now can I come with you?"

...

Ten o'clock Legolas' study

The djinn returned empty handed.

"**What a *nasty* place this Forest is,**" he grumbled, pulling several carantaur leaves from his hair and extracting a twig from down his loin cloth.

"You could not find her," said Legolas.

"**Of course I *found* her,**" he replied, haughtily, "**but she is where I cannot reach her—beyond the black lake.**"

"*Beyond?* But you are sure she is still alive?"

"**You are not my mistress,**" he boomed, folding his arms across his chest, "**and so I cannot answer your question.**"

"You already have," said Legolas. He held up the lamp. "Here. Go back to sleep."

...

Hentmirë handed Gimli a tankard of dwarven ale and watched him take a *sip*. "Are you *sure* that you do not need a healer?" she asked.

"Nay lass. It takes more than a knock on the head to flatten one of Durin's Folk." He took another sip.

"Well, I will be just over there, if you need me..."

She joined Legolas, who was sitting at his desk, carefully preparing his bracers and quiver. "What are you planning to do, my dear?" she asked.

The elf looked up at her, his startling blue eyes burning with cold fire. "I am going to follow her, gwendithen," he said. "I am going to follow her into The Aelvorn and I am going to bring her back."

Hentmirë nodded. "I knew you would say that," she said. "When do we leave?"

Chapter 6: The Aelvorn

Eowyn's guest quarters

Half-past ten

“Just a moment!” Eowyn ran to the door—hastily tying the laces of her elven gown—and threw it open. “Oh...” The smile fell from her face.

“You were expecting Lord Legolas,” said Lord Fingolfin, gently.

“I—yes, I was hoping...”

“I am sorry. But I think, my lady, that when you hear what I have to say, you will understand why it is *not* Lord Legolas—and you will be relieved. Might I come in?”

“*Relieved?* I do not under—ah—yes, of course, come in—please.” Eowyn stepped aside.

Fingolfin wasted no time in getting to the point. “What I am about to tell you, my Lady, will probably sound,”—he searched for the right word—“*fanciful*. But I do believe it can be tested... Might we sit down? Explaining this may take a while.”

He waited until they were both seated, before continuing. “Mannish society has always been of great interest to me. I have read, questioned, collected—”

“I know, my lord,” said Eowyn, with a faint smile.

“Yes, of course.” Fingolfin returned her smile. “Well, since coming to live in Eryn Carantaur, I have made a particular study of the lore of this region, and the men here have a peculiar set of beliefs... You mentioned waking up beside The Aelvorn?”

“Yes...”

“And you were wet?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember falling into the water?”

“No...”

“Do you remember how you came to be beside The Aelvorn?”

“No.”

“Then let us try something that may help your memory.” Fingolfin leaned back, settling himself more comfortably. “Do you remember waking this morning?”

“*Waking?* Why...?” Eowyn blushed, suddenly remembering *exactly* how Legolas had awoken her. “Yes, my lord.”

Fingolfin cleared his throat, delicately. “Well... Do you remember eating breakfast?”

“Yes...” She smiled. “It is working!”

“Good. What happened next? What did you do after breakfast?”

“Legolas had some papers to deal with,” she said, slowly, “from his *father*, so I went to see Lady Lessien—yes, I wanted to ask her something about the Harvest Rite—”

“Then you know Lady Lessien?”

“Of course.”

“Go on. What happened after that?”

“There was a meeting of the Inner Council—we discussed problems with the building works. Then Master Amdir arrived and—oh Béma!” She described what the craftsman-builders had found in Eryn Laeg, and how Legolas had sent Haldir to investigate.

“Who is Haldir?”

“*Haldir*? Our March Warden.”

“I once knew a Haldir—Haldir of Lorien—before the Ring War.”

“That is he.”

“The Haldir I knew died in battle,” said Fingolfin, softly, “defending your country from Saruman’s armies.”

“*Died*? No! I saved him!” said Eowyn. “I *nursed* him.”

“I see,” said Fingolfin. “That *is* interesting—”

“*Interesting*, my lord? It is maddening! *You* say that Haldir is dead. *I* know that he is not. Legolas says that Angaráto is alive. *I* know that he took his own life. And Alatóriël—how can Legolas be betrothed to Alatóriël?”

“Haldir is *not* dead,” replied Fingolfin, “and nor is Alatóriël Lord Legolas’ betrothed.”

“But you just said—”

“I will explain in a moment, my Lady. But, first, can you remember what happened later in the day?”

Eowyn frowned. “We had lunch in the garden. And then... Then...” She closed her eyes tightly, trying to summon up her memories. “I went to The Aelvorn with Berryn! *Yes!* He said...” She turned to Fingolfin. “He told me about a great crack in Middle-earth—he showed me where it lay. Then he went to pack his equipment, and... And I woke up alone.”

“The local edain,” said Fingolfin, “believe that there are *two* Middle-earths. They believe that a being may pass between them, through certain *clefts*—”

“The crack?”

“Yes, perhaps—certainly, the locals believe that The Aelvorn is one such cleft. And, interestingly, the Divor Rocks, close to Eryn Laeg, are said to conceal another.”

“My lord,” said Eowyn, suddenly realising the implications, “are you saying that this is not *my* Middle-earth?”

Fingolfin nodded. “I am.”

“Then *he* is not my Legolas!” She leaped to her feet. “*My* Legolas still loves me! *My* Legolas—oh, dear gods, he will be frantic! I must get back to him.”

“I know,” said Fingolfin.

“Are you sure that what you have just told me is true?”

“As sure as I can be.”

Eowyn began to pace. “You said it could be tested?”

“Indeed. When the messenger returns from Prince Faramir with news that *his* Princess Eowyn is not missing—”

“Then we will know for certain. Yes. But that could be four—five days. Must I wait that long?”

“You intend to re-enter The Aelvorn?”

“I have to.”

“You are a brave *adaneth*,” said Fingolfin. “I shall be honest with you, my Lady. I can find no evidence to suggest that, by simply by entering the water, you will be transported back to your own world—indeed, no evidence that you will not be drowned. And I would not be doing my duty as—I hope—your friend if I did not strongly recommend that you wait until we do, at least, have Prince Faramir’s confirmation that our theory has a basis in fact.”

...

Half past eleven

Legolas could not rest. His mind was too full of questions and—shamefully—of images of Princess Eowyn running towards him, arms outstretched...

Naked.

Taking great care not to disturb Alatóriël, he slid out of bed, walked silently to the window and, pulling aside the muslin curtain, sat down on the window sill, touching his forehead to the carved wooden frame.

Why? he asked the Valar. *Why, when everything—the colony, my future with Alatóriël—seemed so settled, why did you send her? Princess Eowyn! Bright and brave and beautiful and—he cursed—immortal Eowyn.*

*Why did you make an *adaneth* immortal?*

And what was that, he added, that she was saying about last year’s Harvest Rite? And Angaráto?

He leaned out of the window and breathed deeply, savouring the scented air, thankful for its cool caress.

But the click of a door latch quickly undermined his attempts to calm himself, and he opened his eyes, and watched a slender figure leave the guest house opposite.

“Of course,” he grumbled, “who *else* would it be? And where is she going at this time of night?”

...

He pulled on his boots and, with a final guilty glance at the sleeping Alatóriel, hurried from his chambers.

There was no longer any sign of Eowyn on the walkway; he leaned over the wall. *There she is*, he thought, *crossing the clearing and heading for the stables. Naturally.* He ran to the spiral stair and, taking the steps two at a time, reached the bottom just as the woman thundered past on what looked like one of Lord Caranthir’s mares.

At least she has not taken Angarato’s horse...

Legolas, despite his superior senses, had never been a skilled tracker like Aragorn. *If she gets too far ahead, I will lose her.* He ran to the paddock, summoned Arod, and set off in pursuit.

...

She was waiting for him at the city’s edge, where the main east-west thoroughfare shrank to a narrow forest trail. “My Legolas,” she said, “would never have made such a din.”

“Where are you going?”

“The Aelvorn.”

“*What? Why?*”

“Because I want to,” she said. “Are you coming?”

“That place is not safe—”

“*Are you coming?*”

The elf sighed. “*Someone* must make sure that nothing happens to you.”

She gave him a withering look.

“What did you mean,” he asked suddenly, “*your* Legolas?”

But she had already spurred her horse and set off down the trail.

...

21st day of Cerveth

Half past one in the morning

It took almost two hours to reach The Aelvorn, and the woman remained stubbornly silent throughout the journey.

Legolas bided his time until they were seated, side-by-side, on the grassy verge, overlooking the

still, black water. "It is strange," he said, "that the sky is full of stars, and yet not a single point of light is reflected in the lake..."

Eowyn nodded. "It is no ordinary lake."

"Explain what you meant, Eowyn, when you spoke of *your* Legolas."

"You will not believe me."

The elf laughed. "After finding you naked in my bedchamber tonight, I think I can believe almost anything."

"Very well." She repeated what Lord Fingolfin had told her. "So *my* Legolas is at the other side of that water."

"And you are planning to do what—throw yourself in?" He caught her arm.

"No!" She shook off his hand. "Not now! Not yet! But..." She sighed. "I just wanted to be near him."

"You love him very much."

"Of course I do!" She frowned. "You sound as though you believe it."

He shrugged. "I believe that you believe it... And *I* am certainly not your Legolas. Not *now*—not—"

"You never *will* be," said Eowyn, vehemently.

He smiled. "Are he and I really so different?"

"Completely."

"Tell me about him. Where did you first meet?"

"At Edoras..." She described her early impressions of the elf—"Lord Aragorn's right hand,"—and their brief conversations—"I did not realise that, even then, he loved me." She told him how Legolas had watched over her in the House of Healing but had stood aside because she seemed to be in love with Faramir. She described how he had become a regular visitor to Caras Arnen and what she had felt when she had realised that she had fallen in love with him. She explained how Faramir had sent her to attend the Harvest Rite, not telling her what it entailed, how Legolas had chosen her, and how they had travelled to Caras Arnen and, together with Faramir, had obtained Aragorn's decree of annulment and his permission to marry. Then, smiling, she repeated the vows that they had made before Eärendil.

"But what of *my* double," she asked, at last. "Do you know her?"

"We are—acquainted."

"But you are not in love with her?"

"I... No." He sighed. "But, recently, I have dreamed about her. About sharing her bed." He cleared his throat. "I am sorry."

"No, no, do not apologise. We need to discuss this—to understand why your world is so different

from mine... When did your dreams start?"

Legolas leaned back on the grass and, gazing up at the stars, admitted, very softly: "They began the day Lady Lessien and I started preparing for the Harvest Rite. I had—well, I suppose you might call it a vision—in which I chose *her* instead of Alatóriël. And then, that night, I started dreaming."

"Had you ever dreamed before?"

"No. Does *he*?"

"Sometimes. About our future."

"What does he see?"

"He foresaw my immortality... He has foreseen our child."

"Do you think..."

"What?"

He shrugged. "Why do you think *I* am dreaming?"

Eowyn looked at him thoughtfully. "Do you love Alatóriël?" she asked at last. "And do not say, 'She is my betrothed'."

Legolas did not reply.

Eowyn continued, "I asked—Béma, it was only this morning, yet it seems so long ago!—I asked Lady Lessien whether it were possible, when he performed the Harvest Rite this year, that the Valar would give Legolas someone else."

"What did she say?"

"That she believed the celebrant's vision to be an expression of his own love. If she is right, and you love Alatóriël, then you will choose her over my double, no matter what. If you do *not* love her—"

"I love her."

"Well. Now we know."

"Tell me again—what you said about her father."

Eowyn turned onto her side and looked down at him. "In my Middle-earth," she said, gently, "Alatóriël was obsessed with Legolas—she attempted to seduce him on a number of occasions. And her father doted on her—I am not saying that to excuse what he did—but he managed to bribe the Mistress of the Ceremony." She described how a serving elf had given *her* something to drink, just before the Rite began. "We believe it was a potion meant for Alatóriël. And when things went wrong..."

She suddenly fell silent.

But Legolas persisted. "What? What are you not telling me, Eowyn? What happened to Angarátó? You said that that he was dead. And you said something about Alatóriël's not speaking..."

“Legolas—”

“Tell me!”

Eowyn sighed. “Angarátó killed the Mistress of the Ceremony. He was tried and convicted and took his own life. And now Alatóriél is cared for in the House of Healing...”

“She has lost her mind.”

Eowyn nodded.

“*Nadithen vaurui*,” he whispered.

“Yes,” agreed Eowyn, softly. Then she added, gently, “But do not forget, Legolas, that what I have described took place in *my* world. And, there, many things are different—Haldir is alive, and Gimli—Gimli is your best friend.”

“Gimli!”

Eowyn grinned. “To see you—the two of you—my Legolas and him, playing together...”

“Playing! You are sure that this elf of yours is sane?”

“Absolutely. He chose *me*.”

Legolas inclined his head, courteously, “I take your point.” He glanced towards the horses. “Shall we go back to the city, Eowyn?”

“You can if you wish; I will stay here, at least until dawn.”

“Then I shall stay too. But...” He whistled for Arod. “Since you are human, you might need this.” He pulled a blanket from his travelling pack.

“Thank you,” said Eowyn, wrapping it around her shoulders. “Perhaps you are not so different from my Legolas, after all.”

Chapter 7: The cleft

Valandil inspected the fire trench one last time.

We must not burn ourselves to death, he thought, sprinkling the spirits, which Camthalion had found amongst the murdered humans, over the kindling, then touching his torch to the alcohol-soaked twigs.

The wood caught quickly, and an angry sheet of flame was soon rushing up the stone wall.

Valandil took his place in the line of archers, immediately in front of Wilawen and the child. *Come soon, whoever you are*, he thought. *Come whilst my warriors are still fresh...*

Come before the flames die down.

...

Half past ten

"Oh, *gwendithen...*" Legolas smiled affectionately at Hentmirë. "I cannot ask you to—"

"*You are not asking*, Legolas," said the little woman, firmly, "I am telling: Gimli and I will not let you go alone." She turned to the still slightly dazed dwarf for confirmation. "Will we, Gimli?"

The dwarf shook his head.

"Can you swim?" asked Legolas.

"Like a fish," replied Hentmirë. "Well, really more like a cork, but I will manage."

"No. No, it is too dangerous, *gwendithen*."

"Only if you think about it," said Hentmirë, firmly. "But I have found that if you do not think, and just *do* a thing, the danger seems to disappear."

Legolas smiled. "And you will follow me, anyway."

"We both will," said Gimli. He knocked back the remainder of his ale and slammed his tankard down with a flourish.

The elf conceded defeat. "I want to be at The Aelvorn by dawn," he said, "which means we will leave here before three. We cannot take much with us—and nothing that will weigh us down—Gimli, I think you must leave your armour behind—"

"But, surely," said Hentmirë, "we need to sink to the bottom?"

"What makes you say that, *gwendithen*?"

"The djinn said that Eowyn was beyond the water... Does that not mean past the bottom?"

"I have no idea, *gwendithen*. I will simply jump in and hope that whatever currents swept *her* away will take *me* in the same direction."

...

Lord Fingolfin's chambers

"I do apologise, my lord," said Legolas, "for disturbing you at this hour."

Fingolfin waved the apology aside. "I was not resting," he said. "Berryn and I are searching for information about The Aelvorn."

"I thought you would be."

"Come in."

Fingolfin's chambers—little more than an enormous study—were normally kept very tidy but, tonight, they looked as though a whirlwind had ripped through them, knocking books and papers from the shelves and throwing them into a rough circle on the floor. Legolas nodded to the young man sitting at the centre of the chaos.

"I am so sorry, my lord," said Berryn. "If I had taken better care of Lady Eowyn—"

Legolas held up his hand. "You carry no blame, Berryn," he said. "I know that Eowyn persuaded you to take her there, and I am sure that whatever happened to her,"—he smiled sadly—"will have been the result of her own curiosity." He gestured towards the papers. "I plan to enter The Aelvorn in a few hours. Have you found out anything that might assist me?"

Fingolfin and Berryn exchanged glances. "We have, my lord," said the man. "But we do not know whether we can believe it."

...

"So you are saying that the crack *definitely* exists?" said Legolas.

"Yes, my lord." Berryn spread out one of his maps. "It starts here, just north of Emyrn Arnen, and runs along *here* as series of caves. It virtually disappears *here*..." He traced his finger south west, in a great curve. "But then it slices through the Divo Rocks, runs along the edge of the Doro Lanthron hills, disappears again until it crosses The Aelvorn, and ends about *here*." He pointed to an area some fifty miles to the south.

"And are *all* of those places associated with the legend?"

"We do not know," said Fingolfin. "The people of the various regions have different attitudes—some faithfully record such stories, others dismiss them as mere superstition."

"How do I pass through?" asked Legolas. "Assuming that the stories are at least partially true, what do I have to do to cross from this Middle-earth to the other?"

"In every account I have read," said Fingolfin, "the protagonist has fallen into the water by accident."

Legolas sighed. "Then that is what *I* must do... Somehow."

...

21st day of Cerveth

One o'clock in the morning

At first, Valandil thought he was seeing smoke—one thin column of black smoke rising behind the wall of fire, and then another, and another, and then too many to count. And, quickly, each column broadened, and grew arms and legs, and a shock of white hair, and, worst of all, a pair of fire-coal red eyes...

"Shoot!" cried Valandil.

His archers responded, but the volley passed harmlessly through the wraiths, who were still

too insubstantial to feel its sting.

"Hold!" shouted Valandil, raising his hand and waiting until the creatures seemed more solid, then, "SHOOT! SHOOT NOW! SHOOT AT WILL!"

Some of the invaders, shocked by the fire and by the rain of arrows, immediately slipped back into the rock—though one failed, screaming piteously when his head and arm remained trapped outside; Valandil loosed an arrow, and put him out of his misery.

Others howled, and writhed in agony, caught in the denser patches of flame; they were easy targets.

But many—*too many*—passed through the fire unharmed and advanced on the elves in a solid line, simultaneously raising their small hand-crossbows.

"We cannot pierce their armour," cried Camthalion.

"Aim for the head and the hands!" shouted Valandil, and another volley of elven arrows whistled across the divide, dropping three of the invading warriors, and slowing the rest.

"Again!" cried Valandil.

But the enemy had suddenly been enveloped in a strange cloud of darkness, and only the click of mechanical triggers warned the elves that their foes had shot their poisoned darts.

"Agh!" Camthalion pulled a quarrel from his shoulder and threw it to the ground. "Numb..." he gasped, and slumped to his knees.

To the right and the left, Valandil saw other warriors fall. "Stop those crossbows," he roared. And his elves shot blindly into the dark.

"Camthalion is alive," cried Wilawen. "It is a drug, not a poison!"

Of course, thought the elf, *they like to use swords for the kill*. "Keep them back!" he ordered. "Send them back into the flames!"

His archers shot faster, falling into a rapid rhythm that seemed to be holding the unseen invaders at bay and, here and there, holes appeared in the unnatural darkness.

But on the right flank, where the elves had taken most casualties, one dark warrior suddenly seized command, calling out orders—or threats—in a strange, guttural language, and several soldiers emerged from the cloud, swords drawn, and charged the elven line.

"Do not let them lure you away," shouted Valandil, "stay in position—protect the civilians!"

The elven line drew back, forcing the invaders to come to *them*, and—though the elves lacked their enemies' extraordinary armour—their superior size seemed to be carrying the sword fight. Meanwhile, elven archers to the left and centre were opening up more and more holes in the strange darkness.

Valandil started to feel confident...

Then a wail of terror pierced the air behind him, and the child broke free and ran, screaming, towards the enemy, and Wilawen—his *astonishing* Wilawen—ducked beneath his arm, and followed her.

"No, meleth nín," he cried, "*no!*"

Something thudded against his chest. And, suddenly, his arms and legs would no longer obey

him and—as his head drooped—he noticed a tiny crossbow bolt embedded in his jerkin.

It can only be a scratch...

He sank to the ground.

And through rapidly clouding eyes he saw—as if in dumb-show—one of the warriors raise his sword to strike Wilawen—another rush forward, knock his comrade away, and help her to her feet—and then another push her protector aside and drag her, by the hair, into the last shred of darkness...

...

Two o'clock

Haldir could smell burning.

He reined in his horse and fell back to where the Captain of the Night Watch was hurrying the cart drivers along the bumpy trail. "How many men can you spare me?" he asked.

"Trouble?"

"Fire."

"Leave me five—and I will need a guide."

Haldir placed his hand on his heart and bowed his head. "Thank you. Rumil will stay with you. Good luck, Captain."

Moments later the March Warden was galloping down the trail towards Eryn Laeg, followed by Orophin, ten Night Watchmen, and the Reeve's son, bringing up the rear on his feisty little pony.

...

Half past two Eryn Carantaur

"One last thing, my lords," said Legolas, pausing with his hand on Arod's back. "Eowyn and I promised Haldir that we would watch over Cyllien whilst he was away..."

"Leave it with me, my lord," said Caranthir.

"I do not believe I have ever told you—either of you," said Legolas, turning back to his counsellors, "how much I value your friendship and rely on your advice—the entire colony relies on you." He held out his hand to Fingolfin, human-fashion. "If I should not return—"

"Of course you will return," said Caranthir.

"I will certainly do my utmost," said Legolas. "But should it not prove possible, my Lords, I will at least know that the future of Eryn Carantaur is safe." He shook Caranthir's hand. "Oh—" he smiled, drawing a sealed parchment from inside his jerkin, "one *final* thing! This is for my father; it explains what I am doing. If you would—"

"It will go by messenger immediately, my Lord," said Caranthir. "Take care; and bring her back to us."

"I shall do my best, my Lord." Legolas swung himself up onto Arod's back. "Ready?" he asked.

Gimli, already mounted behind him, grunted; Hentmirë, on her stout little pony, nodded; and Berryn, on one of Caranthir's mares, replied, "Yes, my Lord."

"Then let us go." And, with a final salute to Lord Fingolfin and Lord Caranthir, Legolas led his three companions out of the city.

...

Haldir stared at the elves lying at the centre of the stone alcove. "Valandil? Camthalion? Dead?"

"No!" Dínendal quickly assured him, "no, just drugged. We have no fatalities, a few sword wounds, but they—"

"Thank the Valar!"

"I have no idea how long Valandil will sleep," said the healer, "and he does not know—"

"The boy says it lasts twelve hours."

"Twelve hours on *me*," called Arador, "it may be different for an elf." He was kneeling beside one of the fallen enemy. "Come and look, sir!"

Haldir shot Dínendal an exasperated glance. "How many of them did we kill?" he asked, joining the boy.

"Seven," said Dínendal, "—if you count the one caught in the stone—but they have taken—"

"Just *look*," cried Arador, pulling back the cloak covering the creature's head.

Haldir looked, expecting to see a monster. But the face was extraordinarily handsome, with delicate, angular features, ebony-black skin and sharply pointed ears. "Valar," he said, "he is an elf!"

"Of a sort," agreed the boy. "A dark elf. They call themselves 'drow', apparently." He replaced the cloak. "Their women are said to be even more beautiful, and much deadlier than the men. They kill their own husbands—like female spiders!"

Haldir suddenly scanned the stone alcove. "Dínendal," he said, "where is Wilawen?"

...

Half past five The Aelvorn

Legolas stared at the circle of black water, shining like a mirror, with its strange stone lip and its empty grass verge. "It is as though the Forest is afraid to get too close to it..." He dropped from Arod and walked to the edge of the rocky funnel. "Where was she standing when you last saw her?" he asked.

"About where you are, my lord," said Berryn, dismounting.

Legolas crouched and lightly brushed his hand over the grass. "Nothing..."

"My back was turned," said Berryn. "So she may have gone closer without my knowing—she may have gone onto the rock itself."

The elf stepped over the lip and into the funnel.

"Do be careful, my dear," said Hentmirë coming up behind him, "it does not look safe."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Legolas chuckled. "We are here to throw ourselves into the water, gwendithen," he said, over his shoulder. "So I do not think I need to be—"

His expression suddenly changed as the stones shifted beneath him and, instinctively, he threw up both arms to maintain his balance.

And Hentmirë, just as instinctively, lunged for him, losing her own footing and tumbling both of them down the rocky slope and into the waiting waters...

...

Gimli blinked.

He could have sworn that the lake, like a living thing, had *reached up* to catch his two friends, and that—although they had broken its surface without a sound—the inky splash, like a great hand, had then *seized* the helpless Berryn, and dragged him down after them.

The dwarf blinked again.

All three. Taken.

With a furious roar he threw himself from Arod's back, drew his axe, and charged down the stone funnel, launching himself into the black pit.

...

The water was thick, and so silent that Gimli could hear his own heartbeat.

He felt the lake twitch around him, then heave and heave again, as though trying to cough him from its throat.

But the dwarf was having none of that.

Stunning the gullet with a swing of his axe, he rolled onto his belly and stretched himself full length, kicking his powerful legs to propel himself downwards. Faster and faster he went, following his outstretched axe, deeper and deeper, shuddering when a corpse-like face—*Legolas!*—briefly loomed before him as he shot towards a pale saucer of light.

Light.

Lighter.

BLINDING!

He closed his eyes.

And suddenly he was no longer under water but crawling upon dry land, coughing and spluttering, and gasping for air.

Chapter 8: Double Trouble

Shadowland

"Eowyn," said Legolas, gently, "we have seen the dawn and I must go back to the city. Alatárië!"

"Lassui..." said Eowyn.

"I hate that nickname—"

"No!" She pointed to the lake. "*Lassui!*" She sprang to her feet and—crying "Lassui! LASSUI!"—ran to the water's edge, falling on her knees.

And Legolas gasped as his own exact double slowly crawled from the water, and gathered her into his arms.

...

On the Caras Arnen road

By dawn, the messenger from Eryn Carantaur was standing beside a small, grassy clearing, about twenty miles beyond the northern tip of the Divor Rocks.

"Ride with all speed to Caras Arnen," Lord Legolas had told him. "This,"—he had handed Aranwë a sealed dispatch bag— "is for the eyes of Prince Faramir alone."

I will reach The City on the Hills by nightfall, Aranwë thought. There is time for a brief rest. "Avo visto, Gwaloth," he said to his horse, leading her off the road. "We can take no more than a few moments, so enjoy them."

He found himself a place to sit, opened up his travelling pack, pulled out his water skin, and took a sip. The leather dispatch bag felt heavy at his hip; the elf patted it absently. *Everyone knows, he thought, that Lord Legolas has a weakness for ellith. But Princess Eowyn is a woman. And married! What excuse can he possibly be sending to her husband?*

If ever an elf were tempted to break a seal—

Sweet Eru! Aranwë threw himself to the ground and lay in the deep grass, keeping perfectly still, hiding from whatever it was he had just glimpsed running along the forest road.

He could hear no breathing, no footfalls, no rustle of fabric nor clink of metal, but he *knew* that they were there—small, dark, and moving quickly through the shadows.

An entire army of them.

...

"Oh, melmenya," whispered Legolas, "I will never, ever, let you out of my sight again. Never. I swear it." He hugged her tightly. "Have you been waiting here all this time?"

"No, I—"

"She came to Eryn Carantaur and caused chaos."

The voice sent a shiver down Legolas' spine. He raised his eyes, already knowing what he would see, but was still taken aback by the sight of his *exact* double, bending over a wet and spluttering Hentmirë and rubbing her back soothingly.

"My betrothed is now convinced that I have a human mistress," said the double.

"*His betrothed is Alatáriël*," whispered Eowyn. "Everything is different here, Lassui—*everything*—Haldir is *dead*."

Legolas looked to his double for confirmation.

"Yes—I am sorry, mellon nín," said the other elf. "But we can talk later,"—he summoned the horses—"we must get you and your companions back to the city." He smiled down at Hentmirë. "Do you think you are recovered enough to ride now, híril nín?"

...

Cautiously, Aranwë raised his head, and peered across the clearing.

The dark army had passed without detecting him—he could sense no one lying in wait—but he felt for his bow and prepared himself to use it, before he risked rising to his knees.

Nothing happened.

Keeping low, he crossed the grass and crouched on the road, examining its surface with sharp eyes and sensitive fingers. *Dear Valar*, he thought, *had I not seen them I would have sworn that no one had passed this way for days!*

What should he do now? Return home to warn Prince Legolas?

No, he thought. *The army was moving north, towards Caras Arnen, and running swiftly.*

He raised his fingers to his mouth and whistled like a bird and, moments later, Gwaloth emerged from the trees and trotted to his side. Aranwë patted her neck. "Clever girl, hiding in the forest," he whispered. "I shall do the same—keep to the west, take the old sheep-herder's track up to Emyrn Arnen, and warn Prince Faramir before the dark army attacks."

...

Midday

"I trust that this will not take long," said Legolas, following his double across the lobby. "Eowyn may wake at any moment, and I do not want her to find herself alone."

"You love her very much."

"Of course I do."

His double smiled. "That is exactly the answer *she* gave. No, it will not take long. I just want to discuss some—practicalities." He opened the study door and motioned Legolas inside. "Does it look familiar?"

"It is identical," said Legolas, "except for Eowyn's desk, which should be *there*." He grinned. "And a pair of her little boots, which have usually been kicked off about *here*, and one of her dressing robes, which is generally draped over this chair. I am always complaining but she takes no notice... What practicalities did you have in mind?"

"Please sit down," said his double. "What concerns me is that, as far as I can see, no one—except, perhaps, your Princess Eowyn—can tell us apart. So we must find a way to make the difference clear."

"What do you suggest?"

"I think that you should wear black—I will have some clothing sent to you."

"Very well."

"Secondly," said the double, "however familiar this place may seem, I do ask you to remember that it is *my* world and *my* colony."

"Of course. I understand that."

"And I expect your companions—Gimli, son of Gloin, for instance—to remember it too."

"You need say nothing to Gimli," said Legolas, bristling slightly.

"Good. Then there is just one final thing," said his double. "Alatáriël is mine."

Legolas laughed.

"You think I am jesting?"

"No. I—"

"She is a very desirable elleth—"

"I am sure she is," lied Legolas, "but I think that *you* are forgetting that *I* am betrothed to Eowyn." He rose to his feet. "And so I ask *you* to remember that Eowyn is *mine*!"

...

Still muttering under his breath, Legolas crossed the main thoroughfare and entered the guest house opposite his double's private chambers—which, in his own world, was Hentmirë's house—closed the door, and locked it behind him.

'Alatáriël is mine.' The fool!

He took a deep breath, and slowly exhaled. The familiar sound of Gimli's snoring, coming from the bedchamber to his left, immediately soothed him.

Hentmirë, he knew, was in the next chamber, and Berryn in the study, and Eowyn—Eowyn was safe and sound in the main bedchamber!

He smiled. She had refused to ride back from The Aelvorn with Hentmirë—"I want to hold your hand," she had said—but, before they had walked even five miles, exhaustion had overcome her, and he had taken her up in his arms and carried her the rest of the way. By the time they had reached the city she had been sleeping so soundly, he had laid her on the bed, loosened her clothing, and washed her face, all without waking her.

He opened the door to her bedchamber and slipped inside without a sound, but she was already awake, staring up at him with enormous grey eyes.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello, melmenya."

"Are you coming to bed?"

"Yes." He unfastened his jerkin and shrugged it off, pulled off his boots, and climbed onto the bed, sinking into her outstretched arms.

"Your tunic is wet," she said. "Sit up." He obeyed with a smile, watching as she unhooked each

silvery clasp, then slid the damp fabric over his shoulders.

"I must wear black from now on," he said.

"Why?"

"So that 'his' people will not confuse us."

"You will look very distinguished in black." She wrestled the tunic down his arms. "He *is* rather,"—she pulled it off—"I think he is rather spoilt—used to having his own way—but underneath he is not so bad."

"Any elf who could bind himself to Alatáriël is a fool," said Legolas.

"I am not sure that he *is* bound to her."

"What do you mean?"

Eowyn shook her head. "Not now, Lassui. Lie back." She pulled at the lacings of his leggings. "We can talk later."

Legolas sank into the mattress. "Kiss me."

Eowyn tenderly kissed his lips.

"That was nice," he whispered, "but I did not mean *there*." He pushed his leggings down his thighs.

Smiling, Eowyn kissed his lips again. Then, taking her time, she worked her way down his chin, his throat, his bare chest, and—*At last!*—his abdomen, caressing his tense muscles with her lips and her tongue, forcing his body to arch in response. "You taste salty," she murmured, rubbing the tip of her nose along his erection, "perhaps we should wash The Aelvorn off you—"

"No!" Too aroused to think clearly, Legolas could not tell whether she was serious or merely teasing, but he grasped her shoulders and pushed her over onto her back, deftly planting a knee either side of her hips.

Then he lowered himself upon her and let his stiff penis fall between her thighs...

...

"Oh, melmenya," he groaned, thrusting with quick, deep strokes, his brows knitted in concentration.

Eowyn gazed up at her elf, her every sense sated with his size, his strength, his beauty...

She felt the tiny sting of release begin deep between her legs, raised her hips and felt his thrusts connect, felt the sweet pain burst, and flow up into her head, and out into her fingers and toes.

And, amidst her own cries of satisfaction, she heard Legolas sob, and felt his warm seed fill her.

...

Dusk

As the sun slipped down behind the mountains of Gondor, Aranwë sat at the northern edge of Eryn Brethil, looking out towards the foothills of Eryn Arnen. To the east—*Thank the Valar!*—

he could see, as yet, no sign of the dark army. To the north, however, his sharp elven eyes detected many small encampments concealed amongst the rocky slopes and, nestled within the deep gorge directly ahead, a large, fortified command post.

Men, he thought. And they have been here for weeks.

Aranwë lowered his hood, so that his pale hair and faintly glowing skin might be visible in the twilight, raised his hands above his head and, gently digging his heels into Gwaloth's flanks and encouraging her with soft, elven words, he emerged from the trees at a slow walk.

He had not travelled more than a hundred yards before a handful of shadowy warriors emerged—as he had expected—from the brush. One of them caught Gwaloth's head and held her fast. "Where are you headed, Master Elf?" he asked.

"I am a messenger from Eryn Carantaur," replied Aranwë, displaying the arms embossed on his leather satchel, "carrying an urgent dispatch for Prince Faramir. And I bring news of a dark army heading north along the Caras Arnen road."

The men exchanged glances. "How far away?"

"No more than three hours."

"They attack at night, Alfgar," said one of the men.

"Follow us, Master Elf," said the man called Alfgar. "Quickly."

Aranwë dismounted and let the warriors lead him across the open scrubland, to the foot of the hills and the entrance to the fortified gorge he had noticed earlier. There, he was searched by a pair of sentries before being allowed to climb up the steep, twisting trail to the command post, a jumble of tents and hastily-built wooden sheds tucked against the back wall of an enclosed plateau.

Alfgar led him to the door of the largest tent. "Wait here," he said, raising the flap and ducking inside; he re-emerged almost immediately. "Go in, Master Elf."

The tent belonged to a lady, and had been designed for recreation, not for war—its walls were lined with pretty painted cloths, its floor covered with patterned rugs, and a silk curtain partially concealed a feminine bedchamber—but the living space was dominated by a campaign table, covered with maps and charts.

Aranwë stared at its two occupants. The man was unfamiliar, but the woman...

He had last seen the woman in his lord's chambers, moments before he left Eryn Carantaur!

Sensing his scrutiny, the woman pushed herself up from the table and regarded him curiously. "Captain Alfgar tells me you have important news of the dark people, Master Elf."

"Yes, your Highness," said Aranwë, still staring.

"Well?"

"I have seen an army, your Highness, moving swiftly northwards along the Caras Arnen road."

"How many?"

Aranwë made a rapid calculation. "Perhaps two thousand."

"Gods!" muttered the man.

Princess Eowyn beckoned the elf to the table. "Show me where."

Aranwë traced his route from Eryn Carantaur. "They passed me here," he said, pointing to the northern edge of the Divor Rocks, "I was concealed in the undergrowth to the west of the road—I do not believe they saw me."

"If they had, they would have killed you," said the man. "They take no prisoners—they do not know the meaning of honour." The woman patted his arm. "They must be planning to join up with their comrades at Caras Arnen, my Lady. They will take the pass between here and the mountains of Mordor—"

"No," said the woman, shaking her head, "if their plan was merely to reinforce the garrison, they would have come out of the northern hills, as they did before. No—to emerge somewhere in the south and then risk travelling in daylight—which is painful to them, Master Elf—they must be intending something else." She bent closer to the map, scrutinising it carefully. "*A simultaneous attack from north and south... Fetch the two Captains, Berengar. We must be ready.*"

The man hurried from the tent.

"There is something strange about the rock here, Master Elf," continued the woman, tracing the southern edge of Eryn Arnen with her finger.

"Your Highness?"

"They cannot penetrate it. I believe we are safe here." She looked up. "You say you bring a message from Prince Legolas?" She held out her hand.

"I was instructed to give it directly to Prince Faramir," said Aranwë, with an apologetic bow. "*Only* to Prince Faramir."

"My husband was killed when the dark people drove us from the City, Master Elf—over three weeks ago. *I* am in command now."

Aranwë handed her the dispatch.

She broke the seal, unrolled the parchment and quickly scanned its contents. "What does this mean?" she demanded.

"I... I am not a party to its contents," stammered Aranwë.

"Do not lie to me! A messenger *always* knows the meaning of the message," said the woman, impatiently. "Your Prince is claiming that he found *me—naked*—in his bedchamber and is demanding that my husband send a troop of armed guards to remove me. What does he hope to achieve with this nonsense?"

Aranwë searched in vain for a tactful answer.

"Well?"

"You *were* there, your Highness—I saw you myself."

"You saw me? Do not be ridiculous, Master Elf! How long has your journey taken?"

"Eighteen hours, your Highness."

"And do you think that I could have matched that?"

"No, your Highness."

"Then this naked woman is clearly an impostor!" She sighed. "But we will deal with that later. Your Prince has unwittingly thrown us a lifeline—do you think you can return to Eryn Carantaur? Past the dark people?"

"Yes—I believe so, your Highness."

"Good." She crossed to a small writing desk, just inside her bedchamber. "I have sent messenger after messenger to King Elessar, Master Elf, asking for assistance, but none, so far, has survived to cross the Anduin.

"*You* will take a message to Prince Legolas. Perhaps *he* can help us defeat these demons..."

Chapter 9: The Underdark

The blackness—a cold, thick, emptiness darker than anything she had ever experienced—enveloped Wilawen, filling her with a terror that threatened her sanity.

The creatures around her were making no sound, moving in complete silence, and only the occasional glimpse of fire-bright eyes or the rough touch of an armoured hand contradicted her feeling of total isolation as she shuffled forwards.

And every step was taking her further from Valandil.

She knew that he had been hit by a crossbow bolt—she had seen him lose consciousness—and she knew that entering the rock had required some sort of magical transformation that had temporarily distorted her body.

But neither of those obstacles changed the truth: *He will come for me*, she thought—

The creature behind her gave an impatient push, and Wilawen stumbled against the creature in front.

The thing spun round—its red eyes flaring—and its unseen fist connected with her jaw. Wilawen cried out in surprise, raising her hand to her face, as another punch crashed into the side of her head, knocking her to her knees.

She cowered, awaiting the fatal blow.

But it never came.

Instead, she felt the air around her stir as a third creature seemed to rush to her side and stand over her. There was a whispered exchange of angry-sounding words. Then silence. And then a female voice began to chant.

More magic?

Wilawen raised her eyes, wiping away tears and sweat with the back of her hand. A faint glow was appearing, just above her head. She watched it spread upwards, in a long, slender cylinder, then gradually grow brighter.

A torch?

In its steady light, Wilawen could now see her immediate surroundings—a craggy wall close to her right elbow, an uneven floor beneath her knees, two creatures standing over her. One—a male—bent down and grasped her arm and, with surprising gentleness, helped her to her feet. Then, with a few quiet words, he took the torch—a single, pointed crystal glowing with a soft, blue fire—from his female companion and handed it to Wilawen and, giving her a gentle push, indicated that she should continue walking.

Wilawen gasped.

Purple, the child had said, back in the clearing. *Purple*, over and over. *Purple. Purple.* And Wilawen had not known what it meant.

Not until she looked into the face of her protector, and saw his purple eyes.

...

With the help of the elves, the men of the Newhome Night Watch were gradually recovering the bodies of the dead, and laying them on the carts.

Haldir crouched beside Dínendal. "How is Valandil?"

They had moved the wounded to the comparative safety of the road, improvising a 'healing room' along its grassy verge. Dínendal laid his patient's hand back on his chest. "His pulse has returned to its normal rate. I think he will awaken quite soon."

"Good. We *cannot* wait much longer."

There was no question in Haldir's mind that they were going after Wilawen, and he had already decided that the rescue party should be small—just himself, Rumil and Orophin, Valandil, Dínendal, and...

He spoke quietly. "Is the boy fit to come underground with us?"

"Fit?"

"His voice. That *groan*. Is it a sign of illness?"

Dínendal shook his head. "I believe it is his age—what happens to a human voice during the transformation into manhood—Men call it 'breaking'." He glanced at the boy. "He seems perfectly healthy to me. Do you want me to examine him?"

"No—try to waken Valandil."

...

With the crystal to light her way—however faintly—Wilawen could now move without stumbling or falling over her captors, and they—she was painfully aware—had increased the pace accordingly.

How will Valandil find me now?

With her free hand she grasped one of the buttons on the front of her dress, and pulled hard. The mother-of-pearl disc came away easily. *Thank the gods for fine elven thread!*

She lowered her hand and, holding her breath, opened her fingers.

...

Haldir made his way between the stretcher bearers to where the Reeve's son was crouching, searching through his travelling pack.

"Are you still willing to accompany us into the Divor Rocks?"

The boy looked up. "Of course I am. And you need me—I know how to get in. That is what I want to show you." He pulled out a creased and dirty parchment, carefully unfolded it and laid it on a boulder. "Look at this."

The image, though unfamiliar to the elf, was obviously a map.

"Look at the runes," said Arador, "they are the same as on the piece of blade you found. This was made by *them*."

"Where did you get it?"

"I know someone who knows someone," replied the boy, airily. Then he pointed to a narrow ribbon of colour running around the edge of the sheet. "The green is the surface. And I know that *this* is Emyn Arnen, so *this* must be the Divor Rocks."

Haldir shook his head. "How can you be so sure?"

The boy pointed to a circular symbol. "If this is the City on the Hills, then this triangular area is exactly where the gorge on the southern edge of Eryn Arnen should be. See how it curves to the west and then forks? The real gorge does that—I have paced it out. This distance,"—he measured the space between the city and the supposed gorge with his finger and thumb, "is twenty miles. And five times that... Brings you to the Divor Rocks, *here*."

Haldir looked unconvinced.

"These purple and blue lines," the boy persisted, pointing to the maze-like pattern covering the centre of the sheet, "are underground tunnels—but I will not know until we get there which colour is the space and which is the rock—the tunnels do not seem to join up..."

Haldir sighed. "Where do you think we are now?"

"Here." Arador pointed to the left-hand edge of the map. "And these indentations, here, are the Divor Caves—see how this one is coloured purple? If purple does mean tunnel, this is the way in."

...

Wilawen's fingers travelled slowly down the front of her dress.

Twenty.

She would risk ten—every other one. More than that would be too obvious.

She pulled off a second button and hid it in the palm of her hand, waiting for the next fork in the tunnel.

...

"March Warden!" cried Master Dínendal.

Haldir finished helping the Captain of the Night Watch lay what had once been the Mayor of Newhome on one of the carts, then jumped down and joined the healer beside a still-drowsy Valandil.

"His pulse is normal, his breathing strong, his eyes clear," said Dínendal.

"How do you feel?" asked Haldir.

"I..." Valandil looked up and down the road. "What happened?"

"You were hit by a drugged—"

"Wilawen!"

Haldir caught him by the shoulders. "They have taken her. But we are going to follow them and we are going to get her back—*Valandil!*" He shook the confused elf. "*We are going to get her back!*"

...

The rock wall, which, all this time, had been close to Wilawen's elbow, suddenly disappeared. Without drawing attention to herself, the woman raised her eyes—and saw that the roof was no longer visible in the light of her crystal torch.

The tunnel, she realised, had opened up into a cavern. And her captors seemed to be taking a very precise route across its uneven floor. She let the tip of the crystal droop. They were crossing a narrow rock bridge. *Over what?* she wondered. *A chasm? A lake? How far is the drop?*

She tore off her last button and held it in the tips of her fingers. The tunnels had been branching frequently over the last hour or so, and she would soon need some other way of leaving a trail.

She let her hand sink to her side—

And a fist ploughed deep into her lower back.

Wilawen's knees instantly buckled and she cried out in terror as a foot connected with her shoulder and sent her flying, forwards into the blackness—

...

"Master Arador tells me he is going with *you*," said the Captain of the Night Watch.

"That puts you in a difficult position, I know," replied Haldir.

The man shrugged his shoulders. "He is the Reeve's son, so I must do as he bids—and I am officially under your command. If you are willing to take him with you..." He shrugged again. "What I came to say is: I can spare you ten men if you want them..."

...

Something caught Wilawen's ankle and held her fast.

Then another pair of hands grasped her waist and dragged back onto the narrow bridge—and she felt the jagged rock scrape her legs and tear through her dress—and then she lay on her back, panting, gazing up into the halo of blue light—*Gods, I am still holding the crystal!*

She watched the silhouettes of three of the creatures dance above her, their hands flashing back and forth in some sort of...

Speech, she thought, hazily. *They are speaking with their hands, like the tongueless beggar outside my father's shop.*

Oh, my father...

Tears spilled from her eyes and she could no longer hold back the sobs. But one of the creatures immediately dropped to its knees and clamped a hand over her mouth.

Purple Eyes!

She stared up at him, silently begging him to help her, and caught—she hoped—the briefest flicker of sympathy on his handsome face before he hoisted her onto his shoulder and carried her over the bridge.

...

Having bade farewell to the Captain of the Night Watch, Haldir commandeered as many water skins, pieces of Lembas, and additional weapons as the rest of his troops could spare, dispatched six warriors to reinforce the garrison at Baradorn, and sent the remainder back to Eryn Carantaur with the wounded.

"You are sure you are ready?" he asked Valandil.

"Yes," said the other elf, vehemently. He picked up his bow. "Let us go, Haldir."

The March Warden turned to Arador. "From now on, *you* follow *my* orders."

The boy grinned.

"I am serious, Manling."

"*Manling?*"

"I will *not* have you putting Mistress Wilawen or my warriors at risk."

"What would you *do?*" asked Arador, with genuine curiosity. Then he pulled himself together. "No sir, of course not. You can rely on me. Truly. You have my word."

"Then take us to the cave."

Though thin and gangly, the Reeve's son proved surprisingly able, leading them northwards, at a brisk trot, for almost five miles along the edge of the Divor Rocks before coming to a halt beneath a group of caves, clustered on the cliff face like the features of three vast skulls.

Valandil began to climb.

"From the map it is hard to tell exactly which one we want," shouted the boy, "but I think you should start at the right."

In the end it was Arador himself who found the tiny opening, in the 'nose' of the right-most skull, using his own glowing crystal—which he had also bought from the someone who knew someone—as a torch.

He turned to Haldir. "I can see a cave beyond. Permission to go through first, sir?"

Haldir peered into the low tunnel and listened carefully, but he could neither see nor hear nor sense any immediate danger. "Granted," he said, "but do not move *one step* beyond the end of this tunnel."

The boy gave him a slightly cheeky salute, took off his travelling pack and crawled into the hole. Moments later, he came back, head first—"It is further than it looks!"—grasped the strap of his pack, and disappeared once more, shuffling backwards.

"What can you see?" shouted Valandil, anxiously.

"The cave seems quite large... But there is not enough light to see it properly."

Haldir patted Valandil's shoulder. "You go next. But wait with the boy until we join you."

It took some time for all of the elves to slide through the gap. Haldir came last—and was forced to remove his jerkin and tunic before he could squeeze through the narrowest part. He sat on the rocky floor, taking a moment to replace his bracers and let his eyes become accustomed to the dim, greenish light of the crystal.

"Which way, Arador?"

"Purple *is* space and blue *is* wall," said the boy, triumphantly, "so there are four ways out of here, but only one that connects with the tunnel *they* must have taken. If we work our way along the right-hand wall, it should be the first opening we come to."

Haldir pulled a length of elven rope from his pack and handed the end to Rumil. "You and Arador take the lead." He unwound the coil. "Valandil, follow them. Dínendal, stay with me." He

handed the other end to Orophin. "Take the rear. No one lets go of the rope unless everyone is in view. And, if anybody gets into trouble, give three tugs."

...

Once over the rock bridge, the creatures had moved quickly, running through the darkness as surely as through daylight. Wilawen had been carried along, head down, on Purple Eyes' back, no longer able to leave a trail for Valandil.

At length, they had stopped, and Purple Eyes had lowered her to the ground.

Wilawen glanced around, cautiously. The creatures seemed to be settling down to sleep.

Perhaps, if I wait until they...

But how *could* she escape? She could not move without the torch—could not move without giving herself away.

Even if I knew the way back...

Purple Eyes touched her arm, making her jump. "What? What do you—?"

He clamped his hand over her mouth. But none of his fellows stirred and, after a moment or two, he released her. Then, very gently, he took the glowing crystal from her hands and laid it on the ground beside her.

What are you doing? she mouthed, and for a second her heart froze with the thought that he might be planning to *use* her.

But he smiled, reassuringly, and held out his hand, waiting patiently and, after a brief hesitation, Wilawen placed her hand in his, and let him help her to her feet and guide her slowly through the darkness—out of the cave and into another small tunnel—where he lifted her over his shoulder and began to run, and Wilawen could only close her eyes and pray to the gods.

On and on they went, twisting this way and that, until Purple Eyes came to an abrupt halt and, through her tightly closed eyelids, Wilawen realised she could see *light*.

She opened her eyes.

They were standing at the mouth of another cave—a *beautiful* cave of delicate, twisting stalactites and slender, branching stalagmites—a faery forest lit by a carpet of glowing moss.

Wilawen bent down to examine the source of light, but Purple Eyes caught her fingers and, with his free hand made a sideways slicing motion—*No*.

"Is it poisonous?"

He put his hand to his lips, then repeated the slice.

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked.

Purple Eyes pointed to his own chest. "Drizzt," he said.

Wilawen frowned.

He pointed again, "Drizzt. *Drizzt*." Then he pointed to her.

"Oh—Wilawen."

"O'Wilawen," he said, with a gesture she had seen Valandil use to calm a skittish horse. Then he reached into a pouch at his hip, took out a small black object and showed it to her. Wilawen peered closely, in the dim light, surprised to see a piece of black onyx, shaped like a cat.

"O'Wilawen," Drizzt repeated, with the same calming gesture as before. He laid the statuette on a patch of bare rock and called, quietly, "*Guenhwyvar*..."

Wilawen watched the stone cat—its sleek body now brightly lit by the glowing moss—her eyes narrowing in disbelief as a grey mist seemed to emerge from its back, and swirl around it, slowly rising and growing denser and denser, until—

"Ohhhh—!" Wilawen clamped her hand over her mouth.

Chapter 10: Friends in need

Shadowland

“I *felt* it,” said Legolas, cradling Eowyn against his chest, “the pain, when you thought I had betrayed you; the hopelessness. I felt it.”

“I am so sorry, Lassui. I do not know how I could ever have thought—”

“*Shhhhhh.*” He hugged her closer, enjoying the feel of her soft, bare skin against his own. “You did not know what had happened, melmenya; how could you?”

“But I do know you. And *he* is nothing like you. He is—”

“Not nearly so handsome.”

“Lassui!” Eowyn pushed herself up, and grinned down at him. “When Lord Fingolfin told me that *he* was not my Legolas, I was the happiest woman in Middle-earth. In either Middle-earth.”

“I know. I felt *that* too.” He reached up and gently tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“What are we going to do now?” she asked. “Are we going to risk trying to get back?”

“Do you want to stay here?”

“Of course not. But...”

“But what?”

“Suppose one of us were to get safely back, and the other were to drown?”

Legolas remained silent for a few moments, staring up at her. Then he said, firmly, “We will not let that happen, melmenya.”

...

Emyn Arnen Eowyn’s tent

“There.” Eowyn laid down her pen and sprinkled sand over the wet ink. “I have not gone into many details, Master Elf,” she said, shaking the parchment, “for I trust that *you* will impress upon Prince Legolas the desperate nature of our situation.”

“Of course, your Highness.”

She rolled the letter and sealed it carefully, stamping the wax with a heavy gold signet ring. “I have heard much of the fortitude of elves, and of the spirit of their horses,” she said, “but even an elven horse must tire on such a journey. I will lend you my own Brightstar—he is descended from the Mearas.”

Aranwë placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. “I shall take great care of him, my lady.”

The woman rose from her desk and handed him the parchment. “Do not fail us, Master Elf.”

...

Eryn Carantaur

With Eowyn and Hentmirë on his arms, and closely followed by Gimli and Berryn, Legolas descended the main staircase, crossed the clearing, and ascended the broad wooden steps of the Banqueting Hall.

The sky was already darkening, and the intricately carved dome of the Hall was filled with the soft light of candles. The arrival of a *second* Lord of Eryn Carantaur, accompanied by his strange assortment of friends, brought a chorus of gasps from the assembled company—and elves who were unused to making a public display of curiosity shifted in their seats to get a better view.

Legolas' double, sitting at the head of the ring-shaped table between his betrothed and her father, rose and welcomed his guests. "*Suilad, gwador nîn,*" he said to Legolas. "*Baren bar lin.*"

Legolas returned his formal greeting, then added, in Westron, "My friends and I thank you for your gracious hospitality."

His double gestured to a row of empty seats beside Alatóriël. "*Telo, medo a sogo uin mereth...*"

...

Emyn Arnen

"Captains Alfgar and Drago, as you requested, my lady," said Berengar, holding up the tent flap to allow the soldiers to enter.

"Come in, gentlemen," said Eowyn, rising stiffly from one of the folding chairs. "Berengar has no doubt given you the news—two thousand of the dark warriors advancing swiftly along the Caras Arnen road."

"Two *thousand!*" muttered Alfgar.

"That is the elf's estimate. And they are less than two hours away."

She beckoned them over to the map table. "I believe that this gorge is safe—for some reason, they do not seem able to penetrate the wall behind us. So it is the people outside who are at risk—the women, children and elderly. We must bring them inside."

"It will be awful tight," said Drago.

"I know," said Eowyn. "But if we are to have any chance of protecting them, we have no choice." She turned to Alfgar. "*Your* men must build a barricade, from here,"—she pointed to a steep spur of rock extending out into the plain, some two hundred yards east of the gorge—"to here,"—she indicated a deep natural gulley running diagonally from the forest edge to a second, smaller gorge a quarter mile to the west.

"A redoubt," said Alfgar.

Eowyn nodded. "The gulley is all but concealed by brushwood at its southern end so, if we add some obstacles—"

“Stakes—”

“We may well take a first wave unawares.”

“I have heard that these demons can rise up into the air, my lady,” said Drago, doubtfully, “and float over such obstacles.”

“So have I,” said Eowyn, “but I have yet to see proof of it, Captain. And even if it *is* true, I doubt that they can float beyond the range of our archers.” She turned back to Alfgar. “You have less than two hours to construct the wall—take the carts, demolish the sheds, pile up the earth—use anything you can find. If the dark people attack before Captain Drago has brought the women and children safely inside, it will be up to you to hold the enemy back. Once everyone is secure, Captain Drago’s men will join yours at the barricade, and along the gully. In the meantime, my own Guards will be building a second barrier across the entrance to the gorge—”

“Ready for us to fall back, if necessary,” agreed Alfgar. “Who will be leading in the field, my lady?”

“I shall,” said Eowyn. “I shall be directing the battle from the plain.”

Alfgar glanced at Drago.

The other man shook his head. “You will not be safe there, my lady.”

“None of us will be safe, Captain Drago,” said Eowyn, “once they attack. None of us.”

...

Hentmirë turned to her neighbour and smiled warmly. “*Maer aduial, hîril nîn. Hentmirë i eneth nîn*—though I do not speak very much Elvish as yet.”

“Who are *you*?” asked Alatóriël, coolly. “Another of his women?”

Hentmirë cleared her throat. “I am one of Legolas’ *friends*, yes. I live in Eryn Carantaur—*his* Eryn Carantaur. He calls me his ‘adopted aunt’.”

Alatóriël looked at Legolas, deep in conversation with Lord Fingolfin. “How *strange*,” she said.

...

Eryn Arnen

Eowyn stood at the mouth of the gorge, surveying the preparations.

Captain Alfgar, the most capable of Faramir’s—of *her*—officers, had rounded up the able-bodied refugees and set them to work. The men and women, many of them skilled artisans, were scavenging timber from the camp, and wood from the forest, and were constructing a rough, irregular wall of overturned carts, planking, and fallen branches, interweaving it with brushwood, and shoring it up with earth and rocks; the warriors were rapidly digging a trench along the inside of the barricade; and even the children were fetching, carrying, and running errands.

“We will need light, Captain,” said Eowyn. She looked up at the sky. “The night is *dark*—which is in their favour. We must set a line of braziers beyond the barricade...”

...

Lord Fingolfin glanced across the Banqueting Hall.

The young Lord of Eryn Carantaur appeared to be arguing—heatedly—with his future father-in-law, whilst the elves around them tried tactfully to ignore the altercation. “When do you intend to leave us, my lord?” Fingolfin asked Legolas.

Legolas followed his gaze. “As soon as possible,” he said.

Fingolfin nodded. “Then might I invite you—and Princess Eowyn—to join me in my chambers later tonight? I have a fine old red of Dorwinion I think you will enjoy...”

...

Aranwë the messenger brought Brightstar to a sudden halt.

He had been making good progress along the sheep-herders’ trail, keeping far to the west of the Caras Arnen road, hoping to bypass the dark army unseen, and—having come perhaps twenty miles, through dense forest, without incident—he had just begun to think that he was safe, when something up ahead alerted his elven senses.

The forest was dark. Aranwë carefully scanned the trees, tracing the dim outlines of trunk and bough, looking for any sign of warriors waiting in ambush. Brightstar, whether sensing danger, or merely responding to his rider’s alarm, suddenly whinnied.

“*Shhhhhh*.” The elf patted the horse’s neck and, after calming him with a few gentle words of Elvish, he drew his bow from its strap and nocked an arrow. Then he urged the horse forwards. “*Tolo*, Brightstar...”

The horse, though nervous, walked bravely down the trail.

Aranwë heard a faint click.

He spun in the saddle, loosing his arrow at a dark shape that had suddenly appeared in the branches of the nearest tree; the shadow let out a muffled cry, and fell to the ground with a soft thud.

Aranwë’s hand flew back to his quiver “*Noro!*” he cried, digging his heels in the horse’s flanks. “*Noro*, Brightstar!”

The horse broke into a gallop and Aranwë turned, loosing again and bringing another shadow crashing down from the trees, just as something sharp stung his bow hand.

He dropped his gaze. A tiny crossbow quarrel had embedded itself in his flesh!

And, as he went to remove it, the elf could already feel a numbness, like liquid lead, flowing up his arm and into his body. His bow fell from his paralysed fingers, and he slumped forward in the saddle, using up the last ounces of his strength in a desperate attempt to lock his good arm around the horse’s neck.

“*Noro*, Brightstar,” he mumbled, “find the elves... Find... Eryn Carantaur...”

...

Eryn Arnen

“Why do they not attack?” asked Berengar.

The two hours had come and gone. Drago had brought hundreds of refugees into the comparative safety of the gorge; Alfgar had completed the barricade—as best he could—to a height of six feet in some places and backed with a deep trench; the warriors of North Ithilien were armed and ready.

“They hope to break our nerve,” said Eowyn.

Berengar, staring in the direction of the Caras Arnen road, craned his neck forward in a futile attempt to see through the dark. “They are succeeding.”

The woman turned to the young man—once her rival for her husband’s love, now the closest thing she had to a friend—and placed her hand on his arm. “*You* should not be here, Berengar,” she said. “Go up to the camp—I know you want to avenge him—we *both* want to avenge him—but your place is up there. No one can juggle men and stores and set up chains of supply like you can. I need you up there, in the Healing Tents and the Mess Tent, finding help for the wounded and food and shelter for the refugees.” She smiled. “It is where *he* would have stationed you.”

She saw the man’s handsome face distort with terrible grief, saw the pain threaten to overwhelm him, then watched in admiration as, with an heroic effort, he regained control of his emotions. “I shall do as you command, my Lady,” he said.

Eowyn squeezed his arm. “Good luck, Berengar. May we both live to see the dawn.”

...

Eryn Carantaur
Lord Fingolfin's chambers

Legolas leaned back in his chair. “The wine is, as you say, my Lord, excellent, but I do not believe it is the real reason you asked us here.”

“No...” Fingolfin looked slowly from Legolas to Eowyn, and back again, then said, “I do not want either of you to think that I am being *disloyal* to Lord Legolas. I believe in his leadership; I believe in his vision for this colony—” He suddenly looked down at his hands, which he had been unconsciously wringing, and clasped them tightly together.

“My lord?” prompted Legolas, gently.

“Recently,” said Fingolfin, still staring at his hands, “he has seemed...” He searched for the right word. “He has seemed to lack confidence. And some of his decisions have been—unexpected.”

“Are you saying,” asked Legolas, “that he is being influenced by his future father—”

“*No!*” Fingolfin shook his head. “No, my lord. Quite the opposite! I would say that he is deliberately avoiding that by vetoing any policy that might favour Angarátó’s business interests—sometimes to the detriment of the rest of the colony. I am *not* saying that he has lost his integrity—far from it. I am saying that, sometimes, it seems that he can no longer think clearly.”

Legolas set down his wine glass. “Why are you saying this to *us*, my lord?”

“Because I had been thinking for some time,” said Fingolfin, “that Lord Legolas’ feelings for Alatóriel were not natural.”

“In what way?”

The older elf cleared his throat, delicately. “Granted, she is a very beautiful elleth, and he has always had a reputation for—er,”—he cleared his throat again—“*excess*—”

Legolas gasped—his face betraying a mixture of surprise and embarrassment

“He is still young,” explained Fingolfin, quickly. “But their relationship, which has always been quite *public*—”

Eowyn blushed deeply, and reached for Legolas’ hand.

“—appears to have no foundation—besides physical desire—other than a slight affection on his part and a hunger for status on hers. When Princess Eowyn told me how the Harvest potions had been tampered with on your world, I realised that the same might have happened here. And if Alatárië—or, rather, her father—is still plying Lord Legolas with potions, then that might explain his strange attachment to the elleth, and his generally blunted faculties.”

Legolas turned to Eowyn. “You have spent time with him, *melmenya*. Do *you* think he is being drugged?”

Eowyn bit her lip. What Legolas’ double had admitted to her, beside The Aelvorn, had not strictly been told in confidence, and to disclose it now was almost certainly in his own interest, but, still, it felt like a betrayal.

“You have my word,” said Fingolfin, sensing her discomfort, “that nothing you say to me will be repeated outside these walls, my Lady.”

“I cannot say whether he is acting strangely,” said Eowyn, “but he *did* tell me that he has been dreaming of my double. He says he hardly knows her, and yet he has been dreaming about choosing her at the Harvest Rite and making her his wife.”

“*Dear Valar*,” whispered Fingolfin. He turned to Legolas. “Can I ask you, my lord, to stay here a day or two longer?”

“To what purpose, my lord?”

“To spend some time with him. I am sure that if he were to discuss these matters with *you*—”

“*I* seem to annoy him,” said Legolas. “In fact, we annoy each other.”

“Perhaps if you were *both* to spend time with him...”

“Will you allow us to sleep on it—as men say—Lord Fingolfin?” said Eowyn. “We will give you our answer in the morning.”

...

Eryn Arnen **The barricade**

Eowyn climbed onto the escarpment, and peered through a gap in the wooden barricade. “Where?” she asked.

“About three hundred yards, my Lady, to the right of the beech copse,” said Alfgar, softly.

“So *close*...” She scrambled back into the trench. “Light the braziers,” she said, decisively.

“Make ready to light the braziers!” cried Alfgar.

Twenty hand-picked men nocked prepared arrows; twenty comrades applied a light to twenty arrowheads. Alfgar raised his hand, then, “LIGHT THE BRAZIERS!” he cried, bringing it down in a swift, chopping motion.

The twenty archers loosed, and all found their targets. There was a long moment. Then twenty piles of pig fat-sodden kindling caught and flared.

Cries of pain went up all over the plain, from hundreds of dark shadows, stumbling about in the sudden light, some shielding their eyes, others raising their heads and staring bravely into the searing flames...

“Gods,” cried Eowyn. “Loose! *Loose!* Stop them! Stop them *now!*”

“*LOOSE!*” roared Captain Alfgar, and the cry was relayed along the barrier as archers began their desperate work, whilst support crews ran back and forth along the trench, bringing arrows and bowstrings and replacing broken bows.

...

“It is not our responsibility, *melmenya*,” said Legolas, quietly, as they made their way back to their lodgings.

“Why do you say that?”

“You think it is?”

Eowyn paused beside a small garden flet and, leaning against the walkway rail, gazed out across the aerial city. It was not her real home, but its beauty still brought a lump to her throat. “We have no idea,” she said, “how the two worlds co-exist—for all we know, events in one may influence events in the other.”

“If *that* were true, *melmenya*,” said Legolas, dryly, “*our* relationship should already have brought him to his senses.”

Eowyn turned her back to the handrail and smiled up at him. “Perhaps it has, *Lassui*. Perhaps that is what he is seeing in his dreams.”

Legolas shook his head. “You *never* let me win an argument.”

Eowyn grinned. “I *love* you. Especially when you admit defeat.”

“Come on, then—”

“Where are you going?” She grasped his arm.

“Hmm?”

“*We* are over there.” She pointed to the guest house.

Legolas cursed under his breath. “We will ask the others if they are willing to stay a few days more, melmenya—if they are not, we will return home immediately.”

...

Emyn Arnen

The fight

“Look,” gasped Eowyn, “it *is* true!”

The advancing warriors were shrouding themselves, disappearing within strange globes of darkness and, here and there, some were *rising* several feet into the air and floating towards the barricade. Eowyn narrowed her eyes, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. “Aim for the centre of each cloud,” she shouted. “Do not let the flyers cross the wall!”

“We cannot *see* the centres, my lady,” said Alfgar, as more and more of the dark army disappeared. “The clouds are merging...”

Some of his archers had stopped shooting, and stood in confusion, wildly aiming and re-aiming as their targets disappeared before their eyes.

“Shoot the darkness itself!” shouted Eowyn, at the top of her voice. “Shoot *into* the darkness—do not stop! You *must* hold the darkness back.”

Alfgar relayed her orders. Then, “We risk wasting arrows, my lady,” he added, quietly.

Eowyn shook her head. “No! They have no long-range weapons, Captain, just small crossbows, and swords. If we can hold them back, we retain the advantage—see how the darkness begins to thin? They are dying Captain—wounded or dying. The darkness is some act of will...” She leaned over the barrier. “The more we can kill before they get in close, the better our chances. It is worth risking the arrows—”

Alfgar pulled her down into the comparative safety of the trench. “Leave it to me, my lady—KEEP IT UP,” he roared, “keep shooting—hold them back!”

A frantic war cry went up behind them—from the gully, their western defence. Eowyn scrambled from the trench and ran across the tongue of land between the lines, her hand on her sword.

A horde of dark warriors, some mounted on huge lizards, had swept out of the forest and were attempting to cross the natural ditch. With no parapet to protect them, the ordinary men, women and children of Emyr Arnen were risking their lives, pounding the enemy with rocks, felling them with heavy logs, and drenching them with boiling water.

Eowyn drew her sword and prepared for hand-to-hand combat.

Three enormous lizards, running on huge, clawed feet, plunged into the ditch and emerged unscathed, their dark riders—wielding long, curved swords—slashing the defenders to right and left.

Eowyn stood her ground.

The foremost creature lurched towards her, snapping its wide, beaked mouth.

Eowyn waited, sword raised.

The rider veered left, pulling back on his reins, aiming to bring his sword arm within range of her. But the manoeuvre raised his mount's head, and exposed the soft, loose skin of its throat. Eowyn ducked past the creature's cruel jaws and slashed upwards in a long, overhand stroke, slitting its gullet—then threw herself to her knees to avoid the sudden gush of gore, and rolled clear of the falling carcass.

The dark rider, his leg crushed beneath his mount, struggled to release himself from his elaborate saddle.

Eowyn froze, momentarily taken aback by his beauty—by the delicate, almost feminine features, the pointed ears, and the thick white hair. Then the thing raised his head and stared at her, defiantly, with his fiery red eyes, and she remembered Faramir's mangled body, and calmly finished him off.

Now the chaos was all around her, but her warriors were not overmatched and she knew that, if she could regroup the men, form them into a wedge, they might still drive the dark demons back into the forest.

Eowyn raised her sword aloft. "Fall back to the centre," she shouted, and Captain Alfgar, running to her side, took up the cry. The humans started to manoeuvre themselves into position—

And, suddenly, everything changed.

An order seemed to pass along the dark ranks, and the demons began to withdraw, retreating down the gully and melting away into the trees—the humans had no trouble finishing off the few caught at the centre of the battlefield. The fight had mysteriously gone out of them.

Eowyn looked up at the sky.

Dawn! she thought.

...

Eryn Carantaur

"That is exactly how *he* behaved," said Gimli to Hentmirë, "when I first met him. As stiff-necked an elf as ever there was—"

"Good morning, elvillon, gwendithen," said Legolas, walking briskly into sitting room. "Ah, I see our host has provided us with an excellent breakfast!"

"This sounds ominous," said Gimli, quietly.

"Come, gwendithen," said Legolas, drawing out a chair for Hentmirë. "I have something to ask you—all of you—good morning, Berryn, come and join us." He seated Eowyn, then took his place between the two women.

Gimli offered Hentmirë some porridge; she shook her head.

"Lord Fingolfin," said Legolas, "has asked us to stay for a few days."

"Why?" asked Gimli, ladling a good measure of porridge onto his own plate.

“He has asked me to spend some time with my double,” replied Legolas.

“To talk some *sense* into him, I hope,” said Hentmirë, buttering a slice of bread.

“What makes you say that, gwendithen?”

“*He* is civil enough,” said Hentmirë, adding some strawberry jam, “if a little proud. But his lady is quite rude. He could do so much better.”

“To talk some sense into him, then,” admitted Legolas, with a smile. “But *I* have my doubts about the idea,”—he smiled at Eowyn—“and we shall not stay if anyone objects. What do you say, Gimli?”

“From what I saw last night,” replied the dwarf, “every elf in this colony would profit from a few days’ fighting orcs in the Mines of Moria.” He thought for a moment. “I say stay. If nothing else, it will give Hentmirë and Berryn a chance to get a good rest before they have to go back into that black water.”

Berryn laughed. “Thank you Gimli! *I* have no objections to staying, my Lord. It is fascinating to see the differences between the two worlds. As for the inhabitants’ slight frostiness—well, that is nothing I have not experienced before.”

“Hentmirë?”

The little woman laid her piece of bread on her plate, and wiped her fingers on her napkin. “If you can persuade them to give me my own clothes back,”—she held out her arms to indicate the borrowed elven gown that made her look like a short, stout Arwen—“I shall be quite happy to stay for a few more days,” she said. “Perhaps I could have a quiet word with your double.”

Legolas gave her a hug. “Then I shall tell Lord Fingolfin that we will stay for another two days, and then we will go home.”

...

Eryn Arnen

“You *need* some sleep, my lady,” said Berengar, following Eowyn into her tent.

The woman waved his supportive hand away. “How many casualties?”

Berengar sighed. “I estimate eighty dead, some of them women and elderly men,” he said. “We are recovering as many bodies as we can. As for *their* dead, I have not yet decided what to do with them, nor with your lizard—perhaps we can eat it... *We* have over a hundred injured and, of those, the healers say at least ten will not live—”

“They will return Berengar,” said Eowyn. “They will return—perhaps *tonight*. We must shore up the barricade, fortify the gulley—it was the weakest point in our defences—and we need arrows—”

Berengar caught her by the hands. “If you do not take four hours sleep *now* I shall drug you myself!” He led her into her bedroom and started to unlace her cuirass.

“*Berengar!*”

“If you are going to behave like a warrior, expect to be treated like one.” He removed the leather breastplate, and lifted her mail hauberk over her head. “Sit down.” He unlaced her boots and pulled them off. “Now—*lie down*,” he said, lifting her feet and dumping them unceremoniously onto the bed, “and *sleep*! I will organise the repairs. And...”

He sat down beside her and took her hand. “You said earlier that you were using me as Faramir would have used me. Well, Faroth would have trusted me to give him advice. And that is why I am advising *you* to send for your brother immediately.”

When there was no protest, he glanced down at her face.

She was fast asleep.

“Very well,” he said. “*I* shall send for your brother.”

...

Eryn Carantaur

Legolas answered the door.

“I am on my way to inspect the guard post this side of Eryn Brethil,” said his double. “Perhaps you would like to join me?”

Legolas could not keep the surprise from his face.

“I know that Lord Fingolfin has invited you to stay a while,” the other elf explained. “He thinks that we will each benefit from hearing the opinions of the other...”

“Ah. I see.” Legolas nodded. “In that case, yes. Let me take my leave of Eowyn, and fetch my bow.”

...

Berengar scanned the Mess Tent. “Captain Alfgar, may I join you?”

“Suit yourself.”

The captain was a good man, Berengar knew, but he thought the world of Eowyn, and had never hidden his hostility to the secretary who had supplanted her in her husband’s affections.

Berengar laid a sealed letter on the table. “Lady Eowyn has already written to Lord Legolas, asking for his aid—”

“I know.”

“And that is all well and good,” continued the secretary, “but he is an elf and, since the Ring war, the elves have shown little interest in the affairs of men.”

“So?”

“I have written to her brother—”

“Wild Eomer King.”

“The same. And I need a strong swimmer,” said Berengar, “to deliver the letter.”

The captain’s surly expression suddenly changed. “A *swimmer*?”

“Capable of swimming at least ten miles along the Anduin, against the current,” said Berengar. “At Parth Forod there is a farm that Faroth—Prince Faramir—used to visit regularly, when hunting orcs along the northern border. The farmer there will supply our messenger with a horse.”

“That is a clever plan,” said Alfgar, nodding. “Does Lady Eowyn know of it?”

“No,” Berengar admitted, for he anticipated no further resistance from Alfgar. “*Do* you know of a swimmer, Captain?”

...

The Eryn Brethil road

“Have you found it to be true, what they say about the passion of women?”

Legolas, who had been enjoying the slow, silent ride through the carantaur forest, turned to his double in surprise.

His double shrugged. “You cannot blame me for being curious...”

“I fell in *love* with Eowyn the moment I saw her,” said Legolas, pointedly, “as she ran into the Golden Hall, intent on protecting her uncle. Why did that not happen to you?”

The other elf ducked gracefully beneath a low branch. “How do you know that it did not?”

“Did it?”

“I was certainly aware of her charms...”

“That is not what I mean, and you know it.”

“What you mean,” said his double, “is that if your precious union with an adaneth really *is* approved by the Valar, why did it not happen here, too?”

“No—”

“*Yes*. You are not as confident in your choice as you claim—”

“It is not *I* who is dreaming of Alatórië!”

His double drew in his reins and brought Arod to a halt. “What do you mean by that?”

“*You* are dreaming of Eowyn. Or of her double. *You*—” His double suddenly gestured for silence. “Two riders,” he whispered, pulling his bow from its strap and nocking an arrow; a split-second later, his double did the same.

They sat, side-by-side, astride their horses, staring intently through the red-dappled gloom, their arrows trained, unmoving, on a bend in the forest trail, thirty yards ahead.

Moments later, his own bow at the ready, a very familiar figure emerged from the trees, leading a

magnificent black stallion bearing an unconscious elf on its back.

“Valandil!” cried Legolas. “And Brightstar...” He lowered his bow and dropped lightly to the ground. “What has happened?”

“We do not know, my lord,” said Valandil, looking uncomfortably from one Legolas to the other. “We caught the horse galloping south along the old sheep-herder’s trail. Aranwë was already unconscious.” He looked down at Legolas, clearly awaiting an explanation. “*My lord?*”

“This is a distant kinsman of mine,” said Legolas’ double, dismounting. “He is paying me a brief visit. But I was not expecting Aranwë until tomorrow, at the earliest, and he should have brought men...” He came up beside Legolas, who was gently examining the messenger for any signs of injury. “I sent him to Prince Faramir, with a letter demanding he send an armed escort to fetch his wife.”

“Why is he riding Brightstar?” asked Legolas. “Eowyn *loves* this horse...”

“He is carrying a message, my lords,” said Valandil. “I thought it might be urgent.”

Legolas carefully opened the leather satchel, removed a rolled parchment, and handed it to his double, who broke the seal and quickly scanned its contents.

“There is a tiny wound on his hand,” said Legolas, “almost like the insect bites I have seen on men —”

“*Valar!*”

“What is it?”

“Prince Faramir is dead.”

“*Dead...* How?”

“In battle.” He read from the letter:

“We do not know where these demons have come from, only that, until now, they have shunned the daylight and attacked at night. Your messenger, however, has reported seeing an army of two thousand, in the vicinity of the Divor Rocks, running north along the Caras Arnen road. I shall leave it to him to provide further details—” He raised his eyes. “When will he wake?”

“I do not know,” said Legolas. “But his pulse is strong, and its speed is no different from mine...”

His double continued reading:

“I have sent repeatedly to King Elessar for assistance but none of my messengers has reached him. The dark army clearly intends to strike immediately, perhaps with their allies from Caras Arnen, in a two-headed attack. If we endure this night I doubt that we can survive another... I beseech you, Lord Legolas, to keep the promise you once made, and join me in this desperate fight,

“Your former comrade in arms,

“Eowyn.”

“Eowyn!” Legolas grabbed the letter and stared at the signature. It was identical to the one he knew

as well as his own. “It will take us—what?—two days to raise an army and to march it north to Emyrn Arnen. How many warriors can you call upon?—*Eomer!* Why has she not sent to Eomer for help? Why—?” He turned to his silent double, suddenly aware that the other elf was not responding to his questions. “You do not intend to answer her call...”

Chapter 11: The Guardian

The sleek black cat—which, contrary to everything that Wilawen’s father had taught her about the nature of matter, had somehow emerged from the onyx statuette—stretched out its powerful forelegs and bared its claws, impatiently tamping the ground with its hind feet and swinging its his head from side-to-side, opening its massive mouth to display its terrifying teeth.

Wilawen inched backwards until her shoulders touched solid rock.

But Purple Eyes—Drizzt—approached the animal smiling and, catching it by the scruff of the neck, playfully stroked it between its glowing eyes.

The monster *purred!*

“O’Wilawen,” said Drizzt, beckoning.

Wilawen shook her head, but the dark elf beckoned again, trying to encourage her with an exaggerated smile, repeating something in his strange tongue, over and over.

“Why?” she asked.

The drow tilted his head, questioningly.

“Why bring it here? Why ask me to stroke it—oh *no!*”

Responding to a command from its master, the animal was padding towards her. Wilawen clenched her fists as it sniffed at her hands, and trembled when it nuzzled her waist. “Make it stop,” she whispered. “Please—make it stop touching me.”

The dark elf pointed to her—“O’Wilawen,”—then to the cat—“Guenhwyvar,”—then, emphatically, to the cave floor. He searched her face for a sign that she had understood.

Wilawen bit her lip.

The drow pointed to himself—“Drizzt,”—then moved his hand to indicate ‘out of the cave’.

Wilawen nodded.

Smiling reassuringly, he slowly took her hand and placed it on the cat’s head—“Guenhwyvar,”—then, with his own hand, he made a stroking motion in the air.

“Oh gods,” whispered Wilawen, “you want me to make friends with it because you are leaving us here together...” Her head spun with questions. “Why? For how long?”

The drow repeated the stroke.

“Yes, I understand.” Wilawen obeyed and, to her surprise, the cat responded with a deep, contented purr, nuzzling her waist again, but this time the gesture was gentler, almost affectionate.

She looked up at the smiling drow. “You brought it here to protect me?”

He held out his hand and waited for her to take it.

“What now?”

...

Haldir and the others had reached an unexpected fork in the tunnel—Arador was studying the map by the light of his glowing crystal whilst the big elf, painfully aware of the slow progress they were making, handed round a flask that Dínendal had given him.

"Just two sips," he said to the boy, sternly.

"Yes, sir." Arador took a mouthful, then stared up at him in surprise. "Oh my gods! Is this...?"

Haldir nodded. "It is miruvor. We must make it last."

"Do you know where we are?" asked Valandil impatiently.

"Yes. We must go right," said Arador. "Then, in about, oh,"—he measured the distance with his thumb—"four hundred yards, we will join the path the drow took."

"Are you sure?" asked Haldir, quietly.

"As sure as I can be," whispered the boy.

"Let us go, then," urged Valandil.

"Wait!" Haldir caught him by the shoulder. "Drink! Then—everyone—back in formation."

"You do know," said Orophin, as his brother handed him the end of the rope, "that we are being followed?"

"Yes," replied the March Warden, "but I sense no threat, as yet." He shrugged. "Just make sure that you stay close—and be ready to use your sword."

...

Eryn Carantaur

Led by Orodreth, the returning border guards had brought their injured comrades into the clearing beneath the city.

Arinna, the woman from Far Harad, came hurrying down the main staircase to greet her two elves. "Ori! What has happened to Cami?"

"He is sleeping, my Lady, that is all," said Orodreth, holding her back from the fallen elf, who was being examined by Master Findecáno. "The young man claimed that *he* slept for twelve hours," he said, over his shoulder, to the healer. "Valandil recovered in less, but Camthalion seems to be taking much longer."

"There are *two* punctures in Camthalion's arm," replied Findecáno, "so he received a double dose—as did Amras."

He looked around the clearing. There was a bad chest wound, already cleaned, stitched and dressed by Master Dínendal; two head wounds, one of whom was also recovering from the effects of a single sleeping dart; a superficial shoulder wound; and two sleepers.

Findecáno rallied his assistants. "Bring the injured up to the Healing Room—*with care*."

"Go with Camthalion, my Lady," said Orodreth. "I must make my report to Lord Legolas, and then I have a message from Haldir—"

"Legolas has gone," said Arinna, quietly.

"Gone?"

"They are trying to keep it quiet but *I* just happened to hear..." She shrugged; she never revealed her sources, not even to her elves. "He has gone to rescue Lady Eowyn, who has fallen into something called The Aelvorn. Caranthir and Fingolfin are in charge."

"Then I must report to them. I will see you later, my Lady. And do not worry, Camthalion will make a complete recovery,"—he kissed her forehead—"and be home with us in no time."

...

The Green Cave

Drizzt guided Wilawen past the beds of glowing moss to a small hole in the rock wall, about six feet above the cave floor and well-shielded by a group of thick stalagmites.

"You want me to climb in there?" She reached up towards a handhold but—even on tip-toe, and over stretching every part of her body—she could not quite make it. "You will have to help me..."

The dark elf laid a firm hand on her shoulder.

Wilawen turned—and gasped as he stooped, caught up part of her skirt, and pulled hard.

"What are you *doing*?" she cried; had she been wrong to trust him?

He pulled again, this time tearing away a large patch of material, and exposing her bare legs.

"*Drizzt!*"

But his smile was still reassuring, and Wilawen, watching him roll up the fabric and push it down the front of his jerkin, realised that it must be a part of his plan. "If only you could talk to me..."

With slow, exaggerated movements, he pulled a small water skin from his belt and gave it to her; then he bent down and made a stirrup with his hands.

"I know you cannot understand me," said Wilawen, putting her hand on his shoulder, "but—thank you." She gave him a grateful squeeze, and climbed into the hole.

Drizzt gestured for her to move further inside.

Wilawen gave him an almost cheerful wave before shuffling backwards and turning.

The tunnel was not completely dark, thanks to the phosphorescent glow coming from the cave floor below, and she could see immediately that after about twelve feet, it came to a dead end.

I am a sitting duck in here! she thought, and she turned back, intending to crawl out again.

But, before she could move, she heard Drizzt issue a quiet command and, suddenly, a huge, black form appeared in the tunnel mouth, and sealed her in.

...

Arador had been correct—the right-hand passage had, after about four hundred yards, joined what seemed to be a much broader tunnel running from right to left, and—as far as Haldir's blunted senses could judge—downwards into the earth.

"Left?" asked Valandil.

"Yes..." The boy held out the glowing crystal, faintly illuminating a high, vaulted ceiling dripping

with delicate stalactites. Then he bent and held it close to the ground. "See how smooth the floor is? I think this tunnel is well-used."

"Yes," said Orophin, "but by what?"

"Our unseen companion is growing more curious," said Haldir.

Orophin nodded. "Getting closer. And, now and then, it makes a strange sound—like two rocks, tapping together..."

"Let us keep moving," said Haldir, decisively. "If this tunnel is better, perhaps we can make up some time—"

"Wait," said Valandil, suddenly. "Arador, bring the light over here."

The boy handed him the crystal.

Without letting go of the rope, Valandil dropped to his knees. "Oh Valar..." He reached down and picked up a tiny object and, holding it in the tips of his fingers, showed it to the others. "This is Wilawen's," he said. "It is a button from her dress."

"Well, that *proves* that we are going in the right direction," said Arador.

"But how did she lose it?" Valandil swept the crystal across the floor. "How was it torn off? What has happened to her?" He sat back on his heels. "I cannot find anything more..."

"Perhaps she dropped it *deliberately*," said the boy, coming up beside him and, tentatively, laying a hand on his shoulder, "to leave you a trail."

"Arador is right," said Haldir, firmly. "Remember how resourceful she is, Valandil. Come, we must keep moving."

...

Wilawen leaned back against the tunnel wall.

The cat seemed to be sleeping—stretched full-length across the alcove, its head resting upon its crossed forepaws.

Sleep...

Wilawen was exhausted, but she could not rest.

Not now that she had time to think.

She had seen Valandil fall but, in her own selfish fear, she had assumed that he would come and rescue her!

Suppose the drug did more than just induce sleep?

Suppose Valandil had been *poisoned*?

Suppose *he* needed *her*?

...

The larger tunnel had opened up into a cave, and—almost without realising it—the elves, less oppressed by the weight of rock above them, had begun to move more confidently.

"Stop!" cried Arador, pulling hard on the rope. "Stop! Stop! *Wait!*"

"Not so loud!" hissed Haldir, "remember we are not alone down here!" Then, "What is it?"

"I am not sure," said the boy, peering at the map. "But there is something marked—it could be a lake—I do not know."

"Let me have the light," said Rumil. "I will scout ahead—show me, Arador."

"Whatever *this* is," said the boy, running his fingertip around a jagged oval line, "I think you should watch your feet. *This* may be a bridge."

"Tie the rope around your waist to leave your sword arm free," said Haldir. "And if you get into trouble, remember—tug."

"And yell," said Rumil, with a grin.

He picked his way slowly across the great, uneven slabs of the cave floor, holding the crystal low, his eyes on the ground around his feet. "It certainly slopes," he said, "and—yes, you are right, Arador—there is a sudden drop."

"Can we climb down?" asked Haldir.

Rumil crouched by the edge, found a small stone, and dropped it over. "One. Two. Three," he counted, reaching down with the crystal and peering into the blackness. "Eight. Nine—" There was a splash, followed by a hissing, bubbling sound.

"*Acid*," said Arador.

...

The important thing with animals, thought Wilawen, is to show no fear. She reached towards the cat.

Guenhwyvar growled.

Wilawen froze. Then she took a deep breath and—closing her eyes—patted its head.

The cat purred.

Wilawen sighed with relief. "I want you to be good," she whispered, "and stay exactly where you are..." Coming up on her knees, she drew the remains of her skirt between her thighs and tucked its hem into her belt, thanking the gods that Valandil could not see her—*He would surely want his ring back!* Then, with some difficulty, she swung one knee over the cat's body—Guenhwyvar growled a warning, but did not move—and she climbed over.

...

"Come back from the edge," called Haldir.

"Work your way to the right," said Arador. "These lines *must* be a bridge."

Crawling on his hands and knees, Rumil followed the 'shoreline' until he found the narrow spur of rock jutting out into the void. "I cannot see if it spans the entire hollow," he said, "but I think there may be a light at the other end..."

"Stay where you are," said Haldir, following the rope, hand over hand. "We are coming to join you."

Gradually, the entire party assembled beside the bridge.

"This is narrow," said Orophin, using the crystal to examine the path. "And we will not be able to see where we are placing our feet."

"*Wilawen* must have crossed it," said Valandil, anxiously.

"The drow can see in the dark, Valandil," said Arador, "so they may have carried her across."

Haldir turned to Dínendal. "If one of us were to fall, could you...?"

The healer shook his head. "If he survived the drop—assuming we could pull him back up—I have nothing that would help him," he said. "It would be a very painful death."

"What a terrible place this is," said Valandil, quietly.

"We *could* cross in twos, going and coming back," said Arador suddenly. "Like in the children's puzzle."

...

The view from the mouth of the alcove was partly obscured by stalagmites, but *Wilawen* could neither see nor hear any obvious danger. She sat with her bare legs dangling down the rock wall, trying to come to a decision.

Should I wait?

For some reason, she trusted Drizzt and, though she had no idea why he was helping her, she was convinced that he intended to come back for her and take her, somehow, to the surface.

But what happens if he cannot get away from the others? she wondered. *How long can I last on a pint of water and no food?*

What happens when I am weak and the cat is hungry?

Should I try to find my own way out?

If she could carry some light... Drizzt had warned her not to touch the moss, but if she could find a patch growing on a loose stone, and hold it carefully, and if she could persuade the cat to go with her, perhaps she could follow her own button trail back to Valandil.

She sighed: *There are a lot of 'ifs' in that plan.*

Leaving the cave would be dangerous, she knew, but she also knew that her only hope of remaining sane was to find something to do.

I can start by looking for a mossy stone...

She rolled onto all fours, backed up to the edge, and reached down with one foot.

Guenhwyvar suddenly raised its head and growled.

Startled, *Wilawen* missed her footing and slid down the rock wall, scraping her hands on the rough stone and landing on her knees. She picked herself up and examined her injuries.

Silently, the cat leaped down beside her.

...

"What do you mean?" asked Haldir.

"It will take a long time," said the boy, "but—two people cross with the crystal, then one brings it back; then two more cross, and one brings it back; and so on, until we are all across."

Haldir considered the idea. "Rumil and Orophin will go first, then Rumil will bring the crystal back. That means that *you*,"—he patted his Orophin's arm—"will be on your own until the next pair arrive."

"I will manage," said his brother. "Our noisy companion will be over here, with you."

"He may have friends," said Haldir. "Be careful."

...

Eryn Carantaur Lord Caranthir's chambers

"The Divor Rocks," said Lord Fingolfin. "Everything seems to point to Berryn's great crack in Middle-earth—thank you." He accepted a glass of wine from Lord Caranthir.

"But thirty-seven *dead*," said Caranthir. He handed a second glass to Orodreth.

The warrior thanked him with a polite nod. "Yes, my Lord—the Mayor of Newhome, his newly-wed daughter, her husband, and the entire wedding party—apparently, the bride and groom wished to spend their wedding night in the Forest—"

"*Oh, Valar!*" Caranthir sat down heavily.

"It is an ancient custom amongst the edain of these parts, I understand," said Fingolfin. "It is believed to make the marriage fertile—"

"Oh, *no*..." Caranthir shook his head.

"The March Warden immediately informed the Reeve of Newhome, my Lords," continued Orodreth, "and *he* sent the Night Watch to retrieve the bodies."

"Tell us more about these dark people," said Fingolfin.

"According to the Reeve's son—who seems to be something of an expert, my Lords—they visit the surface rarely—perhaps once in every two generations of men—"

"Sixty years..."

"But when they do, there are many deaths."

"Why?" asked Caranthir.

"Hatred, my Lord," said Orodreth, "and revenge—so the young man says. The drow, as they call themselves, believe that *they* ruled Middle-earth until *we* forced them underground. They hate all surface dwellers. Fortunately, the light of the sun is unbearable to them, so their raids are short-lived."

"Are they likely to strike again?" asked Caranthir. "Tonight?"

"I do not know, my lord."

"If they do not," said Fingolfin, "it may be over for another sixty years."

"But the March Warden, my lord," said Caranthir. "He will surely need help. And Mistress Wilawen..."

"Quite." Fingolfin leaned back in his chair, pressing his hands together. "You are a diplomat, Caranthir; I am a scholar. We are hardly equipped to deal with this situation, and Lord Legolas is not here to guide us..." He turned back to Orodreth. "Did Haldir tell you how he intended to enter the Divor Rocks?"

"The young man believes there is way through the Divor Caves."

"Are you willing to return?"

"My Lord?"

"Are *you* willing to lead another expedition to Eryn Laeg?"

"It would be an honour my Lord."

"Then what I suggest is this," said Fingolfin. "We send a well-equipped force to Eryn Laeg to contain any further invasion by the dark people and to provide March Warden Haldir with any assistance he may require. In the meantime, Lord Caranthir, you and I must draw up plans for a permanent guard post at the Divor Rocks."

...

The Acid Cave

The two elves set off across the bridge—Rumil in front, holding the light, and Orophin behind, his hands on his brother's shoulders. The remainder of the rescue party sat motionless on the rocky shore, watching the pale greenish glow disappear into the blackness.

"Are you glad I came?" asked the boy.

Haldir smiled in the dark. "You have yet to prove your worth, Master Arador."

"Ha!"

"We are across," announced Orophin, "and... We have found something."

"What?"

"Another crystal."

"Gods," muttered Arador. He reached for Haldir, found an arm, and squeezed it. "The drow do not need light," he said. "They can see in the dark."

"Wilawen would have needed it," said Valandil. "But why would she have dropped it?"

"I do not know..."

...

With Guenhwyvar waiting patiently at her side, Wilawen crouched beside her third moss bed.

It was hopeless. The plant was rooted in a rich, dark soil that lined the hollows of the cave floor; she could see no way to remove a piece, and carry it, without using her hands, and Drizzt had been adamant that she should not touch it.

She looked through the cave mouth, to the profound darkness beyond. "I cannot leave here

without light," she said patting the cat. "Not unless *you* can carry—"

The words died on her lips. Something in the cave had changed.

Wilawen slowly rose to her feet and stared.

When Drizzt had summoned the cat, she had been standing close to the cave mouth, with her back against the rock. Now, a row of mushrooms—she could think of no other word for them, though they were more than six feet high—was growing against the wall.

Grasping Guenhwyvar by the scruff of the neck, Wilawen threaded her way between the clumps of moss, towards the strange fungus.

...

Using both crystals, the entire rescue party had crossed the narrow bridge two at a time—Rumil and Orophin; then Arador and Valandil; then Rumil and Dínendal; and, finally, Orophin and Haldir.

"We will take a few moments' rest," said the March Warden, laying his burden on the ground.

He stretched his body, wearily, before crouching beside his pack and pulling out the flask of miruvor. Elves were tireless under normal circumstances, but for an elf to be confined within a mass of rock, isolated from the trees and divorced from the stars—even a worldly elf like Haldir—was *not* normal.

Where is the dwarf when you need him?

And where is that Manling?

"Arador?" He glanced over his shoulder. The boy was crouching beside the bridge—far too close to the acid lake for Haldir's liking. "Arador!" he barked, "get away from the edge!"

The boy whirled round, his face—visible in the light of the crystal he was holding—a picture of guilt.

"What have you done?" demanded Haldir.

"Shhhhh," said the boy.

Rumil and Orophin gasped.

Ignoring the boy's insolence, Haldir repeated the question.

Arador glanced unhappily at Valandil before answering, quietly, "I have found something."

"What?" demanded Haldir. "*Answer me.*"

The boy ran his hand through his hair. "A piece of a woman's dress," he admitted.

"*WHERE?*" Valandil scrambled towards him.

"I did not want to tell him like this!" cried Arador. He turned to Valandil. "It is snagged on the rock down there—see?" He held out the crystal. "*It looks as though she fell, Valandil...*"

"No!" cried elf, "No! *NO!*"

The boy grabbed his arm.

...

Eryn Carantaur Haldir's flet

"Mistress Cyllien." Orodreth placed his hand on his heart and bowed his head. "I have a message from March Warden Haldir. May I come in?"

The elleth ignored his formal greeting, but stepped aside to allow him to enter.

Orodreth had visited Haldir's flet twice before and, on both occasions, had been impressed by the sparse neatness of his home, run with military precision.

Now the place lay in chaos, with objects piled on every surface and ellith's clothing draped over the furniture and scattered across the floor.

"Where is he?" asked Cyllien.

"May I sit down?"

The elleth shrugged.

Orodreth could not help wondering what Haldir saw in her. "We were attacked," he began, adding, quickly, "the March Warden was not injured,"—though the elleth did not seem particularly concerned—"but Mistress Wilawen was abducted."

He paused, expecting a response, but Cyllien said nothing.

"The March Warden is leading the rescuers. He asked me to give you this." He handed her a small wax tablet.

"Thank you." She did not open it.

"I will leave you then," said Orodreth, rising. "I shall be returning to Eryn Laeg, in case the March Warden needs any assistance. But if there is anything I can do before I leave—"

"No, thank you."

Orodreth bowed his head. "I will see myself out, then."

He closed the door behind him, thinking, *That elleth is fading.*

...

The Green Cave

Crouching low, Guenhwyvar flattened its ears and growled and—as if in response—a cloud of spores puffed from one of the mushrooms, entering Wilawen's nose and mouth, making her organs twist in her body. She clasped her stomach with one hand, coughing violently, whilst she tried to restrain the massive cat with the other.

...Keep back...

Still coughing hard, but less painfully now, Wilawen peered at the fungus. It was as tall as an elf, its stem as broad, and its dark, rounded cap resembled a head, with unblinking white eyes.

...Why are you here...?

"How are you speaking to me?" she whispered. "What are you?"

...WHY ARE YOU HERE...?

"I am hiding from the dark warriors..."

...You bring danger...

"I am sorry."

...We are a peaceful people. But we will fight if we must...

The fungus released another cloud of spores, making Wilawen gag uncontrollably as her stomach threatened to turn itself inside out.

"Please stop," she sobbed, "please! I will go as soon as I can, but I cannot leave by myself."

...We intend you no harm. Take the beast back into the hole and wait there...

"I will," said Wilawen. "Thank you."

...

"Hush!" cried Orophin, "*Listen!*" He swept the outstretched crystal back and forth in a wide arc.

"What is it?" asked Haldir.

"Dark warriors! The cave is *full* of them!" And, even as he said it, his companions heard the now-familiar click of tiny crossbows coming from left and right—and even from above.

Haldir reached for his sword—

But Valandil was already springing to his feet and, screeching like a wild animal, he charged into the enemy, hacking and slashing.

"Valandil!" Haldir drew his own sword and followed, trying to protect his comrade's right flank, whilst Orophin joined them on the left.

The three elves fought blindly in the dark—Valandil screaming obscenities like an Uruk Hai berserker—outnumbered five or ten to one, occasionally connecting with flesh or steel, but more often slicing through nothing but air.

"Agh!" Haldir felt something cut his shoulder.

An intense light flared up behind him, and an unexpected voice shouted, "Get down! GET DOWN NOW!"

Haldir hit the ground.

There was the bizarre sound of breaking glass, and then burst of fire, and the cavern floor ahead of them was ablaze.

Howls of pain went up around them, and Haldir raised his head to see, through dazzled eyes, twenty or thirty drow—some of them in flames—fleeing to the safety of the next cavern.

...

Eryn Carantaur Arinna's flet

Still wondering about Cyllien's strange behaviour, Orodreth entered the flet he shared with

Camthalion and Arinna to find his friend—still fast asleep—lying on Arinna's divan.

"Master Findecáno says that he will awaken, quite naturally, in an hour or so," said the woman, "so I had him brought home. I hear that *you* are going back to the Divor Rocks."

How can she possibly know that? he wondered. "Yes."

Arinna rose, and Orodreth marvelled, as always, at her cat-like sensuality as she came up to him and slid her arms around his neck. (It was true what they said about elves and women, and he and Camthalion were the luckiest ellyn in Middle Earth).

"You *will* be careful," she said, softly.

"Of course—do not worry, *híril nín*." He kissed her, thoroughly. "*Camthalion will not have you to himself for long.*" He smiled down at her. "Can I ask you a favour?"

"You know you can."

"It is not *that* sort of favour."

"I have been known to do other things, occasionally."

"Will you visit the March Warden's lady?"

"Mistress Cyllien?"

"Yes. She seems—I think she needs help. From a woman."

Arinna looked up at him shrewdly. "Leave it to me, Ori."

...

"What in Middle-earth was *that*?" asked Haldir, raising his arm to shield his face from the searing heat.

"A glass bottle part-filled with spirits," replied Arador, guiding a stunned Valandil away from the flames. "I got the idea from seeing my mother knock over an oil lamp—you pull out the cork, light the cloth wick, and throw it. When the bottle breaks, the spirits run out and catch light. That is why I was late joining you outside my father's house—I had to make them."

"Them? You have *more*?"

"Two more."

"Master Arador," said Haldir, "I think you have just proved your worth."

"For about the *tenth* time," muttered the boy.

Chapter 12: Disagreements

Shadowland

I have persuaded them to stay—

With a sigh, Lord Fingolfin laid down his pen and leaned back in his chair.

Reason told him that it was impossible—that, in this world, Princess Eowyn was mortal, and married to the Prince of Ithilien; that, in this world, she and Lord Legolas were practically strangers.

But no amount of reasoning could shake his feeling that, somewhere in the past, a terrible mistake had been made, and that the future of the colony—perhaps the future of Middle-earth itself—now depended upon things being put right.

He picked up his pen.

I have persuaded them to stay, he wrote, in the hope that, by observing his counterpart and Princess Eowyn, Lord Legolas will come to see what is lacking in his own match. Perhaps it will persuade him to pay greater heed to the visions he seems to be experiencing. But what of the lady's husband?

To that question Fingolfin had, as yet, no answer.

...

The Eryn Brethil Road

“But *why* will you not help her?” Legolas demanded.

His double walked back to his horse. “I have said nothing—I have yet to decide,” he replied. “But it has never been our way to involve ourselves in the affairs of men.”

Legolas pushed the letter inside his jerkin. “*Never been our way?* How was Sauron defeated if not by an alliance of men, elves, and dwarves! How could this colony exist without the permission of the King of Gondor and the grace of the Prince of Ithilien? How can you ignore the human homesteads within its boundaries, the human settlements along its borders? How—”

“You speak of your own world, not of mine,” said his double. “And may I remind you that you agreed not to interfere in the running of my colony.” He mounted Arod.

“EOWYN NEEDS YOU!” Legolas saw Vandalil wince, but he pursued his double. “What *happened* to you?” he demanded. “What happened with Aragorn—with *Eowyn*—during the Ring War? Why are you not friends?”

“That,” said the other elf, coldly, “is none of your concern. Now I suggest that *we* take Aranwë back to the city—Vandalil, return to the guard post.”

The Mirkwood elf, though clearly confused by what he had just witnessed, accepted his orders with a bow of the head.

“Keep a watch for these dark warriors,” said Legolas. “We will send reinforcements—”

“That is for *me* to decide,” said his double.

Legolas stared up at him. “Then you had better make the *right* decision,” he said. “Immediately.”

“Go, Valandil; I will do what is necessary.”

“You must assemble your Inner Council,” insisted Legolas, grasping his horse’s shoulder and springing onto its back. “This war is already putting the colony at risk—you cannot pretend otherwise simply because you have decided to shun men. Even if you will not help Eowyn, the dark army has already invaded your land. You must—”

“*I will do what is necessary*,” his double repeated, catching up Brightstar’s reins. “Come, we have wasted enough time already.”

...

Five years earlier, at Edoras

The revels were over. One by one, the few determined drinkers that remained in the Golden Hall were falling asleep where they sat. Legolas, wandering aimlessly between the carved wooden columns, glanced into a dark corner and met the startled eyes of a warrior, vigorously enjoying a young serving wench.

Apologetically, the elf backed away and, suddenly needing to see the stars, fled outside onto the terrace.

But the sky was veiled and a dark shadow of foreboding settled across his mind. He raised the hood of his elven cloak.

“Is something troubling you, my Lord?” King Theoden’s beautiful niece came up beside him.

“I needed some air, my Lady.”

“The smell of sweat and ale can be overpowering,” she agreed. She looked out across the plains of Rohan. “What is it you see?”

“The eye of the enemy is moving, my Lady.”

“Searching for the Ring?”

“Yes...”

“You should rest, my Lord. I believe my uncle’s steward has already found you a bedchamber, but if you need clean clothes, or a bath—or company for the night...”

...

Eryn Arnen

“How long did I sleep?” asked Eowyn, emerging, still undressed, from her tiny bedchamber.

Berengar looked up from the ledger he was carefully updating. “Eight hours—”

“*Eight hours!* How could you leave me—”

“You needed it—*here*.” He rose, unfolded a chair for her, and helped her sit down.

“I must wash...”

“I was not going to mention that.” He grinned. “You will need breakfast, too. I shall send one of women in with soap and water. After, that is, I have made my confession.”

Stifling a yawn, Eowyn squinted up at him. “What else have you done?”

Berengar leaned back against the table, arms folded across his chest. “I have sent a messenger to your brother,” he admitted, “with Captain Alfgar’s help. We have asked Eomer King to send an army.”

“Oh Béma, *no!*” Eowyn sprang to her feet.

“We need help, my lady.”

“That is why *I* have sent to Legolas.”

“But he is an elf, my lady,” said Berengar, gently easing her back into her chair. “And the fair folk—even those that remain—shun our world and all its troubles. I do not believe he will come.”

“He *will* come; he *said* that he would...” Eowyn rubbed her face, sighing. “You do know that he and Eomer hate each other? If they both come we will have *three* hostile forces to deal with.”

“Then perhaps they will all fight amongst themselves,” said Berengar, “and leave *us* alone.”

...

Eryn Carantaur

To Legolas’ surprise, when they reached the city, his double wasted no time in dispatching reinforcements to Eryn Brethil. “The Inner Council will meet in half an hour,” he said. “You may attend if you wish.”

...

The guards beside the door bowed uneasily as Legolas—leading Eowyn and Hentmirë, and followed by Gimli and Berryn—entered the Council Chamber. His double was already seated at the table, together with Lords Fingolfin, Caranthir, and Lenwë, and his March Warden, Golradir. “I did not invite your entourage,” he said, quietly.

Legolas bowed. “I took the liberty of bringing my companions, my Lords, since Lady Eowyn’s opinion will be of great value in this matter, and Master Berryn has detailed geographical knowledge of Eryn Arnen, Lord Gimli is an experienced warrior, and Lady Hentmirë—”

“I insisted on coming,” said the little woman.

“I have no objection, my Lord,” said Fingolfin, “to hearing the opinions of Lord Legolas’ friends.”

“Nor have I,” said Caranthir. Lenwë and Golradir murmured in agreement.

“Very well, then—please, all be seated. But do remember that we must keep these proceedings brief.”

“Then might I put Princess Eowyn’s case?” Legolas drew her letter from inside his tunic.

His double waved a hand in assent.

“I have spoken to Master Dínendal,” said Legolas. “Aranwë is awake and will join us shortly to describe what he saw at Emyrn Arnen. Until then, I will explain what we know from Princess Eowyn’s message.

“Approximately three weeks ago, an army of what she calls ‘dark warriors’ emerged from the rocks immediately south of Caras Arnen. They stormed the city under cover of darkness, taking the people by surprise and inflicting heavy casualties,”—he wrapped a supportive arm around Eowyn—“Prince Faramir, I am sad to report, was amongst the dead.”

Lord Fingolfin gasped.

“By dawn, the dark army was in control. Princess Eowyn managed to escape and, together with the remnants of the North Ithilien Guard, led the survivors to a refuge south of the hills. The following night, a small force of dark warriors attacked but were easily repelled—Princess Eowyn thinks that her present position is—or rather *was*—relatively safe. Whatever method the dark people use to pass through the rocks, she believes that they cannot use it there.”

“You say that she *was* safe,” said Lord Caranthir. “What has changed?”

“Aranwë observed a *second* army on the Caras Arnen road,” replied Legolas. “It will have reached Emyrn Arnen shortly after dusk, last night.

“The dark warriors,” he continued, “now have reinforcements. In her letter, Princess Eowyn suggests that the two forces may be planning to attack in concert.”

“But that means,” said Caranthir, “that it may already be too late—the Princess may already be dead.”

“She may—” began Legolas.

“But she may not,” said Eowyn suddenly. “She is entirely alone, my lords—cut off from King Elessar in the west and her brother in the north, and she has appealed to *you* as a last resort. *You* are her only hope.” She spoke directly to Legolas’ double. “Please—you cannot ignore her cry for help—even if *she* is dead, her people still need you.”

Legolas gave her a comforting hug. His double poured out a glass of water, and pushed it across the table.

“Remember, my lords,” said Legolas, “that these dark warriors have already invaded *your* lands. Princess Eowyn’s letter mentions the Divor Rocks—”

“Oh *shi*—er—I mean...”

The elves of Inner Council turned towards the new voice. “Do you have something to say, Master—Berry—*is it not?*” asked Legolas’ double.

“Yes, my Lord—yes, I do. Three days ago,” said the cartographer, “in *our* world, several bodies were found in the forest of Eryn Laeg, immediately south west of the Divor Rocks. Now, it may be a co-incidence,” he admitted, “but The Aelvorn, the Divor Rocks, and Emyrn Arnen all lie along a

crack, or fissure, that seems to join our two worlds..."

...

Ewyn Arnen

Washed and dressed, Ewyn left her tent and, threading her way through the mêlée of people and horses, crossed the plateau to where a group of hastily-erected wooden sheds and canvas awnings had been turned into a field Healing Room.

She paused beside the door of the largest building, screwing up the courage to enter, then stepped inside.

Gods...

Ewyn was no stranger to battle wounds—she had been injured herself on Pelennor Field—but this was the first time that she had had to face the agonies of men and women who had been wounded as a direct consequence of her own orders.

She let her gaze travel round the room, taking in the broken and bleeding bodies, heaving and moaning and sobbing on their beds of straw and blankets. She bent over the man—no more than a boy—who lay at her feet, and tried to shoo away the flies that were feeding on his wound.

The young soldier caught hold of her tunic. "My Lady," he sobbed, "please don't let me die—my mother has no one else—*please* don't let me die..."

Tears spilling from her eyes, Ewyn squeezed his hand, but no words of reassurance would pass her lips.

"Your Highness!" The healer in charge—formerly the Palace physician—hurried to her side, gently disengaged her hand and drew her towards the door. "What can I do for you, my Lady?"

"I... It is more a matter of what *I* can do for you," said Ewyn. "Is there anything you need, Master Ethelmar?"

The healer smiled tiredly. "Bandages and splints, my lady; clean water, spirits, healing herbs and salves—but I believe that Master Berengar has it all in hand."

Ewyn nodded. "Good."

"There *is* one thing more, though." He drew her further from the boy, and lowered his voice to a whisper. "A good, strong man, who is not afraid to use a club."

Ewyn's blood ran cold.

"To ease their passing, my lady," he added, softly.

"I will try to find someone, Master Ethelmar," said Ewyn, the words catching in her throat.

"Thank you—excuse me." One of his patients was screaming in pain.

Ewyn returned to the boy who had earlier caught her hand. "I will find your mother," she began.

But his eyes were staring up at her, unseeing.

...

Eryn Carantaur

Aranwë, though still somewhat drowsy, had given a detailed account of everything he had seen, both on the Caras Arnen road and at the camp in Eryn Arnen.

“Would you say that Princess Eowyn is overmatched?” asked Legolas.

“Indeed I would, my lord,” replied the messenger. “The lady is resourceful—there is no doubt of that—her captains are loyal and all her men love her. But her forces are few and her supplies are running low.”

Legolas turned to his double. “What do you propose to do?”

The other elf addressed his counsellors. “Naturally, my Lords, March Warden, I would value your opinions. What do *you* advise, Lord Fingolfin?”

“We must aid the lady,” said the counsellor, without hesitation. “It is the only honourable course open to us.”

“Lord Caranthir?”

“I agree.”

“Lord Lenwë?”

“From what I have heard, my Lord,” said the Treasurer, “it is also in the interests of our own security to do so.”

“March Warden?”

“I agree with Lord Lenwë,” said Golradir, “and, in addition, I suggest that we send a small force to the Divor Rocks.”

“It is unanimous then,” said Legolas’ double, with a faint smile.

“How many troops can you raise?” asked Legolas.

“No more than a thousand,” replied Golradir, “without leaving the colony itself unprotected. In time, we may call up another two hundred, perhaps, from the southern settlements.”

Legolas shook his head. “It is still too few...”

“When we reach Eryn Arnen,” said Gimli, speaking for the first time, “we must send immediately to Aragorn and make sure that the message gets through.” He turned to Legolas’ double. “May I make a suggestion, lad?”

The elf’s face froze in a most peculiar expression. “You may, Gimli, son of Gloin.”

“I suggest that Legolas, Eowyn and I leave now, with a handful of volunteers. We will follow the route your messenger took, running the gauntlet if need be, and inform the lady that your army is on its way. Then we will leave for Minas Tirith immediately.”

“Gimli,” said Legolas, “you are a genius.”

...

Ewyn Arnen

Eowyn stumbled from the Healing Room and vomited her breakfast at the foot of the rock wall.

“My lady...” Captain Alfgar remained at a tactful distance.

“I—” Eowyn wiped her mouth before turning to face him. “I am ready to discuss tactics,” she said, resolutely.

“There is no shame in feeling for the wounded, my Lady,” said the soldier gently. Then he added, “We have taken a prisoner. I thought you would want to question him yourself.”

“Does he speak Westron?”

“He has not uttered a word, my lady. But he has a smug look about him, if you know what I mean—as if he does understand what we are saying. This way...” He guided her between two groups of citizens—men and women—practising simple sword skills. “We have put him in one of the refugee tents.”

“Where was he captured?”

“He had fallen into the gully and got himself a stake through the shoulder. We missed him in the first search because he had managed to hack through the wood and hide in the undergrowth.”

“Will he survive his injuries?”

“The healer thinks so.”

“Good.”

Alfgar raised the tent flap and Eowyn stepped inside. The prisoner was sitting against one of the tent poles, his hands crossed behind the wood and bound with a length of stout rope.

Eowyn watched him, thoughtfully. With the wound in his shoulder, the position must have been excruciating—*I am surprised the healer permitted them to bind him like that*—but there was no sign of pain on the creature’s handsome face, nor any fear in his fiery red eyes.

“I want him stripped naked,” she said.

“My *Lady!*” Captain Alfgar stared at her, open-mouthed. “What—”

“I want our armourers to examine his leather and mail—to test its strengths and weaknesses. Were his weapons found?”

“A long knife, my lady,” replied Alfgar.

“No crossbow?”

“No, my lady.”

“Pity. Have the armourers test the knife, too. Then fetch Master Ethelmar—I want *him* examined. I want to know *his* strengths and weaknesses.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“And, when Master Ethelmar has finished, send for me and I shall question him.”

“*Naked* my Lady?”

Eowyn chuckled. “No, Captain. You may find him a blanket. Or, better still, a tunic and some leggings!”

...

Eryn Carantaur

“*Well?*” asked Legolas.

“It is a good plan, Master Dwarf,” said his double. “You have my permission to recruit your volunteers—how many do you seek?”

“Six,” said Gimli.

“March Warden Golradir will assist you.”

“I shall need a sword,” said Eowyn.

“I am sure we can accommodate you, my Lady.”

...

After leaving the Council Chamber, the Lord of Eryn Carantaur hurried to his private chambers and climbed the stairs to his garden flet. He had some unpopular news to break.

Alatáriël was waiting for him, sitting motionless on their swing. Legolas crossed the wooden platform and knelt before her.

“You are going to war,” she said.

All her customary sparkle—all her mischief—had deserted her, leaving her barely recognisable. Legolas lifted her hands to his lips. “Yes,” he said, softly.

“Because of her.”

“Because it would be dishonourable to leave Princess Eowyn to face this threat alone, yes. But also because if North Ithilien falls, South Ithilien will follow soon after.”

“I do not want you to go!”

“I would be disappointed if you did,” said Legolas, gently. “But in time of war, *nadithen*, a warrior has no choice—”

“Let me go with you.”

“You have not been trained to fight, *meleth nín*. It would be too dangerous.”

“*She* is going! They will both be there.”

“Yes. They are both warriors.”

“Promise me, Legolas Greenleaf—promise that you will never make love to her—not to either one of her.”

Smiling, Legolas wrapped her in his arms. “I love you, Alatáriël. Do not doubt me, *meleth nín*.”

...

Five years earlier, at Edoras

Company for the night! Legolas, still affected by what he had seen in the Golden Hall—and painfully aware of the months that had passed since he had last been with an elleth—reached for Eowyn.

She did not resist.

He lifted her onto the parapet and—kissing her hungrily—groped for the hem of her skirts, pulled them up, pushed her legs apart, and buried himself inside her with a sigh that seemed to anticipate the satisfaction to come.

He felt her gasp, and open her legs wider to take his bulk. Then she crossed her ankles behind him, and drew him in tight...

Sweet Valar!

Legolas grasped her buttocks and thrust—with hard, sharp, sudden lunges—his body trembling at the prospect of release.

Eowyn dug her fingers into his hair, holding his head close whilst she devoured his mouth, moaning, “Yes! Oh, yes!” against his lips.

And when he reached his first climax—bursting inside her with a cry of wonder—he did not feel that what he was doing was wrong...

...

Eryn Carantaur

The five companions returned to the guest house in silence.

Gimli immediately disappeared into his bedchamber to fetch his axe.

Hentmirë, who had insisted on volunteering for the mission—“I *know* the journey will be dangerous, Legolas, but once we are there I shall be right at the back—helping to make food and bandages,”—went to change into her trousers and boots.

“*Lassui...*” Eowyn drew Legolas into their bedchamber. “Are you sure,” she asked softly, “that we should be doing this? Since Berryn mentioned the Divor Rocks, I keep wondering—what if the bodies that Master Amdír found in Eryn Laeg were the start of an invasion? Do you not want to go home?”

Legolas took her in his arms. "We do not know what may be happening in our own world, melmenya, but *this* invasion is real. And this Eowyn needs us." He hugged her tightly. "When you fell into The Aelvorn, my darling, I did not stop to consider my responsibilities to Eryn Carantaur. I followed you here."

"The colony did not seem to be in danger then."

"Do you think that would have made any difference?" He kissed her forehead.

"No. But she is not me, Lassui."

"I know, melmenya. I know. But there is something... Her hand—her *signature*—is exactly like yours."

"Do not confuse us."

"*Melmenya!*"

"You will find that I can be a very jealous wife, Legolas."

Laughing, the elf lifted her off the ground, and kissed her thoroughly.

...

As Legolas' double descended from his garden flet, with Alatóriël clinging to his arm, a tiny movement, visible through the window of the guest house opposite, caught his attention and held it, mercilessly.

...

Five years earlier, at Edoras

"Oh gods..."

Legolas raised his head from Eowyn's bosom.

"*This did not happen,*" she whispered. "*Nothing can come of it; it cannot have happened.*"

"*But I am bound to you now—*"

"*No! You cannot be! I am the niece of a King—his heir; should my brother fall in battle—I have a duty to my people. I cannot be with an elf.*"

Legolas moved his hand to her stomach. "I am sorry."

"*The mistake was not yours alone—*"

"*No...*" He shook his head. "*No, I mean that we no longer have any choice, meleth nín.*" He stroked her belly, and felt her tremble at his touch. "*You are carrying my child, Eowyn nín.*"

For a moment, she stared at him in alarm. Then she slowly shook her head. "No, Prince Legolas," she said, "no—for I am barren."

Legolas frowned.

"I know it for certain," she said. "If you must hear more, I will tell you. Or we can leave it at that."

"But I am an elf," he said. "Perhaps—"

"No. I am barren," she insisted, tears filling her eyes. "Please, your Highness, say that this never happened."

Legolas felt an emptiness spread, like ice, from his heart up into his head and down into his belly. "Very well," he whispered, carefully withdrawing from her body, "I shall say that it never happened. And I shall leave you now." He rose, and instinctively turned his back to her before replacing himself in his leggings and redoing his laces.

"Thank you."

She was trying to sound indifferent, he knew, but a tiny tremor in her voice gave him hope. "Eowyn...?"

"Please, your Highness, go quickly, before someone sees us."

Wearily, he placed his hand upon his heart and bowed his head. "No i Melain na le," he said, softly. "And if it should prove that you have been mistaken—that you are with child—you have only to send for me—if you ever need me, you have only to send."

...

Eryn Carantaur

"You will take care of her..."

Frowning, Legolas followed his double's gaze to where Eowyn, wearing elven armour, and carrying an elven sword and bow, was mounting Vanyasul. "She is perfectly capable of taking care of herself," he said. "She has saved me more times than I can count."

His double smiled. "Of course..." He dragged his attention back to Legolas. "I shall follow you at first light—tell Princess Eowyn—the other Princess Eowyn—to expect me by dawn on the second day."

Legolas placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. "You have made the right decision," he said.

"You will have left for Minas Tirith by the time I arrive."

"If all goes according to plan."

"Then—what is it that men do?" He held out his hand. "No i Melain na le."

Legolas grasped it firmly. *"Hannon le, mellon nín. Silo Anor bo men lín."* He gave his double a final wry smile before mounting his horse and joining the small force assembled in the clearing—Eowyn, Gimli, Berryn and Hentmirë; March Warden Golradir; Camthalion and Orodreth; two Lorien elves, Malgalad and Edrahil; and, to Legolas' surprise, clad in armour and with a bow, quiver, and knives strapped to his back, Lord Fingolfin.

...

Emyn Arnen

The prisoner, naked apart from the bandages swathing his slender torso and the blanket draped around his loins, was still bound uncomfortably to the tent pole. As Eowyn approached, he leered up at her defiantly.

“Master Ethelmar tells me that you can see both light and heat,” said the woman, turning up the wick on the small oil lamp she was carrying. “And that too much of either is painful to you. Shall we see how much is too much?”

Crouching beside him, she passed the lamp back and forth in front of his ebony face.

The dark elf did not move, but a subtle change in his expression told Eowyn that the healer had been right. She held the lamp closer, and watched the drow keep his head still and his eyes open—even though tears were running down his sculpted cheeks.

Eowyn smiled. “Captain Alfgar,” she called, “bring the brazier here—right in front of him—and light it. Let us see how long it takes this weakling to beg—”

The drow spat in her face.

Eowyn chuckled. “So you do understand me,” she said, wiping away the spittle with the back of her hand. “That will make things so much easier.”

The creature sneered.

“Do you still want the brazier, my lady?” asked Alfgar.

“Bring it closer but do not light it just yet.” She turned back to the drow. “I have watched your people,” she said. “Every warrior fights alone—you have no loyalty to one another, no honour—”

“You know *nothing*!”

“Your commanders do not rescue the injured; they do not recover the bodies of the dead—”

“I am not one of those house slaves!”

“What are you, then? Hmm? No one cares that you have been taken. No one begs for your release. It is as though you had never existed.”

The creature settled back against the tent pole and hid behind a blank expression.

“I offer you a bargain, Master Dark Warrior,” said Eowyn. “Tell me everything you know of this campaign—tell me what your people are planning and why. And if your information proves true, when the war is over, I will set you free.”

There was no response. “Very well...” She turned down the lamp wick until the flame went out. “I will give you some time to think about it. Come, Captain Alfgar.”

Chapter 13: The hook horror

In the firelight, Rumil and Orophin quickly found a defensible position, shepherded their companions into it and, swords drawn, mounted guard. Arador settled Valandil against the rock wall, then drew the glowing crystal from his pack—the flames were already dying down—and held it over Haldir's wounded shoulder whilst Dínendal carefully opened the March Warden's jerkin.

"How is he?" asked Rumil, over his shoulder.

"*He*," answered Haldir, pointedly, "has been much better."

"It is a deep cut," said the healer, "and needs stitching. Bring the light closer, Arador."

"Did you feel anything," asked the boy, curiously, "apart from the blade?"

"What do you mea—*nn*?" Haldir gritted his teeth as the needle pierced his flesh.

"I have read," said Arador, "that some of their swords are *sentient*, and will feed on their victims."

"I—*oh!*"

"Yes, this is cold," said Dínendal, spreading a thick layer of healing salve over the wound. "But it will deaden the pain..."

"I felt nothing but steel," said Haldir.

"Pity. I mean—not from *your* point of view, obviously—"

Haldir tried to move his hand, but Dínendal caught it and, gently bending the March Warden's arm at the elbow, placed it on his breast. "I have no choice," said the healer, in response to Haldir's heavy sigh, "your shoulder must be kept still." He slid a piece of cloth beneath the arm and motioned the boy to hold the ends in position.

"What else have you read, Arador?" asked Valandil suddenly. Since his crazed attack on the drow, he had been silent, leaning against the rocks with his eyes tightly closed. Now he seemed fully alert again. "Why have they taken her? Do you know?"

"Not really... Though, in their society, women are far more important than men."

"So they may have thought she was our leader?"

"Your holy woman," said the boy. "They have holy women who accompany the warriors into battle to call upon their goddess for help. They probably thought she was your holy woman."

"And what will they do with her?"

"Valandil..." The boy handed the bandage to Dínendal and turned towards the other elf. "She *fell*..."

"No. She did not," said Valandil, firmly.

"We cannot be sure, Arador," agreed Haldir, relaxing his arm into the sling. "All you found was a piece of her dress—"

"And *I know* she is still alive," said Valandil. "I can feel it."

The boy opened his mouth to point out that Valandil's earlier suicidal fury had suggested otherwise—but immediately thought better of it. "What are we going to do then," he asked, "now that they know we are here—and Haldir is wounded?"

...

Fighting waves of nausea, Wilawen backed away from the mushroom men, turned, and ran, doubled-up, across the eerie moss-lit cavern to the screen of stalagmites that hid her tiny refuge. Still clasping her stomach, she stared up at the hole. *It is too high*, she thought, tears of exhaustion—and frustration—spilling from her eyes. *I cannot reach it...*

She searched the ground for a piece of stone to use as a step.

Behind her, Guenhwyvar growled softly and, nudging her back, gently pushed her out of the way, then crouched down at the foot of the wall.

Wilawen gasped. "Are you sure...?"

The cat did not move.

Wilawen patted its shoulder. "Good cat; good, good cat,"—slowly she raised her foot and climbed onto its back—"keep still, keep—" But Guenhwyvar had a better idea, and rose smoothly to its feet, allowing Wilawen to crawl easily into the safety of the tunnel.

...

"We know they are afraid of fire," said Haldir, struggling to shoulder his pack with his one good arm. Dínendal stepped forward to help.

"It blinds them," agreed Arador.

"And they have no long-range weapons," continued the March Warden, reaching for his bow. "So we will attack suddenly. Arador will throw one of his fire-bottles, and we will use the light to shoot as many as we can."

"You cannot draw," said Orophin, "which means we only have three archers."

"Arador—"

"I have never used a bow in my life," said the boy. "Not even a human one."

"Then it will have to be Dínendal." Haldir handed the healer his great war bow and, with a struggle, unbuckled his quiver.

"I shall do my best..." said Dínendal, doubtfully.

"I know you will," said Haldir. "Give me your healing bag."

"I do not suppose you need me to point out," said Arador, "that, given that we cannot see without the crystals, our chances of creeping up on a drow army are less than nil—"

"No," said Haldir.

"I thought not."

"All I need *you* to do, Master Arador, is follow my orders."

...

Wilawen crawled to the end of the tunnel and curled up into a ball. Guenhwyvar, seeming to understand her distress, settled down beside her and nuzzled her shoulder, purring softly.

The woman's sob turned into a shaky smile. "Thank you," she whispered.

...

"You did not answer my question," said Valandil, taking hold of the rope beside Arador. "What will these demons do with Wilawen?"

"I do not know."

"You are not telling me the truth," said the elf, for betrothal to a woman had taught him to recognise when something was being hidden from him 'for his own good'. "What will they do with her?"

The boy sighed. "Their goddess demands living sacrifices," he admitted.

Haldir touched Valandil's shoulder. "We will get her back before they have the chance to harm her, *mellon nín*," he said. "Move off Rumil. And, from now on, everyone is *silent*."

...

Eryn Carantaur Arinna's flet

Camthalion took a sip of dark green liquid. "What *is* this?" he asked, eyeing Arinna suspiciously

"I have no idea, Cami," said the woman. "Master Findecáno told me to give it to you when you woke up. I should think it is some sort of tonic."

"A tonic..." He reached for her arm.

"A-ah!" Arinna drew back with a playful wave of her hand, and rose gracefully. "I have promised Ori that I will visit Mistress Cyllien—he is worried about her. Will you be all right on your own for a while?"

"Of course."

"I shall try not to be too long." She draped her silken shawl over her dark hair, throwing its fringed ends over her shoulders. "If you get up, Cami, remember to take things slowly," she said, bending over to kiss his forehead.

But the elf caught her around the waist and, drawing her close, kissed her mouth.

"*Slowly*, Cami!"

Arinna left their flet and strolled along the winding pathway, through the clusters of elegant houses—all delicate swirling arches and opalescent glass—amongst the red-leaved carantaur boughs.

Who would have thought, she mused, admiring the beauty all around her, *that I could be so happy living in the middle of a forest, cooking, cleaning—sometimes—and being faithful, like a good housewife?*

She passed Legolas' private chambers, turned off the main walkway, and climbed the spiralling stairs up to the next level.

Of course, she thought, *it does help having two willing and able elves for husbands...*

She nodded a greeting to an elleth she knew by sight, and continued along the private path to a select group of dwellings tucked just behind the Palace.

I wonder if Lord Legolas realises how well his garden is overlooked?

She stopped at the first house, and knocked on the door.

There was no answer.

She knocked louder.

Still no response.

She laid her fingertips on the wood and pushed, lightly.

The door swung open. *Strange...* "Hello?"

Arinna stepped inside. The sitting room looked exactly how her own bedroom had looked the time she had found that animal, Wolfram, ransacking it, but she did not, for one moment, imagine that the March Warden's flet had been burgled.

She took a few more steps.

And gasped.

Because lying in the middle of the floor was a leather apron—of the kind the human carpenters working on the new wing of the Palace all wore—and coming from what Arinna assumed was the bedchamber was the unmistakable sound of two people having sex.

Silly tart! she thought. *If that was all she wanted, she should have stayed in Carhilivren.* And for a moment she considered barging in and sending him—whoever he was—packing.

But no, she decided. *I promised Ori I would take care of her, and I shall.*

...

The Green Cave

Wilawen opened her eyes.

There was something else in the green cave—something other than the mushroom men—something that had just made a noise like two stones, banging together. She turned to Guenhwyvar. The cat had heard it, too, and had already risen to its feet, ears pricked and listening hard—

Clack!

Wilawen immediately caught the scent of the mushroom men's noxious spores. *That will stop it, whatever it is,* she thought, remembering the effect the poison had had on her own body.

But Guenhwyvar was growing more and more agitated, and suddenly moved to the tunnel mouth, tamping the rocky floor with its paws.

Wilawen closed her eyes and listened. There were more rhythmic stone-claps, more spores, then the sound of clawed feet scraping on stone... getting closer... and closer...

Guenhwyvar growled and dropped into a crouch.

Wilawen looked around frantically for a weapon.

...

Watching his feet, Arador shuffled forward, rope in one hand, uncorked spirit bottle in the other, steeling himself for his part in the next battle. *The moment Haldir gives the order, he thought, I drop to the ground, pull out the tinder box, light the wick, and throw... Ground, tinderbox, wick, throw. Ground, tinderbox—gods! What was that?*

The boy pulled hard on the rope, and the elves around him stopped as one. Haldir came up beside him and leaned close to his ear. "What?" he whispered.

"Another piece of Mistress Wilawen's dress."

"Where?" hissed Valandil.

"Lying on the floor, back there."

Letting go of the rope, Valandil dropped to his knees and crawled along the ground, sweeping the crystal back and forth. "I have found it," he whispered, excitedly, "I—"

Suddenly silent, he lifted the crystal and held it a few inches above the ground. "*Tail*," he whispered. Then he brought the light higher, slowly revealing a pair of leather-clad legs, a fine mail hauberk, a shock of white hair, and a handsome ebony face...

It was one of the dark warriors, standing with his back to the wall, his empty hands raised in surrender.

...

Guenhwyvar sprang.

Wilawen heard the cat snarl, heard more stone-claps close to the tunnel, and snatched up a jagged piece of rock. She hesitated for just a moment; then, spurred on by the sounds of fighting, she followed the cat, sliding painfully down the rock wall and tumbling out into the green cave.

The air was thick with spores and she immediately clutched her stomach, gagging. But the effect did not last long and, squinting through watery eyes, Wilawen realised that she was kneeling amongst the ripped and shredded remains of the mushroom men, strewn across the cavern floor.

Horried, she raised her head to see what had killed them.

...

The elves drew their weapons; Valandil slashed with his sword.

"O'Wilawen!" cried the dark elf, neatly dodging the cut.

Valandil froze. "*What* did you say?"

"O'Wilawen," the drow repeated, and pointed down the passage.

"Take me to her," said Valandil, sheathing his weapon. "Take me to *Wilawen*."

The dark elf raised his finger to his lips. *Shhh*. Then he beckoned. *Follow me*.

Valandil nodded.

But Haldir, sword in his left hand, came up beside the drow and, using his superior size, caged

him in against the wall. "How do we know we can trust you?" he hissed.

"He saved her before," said Valandil. "When I was shot, I saw him—he has purple eyes—the others have red."

Haldir looked at Valandil for a long moment. Then, "Very well," he said. He stepped back.

Suddenly, the dark elf drew a pair of swords and, snapping them into line, brushed Haldir's chest with their curved points, let the blades drop and, turning the hilts outwards, offered them to the stunned March Warden.

"I think he is trying to show you that you can trust him," said Arador, obviously impressed.

"*Thank you, Master Arador,*" said Haldir. "Make sure that *bottle* of yours is ready." He shook his head at the drow, refusing the weapons.

The dark elf spun his swords back into their scabbards. Then he pointed to his own chest. "Drizzt," he said. "*Drizzt.*"

...

The creature that had killed the mushroom men was huge—at least twice the height of a man—with a vulture's head and massive forearms ending in long, hooked pincers. Wilawen crouched down, ducking in terror as the thing staggered back and forth across the rocky floor, flailing its arms—deadly pincers clacking—in an attempt shake off Guenhwyvar, who was hanging from the upper rim of its crab-like shell, snarling and snapping.

Wilawen could see that, although the monster's head and strange under-body were protected by a natural bony armour, the plates shifted as it moved, occasionally leaving patches of its moist red flesh exposed...

She shuddered.

...

Holding the end of Haldir's rope, the dark elf drew the rescuers swiftly down the branching tunnels. He had already cautioned them to be silent but, several minutes into the journey, he suddenly brought them to a halt and, stepping into the light of Arador's crystal torch, he raised his hands and made a series of complex shapes with his fingers—evidently giving them some sort of explanation.

When there was no response, he put a finger to his lips and waited until Haldir had acknowledged his instructions with an emphatic nod.

They were clearly passing close to his dark comrades, and Haldir wondered what he was planning. Did he intend to lead an attack on his own people? Or had he somehow managed to separate Wilawen from her captors?

Or was he simply leading the elves into a trap?

Uneasy at the trust he was having to place in this stranger, Haldir passed the rope to his injured hand and grasped the hilt of his sword.

...

Guenhwyvar was tiring, but so was the monster, and the cat seemed, at last, to have gained the upper hand—clamping its hind feet on the lower ridge of the thing's shell, it lashed out with its claws, raking its foe's unprotected eyes...

The creature lurched under Guenhwyvar's shifting weight and, bringing its unwieldy pincers up to its face in blind panic, crashed down on its knees.

...

Look, mouthed Arador, slipping the glowing crystal under his jerkin.

"Sometimes, Master Arador," whispered Haldir, "your behaviour baffles me—"

"The tunnel is getting *lighter*."

Haldir peered down the passage. He had failed to notice it—perhaps because his elven senses had been less hampered by the dark than Arador's—but the boy was right. The darkness had acquired a faint green tint.

...

Guenhwyvar, thrown clear, landed on its feet and turned, ready to spring back into the fray.

But Wilawen had spotted a chance. With determination, she staggered to the monster's side, slid her jagged rock point into the crimson gap between its shell and its bony skull cap and, when the creature blindly pushed itself up on its hooked pincers, she drove the stone home, crying out as—hitting bone—it slipped and cut her own hand.

...

Without warning, the dark elf suddenly grasped Valandil's arm and, hissing "O'Wilawen!", tried to push him towards the source of light, but Haldir drew his sword—clumsily—and slipped it between their bodies, holding the drow back. "Stop—"

From somewhere up ahead, Wilawen screamed in pain.

With a cry of anguish, Valandil slipped from the dark elf's grasp and took off down the tunnel.

Haldir released the drow and ran after Valandil, crying, "Come on!" and the rescuers followed as best they could, Arador fumbling for the tinder box in his pocket.

...

Lying face-down in the lethal moss, the creature convulsed, blood-streaked foam pouring from its open beak.

Wilawen sank to the ground. Guenhwyvar, equally exhausted, padded to her side and settled down, laying its great head on her lap.

The woman looked at her hand—it was hurting, but the cut did not seem very deep. Using her left hand, she pulled Drizzt's water skin from her belt, took a mouthful of water, and offered to pour some into Guenhwyvar's mouth.

The cat refused.

Wilawen's head slumped forward. *We are safe for now*, she thought, closing her eyes...

...

"*Wilawen!*" Valandil raced into the eerily-lit cavern, ripping out his sword and lunging at the monstrous black cat that was pinning the woman to the ground. "*Yaaaaggghhh!*"

But the blow fell short—for the drow, smaller and nimbler than his surface cousins, had

brought Valandil down with a flying tackle. The elf kicked and swore and struggled, using the strength of his arms to crawl towards Wilawen—until her calm voice finally penetrated his fury.

"Valandil?"—she raised her head, staring at him in disbelief—"Oh *Valandil!*"

The cat, who now seemed to be standing guard over her, growled a warning but, "No," she said, patting its shoulder, "this is Valandil."

And, to the elf's relief, the cat stepped aside, the drow released him, and he crawled to his beloved, and took her in his arms.

...

Eryn Carantaur Haldir's flet

Arinna leaned over the walkway rail, idly wondering what fun might take place in that pretty little garden—beneath the canopy of that bed—when the moon was full and the stars were shining bright. She had a great fondness for Legolas, who, despite his three thousand years, struck her as a very innocent lover...

A noise caught her attention and she turned, screened by a carantaur bough, and watched 'him' slip from the house—wearing his leather apron and carrying (she smiled cynically) his bag of carpenter's tools—and swagger off down the twisting walkway.

Arinna assessed him with a professional eye—tall, blond, ruggedly handsome, and, by elven standards, magnificently built—though the woman knew that elven bodies were deceptive in the critical matters of strength and stamina.

She waited until the lover had disappeared around a bend, then crossed the flet and knocked on Cyllien's door.

The elleth opened it immediately. "What do *you* want?" she demanded, for the pair had had more than one encounter in Carhiliwren, and none of them had been amicable.

"I saw that you were having the bed refurbished, and thought I might offer some advice." Arinna stepped inside. "I have come," she said, quietly, "because someone has asked me to watch over you."

"Haldir!"

Arinna shook her head. "No. But someone who has his well-being, as well as yours, at heart."

"Legolas..."

Arinna did not correct her. "You are such a fool," she said.

"*What!* How dare—?"

"I, as you know, am the first to recommend sex as a hobby, but it is not the answer in your case—*you* do not even like it."

"How *dare* you—?"

"You are using that young bull to escape your disappointing life with the March Warden just as you used the March Warden to escape from Ribhadda, and you used Ribhadda—"

A stinging blow from Cyllien cut her off, mid-sentence.

Arinna calmly rubbed her face. "You used Ribhadda," she continued, "and, I imagine, many others—to deaden the pain of losing *him*." She waved her hand. "We need not speak of him—there is always a 'him' and, no doubt, some tragic reason why you cannot be together—"

"Get out! I mean it! Get out *now*!"

But Arinna stood her ground. "I have made a *fortune* out of fools like you," she said, "men and women who think that sex will make them forget. *Do* you forget him? Of course not! That oaf only makes you remember him more. Sex is release, and when a woman is filled with pain, pain is what it releases. Look—" She moved aside a pile of clothing and sat down. "No one doubts that you have suffered a great loss. No one doubts that, as an elf, you can grieve for eternity. But you have been given a second chance with the March Warden—"

"What do *you* know of Haldir?"

"I know that he is good elf and that you would be stupid to throw him away. I also know that he is far too proud to turn a blind eye to this sort thing," she said, waving her hand towards the bedroom.

...

The Green Cave

Haldir's gaze lingered on the reunited couple—

"Look at *this*!" hissed Arador.

Haldir turned away, reluctantly.

The boy was crouching beside a strange creature, lying dead in a patch of luminous moss. "It is some sort of crab-man!" he whispered, excitedly. "It has eight legs and—*look*—these are what make that noise we keep hearing!" He pointed to its curved pincers. "And this,"—he rapped his knuckles against its shell—"is a natural suit of armour, but Mistress Wilawen found a chink." He reached for the jagged sliver of rock protruding from the thing's neck, but Drizzt grabbed his arm. "What?"

The dark elf pointed to the glowing moss, then gestured with his hand, *No*.

"It must be poisonous..." Arador bowed to the drow. "Thank you."

Drizzt smiled.

"*Haldir!*" cried Rumil. "*Over here.*"

Beckoning Arador to follow, the March Warden joined his brothers beside what looked like pieces of a vast mushroom. "It has eyes," said Rumil, prodding the rounded cap with the tip of his sword. "And *organs*," he added, distastefully.

"We must move," said Haldir. "The Valar only know what else is down here." He turned to Drizzt. "Show the Manling the way out."

He returned to where Wilawen was sitting between Valandil and Dínendal (who was bandaging her hand). "How is she?"

The woman smiled up at Haldir. "I am tired and hungry and my hand hurts," she said, "but none of that matters now." She turned to Valandil, who hugged her close and kissed her forehead.

"If you could just wait until I have finished," grumbled Dínendal.

"What happened to your arm, March Warden?"

"Oh—it is just a scratch. Do you think you can walk, Wilawen? I want us all safely back on the surface as quickly as possible."

"Of course," said the woman.

"And I will carry her if she cannot," said Valandil.

...

"But what about the lake?" asked Arador, pointing to the map. "There is no bridge." He spread his hands to indicate that he did not understand how they could cross the water.

Drizzt moved his arms, imitating breast stroke.

"Suppose one of us cannot swim..."

The dark elf, not understanding his question, seized the map and traced the entire path—from the green cave, across the lake, and along a short tunnel that appeared to end in a rock wall but which must, Arador realised, connect with the surface world. The route had the advantage of taking them, as quickly as possible, far from where Drizzt's comrades were lurking...

Arador sighed. "Yes," he said, "I understand. It is the best way."

...

Drizzt approached Wilawen and Valandil cautiously, hands raised in a gesture of reassurance, but Guenhwyvar, having no inhibitions, bounded up to the couple and nuzzled Wilawen's shoulder affectionately.

Wilawen laughed. "This," she said to Valandil, "is the best bodyguard a woman could have—except one." She looked up at Drizzt. "Or two."

The dark elf reached into the pouch at his hip and drew out a small black object—the onyx cat that Wilawen had seen him use before. He placed it on the ground and, with a smile at Wilawen, said something in his own language.

Reluctantly, the cat left the woman's side and approached the figurine, its body seeming to dissolve with each step, until, when it reached the tiny cat, there was nothing left but a dark grey mist, swirling down into the black stone like water in a funnel.

"Good bye," whispered Wilawen.

Valandil gave her a comforting hug.

...

With Drizzt leading them, the companions—though they heard the occasional stone-clap—reached the lake without further incident. Arador gazed across the expanse of inky water, just visible in the shafts of dim light that filtered through chinks in the rock above and turned the roof of the massive cavern into the semblance of a moonless sky.

In its own way, it is beautiful down here, he thought. Which is just as well... He glanced at the March Warden. Best to get it over with. "Haldir..."

The elf sighed. "What have you done now, Master Arador?"

The boy considered the phrasing of the question and gave his answer accordingly. "I have never learned to swim."

The elf laughed. "Is that all?"

Arador was surprised at the reaction. "I *cannot* cross the water," he insisted. "I will have to stay here..."

"You will come with one of us—with Rumil or Orophin, that is," said Haldir, indicating his sling. "He will do the swimming—so all you will have to do is stay calm."

"But I have never *been* in deep water—"

"Are you saying that you are afraid?"

"No..."

"Good. Then just lie on your back and *stay calm*."

Arador, relieved beyond words, and disliking Haldir's obvious amusement, changed the subject. "Why have his people not come looking for him?" he asked, nodding towards Drizzt.

"Because they do not know he is missing," said Haldir. "He is a scout, used to patrolling the tunnels on his own, or with the cat; his commander has sent him ahead and has no way of knowing that he is not doing his job."

"Why do you suppose he helped her?"

"Because a true warrior does not harm the weak and helpless."

"Mistress Wilawen is hardly weak and helpless," said Arador. "And drow men are *afraid* of women—or so I have read."

Haldir tried to shrug, but only achieved a wince. "Are you ready for your swimming lesson, Master Arador?"

...

"Goodbye," said Wilawen, "and thank you."

As she walked away, her hand automatically slipped into her pocket, where she found something and, turning back, pressed it into Drizzt's hand. "To remember us by," she said, smiling.

...

Arador watched nervously as Valandil and Wilawen, then Dínendal, and then Haldir and Rumil all waded waist-deep into the water and began the long swim across the lake.

"Ready?" asked Orophin.

"Yes..."

"Take off your pack—that is right, you will have to drag it beside you—then wade into the water."

Clenching his fists, Arador did as he was told—

"Open your eyes," said Orophin.

"Easy for *you* to say..."

"Now turn your back to me... Good." The elf wrapped his arms around the boy's torso and, pulling him down into the water, set off in pursuit of their comrades.

Arador, staring up at the ceiling, had just begun to relax when something pulled on his feet—pulled and pulled—so hard that he slipped from Orophin's grasp.

"No!" he cried, "no, *no*, *nnn*..." getting in a mouthful of brackish water as he slid beneath its surface and began to fall—slowly at first, then faster, and faster—struggling to hold his breath as he sped towards a pale saucer of light that seemed many miles beneath him...

Chapter 14: The rival

Shadowland

Heart pounding, lungs burning, Arador burst through the surface of the water and fell, gasping, upon the shore.

...

Legolas' advance party filed silently down the old sheep herder's trail. The sun was already low in the sky, and its hazy golden light, filtering through the beech trees, cast alarming shadows throughout the Forest.

"Hentmirë," said Eowyn, softly, "you need not cling so tightly."

"I am sorry," whispered the little woman, looking to left and right. "I am a bit nervous."

"We are all nervous," replied Eowyn, reassuringly, "but you know Legolas' orders. If we are attacked, I am to get you safely away from the fight."

"Yes," said Hentmirë, "but that means leaving *Legolas* behind. And Gimli and Berryn."

Smiling, Eowyn patted her hand.

...

Clack!

Arador raised his head. The noise was unmistakable, and—now that he had seen exactly what made it—terrifying. *We must move*, he thought. "Orophin?"

Where is he?

Where am I? Clumsily, he rolled onto his back. *Still in the starlit cavern...*

But how can that be? He remembered being dragged down by his heels, deep, deep into the suffocating water. But he had no memory of rising up again. *Am I dead? Is this...* "Orophin!"

"He is not here." The voice was familiar, but sounded strange. "Not Orophin. Not Rumil. There are both—they are not here."

"Haldir?" Arador struggled onto his elbows. The big elf was sitting at the edge of the lake, staring out across the mirror-still water. The boy crawled towards him. "*Haldir...*"

"They did not survive—none of them survived... Just us."

Arador laid a hand on the elf's arm. "I am not sure that it is *we*—"

"My brothers are both dead—"

CLACK!

The boy jumped. "*Gods, it is getting closer!* Haldir, we must move—come! We cannot stay here. Please—come!"

...

Ewyn Arnen

Captain Alfgar coughed respectfully.

“Come in!”

The soldier lifted the tent flap and ducked inside. Ewyn was sitting at her little writing desk, working her way through a pile of papers. Alfgar waited until she had laid down her pen. “The prisoner wants to talk to you, my lady.”

“Good... Are we ready for his comrades?” She turned to face him.

“The braziers have been moved further out, as you instructed. The barricade has been strengthened —”

“With what?”

“We felled some trees. Radulf’s citizens are drilled and ready to fight.”

“We will keep them in reserve.”

Alfgar nodded approvingly. “Gybon has had the civilian blacksmiths working hammer and tongs, turning every bit of metal he could scrounge into spikes—we have lined the gulley with them.”

“The demons can fly.”

“I know that, my lady. But their mounts cannot. And some of the lads from the boatyard have helped Hallyng build two crossbows—massive things, mounted on wooden horses—that shoot bolts as thick as your wrist.”

“For the lizards?”

“Yes.” He smiled, grimly. “If they come back tonight, my lady, we shall be ready for them.”

“And Captain Drago?”

“No word as yet, my lady.”

...

Captain Drago moved cautiously through the undergrowth.

He had been searching for the dark elves’ encampment since shortly after dawn, starting at the wooded foothills of Eryn Vorn, ten miles east of the gorge, which was where he had told Princess Ewyn they would be, because that was where *he* would have been.

But they had not been there.

So, disobeying Ewyn’s direct orders, he had continued the search, leading his small band of men farther and farther east, deeper and deeper into possible enemy territory, towards what would have been his second choice of hideout, the great overhanging rocks of Gynd Thûn.

...

Fighting the panic that was rising, like bile, in his chest, Arador dragged the elf through a low opening in the cavern wall.

The noise had multiplied—now there were two, perhaps three, crab-creatures, and they were closing in.

Hunting us, thought Arador. *By sound or smell or... something*. “Haldir!” He grasped the elf’s good arm and shook him as hard as he could. “We *must* keep moving!”

“Yes... I am sorry. I... *Yes*.”

“Here.” The boy pulled the glowing crystal from his pack and put it in the elf’s hand. “*Go!*” For a long moment, Haldir simply stared at the thing in confusion, then he set off down the twisting tunnel.

Arador followed. He had sealed his map in its oilskin pouch before entering the water, and he knew that it would take too long to retrieve it now. So he could only hope that he was remembering Drizzt’s instructions correctly.

Drizzt!

Where was Drizzt?

The boy’s last memory, before he had slid beneath the water, was of the dark elf, watching them cross the lake. *It is not that the others have drowned*, he thought, as he scrambled after Haldir. *If they had, Drizzt would still be beside the lake... It must be that we have drowned.*

Oh mama, I am so sorry—

CLACK!

“*Shit!* They have followed us into the tunnel!” Arador grabbed Haldir. “They are catching up.”

“One of your bottles,” said the elf.

“Yes!”

They rounded a sharp turn, stopped, and—whilst Haldir held the crystal over the boy’s pack—Arador found his tinderbox, wiped away the worst of the water, and unscrewed the metal lid. *At least the tinder is dry.*

If I am already dead, he thought, as he struggled to strike a spark, *why am I so scared? Can I be killed again? Do we pass from world to world, dying over and over? No. I was born in the last world; I remember growing up there. Besides, why would Haldir be in the same place as me...?*

CLACK!

“Oh gods!”

CLACK! CLACK, CLACK!

No! We are still alive! We are alive and we are going to stay alive!

Fired by a new determination, Arador uncorked the bottle and touched its cloth wick to the glowing tinder, waited until the flame caught, then stepped around the corner—crying out in shock as a pair of massive pincers snapped at his head, barely missing his ear—and flung the flaming bottle between the hook horrors' legs.

The bottle exploded.

For a split-second the boy froze, mesmerised by the sight of the creatures' bodies writhing in the flames and the sound of their hard shells cracking in the heat.

Then Haldir dragged him back to safety.

"You," the boy gasped, "are the warrior. *You* are supposed to do the killing."

...

Ewyn Arnen

The drow prisoner was still bound to the tent pole, but someone had taken pity on him and found him a pair of breeches and a shirt. Ewyn crouched beside him. "Captain Alfgar tells me that you have agreed to talk."

The dark elf turned his beautiful face towards her. "What do you want to know?"

"What I asked you before," said Ewyn. "What are your people planning, and why?"

The drow shook his head. "They have no plans, and they have no reasons."

Ewyn sighed. "What is *that* supposed to mean?" She sat back on her heels.

The drow stared thoughtfully at the ground, and Ewyn realised that he had meant what he said. "They act upon the orders of their goddess," he explained, "and she lusts after chaos."

"Why?"

"It increases her power."

"So we are—what?—a *sacrifice* to her?"

The drow raised his head and eyed her with sudden respect. "You," he said, "are clever."

"Why did they capture Caras Arnen?"

"They did not—you abandoned it—you left it in their hands."

"To save our people," said Ewyn.

The drow nodded. "That was a surprise. You do not behave as they expected. But your resistance is only playing into her hands."

"The goddess?"

"Increasing her power."

"But someone—one of the dark elves—must lead your army. Who is it? Your king?"

The drow smiled. “We have no king!” He considered her question. “The soldiers belong to the noble houses; the army is commanded by the matron mother of the foremost house—House Baenre.”

“A woman? Your leader?”

“Not *my* leader.”

Eowyn looked at him curiously. “You said that before—you said that you were nobody’s slave...”

“I am a free male. A soldier of Bregan D’aerthe,” said the drow, proudly.

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“How do I know that I can trust you?”

Eowyn turned to Captain Alfgar. “Cut him free.”

“My lady, it is far too dangerous...”

“He knows that if he puts one foot outside this tent your men will cut him down.”

“He could do a lot of harm without ever leaving the tent, my lady.”

“I can defend myself, Captain.” She tapped her sword hilt. “Cut him free.”

Reluctantly, Alfgar drew his long knife and, taking care to stand behind the drow—beyond his reach—sawed through his bonds. The dark elf gasped as feeling flooded back into his cramped arms.

“Now,” said Eowyn, “what have *I* earned by trusting you?”

The dark elf, rubbing his upper arms, gave her a faltering smile—and Eowyn, though surprised again by his extraordinary beauty, carefully kept her expression neutral. “Most male drow,” he said, “are slaves, kept for nothing more than breeding and fighting—”

Captain Alfgar made such a strange noise that the drow turned towards him, startled.

“Go on,” said Eowyn.

“The members of Bregan D’aerthe do not belong to the houses. Our services must be bought. Our leader is respected by all the matron mothers.”

“So you fight for the highest bidder?”

...

“Do you think they are dead?” asked Arador.

Haldir passed him the crystal. “I do not know. But I can hear no sound from them.” He sighed. “You are sure this is the right way?” The tunnel had suddenly closed in upon them—they could no longer stand upright—and, in places, the gaps were so narrow that Haldir had difficulty squeezing through.

“I have never killed anything before, Haldir. Do you think any of the drow in the acid cave died?”

“*Arador—*”

“It had human *eyes*.” The boy handed back the crystal and slipped easily through the slit, pulling his pack behind him. “It was afraid of the fire.”

“I know it is difficult,” said Haldir, wearily, “but you must save your remorse, just as I must save my grief.” He grimaced as, pulling himself through the next gap, he grazed his bound hand on the rough wall. “If this is the way,” he said, holding up the crystal, “how much farther do we have to go?”

...

Captain Drago raised a hand, bringing his men to a halt, then beckoned them to his side. “The sun is already going down,” he said, quietly. “So we do not have much time. Janekin—come with me. The rest of you, stay here—*eyes open*.”

The two men crept forwards through the scrub, then dropped to the ground and, bellies in the dirt, crawled out into the long, dry grass at the foot of the rock shelter.

Cautiously, Drago raised his head. “Well I’ll be...!”

...

“Let me go first,” said Haldir.

“Alright,” said Arador. “But be quick. Do not leave me alone in here for long.”

Haldir patted his shoulder. Then he slipped his arm from its sling and pulled himself through the tiny hole into the daylight beyond.

...

Captain Drago leapt to his feet, ripping his sword from its scabbard as he ran towards the stranger.

The big elf—for it was obviously an elf, not a dark warrior—turned, and immediately drew his own sword, holding it, Drago noticed, in his left hand. “Captain Drago!” he said, suddenly smiling and lowering the tip of his blade. “What are *you* doing in Eryn Carantaur?”

Frowning, the man planted his feet and levelled his sword. “Janekin?” he shouted.

“Yes sir.”

“Have you got your bow on him?”

“Yes sir.”

“One wrong move, elf,” said Drago, “and you will be waiting in your Halls of Mandos. Now—slowly—drop your sword—good—and tell me who you are, and how you know my name.”

“We have met before,” said the elf, “twice or thrice—when you have accompanied Prince Faramir to Eryn Carantaur.”

“I have never seen you before,” said the man. “And I have never been to the elven colony—”

A sudden movement beside the prisoner's feet caught Drago's eye. “Remember, elf,” he said, cautiously approaching the cliff, “my man has you in sight.” He watched, sword at the ready, as a

battered travelling pack emerged from a small gap at the foot of the rocks, followed by a very dirty but familiar-looking young man, crawling on all fours.

“Arador,” said Drago. “What are you doing here?”

Shielding his eyes from the dying sunlight, the boy peered up at him. “Have we met before, sir?”

...

For more than an hour, the Captain hurried them through the trees, staying close to the forest edge with the rocks of Emyrn Arnen visible to the right, until they emerged into a wide, triangular plateau, fortified with a barricade running diagonally from the forest on the left to the cliff face on the right, defending a narrow gorge that sliced into the cliff behind.

Drago approached the wooden wall. “Amandil,” he shouted, “let us in.” A man appeared above the parapet and immediately lowered a ladder. Drago gave both prisoners a push. “Go on.”

Arador began to climb.

“My lady expected you hours ago,” said Amandil. “Who have you got here?” He helped Arador over the barricade, holding him firmly by the arm. “Nowhere to run from here, son—gods, is that *you* under all that dirt, Master Arador?”

The boy shrugged.

“Your father thinks you are dead...”

Drago pushed Haldir again. “Go on! Princess Eowyn is anxious to give me a roasting.”

“*Eowyn!*” Haldir turned to face him. “What is Eowyn doing here?”

...

Eowyn’s tent

“My lady?”

Eowyn laid down her pen. “Come in, Captain Drago.” She turned to greet him. “Did you find their camp?”

“I did not, my lady, but I have taken two prisoners, who may be able to tell us something more.” He explained how he had caught an elf and a boy, emerging from inside the rocks. “The boy is the spitting image of Lord Aubin’s son, ma’am, but claims he does not know me. The elf—”

“Bring them in, Captain.”

“Very good, my lady.” Drago lifted the tent flap. “Come inside.”

Eowyn watched the prisoners enter—Aubin’s son, Arador, and a big, handsome elf, who seemed familiar.

“Helm’s Deep!” she said, rising to her feet. “You led the elves at Helm’s Deep. But—”

“*Eowyn!*” The elf rushed forward, arms outstretched, and caught her by the hands.

“You died. I saw your body—”

“Eowyn!” He laughed, uncomfortably. “What on Middle Earth are you talking about? What are you doing here? Where is Legolas?”

Eowyn frowned. “Sir Elf,” she said, for he was clearly a person of some authority, “please, calm yourself.” She guided him towards one of the folding chairs. “I see that you are injured—Berengar, please fetch Master Ethelmar.” She sat him down. “You mentioned Prince Legolas. Is he on his way? Were you separated from him?”

The elf stared up at her. “I left Legolas with *you*, in Eryn Carantaur, three days ago.”

“Was I naked?”

“*Naked?*”

“You are not the first person to mention having seen some—some *double* of mine in the elven colony,” said Eowyn. “But I assure you that she, whoever she is, is an impostor. As for you—you bear an uncanny resemblance to someone I saw fall at the Battle of the Hornburg.” She sighed. “But all this can wait. What I need to know now is—ah, Master Healer, here is your patient.”

She stepped back to give Ethelmar space to work. “All I need to know now, Sir Elf,” she repeated, “is what you can tell me about the dark demons.”

“About the drow?” The elf shook his head. “I do not understand what is happening here, but... Very well, I will tell you about the drow.” Slowly, he described how he had been sent to investigate a massacre near the Divor Rocks and how one of his people—a woman—had been kidnapped by the dark warriors.

Master Ethelmar, meanwhile, helped him out of his jerkin and tunic. Eowyn looked away.

As the healer cleaned and dressed his wound, the elf told how he had led a small band of rescuers into the Underdark, how they had been helped by one of the drow, and how the rest of the party—including his two brothers—had perished.

“I am sorry,” said Eowyn.

Finally, he explained how he and Arador had found their way out of the rocks at Gynd Thûn.

Eowyn looked enquiringly at Arador. “And you confirm this.”

“Of course, my lady,” said the boy.

“You *befriended* a dark elf?”

“He befriended us, my lady—or rather, he took pity on Mistress Wilawen.”

“He took *pity*...? Do you have any injuries, Master Arador?”

“Not really, my lady.” Arador smiled. “I am just hungry.”

“Berengar will take you to the mess tent.” She turned to her secretary. “Then find his father, Berengar. He will be overjoyed to see that his son is still alive.”

“All done, my lady,” said Master Ethelmar. “I will need to see him again tomorrow. But, for now, he is all yours.”

Eowyn cleared her throat. The elf was still stripped to the waist, but most of his broad, muscular chest was now covered in linen bandages. “Are you hungry, Sir Elf?”

He shook his head.

“Then I will leave you to get some rest. Please feel free to use my—er—bedchamber.”

...

Arador dumped his wooden bowl on the table and sat down heavily. Now that the danger had passed he was both tired and hungry—exhausted and ravenous—and it was hard to decide which need was more pressing.

But the soup smelled delicious.

He dipped his spoon into it.

“When did you last eat?”

The boy looked up. Berengar was sticking to him like a shadow. “I thought you were supposed to be fetching my father—though I do not understand what he is doing here.”

“I will find him in a moment.” Berengar sat down.

“I am not that sort,” said Arador.

“I am sorry?”

“I like *women*.”

Berengar laughed.

“I *do*.”

“I do not doubt it—though I think you are a little young for *women*. Girls, perhaps.”

“Then what do you want?”

Berengar beckoned to someone behind Arador’s back and immediately Captain Drago and the other soldier from the Princess’s tent—Captain Alfgar—joined them at the table.

“We want to hear more about the drow,” said Drago. “We plan to take the fight into their own territory—”

“You think you can invade the Underdark?” Arador looked up from his soup. “No,”—he shook his head—“impossible. First of all, it is dark down there—*so* dark that even an elf like Haldir cannot see without some sort of light. But light attracts them.”

“The dark demons?”

“And whatever other monsters are down there. They do not even need the light to find you—the

crab things tracked us by some other sense—smell or hearing...”

He took a spoonful of soup, and continued, with his mouth full, “Then there was a lake of acid, and poisonous fungus, and tunnels so narrow that Haldir had to take his clothes off to squeeze through. You cannot lead an army down there. You would not last an hour.”

The three men exchanged glances. “The elf mentioned a map,” said Drago, as if the boy had said nothing during the past five minutes.

Arador sighed. “*Believe* me. You would not last an hour.”

“But *you* did.”

“I was with *elves*! Besides, we had help—”

“Tell us more about this friendly dark elf,” said Alfgar.

Arador shook his head. “Drizzt helped us because of Mistress Wilawen. He would not betray his own people for *you*.”

...

The forest

Legolas brought his followers to a halt, drawing them off the trail and into the comparative safety of the trees. “They are up ahead,” he said, softly. “I can sense them.”

Captain Golradir nodded in confirmation.

“How many?” asked Gimli.

“Thousands,” said the Captain, shrugging. “The entire army.”

“How can we get past them?” asked Eowyn.

“They will not be camping on the trail itself,” said Legolas. “Captain Golradir, Orodreth, and I will go ahead, on foot, to deal with the lookouts. The rest of you will wait here until we give the signal.” He raised his hand to his mouth and whistled like a bird.

“We must warn your double, Lassui,” said Eowyn.

“Yes.” He glanced around the remaining elves. “Malgad—you will ride back to Eryn Carantaur, immediately.”

...

“You intend to set him *free*?” Drago shook his head.

“If this leader of his,” said Eowyn, “can be persuaded to change sides—”

“He would be asking his men—his elves—to kill their own,” said Alfgar.

“They are mercenaries, Captain,” said Eowyn, “it is how they make a living—and, from what the prisoner tells me, their kind are constantly engaged in civil war.”

"You are assuming that he will keep his word," said Drago.

"Because I will make it worth his while."

"It is still a gamble, my lady," said Alfgar.

"I will follow him," said Drago. "This is our best chance to find their camp."

"No!" said Eowyn. "No—going into the forest after dark would be suicide, Drago. Besides, if they attack tonight we will need you here. We must trust him. And if he does betray us, what have we lost? Just a few gold pieces."

...

"Be careful."

Legolas pulled Eowyn into his arms and hugged her tightly. "A Captain kissing his second-in-command," he whispered. "There will be a scandal..."

"*Promise me.*"

"I promise." He kissed her forehead. "You know what to do?"

"Wait for the signal then move out as silently as possible."

"Take care of Hentmirë for me, melmenya."

"You know I will, Lassui."

...

"Five hundred gold," said Eowyn.

"A thousand," replied the prisoner.

"Seven hundred and fifty. And that is my final offer."

"Half *now*."

"*Two hundred now*," said Eowyn. "Five hundred and fifty when I have spoken to your leader." She cocked her head, regarding him shrewdly. "And one hundred extra if you bring him here in two days. Agreed?"

The drow sighed. "You drive a hard bargain, my lady, but yes—agreed."

"Captain Alfgar will return your armour and your knife, and escort you to the gulley." She held out her hand. "We humans," she said, "shake hands when we make an agreement like this. It binds each party, on his honour."

The drow took her hand but did not shake it; instead, he raised it to his lips. "I am your servant, my lady," he murmured.

Eowyn calmly withdrew her hand. "I will believe *that* when you return with your leader, Master Drow. In two days."

“Two days.”

...

Legolas, Golradir and Orodreth had left the trail and were moving through the trees, bows in hand.

They found the first pair of lookouts less than a quarter mile from where they had left Eowyn and the others. Legolas nocked an arrow and drew, aiming for the nearer of the two. The dark elf, suddenly sensing him, turned.

Valar, they look so much like us, thought Legolas, as he loosed the arrow, *but on the inside, they are no better than orcs*.

He hit his target between the eyes, and the drow fell from the tree, his mouth open in a silent cry.

His companion, shot by Golradir, fell a split-second later.

The elves pressed on.

The next pair of lookouts—alerted by the sound of their comrades’ fall—came running to meet them, swords drawn. Legolas took them both with two rapid shots.

“We must hurry,” he said, softly. “The next pair will know we are coming. And if they raise the alarm...”

“We should split up,” said Golradir.

The three elves broke into a run, weaving silently through the trees, scarcely disturbing the undergrowth.

The forest is our world, thought Legolas. *Here, we have the advantage*.

He saw the next pair of lookouts and, without breaking his stride, nocked an arrow and loosed.

Golradir and Orodreth ran on to the next post, leaving Legolas to take care of the second drow.

...

Eowyn’s tent

“I am sorry,” said Eowyn quietly. “I did not mean to wake you. I just need—”

“You did not.” Haldir swung his feet off the camp bed and sat up. “*You* look tired.”

“No.” Eowyn smiled. “That is, yes, I am, but not in the normal way.”

“Why are you here, Eowyn? Where is Legolas? And Eomer? Where is Faramir?”

“Faramir was killed,” said Eowyn, “in the first attack.”

“Faramir—*dead*?”

“Yes.” She sat down beside him. “I miss him so much... As for Eomer—Eomer and I quarrelled—he does not approve of me. And Prince Legolas and I had a misunderstanding.”

“So much has changed in three days? None of this makes any sense...”

Eowyn smiled, sadly. “At least *you* seem to be feeling better. I am so sorry—about your brothers, I mean.”

“Please...”

“You are not ready to talk about them.”

“No.”

“Elves are not accustomed to death—I saw that at Helm’s Deep.”

“You saved my life at Helm’s Deep,” he said. “You *did*.”

He looked at her intently—so brave, and yet so small and so vulnerable. So alone. His gaze dropped to her lips, delicately curved and petal-soft, and he leaned in closer and, with his good arm, he gathered her to his chest...

Chapter 15: The drow

For Arwenevenstar.

...

Clutching the glowing crystal in one hand, Rumil dived beneath the surface of the lake. The cave was dimly illuminated but beneath the water the world was black and oily and, even with the torch to light his way, the elf could see nothing. The profound darkness made him nauseous, but he kept trying, diving down as deep as he could bear, turning full circle, then coming up to the surface, taking a great gulp of air, swimming to another spot, and diving again—

But this time his older brother was waiting for him. "It has been too long, *muindor nín*," said Orophin, catching him by the arm. "Come. Swim back with me—the others are waiting."

"No," said Rumil, wrenching his arm free. "Dínendal says that he can be revived—if I can find him, he can be revived!" He tried to swim away.

Orophin grabbed his brother's shoulders and, like a human adult chastising a child, shook him hard. "Dínendal said," he corrected, "that a person can *sometimes* be revived if the water is cold enough... But *listen*." He nodded his head towards the southern edge of the cave where an ominous clack-clacking sound was rapidly approaching. "More of the crab-men. We must get the others to safety, little brother."

"He is not dead, Orophin. I know he is not dead."

The older elf tightened his grip. "If anyone could have survived, it would have been Haldir," he agreed. "But we have run out of time—*Rumil!*" He shook his brother again. "He would have moved us off long before this—"

"No! You are talking as though he were dead!" cried Rumil, angrily. "He is not! And he would never give up looking for one of us!"

"Rumil?" Wilawen's tearful voice suddenly echoed across the water. "Is there any sign of him?"

Rumil's normally impish face contorted with grief.

"No," shouted Orophin. "So we are coming back. Be ready to move off."

...

"What about Arador?" asked Valandil, helping Orophin bring Rumil ashore.

"Nothing," said Orophin. They sat his younger brother on a rock. He turned to Dínendal. "Miruvor?"

The healer laid down Haldir's bow, fished in his healing bag, and brought out a small flask, which he uncorked and handed to Rumil. "Just one sip. We must make it last."

"What about Drizzt?" asked Valandil.

"Gone," said Orophin, strapping on his quiver. "He must have left the moment we began to cross the lake." He took a sip of cordial and passed the flask to Valandil—"Quickly."

"But without him," said Valandil, "or the map..." He handed the flask to Wilawen.

"I know," replied Orophin. "We will have to trust to luck—"

Clack, clack-clack!

"Ceryn Manwë! They are almost upon us! Come Rumil—are you ready, Wilawen?"

The woman returned the miruvor to Dínendal, and wiped her wet face with the back of her hand. "Yes," she said, with a sniff. Then she added, "Drizzt and the boy showed me the map, so I may be able to find the tunnel." She scanned the wall of the cavern. "I think it is over there." She pointed to a shadowy recess towards the south—the direction from which the noises were coming.

"Orophin," said Dínendal, taking up his borrowed bow, "if we leave this cave, we will be blind. Would it not be better to fight them here, where there is at least some light?"

"I do not intend us to fight if we can avoid it—"

CLACK! CLACK!

The closeness of the noise took them by surprise, and the elves turned, instinctively raising their weapons—Valandil stepped in front of Wilawen. "Can you see them?" he whispered.

"No..." said Orophin, peering into the shadowy maze of rocks.

"I can see one," said Dínendal, sounding unnaturally calm. He had already nocked an arrow and drawn his bow. "Over by that crooked spire—and I think there are two others, further left.

"I see them." Orophin aimed for the centre shape. "Valandil, take the left, Rumil, Dínendal, you take the right. We must aim between their armour plates."

"I cannot see well enough for that," said Rumil.

"Then wait. Let them come closer. Do not waste your arrows."

...

Wilawen dropped to the ground, searching for a weapon, a blade-shaped stone, which she could use as a dagger if it came to a hand-to-hand fight—

Something moved on the mirror-still surface of the lake.

She crawled closer to the water's edge.

A shadow...?

It took Wilawen a moment to understand what she was seeing—to realise that something must be obscuring the light that filtered down from the ceiling.

Slowly, she raised her eyes.

...

The creatures charged.

The elves, shooting almost blind, loosed their arrows—and Orophin must have scored a lucky hit, because the one in the centre suddenly dropped like a stone but the others, protected by their living armour, came on, snapping their massive pincers.

Discarding his bow, Valandil drew a short knife and ran at the creature on the left, ducking under its outstretched arms and coming in close to its body—too close for it to bring its pincers to bear on him, too low for it to use its beak.

Instead, the thing folded him in its arms, and crushed him to its armoured chest.

Struggling to breathe, fighting the darkness that was quickly filling his head, the elf slid his knife point up the creature's bony casing—if he could just—yes—he found a chink, below the thing's left breast and, willing all his remaining strength into his hand, he worked the blade into the narrow gap between the plates, and—praying to the Valar that the creature's organs were arranged like his own—he drove it home, ramming it upwards into the monster's heart.

The creature shuddered, and tightened its arms around him; and, as the darkness finally claimed him, it seemed to Valandil that the world was falling away, and that he was spiralling down after it...

...

"Aim for the eyes!" shouted Orophin as he, Rumil and Dínendal took on the rightmost beast.

"No!" cried Dínendal. Forcing himself to work slowly, he carefully nocked another arrow, and raised Haldir's great Galadhrim bow. "Aim for the *mouth*," he said, "inside the beak." The healer took careful aim, and loosed. "*Elbereth Gilthoniel*..." he whispered.

And his arrow flew true.

Pierced through the back of its throat, the creature took a great gasp of air and shook its head, coughing and retching, trying to expel the missile. Then Rumil loosed and, despite the creature's frantic thrashing, buried a second arrow deep in its gullet. And Orophin brought the monster to its knees by taking out its eyes with two rapid shots.

The brothers drew their knives, and moved in for the kill.

...

"DROW!" cried Wilawen. "*Hundreds* of drow! Up there!"

Orophin whirled round, looking up into the roof of the cave.

Dark shapes—*Yes, drow!*—floating against the 'starlit sky', were streaming over the lake, their swords and poisoned crossbow quarrels at the ready—*Not hundreds*, thought the elf, *but certainly more than enough*.

Forgetting the dying hook horror, Orophin took up his bow. "Rumil, Dínendal, Val—*Valandil?*" His comrade was buried beneath one of the armoured brutes. "Wilawen, see to Valandil—you two, shoot at will! Make every arrow count."

"Just look at that," whispered Rumil. High above the hovering drow, three massive lizards, bridled like the horses of the Rohirrim, were running swiftly across the cavern roof, their dark elf riders hanging upside down in their saddles. "This place is an abomination..." Rumil loosed an arrow, narrowly missing the leading rider but hitting his mount in the thigh—though the creature barely broke its stride.

Beside him, Dínendal drew his bow—and held it. To kill a monster was one thing. But to kill a *person*, someone with thoughts and feelings like his own—someone with a mother and, perhaps, a wife—when he had taken an oath to *preserve* life—

"Shoot them, Master Healer," cried Orophin, as if sensing his doubts, "they will not scruple to kill *you!*" And, setting his gentler comrade an example, the brother loosed, and shot the foremost drow out of the air.

...

"Vandalil?"

He was lying across the crab man's body, still trapped in its suffocating embrace.

Blinking back her tears, Wilawen knelt beside him, and touched his face. He felt cold, but she quickly found a pulse in his neck—strong and steady—and when she checked his breathing she could see that, although shallow, it was regular.

Thank the gods for elven resistance to hurt!

Crying with relief now, she tried to break the monster's grip.

...

Darkness engulfed the three archers.

"Keep shooting," cried Orophin. "Shoot blind! We have nothing to lose now!"

...

Gently, Wilawen prised Vandalil's fingers from the handle of his knife and pulled the blade from the creature's body.

She could not hope to use an elven sword, but a dagger was becoming a familiar weapon, and she would defend her betrothed with it until the drow took her life.

...

The elves never knew how many of the enemy they killed—certainly not enough—for, the moment they ran out of ammunition, the dark cloud vanished, and they, together with Vandalil and Wilawen, were bombarded by a hail of tiny crossbow quarrels.

...

Eryn Carantaur Haldir's flet

"Suppose I tell you to mind your own business," said Cyllien.

"That would be a terrible waste of good advice."

"And you would pay no attention to me, anyway."

"You are learning." Arinna leaned forward, and stared at her intently. "I am here because there are people in this colony—people I respect, who—for reasons I cannot begin to understand—care about you and want you to be happy. So..."

Arinna counted off the options on her fingers. "You can carry on as you are, betraying Haldir—many people thrive on the piquancy deceit adds to a relationship—but,"—she glanced around the domestic chaos and raised her hands with a flourish that Cyllien found particularly annoying—"I do not think that that is the case here.

"You can make a clean break with the March Warden, live alone, and entertain men or elves—or dwarves—" Cyllien shot her a murderous look. "I am told," said Arinna, "that dwarves make surprisingly tender lovers—you can entertain them wherever and whenever you feel the urge. But you strike me as the sort of woman that does not do well on her own."

Cyllien sighed, theatrically.

"Well," said Arinna, "we *have* hit a raw nerve. In that case, and taking all other things into consideration, I would say that you have only one option left: be faithful to the March Warden."

"*Brilliant.*"

"What is *wrong* with him, you foolish elleth? I mean, apart from the fact that he is not *him*, (because you can never have everything), what is wrong with him? Does he beat you?"

"*No!*" Cyllien was genuinely shocked at the suggestion.

"Does he chase other women?"

"He—no." Cyllien was certainly not going to discuss the Mistress Perfect problem with this woman. "But he leaves me—"

"Because he has a job to do. That is how men are. But, goodness, woman, count your lucky stars! He is handsome. And, if I am any judge of male flesh at all, he is a decent lover and ready, willing and able to learn."

Cyllien did not reply.

"You elves are designed for openness and innocence," said Arinna, "not for *furtive* sex—leave that to us humans."

Still she did not reply.

"Well, that is all I came to say; so, if you will excuse me, I will take my leave. There is, after all, no sense in flogging a dead horse." She picked her way to the door. "Thank you for your generous hospitality."

...

The Divor Rocks

Straddling the fire trench, Orodreth placed his ear to the soot-stained wall, closed his eyes, and listened.

"Do you really think," asked Malgalad, filling the trench with new wood, "that the dark elves will emerge here again—after losing so many of their comrades in the flames last time?"

"I have no idea."

"Can you hear anything?"

"*Shhhh!*" Orodreth let his mind clear and tried to focus on the unknown world beyond the rock, searching for the strange, hypnotic chant that he and Camthalion had heard before the last attack.

Nothing.

He turned to his second-in-command. "Our orders are to prevent another massacre," he said. "We do not have enough elves to seal off the entire ridge, so we have to assume that they favour this place—and have used it two nights running—because the rocks have some special quality..."

"Might I make a suggestion, sir?"

"Go on."

"You could station lookouts at intervals along the foot of the ridge—hide them up in the trees. Then, if the dark elves emerge elsewhere..."

"The lookouts can relay a warning to us. Good. Arrange it. Use our least able warriors and impress on them that their task is to watch and to raise the alarm—they are not to engage the enemy until they are sure we have received it."

...

Arinna walked slowly back to the flet she shared with Camthalion and Orodreth.

Should she pay the young stud a visit and warn him off?

No. The oaf was collecting tails. To add a whiff of danger to this one would merely increase its bragging value. She had said her piece, planted the seeds of doubt, and she was almost sure that Cyllien would do the right thing.

But she would keep a discreet watch on the elleth, just to make certain.

...

Dawn

As the sun rose above the Divor Rocks, Orodreth gave the order to stand down. Malgalad and his second lieutenant, a former Ranger, fell in beside him.

The man stretched his cramped limbs. "What now, sir? Shall I dismiss the lookouts?"

"No," said Orodreth, "rotate them—I want the entire ridge under constant watch. Meanwhile, the rest of us will look for that tunnel the boy claimed was in the Divor Caves."

"Do you intend to *follow* the March Warden, sir?"

"I will make that decision," said Orodreth, "once we have found a way in."

...

Eryn Carantaur Haldir's flet

Cyllien opened the door. The carpenter—Heral, though she had never used his name to his face, and could seldom remember it—gave her his usual impudent smile.

"Come in," she said, watching him cross the threshold.

He was tall—taller than most elves—and broad, (heavy when he lay upon her), with a strong-featured, freckled face, deep blue eyes, and a shock of thick blond hair. Everything about him was... manly—he smelled of 'man', and he moved as though displaying a permanent erection.

Cyllien bit her lip. Twenty-four hours ago his body had almost driven her out of her mind. Now the sight of him made her feel faintly nauseous.

She closed the door. "We need to talk," she said, "Sit down."

But the man came up close, backing her against the door and, placing a hand either side of her head, deliberately used his size to intimidate her. "Talk? Why waste time on talk?"

"Because there is something I want to say to you. Sit down." She slipped beneath an arm and escaped to the centre of the room. "Sit down."

"No."

"Very well. Stand." Cyllien took a deep breath. "It has been enjoyable—"

"Ha!" The man laughed. "Is that the best you can do?"

Cyllien felt a sudden shiver of fear—for, although his tone was calm, there was something wild in his eyes, something she had never seen in him before. "At present," she said.

"Then let me make sure I understand, because I am only a stupid man, not an elf princess..." He followed her into the room, and the natural sensuality of his movements only made him more threatening. "*You* have decided that *you* have had enough, and *you* want to be rid of me?"

What was the point of lying? "Yes."

The man shook his head. "Well that doesn't work for me. You see, I came here ready for a fuck."

Cyllien took a step backwards. "Then I am sorry to disappoint you."

"Oh no. I am not leaving disappointed." He reached for her hair—

But if there was one thing that Cyllien had learned from her encounters with Wolfram, it was to be prepared and, before the man could touch her, she had a knife to his groin.

"Now," she said, pressing the tip through his woollen breeches, "all I have to do, is *slice*."

The hand that—a moment before—had been threatening her, rose in submission.

"Good," said Cyllien. "Now go. Go, and do not come back." She shuffled forwards, pushing him across the room and through the door.

The man stumbled outside. "You bitch!" he cried. "You crazy bitch! You have not seen the last of me! Just watch out!"

Cyllien closed the door, and barred it with a chair.

She pulled open the side-slit in her gown, and sheathed Haldir's hunting knife in the scabbard she had strapped to her thigh.

Then she sank to the floor, and buried her face in her shaking hands.

...

The Underdark **Some time later...**

Wilawen opened her eyes and, instantly remembering the danger that surrounded them, tried to scramble to her feet, but a gentle hand restrained her. "Dínendal?"

The healer placed a finger to her lips. "Try to be quiet," he whispered. "It seems to anger them less."

"Where is Vandalil?"

"He is lying beside you, still sleeping—it may be some hours before he wakes. He and the brothers were hit more times than we were..."

The crossbow bolts! Wilawen pushed herself up on her elbows—every part of her body seemed to ache—and turned onto her side. In the faint, bluish light, Valandil did, indeed, seem to be sleeping. She stroked his face. “I have never seen him close his eyes before,” she whispered.

“It is healing sleep,” said Dínendal.

“But he was already unconscious before they shot us—are you sure he is all right?”

“As far as I can be.”

Wilawen turned back to the healer. “I am sorry; I did not mean to doubt you.”

“You are worried about him. That is all.” Dínendal patted her shoulder, supportively.

“Where are we?” she asked. They were sitting in a smooth, oval, bowl-shaped object, with a glassy floor that curved up into low sides topped by a broad ledge. “Is this a boat?”

“I think,” said Dínendal, “that it is some sort of shell...”

“*Shell?*” Wilawen leant over the side, until the sudden crack of a whip above her head made her pull back, but she had seen enough.

Dínendal had been right, they were sitting in an enormous shell—like one half of a vast freshwater mussel—borne on the back of a creature that resembled a giant slug—Wilawen gagged at the memory of its slime-covered body *rippling* along beneath her. And she had briefly glimpsed at least three others, all driven by whip-wielding drow, and several lizard-mounted escorts...

She crawled back to Valandil’s side.

...

Wilawen lay on her back, staring up at the roof.

The slug’s soft body dampened all sense of movement, so it seemed as though the tunnel itself were slowly streaming past her. She had no idea how long she had been awake, nor how much time had passed since they had been ambushed in the starlit cave, but she was certain that they must be nearing the end of their journey, for the blue light was gradually growing brighter and brighter.

...

The roof had stopped moving.

Cautiously, Wilawen shuffled to the rim of the shell and, keeping her head well inside, peered out.

“Gods!” she murmured. “Dínendal, look at this... It must be their homeland.”

The caravan had paused at the edge of a massive cavern—perhaps two miles across at its widest point, with a great, arched roof that soared hundreds of feet above its sloping floor. To her left, Wilawen could see a dense forest of tree-sized mushrooms and, beyond that, the very tip of what looked like a lake and, to the right of the lake, carved from the living rock, a city—a *magical* city...

Dínendal came up beside her, and she heard him gasp.

The cave was filled with natural rock formations, with spikes and spires—stalagmites, she had heard her father call them—and hanging spines, and curtains and pillars, and every one of

these forms, it seemed, had been worked upon—hollowed out to form a city of castles, with fluted walls and crenulated battlements, slender towers and spiralling turrets, every surface carved with exquisite spider-web patterns, and softly outlined in blue and mauve and red light.

"Spiders," whispered Dínendal. "They venerate spiders as we venerate Nature."

"But why have they brought *us* here?" said Wilawen. "Of what use can we possibly be to them?"

"The boy, Arador," said Dínendal quietly, "told us that their goddess demands living sacrifices." He turned his back to the city. "He thought that surface dwellers might be considered a special gift—particularly surface elves, for whom the drow have a deep hatred—"

Crack!

They flinched at the sound of the driver's whip, but the lashes were not directed at them. Slowly, the slug-creature moved off, silently hauling its cargo down the steeply sloping causeway that led into the City of Spiders.

...

After the eerie silence of the rest of The Underdark, the sudden din of a market place took Wilawen by surprise. "*Dínendal...*"

The healer, who was making one of his regular examinations of the sleeping elves, placed Rumil's hand back on his chest and crept up beside her. "Do you have any ideas?" she asked.

"No."

They heard the driver shout, and turned to see him gesturing to someone on the ground. Moments later a ladder appeared, and whoever was holding it tried, unsuccessfully, to hook it over the rim of the shell.

Dínendal took hold of Wilawen's hand. "*I cannot leave my patients,*" he said softly, "*and... And I would advise you not to try to run. Not yet.*"

Wilawen squeezed his fingers. "Do not worry..."

There were more shouts; the driver gesticulated, then he rose up, climbed over the back of his seat, walked nimbly along the shell's edge and guided the hooks into position.

Immediately, two dark elves swarmed up the ladder. One drew a long, slender blade and, hooking it under Dínendal's chin, forced him away from Wilawen. The other grabbed her by the arms. "You come," he said, in heavily accented, broken Westron, "or we kill." He gestured towards Dínendal, and his cohort grabbed the elf by the hair.

"No!" said Wilawen. "I will come with you."

The drow shoved her towards the ladder.

"Take care—and look after Valandil for me," she said to Dínendal. Then she added in a whisper, "Goodbye my love..."

With difficulty she climbed onto the rim of the shell and swung herself onto the first rung. The ladder curved over the slug's body, and, for the first part of the climb, she lay horizontal, her face just inches from its spotted, slimy skin. Closing her eyes, she worked her way downwards until she felt someone seize her by the waist, and let him lift her the rest of the way.

Not until her feet were firmly on the ground did she open her eyes, and her first impression was of chaos—market stalls, some built from stone, some from bone and hide, stretching as far as she could see (in the dim light), packed with familiar and unfamiliar wares—the narrow spaces between them seething with creatures of every size and shape and smell that Wilawen could imagine.

The newcomer grasped her arm and held it tightly.

She risked a glance at him.

He was a male drow, taller than Drizzt, but thin—a scholar, perhaps, or, judging by his exquisitely embroidered cloak and his elaborately dressed hair, a courtier—at any rate, not a warrior.

The drow who had threatened Dínendal came down the ladder and padded into one of the tent-like stalls. The courtier—quite gently—pushed Wilawen inside and, holding her at arms' length, scrutinised her, turning her head this way and that, checking her eyes, her ears, grasping her chin and opening her mouth so that he could examine her tongue and her teeth, holding her hands up to the light to inspect her fingernails, and, finally, grasping her skirt and lifting it—

Wilawen slapped his face.

The trader snatched up his whip, but the courtier merely laughed and waved the other drow away.

There was a brief interchange of words—and Wilawen realised that the pair were haggling over her—then the courtier handed the trader a pouch of money and said, in perfectly pronounced Westron, "Leave us."

The trader held up his hand, fingers spread.

"Then I shall be quick," said the courtier. "Go."

He turned to Wilawen.

Wilawen backed away.

"You have nothing to fear," he said, "not as yet."

He reached inside his cloak, drew out a small object and, holding it towards her, moved his free hand, weaving his fingers in a strange pattern, whilst reciting some sort of chant. When he came to the end, he smiled, and bowed as if expecting applause, and Wilawen realised that, try as she might, she could not move her feet.

"Come," said the drow, "at the very least we must bathe you, and time is short."

Then he gestured towards the street, and Wilawen had no choice but to step out into the crowd.

Chapter 16: Confusions

Shadowland

Eowyn's tent

***Legolas!* thought Haldir and, with a gentle, apologetic hug, he released Eowyn.**

"I am sorry, my Lady," he said, rising and walking out into the main part of the tent. "That was inappropriate—I have insulted you, and I have betrayed Legolas..."

"*Legolas?*" Eowyn followed him. "Did Legolas tell you what happened? Haldir?" She caught him by his good arm.

Haldir turned. "What *has* happened?"

Eowyn's eyes narrowed as she scrutinised his face. "No. He did not tell you... So how do you know? Did my brother tell you? Or Aragorn? Or was it Arwen?"

"I do not understand—"

"One moment of foolishness," she said, raking her hand through her hair. "One *moment!* And I must pay for it for the rest of my life, whilst *he...*!"

Haldir's expression softened. "Will you please tell me what you are talking about, Eowyn" he asked, gently.

...

Deep in the forest

Legolas crouched beside Golradir. "Do you sense any more lookouts?" he whispered.

The March Warden shook his head. "Not along the trail."

"Nor do I. I think it is safe to summon the others." He raised his hands to his lips and whistled like a bird.

Then he turned back to Golradir. "Now would be a good time," he said, "to scout the enemy encampment, get a count of their numbers, and view their defences—perhaps discover what they intend next."

"Are you asking for a volunteer, my Lord?" asked Golradir, smiling.

...

"That was the signal, my Lady," said Fingolfin.

"Return it, my Lord," said Eowyn. She patted Hentmirë's hand. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," whispered the little woman, hoarsely.

Eowyn signalled the others to move out. "Remember," she said, quietly, as the riders passed by, "stay on the trail; move swift and silent."

...

Eryn Arnen **Eowyn's tent**

Eowyn sat down heavily on the camp bed, beckoning Haldir to join her.

“After we had defeated Saruman’s army,” she said, “and Fangorn had finished off those we had not killed—rending them limb from limb as they fled—we tended the wounded, and buried the dead.” She glanced at the big elf. “Forgive me—I was sure that I had seen you amongst the fallen...” She shook her head, as though to clear away the false memory.

“At last,” she continued, “we could celebrate our victory. We gathered in the Golden Hall. The ale flowed and the warriors drank... I went out onto the terrace for some air. Legolas was already there—a single, lonely figure, gazing out across the plains of Rohan. I went up to him. We talked...” She closed her eyes. “It was madness—I knew that it was madness! And afterwards he spoke of marriage. But *he* was an elf, and I—my uncle had named me his heir should Eomer not survive. How could I marry an elf?”

She looked up at Haldir, her eyes pleading for understanding. “But he was right, I *was* with child. I had a little boy,”—her face was suddenly transformed—“half elf, half human.”

“A *child*? But... Where is he?”

“He lives in Minas Tirith,” replied Eowyn, “with Arwen and Aragorn. I will not live to see him grow to manhood, Haldir, and it seemed best that he should think Arwen his mother from the outset.”

“You are not the Eowyn I know,” said Haldir, slowly. “You look like her, you sound like her, but you... You are more experienced, more worldly-wise than she. How can that be?”

Eowyn shrugged.

“Do you still love him—Legolas?”

“*Love* him? I told you, it was a moment of madness, not an act of love.” She frowned. “Truly.”

“But you speak of his child with such tenderness.”

“He is *my* child, Haldir—I carried him, for almost a year, I gave birth to him—of course I love him, though I have not seen him since the day he was born...” She turned to the elf, suddenly anxious. “Legolas does not know that he has a son—we thought it best that he should not know. Please, swear to me that you will not tell him.”

“*We*?” said Haldir.

“Faramir and I.” Eowyn looked away. “I was betrothed to Faramir before I realised that I was with child, for the healers had always told me that I was barren. When I confessed my folly to him—he was such a good man, Haldir—he promised to love the child as his own,”—she shook her head—“so different from Eomer! But, of course, once Meldon was born, it was obvious that his father had been an elf. So we asked Arwen to help us, and she and Aragorn agreed to adopt him—and to tell Legolas nothing.”

"You *must* tell him," said Haldir, softly.

"No."

"Why, Eowyn? Elves love their children above all else. For him not to know..."

Eowyn shook her head, determination hardening her beautiful face.

"Oh, Eowyn,"—Haldir reached for her—"what a difficult life you have been given to lead..." He drew her close. And, this time, his conscience did not stand in their way.

...

Deep in the forest

The three elves darted from the trees, and signalled the riders to stop.

Legolas came up beside Eowyn and caught hold of Brightstar's bridle. "We have dealt with the lookouts," he said, "so you should have no trouble, provided you keep to the trail."

"What will *you* be doing?"

"Golradir and I are going to scout the enemy encampment. Orodreth will come with *you*." He laid a reassuring hand on Eowyn's booted leg. "We will make sure that we are not seen. You must lead the others to Eryn Arnem. Leave our horses another quarter mile down the trail and we will catch up with you as soon as we can." He squeezed her ankle, mouthing, "*Trust me*."

Biting her lip, Eowyn nodded curtly, then signalled the other riders to move off. As they passed behind her, she lingered, gazing down at Legolas. "If you get into trouble, *tell* me," she said softly, referring, as he knew, to their mental bond. "Gimli and I will come back for you."

"I shall, *melmenya*." He patted Hentmirë's foot. "And you—do not look so worried, *gwendithen*!"

"Take care," said Eowyn. She drew up the reins and nudged Brightstar's flanks, and the two women galloped down the trail after the others.

...

The mess tent

"Master Arador..."

The boy tried to swat aside the hand that was gently shaking his shoulder. "*Wha*?"

"I have brought your father."

Arador sniffed, and—suddenly aware of the painful crick in his neck—raised his head; he had fallen asleep in the empty Mess Tent. He peered up at the two men standing beside him. One was Berengar; the other was...

"Uncle Aubin." The boy yawned. "What are *you* doing here?" Moving his head cautiously, he looked around. "I thought you said you had brought my father?"

The two men exchanged glances. "Did you bump your head in that cave?" asked Aubin.

"I bumped everything," said Arador, stretching his arms. "Several times. And nearly drowned." He rubbed his face. "Where is my father?"

"What are you talking about? I am here." Aubin sat down opposite him. "Can I trouble you to fetch my wife, Master Berengar?"

"Of course..." The secretary left.

"Let me see your eyes," said Aubin.

"What?" Arador scowled. "*Why?*" He batted the man's hand away. "Why are you pretending to be my father? What has happened to my father?" He suddenly rose to his feet and demanded, loudly, "Where is my mother? What have you done with her?"

"I am here, Aran..."

The boy turned towards the feminine voice. "*Mama?*" He frowned. The woman standing beside Berengar looked at least ten years older than the mother he had left behind in Newhome but—despite the grey hair—there was no doubting that it was she.

There was a moment's pause. Then Arador held out his arms and his mother rushed to him, hands outstretched.

"Oh, Aran, I thought you were dead! I thought I had seen your dead body..." She threw her arms around him and Arador gathered her close, cradling her head on his shoulder.

"What is *he* doing here, Mama? Where is my father?"

The woman looked up at her son, then turned to her husband, confused. "What do you mean, Aran?"

"You are not married to him—he is my uncle."

Berengar stepped forward. "Whatever is happening here," he said, "must wait—"

"He is *not* my father," insisted Arador. "He is my father's twin—"

"Please, Lord Aubin, Lady Morwen," said Berengar, gently disentangling the woman from her son's embrace and handing her to her husband, "I will bring your son to you when he has discharged his duty."

"He is *not*—" began Arador.

"HUSH!" Berengar waited calmly, pinning Arador in place with one outstretched hand whilst staring down Lord Aubin until the man reluctantly drew his sobbing wife from the Mess Tent. "Good. Now, what I told your parents,"—he held up his hands—"told *those people*, was true. Princess Eowyn needs you—map in hand and with all your faculties alert." He grasped Arador's shoulders and shook him hard. "You must put this behind you until the war is over. And then..." His voice trailed away.

"We may all be dead," finished Arador, quietly. "And, if so, nothing else will matter."

"Exactly."

...

Haldir sighed contentedly. He had always known that Eowyn was the true companion of his spirit—He felt her stir against his chest. “You are a dear, sweet elf, Haldir,” she said, softly.

“And you,” said Haldir, raising her small hand to his lips and kissing her fingers, “are a dear, sweet adaneth.”

The smile they exchanged was filled with all the intimacy they had just experienced. Eowyn was the first to turn away. “I suppose I should—”

“No. Not yet.” Haldir exerted just a fraction of his elven strength. “Stay with me a while longer.”

She gazed into his eyes, and read his mind. “*This cannot last.*”

“No. I wish for nothing else, *meleth nín*, but I do not believe it can.”

“Then let us stay like this until they come to fetch me.”

...

Deep in the forest

Eowyn led the advance party northwards until she found a sharp bend in the Forest trail, skirting an outcropping of rocks that formed a natural fortification. She drew the riders to a halt. “This will do,” she said.

“One of us should stay with the horses, my Lady,” said Orodreth.

“My thinking exactly—Lord Fingolfin, might I trouble you to take care of Lady Hentmirë for me?”

“Of course, my Lady.”

“Eowyn?” The little woman peered over her companion’s shoulder. “Why?”

“Because Gimli and I are going to wait here for Legolas and Golradir,” said Eowyn, patting the older woman’s hand, “just in case Legolas needs us, Hentmirë. The rest of you will make for Emyn Arnen as planned. Lord Fingolfin,”—she pulled a small leather document pouch from around her neck and handed it to the elf—“this is the message from your Lord. I trust that you will give my double your full support if, for any reason, Legolas and I cannot reach her.”

Fingolfin placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. “You may rely upon me, my Lady.”

...

Legolas raised a hand to signal caution, then beckoned.

Golradir leaped gracefully through the branches and landed silently beside him. From the cover of the foliage, the two elves gazed down into the clearing below.

“By the two trees,” murmured the March Warden. “That must be their command post.” He pointed to a pavilion of dark canvas, sited at the far end of the encampment.

“And that,” said Legolas, referring to the small, elderly woman seated on an elaborate chair, “must be their Queen.”

“Valar,” said Golradir. “That throne...”

“Is built of bones,” said Legolas.

“Something is happening.”

Two female warriors, clad in leather armour, dragged a male—somewhat smaller than themselves—into the command post and threw him to the ground at the Queen’s feet. Then one of the females drew a curved blade and, placing her foot on the wretch’s back, pressed its tip to his neck.

“They do not appear to be celebrating a victory,” said Golradir, thoughtfully.

“No...”

In the tent, there was a brief exchange of words, then the elderly Queen waved her hand.

The female warrior raised her sword high above her head, and brought it down in a single clean cut. The male’s severed head rolled away from his body; his executioner caught it with the flat of her blade and swept it away from the throne.

“At least it was swift,” whispered Golradir.

A second male was brought in, and dispatched in the same way.

“How many troops do you see?” asked Legolas.

Golradir scanned the clearing. To the right, a herd of massive lizards waited restively, stamping and snapping at their handlers; to the left, ten distinct clusters of male warriors appeared to be digging in for the night. “No more than two hundred here,” he whispered, “but that trail,”—he nodded northwards—“leads to a long chain of clearings, all of comparable size. If they are making full use of them, we could be looking at a total force of,”—he shrugged—“up to three thousand, perhaps.”

Legolas nodded. “Do you see any indication that they will attack tonight?”

Golradir looked back into the tent. A third male had been brought inside, but this one—a fine-looking elf, taller than most of the females, heavily built, and with a thick mane of white hair—appeared to be in favour. Golradir watched the executioner unbuckle the sword belt from her first victim and present it to the newcomer. “He must be their new field commander,” he muttered. “I would wish him more success than his predecessor, but that would not be in *our* interest...” Then, “No,” he concluded, “I do not see any preparations for battle tonight.”

“Nor do I,” said Legolas. “And that gives us a chance. Come.”

...

They remained aloft until they had passed the perimeter that had been marked by the chain of lookouts, then they dropped to the ground and, staying within the trees to the west of the trackway, headed north to collect their horses.

They had covered no more than five hundred yards, however, when Legolas suddenly sensed

something—someone—hidden in the Forest to his right and, as he pulled his bow from its strap and smoothly nocked an arrow, he saw that Golradir, having felt the same presence, was doing the same.

The two elves turned to face the threat.

At first they saw nothing.

Then a lean, dark figure stepped out onto the path, swept off an extraordinary plumed hat, and favoured them with an elaborate, sweeping bow.

Legolas lowered his bow.

The stranger straightened up, smiled, replaced his hat, and stepped back into the trees.

“What, in Manwë’s name, was that?” asked Golradir.

“I have no idea—” Something else caught Legolas’ eye, and he turned south to see a band of dark warriors streaming towards them, hand crossbows raised. “Poison,” he cried. “*RUN!*”

...

Eryn Arnen Eowyn’s tent

“*Ahem.*”

Eowyn grinned at Haldir. “What is it, Berengar?” she called.

“Messengers, my Lady, from Prince Legolas, leading an advance party of—”

Eowyn leaped up and, pausing only long enough to pull off the coverlet and wrap it around herself, threw back the curtain that closed off her bedchamber, temporarily forgetting the naked elf still lying in her bed.

“Oh!” Berengar quickly turned his back. “I will give you a few moments to make yourself decent, my Lady. Open the tent flap when you are ready.” He glanced over his shoulder and winked at her, affectionately.

...

Deep in the forest

Gimli, sitting astride Arod, was growing impatient. “Where has that crazy elf got to?” he muttered. “I should have insisted on going with him. When I—*what?*”

Eowyn had raised her head. “He is coming,” she said, reaching for her sword, “—and he is running!” She took up her bow, and swiftly knocked an arrow.

“*Running?*” Gimli rolled off Arod’s back, drew his axe, and assumed his battle stance.

They waited.

At last, the elves flew out of the Forest, closely pursued by a dozen black-clad warriors.

Gimli hefted his axe and, roaring like a warg, charged with such ferocity that several of the enemy simply turned and fled. The remainder raised their crossbows and took aim.

Eowyn immediately loosed her arrow, burying it deep in a glowing red eye. Blinded and panicking, the stricken dark elf blundered about, throwing his comrades into chaos, and giving Legolas and Golradir time to turn, and plant their feet.

As Eowyn nocked her second arrow, Gimli swirled through the knot of warriors, swinging his axe in great curving strokes, smashing heads and slashing limbs, and batting their tiny crossbow quarrels out of the air.

Legolas and Golradir, meanwhile, had raised their bows, and begun shooting steadily, finishing off the remaining dark warriors with surgical precision.

It was a short battle.

...

“Shall I leave?” asked Haldir, struggling to close his jerkin with one hand, his earlier exertions having made his wound tender.

Eowyn reached up and, smiling, undid the misaligned hooks and refastened them. “No. You are an experienced warrior and my trusted advisor. I want you here.” She smoothed the fabric over his broad chest. “Do you need to see Master Ethelmar?”

“Later, perhaps.”

“I do not want your wound to fester.”

“I am an elf,” said Haldir, smiling. “We do not fester.”

“Well then. Sit down. I will call them in.”

She raised the tent flap and peered outside. Moments later, Berengar ushered in the strange group of messengers: a tall, distinguished-looking elf, a plump little woman dressed—ridiculously, Eowyn thought—in an elven jerkin, leggings and boots, and a young man.

“Hentmirë!” cried Haldir, leaping to his feet. “Lord Fingolfin! Berryn! It is so good to see you all.”

Eowyn watched in fascination as the woman threw herself at the big elf, wrapping her stout arms around his waist.

“Haldir of Lorien,” said the elven messenger. “How did you... Cross over?”

“Cross over?” Gently, Haldir deposited the little woman in one of the folding chairs. “What do you mean?”

“Perhaps,” said Eowyn, taking command, “we should begin with business.” She turned to Lord Fingolfin. “My secretary tells me that you carry a message from Prince Legolas.”

“Of course, my Lady. Forgive me.” Fingolfin bowed formally. Then he drew a leather dispatch pouch from around his neck and handed it to her. “Lady Hentmirë, Master Berryn, and I left Eryn Carantaur yesterday, in an advance party. The plan is for us to leave for Minas Tirith and make

contact with King Elessar as soon as possible. Prince Legolas, meanwhile, is raising troops and will be marching out tomorrow at dawn.”

“The Prince’s letter,” said Eowyn, looking up from the parchment, “mentions my double.”

“That is correct, my Lady,” said Fingolfin.

“Who is this woman? Why has she suddenly begun to haunt me?”

“May I?” Fingolfin gestured to one of the folding chairs. “It may take a while to explain.”

“Please do,” said Eowyn. “Master Berryn, Berengar, please be seated.”

“Several days ago,” Fingolfin began, “a young woman—identical to you in almost every way, it seems—appeared at Eryn Carantaur claiming to be Lord Legolas’ wife. At first we both thought her deluded. But, after listening to her story, and questioning her, and looking into local lore, I became convinced that she was telling the truth—that she *is* Lord Legolas’ wife, and that she *is* the joint ruler of the colony, just...” He leaned towards Eowyn, as if closer proximity would make her more likely to believe him. “Just not *this* Lord Legolas and not *this* colony. It seems that there exist two versions of our world—you may imagine them lying back-to-back, like this.” He raised his hands and held them palm-to-palm to illustrate. “In certain places, where the boundary between them is weak, it is possible to cross over—pass between the two—and that is what she had done. Two days later, *her* Lord Legolas, Lady Hentmirë, Gimli son of Gloin, and Master Berryn followed her.”

“Manwë and Varda,” muttered Haldir.

“Quite,” said Fingolfin.

Eowyn looked thoughtfully at her lover.

“Where is Legolas?” Haldir asked. “Did he come with you?”

“Yes. But he and Lady Eowyn sent us ahead whilst they scouted the dark warriors’ encampment with March Warden Golradir and Gimli son of Gloin. They will be here shortly.”

“I should go to them,” said Haldir, rising. “I should make sure that they—”

“No,” said Eowyn firmly. “Sit down. You are not yet fit to ride and, besides, I want a word with you.”

...

Stupid map! thought Arador.

He pulled the sheet of parchment from its oilskin pouch and, showing none of his customary reverence for it, spread it out on the Mess table.

I should never have bought the stupid thing. I should have spent the money on drink and women, like Brand, son of Bain.

At least he had some fun.

Or so he said.

He peered at the coloured markings.

That would have killed Mama, though...

Frowning, he leaned in closer.

To the left of what he believed was Emyr Arnen, in the very corner of the map, was a shape that could only be—and he wondered, now, why he had never noticed it before—Minas Tirith. And about half-way up the city's sloping side, corresponding, he supposed, to the third or fourth level, was a tiny image. At first sight it looked like a lantern, for the artist had, with remarkable skill, contrived to make it seem to glow.

But as Arador stared at it, some unconscious part of his mind sorted through the information stored there, and retrieved a tiny piece...

And suddenly he knew exactly what the drawing represented, why the dwarf artist had marked it, and how it could be used.

Arador folded up the parchment and rushed out in search of Berengar.

...

Leaving Berengar to make her guests comfortable in the tent, Eowyn led Haldir out onto the plateau. "We will inspect the defences," she said. "You may be able to make some further suggestions."

As they walked down the winding path in silence, each wanting to say so much and neither knowing where to begin, Haldir watched Eowyn thread her way through the various groups of warriors, engineers, and earnest civilians, taking the time to greet them by name, ask them about their work and, often, make useful comments.

They passed the inner barricade, which closed off the gorge mouth, and walked out onto the plain. "The area is roughly triangular," she began.

"I know, *meleth nín*," replied Haldir, gently, "and I am intimate with your outer wall, having been forced to climb over it by Captain Drago. Eowyn... Tell me what is on your mind."

"You are in love with *her*," said Eowyn. "My double."

"Whatever makes you say that?"

"I am not a fool, Haldir, and I do not believe in love at first sight." She turned west and walked towards the gulley. "When you made love to me, it felt as though you had suddenly been given something you had wanted for a very long time—as though your moment had come." She turned to him. "It was *her*, was it not? You were making love to *her*."

"No!" Haldir caught her by the arms. "*No, meleth nín*. It is true that I *have* loved her, true that I... Well, that does not matter now. But you and she are so different, Eowyn, and I made love with *you*—with *my* Eowyn. Not with *her*."

"Hold me."

"Oh, *meleth nín*."

...

Captain Drago jogged across the tongue of land. “*Riders*, my Lady,” he cried, ignoring Haldir, “approaching from the south west—the old droveway. Three horses carrying what looks like two elves and a woman. And maybe a dwarf.”

“Legolas and Eowyn,” said Haldir.

The couple accompanied Drago to the edge of the gulley to watch the horses approach. Eowyn brought her hands up to her mouth. “Turn east,” she shouted, “follow the wall until it meets the escarpment. We will let you in there.”

Legolas raised his hand in a salute and the riders wheeled to the right and galloped past.

Haldir and Eowyn ran to the barricade. “Open the gate, Alfgar!” the woman cried. “Quickly.”

The captain’s men hauled back one of the carts, making a temporary hole in the fortification and, one by one, the horses jumped the ditch. Then the warriors re-sealed the defences.

...

Half an hour later

The walk up to the plateau had been uncomfortable. When Haldir—explaining how he came to be in what Legolas called ‘the shadow land’—had described losing his brothers in the Underdark, Legolas’ wife had hugged him, much to *his* embarrassment and her double’s annoyance.

Now they were all sitting in the shadow Eowyn’s tent, trying to ignore the emotional undercurrents, whilst they planned their next move.

“March Warden Golradir has seen the enemy encampment and can lead your men to it,” said Legolas, “though I would counsel you against mounting an attack until we have returned from Minas Tirith with reinforcements.”

“But the other Prince Legolas will be approaching from the south *tomorrow*,” said Drago. “That will be the ideal opportunity to attack on two fronts. In the daylight we will hold the advantage.”

“True,” said shadow Eowyn. “But my drow mercenary is not due to arrive until the following day ___”

“If at all,” muttered Alfgar.

She shook her head, smiling. “He *will* come, Captain. And we will buy his services. Then we will attack on two fronts *and* from within; but it must be timed perfectly.”

“I do not like waiting so long,” insisted Drago. “If we give them the chance to attack again at night, my Lady, they may defeat us before we can put your clever plan into action.”

“That is why *we* are leaving for Minas Tirith immediately, Captain,” said Legolas. “We can be there and back by the day after tomorrow.”

“Thanks to Legolas,” said Eowyn, patting her husband’s arm, “and Captain Golradir, we know that the drow are not preparing to attack tonight. So all you need do, Captain Drago, is stop them

attacking tomorrow.”

“With a small, pre-emptive strike,” said Golradir, “at dusk.”

“Exactly. You saw the camp, March Warden, what could we achieve with a small band of warriors?”

“We could set the lizards free,” said the elf, without a moment’s hesitation. “Those things are barely trained—they have no loyalty to their riders. If we can stampede them from clearing to clearing...”

“They will do our work for us,” agreed Legolas.

“Very well,” said the shadow Eowyn, rising and walking over to her map table. “We agree. March Warden Golradir will attack the drow encampment just before dusk. At the same time, Prince Legolas and my double,”—the two women exchanged an awkward nod—“will leave for Minas Tirith with Lord Gimli and,”—she hesitated—“and with Haldir. Captain Drago and Lord Fingolfin—I will need you here in case the drow retaliate. Tomorrow, Captain Alfgar will ride out to intercept the other Prince Legolas and lead him here as swiftly as possible. The following day—” The tent flap suddenly rose letting in a flood of firelight, and she turned towards the door in irritation. “What is it Berengar?”

“Master Arador has something to show you, My Lady.” He pushed the boy inside.

“Well?” asked Eowyn. Haldir came up beside her.

“I think I know another way into the Underdark,” said Arador.

Chapter 17: The demon

Wilawen took one last look at the giant slug, and bid Valandil farewell, before her ensorcelled feet carried her away from him, perhaps forever.

No, she thought. Do not think that! All you need do is survive and, eventually, you will find your way back to him—or he will find his way to you.

She glanced at her new owner. *I will survive*, she promised herself. *I will do whatever it takes.*

She worked her way through the jostling crowd—the drow following close behind—aware that her feet, no longer under her own control, knew exactly where they were going and were navigating her, with smooth efficiency, past stall after stall—past cages of dejected slaves, naked and shackled; past displays of embroidered silks and dyed leathers; past racks of extraordinary weapons, and burnished armour, and fine, supple chainmail...

And at every step the city's strange inhabitants loomed out of the darkness at her—drow females, tall and strong, striding confidently through the milling shoppers; fish-men with strange goggle-eyes, staring at her and sniffing disdainfully; smartly dressed orcs in elaborate livery, hurrying past on their owners' business; tiny reptile-men, scurrying to collect rubbish; male drow...

The males, Wilawen noticed, were subservient to the females—even the courtier stepped aside and bowed (almost respectfully) when a female drow passed by. But *she*—being, she supposed, like and yet not like their own women—drew insolent stares from every male drow she encountered, some going so far as to reach out and grope at her until her owner dismissed them with a flick of his elegant hand.

"You are," he murmured in Westron, "the stuff their dreams are made of..."

They turned a corner, and Wilawen's feet came to a sudden and disturbing stop. To her right, a double-fronted stall caught her attention. She peered into its dimly-lit interior.

"Shimmerdark's Decanter," said the courtier, "with its astonishing collection of wines and spirits and—if you have the right currency—potions and poisons from all over the worlds, below and above."

"Why have you brought *me* here?" asked Wilawen, her mouth dry with fear.

"Brought *you*...?" The courtier frowned; then his handsome face shone with amusement. "I think you misunderstand, My Surface Lady. We are here because I have a fancy for some wine."

...

The forced march through the city ended at the foot of a grand staircase, wider and more imposing than the Great Gates of Minas Tirith, sweeping up to another, smaller cavern. And in that cavern—blazing, it seemed, with lights of every colour—stood three massive buildings: to the right, a solid, windowless pyramid; to the left, an elegant, many-spired tower; and in the centre—dwarfing them both—a stone spider, bigger than The Citadel itself!

Wilawen's owner took her by the arm and drew her into the shadow of the sweeping stonework, where another drow was waiting for them. The two males greeted each other with a familiar hand-clasp, though it seemed to Wilawen that the second drow—a tall, burly creature clad in plate armour—was angry. But the courtier held up a hand and spoke soothingly and, suddenly, all was calm—and Wilawen strongly suspected that he had cast another of his spells.

"This," he said, affably, "is Master Argith and, in a moment, he is going to carry you up the stairs and past the sentries."

"Sentries," said Wilawen. "Why do..."

The courtier reached inside his cloak and drew out a small object—a tiny glass lens—raised it to his eye and sighted her through it. "Because I can make you invisible, but not without lifting the spell that forces you to walk, which means that you must be physically coerced, and *I* was not fashioned to carry heavy burdens."

Wilawen clenched her fists. She was seething with fear and anger and indignation—at being bought and sold; at being smuggled into this place; at whatever the courtier intended to do with her once he got her inside—but all she said was, "I am not heavy."

"Hmm." Her owner signalled to his friend and the big drow scooped her up, and held her fast.

Then the Mage—*That is what he is*, thought Wilawen—cast his spells, and the two drow ascended the staircase and, nodding to the guards, passed unhindered through the gates, crossed the cavern, and carried Wilawen into the smallest of the three buildings, the slender tower.

Survive, thought Wilawen. *I must survive.*

...

Eryn Carantaur Haldir's flet

Cyllien ran a hand through her tangled hair.

She had been lying on her bed—the bed she shared with Haldir and, sometimes, with others—since she had forced the carpenter, Heral, to leave at knife point the day before.

Lying on her bed, and hoping that she might die.

But morning had broken and she was still alive.

And now she needed some pipeweed.

Sighing, she pushed back the coverlet, swung her feet to the floor, and sat up.

A wave of nausea—an unfamiliar sensation—made her head swim. She swallowed hard and, ignoring the cold sweat on her forehead, and the sharp saliva filling her mouth, she stood up. *It will be all right*, she thought, *when I have had a smoke.*

She picked up Haldir's hunting knife and, fumbling with the buckle, strapped it to her thigh.

Her pipe was hidden in the sitting room—for Haldir, though he said nothing, did not like her smoking, and Cyllien, though she took a childish pleasure in crossing him, was, for some reason, sensitive to his disapproval of *that* vice.

She opened the bedchamber door—

And, retching, clamped her hand over her mouth.

Lying in the middle of the sitting room floor, its head almost sliced from its body, was a dead cat.

...

The Underdark

"Dínendal?"

"Yes, Valandil?"

"Where are we?"

In the inky darkness of the holding cell at the rear of the slave dealer's stall, Dínendal sought out Rumil and Orophin, and beckoned them closer. "We are prisoners," he replied, softly, "we —"

"Wilawen!" Valandil sat bolt upright.

Rumil and Orophin caught his arms.

"*Shhhh*," whispered Orophin. "She is still alive, *mellon nín*. And where there is life, there is hope. Sooner or later someone is going to open the door and, when they do, we will be ready. They will be armed, but they will not be expecting any resistance..."

"What makes you think that?" whispered Rumil.

"They have not restrained us," replied Orophin. "They have underestimated us."

"They just know that we have nowhere to go," said Rumil.

"So what are you saying? That we should give up?" said his brother, sharply. "Are we going to cower in our cage or are we going to fight?"

"Orophin is right," said Valandil, quietly. "We must try to escape."

"*Together*," said Dínendal. "Our only chance is to stay—"

"*Shhhh*," said Rumil, suddenly. "Someone is coming."

...

Eryn Carantaur

Swathed in a dark mantle, and keeping to the shadows as she passed the Palace building works, Cyllien descended to the main walkway and followed it westwards to the quiet neighbourhood where Arinna shared a house with the two Mirkwood elves.

Camthalion was surprised to see her, but politely invited her inside.

Arinna, sitting by the fireplace, gestured towards a chair. "You look as though you had seen a ghost," she said.

Cyllien sat down heavily and—suddenly feeling safe enough to let her control slip—buried her face in her hands.

"Camthalion," said Arinna, "some apple brandy, please. He has threatened you," she said to Cyllien. "I am sorry. I should have realised—ah—thank you, Cami."

Sensing the elf beside her, Cyllien raised her head, took the glass from him, drained it, and handed it back. Camthalion glanced at Arinna. The woman nodded. He went to fetch a refill.

"Tell us what happened," said Arinna.

Cyllien frowned at Camthalion's back.

"You may speak in front of Cami," said Arinna. "He already knows. And he is very discreet."

Cyllien sighed. "When Heral came, yesterday, I told him I wanted to end it. But he would not listen; he frightened me. I—I threatened him with a knife and made him leave."

Camthalion handed her another apple brandy. Cyllien took a large mouthful and cradled the glass against her chest.

The elf stood waiting.

Cyllien looked up at him, questioningly. Then, flushing, she whispered, "Thank you."

"You are welcome." He went to stand behind Arinna's chair.

"Go on," said the woman.

"This morning," said Cyllien, "I found a dead cat in the sitting room. He must have come in whilst I was in bed and put it there. I had barred the door with a chair; I do not know how he got inside..."

"You are sure that this cat," said Arinna, "could not have crawled in by itself—been injured somewhere else, perhaps, and—"

"No." Cyllien shook her head. "Its throat had been cut with knife."

Arinna leaned back in her chair. "How much cleaner things are," she said, "when they are done properly. If I were running a house here... Still, things are messy, you have made your decision, and we must persuade him to accept it."

"Accept it! He will never accept it!" cried Cyllien. "He left a *dead cat* in my house! In *Haldir's* house."

"Shall I fetch Captain Golradir?" asked Camthalion.

"No..." said Arinna. "Not yet. The Captain would be honour-bound to tell the March Warden—and we must avoid that, if we can."

"I will see to the cat, then," said the elf. He gave Arinna's shoulder a brief squeeze; then, placing his hand on his heart, he bowed his head to Cyllien, and left.

"He is the best sort," said Arinna, watching the door close behind him. "Completely trustworthy. They both are. Like your March Warden."

"Thank you," said Cyllien, bitterly.

...

The Underdark

The cell door opened.

Rumil and Orophin, crouching either side, sprang forward, grabbing the slave dealer by the arms and throwing him to the floor. Rumil pinned him down—

Crack!

A second drow had appeared in the doorway, wielding a whip—*Crack!*—and Rumil cried out as the lash bit into his back. His body convulsed violently.

"*Rumil!*" Orophin dropped to his knees beside his brother.

"Back!" The second drow—a magnificent female—stepped into the cell, one hand on her hip, the other holding the whip—which she trailed suggestively down Orophin's cheek, letting its six heads lightly brush his skin.

Then she drew it away, and the heads *hissed*—

"Snakes!" cried Dínendal. "The whip is made of snakes!" He crawled forward. "Rumil has been bitten!"

"Back!" The drow raised her arm.

"I am a healer," said Dínendal, holding up a hand in submission. "Please! Let me help my friend!"

"He does not need help," replied the drow, in heavily-accented Westron. "That was just a warning. But,"—she cracked the whip again, letting the snake heads pass within a whisker of Rumil's back—"a second lash will kill him. Release the male."

Gently, Orophin and Dínendal lifted Rumil off the drow, and laid him, face down, on the cell floor. The male scrambled to his feet and stood before the female awaiting his punishment.

"You told me they were docile," said the female, still speaking in Westron.

"Mercy, mistress," the male mumbled, head bowed so low that his chin was resting upon his chest.

The female, however, was fondling her snakes, thoughtfully. "You have done well," she said. "My clients will pay extra for males with spirit."

...

Later

Orophin paced back and forth across the tiny, dark room, cursing under his breath.

After allowing the female drow to cow him with her demonic whip he had let her force him to lift his unconscious brother onto his back and, with Dínendal and Valandil in tow, and escorted by a troop of heavily armed drow males, he had followed her across the city like a gelded hound.

Manwë's balls! Orophin drove his fist into the wall.

The pain was excruciating but, at the same time, calming.

Dínendal was right, he reminded himself. Our only chance is to stay together. Once Rumil had been bitten, we had no choice but to bide our time...

So why am I feeling like Orc shit?

The female drow had led them to an elegant tavern on the edge of the bazaar, set, like a castle, in its own moated grounds. She had brought them in through the rear entrance, had had them looked over by another female, and had locked them up in separate cells.

Orophin had no illusions about what the place was. He had visited human brothels himself, and

had heard that there were some where males would lie with other males.

He punched the wall again. *That will not happen to me! I will die first*, he swore. *I will—*

The key turned in the lock.

Orophin clenched his fists, and prepared to fight. The door swung open and a drow entered, carrying a dark lantern. Orophin charged.

The drow stepped aside.

Someone outside slammed the door shut. Orophin hit it with a sickening thud.

And, as he leaned against the planks, momentarily winded, he felt a hand slide down his back, and over his buttocks, and reach up between his legs.

"No!" He whirled around, lashing out with his fists, knocking the filthy animal to the floor.

The drow's dark lantern fell open, and a soft light filled the room.

Orophin gasped.

His molester was the drow female—no longer wearing her boiled leather armour, or carrying her fiendish whip, but dressed in a translucent gown that scarcely contained her voluptuous curves—and she was looking up at him with a mixture of sham contrition and genuine lust...

"I have been a very naughty girl, Master Elf," she purred, in Westron, her exotic accent lending her words an extra frisson, "and I have come here to be punished."

...

Wilawen stood beside the carved marble bath, staring at the warm, flower-scented water. It had been so long since she had felt clean, but...

"Undress and bathe," said the Mage

"Why?" she asked, sharply.

"You smell. You must be cleansed."

"Why?"

The drow sighed. "Here am I, about to involve you in one of the most arcane, most abstruse, most audacious rites a Master of Sorcery has ever attempted, and all you can do is quibble about bathing—have you no sense of the honour I am conferring on you? Have you no sense of gratitude?"

Wilawen sat down on the rim of the bath and folded her arms across her chest.

"Undress and bathe by yourself," said the Mage, "or I will send for Master Argith and he will do it for you."

"He would not," said Wilawen, hoarsely. "He is your friend, not your servant, and he could never be persuaded to do anything so dishonourable in the name of friendship."

The drow looked at her curiously. "And you know this, how?"

"By observation," said Wilawen, "of him and of you. And from the way he held me when he carried me."

"An impressive insight. But not, at this moment, of the slightest use to either of us. Very well, I shall undress you myself." He raised an elegant hand. "With a single word."

"If you could really do that," said Wilawen, "you would already have done so—OH!"

The Mage had uttered his word.

Wilawen covered herself with her hands.

"I was refraining out of respect," said the drow. "And because watching a woman undress is always pleasurable. Now bathe!" He turned to leave.

Wilawen glowered at his back.

"Two words and your face will stick like that," he said.

...

A young drow climbed the massive staircase, gave his excuse to the sentries, and entered the School of Wizardry.

...

The Mage returned carrying a gown of soft, black suede spangled with blood-red gems, and laid it carefully on the bed. "Are you considered a beauty amongst humans?"

"No."

"Are you—at least—*intact*?"

Wilawen stared up at him.

"I can look."

"No."

"Pity... Still, it is the thought that counts—and you do have all the working parts—here." He picked up a towel and held it ready for her. "But, if he should ask, tell him that you are a virgin."

...

Orophin lay upon his bed, staring into the darkness.

The drow had not forced him. What he had done, he had chosen to do.

...

Survive.

Wilawen watched the Mage take a long, slender rod from a padded box and approach the geometric figures inlaid in the marble floor. "What is your name?" she asked.

"What is yours?"

"I asked first."

"Yes." He turned, abruptly, his handsome face lit by something approaching a grin. "But *I* have more to lose." Then he went back to his work, slowly drawing the rod down each side of the

first figure, reciting a short phrase at the end of each stroke.

Wilawen, watching him, noted his absorption in the delicate process, and took a chance. "Eowyn," she said. "My name is Eowyn."

"Pharaun," replied the Mage, sweeping the rod around a curve. "Pleased to meet you, Eo..." Then, under his breath, "Oh Lloth, you addle-headed fool!" He raised his head, fixing Wilawen with his fiery eyes. "Do you know anything of arcane magic?"

"No..."

"Good!"

He took her by the hand and drew her into a circle, reciting more words. "Perfect," he said. "Now we are ready." He backed away. "This may take some time..."

He had collected several items and arranged them on a table, and now he stood behind them, lighting an incense burner and using his hands to waft the fragrant smoke into the prepared space, whilst he chanted a monotonous refrain—quietly at first, then louder, and louder, slowly building more and more momentum, until, at last, his summons reached its climax...

And a massive, man-like creature suddenly shot up through the floor, and stood beside Wilawen.

...

The young drow paused, and glanced back.

There was no one following him.

He drew a small onyx figurine from a pouch at his waist, set it down on the floor, and whispered a single word.

"*Guenhwyvar*."

...

The demon clenched its fists and roared.

Wilawen stared in horror at its naked body—slimy mottled skin stretched over broad shoulders, a heavily muscled chest, powerful thighs, and a big, erect penis.

Survive.

"WHO HAS BROUGHT ME HERE?"

"I have," said Pharaun, calmly.

"I WILL KILL YOU!"

"Do not be foolish," said the Mage. "For one thing, you are imprisoned—"

The demon lashed out, smashing both fists into the walls of an invisible cell.

"Well," said Pharaun. "I suppose there is no harm in your trying. Unless, that is, I take steps to dissuade you." He skimmed his fingers over the objects on the table and, dipping them into a small bowl, took a pinch of dust, and threw it at the demon.

The substance fell in a silvery shower, cascading down the invisible dome and studding its

surface, like diamonds.

The creature fell silent, watching, as if mesmerised. Then it reached out, and stroked the glittering surface—

The dust motes exploded under its fingertips, shooting into its hand like a thousand tiny arrows. The demon drew back, crying out in pain.

"Now," said Pharaun, "if you will just calm down, and look to your right, you will see that I have a gift for you."

The demon looked Wilawen up and down.

"Is that not worth having?" asked Pharaun.

"Depends. What do you want in return?"

"We can discuss that later. Just give me your word that you will grant me one wish, and I will dispel the walls, and leave the pair of you to get acquainted."

"No," cried Wilawen. "No! Please—*sir*—I will do anything else you ask. Please!"

"It is a tempting offer," said Pharaun; "but *no*." He turned to the demon. "Well? What do you say?"

The creature leaned as close to Wilawen as his prison would permit, and snuffed at her skirts. "Is she a virgin?"

"Would I give you anything less?"

"No!" cried Wilawen. "No, I am not! He is trying to trick you! Pharaun, *please*, I am begging you—"

"PHARAUN!" bellowed the demon, pounding on the magical wall—oblivious, now, to the volatile dust that exploded with every blow—"I command you to release me, PHARAUN!"

...

Pharaun clasped his hands (as though around the creature's massive neck), and hastily recited a spell that would shrink the demon's prison and grip him in an invisible vise...

He completed it just as the creature broke free—disappearing through the floor and back to the astral plane from which it had been summoned—and the spell closed on empty space, met itself in the middle, and rebounded, lifting Wilawen bodily, and depositing her *almost* neatly in Pharaun's outstretched arms.

Chapter 18: Departures and arrivals

Shadowland

“It is called a ‘portal’,” said Arador. “It is like a doorway. You step into it *here*—in this case, somewhere in Minas Tirith—and step out of it *there*—wherever it happens to lead.”

Cramped together in Eowyn’s tent, the warriors exchanged glances. There was a long silence. Then Legolas said, “Lord Fingolfin, have you ever heard of such a thing?”

The scholar shook his head. “Nothing precisely like this, my Lord—”

“They are described in several books,” Arador interrupted. “I brought one with me.” He rummaged in his travelling pack and pulled out a small, badly-worn volume, which he passed to Fingolfin. “I have marked the page...”

“Even if this thing does exist,” said the shadow Eowyn, “I see no reason to change our plans. March Warden Golradir’s attack will buy us time, and give *you* the chance to reach the river. If all goes well you will be back with reinforcements at about the same time my mercenary returns with his leader. No—we already have the means to attack the enemy from within—there is no need to risk sending our men into the dark, and putting them at a fatal disadvantage.”

“With respect, my Lady,” said Captain Drago, “you cannot rely on this turncoat—”

“Their leaders are *here*, Drago—on the surface—Lord Legolas himself saw their Queen. Whether we hire the mercenaries or not, this is where we will defeat them.”

“I agree with her—with your Lady—Captain,” said the other Eowyn, suddenly, “we should not try to fight them in the dark—we should attack them above ground and in broad daylight. But this doorway does worry me. If—*Arador?*”—the boy nodded—“if Arador is right and it does exist, could *they* not use it, to enter Minas Tirith?”

There were gasps and murmurs all around the tent.

“We must surely bar it,” Eowyn continued. “And quickly.” She turned back to Arador. “Where is it?”

The boy blushed. “I am not absolutely sure, my Lady, but...” He dropped his gaze. “The mark is against the third level of the city, and that—in *my* world—is where one of my contacts has his shop. If *he* also exists here, he may know more about it.” Then he added, with unusual diffidence, “I could go to Minas Tirith with you...”

Legolas looked to Haldir. “Is he up to it?”

“Yes. If he does as he is told.”

“Good. Then he will help *you* find this contact, March Warden, whilst Eowyn, Gimli and I speak with Aragorn.”

...

The mess tent was busy. Legolas and Gimli found four empty seats, and sat down.

“You are *sure* we need the lad?” asked Gimli, eyeing the lines of weary soldiers and frightened townsfolk waiting for their evening meal. “He is awful young.”

“I know. But it will not be the first time that you and I have fought beside a child, *elvellon*,” said Legolas, “and Haldir says that his knowledge of the dark warriors has already proved invaluable—”

“I am to sleep in Lady Eowyn’s own tent,” said Hentmirë to Eowyn, as she set two bowls of stew on the table. She took the chair next to Gimli’s. “And Master Berengar says that there are lots of jobs that I can help him with.”

“Berengar is a good man,” said Eowyn, setting a third bowl in front of Legolas, and sitting down beside him.

“Where is yours, melmenya?”

“I am not hungry.”

The elf pushed his bowl towards her. “Eat half.”

“When are you leaving?” asked Hentmirë.

“In about an hour,” said Legolas. He took a mouthful of stew, then handed the spoon to Eowyn.

“We will leave the enclosure shortly after Golradir attacks the enemy camp—according to Drago’s scouts, to the south east the way is reasonably clear, and any drow lurking there should be pulled back when the alarm is sounded. Once we reach the Anduin, we will turn north and follow the river to Osgiliath.”

“You *will* be careful?”

“Of course, gwendithen.”

“Only, if it really *were* that easy,” she said, quietly, “Lady Eowyn’s men would have crossed the river weeks ago.”

Legolas patted her hand. “Nothing much passes by you, does it?” he said. “You be careful too, Hentmirë.”

...

“There has been some bleeding,” said the healer, carefully peeling back Haldir’s dressing, “but the wound has already knit itself back together.” He sponged away the dried blood. “Quite remarkable. If we humans had a tenth of your powers of healing, Master Elf, I might even enjoy my work.” He looked up at Eowyn. “I would say that he is fit to ride, my Lady, if he takes reasonable care.”

He applied a clean dressing and re-banded the shoulder.

“Good,” said Eowyn. “Thank you, Master Ethelmar.”

She waited until the man had left, then turned back to Haldir.

The elf stretched out his hands and she came to him, dropping to her knees before him; he wrapped his arms around her. “You are sending me away,” he said, burying his face in her hair.

“You are needed.” She closed her eyes, tightly. “We are both needed. *Separately*—”

"I know. And I accept that, *meleth nín*. But you would be sending me away even if it were not so." He kissed the top of her head, adding, softly, "I *do* understand, Eowyn."

"Do you?" Gently—very aware of his injury—she disentangled herself and looked up into his face. "Gods, I am no good at this." She reached up and brushed back a strand of his silvery hair.

"At what, *meleth nín*?"

"At the 'afterwards'." She smiled sadly. "At picking up the pieces, *afterwards*."

"I am not Legolas..." Her hand was still in his hair and he grasped it, and drew it to his cheek. "*I* have no great destiny to fulfil, as he has. *I* would be content to be your companion, Princess of Ithilien."

She grinned, suddenly. "You would be my *wife*?"

He smiled. "If that is what you need. And the Captain of your Guard, perhaps. When all this is over."

"But you said it could not last."

He kissed her fingers. "Because this is not my world, *meleth nín*, and I do not yet know whether I can stay."

"But you would want to?"

"Oh, yes," he whispered. "But... Would you want me to stay?"

Her reply was forestalled by a polite cough from outside the tent. "Who is it?" she called.

"It is Eowyn—your double—you promised to lend me a broadsword."

The woman looked up at the elf, mouthed, *Later*, then rose quickly to her feet. "Come in."

...

Eowyn lifted the tent flap and entered.

Directly before her was Haldir, sitting on a folding chair, his broad chest bare apart for the bandage that passed under his arms and over his right shoulder, and she blushed to the roots of her hair.

Haldir picked up his tunic and slipped it on.

"This is a bad time," she said.

"No," said her double. "Wait there." She pulled back a silk hanging and disappeared into her bedchamber.

"It is strange to see *you* here," said Eowyn, quietly. She could not meet his eyes. "I mean, in this world. It is as though... Fate..."

"Yes."

"Haldir..." She thought of Legolas' double, and the dreams that he had described to her, of himself

with her own double. “Be careful—”

“Here,” said the shadow Eowyn, emerging from her bedchamber, “my cousin gave this to me on my sixteenth birthday. It is a good sword, perfectly balanced. The blade—”

“—is forged from Haradin steel,” said Eowyn, “and there is a firestone set in the pommel.” She watched her double draw the sword from its scabbard, and examine its edge. “Is he... Did Theodred survive the Fords of Isen?”

“No. He died bravely.”

“Yes.”

“In your world too?”

“Yes.”

“It was a terrible loss for his father. For all of us.” The shadow Eowyn re-sheathed the blade and gave the sword to Eowyn; and *she*, impulsively, caught hold of her double’s hand and—although the other woman immediately pulled away—their eyes met, and something passed between them—and it was as though Eowyn were seeing her own life, with all its joys and sorrows, in the mirror of her double’s eyes.

All its joys bar one, she thought. The most important one...

The shadow Eowyn laid a hand on Haldir’s shoulder. “My healer has pronounced Haldir fit to travel,” she said. Then, “Will you give us a moment?”

“Of course.”

...

“She knows,” said Haldir.

Eowyn smiled. “She is a woman; of course she knows.” She squeezed his good shoulder, gently. “Does it trouble you?”

“She will tell Legolas.”

“Does it matter?” She stepped in front of him and, dropping to a crouch, peered up into his face. “Gods, you are feeling guilty!”

“No...”

“*Yes!* Why? Because of her? Or because of him?” She stared up at him, her face suddenly flushed with annoyance. “Haldir! You have not betrayed *her*, because she chose *him*; and you have not betrayed *him* because I am *not her*.” And when he did not respond she rose to her feet and cried, “Get out. Go on! *Out!*”

But Haldir did not move. “It is not guilt, Eowyn,” he said, quietly. “It... It is embarrassment.”

“*What?*”

“By making love to you, it is as though I have made love to her... And... And *shared* with him.”

“*I am not HER!*” Eowyn clenched her fists in frustration. “It makes no *sense!*”

“No,” said Haldir, “perhaps not, but... Yes, it does: you are different but you are the same...”

“*No!* You said that I was *your* Eowyn. You *said...*” She ran her hand through her hair. “So where does this leave *us?*”

Haldir looked up at her, sadly. “I do not know, my love.”

...

Arador approached the jumble of wooden sheds and canvas awnings that served as the field Healing Room. Captain Drago had told him that his ‘mother’ helped tend the wounded.

The boy was not sure what he was going to say to her—he just knew that he had to say *something*.

He found her working in one of the outlying tents. She looked exhausted—and the marks of her earlier tears were still on her face—but she was doing her best to help, carrying a pitcher of water from bed to bed, patiently giving each man a ladle-full.

Arador waited until she had emptied the jug, then he stepped inside and caught her eye.

“Aran!” Her face lit up at the sight of him. “Is everything all right now? Has Lady Eowyn seen you?”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and hugged her. “Let me help you fetch some more water, mama.”

...

“What is wrong, melmenya?” Holding the reins of Eowyn’s horse, Legolas watched Eowyn as she tried to buckle Theodred’s sword into her shoulder harness.

“Wrong...?” The straps were uneven and the sword was hanging awkwardly; she pulled at it in frustration. “*Argh!*”

“Here. Take these.” Legolas handed her the reins. “You must calm down, melmenya. Once we leave this enclosure, you will need all your wits—”

“Do you think I am a green *girl?*”

Legolas smiled (to himself) as he made a careful adjustment.

“I am worried for him,” she said. “That is all.”

“He is a grown elf.”

“But he is so... You are *all* so... When it comes to emotions, Lassui, you are like children. *What?*”

“Why should he not be with her, melmenya? Why does it trouble you so much?”

Her answer took him by surprise. “Because *he* is coming. Your double. Another *you*. And she... She is so like me, Lassui.” She shook her head. “She is just like me.”

...

Arador took the jug from his 'mother's' hands and let her lead him down the alley between the two rows of wooden sheds, to the back of the plateau, where a low wall had been built to catch the waters of a spring that bubbled up from the depths of Eryn Arnen and, there, they joined the line of people waiting to fill their pitchers.

Arador could stay silent no longer. "Do you remember," he said, "what you said when you first saw me in the mess tent—that you had seen me die?"

The woman's eyes filled with tears. "I am so sorry, Aran. I do not know how I could have imagined it..."

"No." He put his hand to her cheek and gently turned her face towards him. "No, what you saw was real. Though I do not know how to explain it to you... Unless,"—inspiration suddenly struck him—"come with me."

...

"Where is the lad?" asked Gimli. "He should be here now."

"He has a few minutes yet." Legolas helped the dwarf into the saddle.

Gripping the leather tightly, Gimli straightened up, and raised his head. "Hmmm," he said, "and here is more trouble."

Legolas smiled. He could sense the shadow Eowyn and the March Warden approaching from behind, but he resisted the temptation to turn and stare. "Shhhh."

"What?" growled Gimli.

"Do not bait him. I am warning you."

But Gimli was not listening. "It is hard to tell you ladies apart," he said to Eowyn.

...

"So, just as there are two Lady Eowyns," said Arador, swallowing the lump in his throat, "there are *two* of you, and—there were—*two* of me. The other you is my mother; the other me was your son." He hugged her tightly.

"I am telling you this because Lady Eowyn has asked me to go to Minas Tirith, with Lord Legolas and the others, and it will be dangerous, and I may not come back. So I wanted you to know. I wanted to make sure that you did not lose your son twice..."

...

"Lord Legolas,"—the shadow Eowyn handed him a leather dispatch pouch—"I have written a letter to King Elessar—to Aragorn—explaining the situation—the loss of Caras Arnen, Faramir's death, our present position—it may help you convince him."

Legolas bowed. "I am sure it will my Lady. Thank you." He slung the bag over his shoulder.

"My Lady!" Captain Drago approached at a run. "It is almost time."

“Very good, Captain. Prepare to open the barricade.”

Legolas and his small band of warriors trotted forwards, lining up along the cart that served as a gate—Eowyn to his right on a powerful grey stallion; Arador to his left on a swift Haradin gelding; and Haldir to the rear on one of Lady Eowyn’s own hunters.

“Can you tell *my* double from *me*, Gimli?” asked Legolas, over his shoulder.

“Oh, easily,” said Gimli. “He is the one with the axe handle up his backside.”

...

Outside the drow encampment

I would have preferred, thought Golradir, to have done this at dawn. The sudden daylight would have helped us.

He signalled Camthalion and Orodreth to follow him, and the three men—all of them excellent warriors, though not up to the task of approaching the drow unseen—to wait; *they* would be needed to cover the elves’ retreat.

The trio advanced slowly, keeping their warm bodies, as far as possible, hidden behind the trees. The encampment was just as Golradir remembered it, and the elves worked their way along its northern border, staying high up in the branches.

Lady Eowyn and the others, he thought, were wrong to think that the dark elves might be sleeping. Night, he realised now, was their natural element and, though some of them appeared to be resting, most of them were fully alert—with their weapons to hand.

But now was not the time to falter.

Silently, Golradir gave the sign, and the elves spread out, taking up their positions on three sides of the lizard herd.

He gave the signal to shoot at will, and they filled the clearing with a blizzard of arrows, targeted, with deadly accuracy, at the lizard handlers, at the tethering ropes, at the lizards’ throats and bellies, and—when the drow warriors all too quickly realised that they were under attack—between the pairs of fiery eyes that were scanning the forest in search of them.

Several of the lizards broke free and caused havoc—one viciously attacking its drow handler, the others lurching about the clearing, trampling anyone who came between them and their quest for cover.

But, despite the chaos, Golradir could see no way to withdraw without exposing his warriors’ backs, and he was painfully aware that their ammunition could not last much longer...

Then fate kindly intervened.

The drow had lit no fires—had no light at all save, here and there, the odd glowing jewel—but a tent towards the rear of the clearing must have housed some kind of smithy, with a covered furnace, and into this one of the lizards suddenly blundered, scattering hot coals across the ground in a wide arc.

Clumps of dry grass and brushwood caught light instantly and, as the fire quickly spread, Golradir raised his hand to his mouth and gave the familiar bird-call, and his warriors retreated, leaving the panicking drow to deal with their worst nightmare.

...

The barricade

The sound was faint but unmistakable—the noise of an army in chaos, of animals stampeding and of men—dark elves—struggling to regain control whilst their comrades panicked and—yes—screamed, in terror and pain.

And then another sound reached them—a snapping, crackling sound—

“Gods,” whispered Drago, “the forest is alight!” And he pointed, above the trees, to a dull red glow that was bleeding up into the sky. “*Now*, my Lady—they must leave *now*. Before the fire spreads west and cuts them off from the river!”

“Open the gate.”

Drago gave the signal and his men hauled back the carts.

And—with a final salute to Hentmirë (who had already taken Arador’s ‘mother’ under her wing), and to Berryn, Lord Fingolfin, Berengar and, of course, the shadow Eowyn herself—Legolas’ small band of warriors galloped through the barricade, cut sharply west, crossed the plain, and disappeared into the trees.

...

Dawn

Eowyn’s tent

“Eowyn...” Lightly, Berengar touched her shoulder.

The woman—who had fallen asleep at the map table—lifted her head from her folded arms and looked around in confusion, but it took her only a moment to recover. “Any news?” she asked.

“Yes. They are here.”

“*They?*”

“Lord Legolas and his elves. About a thousand, fully armed and mounted.”

“Already? Where have you put them?” She pushed her hair back from her face. “But what I really meant, Berengar, was is there any word of Ha—of the others?”

“The elves have pitched camp higher up the hillside. As for the others—no, but I think that no news is good news, my Lady.”

Eowyn sighed. “I suppose so. And Golradir?”

“He returned soon after Lord Legolas left—no fatalities, just two walking wounded.”

“The fire?”

“There was a heavy downpour around midnight—thank the gods—it seems to have contained it. And there was no retaliation from the drow, so the bulk of Captain Drago's men have stood down.”

“Good. Let them get some sleep,” said Eowyn, standing up and stretching. “They need it—and we have the elves now.” She yawned. “I suppose I had better see *him*.”

“Have a wash first,” said Berengar. “I will bring you some breakfast and—well, do you want to see him alone, or should I find Lord Fingolfin? Or perhaps Lady Hentmirë?”

Eowyn frowned. “You are indispensable as a secretary, Berengar, but there are times when you should mind your own blasted business,” she said.

“Then I will fetch him,” said the man, unperturbed. “That is, *after* you have changed your linen.”

...

Eowyn took a deep breath and let it out, slowly.

Gods, what is keeping him?

There was no reason to be so nervous. It was over—it had ended that same night, so long ago. And Meldon—well, Meldon was Arwen's son now. Arwen and Aragorn's.

She got up and paced, from the table to the door, and back again—

“My Lady—”

“Show him in, Berengar.”

She turned.

The tent was made for men—for short, sturdy Rohirrim—and, like Haldir, Legolas was forced to stoop to enter it. She watched him straighten up, and their eyes met.

“Please sit down, Lord Leg...” Her breath caught in her throat.

The elf placed his hand on his heart and bowed his head. Then, with cat-like grace, he walked past her, and took the seat she was offering.

Gods, how can two identical beings be so different? she wondered. The other Legolas had been beautiful, yes, but she could never have mistaken him for this Legolas.

For *her* Legolas.

Haldir's face blossomed in her mind's eye and she turned her back on the elf—and noticed that Berengar was still hovering in the doorway.

“That will be all,” she said.

The man spread his hands. “There is nothing that requires my urgent attention, my Lady,” he said. “So perhaps I should stay, and take notes for you...”

She inclined her head just a fraction of an inch: *Please, Berengar, no.*

"I will not be far away," he said softly.

Eowyn turned back to Legolas. "Thank you for coming, my Lord. You said that you would, but I—"

"We both said many things that night," said the elf. "You, mostly hurtful things, I remember."

"Your double tells me that you are betrothed," replied Eowyn, quietly, "to an *elleth*. Was it not, then, for the best? Is it not better that you should spend eternity with another immortal?"

"You understand *nothing* of elves," said Legolas, bitterly. "You do not know what it cost me to—to sever the bond that I had with you, to strive to bind myself to another... If the Valar had not given me Alatóriël, if she were not perfect—" He stopped, abruptly.

"I am sorry," whispered Eowyn. Then she added, more forcefully, "I am sorry to have been the cause of such distress—"

"*Distress!*" Legolas leaped to his feet. "I endured *physical* pain to break that bond! An elf may die of a broken heart."

"*Truly?* You mean that Ha...?" Eowyn caught herself, just in time. *This must go no further.* "I am sorry," she repeated. "What else can I say? What can I do?" She walked over to the table and stood, hunched over the campaign map, her back turned to him. "I am very, very sorry."

She heard him sigh. "*I was sorry to hear of the death of your husband.*"

"Thank you. I do miss him; so much."

"Perhaps we should discuss your battle plan, *híril nín*."

...

Later

Legolas ran swiftly back up trail; it was a relief to leave the plateau behind. His elves had made camp high on the hillside, on a broad ledge overlooking the human encampment, and Eowyn's tent

Infuriating woman—he nodded to the guards as he flew past—even *more infuriating than that infuriating double of hers!*

He remembered, suddenly, how the other Eowyn had emerged from the bathing room, naked and dripping wet, tendrils of golden hair clinging to her lovely breasts; how she had thrown herself at him—pressed herself against him—and how his body and his spirit had both risen in response...

Thank the Valar that Alatóriël had not been there to see *that*—though what she *had* seen, later, and what she had overheard, had been bad enough.

He slowed to a halt and turned southwards, gazing longingly towards Eryn Carantaur, missing his home and Alatóriël, and, as always, feeling the pull of the sea.

Alatóriël.

She would sail with him when the time came.

So was Eowyn right? Was it better to have suffered—as he *had* suffered—to rid himself of his love for a woman? He could not have survived it if not for Alatóriël—of that he was sure.

But if 'his' Eowyn had been granted immortality, like her double...

He pushed that foolish thought from his mind, turned his back on the view, and ran on.

...

Having given Golradir his orders—explaining that he had agreed that the elves would take the next two watches to give Eowyn's exhausted men a chance to rest and recuperate—Legolas retrieved his travelling pack and, realising that he had not eaten since leaving Eryn Carantaur, settled himself down on rock.

Golradir is a good elf, he thought, watching the March Warden drill a troop of archers. *Reliable...* He opened his pack and reached inside, feeling for his pouch of lembas bread.

His cloak, neatly folded, was at the top of the pack and, as he worked around it, his fingers found something unexpected tucked underneath—a small, hard, cylindrical object.

Legolas smiled.

It was a flask of the herbal tonic that Alatóriël insisted on buying, at immense cost, from his father's Mistress of the Ceremony, to keep all his parts in working order.

He did not need it, of course.

But, since it could do no harm, he took it regularly, just to please her.

She must have slipped it in when we were saying goodbye.

Suddenly missing his betrothed, Legolas pulled out the slender bottle and held it up to the light. The tonic was a strange colour—one moment a deep, rich red, like wine, the next a profound black, like ink. He had always found its changes fascinating, and now he sat, turning the vial this way and that, watching it alter...

The smooth glass slipped through his fingers; Legolas lunged, but he was too late.

The vial hit the rocks with a sickening crash, and all its precious contents splashed out across the ground.

Chapter 19: The discovery

The air above Wilawen was swirling like a tornado, bearing curled flakes of charred flesh and the singed fragments of what had once been the room's rich furnishings, downwards into the glowing portal through which the demon had escaped.

She struggled to free herself from Pharaun's grasp. "We must get out of here," she cried, shouting over the roar of the wind. "Let go of me!"

The drow released her.

Wilawen tried to rise, but the hot air tore at her head, crisping her hair and scorching her face.

"Come on!" she shouted. "Keep low!"

On her belly, in the unnatural layer of stillness beneath the chaos, she crawled to the door and, wrapping her hand in her leather skirts, she reached up through the rushing heat, and tried to turn the handle.

The door was locked. *Of course!* But the drow was behind her. "Open it!" she bellowed.

Again, he obeyed, withdrawing a key from inside his tattered robes, reaching up—his hand blistering as it entered the whirlwind—unlocking the door and turning the handle.

The door remained closed.

"Push!" cried Wilawen, throwing her weight against it, "the wind is sucking it in and holding it shut! *Push!*"

Once again, the drow followed her orders, shoving the door until it suddenly gave, and the pair scrambled through—Wilawen just managing to drag herself clear before it slammed shut again. "Give me the key!" She turned the lock. "That will give it more support, but I am not sure it will hold for long; the wood is being pulled apart... When will the wind die down?"

"It will not. Not by itself."

"Not..." Wilawen frowned. "You *can* stop it? With your magic? Why do you not—"

A finger of air suddenly lifted her skirts, drawing her gaze to a stream of dust, sparkling in the bluish light, that was flowing beneath the door.

"The wind is *growing*," she cried.

...

Dínendal's cell

"Come," said the female drow, beckoning. "Quick!" She pointed to the ground beside her feet, for emphasis.

Calmly, Master Dínendal rose and joined her in the corridor outside his small cell.

"Another guest has asked for you," she said, in heavily accented Westron, "the surface elf with the magic hands' she called you. She is waiting for you in the steam room. Come—this way."

She had brought a lantern for his benefit, and she raised it high, and led him along the passageway, prattling as she went, "I have five hundred saved, and a free afternoon next week, so I may just decide to hire you and see for myself what all the fuss is about..."

Dínendal followed her in silence, letting her chatter wash over him, unheard. Rumil, he knew, was in the cell next to his own—he had been permitted to examine the injured elf twice since they arrived—but as to where the others might be... He strained every one of his senses, searching for the slightest sign of them.

"I said *this way*," said the drow sharply, grasping his arm and guiding him round a corner—and Dínendal found himself face-to-face with Orophin, chained hand and foot, being led in the opposite direction by a burly female brandishing a snake whip.

In the dim light of the lanterns, the two elves exchanged a silent greeting, and Dínendal managed to mouth, "*Do not give up hope*," before Orophin's gaoler dragged him away.

"We die," said Dínendal to the talkative girl. "If we are forced to couple against our will, like beasts, we die."

"Lucky, then, that *you* are so good with your hands," said the drow.

...

"*Come away from the door!*" cried Wilawen, crouching behind a chair.

Pharaun immediately dropped down beside her, obeying her without question, like a child.

The woman frowned. What had happened to the confident Mage who had used her as bait to lure a demon? Why was he being so compliant, so—

With a sudden flash of insight, she squared her shoulders and, speaking in a firm voice, said, "*Take me back to the slave market.*"

The drow smiled, though his handsome face immediately crumpled in pain. "Clever," he said, delicately probing his blistered skin with the tips of his fingers, "but you are aiming too far."

"Then take me outside," said Wilawen.

"Still too far." The drow held up a scorched hand. "Now, try to be quiet." He closed his eyes and, moving his fingers in a series of subtle—and, Wilawen thought, rather beautiful—gestures, he said a few words in his own tongue.

In the dim light—most of it streaming from beneath the shuddering door—the woman watched as the blisters on his hands and face burst and drained, and the skin knitted itself together, the blemishes quickly fading until the damage was completely healed.

Pharaun opened his eyes. "You should close that mouth," he said.

Wilawen held out her hands. "Heal me."

Without the slightest hesitation, the drow repeated his conjuring and Wilawen felt the pain seep away, to be replaced by a maddening *itching* as her skin repaired itself. She scratched her cheek.

"Stop that," said Pharaun, knocking her hand away. "You will spoil my work."

Wilawen clasped her hands behind her back and, looking into his fiery eyes, said, "There. Now —*take me out into the corridor.*"

With a sigh, Pharaun rose, and helped her to her feet.

Wilawen smiled—but her triumph was short-lived. There were, she noticed now, *two* doors in the far corner of the opulently furnished room, and she had no idea which was the right one.

She glanced at Pharaun.

How far could she trust the power she now seemed to have over him?

...

Valandil's cell

"No," said Valandil. "I am betrothed, soon to be married." He sat down on his bunk and folded his arms across his chest.

"Betrothed? Not any more." The female drow stepped inside his cell.

"I will *not* betray my beloved," said Valandil.

The drow shrugged her shoulders. "Who said anything about betrayal? Just come and pleasure the Matron Mother."

"No!" Valandil rose to his feet. "I will not lie with another."

The drow raised her snake whip. "Come," she said, coldly; the snakes writhed with excitement.

"No," said Valandil.

"Then we must persuade you," she said—speaking of her snakes—and she cracked the whip beside Valandil's ear, letting its venomous heads brush his cheek. "Next time," she hissed, "they will use their fangs—and you will die." She raised the whip again. "Now do as I say!"

Valandil shook his head—

The drow lashed her whip—

And Valandil—his elven speed enhanced by desperation—caught the writhing heads in both hands and, silently offering up a prayer of remorse for the destruction of six enslaved beings, he snapped their necks.

The drow—mentally bonded with her demonic weapon—shrieked in agony, lashing out with her free hand, knocking the elf to the ground and kicking him, frenziedly. "Animal!" she cried. "Cursed of Lloth!"

Valandil, dazed by her blows, curled up in a ball.

"Coward!" she screamed, kicking him again and again. "Piece of surface shit!"

And she kicked and stamped, and might have killed him, if one of her colleagues, drawn by the commotion, had not dragged her from the cell.

...

Pharaun walked straight to one of the doors and grasped the key—then jerked his hand back. There was something outside—something with a deep, angry *growl*.

"*Open the door,*" Wilawen commanded.

This time there was a split-second's hesitation before the drow obeyed, but then he turned the key, pulled the door open—and was immediately knocked to the ground by a sleek, black shadow that shot through the gap and skidded to a halt before Wilawen, nuzzling her outstretched hand.

Patting Guenhwyvar, Wilawen smiled, through the doorway, at the cat's familiar companion. "Pharaun," she said, "ask Drizzt what he is doing here."

Still sprawling on the floor, the Mage muttered something in his own language then translated the other drow's reply. "He is rescuing *you*, apparently. And you might help me up."

Ignoring him, Wilawen glanced back towards the study door—it was standing up to the whirlwind, but there was no telling for how long—she would have to be quick. "Ask him to come inside—and to shut the door," she said. "Then ask him if he knows where Val—where my friends are."

"He says that he followed the surface elves," said Pharaun, struggling to his feet, "to *The Silken Rack*—a choice establishment," he added, brushing himself down, "where—"

But his explanation was cut short by the sharp report of the study door splitting, its two halves sucked inwards by the magical storm.

"Take us somewhere safe," cried Wilawen, "*quickly!*"

...

The special chamber

Smiling wickedly, Orophin's naked 'guest' brandished the key to his shackles.

The elf held out his hands.

The female drow had hired a special chamber for her amorous adventure—a sculpted grotto featuring a canopied bed surrounded by a shallow pool of gently lapping water, set amidst a garden of softly glowing fungus; she was clearly a woman of some substance, and she was bent on teasing him—reaching between his outstretched arms, she trailed the cold metal down his bare chest and slid it under the waistband of his leggings, smiling triumphantly.

Orophin gritted his teeth, telling himself (again) that the only way to survive this ordeal was to play along with her, and—as she continued to enjoy herself, slowly divesting him of his remaining clothing—he tried to occupy his mind by analysing everything he had learned so far.

The building is carved from living rock, he thought, and appears to be windowless, its only weak points being the main door—which Orophin had never seen but had deduced must exist—and the rear entrance, through which we entered—was it only a day ago?

The drow wrapped her arms around his waist and *slid* herself down his body. Orophin spread his legs and, clasping his shackled hands together, braced himself.

With a little luck, I could retrace the route from my cell back to the rear entrance—

The drow's hot mouth took him by surprise.

No! I must stop this. Now.

Holding his chains back in one hand, he placed the other hand on the top of her head and, gently but firmly, pushed her away. "Allow me, mistress," he said. He had no idea whether she could understand him—but when he lifted her onto the bed, she seemed happy enough.

Where was I, he wondered. Yes... Retracing the route.

He ran his hands over the drow's curvaceous hips, brought them together, and slipped them between her shapely thighs, gently spreading her legs. He leaned in.

His cell was one of eight and, since briefly seeing Dínendal, he was reasonably certain that three of the others were occupied by his companions. *That means that up to four potential allies are imprisoned in the rest, he thought. Surely, they will want to escape with us?*

The drow cried out in appreciation.

All that remains is to find eight weapons—and some way of opening the doors.

...

Whilst Pharaun locked—and magically sealed—the door to the devastated apartment, Drizzt returned the big cat to its own dimension. Then the three unlikely allies hurried away into the darkness, Drizzt carrying Wilawen over his shoulder.

Chapter 20: Osgiliath

Shadowland

Legolas and his small band of warriors entered Osgiliath shortly before dawn.

They had worked their way through the Forest, staying close to the Anduin and keeping as far from the rocks of Eryn Arnien as the terrain allowed. They had seen no sign of the dark elves, but Legolas could not shake the feeling that danger was close by and, when they reached the abandoned city, he decided to wait until daylight before attempting to cross the river.

They quickly found a safe place to camp—a small, thick walled, flat-roofed guard post, built into the city wall and commanding views of the ruins to the east, and of the river to the west with the western suburbs of the city beyond.

Haldir volunteered to keep watch.

“We will rest here for two hours,” said Legolas to Eowyn, Gimli and Arador. “Try to sleep.”

He sat with Eowyn until her slow, regular breathing told him that she was safely asleep, then he joined the March Warden outside.

...

Haldir had walked a little way north along the wall, and was standing beside its outer parapet, looking towards the Anduin.

“If they attack,” said Legolas, quietly, “it will be from over there.” He indicated the ruins behind them.

“Yes...”

“But?”

“They are not here. They *should* be here—otherwise, why did none of Eowyn’s messengers reach Minas Tirith? They cannot be beyond the wall,”—he nodded towards the great fortification that surrounded The Pelennor—“for the plain within is too exposed.”

“They live in the rocks,” said Legolas. “They may be beneath us, or...”

“Or what?”

“They may already be in Minas Tirith.”

Haldir turned to him in alarm.

“Suppose they have emerged from Mount Mindolluin,” said Legolas, thinking aloud, “and taken Minas Tirith as they took Caras Arnien. That would explain why Aragorn has sent no aid—for, even without Eowyn’s messengers, he *must* know that something is wrong—he has had no communication from Faramir in almost a month, and there will have been no travellers, no merchants ...”

“Where would that leave *us*?”

“We will proceed as planned,” said Legolas.

“With Eowyn? And the boy?”

“It is all conjecture at present,” replied Legolas, “we will not know for certain until we reach the city. And Eowyn and the boy would be no safer back at the encampment.”

Haldir nodded. Then, turning back towards the east, where a faint, pinkish glow was already spreading upwards over Osgiliath, he said, “Eowyn and I—the other Eowyn—we—”

“Yes,” said Legolas.

“It must seem...”

“What?”

With an effort, Haldir looked his Lord in the eye. “When it happened, I did not know exactly who she was, but I *was* sure that she was not your wife.”

“Oh, Haldir!” Legolas patted his friend on the back. “Do you think I ever doubted that?”

“You are more trusting than I would be,” said Haldir.

“I know you. And I know my Eowyn.” He nodded towards the west and the two elves crossed the wall-walk and surveyed, once more, the shores of the Anduin.

“Do you intend to stay here?” asked Legolas.

“If it is possible,” said Haldir. “And if you will grant me permission.”

“What is, and is not, possible,” said Legolas, “we will not know until we try—we may none of us have any choice but to stay here. As for the other: do you really feel you need to ask?” He shook his head. “But Haldir—” He stopped abruptly. Then he said, softly, “Did you see *that*?”

Haldir nodded. “It is not a dark elf—too tall...” He leaned across the parapet, observing the figure that had emerged from the ruins on the farther bank of the river. “It is a man,” he said, “who has darkened his face.”

“So as not to be seen in the moonlight,” agreed Legolas.

As the two elves watched, the man slipped into the water and began to swim—working hard to maintain his course across the swift current.

“He is a good swimmer,” said Legolas, “but he will need help. Wake Gimli: tell him to take over the watch. Then join me at the water’s edge.”

...

Eryn Arnen Eowyn’s tent

“Good morning,” said Legolas, awkwardly. He stepped into Eowyn’s tent, lowering the flap behind him. “Did you sleep well?”

Eowyn frowned. “Yes, since you ask, thank you...”

“It is just...” Legolas cleared his throat. He himself had spent a difficult night, slipping in and out of reverie—sometimes falling into mortal-like sleep—plagued by lurid visions of the woman now standing before him. “I know,” he said, “that mortals need sleep...”

“There is precious little time for it here,” said Eowyn, brusquely. “What did you want?”

Legolas narrowed his eyes—everything was suddenly blurred—and his head seemed too heavy for his shoulders. “May I—sit down?”

“Over here.” Eowyn—most inappropriately, he thought—put her arm around his waist and led him to a chair. “Are you all right?”

“I...” Legolas sank into the seat. “To tell the truth, I...”

...

“Berengar!” Eowyn struggled to stop the unconscious elf falling. “*Berengar!*”

The tent flap rose, but it was not Berengar who came rushing to her aid. “Perhaps,” said Hentmirë, supporting Legolas from the other side, “we could lie him on the floor...”

“Yes.” Eowyn allowed the little woman to take the lead and, together, they lowered Legolas’ inert body to the ground and rolled him onto his side. “Where is Berengar?” muttered Eowyn. “We need a healer—*what are you doing?*”

“I am loosening his clothing,” said Hentmirë, opening the elf’s suede jerkin. “It is what Master Findecáno did when Legolas—my Legolas—swooned the other day. And he gave him some smelling salts. Do you have any smelling salts?” She hesitated briefly then, blushing deeply, she lifted the elf’s silken tunic and unlaced the waistband of his leggings.

“Smelling salts?”

“Yes.” Hentmirë quickly lowered the silver fabric. “Perhaps there is a healer with the elves. If you will watch over him, I can go and see...”

“No,” said Eowyn, “you stay here with Legolas—you seem to know what you are doing. I will find Berengar, and ask him to fetch an elven healer.”

...

Osgiliath

Despite Haldir’s best efforts, it had been impossible to rouse a fully-armed dwarf and get him out of the guardhouse without making enough noise to wake Eowyn.

“Haldir...?”

He raised a finger to his lips. “Arador is still sleeping,” he whispered.

She nodded. Then, stretching, and gathering her cloak around her, she rose and followed the elf out onto the wall-walk. “What is happening? Where is Legolas?”

“We saw a man trying to cross the river—it looks as though he may be a messenger from Minas Tirith—”

“From Aragorn.”

“Possibly.”

She smiled, suddenly. “With a message for my double!”

“If it *is* a message from Aragorn,” said Haldir, gently, “it is more likely to be for Faramir.”

“Because no one knows that poor Faramir is dead—” She looked up in alarm. “He will be heading for Caras Arnen!”

“Yes. But Legolas has gone to intercept him,” said Haldir, “and he ordered me to follow. I must go, Eowyn.” He bowed his head in a brief salute and turned to leave—

“No, wait!” She caught his wrist.

The elf stopped, staring down at the little hand restraining him.

“I will come with you,” she said.

...

Knowing that the drow could see better in the dark than in the light, Legolas ran down to the waterfront, bow in hand, keeping to the brightest, warmest parts of the embankment, scanning both sides of the river for any sign of the enemy.

The man was a good swimmer but the Anduin was in full flow and Legolas could see that he was already tiring. *What is keeping Haldir?* he wondered. *Without someone to provide covering shots, it would be madness to enter the river..*

He surveyed the area again—looking, listening, and reaching out with that elven sense that can feel imminent danger. *Nothing.*

And now the man was starting to drift.

Legolas slipped his bow into its strap and dived into the water.

...

“What did you want to say?” asked Haldir as they approached the city gate.

“Say?”

“Is that not why you came with me?” He stopped walking and turned to Eowyn, looking her directly in the eye. “Legolas is happy for me—he trusts me—but *we* both know better.”

“I do not know what you mean.” Eowyn ducked past him.

“I thought I was free of you,” said Haldir, raising his voice. “I thought that she... I thought that I had found *my* Eowyn. Then *you* came into her tent and everything—”

“*Please!*” Eowyn rounded on him. “We have had this conversation too many times, Haldir.”

“I am fond of her,” said the elf. “And I will stay with her, if I can. I will grow to love her.”

“I hope you can,” said Eowyn, softly. “I really do. But be careful, Haldir.” She placed her hand upon her breast. “Be careful with your *heart*. She is too like m—”

But Eowyn never finished her warning, because the big elf suddenly gathered her into his arms and held her tightly.

...

As Legolas closed in on him, the man—who had been floundering—suddenly discovered an extra reserve of strength and, turning northwards (against the flow of water), tried to swim away.

“No,” cried the elf, following him. “No! Wait! I am here to *help* you! I am King Elessar’s *friend!*”

Whether the man heard him, Legolas could not tell but, suddenly, all his strength seemed to desert him and, although his arms were still moving, he began to drift once more, bobbing up and down, overwhelmed by the current.

It was easy, then, for Legolas to come up behind him and, grasping him beneath the arms, strike out for the shore.

...

By the time Legolas reached the bank, Haldir and Eowyn were there to lift the exhausted man out of the water and lay him on the stone wharf.

Legolas clambered up by himself and quickly scanned the surrounding buildings for any sign of the enemy. “You should not have come, melmenya,” he muttered. Then, “How is he?”

When neither Eowyn nor the March Warden replied, Legolas—fearing the worst—looked down at the man and, for the first time, had a clear view of his face.

“Sweet Eru!” he gasped. “It is *Berkin!*”

...

Eryn Arnen Eowyn’s tent

“I do wish they would hurry,” said Hentmirë. The two women had covered the elf with a blanket and, at Hentmirë’s insistence, had folded a cloth and placed it beneath his head. “To keep it tilted, in case he vomits, I think,” she explained. She lifted Legolas’ hand and attempted again to check his pulse. “I am not sure that I am doing this right...”

Eowyn patted her shoulder. “You are taking very good care of him, Lady Hentmirë—thank you.”

“He is not *my* Legolas,” said Hentmirë, “but I do not want anything bad to happen to him.”

“Berengar should be back with help at any moment,” said Eowyn. “Yes, thank the gods; I can hear him coming!” She turned towards the tent door as an unfamiliar elf appeared at the opening.

“Quickly, please—over here.”

The elven healer ducked inside and—without even pausing to greet her—went to work immediately, examining his patient from head to foot. Though her inclination was to stay at Legolas' side, at least until the healer had given his diagnosis, Eowyn saw that Berengar—one step ahead of everyone else, as usual—had also brought Lord Fingolfin and Captain Golradir with him, and she knew that her responsibilities as commander-in-chief must come first.

She forced herself to rise and greet them. "Thank you for coming my Lord, Captain," she said, inviting them to sit down. "You will be acting as Prince Legolas' deputies, I presume."

Fingolfin bowed his head in assent. "Captain Golradir will assume command of our warriors, should that prove necessary, and I will help you all I can—but I confess that I had another reason to accompany Master Findecáno—"

"You were right, my Lord," called the healer, suddenly.

"What is it?" asked Eowyn, immediately returning to Legolas' side.

"He has been poisoned, my Lady—"

"*Poisoned!*" cried Hentmirë. Then, "So you cannot use the smelling salts?"

"Not for this, my Lady."

"But he *will* be all right?"

Eowyn, equally—though not so visibly—worried, looked to the healer for an answer.

The elf patted Hentmirë's hand reassuringly. "Healing sleep is all that he requires in this case, my Lady. That is how elven bodies recover."

Eowyn let out a sigh of relief. "Can he be moved?"

"Of course," said the healer. "I will arrange to have him carried up—"

"No," said Eowyn, "he can stay here, of course. I meant that perhaps the Captain would help you lift him onto my bed."

"But what has poisoned him?" persisted Hentmirë, as the elves carried Legolas into the bedchamber. "Was it something he ate?" She picked up the blanket and followed them. "Is anyone else likely to be poisoned?"

"No," said the healer. "Thank you Captain." He turned Legolas onto his side and carefully arranged his limbs. "Someone has been feeding Prince Legolas small amounts of poison over a long period of time, my Lady, and his body has grown accustomed to it. Now that he is no longer taking it, he has had a severe reaction to its withdrawal."

"But who would do that?" asked Hentmirë, carefully draping her blanket over the sleeping elf.

Eowyn frowned—that was exactly what she had been wondering.

"It was a love potion," said Lord Fingolfin (putting it tactfully, for the little woman's sake).

"*His elf lady!*" said Hentmirë. "I *knew* that she was not good enough for him." She smoothed the blanket over Legolas' chest.

“Alatáriël,” agreed Fingolfin, “but not, I think, on her own. I imagine it was her father’s plan.”

Eowyn drew the healer aside. “He *will* recover?”

“Oh, yes.”

“How long will he sleep?”

“It is hard to say, my Lady. A day or two; perhaps more—I have no way of knowing how long he had been taking the poison, nor in what amount,” said Findecáno.

“Thank you.”

Eowyn turned to Golradir. “You must assume command of the elven army, Captain. And,”—she addressed Fingolfin—“and I would be most grateful, my Lord, for *your* assistance in certain matters.”

“We are both at your service, my Lady,” replied the elf.

...

Osgiliath

“P-princess Eowyn, is P-prince Faramir with you? I have b-bad news...” Teeth chattering, Berkin sat, bunched up, trying to rub some warmth into his upper arms. “Oh! I am sorry—I r-really must get up and g-get moving.”

“Your cloak, Haldir,” said Legolas, “thank you.” He draped it around the young man’s shoulders. “This should help.”

“Th-thank you, Prince Legolas.” The young man bowed his head respectfully.

The elf helped him to his feet. “Come, Berkin. We must find you some dry clothes. And then we can talk.”

“Yes... But—wait—h-how do you know my name, your Highness?”

“I will explain that when we are safe,” said Legolas. He led the young man through the city gate and gestured towards the steps leading up to the guardhouse. “Up there.”

Berkin stopped suddenly, and eyed him cautiously.

“You do not trust me,” said Legolas.

“I... I do not know how you can p-possibly know my name, unless...” He sighed. “But, s-since you are an elf, it does not matter whether I t-trust you or not—I have no ch-chance of escaping.” He began to climb. “And I d-do not think that Princess Eowyn would betray us...” He stepped up onto the wall-walk. “But where is Prince Faramir, your Highness?” he asked, “I m-must speak with him.”

Eowyn shook her head. “We have bad n—”

“*Berkin*, lad!” cried Gimli running up to the boy and giving him a mighty bear hug. “My, you have filled out! There is muscle on you now!” He slapped the young man’s back. “But you are soaking

wet!”

“Lord G-gimli!” Berkin looked from the dwarf to Eowyn and Legolas, and back again. “W-what is going on? What are you d-doing *here*? And how do you all know me?”

“Come inside,” said Legolas. “Before you freeze to death.”

...

They found him some dry leggings and a tunic and, whilst Arador and Haldir stood guard outside, they sat down to talk.

“How we know you, I will explain later,” said Legolas, “for that is a long story. But as for why we are here... Three weeks ago, Caras Arnen was invaded and Prince Faramir was killed in the attack ___”

“Oh gods!”

“Princess Eowyn led the survivors away from the city and took refuge in a natural stronghold, south of the hills, where she is now under siege. We have come to ask King Elessar for help.” He looked intently at the boy. “But I begin to think that something has befallen Aragorn, too—is that not the news you were carrying to Faramir?”

“What has happened in Minas Tirith, Berkin?”

...

On the wall-walk

“She is beautiful,” said Arador, gazing out across the ruins, “really beautiful, like a princess—well, she *is* a princess, of course—I mean, like a princess in a tale.”

Haldir frowned. But he already knew the boy well enough to sense that he was not teasing.

“So it is easy,” Arador continued, “to see how things could happen that should not have happened.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know what I am talking about.”

Haldir said nothing for a moment. Then, “So you saw us. What do you want Arador?”

“*Want?*” The boy turned to him in surprise. “You think that I...?” He shook his head, his expression deadly serious. “*I* am not the one who is going to wreck two other lives.”

...

“It started about two weeks ago,” said Berkin. “My father—”

“Your father is still alive!” exclaimed Gimli.

“Yes, of course... Oh! No, not my real father—I mean Lord Olivan, who adopted me. I call him my father, because—well, he *is*.”

“What of your uncle?” asked Legolas.

“My *uncle*? My uncle was a murderer and we do not speak of him.”

“That explains a lot,” said the elf. “But we interrupted you, Berkin. You were telling us what had happened.”

“Two weeks ago,” said Berkin, “the King suddenly dissolved the High Council and started using his Powers of Decree to introduce new laws. At the same time, he dismissed all the Captains of the Gondorian Guard and replaced them with men who—” The boy searched for the right word. “Well, my father calls them ‘scavengers’. No one is allowed to leave his home without a special permit—”

“Issued by these scavengers,” said Gimli.

“Exactly, my Lord. All public gatherings are banned—even the taverns are closed—and anyone who speaks out is immediately punished. Several of my father’s friends have been arrested and had their fortunes confiscated. Poorer citizens just—*vanish*... If anyone is caught out of doors without a permit or, even with a permit, is found outside after curfew, he is summarily executed—run through with a sword.”

“How did *you* get out?” asked Legolas.

“Well, I know certain ways, your Highness.”

“The tunnel network,” said Gimli.

“Yes. How do you know of that, my Lord?”

Gimli smiled. “Can you get us in the same way, lad?”

“I should think so...”

“And your contacts in the underworld,” said Legolas. “What do they make of all this?”

“They bide their time. But they complain that their livelihood is threatened,” said Berkin.

“Perhaps we can persuade them to help us,” said Gimli.

“If numbers prove necessary,” said Legolas.

...

“My uncle,” said Arador, “that *pig* who is claiming to be my father,” he gestured angrily in the vague direction of Emyr Arnen, “pestered my mother for years—telling her that he loved her, giving her gifts, turning up whenever my father was away. My mother is a kind, gentle woman and could not bear to hurt him, so she tolerated his—attentions—until my father began to believe that she was being unfaithful to him—with *his brother*.”

“He threw her out of the house!”

“She and I spent *four nights* hiding in the stables.”

...

“How did you cross The Pelennor without being seen by the Guards?” asked Legolas.

“I did not—not exactly,” said Berkin. He smiled—revealing, for the first time, that confident self-reliance that was so marked in his double. “There is an underground tunnel running northwards, following the line of Mount Mindolluin, that issues a few hundred yards beyond the Rammas Echor,” he explained. “My family owns a herd of horses, which we keep corralled just south of the Grey Wood. I set them free, knowing that they would head for the water, and rode amongst until I was close enough to Osgiliath to dismount and crawl the rest of the way. It was an expensive plan...”

“It is good,” said Gimli, “to see you so active, lad!”

Berkin frowned. “What do you mean, my Lord?”

...

“That,” said Arador, “is all I wanted to say.” He turned to leave.

Haldir caught his arm. “Do not say anything to *her*...”

“Do you think I would?” He shook off the elf’s hand. “*She* is not at fault—unless being too kind is counted a fault.”

...

“There is not much else to tell you,” said Berkin, “except that I fear for my father and mother’s safety.”

“So you came to ask Faramir for help,” said Legolas. “Does your father know what you are doing?”

“Yes.”

“Anyone else?”

“Just Olemi—a servant.”

“You did not tell your mother?” asked a new voice, from just inside the doorway.

Berkin looked up at Arador. “She cannot keep a secret...” he said.

“The fewer people who know, the better,” said Legolas, “for them as well as for us. Come and join us, Arador.”

“But what has happened to Aragorn?” asked Eowyn, suddenly. “None of this can be his doing—they must have taken him prisoner.”

Legolas slipped his arm around her, and hugged her briefly. “We will find him, melmenya; we will free him and help him put things right.” He looked up at Berkin. “Have you seen the King recently?”

“No, your Highness. No one has seen him since all of this began. My father requested an audience—when such a thing still seemed possible—but he was refused. And no one has seen the Queen, or the royal children, either—”

“The *children*,” growled Gimli. “That is why Aragorn is doing their bidding. They have taken the children! The *dogs*!”

“What ‘dogs’, Lord Gimli? Who do you mean by ‘they’, my Lords? *What is happening?*”

“I think,” said Legolas, “that it is time we told you everything, Berkin. And then, we will need a plan...”

...

Dusk

Under cover of darkness—for Berkin’s tale had convinced Legolas that any immediate danger was from men, not drow—the small band of warriors approached the River Anduin, dragging behind them a large wooden object built from an assortment of barrels, planks and bits of furniture, all salvaged from the ruins of the eastern city and lashed together with cords.

At the water’s edge they paused whilst Haldir secured a length of fine elven rope to an arrow, and handed the arrow to Legolas, who nocked it and—taking unusual care in aiming at the far bank—loosed it.

“Good shot!” said Gimli.

“Do not forget the tethering rope,” said Arador, anxiously.

Haldir took a second length of rope and, after looping it over the first, tied both ends to a metal hasp driven into the centre of the wooden contraption.

Then he, Legolas and Gimli pushed the contraption off the wharf.

“It *floats*!” said the dwarf.

“Of course it floats,” said Arador, with obvious relief. “I told you—those barrels are full of air...”

...

Legolas dropped lightly onto the raft. “You first, Eowyn nín.”

Eowyn descended the stone stairs and, steadied by Haldir, stepped onto the bobbing wooden platform.

“Very good,” Legolas whispered, squeezing her arm. “Sit at the centre—Arador, you next.”

One by one the warriors took their places on the makeshift craft. Then Legolas and Haldir, standing fore and aft, seized the elven rope and, working together, hauled the raft across the turbulent waters, hand over hand.

...

Once ashore, Legolas and Eowyn crossed the wharf—“Keep low, melmenya,”—and, staying in the shadows, made their way through the ruined streets to where a breach in the western wall of the city provided clear views of the Rammas Echor and the white city beyond it (glowing faintly in the starlight), and, to the north, separated from the dark mass of Mount Mindolluin by the Stonewain Valley, the mysterious Grey Wood.

“Can you see them?” whispered Eowyn, peering through the gap.

“Yes...” Lifting his hands to his mouth, the elf whistled.

For a moment nothing happened. Then a faint sound, like distant thunder, brought a huge smile to Eowyn’s face. “You have done it,” she said, “the horses are coming!”

...

Haldir, Gimli, and the two boys, meanwhile, had dragged the raft out of the water.

Haldir seized his elven rope, gave it a swift jerk—the knots securing it to the arrow and to a mooring ring on the far bank immediately came loose—and he drew it in, coiling it over his forearm as it came.

“Neat trick,” said Arador.

It was a peace offering. “Fetch the arrow,” said Haldir, smiling in the darkness.

“Yes, sir,” replied the boy, cockily.

Berkin watched him go, a curious expression on his face. Then he said, “I do not think we should leave the raft here. It could take us a day to reach The Citadel, and we do not want to give them any warning.”

“He is right,” said Gimli. “Let us push it back into the river. It will soon be gone.”

...

They crossed the plain on horseback, galloping amongst the herd, sweeping along the Rammas Echor; then, wheeling in a great arc, they turned north west, and followed the dark cliffs of Mount Mindolluin until Legolas, spotting the feature that Berkin had described, brought the horses to a halt with a low whistle.

The warriors dismounted, ran into the rocks, and hid themselves in the shadows.

“Wait here, your Highness,” said Berkin. “I will be as quick as I can.” He disappeared into a deep natural crevice in the purplish cliff, and Legolas, listening intently, heard the faint screech of stone grating on stone, a muttered exchange, another screech, and then silence.

Minutes passed.

“Do you have a second plan,” asked Gimli, “if the lad’s friends will not play?”

“Yes,” said Legolas, seriously. “If we cannot use the tunnels, I will toss *you* over the wall.”

The dwarf growled.

Eowyn smiled nervously at Haldir. “You have been in these tunnels before...”

“Yes,” said the elf. “It is not unpleasant, though the air is a little stale.”

“What I said—before—”

“Do not apologise, Eowyn,” said Haldir, softly. “You were right to rebuke me.”

She smiled again, this time more confidently. “I shall miss you if you stay here,” she said, “but I do hope, with all my heart, that you *can* stay.”

She frowned—for he had suddenly turned his head in the direction of Berkin’s doorway—and she glanced at Legolas, and saw that he, too, was staring into the crevice.

A moment later, Berkin emerged from the shadows and joined them. “It is all arranged,” he whispered, “but I have had to lie about your purpose, so, please, *all of you*, keep your heads covered and, whatever happens, whoever may accost us, do not let them see your faces.”

Chapter 21: The truce

"Home Sweet Home," said Pharaun, closing and locking the door. "Is that not what you surface dwellers say?" He lit a series of candles with a sweep of his hand. "Put her in the ch—oh..." He switched to his own language and repeated the instruction.

Gently, Drizzt set Wilawen down and took up position beside her, standing, like a bodyguard, with his hands upon his swords.

"Whatever did you do to inspire such loyalty in the brute?" asked Pharaun. "I assure you, his manly protection is not required—I need you, and in good condition."

"For what?"

"What do you think?" Side-stepping past Drizzt, the Mage walked to the far side of the room—which was covered, Wilawen could just see in the candlelight, with bookshelves—and selected a book. He began leafing through the pages.

"But *I* can control you," she said.

"In small things, yes—in small things you seem to have *total* control." He looked up from the book, keeping his place with his forefinger. "It is an interesting sensation. With larger tasks, however, I find that I can question your orders, though you still have the upper hand. When you try anything too ambitious, I can refuse."

"Why did it happen?"

"I have no idea. And neither, it seems,"—he closed the book and waved it at her—"does our esteemed author." He replaced the volume and selected another.

"All I have to do," said Wilawen, "is keep each step very small."

"So I have noticed. And at that you are proving quite adept..." He looked up at her. "You really are the strangest combination of mental strength and physical docility. Are all surface women like you?"

"I will have nothing more to do with the demon," said Wilawen, ignoring his question, "nor with that—*hole* you have made." She stood up—Drizzt shifted to let her pass, but followed close behind her as she approached the Mage. "*You* are going to help me and my friends get back home," she said. "And we will start by rescuing the others." She drew herself up to her full height and commanded him, firmly, "Take me to *The Silken Rack*."

"Too far," said Pharaun. "*And*,"—he put his book down—"before you start showering me with little tasks and set us off on a course that we will both regret, for Lloth's sake, sit down and let us make a sensible plan."

"I will *not* help you summon the demon again."

"Perhaps we can come to some arrangement—"

"No!"

Drizzt, seeing Wilawen's agitation, stepped between her and Pharaun, using his greater bulk to intimidate the taller drow.

"All right! Call him off," said the Mage. "And then, at least, listen to what I propose."

For a long moment Wilawen considered her options. Then—"Drizzt..."—she laid her hand upon

the warrior's arm. "Let him go."

Drizzt stepped back.

"Thank you," said Pharaun, brushing, with great dignity, several imaginary creases from his embroidered robes. "Now, sit—both of you." He repeated the words in drow. "I, for one," he added, "am in need of a stiff drink."

He crossed to the dresser and, from one of its richly carved shelves, selected a bottle, pulling out the cork and smelling its contents appreciatively. "Yes—a drop of surface Brandy—most appropriate, under the circumstances," he said.

"These are your chambers," said Wilawen, suddenly. "Those other rooms belonged to someone else..."

"Unfortunately, yes." He handed her a glass of spirits. "To the Archmage of Menzoberranzan, to be precise. One might have thought," he added, offering another glass to Drizzt, "that it would have been better protected. I now suspect that the figures on his study floor are merely decorative. He must have some other space, properly prepared, that he uses for professional purposes. It is a pity. With adequate warding, the summoning might have worked..." He sat down opposite Wilawen and took a long draught of brandy. "Mmm—that is better. Now—"

"Make Drizzt understand me," said Wilawen.

Pharaun frowned.

"If we are going to discuss a plan," she persisted, "he must be able to join in. Make him understand Westron."

"I cannot."

"Why?"

Pharaun shrugged. "I feel no compulsion to do so—so it must be too ambitious."

"Then make *me* understand *your* language."

Without any further argument, the drow reached inside his robes and drew out a goose feather. "From the surface," he explained. "I bought two—they cost a Matron Mother's ransom." And, holding it like a quill pen, he wrote a few words upon the air, pronouncing each syllable as he formed it. "There," he said, "speak to him."

"I did not feel anything—"

"O'Wilawen! You can speak drow!"

Wilawen turned to Drizzt. "Can you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes!" He beamed.

She reached out to him. "Thank you, Drizzt," she said. "Thank you for rescuing me in the caves, and for leaving Guenhwyvar to protect me; thank you for bringing Valandil—"

"Yes, yes; very touching," interrupted Pharaun. "But shall we get down to business?"

Drizzt and Wilawen exchanged smiles. "I want to rescue my friends," she continued. "Will you help me?"

"Of course."

"Do we need *him*?" She jerked her head towards Pharaun.

"A skilled wizard is always useful," Drizzt admitted.

"Are you skilled?" asked Wilawen, turning back to Pharaun.

"You have seen the evidence."

"I have seen a hole in the floor."

"Summoning that demon would have taxed even the most senior Masters of Sorcere," said Pharaun, re-arranging the front of his robes and smoothing the fabric over his knees. "On reflection—yes—perhaps it was a little ambitious of me to attempt it at this stage. But I have given you ample evidence besides."

Wilawen sighed. "What is your plan, then?"

"You will help me close the portal, then we will rescue your friends and I will send you and them back to the surface."

"No. We will rescue my friends first, and you will send them to the surface, *then* I will help you with the hole."

Pharaun shook his head. "Time is of the essence here—you said yourself that the portal is growing. Happily, I was able to seal the outer door, so that—at present—it is confined. *At present*. But I must close it before the Archmage returns and discovers that half his chambers is missing. Besides," he picked an imaginary thread from his sleeve, "*you* can force me to do whatever you like, whenever you like—it is *I* who must do the trusting..."

"For how long?"

The drow shrugged.

"Or is it that..." Wilawen drew herself up, straight-backed, and said, commandingly, "Answer me truthfully: will sealing the hole break my hold over you?"

Pharaun's handsome face contorted in pain. "Yes..." he hissed, through clenched teeth. "*I believe so.*"

Wilawen heard Drizzt suppress a laugh.

"Answer me truthfully: can you really send us safely to the surface?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then, as I said, we will rescue my friends first and—well, you will just have to trust that I will help you once they are safe." She rose to her feet and began to pace, back and forth.

"What is this place, *The Silken Rack*?" She turned to Drizzt.

"A—a brothel," he answered, shyly.

"Have you ever been there?"

He shook his head, averting his eyes with embarrassment.

"*The Silken Rack*," said Pharaun, his voice sounding smooth and cultured once more, "caters for Matron Mothers, and for the elder daughters of the great houses, who have an illicit taste for... certain types of mate."

"Women go there?"

"Of course. Women are obsessed with sex—is it not so on the surface?"

"You are saying that Valandil will be expected to...? *Service...*?" Wilawen wrung her hands in anguish. "We must hurry! We must—" She looked down at her clenched fists. "You healed my skin," she said. "Can you change its colour? Can you make me look like one of you? If I looked like a drow I could simply walk into this place, take you and Drizzt in as my servants, and..."

She stepped before Pharaun holding out her hands as though she expected him to *paint* her skin black. "Make me look like a drow," she commanded.

Pharaun raised his hands, touching his fingertips to hers. Then, closing his eyes in concentration, he murmured a long, musical spell.

Wilawen stared at her fingers. The ebony hue seemed to be flowing from Pharaun's body into her own, and she felt her skin tingle as the colour spread along her arms, across her shoulders, up her neck, and over her face to the roots of her hair (which seemed to be growing), down to her bosom (which was *certainly* growing), spreading to her waist (which was shrinking), over her belly and down her thighs, then (all in a rush) to the tips of her toes. Her leather gown, meanwhile, was altering itself into a low-cut bodice and knee-length breeches, closely moulded to the contours of her ample new curves.

"That is better," said Pharaun.

Wilawen scowled.

"If you are going to visit a brothel," he said, "you must look like one of those sex-obsessed strumpets... It is not my fault if it also makes you a little easier on the eye."

"How long will it last?"

"A day at most."

"You are not sure?"

"How could I be? I have had no chance to practice on humans, and—aside from a few tortures—the books are silent on the subject."

"Could I change back into myself whilst we are in *The Silken Rack*?"

Pharaun shrugged. "For your information, that spell does not fall into the category of 'small tasks'. It is actually quite difficult. I cast it because it was a surprisingly good idea. However, we will also need money. Any suggestions?" He looked from Wilawen to Drizzt and back again. "I have none," he added. "A noble does not carry coin."

"Can you not use a spell to make some?" asked Wilawen, trying to pull the neckline of her bodice higher.

Pharaun slapped her hands away. "Leave it! No," he said, "not without a focus. So, unless you happen to have a coin that I can use..."

"No..."

"I do," said Drizzt, suddenly. "The one you gave me, O'Wilawen." He opened the pouch at his waist—the pouch in which he kept Guenhwyvar's statuette—and pulled out the silver ten-piece that Wilawen had given him in the starlit cave. "I shall want it back," he said to Pharaun. "It is a keepsake." He dropped it into the other drow's palm.

"I will do what I can."

"What about weapons?" said Wilawen, remembering the Bazaar with its stalls of elven bows and swords. "If we can arm Valandil and the others we will all stand a better chance of getting away. We will need two lots of money."

"The next person who calls me 'indolent'," said Pharaun, "will quickly wish that he had never been born." He carried the coin to a small table and set it down on the velvety cloth. Then he fished two fragments of leather from one of his many pockets, and placed them either side of the coin. "Talk amongst yourselves," he said, "this may make some time."

Naturally, Wilawen and Drizzt watched his every move, in silence.

Pharaun took two long, deep breaths, stretched out his hands, and muttering the same strange phrase over and over (which Wilawen, despite her new ability to speak his language, could not decipher), slowly built, it seemed, out of thin air, two leather pouches bulging with coins.

"There," he gasped, picking up the original ten-piece and tossing it back to Drizzt with a triumphant (though weak) smile. "I shall need to rest before we go to the brothel—at least six hours of reverie. But first," he added, breathlessly, "whilst I am on such form, one last spell." And he produced a slender wooden baton from inside his robes.

"Hold this," he said, handing the rod to Wilawen. "No mistress would be complete without her deadly snake whip. I am afraid that my snakes will not be properly animate, but if you use them sparingly, they should suffice."

...

The Silken Rack

"Here," said Orophin's burly keeper. She handed him a small block of dried fungus, then turned to unlock his cell door.

"What is it?" asked the elf.

"Eat it later. It will keep your strength up." She winked.

Orophin handed it back. "I have no need."

The drow laughed. "No. At least, not yet—or so I have heard." She looked him up and down, her eyes travelling slowly over his bare chest and lingering on the bulge in his leggings. Then she nodded towards the cell door. "Go on..." It was perfectly clear what she intended to do.

Orophin swallowed hard. *Play along*, he thought. *For now*.

He stepped past her into his cell, bracing himself to deal with her demands but, to his surprise (and relief), she did not follow and he realised that something must be happening, further down the corridor—and, suddenly, some elven instinct told him that it involved Valandil.

Oh. Valar.

Quietly, he stepped back to the door and peered out. The passageway was dark, but Orophin was still able to make out the shapes of two drow females, carrying between them Valandil's limp body.

Chapter 22: Minas Tirith

Shadowland

It was a long, slow tramp along the shadowy tunnels of Mount Mindolluin to the foot of the Hill of Guard; then an even slower climb up the steep, uneven staircases linking the rough-hewn under-raths. The friends walked in silence and, when they encountered other travellers, took care to keep their faces hidden, as Berkin had advised.

At last, their guide brought them to a halt. "Third level," he muttered to Berkin. "Rath Luin. How many are going out?"

"Two," said Berkin, indicating Haldir and Arador.

The man scrutinised the pair, looking them up and down as though trying to decide if they were trustworthy. Then, "Wait here," he said. "I'll prepare the way. Be ready when I get back. Ten minutes." He walked off into the darkness, taking his torch with him.

"They have to be very careful," said Berkin, apologetically. Legolas patted his arm.

"Ten minutes," sighed Eowyn, sitting down, heavily, on one of the worn steps.

Legolas laid a hand on her shoulder. "*And* another ten or so whilst he lets them out, melmenya."

He was proud of her—of her courage and resilience—but he knew that the physical demands of next few hours would be far harder on her than on him. Eowyn smiled up at him, shuffling sideways to make space for him beside her, but Haldir had already caught his eye.

"In a moment, Eowyn nín," he whispered, squeezing her shoulder. "I need a word with the March Warden first."

...

Haldir drew Legolas away from their companions. "There is something I..." He sighed. Then, making up his mind, he continued, resolutely, "It is not my secret, but she did not ask me not to tell *you*, and only you can know whether Eowyn need be warned."

He beckoned Legolas still further down the tunnel. "There is a *child*," he said, softly.

...

The guide returned sooner than expected. "Come," he said, showing the way with his torch. "Everything is ready."

Haldir turned to his fellow travellers. "*Ortheritham hain*," he said.

Eowyn scrambled to her feet. "Be careful Haldir," she murmured, making a final adjustment to his headgear. "And you, too, Arador."

The boy mumbled a reply—hiding a huge, blushing smile by fussing with his travelling pack.

"Remember," said Legolas. "Afterwards, we will meet at Berkin's father's house."

“*Na-den pedim ad*,” agreed Haldir, with a curt nod. “Come, Master Arador.”

...

Arador and Haldir followed their guide down the curving under-rath for a few hundred yards before turning into a narrow side-passage.

“We could almost be back in the Underdark,” whispered Arador.

“No,” replied Haldir. “These tunnels are safe. I can feel it.”

The boy frowned. “Yes,” he said, suddenly serious, “why have they not captured them?” Then, “Sir,”—he addressed the guide—“have *you* ever seen them down here?”

“Seen who?”

“The dro—”

“Ignore him, sir,” interrupted Haldir, grabbing Arador by the arm. “He is a dreamer.”

The side-passage ended abruptly in a well-lit chamber, with a heavy iron door set in the far wall, barred and bolted and guarded by two armed men.

“Wulfric will see to you from here,” said the guide, and left without another word.

...

Eowyn shifted on her uncomfortable seat, stretching out her aching legs with a sigh. “What was Haldir saying, Lassui?” she asked. “It looked... I thought he seemed to be looking at *me*...”

Legolas kissed her hand; she had decided it *for* him. “He was telling me something that your double told him, *melmenya*,” he said, “not exactly in confidence, but she begged him to say nothing to *my* double...” He glanced around. Gimli and Berkin were standing, some distance away, in a pool of torchlight, Gimli showing Berkin how to grip an axe. “You remember that night, after Helm’s Deep, outside the Golden Hall?” He was referring to the moment when he had first revealed his feelings for her.

“Of course,” said Eowyn.

“Well, on that night, *they*...”

“Our doubles?”

“Yes. And...” He squeezed her hand gently. “There was a child, *melmenya*—a boy.”

Eowyn turned to him abruptly, her face frozen in a frown. Then she smiled, and she whispered, excitedly, “*That* is what went wrong, Lassui! *That* is why everything is so different here! You were right all along—you said that I was wrong to regret not making love that night, and you were right!” She stood up—and the sudden movement startled both Gimli and Berkin, who turned, and stared her for a moment before returning to their lesson. “Eomer must have stepped in, with all his usual tact, and that is why he and my double are estranged!”

“Yes. And *my* double took himself off to Eryn Carantaur in a sulk,” said Legolas. He rose, and caught her, mid-stride. “But the child, *melmenya*,” he began, gently—

"If *they* can have one, Lassui, so can we!" She smiled, broadly.

"Oh. Yes." He hugged her close. "Yes, *melmenya*," he said, kissing the top of her head, "so can we. But the child has been adopted by Aragorn and Arwen—and if they are being held prisoner then, the chances are that he is too."

...

The concealed exit

"Over here, gents."

The man called Wulfric left his station beside the door and crossed to a shelf cut into a wall of the chamber, beckoning Haldir and Arador to join him. "These are your permits," he said, indicating two parchments lying on the stone slab, "signed and sealed by the King himself." He winked. "But they're good enough to keep you out of trouble, provided you get your story straight."

"Story?" said Haldir.

"You're a merchant," said Wulfric, showing him the appropriate place in the document. "One Master Lennard." He folded the parchment and handed it to the disguised elf. "And he,"—he nodded towards Arador—"is your apprentice."

"Do you know a Master Geruil?" asked Arador, scanning his permit.

"No."

"Are you sure? His shop is somewhere near—"

"*No*. Now," continued Wulfric, speaking to Haldir, "if they stop you, bow politely keeping your hands by your sides and in full view. If they ask to see your permit, show them that, and pray. Do not *ever* mention us. Understand?"

"Yes," said Haldir. "Do they stop everyone?"

"No. But it's early in the morning, so they'll be suspicious—though, saying that, the main patrol has already passed and you may just slip through. Ready?"

Haldir glanced at Arador; the boy nodded. "Yes," said the elf.

"Once this door closes you're on your own," said Wulfric. "There's no coming back inside." He signalled to his fellow guard and the man snuffed out the torches. In the darkness, Haldir heard the well-oiled bolts slide back in their chutes. Then a line of light appeared, growing wider as the door swung silently open.

"*Now*," said Wulfric, quietly.

And Haldir and Arador stepped outside.

...

"Are you all right, *melmenya*?"

They had scaled three more levels, by Legolas' estimation, and Eowyn—climbing doggedly, head

down, up step after step—seemed miraculously to have discovered an extra reserve of strength.

She nodded, smiling, though she looked tired.

“Almost there,” said the guide.

...

Rath Luin

The door that had closed behind them was set in a shadowy alcove, tucked beneath the arches of a portico that ran the full length of a row of shabby shops. From the outside, it was indistinguishable from the rest of the stone wall.

Cautiously, the pair stepped out into Rath Luin.

In the damp, early morning light, the fabled White City was a dull grey. Arador looked up and down the street to get his bearings, then set off eastwards, following the curve of the rath towards the Third Gate. Haldir followed, glancing behind every few steps, his elven senses alert—

Suddenly, the boy grasped his arm and—with a grin of triumph—drew him into an alley that headed back into the Hill of Guard. “If the shop exists,” he whispered, “it will be down here. I am sure of it...”

The lane twisted its way past several small workshops—a tanner’s, a boot-maker’s, a place selling lanterns—all closed and shuttered, before reaching, at the very end, a double-fronted shop displaying a faded sign,

Geruil and Daughter *Rarities*

The elf peered through one of the dusty windows. “It is empty,” he muttered. “Abandoned.”

“No,” said Arador, “it always looks like this.” He pushed the door. “Hmm. Locked.”

Haldir looked to left and right. They were not visible from the main rath, but he could see nowhere for them to hide if anyone were come down the alleyway...

Arador, however, had slipped off his pack and was rummaging inside. “Keep watch,” he said, brandishing a bunch of bent metal rods and, crouching down beside the shop door, he selected one and slid it into the key hole.

Haldir had had little experience of locks, but he immediately understood what his companion was doing. “Where,” he whispered, moving to screen the boy, “did you learn that?”

“My father sent me to school, here in Minas Tirith, for a while.” He selected another rod, and aligned it with the first.

“And they taught you to pick locks?”

Arador grinned. “They shut us in at night, so—ah—there we are!” He withdrew the skeleton keys —“Simple!”—pushed the heavy door open, and stepped inside. “Bugger!”

“What?” Haldir followed. “Oh.” His first impression of the shop had been correct; two overturned

chairs, a half-emptied display case, and an open strong box sitting on the counter—all suggested that the owner had left in a hurry, taking his valuables with him.

Arador reached into the display case and, ignoring the amethyst crystals and the lumps of fool's gold, lifted out a piece of carved black onyx. "Why would Geruil bother to lock the door behind him?" he wondered, putting the object in his pocket.

"Perhaps to protect what remained of his shop from people like you," replied the elf.

The boy smiled. "I will pay him for this when I see him," he said. "Well—what do we do now?"

...

The under-raths

"Yes," repeated the guide, "*almost* there..."

Legolas frowned—reaching out to hold Eowyn back—because there was something up ahead...

Men! Not one of the groups of travellers they had been passing from time to time, but *warriors* lying in wait!

The elf's hands flew to his white knives and, immediately, Gimli pulled out his axe and, a split-second later, Eowyn drew her sword, and the three stood, side by side across the passage, with the nervous guide in front and Berkin, safely shielded, behind.

"Now, now, gentlemen," came a friendly-sounding voice from the darkness above, "is that any way to treat your host? Put up your weapons."

With elven speed, Legolas sheathed one knife, caught the guide by the neck, and laid his second blade across his throat. "I have your man," he shouted.

The voice laughed. "What is that to me?" he asked. "Now *listen*,"—and he sounded much less affable now—"if you want to enter the Citadel—if you want to leave these tunnels at all—put up your weapons and surrender. You are outnumbered, five to one."

...

Haldir and Arador had searched the shop and the dwelling above it from end to end but had found no clue to the whereabouts of Geruil and his daughter, nor any indication that the man might know where the portal—if it existed—was concealed.

"So—do we go up to the Citadel?" asked Arador. He uncorked his water skin and took a sip, then offered it to Haldir.

The elf shook his head. "No. Our orders are to wait for the others at Berkin's father's house."

The alley outside was still empty, but the doors of the workshops were open now and, as the pair approached the main rath, they could hear the quiet sounds of people going about their business in a time of trouble.

Haldir adjusted his hood. "Try to look—"

"Ordinary," said Arador.

They stepped out into Rath Luin.

A cart, laden with vegetables, was trundling by and Haldir, grasping Arador by the arm, followed in its wake, letting it clear a path for them. They reached the Third Gate unhindered, walked slowly past the houses beyond, through the tunnel in the great stone prow, and were about to enter the next level when a troop of liveried horsemen emerged from the Fourth Gate.

The leading rider waved the cart past. “*Permit*,” he said, to Haldir.

“Of course, sir,” said the elf, bowing—as the outlaw had instructed—before reaching inside his cloak for the document—

“Lower your hood when you are spoken to,” said the rider angrily.

“Pardon... *Sir*.” Very carefully, Haldir lowered his hood. Arador did the same.

“That is better.” The man held out a gloved hand. Haldir gave him the permit. “It says that you are a *merchant*, Master Lennard. What exactly do you sell?”

Sell? Haldir’s mind raced.

“*Curios*,” Arador piped up, “from other lands. Crystals and... and things.”

“Things?”

“Anything our clients want,” said Haldir, regaining his composure. “Like this.” He opened the leather pouch at his waist, took out a leaf-shaped piece of gold, and handed it to the soldier. “It is a rare elven coin,” he explained. “A fifty-piece, from the colony in South Ithilien.”

“A *fifty*-piece...” The man weighed the coin in his palm; then he tossed it in the air, caught it, and slipped it into his pocket. “Move along,” he said.

Haldir bowed again. “My permit, sir,” he said, diffidently.

“*What?* Oh.” The soldier opened his fingers and let the parchment float to the floor. “Come,” he called to his men, and spurred his horse.

Haldir bent to retrieve the document. “I will remember that Orc’s *criss*—”

“Haldir,” said Arador, suddenly, “Haldir—look! Going into the house over there! *Look!*”

...

Eryn Arnen Eowyn’s tent

“Is there any change?” asked Eowyn, looking at the elf sleeping on her camp bed.

“No,” said Hentmirë, yawning.

The younger woman smiled, sympathetically. “Were you awake all night, my Lady?”

“Oh no,” said Hentmirë. “No—I was dozing. I am not tired at all.” She yawned again.

“Well,” said Eowyn, “I will have Berengar arrange some hot water for you, and then—will you join me for breakfast, Lady Hentmirë?”

...

Minas Tirith

Arador ran across the rath, reaching the door just as it closed.

“Wait,” he hissed, trying to speak through the wood without drawing the attention of passers by, “wait, *please!*” He knocked, anxiously, but softly. “Open up! *Please!* Mistress Wilawen...”

...

Emyn Arnen

“I have found some *butter*,” said Berengar, “just for you.” He set the tray down on Eowyn’s map table. “And a little strawberry jam, and some honey as well.”

“Thank you.” Eowyn cut Hentmirë a slice of bread. “Please, my Lady,” she said, indicating the tray, “help yourself.”

The little woman took a tiny portion of the precious butter.

“You were saying that *your* Legolas is married to my double,” prompted Eowyn.

“Yes,” said Hentmirë, spreading her bread. “Well, they will not be *fully* married until they hold the public ceremony at Yuletide but, yes, they have already taken private vows.” She added a small spoonful of honey.

“Are they happy?”

“Oh, very happy. They are devoted to each other.” Hentmirë took a bite of bread and honey.

“And, the other elves—do they accept her as Legolas’ consort?”

“She is the joint ruler of the colony,” said Hentmirë. “And it is not just elves—men have settled there, too, and dwarves. We all live together.”

“And Eomer approves of this?”

Hentmirë frowned, thoughtfully. “Well, I have never met Eomer King myself,” she admitted, “but I do know that he visits regularly.”

...

Minas Tirith

Desperately, Arador knocked louder.

The door opened. “Hush,” said the woman, “*go away!* You will bring the patrol down on us—”

“May we come inside, Mistress?” asked Arador, stepping forward. “Please—”

“*No!*”

“Wilawen...” Haldir’s voice was full of calm authority, and he pulled off the velvet cap—borrowed from Berkin—which, with Eowyn’s help, he had been using to conceal his pointed ears and most of his long, elven hair.

“An elf!” cried Wilawen. “What...? How do you know my name?” She looked anxiously up and down the rath.

“I will explain everything,” said Haldir. “Please, let us in.”

“My father—”

“It is your father we need to speak to, Mistress,” said Arador. “It is very urgent.”

...

The under-raths

Still concealed beneath their hooded cloaks, the elf, the woman, the dwarf and the boy followed their unknown captor down a narrow passage, through a broad, vaulted hall (lined with armed men), and into a large, well-lit chamber.

The room was furnished like a nobleman’s study, with heavy wooden furniture, brightly coloured tapestries, exotic rugs; the effect was rich, but tasteless. Legolas watched the door swing closed and the two guards, who were standing either side, step forward to block it.

This, he thought, is the lair of the Outlaw King! He leaned closer to Berkin and whispered, “How much should I offer him?”

“Five thousand gold,” replied the boy. “Each.”

The ‘Outlaw King’, meanwhile, had thrown himself down in a chair behind his huge, carved desk and, with his hands clasped over his bulging stomach, was looking at each of his captives in turn.

Slowly, his gaze returned to Legolas. “I have been receiving reports of you since you left Osgiliath,” he said. “I must say—you have some clever moves. Who are you? And what do you want in The Citadel?”

“I will pay you twenty thousand gold pieces—that is five thousand gold for each of us—for safe passage into the Palace,” said Legolas, calmly.

“That hardly answers my question,” said the man, “though it *does* tell me that you are someone important in the world outside. Let me see your face.”

Legolas could see no advantage in refusing. He lowered his hood.

“An elf...” The man seemed mildly surprised. “Why does an elf want to enter the Palace secretly?”

“Melmenya,” said Legolas, “let him see *your* face.”

Eowyn lowered her hood.

“And a princess, too,” said the man. “We *are* honoured.” He inclined his head in a mock bow, but it was obvious from his expression that Eowyn’s presence had piqued his interest—and that he sensed an opportunity.

"I am Legolas of the Woodland Realm," said Legolas, with princely authority, "Lord of the Elves of South Ithilien, sworn ally and brother of His Majesty, King Elessar. In normal times, Princess Eowyn and I would ride up to The Citadel with a royal escort—but, as you know, these are not normal times."

"You are speaking of the new laws?" asked the man. "Why would they affect *you*?"

"I am speaking," said Legolas, "of the people responsible for the new laws—of the people who, it is my belief, are holding the King and his family hostage—the people who plan to destroy Gondor and, with it, your,"—he waved his hand to indicate the opulent chamber—"your *kingdom* forever."

The crime lord stared at the elf for a long moment. Then, "Nice try," he said. "Interesting story. But nothing happens here that *I* do not know about."

"You *do* know," countered Legolas, "that the King is behaving out of character. And you have wondered why. Suppose I prove to you that what I am saying is true?"

The man's eyes narrowed. "How?"

"I assume that you have more than one way into the Palace," said the elf, "and that you can see into the royal chambers from your tunnels?"

"Suppose I can?"

"I need to find the King," said Legolas, "and set him free. Then I need to help him drive out the invaders and restore proper order. *You* need that too. For your help I will pay you triple the sum I offered you before—once the King is back in control. How *he* will reward you,"—Legolas shrugged—"I do not know. But I can tell you that I have never known him be less than generous to his friends."

"Thief by appointment to His Majesty, King Elessar," said the crime lord, rubbing his chin. "It has a ring to it..."

...

Eryn Arnen Eowyn's tent

"My lord." Eowyn greeted Lord Fingolfin with a formal bow, and offered him a seat. "I am afraid that Prince Legolas' condition has not changed," she continued. "Lady Hentmirë is sitting with him..."

"I am sure that he is in good hands," said the elf. "But, in truth, your Highness, I came here to speak to *you*."

"Me?" Something in the elf's manner made Eowyn glance towards her bedchamber. The curtain was closed, but she knew that the silk hangings would not prevent Legolas from overhearing their conversation should he awaken, and something told her that she would not want that. "I was just about to inspect the fortifications, my Lord," she said. "Perhaps you would join me."

They left the tent and crossed the busy plateau, and started down the winding path to the outer redoubt with its barricade and ditches.

"I believe you know what I have come to say, your Highness," said Fingolfin. "Your obvious concern for Prince Legolas has made me hope—"

"Is this not a matter, my Lord," said Eowyn, "for Prince Legolas and me?"

"Of course, my Lady," said the elf, bowing slightly. "Of course. But *I* am speaking for the colony. I have observed you; I have observed your double and my Lord's double. And it is my belief, your Highness, that you would make Eryn Carantaur a fine co-ruler."

"This is premature, my Lord! Prince Legolas is still betrothed and I—I am not free."

"There can be no question of Lord Legolas' marrying Alatóriel now, your Highness," said Fingolfin. "And, after the proper period of mourning has been observed—"

"I do not speak of my late husband, my Lord."

Fingolfin frowned—then his brow cleared, as the truth dawned upon him. "Haldir of Lorien," he said.

Eowyn felt herself blushing.

"But he does not belong in this world, your Highness," said the elf, gently.

"Be that as it may, my Lord," said Eowyn, "he and I..."

They had passed through the inner barricade, at the mouth of the gorge, and were walking out onto the plain—and a commotion at the outer barricade suddenly caught their attention.

"I believe we have visitors, my Lord," she said. "Yes, I believe that my mercenary has arrived!" She turned to the elf. "I would value your support during the negotiations, my Lord."

"Of course, your Highness. I am at your service."

...

Minas Tirith Wilawen's house

"So you are saying that *he* is the owner of the shop," said Haldir, dubiously.

They were sitting, incongruously, in the pretty front parlour of the little house—*Like guests at a tea party*, thought the elf—waiting for Wilawen to fetch her father. He knew that the woman had locked them in the room and, although he was sure that there was no one else in the house, and he knew that she would never summon the patrol, he had already planned his and Arador's escape through the window, should the need arise.

But the boy was insisting that it was Wilawen's father whose help they needed. "I am sure of it," he said. "I never met Geruil's daughter in our world but, when I saw Mistress Wilawen, I remembered what Vandalil had told me about her father, and I put two and two together, and... Well..."

"Then why does *our* Wilawen know nothing of the drow?" said Haldir. "Why had she never seen that map of yours? And why has she never mentioned a portal?"

Arador shrugged. "I do not know. Maybe she is not party to all of her father's dealings. Maybe, for

her own safety, he—”

Haldir rose suddenly, pulling back his cloak to uncover the hilt of his sword.

“What is wrong?” said Arador, jumping up, too, as the key turned in the lock and the door opened, but it was only Wilawen and her elderly parent.

Haldir let his cloak fall back over his sword.

Expertly, the woman helped her father shuffle to a chair and sit down. “Father says that he knows you, Master Arador—that you are a good customer,” she said; she turned to Haldir, blushing. “Please sit down, sir. I will fetch you some tea...”

Her father watched her leave the room, then turned to his guests. “My daughter tells me you have been to the shop,” he said.

“Yes.” Arador glanced at Haldir for permission to continue; the elf nodded. “We are looking for a portal, Master Geruil,” said the boy. “Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

The man said nothing.

“Dark Elves,” said Arador, “*drow*, have invaded Eryn Arnen and captured the City on the Hills. Princess Eowyn is afraid that they will do the same here in Minas Tirith. She has sent us to destroy the portal. Do you know where it is, sir?”

“Close the door,” said Geruil.

Arador leaped up and pushed the door shut.

“The strange thing,” said the old man, “is that it is a relief to finally tell someone, after all these years.” He sighed. “It is in the shop.”

“Have the *drow* already used it?” asked Haldir. “Is that why you abandoned your shop?”

The man nodded.

“How many came through?”

“Whilst I was there, about twenty.”

“When you were there?” said the elf. “But... Why did they not kill you?”

“I... They could not see me, sir. You see, I—”

“*Bugger!*” said Arador, suddenly.

The man and the elf both turned to him in surprise.

“You do not know how to close it,” said the boy. “You ran away because you do not know how to close it.”

...

The under-raths

It had taken almost an hour to convince the crime lord—Redwald son of Edric—that it was in his own interests to join the fight against the drow but, at length, he had agreed to assemble his men, and the four friends had suddenly found themselves with half an hour in which to rest and prepare themselves for the next stage of the mission.

Redwald had offered Eowyn the use of his private bathing room and she had stripped off her cloak and jerkin, rolled up the sleeves of her tunic, and was washing her hands and face.

Smiling, Legolas watched her—the fall of her hair, the delicate line of her neck, the soft curve of her bare shoulder...

There was no one else like her—no one so brave, no one so beautiful...

Love and desire both welled up inside him, and he came up behind her and, slipping his arms around her waist, pulled her against him, sliding his hands up to cup her breasts.

“Oh, Lassui...”

“*Shhhhh*, my darling...” He kissed her neck.

“No,” she gasped, “we do not have time...”

“Yes, we do...”

He turned her to face him and, kissing her, he gently pushed her backwards until she was resting against the wall—his lips never leaving hers—and his mouth curved in a smile when he felt her little hands slide down between them and pull at the lacings of his leggings.

They were both *so* aroused and—after a little fumbling—Legolas bent his knees and slid eagerly inside her, and felt her moan against his kiss.

But he could not take her properly, hunched as he was, and he lifted her off her feet and—holding her against the wall—he thrust up into her and felt her legs wrap around his waist, and her hands grasp his shoulders, as she rode his desperate strokes.

And—in no time at all, it seemed—the waves of her climax engulfed him, and he buried his face in her golden hair and *came* with a ragged groan of satisfaction.

...

Smiling, Legolas set Eowyn’s feet back on the floor. “My lovely, lovely Shieldmaiden,” he murmured, kissing her forehead. “When all this is over, *melmenya*, *I* am going to *ravish* you properly.”

Chapter 23: The escape

***The Silken Rack* stood close to the Bazaar, a glimmering palace of slender towers and delicate turrets—overtly feminine in a world already dominated by the female.**

Escorted by the two male drow, Wilawen strode towards its elegant gates. Her heart was pounding, but her journey through the busy market place, where males of every species had bowed, and stepped aside with cringing respect, had convinced her that, provided she could control her nerves, and could talk her way inside—

"Let *me* do the talking," said Pharaun.

Wilawen turned on him, her eyes narrowed, but the drow's gaze was respectfully lowered. "Remember," she warned, "how much you *need* me."

"We are in this together—*mistress*." He bowed. Then, assuming a regal air, he approached the drow guards with a curt, "Open the gates for my Lady!"

Wilawen saw one of the males cast her a surreptitious glance. But it was no more than a quick appraisal of her new, curvaceous body; and, when their eyes met, he hastily bowed, then swung the gate open, and backed away to let her pass.

With Pharaun and Drizzt in tow, Wilawen swept inside.

...

The proprietress of *The Silken Rack* welcomed her new client into an elegantly furnished parlour. "I was just about to take a little refreshment," she said, "will you join me?"

"Thank you," said Wilawen.

The madam looked at her curiously. "Is something troubling you, my Lady?"

"I... *No*."

"This is all new to you," said the drow, soothingly. "I can see that. Please, sit down..."

There was a small table standing between them, with a crystal decanter and goblets upon it, and the madam poured two glasses of pale green wine and handed one to Wilawen. "Believe me," she said, "these males may *look* different—and it is true that most of them have more spirit than a drow—but, in the end, they are still only males. There is no reason for a Lady to be nervous."

I must be bolder, thought Wilawen.

She took a sip of wine, set the goblet back on the table, and told the tale that she and Pharaun had concocted beforehand: that she was a noble, from the city of Ched Nasad, visiting House Mizzrym, that her hostess had heard that the *Rack* had recently acquired a number of surface elves, and that she, Wilawen, was... *curious*.

"Ah, the new elves," said the drow, leaning back in her chair with a self-satisfied smile. "Yes, they *are* exceedingly popular—and with good reason. They are so *skilled*."

"Might *I*...?" Wilawen's voice stuck in her throat. She pretended to cough.

"You are most fortunate, my Lady. It just so happens that one of them is free."

"Then I should like to see him."

The madam took up a little bell from the table and shook it, and a male drow immediately emerged from the shadows. "Vorion will show you to your room," she said.

The drow presented himself to Wilawen with a bow.

"My—er—*my* males..." she said.

"They will be quite safe in the waiting room," replied the madam.

"No," said Wilawen, firmly, "I want them with me."

"With you?" The drow frowned. "That is a most unusual request, my Lady. You will not need them, I assure you."

"I... I *want* them," said Wilawen. It sounded pathetic. She squared her shoulders and tried again. "It is better—more *enjoyable*—when they are present. If I cannot have them—" She began to rise.

But the madam reached out, and—without actually touching her guest—kept her in her seat. "Of course, my Lady," she said, with a forced smile. "The *Rack* takes pride in satisfying its patrons' desires.

"Vorion, escort the Lady to the Blue Room, then have her males taken to join her—but," she added, quietly, "tell Kyrnill I want them thoroughly searched and disarmed, first."

...

The Blue Room was an elegant, high-ceilinged cavern, subtly decorated with web-like carvings, and softly lit by lavender-blue faerie fire.

Wilawen wandered nervously amongst its graceful pillars, breathing deeply in an attempt to control her nerves.

Which of the elves would they bring to her?

Please, gods, let it be Valandil!

But would he recognise her?

And how would she convince him if he did not?

...

Orophin followed his gaoler down the pitch-black corridor.

What had happened to Valandil had changed everything.

Orophin did not know whether his friend was alive or dead but, even if he *were* still alive, there could be no possibility now of their escaping together.

A great, hollow misery filled the elf's heart.

...

Wilawen shuddered. She was sitting on the bed, and the mattress, filled with something soft and fluid, kept rippling suggestively beneath her—

Suddenly, a door—hitherto concealed—opened in one of the carved walls, and a burly female drow entered, leading an elf. Wilawen leaped to her feet. "*Oro—!*"

She stopped herself just in time. "Oh," she said, deliberately. "Thank you."

The drow removed the elf's shackles, and gave Wilawen a perfunctory bow, before withdrawing, and shutting the door behind her.

...

Orophin steeled himself.

His 'guest' was small, with delicate features that seemed very familiar, though he could not recall where he had seen them before, and she was standing awkwardly, as though trying to hide her shapely body. Had she been an elleth, he would have said that she was shy.

Orophin made up his mind: if an opportunity arose, he would take it; one way or another, he would not spend another day in this terrible place.

...

"Orophin!" cried Wilawen, running to the elf and throwing her arms around him. "Oh, Orophin, I am so pleased to see you! Where is Valandil? Tell me that *he* is safe, too!"

To her surprise, gently but firmly, the elf pushed her away. "Please, allow me, mistress," he said, lifting her into his arms and carrying her to the bed.

"Orophin?"

He laid her on its swaying mattress and, sitting down beside her, he ran his hands over her body, caressing her breasts, her waist, her hips, then bringing them down between her thighs...

...

No weapons, thought Orophin, except for the snake whip, And if I try to wield that, will it obey me? Or will it strike?

...

"No!" Wilawen knocked his hand away. "What are you doing? Orophin!"

The elf frowned—and it seemed to Wilawen that her blow had awoken him from some sort of trance.

"*What* was that?" he asked. "Were you saying my name?" He leaned over her. The mattress shuddered beneath them. "How do you know my name? I have not told anyone my name!"

Wilawen shuffled backwards on the heaving bed, and pushed herself up on her elbows. "I am *Wilawen*," she said. "In disguise."

"Did you say 'Wilawen'?"

"Yes."

...

He grasped her shoulders. "Where is she? What have you done to her? Tell me!"

"O'rro-phinn," cried the drow.

"Tell me!" He shook her hard. "*Tell* me!" He lifted a hand and—*Valar forgive him*—he

threatened to strike her, and her eyes widened with shock—

And then he knew where he had seen her face before.

...

The public door—the one through which Wilawen had entered—suddenly opened, and Orophin released her, and quickly backed away.

Wilawen turned—and could hardly believe how relieved she was to see Pharaun enter, followed by Drizzt.

"Well. I see that you have lost no time in getting reacquainted with your friend," said the Mage, dryly.

"Why does he not understand me?" Wilawen crawled across the swaying mattress, rolled awkwardly to her feet, and advanced upon the drow. "What have you done?"

"What have *I* done? *I*?" He turned her to face Orophin. "The elf cannot understand you because you are speaking drow—as *you* commanded, remember? You will continue to speak drow until you ask me to remove the spell." He examined his beautifully-shaped hand.

Wilawen sighed. It was too soon to risk that. "But *you* can speak Westron," she said. "*You* tell him who I am." She made it a command.

Pharaun waved at Orophin to draw his attention. "This," he said, pointing, and enunciating his words carefully, as though to an idiot, "is your friend,"—he turned back to Wilawen—"what did you say your name was?"

She had told him that it was 'Eowyn' but now was not the time for caution. "Wilawen," she said.

"Ah... This is your friend, *Wilawen*, whom I have, very cleverly, disguised as one of your—er—customers, so that she may help you escape."

The elf's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

"I do not think he believes me," said Pharaun.

"Tell him to ask me something," said Wilawen. "Something that only I—*Wilawen*—would know." And, as Pharaun translated, she moved closer to the elf, willing him to recognise her.

Orophin stared at her for a long moment, then said, hoarsely, "What happened to my older brother?"

...

It was impossible—ridiculous—and yet Orophin already knew that it was true. "What happened to my older brother?" he asked.

And the drow who was really Wilawen, tears spilling down her ebony cheeks, replied.

And he had no need of that arrogant fellow's translation to understand what she was saying.

...

"He drowned," said Wilawen, softly, "in the starlit cave."

...

They gathered beside the bed to plan their next move.

"Valandil refused," said Orophin—and Wilawen, who could understand him, though she could not make him understand her, translated his words for Drizzt—"and fought them. I saw them drag him from his cell. I do not know where they took him. I do not know whether..." He saw Wilawen's anguish and touched her hand. "I am so sorry."

Drizzt took charge. "We must release the others first," he said, decisively. "If he is badly injured we will need their help. Mizzrym,"—he turned to Pharaun—"you must find him for us."

The Mage sighed. "Just remember that I am *not* an infinite resource. Do you have anything that belongs to this elf of yours?"

Wilawen wiped her eyes. "No," she sniffed. "Unless... Yes, I do have the ring he gave me when we made our vows."

Pharaun held out his hand.

Wilawen fished down the front of her bodice. "I was keeping it safe," she explained, dropping it into his palm.

"Oh, *good*. It is warm."

Holding the ring in his open hand, and using the fingers of his free hand to draw delicate patterns in the air above it, Pharaun recited his spell. As he finished, the ring jumped, and he quickly clasped his hands together. "There," he said, keeping the jewel trapped, "now it will lead us to him."

"We will need the weapons, O'Wilawen," said Drizzt.

Once again, the woman reached into her leather bodice, this time pulling out a small, black velvet pouch, and offered it to Pharaun.

The Mage turned to Drizzt. "This is your territory, not mine," he said. "You had better do the manly part."

Drizzt set the pouch on the bed, untied the knot in its drawstring, and loosened the fine cord. Then, slipping on his gauntlets, he carefully pulled the pouch open—and as his hands moved, the velvet seemed to stretch with them, stretching and stretching until it spread out over the bed like a black coverlet; and lying upon it was an assortment of knives, and swords, and Drizzt's pair of scimitars hanging from their tooled leather belt, and a small self-bow, made of dark, polished wood and inlaid with golden leaves (which must have originated in the Woodland Realm), and lying on top of all—

"My bow," said Orophin.

"It is wonderful what you can find in the Bazaar these days," said Pharaun.

"Please," said Drizzt, speaking as one warrior to another, and needing no translation, "take up your weapon."

So Orophin lifted his great Galadhrim bow and, with a smile that mingled triumph and relief, tested it with a slow, careful draw.

Then he watched in fascination as Drizzt, having set aside his own swords, and a dagger for Wilawen, drew up the edges of the velvet sheet—which instantly reformed itself into a tiny pouch—sealing the remaining weapons inside. "How is that possible?" he asked.

"What you are seeing is a simple bridge between dimensions," said Pharaun. "On the outside it is a pouch, on the inside—oh, never mind. It is *magic*."

Then, with a complacent smile, he added, "The *clever* thing was hiding it where our hostesses would never have dared to search."

...

They put their plan into action.

Drizzt took up position beside the door.

Orophin, kneeling astride Wilawen, who was lying on her back on the bed, wrapped his hands around her throat.

"Begin," said Pharaun.

"Help," she screamed. "Help! *Help!*"

Nothing happened.

"Again," said Pharaun. "Louder."

"HELP," cried Wilawen—the Mage added the sounds of a violent struggle with a few sweeps of his elegant hand—"HELP! HELP! *HEEEELP!*"

At last, the concealed door flew open and Orophin's burly gaoler rushed in, snake whip already raised—

But she had not taken more than three steps towards the elf before Drizzt called upon her to turn and, as she stared at him in surprise, he stepped forward, and sliced her head from her shoulders with a single cut of his scimitar.

...

They laid the drow's body on the bed and left the Blue Room, closing the door behind them. "It is not worth wasting my energies on sealing it," said Pharaun. "They will not miss her for at least another hour, and the fun will have begun long before that."

Orophin had broken a glowing crystal from one of the chandeliers, and he led them down the maze of corridors, following the route that he had memorised.

"*Tell me*," said Wilawen to Pharaun, in her most commanding whisper, "where is Valandil?"

"Happily, we appear to be heading straight towards him," replied the drow. "And I *must* add that your mistrusting me now shows extremely poor judgement."

Despite—or perhaps because of—the state of her nerves, Wilawen laughed.

"*Shhhh!*" hissed Orophin; there was someone up ahead.

Drizzt laid one hand on the elf's arm and, gesturing with the other, indicated that he should hide the crystal, and allow the drow to investigate. Orophin agreed, handing the light to Pharaun, who slipped it inside his robes.

Drizzt disappeared into the darkness.

The others waited.

There was a short, muffled cry, and then a thud.

Pharaun returned the crystal to Orophin.

...

They found Drizzt crouching beside another female. "She was delivering a prisoner—she will soon be missed," he whispered, "and there is nowhere to hide her body."

Her charge—a giant, heavily muscled man—was watching them placidly.

"His spirit has been broken," murmured Orophin.

But Wilawen waved a hand in front of the man's eyes and, when he looked down at her, bewildered, she said, relying on Pharaun to translate, "We have come to set you free—to free as many of you as we can. Will you help us?"

The man nodded.

Wilawen handed him her dagger.

...

They found the cells, exactly as Orophin had described, arranged in pairs along a closed side-passage. Two of the eight doors were already standing open—Orophin's own, and Valandil's.

"The others must be occupied," whispered the elf. "This,"—he pointed to one of the stout, fungus-wood doors—"is Rumil's, I think..."

"Open all of them," ordered Wilawen. She turned to Pharaun and looked him directly in the eye. "*Open them.*"

Slowly—because, although it was not really in his interests, he found that he could resist this command, just a little, and he did not want the woman thinking that she had more power over him than she really had—Pharaun raised both arms and pronounced a very loud and very agitated spell—

BOOM!

The doors burst open, smoke and dust and splinters of fungus-wood flying out into the corridor and raining down upon the rescuers.

Drizzt ran back to the mouth of the passage, scimitars drawn, ready to deal with anyone who might come to investigate the noise.

Orophin plunged into his brother's cell.

Wilawen, one arm raised to protect her face from the debris, turned to Pharaun. "Could you not have done something less spectacular?"

"The doors had to come outwards," said the drow, "or the blast would have killed your friends." He approached one of the open cells, cautiously.

"I *meant* could you not just have broken off the locks and—oh, Master Dínendal—oh, *no!*" She caught the elf's arm as he tried to retreat back into his cell. "*Dín-en-dal,*" she said, as clearly as she could, "please, go in there, with Or-o-phin and Ru-mil." She pushed the elf towards Rumil's cell.

Meanwhile, the occupants of the other cells had emerged—two more humans, a dwarf, and a

huge Uruk Hai.

"There really is *no* accounting for female taste when it comes to sex," muttered Pharaun, prudently taking shelter behind the big, dull-witted human, but the prisoners were not interested in him—they were closing in on Wilawen, whom they took to be one of their gaolers

"Help me," she hissed.

Pharaun considered his options.

"*HELP ME*," she bellowed—and, suddenly, he had no choice but to step in front of her.

"We are here to save you," he said, in Westron. "We have weapons—*look*,"—he gestured towards the big human—"we have already armed your friend." Wilawen slapped his back. "Oh! And the female is with us."

...

The Uruk Hai had armed itself with an axe and, as they swept back along the corridors, following Valandil's enchanted ring, it released more and more of the prisoners, striking off the locks and shouldering open the doors.

The supply of weapons was soon exhausted, but there was strength in numbers, and the motley army, bound together by nothing more than a common hatred of their gaolers, dealt ruthlessly with the few females who tried to stand in their way.

...

"He is in there," said Pharaun. He handed the ring back to Wilawen and she slipped it on her finger.

The door that the Mage had identified looked no different from any of the others, except that it did not appear to be locked. Drizzt, however, signalled to the Uruk Hai, and the brute smashed it open. Wilawen and Dínendal immediately slipped inside, followed by the two drow and a handful of prisoners.

Two females, working at a bench on the far side of the room, were quickly seized, thrown from male to male, and swallowed up by the crowd.

What if they were healers, thought Wilawen, with a pang of guilt.

But then she saw Valandil, lying unconscious on one of the beds, and she sat down beside him, and took his hand in hers, whilst Dínendal examined him. "There are no broken bones," said the healer, "and no sign of serious internal injury; but he is very badly bruised. He needs sleep." He glanced round his companions and, not knowing whom to address, settled for Pharaun. "I would prefer not to wake him just yet."

"Then we must carry him," said Wilawen. She leaned over the elf and lovingly stroked a strand of his hair back from his forehead.

"*Wilawen...*" whispered Dínendal, for he had seen that gesture before.

"Whatever we do," said Drizzt, "we must hurry. We cannot control this mob, but we need them. *The Silken Rack* is run by two of the most powerful houses in Menzoberranzan; the proprietress will be calling on their armies for protection. We must get out quickly."

Wilawen turned suddenly to Pharaun. "*Answer me truthfully*," she said, "would a person be safe inside the velvet pouch? Would he be able to breathe?"

"Yes," said the Mage, without hesitation.

But the woman was cautious. "Are you telling me the truth?"

"If he is not," said Drizzt, "I will kill him."

"You could *try*," Pharaun sighed. "Yes," he said, emphatically, "he will be safe inside the pouch."

"Then *I* will carry him." Wilawen pulled the velvet bag from her bodice and handed it to the Mage. Pharaun set it down on one of the beds and opened it out; Dínendal and Drizzt carefully lifted Valandil and laid him upon the velvet sheet, and Pharaun began gathering it up—

"*Wait*," cried Wilawen. She leaned down and kissed the elf's forehead. "What if he wakes whilst he is still inside?"

"He will find himself in a warm, dark place," said Pharaun. "It may be confusing but it will not, I think, be particularly unpleasant. He will be tucked in your bosom—it will probably smell of *you*."

Wilawen nodded. "Close it."

Pharaun drew up the corners—the pouch reformed—and he pulled the drawstring tight, and tied off the cord. Then he handed the bag to Wilawen, and she slipped it inside her bodice.

...

Outside the Healing Room all was in chaos.

Up ahead, the furious prisoners had broken into the public rooms, and the screams of female drow pierced the general roar of anger. Behind, males still caged in the cells were banging on their doors, and shouting for help, aware that something was happening outside.

Drizzt, leading Wilawen by the arm, found Orophin and his brother. "Which way?" he asked.

And, though the elf could not understand the drow's words, he knew their meaning and, once again, he took the lead, forcing his way through the mob—with the others following as best they could—until, clear of the throng, he turned into a deserted corridor and, still supporting Rumil, hurried towards the outside.

But some of the prisoners had seen the little group leave the crowd, and understood their intention, and they began to follow, crying to the other males, "This way! This way!" and, "Come with us!"

Drizzt grabbed Pharaun's arm as they rushed ahead of the mob. "The door will be locked," he said. "You must open it quickly, or we will be crushed against it."

"I am preparing the spell as we approach," replied the Mage, "but I will need some time. *You* must hold them back."

With a grim nod, Drizzt released Wilawen and fell back behind the other drow. "I will do my best."

...

Orophin had remembered the route correctly.

The passage, having turned a sharp corner, ended abruptly. The door was unguarded, and there was no obvious lock, but when the elf pushed at it, it would not move.

"Stand aside," said Pharaun, in Westron; he raised his hands.

At the same time, Drizzt, drawing his scimitars, turned to face the mob. "Stay back!" he cried. "Give the wizard room to work! You will *all* be leaving, but you must let us open—"

"*Female!*" cried a voice.

"*Female!*" repeated another.

Then others joined in, "*Fe-male! Fe-male! Fe-male!*"

And some of the prisoners began pushing forwards, trying to reach Wilawen, who, until then, had been standing beside Drizzt, but who now shrank back behind him.

"*Give us the female!*" shouted the Uruk Hai.

Hopelessly outnumbered, Drizzt raised his twin blades.

Chapter 24: The King

Shadowland

Legolas peered through the spy hole.

His view was restricted, but he immediately recognised the small reception room where, in *his* world, with the help of several secretaries, Aragorn conducted most of his day-to-day business—talks with foreign emissaries, meetings with his own counsellors, audiences with his people's representatives.

Here, the room was empty.

Pressing his cheek to the stone, the elf peered at the entrance to the royal chambers.

"No guards," he muttered.

"They're inside," whispered Redwald. "Two of them. You can see them when the door opens."

"And you say that the King has not been out for two weeks?"

"At least two weeks. His new counsellor comes out here to give the men their orders."

"Who is he, this new counsellor?"

The outlaw shrugged. "Some out-of-towner."

"Is he human?"

"Oh yes. And he knows the local villains—he knew who to take on and who to avoid."

"He avoided you," said Legolas.

The man said nothing.

The elf shifted, turning his head to look in the opposite direction. "What?" whispered Redwald, when it seemed safe to speak.

"Someone just entered the royal apartments. Can we get any closer—can we see into the King's bedchamber?"

"No."

"Can we get out? Into the Palace?"

"Yes—but I wouldn't advise it in daylight."

"Daylight will be our best chance," said Legolas.

...

Emyn Arnen

The barricade

The mercenary leader swept off his wide-brimmed hat and, clasping it to his chest, bowed low. “My Lady,” he said, in accented Westron, “I hear that you have need of my services.”

He set the hat back on his shaven head, and regarded her with one fiery eye—the other being covered by a black eye-patch—and Eowyn had never been subjected to such open and insolent appraisal in all her life.

“*Sir*,” she said, with a dignified bow, “thank you for agreeing to meet with me. This is Lord Fingolfin, my advisor. My headquarters are up in the hills.” And she gestured towards the gorge, saying, “After you, sir,” for she would not have allowed him to walk *behind* her for all the wine in Dorwinion.

...

Minas Tirith

Crouching in the darkness, Legolas found Eowyn’s hand, squeezed it, and felt her fingers press his own in response—

Then the door swung open, and the elf and his small band of warriors—including ten men hand-picked by Redwald—ran out into the Queen’s Garden and, keeping low, darted across the courtyard to the pretty archway in the northern wall. The door was locked, but Legolas could sense no one in the corridor beyond, so he signalled to two of Redwald’s men and, within seconds, they had pulled the pins from the hinges and pushed the door open.

Legolas stepped inside.

He was standing at the very heart of the Palace, in the corridor leading from the public rooms to the reception chamber that he and Redwald had earlier been observing. In his own world he had walked its length many times, meeting and greeting courtiers, stepping aside to permit functionaries to hurry past... But here, in the shadow world, the corridor was deserted. Reaching out with his elven senses, Legolas sought some sign of life—the discreet hubbub of palace business—and found nothing; the chambers were empty.

Except...

Legolas closed his eyes. Deep in the royal apartments, he sensed a presence—someone small, bewildered, and very, very frightened.

Oh, dear Valar!

And having found *him*, the elf quickly discovered the rest—Arwen and Eldarion, huddled with him; Aragorn, frantic, confined in a separate chamber—all of them surrounded by dark *shadows*.

He glanced at Eowyn, standing beside Gimli, her hand on her sword, awaiting orders.

Thank the Valar that she cannot sense him too, he thought.

...

Wilawen’s house

“Well, what are we going to do now?” whispered Arador.

Haldir, watching Wilawen rearrange her father's cushions, and hand him his tea, came to a decision. "With your permission, sir," he said to Geruil, "the boy and I will go back to your shop."

The old man nodded, slowly. "You *have* my permission, of course," he said. "But—"

"These men," said Wilawen, "who threatened my father,"—for Geruil had lied to her about his reasons for abandoning the premises—"might they not come back?"

"That is precisely why we are going, Mistress," said Haldir. "If they come again, we will be waiting for them. It is all we can do at present." He turned back to Geruil. "I must get a message to Lord Olivan."

"Wilawen will take it for you."

"Of course I will," said the woman. "What do you want me to say?"

"Tell him that his son has made contact with Prince Legolas and that they have gone up to The Citadel," said Haldir. "Ask him to tell them—when they come to him—that *we* have found what we were looking for, and will defend it. And tell him where they can find the shop."

"I will. I will write it all down."

"Thank you, Mistress. And," he continued, "if you should know of a pair of strong, reliable men who would be willing to wait in the shop with us..."

"Well," said Geruil, scratching his chin—

"Ailbric, son of Alberic," said Wilawen. "*He* is strong—a carter—and he has worked for my father before. He may have a friend. I could speak to him on my way up to Lord Olivan's."

"We are in your debt." Haldir placed his hand on his heart and bowed his head. Wilawen blushed. The elf turned back to her father. "And the boy will search through your books, sir."

"I pray that he will find the answer."

"You are not the only one," muttered Arador, under his breath.

Haldir set down his tea cup and rose to his feet. "Well. Thank you, sir, Mistress, for your help—come, Master Arador. Oh,"—he paused by the parlour door—"I believe that you owe Master Geruil some money, Arador."

"Yes, I had forgotten!" The boy pulled out the onyx carving he had taken from the shop and held it up. "How much do you want for this, sir?"

"Have it, young master," said Geruil, "with my compliments."

...

Eryn Arnen Eowyn's tent

Sitting at the map table, opposite the drow—he with his lieutenant, her former prisoner, she with Lord Fingolfin and Captains Golradir, Alfgar and Drago—Eowyn decided that her attempts to question him, to sound him out and decide whether she dare trust him, were doomed to failure.

She leaned back in her chair.

Instantly, the drow mimicked her, leaning back in *his* chair and folding his arms across his chest.

Eowyn sighed inwardly. *Time to change tactics*. “Can I offer you some refreshment?”

The drow answered with a slow, suggestive smile—Eowyn felt Captain Alfgar bristle, and willed him to let it pass. “Thank you. I should like some of your surface brandy, if that is not too much trouble.”

Eowyn nodded to Berengar, then turned back to the drow. His smile, disconcertingly, was still frozen upon his face, but she ignored it. “I will not waste any more of your time,” she said, firmly. “You know our position—no doubt better than I do. We are out-manoeuvred and outnumbered. We need your assistance.”

“My fees are high.”

“*Then I will expect you to earn them.*”

The smile vanished; and, for the first time, the drow seemed to take her seriously. “Do you have a plan?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Eowyn.

...

Minas Tirith The Palace

The warriors ran through the deserted reception chamber—each man already in position, with Legolas at the front, his bow raised. As they reached the doors to the royal apartments, Berkin slipped past, knocked loudly, then dropped back.

The doors opened, Legolas loosed two arrows, and both guards fell.

The band surged into the corridor following Eowyn and Gimli to the next set of doors, whilst Berkin and Legolas, with two of Redwald’s men, hung back, fashioning a barricade using furniture from the reception chamber.

“You know what to do?” asked the elf.

“Hold the doors,” said Berkin.

“We may need to leave in a hurry, with the King and his family.”

“I know.”

Legolas patted the boy’s shoulder, and sprinted off to join the others.

...

Emyn Arnen Eowyn’s tent

“Surviving the next attack is not enough,” said Eowyn unrolling her battle plan and spreading it out on the table. “To win the war, we must attack. We must inflict sufficient casualties to—”

“*Wipe them out,*” said Drago.

“Thank you, Captain,” said Eowyn, tersely. “We must persuade them—”

“No. Your man is right,” said the mercenary. “Casualties mean nothing to them. Males are, by definition, expendable. And when they run out of drow, they will send in orcs, and goblins, and kobbolds.”

“Then how would *you* defeat them?” asked Lord Fingolfin.

“I would strike at the heart,” said the drow.

“The *heart*?” Eowyn frowned. “You mean their Queen?”

“Queen?” The drow’s infuriating smile broadened. “She would like that.”

Eowyn continued. “Our plan,” she said, “is quite simple. *You* get your men into key positions,”—she pointed to various places on the sketch map that Golradir had drawn for her—“and then we both attack, simultaneously, in daylight.”

The mercenary looked at the sketch. “They are more spread out than this,” he said. “There are other camps—over here.” He waved his hand to side of the parchment.

“We know that,” said Golradir. “We will need as much information about those as you can give us.”

“It will cost you.” The drow leaned back, looking Eowyn up and down. “It will cost one hundred thousand gold,” he said, “and a night with you.”

Eowyn threw out an arm to restrain Captain Alfgar. “He is *joking*,” she cried, over the bubbling anger of her male companions. “Are you not?”

The drow smiled.

“We will pay you fifty thousand in advance,” she said, “and the rest—of the *money*—after the battle.”

...

Minas Tirith The Palace

Gimli was waiting at the next doorway and, as Legolas approached, with an arrow already nocked, he swung his axe, dealing a series of mighty blows that split the wood and pushed the leaves inwards.

Inside the chamber—the Queen’s sitting room—dark warriors, taken by surprise, overturned the furniture in their haste to defend themselves.

Legolas loosed a handful of arrows into the moving shadows and was gratified to hear their points pierce flesh and bone. “*Now!*” he cried, and his warriors crashed through the doorway, and took on the survivors, hand-to-hand.

...

From the far end of the dimly-lit corridor, Berkin watched Gimli demolish the doors and Legolas shoot into the darkness beyond, wondering, *Why is it so dark?*

“Stay here,” he said, slipping through the barricade and, back in the reception chamber, scanning the remaining furnishings for something he could use.

In the corners of the room there were free standing candle holders—five feet high, cast in bronze, with heavy, circular bases. Berkin seized the nearest. *Perfect!*

He carried it back into the corridor.

“Fetch the others, and see if you can light them,” he said, discarding the candle from his own.

Then, grasping the metal shaft in both hands, he set off down the passageway, smashing the enchanted glass from the windows, and letting the daylight back in.

...

Geruil’s shop

Haldir closed the door, and he and Arador stood with their backs to it, staring at the blank wall opposite.

“It is hard to believe,” said the boy.

“Mm.”

“Do you think it is active?” Stretching out a hand, he slowly walked forward—until his fingers touched solid stone. “No...”

Haldir pulled off his velvet cap. “You had better start looking through the books,” he said.

“You *do* know that that is a crazy idea?” said Arador. “It is like looking for a needle in a haystack when you do not even know there *is* a haystack—”

“Yes,” said Haldir, “but I have great faith in you, Master Arador.”

“What will *you* be doing?”

“Arranging a few surprises for our guests.”

...

Eryn Arnen Eowyn’s tent

“Why wait two days?” asked the mercenary.

“Because that is the plan,” said Eowyn, firmly.

“Ah...” The drow smiled. “You are expecting reinforcements. From where?” He looked around the table, searching for the weakest link. “Gondor? *Hm?* Rohan? Or is it from the elves of East

Lorien?" His fiery eye settled on Eowyn. "You will not tell *me*? Your ally?"

"You are not our ally," said Eowyn. "We are paying for your services."

"You wound me."

"We are under no illusions," said Eowyn. "You fight for the highest bidder. And you will not know which side pays most until the battle begins."

"Very astute."

"Our plan allows for that. But if you *do* fight for us, you will make the difference, and that is why it is worth hiring you."

...

Minas Tirith The Palace

"Gimli! *Arwen and the children!*" cried Legolas—for his elven senses were telling him that the drow in the Queen's bedchamber had grown nervous—and the dwarf hurled himself at the chamber door, ripping it from its hinges, and plunged inside.

He was immediately hit by a hail of tiny crossbow quarrels, but his gauntleted hand was already raised to protect his face, and the poisoned points glanced off his helm and caught harmlessly in his thick dwarven mail.

Roaring, he charged his attackers.

"Stay back, melmenya," cried Legolas, and ran in after his friend.

There were five drow inside the chamber, two of them females—and one of them appeared to be casting a spell, but Gimli barged through the males surrounding her and put a stop to her incantation with a single swing of his axe.

The other female had seized Arwen—huddled on the bed with the children—and was holding a blade to her throat. Legolas shot two arrows into her skull, and the knife fell from her dead hand as she toppled forwards over her prisoner.

One of the children howled in terror.

But Arwen had already freed herself and was gathering them into her arms.

Legolas drew his white knives and turned to help Gimli finish off the males.

...

Watching anxiously from outside the door, as Legolas had ordered, Eowyn could see Arwen struggling to calm the two terrified children. "*Come*," she cried, darting past the fight, "bring them in here." She opened the door to the Queen's closet. "Stay inside until I come back for you."

"*Eowyn?*"

"Yes—*come*—see if you can find some way to block the door from the inside."

“What are *you* doing here?”

“I will explain later.”

Arwen had gathered up one of the boys, but the other was still hiding amongst the bedclothes, too frightened to move.

“Get Eldarion into the closet,” said Eowyn, “I will bring *him*.” She slipped her arms around the smaller boy and—awkwardly, because she had had no experience of children—she lifted him up and, for the first time, saw him properly.

His little face was round, and dirty, and tear-stained but, with his pale, silken hair, his huge blue eyes and his sweet button nose, he was the image of his father. Eowyn’s heart lurched.

And the elfling, wrapping his arms around her neck and hiding his face in her hair, whispered, “Other Nana.”

...

Holding his candlestick like an axe, as Gimli had taught him, Berkin followed the warriors into the Queen’s sitting room. To his right, through an open door, he could see the elf and the dwarf, fighting. To his left, Redwald’s men—those who had not fallen—were battling a pack of drow that had emerged from another chamber; directly ahead, there were more darkened windows to deal with.

Berkin took a step forward—

Something grasped his ankle, and pulled—

The young man kicked himself free, stamped down hard, swung the candlestick—once, twice, again, and again—and killed another being for the first time in his life.

...

Geruil’s shop

Arador dumped a pile of carefully selected books on the counter, and looked across at Haldir.

The elf had found a handful of wooden chairs and a couple of stools, had broken off the legs, and was using a hunting knife to turn them into stakes.

“What are you going to do with those?”

“Mount them on a beam—”

“I found a weapons chest,” the boy interrupted. “in one of the other rooms. There are swords in it.”

“We do not have anyone to wield a sword, Master Arador.”

“No—at least, not yet. But you could mount the swords on your beam.”

Haldir looked up from his carving.

“Did I just prove my worth again?”

The elf smiled. "Show me this weapons chest."

"I will, but—there is something else." The boy was suddenly very serious. "Something I... Well, I am not sure that it will work even if we dare try it, but if it *did* work..."

"What?"

Arador pulled the piece of black onyx from his pocket.

...

Eryn Arnen **The barricade**

"Two days, then?" said the mercenary.

"Two days," agreed Eowyn. "You will attack on *our* signal. In the meantime, we will leave the first instalment of gold at Gynd Thûn, as you requested." She held out her hand.

The drow took it and—instead of shaking it, as she had intended—raised it to his lips. "I had heard," he said, "that human women had no understanding of warfare, but you, my Lady—"

"Human women, sir, can do whatever they are required to do," said Eowyn, withdrawing her hand.

The drow smiled. Then, pulling off his hat, and sweeping his arm in a wide arc that encompassed Eowyn, Lord Fingolfin, and all three captains, he bowed. "Until we meet again..."

He nodded to his silent lieutenant and the pair sprang over the barricade, ran across the plateau, and disappeared into the forest.

"And that is the last you will ever see of *him*," muttered Captain Alfgar. "If you are lucky."

...

Minas Tirith **The Palace**

Eowyn shut the closet door, and turned, just as Legolas dispatched the last drow, and their eyes met, and she knew that he had sensed the turmoil inside her, and had understood what had caused it, and she ran to him—

But the battle was not yet over—a sudden cry in the Queen's sitting room startled both of them, and they dashed into the chamber to find Aragorn, sword in hand, in full battle rage, fighting his way to his wife's bedchamber.

"Arwen and the children are safe," cried the elf.

"*Legolas?*" The King, dodging a close cut, and striking back, smiled.

The room was flooded with midday sunlight, giving the surface dwellers a natural advantage, and the drow, fighting blindly, were soon surrounded. It seemed that it was over—until three of the dark warriors, led by a female, broke free and fled.

"Stop them," cried Aragorn. "*She* is their leader."

The men holding the barricade advanced, with swords and lighted candles, but the female veered left, sprang, and disappeared through one of the shattered windows, with her warrior escort behind her.

Aragorn, close on their heels, ran at the window, and vaulted over the sill.

“Eowyn, Gimli—stay with the Queen,” cried Legolas, and followed.

...

They ran across the empty courtyard, skirting the White Tower of Ecthelion, and emerged in the Place of the Fountain just as the drow were entering the tunnel.

“They move fast,” muttered Aragorn, “and they leave no trail.”

There were no guards beside the White Tree, nor any at the tunnel mouth. The lamps inside the passageway had all been extinguished.

“Let me go first,” whispered Legolas, pulling his bow from its strap and nocking an arrow.

Aragorn nodded.

Cautiously, the pair pressed forward, Legolas scanning the darkness for any sign of an ambush. But all his senses told him that the warriors were still moving. “They are pulling away from us,” he whispered.

“They are in their element down here,” said Aragorn. “We must move faster.”

So Legolas grasped his friend’s arm and led him, at the run, down the curving passage until, at last, they saw the daylight ahead, and sprinted towards it. At the tunnel mouth they found grim evidence of the drow’s passage—four members of the city patrol, shot with tiny crossbow bolts, and finished off with knives.

Aragorn crouched beside one of the bodies, and closed the dead man’s eyes. “This is not one of my guards...”

“No,” said Legolas, “anyone loyal to you has been replaced. They have rewritten the laws by royal decree, and hired thieves and murderers to terrorise your citizens.”

Aragorn examined the paving stones. “Horses,” he said. “They have taken the horses.”

“Then we will never catch them on foot,” said the elf, looking down the curving path. “We must go back to the stables—”

“There are other ways down,” said Aragorn. “If we are quick, we can cut them off at the next level. Come.” And he led the way—through an arch, down a narrow alley, over a wall, through a garden, under a washing line, through a gate, into a kitchen—

The cook turned, frying pan in hand, but froze, and dropped a flustered curtsy.

Acknowledging her with a hasty salute, Aragorn ran on—through the servants’ quarters, into the great Entrance Hall, out through the front doors, and into Rath Bein.

Too late! The drow had already thundered past, leaving chaos in their wake.

“Come on!” cried the King. Down another alley they ran, vaulting two more walls, ducking through another gate, emerging in Rath Amrûn. Aragorn stood in the centre of the street, staring down its empty length. There was no sign of their quarry.

“They have an affinity with stone,” said Legolas, “they must have found a way through. But I think I know where they are going—down to Rath Luin.”

Aragorn slapped his shoulder. “Come on, then.”

Off they ran again, down more alleys, over more walls, round more gardens, through more gates. And, as they passed, more and more people recognised their King, and his friend, Prince Legolas, hero of the Ring War; they remembered the rumours that Elessar knew nothing of the new laws, and would personally set things right when he heard of them, and they began to follow him. Soon, the pair had a band of warriors at their backs—brave, stout fellows, though armed with nothing but the tools of their trades.

Legolas caught one of the men by the shoulder. “A curio shop,” he said, “that sells things from other lands—books and maps, crystals and strange weapons—somewhere near here. Do you know it?”

“There’s a shop on the next rath that sells books...”

“No, no,” said the man’s companion, “he means somewhere like old Geruil’s.”

Geruil. Legolas frowned—he had heard that name before, though he could not remember where. “Yes,” he said, “take us to Geruil’s.”

...

Geruil’s shop

Haldir stared at the black onyx cat. “It may, of course,” he said, “be nothing more than a piece of carved stone.”

“I know,” said Arador. “Geruil thought so—he let me have it for nothing.”

“Do you remember the beast’s name?”

“Yes. At least, I think I do.”

The elf drew his sword. “Try it.”

Arador lifted the stone cat from the counter, and set it down on the floor. “Gwen...” he began. “No, *Gu-en...*” He cleared his throat and took a deep breath. “Guenhwyvar,” he said.

Nothing happened.

“Try again,” said Haldir. “But, this time, make it a summons.”

“*Guenhwyvar,*” said Arador.

...

Eryn Arnen Eowyn’s Tent

Eowyn pulled back the silken curtain and looked into her bedchamber.

Legolas was still lying on her bed, his eyes closed in healing sleep. Hentmirë was still sitting beside him, but now she was making bandages—carefully shredding fabric into strips, forming the strips into rolls, and packing the rolls into a basket.

Eowyn smiled. “I was just about to have a glass of brandy, Lady Hentmirë. Would you care to join me?”

“That would be very nice,” said the little woman. “But just a small one.” She set down her work and, leaning over her patient, she checked his breathing and his pulse. “He does not seem to be sleeping quite so deeply now—thank you,” she said, taking the glass from Eowyn, “I think he may wake up quite soon.”

Eowyn sat down beside her. “I do hope so.” She took a sip of the warming spirits. “It would be a relief to have someone more experienced take over command.”

“You are doing very well,” said Hentmirë. “Your plan sounded like a good one to me, and even Legolas could not have handled that dark elf any better than—*oh...*” She clapped her hand to her mouth, blushing deeply. “I am sorry—I could not help overhearing.”

Eowyn smiled. “Of course you could not.” She patted the other woman’s arm. “Thank you. I do know that I can do it. I just... I miss Faramir, that is all, and...”

It was such a relief to have someone to talk to, and Hentmirë was a good listener; and soon, without realising quite what she was doing, Eowyn had told her everything.

“You have not seen the baby since he was born?”

Eowyn shook her head.

“I am so sorry.” Hentmirë bit her lip. “I know that it is none of my business,” she said, slowly, “and I know that he is not *my* Legolas, but... I am sure that he would be a good father. Would it not be best to tell him that he has a son? It might even be the making of him.”

Neither woman noticed that the elf’s eyes had opened.

Chapter 25: Flight

"Keep back," cried Drizzt. "Back!"

He stretched out his arm, pointing the tip of his scimitar at the Uruk Hai's throat. "We have all come this far, and there is no reason for anyone to be harmed now. As soon as the door is opened—"

"*Female!*" shouted one of the Orcs and, slipping under the drow's guard, it made a grab for Wilawen.

"No!" shouted Drizzt. "No! She is not your enemy! She is one of you!"

He heard the surface elf draw his great bow, and he saw, to his surprise, several of the mob fall back, but—

BOOM!

At last, the Mage had opened the door! Coloured light was flooding into the corridor and, from the shadows moving on the wall beside him, Drizzt knew that his companions were escaping—he retreated, scimitars still raised to hold back the mob—

"Drizzt! Come *on*," cried Wilawen.

He took a few more steps and found himself outside.

The air was filled with smoke and floating debris. Directly ahead, a portion of the outer fence—an intricate confection of glistening metal—had fallen, and the Mage was scrambling through the gap, followed by the archer and his wounded brother. The other surface elf—the healer—was trying to persuade Wilawen to go next. Drizzt sheathed his blades and grasped her arm.

"No!" Wilawen pulled herself free. "I have dropped the pouch," she cried. "*Valandil!* I have dropped *Valandil!*"

The healer—who did not understand what she was saying—tried to calm her. Drizzt scanned the ground. The prisoners were streaming through the ruined door; the bag was lying at the threshold.

"They will trample him!" shrieked Wilawen. She shook off the surface elf and ran back, battling her way through the crowd of prisoners. Drizzt followed, aware that the healer was close behind him.

Wilawen reached the pouch and scooped it up, but the big Uruk Hai—the door breaker—had spotted her, and it grabbed her and, holding her with one of its massive hands, it roared and beat the other upon its chest, and the mob responded, moving in for the kill.

"LET HER GO," Drizzt commanded, reaching for his swords—

But, before he could draw them, something streaked past his shoulder, and he saw an arrow bury itself between the Uruk Hai's startled eyes. Panic spread through the mob; Wilawen broke free and Drizzt grabbed her, and—with the surface elf in tow—dragged her back to the fence.

"Thank you," he said to the archer, pulling Wilawen through the gap. The healer clambered after them.

"Ah, here you are, at last," said Pharaun, cheerfully.

They had planned that Drizzt, with his scout's knowledge of the Dark Dominion—the network

of tunnels that surrounded Menzoberranzan—would take the escapees to somewhere they could safely hide, but that had been before they had acquired their murderous escort. “They will follow us,” he said, taking Wilawen by the hand. “They will draw too much attention to us.”

“You do not think,” said Pharaun, impatiently, “that it took me all that time just to open the door, do you?”

Drizzt looked back at the fence. Several of the prisoners had seized the metal web and were shaking it, angrily. The gap had sealed itself.

“No one can pass through unless I have named him—or her,” said the Mage. “*They*,”—he nodded towards the frenzied mob—“will act as our diversion. Now, *please*, let us move away, before my genius is *completely* wasted.”

“Do you have the pouch safe?” asked Drizzt.

Wilawen nodded.

...

Drizzt led them, briskly, down the shabby-genteel streets of Eastmyr; into the chaotic slums of The Braeryn where, though they drew more attention than he would have liked, no one dared challenge three nobles travelling with their slaves; through the dense fungus forests of Donigarten, to the edge of the mantle, where they slipped, unseen, into the Dark Dominion.

...

“Are you *sure* that this place is safe?” said Pharaun, looking dubiously at the strange, smooth-walled cavern.

“Yes,” said Drizzt. “It is new. The patrols do not know of it as yet.”

“*New?*”

“A Svirfneblin mine. They have quarried out the rock.”

Satisfied, the mage positioned himself beside the small, rounded entrance and began an incantation.

“What do you suppose he is doing now?” asked Wilawen, fishing inside her bodice for the black velvet pouch.

“I think,” said Drizzt, “that he is sealing us in. I suspect he needs to rest again.”

The elves had sat Rumil down close to the wall and, whilst Orophin held the glowing crystal over him, Dínendal examined his back.

“I am feeling much better,” said the injured elf. He stretched out his arms. “See—I could not have done that yesterday.”

Wilawen laid the pouch upon the ground, untied its cord, and pulled it open. Valandil was still sleeping soundly. She sat down beside him.

“There,” said Pharaun, joining the others. “We should be safe for a few hours, at least. I suggest you sleep—or whatever it is you surface dwellers do.” He repeated the advice in Westron, for the benefit of the elves. “The next part of our journey will not be so easy.” He settled himself against the wall.

Drizzt and Wilawen exchanged glances.

"Do as he says," said the warrior, quietly. "I will be over by the door, just in case."

...

Wilawen was awoken by a sudden tingling in her limbs.

She rubbed her hands up and down her quivering arms and, in the dim light of Orophin's crystal—for her drow eyesight was already fading—she watched her skin turn from ebony black to milky-white.

...

When she woke again, she found Pharaun awake, consulting a tiny book of spells. "When are you going to send my friends back to the surface?" she demanded.

The drow looked up from his reading. "Well, I see that you are back to your old self again—almost."

Wrong-footed, Wilawen scowled.

"Most females," said Pharaun, complacently, "pay good money for bosom enlargement. But you will probably find that they return to normal in a day or so."

"They had better; I must look ridiculous."

"No, actually, you look quite..." He cleared his throat. "I am not going to send your friends back," he said. "I am going to *take* them back. By shadow walking."

"What does that mean?"

The Mage laid down his book. "In the gaps between this world and, well, other worlds," he said, "there exists a place without dimension. Provided you know how to enter it—and, fortunately, I do—you can travel very rapidly from place to place, as long as you know the way."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

Wilawen sat down beside him. "Answer me truthfully," she said. "Do you know the way to the surface?"

"Yes."

"And the way back?"

Pharaun smiled. "Would you miss me?"

"I have given you my word," she said, "that I will stay here and help you with that—that hole, whatever it is. And I shall. But, the moment it is closed, I will follow my friends back to the surface just as quickly as I can."

...

Pharaun insisted that Valandil must be taken out of the velvet bag. "The pouch is a bridge between dimensions," he said, "and we will be travelling in a place where dimensions have no meaning. There is no telling what might happen to it. No—the pouch stays here. *You* must carry him."

Orophin turned to Wilawen. "You are sure that you will stay?"

"Yes," she said; Pharaun translated.

"Then it will fall to me to explain to Valandil."

"Tell him," said Wilawen, emphatically, "that I will be back with him very soon."

Orophin placed his hand upon his heart and bowed his head. Then he took his place beside Valandil, and he and Master Dínendal lifted the sleeping elf between them.

"Good," said Pharaun. "Now—do not move until I give the signal."

He began yet another incantation.

...

Wilawen, watching her friends closely, and not knowing what to expect, thought, at first, that the elves' growing paler, and less distinct, was just a trick of the light. But then Pharaun stopped speaking, and beckoned to the others, and she almost laughed out loud as the translucent figures took a single, giant step and shot through the wall of the cave.

...

They were travelling down a smooth, grey tunnel.

Through its membranous walls they could see things, vague *scenes*, that would burst into view and, just as suddenly, disappear—a dazzling gateway, seething with power; a stone city, swarming with tiny grey dwarves; a herd of formless creatures, floating in a void; an ink-black lake, teeming with fish-men; a great, carven labyrinth, choked with dense, grey matter...

The elves soon learned that it was best not to look.

The constant shifts of perspective made them nauseous.

...

"If, for some reason, he does not return," said Drizzt, crouching down beside Wilawen, "I will take you to the surface."

The woman, sitting with her knees drawn under her chin, unconsciously rocking back and forth, turned to him in surprise.

"That *is* what you were thinking, is it not?" he persisted. "You were wondering what would happen to you if he did not return."

"I... Well, yes, that was part of it."

"We would find a way."

"Thank you." Wilawen stopped rocking. "Drizzt... Why are you helping me? Right from the start—I would not have survived if you had not. Why are you?"

The drow sighed.

"Drizzt! What is it?"

"*Guilt*," said the warrior. "I helped you out of guilt—at least, at first."

"I know that you were one of the drow who attacked the wedding party," she said. "The little girl described you—your eyes." She turned to him. "But it was *you* who tore open her dress and covered her in her mother's blood; it was *you* who made it look as though she were dead. You saved her life."

"It was not much," said Drizzt.

"It was everything," said Wilawen.

"What happened to her?"

"The elves went for help. Someone will have come for her—a relation. They will adopt her and raise her as their own. You did a good thing, Drizzt. It counts."

"I had never seen a surface dweller before," said the drow. "They were dancing. Our teachers had told us that they were evil. How could they be evil, when they were dancing...?"

Wilawen patted his arm.

...

Eryn Carantaur The Divor Rocks

It had taken Orodreth and his elves almost a full day's search to find the tiny opening in one of the Divor Caves that led to the network of tunnels within the rocks and, ultimately, Orodreth was convinced, to the home of the dark people.

In the two days that had since elapsed, he had made several cautious sorties into the tunnels and found traces of Haldir's earlier expedition, but nothing he had seen in that hostile place had persuaded him that his troops stood any chance of penetrating the dark world, or of rescuing their comrades.

In the absence of explicit orders, Orodreth had decided to wait, concentrating his forces at the foot of the rocks and maintaining the ring of lookouts he had posted on the first night.

He climbed up the cliff face, and crawled into the cave. His warriors, who had been on watch all night, were more than ready to be relieved. "Good morning, sir," said their leader. "Nothing to report. Not a—"

Without any warning—even as the man's lips were forming the word 'sound'—four *blades* of pure light burst from the cave wall and, before Orodreth could reach for his bow, coalesced into four very familiar shapes.

From the corner of his eye, the elf saw his lieutenant grasp his sword. "Stop!" he cried, stretching out a hand. "Do you not recognise them?"

...

The ghost of Pharaun emerged from the rock, stumbled over Wilawen, and fell in an inelegant heap in the middle of the cave.

"One *slight* drawback of shadow-walking," he said, brushing the dust from his sleeves.

...

Eryn Carantaur The Divor Rocks

"You are sure he is..." Orodreth could not bring himself to say the word. "*Gone?*"

"We searched," said Orophin, "for as long as we were able." He shook his head. "There was no sign of Haldir."

"I cannot believe it."

"No."

"I am so sorry."

"Thank you."

Orodreth looked across the camp site, to where Orophin's companions were resting. "What will you tell Valandil when he wakes?"

"The truth—that Wilawen made a bargain with the wizard to save him—and us. She is a brave adaneth."

The other elf nodded.

"Valandil will no doubt blame me—"

"No," said Orodreth. "He knows her. And he is proud of her spirit." Then, "This wizard—can he be trusted to bring her back?"

"No," said Orophin. "But the other one—Drizzt—he has a sense of honour."

...

"Are they safe?" asked Wilawen.

"I believe so." Pharaun approached the mouth of the cave, gesturing impatiently for Drizzt to step aside. "I did not linger—their friends were too heavily armed."

"Thank you."

The Mage frowned. "*Thank...? Oh!*" He waved a hand, dismissively. "Since *that* was your price, I paid it. Now, if you will just be quiet for a moment." He positioned himself beside the small passageway, and raised his hands.

"What is wrong?" asked Wilawen, eyeing him curiously.

Ignoring her question, Pharaun took a deep breath.

"Why are you so—*flustered?*"

"I have a lot to do." He ran a hand through his hair. "Will you *please* be quiet?"

Wilawen backed away.

"And, *please*," he added, "do not delay me with one of your petty orders. As I have said before, time is of the essence now." He composed himself again, then recited another brief spell.

"There," he said, "now we can leave. Where is the pouch?"

Still watching him suspiciously, Wilawen pulled the little bag from her bodice.

"Open it up," said Pharaun, "and sit on it."

Wilawen spread the velvet sheet out on the ground and crawled onto it. "Is this how you plan to smuggle me back into the Academy?" She drew her knees up under her chin. "Why did you not do this before?"

"Because I did not think of it," said Pharaun, leaning over her to draw up the corners of the bag. "I really cannot be expected to think of everything, you know."

Wilawen looked up at Drizzt in alarm. "I am not sure I—"

...

Pharaun popped the pouch into one of his pockets. "Ready?"

Drizzt grasped his arm—

With unexpected skill, the Mage swung his hand in an arc, breaking the warrior's grip and freeing himself. "Twin sisters," he explained, "one of them a terrible bully." Then he added, "I assume that you were about to issue some sort of warning?"

"I will not let you hurt her," said Drizzt, seriously.

Pharaun shrugged. "Magic is seldom an exact science."

...

No one paid them any attention as they walked back to the Academy via the Bazaar.

None of the proprietors who sold Pharaun the various magical supplies he needed was surprised when the Mage also probed him for news of the recent disturbance at *The Silken Rack*.

"Some of the studs escaped, apparently," said one of the stall holders, "and killed a few of the women. No one's saying whether they got out of the grounds, but if they did..." He shrugged. "Good luck to them."

None of the guards at the entrance to the Academy bothered to stop Pharaun, nor to search him when they detected the magical items on his person—assuming, no doubt, that a small pouch of unknown contents was just part of a Master of Sorcere's usual paraphernalia.

...

The door to the Archmage's chambers was still intact, for Pharaun's hastily-improvised magical seal was holding, and from the outside there was no sign of the devastation within.

"So much to do, so little time," muttered Pharaun, "and no one, alas, to appreciate it." He turned to Drizzt. "I speak of sorcerers. You and she do not count."

"When you open that door," said the warrior, "the wind will—"

"Go to the end of the corridor," said the Mage, "and keep watch."

Reluctantly, Drizzt moved away, but only a few paces.

Turning his back to the door, Pharaun stretched out his arms and, closing his eyes, recited a complex spell, moving his elegant hands in time to the words, as though braiding the air.

Drizzt frowned. Nothing *appeared* any different, but it *felt* as though a wall had risen across the corridor—and, when he reached towards Pharaun, his fingers rapped against something solid. "You have shut me out."

"Not *just* you." Pharaun pulled the black velvet pouch from his robes and, crouching down, released Wilawen.

The woman rubbed her head. "Gods, you lied," she said, swallowing hard. "It was horrible in there—like being tossed about at sea—"

"Yes, I know. Now, out of the way." He pulled her to her feet. "Some of us have urgent work to do. Go over there and smile at Do'Urden for a moment."

Wilawen took a step towards Drizzt.

"He has shut me out," said the warrior, showing her the invisible barrier. "I cannot protect you, O'Wilawen. You are at his mercy..."

Pharaun, meanwhile, had taken out a small vial, uncorked it, and was sprinkling some of its contents on the open pouch. As each drop of liquid fell, the velvet was transformed, the fabric becoming smooth and transparent, its flat edges rising and curving, its corners joining—

Pharaun grasped Wilawen's arm. "Inside!"

The bubble sealed itself around them.

"Perfect," said Pharaun, "now, brace yourself!" He raised a hand and flicked his fingers at the door, as though dismissing an annoying slave.

The fungus-wood imploded.

The bubble lurched forwards, wobbled, squeezed through doorway (tumbling its occupants together), shot into what was left of the room beyond, and came to an abrupt halt, hovering at the edge of the portal.

...

The hole had grown.

It had spread from the study to the adjoining rooms, devouring everything—walls, floors, ceilings—that stood in its path. "So much for the Archmage's priceless antiques," muttered Pharaun.

He removed several items from the pockets of his robes and set them down on the curved 'floor' of the bubble—an incense burner, incense, a tinder box. "I have considered all the options," he said, lighting the incense, "and there is only one that will conceal what I have—er—achieved here: we must perform exactly the same ritual, in reverse." He wafted the fragrant smoke towards Wilawen. "Provided I can remember the words, and say them in the right order, everything should be fine."

But Wilawen, crouching on hands and knees in the bottom of the bubble, was not listening to him. Beneath her, through the portal, an image was swirling in and out of view. "What is that?"

Pharaun sat down beside her. "Part of the astral plane."

"It looks like a city."

"Well, demons have cities too..." He reached for her.

"It looks like Minas—*what are you doing?*" She pushed him away.

"We must do everything in reverse, remember? Lie on top of me."

"No."

"Wilawen."

"Do not call me that."

The Mage sighed. "It is nothing personal, I assure you; it will last no more than a moment; and it is the first step on your journey home."

"You have no *intention* of sending me back home," said Wilawen.

"No," he admitted, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her down. "But you never know. If all ends well, I may feel generous. Now, just go with the flow..."

...

He uttered a single word.

The bubble burst.

Pharaun's arms flew open. Wilawen, lifted from him by some invisible force, sailed backwards through the air, and landed on the (non-existent) floor in a blaze of pyrotechnics, just as the demon shot up through the portal, beside her.

The Mage was shouting a strange-sounding curse, wringing his outstretched hands.

"PHARAUN!" the demon bellowed, sparks flying from its flailing fists—"PHARAUN! Me release! To you command I!"

The drow's hands fell to his sides.

Disordered words tumbled from Wilawen's lips. "You begging am I!" she cried. "*Please*, Pharaun!"

But the demon—naked and hideously aroused—was not interested in the Mage. It snuffed at her skirts. "Virgin she is?"

Terrified, Wilawen pleaded with Pharaun. "Ask you else *anything*! Do will I," she sobbed. "Sir—*please*!"

Pharaun began to chant, using his hands to catch the incense and send it back into the burner—and the demon dropped, roaring its frustration, down through the (still non-existent) floor, disappearing as suddenly as it had first appeared.

...

Whilst Pharaun continued to chant, his voice growing gradually softer and softer, Wilawen watched, trembling, as some invisible hand restored the room to its opulent former glory.

...

"By *Lloth*," muttered the Mage, running a hand through his hair, "that was something!"

"It ended well," said Wilawen.

"Yes." He smiled, triumphantly. "Yes, it did!"

"You said..." She came up beside him.

"Hmm?"

"Will you take me home?"

He turned to face her. "You are a mess," he said. And, raising his hand, he brushed a strand of tousled hair back over her shoulder. "*Strange...*"

"*Will* you?"

"Well," he said, "that depends."

Chapter 26: Preparations

Shadowland

“Lady Hentmirë,” said Legolas, quietly, “will you leave us, please?”

Eyes wide, Hentmirë turned to Eowyn. The younger woman nodded, mouthing, “*Fetch the healer.*” Hentmirë rose, and hurried away.

“So I have a son,” said Legolas, bitterly, the moment they were alone. “And you decided to keep him from me.”

“You would have forced me to marry you.”

“*Forced!*” He struggled to sit up. “Elves do not—”

“No!” Eowyn caught him by the shoulders and pushed him down onto the bed. “Lie still until the healer has seen you.”

“My son—I do not even know his name!” Legolas tried to shake her off. “*My* son and his mother should be with me! When this nightmare is over, I am taking you both back to Eryn Carantaur.”

“No,” said Eowyn, firmly, “you are not. You and I do not belong together, Legolas, whatever we may once have wished. And Arwen and Aragorn love Meldon as though he were their own. You can visit him, whenever you—”

“*He is my son!*” he cried, still trying to escape her grasp. “Valar! Why am I so *weak*?”

“You were poisoned, by—by Alatáriël’s father. The healer will explain it to you—Hentmirë is fetching him now. And you *must* do whatever he says, Legolas, because we need you. I have hired the drow mercenary, and—”

“Why did you give him away, Eowyn?” He lifted a shaky hand and grasped her shoulder. “Our *son*? After what I said to you that night—after what I *promised* you.”

“What sort of life could we have given him? What sort of family would we have made? *I* will age, and die long before Meldon reaches manhood; and you—you will live, unchanging, till the end of days. Our son needed a mother and father like himself—long-lived but not immortal. I did what was right for him; I know I did. But do not imagine that a day passes, Legolas, when I do not miss my child.”

...

“I think,” whispered Hentmirë, drawing her hand back from the tent flap and turning to the healer, “that we should give them a few more moments.”

...

Minas Tirith Geruil’s shop

Arador watched the fine grey mist rise from the onyx figurine, swirl upwards, and curl in upon itself. “Oh shit,” he muttered, “shit, shit, shit. What if it eats us?”

“It is too late to worry about that,” said Haldir, gripping his sword. “You have called it—you must command it.”

“Yes. But—suppose I cannot—do you think you can kill it?”

“No.”

“Right.” Frowning, Arador concentrated on the cloud, watching it take shape, gathering into a long, muscular body, four sturdy limbs, and a broad, powerful head; he saw the cat’s eyes open, and brighten with life; and, the moment he judged the creature sufficiently aware, he said, “Guenhwyvar...” His voice wavered.

The cat growled, deep in its chest.

“Guenhwyvar,” he repeated, trying to sound confident, “I have summoned you to help us guard the portal.” He gestured towards the blank wall.

The cat turned full circle, as if surveying its new territory.

The boy glanced at Haldir. “I think it understands.”

Guenhwyvar turned towards the shop door and, ears flattened against its head, growled again

“No,” said Arador, “the *portal*.”

But Haldir, too, was watching the door. “Someone is coming—”

Behind them, the wall transformed, solid stone melting into shimmering silver liquid—

And, at the same moment, the door flew open, and three drow ran into the shop.

“Shit!” cried Arador.

The cat leaped, bringing down the first warrior and pinning him to the ground. Haldir, sword already in hand, cornered the second. The third, a female, streaked past her comrades, heading straight for the portal, pursued by Aragorn and Legolas.

“Stop her,” shouted the King.

Arador scooped up the onyx figurine, and hurled it.

...

The Queen’s bedchamber

With a final glance around the chamber, Eowyn approached the closet. Gimli had removed the drow bodies; she and Berkin had cleared away the rest of the debris and straightened the furniture. Everything looked normal.

She hoped that the little boys would feel safe.

“Arwen,” she called, softly, “you can bring them out now.” She opened the door—

Something very small and very blond shot through the gap, and cannoned into her, burying its face

in her stomach. "Ooof!" she cried; then, smiling, she wrapped her arms around her double's son. "Hello..."

Arwen appeared in the doorway, carrying Eldarion.

"It is safe for them now," said Eowyn. "Do they need anything? Food? Water?"

"Where is Estel?"

"Some of the drow escaped." Eowyn guided the elfling to a chair and sat him down. "He and Legolas went after them. Gimli has caught the rest, and their human collaborators, and has recalled your servants." She knelt down before the child, hoping to reassure him, and found herself buttoning his crumpled jerkin. She smiled up at the Queen. "Everything will soon be set to rights, Arwen. Do you need anything? Do the children?"

"Just Estel."

"I am sure he will be back soon." She shifted her weight, intending to stand, but the elfling caught her hand. "Do *you* want something? Would you like a drink?"

He shook his head, but his little fingers held onto hers, tightly.

...

Geruil's shop

"This," said Legolas to Aragorn, "is Arador. He can tell you more."

The King eyed the boy, standing between Haldir, whom he had seen die at Helm's Deep, and the massive black cat, which was, apparently, some sort of demon, and shook his head in disbelief. "*Can* you close it?" he asked, gesturing towards the portal.

The boy shook his head. "It seemed to become active when the drow approached it, your Majesty," he said, without any of his usual jauntiness, "and, from what I have read, I would say that they are carrying some sort of key—a jewel, or other magical object. If you can find that, and take it far enough away, the portal will close. But it will not seal permanently, sir," he added.

Aragorn ordered one of the men to search the drow prisoners. "Whatever it is, you will probably find it on the woman," he said. "What *will* seal it, Arador?"

"I do not know, your Majesty. I am still trying to find out."

Aragorn approached the shimmering wall. Beyond its watery surface, a narrow tunnel, with walls of jagged rock, seemed to recede into the distance. "And it leads to their homeland?"

"Yes," said Legolas. "A world, deep underground, that is almost completely dark, and filled with strange beings."

"Like the cat."

Guenhwyvar growled.

"Far worse than the cat, your Majesty," said Haldir.

Aragorn turned to his old friend, smiling. “How long were you down there?”

“It is hard to tell,” said the elf. “The depth of rock and the darkness confuse the senses—but I believe it was no more than two days.”

“I see.” Aragorn turned to Legolas. “This,”—he indicated the shadowy tunnel beyond the portal—“is a serious breach in our defences, but there is no sign of preparations for an invasion.”

“And Eryn Arnen is *already* under siege.”

“Yes...” Aragorn seemed to make up his mind. “Haldir,” he said, “if you are willing to stay here and guard this, I can leave you a company of warriors, and,”—he gestured towards the men who had followed him earlier and were still thronging the alleyway outside—“a citizen militia.”

The elf placed a hand upon his heart and inclined his head. “It will be an honour, your Majesty.”

“*Hannon le, mellon nín*,” said Aragorn, returning his bow. Then, “Arador,” he continued, “keep looking for a way to seal it.”

“I shall, your Majesty,” said the boy, bowing low.

...

The Queen’s bedchamber

Hugging the elfling, Eowyn spoke quietly to the Queen. “Why did he call me his ‘other Nana’?”

“Because he *knows*, Eowyn,” replied Arwen. “He has always known—the moment he could speak he began asking about his ‘other Nana’ and his ‘other Ada’. It has been hard, answering his questions without breaking our word to you.”

Eowyn stroked the boy’s silken hair. “Thank you for taking such good care of him, Arwen,” she said, kissing the crown of his little head. “But there is something I must explain to you.”

...

“It is just like the old days,” said Aragorn, as he and Legolas jogged back to The Citadel, accompanied by a small band of men escorting the drow prisoners.

“Aragorn,” said Legolas, “there is something I must explain to you.”

...

Arador sorted through the collection of objects that had been confiscated from the drow—two tiny crossbows and their poisoned quarrels, a jewelled dagger, several heavy rings, a carved wooden rod, a large, circular brooch, set with a single, glowing gemstone, and an ivory bracelet.

He picked up the brooch and examined its stone more closely. *This is the most likely*, he thought. And, followed by Guenhwyvar, he walked out of the shop, through the crowd of men, and turned.

The wall was solid stone.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose that is a start.”

...

The King and the elf entered The King's House and climbed the Great Staircase. The Palace was bustling with activity.

"I cannot believe it," said Aragorn. "I know you—or, if you are right, your double—too well to doubt your sincerity—you are an *elf*, after all—but, still, I cannot believe it. And yet I have seen Haldir, *alive*..."

"You will be in no doubt once we reach Eryn Arnem," said Legolas. "Two Eowyns, two of me."

"Hmm." They approached the Royal Apartments. Aragorn eyed the unfamiliar guards flanking the doors.

"They are Redwald's men," said Legolas, "and trustworthy, for the present."

"Where is the queen?"

One of the men bowed, awkwardly. "I think she is in her bedchamber, your Majesty—"

"*Laddie!*" cried Gimli, running to Aragorn, and throwing his arms around him.

"Old friend," said the King, returning the dwarf's embrace, "it is good to see you after all this time!"

"Come inside, come inside," said Gimli. "We have caught the Orc that was calling himself your Counsellor, and one or two of his friends—but you can deal with all that later—the Queen is safe, in there, with the little lads and Eowyn."

...

Aragorn opened the bedchamber door.

Legolas, close behind him, heard one of the children cry out in fear. Then a voice shouted, "Daddy, *Daddy!*" and he saw Eldarion slide from his mother's lap and run to his father, who lifted him into his arms.

"Estel!" cried Arwen.

But Legolas had spotted Eowyn, holding his double's son, and he rushed to them, and gathered them close.

"Are you all right?" asked Eowyn.

"Yes." He pressed his lips to her forehead. "We caught them, *melmenya*, and Aragorn has agreed to come back to Eryn Arnem with us."

"Thank the gods." She smiled up at him. "This is Meldon," she said.

"I know," said Legolas, hugging them both tightly.

"Other Ada," murmured the elfling, contentedly. "Nana and Ada."

...

Arador picked up the figurine. "I am sorry," he said, "I should not have thrown it."

Guenhwyvar growled.

"But it does not seem to be damaged." He set it down on the floor. The cat padded towards him. "Gods," he muttered, "you are scary. I am so glad that you seem to be on our side." He took a deep breath. "Right, let us hope you understand this: *go home*."

The animal circled the statuette, once, twice, again, and again, smoke peeling from its body and swirling down into the stone; and—as the last grey wisps were finally draining away—Arador thought he heard a faint sound, almost like a voice, and it seemed to be calling, "*Guenhwyvar*?"

...

Eryn Arnen Eowyn's tent

"So what Princess Eowyn told me is true," said Legolas. "I *was* poisoned?"

"Yes, your Highness," replied Findecáno.

"With what?"

"A philtre, your Highness, designed to enslave you."

"Enslave? You mean Alatóriel's tonic? No,"—Legolas shook his head, smiling—"that was simply—she said that was just..."

"To increase sexual appetite," said the healer, "and the ability to satisfy it."

"It had no effect," said Legolas, colouring.

"Its effects would have been so gradual, your Highness, that you may not have noticed them. But you would, for example, have felt increasingly dependent upon the lady, and have experienced difficulty making decisions of your own—"

"Leave me," said Legolas.

The healer bowed, and turned to go.

"Findecáno..."

"Your Highness?"

"Forgive me, I am sorry... Will you ask Princess Eowyn to join me?"

"Of course, your Highness."

Legolas watched the healer leave. *Alatóriel*, he thought; and, closing his eyes, he tried to picture her, tried to summon up the feelings of tenderness—and of deep physical desire—that had always accompanied his thoughts of her.

And he saw her face, with its wicked smile, and he smiled too; but his heart and his body remained strangely unmoved.

...

Eowyn and Hentmirë were waiting in the busy Mess Tent.

"You are more nervous than I am," said the younger woman.

"Well, *I* am to blame," said Hentmirë, miserably. She toyed with her bowl of stew. "I *knew* that he would be waking soon. I should not have let you speak to me so openly."

Eowyn patted her arm. "You did me a great kindness, Lady Hentmirë, allowing me to unburden myself like that," she said. "And, now that Legolas knows about Meldon, I feel, somehow—*lighter*—as though a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders."

"Will you—I mean, what do you intend to do?"

"Legolas wants me to go to Eryn Carantaur with him. He wants the three of us to live as a family."

"Will you?"

"No." She saw the disappointment on Hentmirë's face, and squeezed her arm, smiling.

"However...Though I hope that he will leave Meldon with Arwen and Aragorn, if he insists on taking him, I will not oppose it. I may even visit them from time to time. But—assuming that I survive the next battle—I will have work to do here. *Faramir's* work. And, besides..." Her voice trailed away.

"Does Haldir intend to stay with you?"

Eowyn smiled. "You are observant. Yes, he has suggested it," she admitted. "And he is kind, and honourable; a brave warrior, and a natural leader of men."

"Yes," said Hentmirë. Carefully, she removed a lump of gristle from her bowl, and laid it on her platter. "He is all of that. But do you love him?"

"I..." Eowyn frowned. "I do think that I could be happy with him."

Hentmirë nodded.

"But you do not think that that is enough," said Eowyn.

"I am biased," said Hentmirë.

"Legolas is not your Legolas," said the younger woman. "And I am not your Eowyn."

"No. But he *is* my Haldir."

"*Ah...*" Eowyn smiled. "You are a loyal friend, Lady Hentmirë," she said.

...

Eowyn returned to her tent to find Legolas sitting on the edge of the bed, fastening his jerkin.

"You are leaving?"

"I am going back to the elven encampment," he said. "There are preparations to be made. Captain

Golradir is a reliable elf, but—”

“The warriors are *your* responsibility.” Eowyn smiled. “Yes, I understand that. But I must show you our battle plan before you go.” She beckoned him to the table.

“Findecáno has told me about Alatárië’s tonic,” said Legolas, watching her unroll her map. “I do not—I cannot—I thought it was harmless.”

“Lord Fingolfin believes that it was really her father’s doing.”

“*I loved her.*”

“I am so sorry.” Eowyn grasped his arm.

“And now I do not know *what* I feel for her.”

“I have decided,” said Eowyn, “that I will not oppose you; if you want to take Meldon back with you—if Arwen will permit it, that is—I will not try to stop you.”

“But you will not come with us?”

“I belong here, Legolas. I have *work* to do here. Besides, you are still betrothed to Alatárië, and I,”—she turned from him and, smoothing out the parchment on the table top, placed a weight on its corner—“I am mortal.”

“Your double is not.” Legolas came up beside her.

“What do you mean?”

“She will not die. I do not know how it happened, exactly, but my healers confirm that it is true. And my double believes it to be a gift—a sign from the Valar that he and she are meant to be together.”

“That has no bearing on our circumstances,” replied Eowyn, placing another weight on the parchment. “*Now*,”—she pointed to the sketch of the drow encampment—“their troops are concentrated in this clearing and in three others to the east—”

“Haldir of Lorien is immortal,” he said, softly.

Eowyn looked up in surprise.

“I have heard you mention his name,” said Legolas, “with fondness.”

“Haldir has offered to stay with me,” Eowyn admitted, “to be my consort and the Captain of my Guard.”

“And the father of your children?”

“We do not have time for these emotions, Legolas,” said Eowyn, curtly. “Not *now*.”

The elf sighed. “I am sorry,” he said. “Show me your battle plan.”

...

Minas Tirith Geruil's shop

"There," said Haldir, placing a bowl of soup and some bread on the counter, "*eat*, Master Arador."

The boy laid down the book he was consulting, and took up the horn spoon. "Thank you. It smells delicious."

"The alleyway is now a barracks. Mistress Wilawen has set up a field kitchen in one of the workshops."

"I never imagined her as a cook." Arador broke off a piece of bread. "Do you think the drow will attack tonight?"

Haldir glanced at the wall—blank stone once more, now that the key had been removed and locked safely away in the lantern shop. "No."

"Good," said Arador. Then, "Why not?"

"Because they were not expecting today's defeat," said the elf. "The portal is small and the alleyway is narrow—it is designed for stealth, for gradual infiltration, not full-scale invasion. Now that we have captured it, it will take them time to plan a counter move."

"Assuming," said Arador, "that they even know we are here." He dipped his bread in the soup.

"They know."

"No one got back through the portal to tell them."

"No. But I would be willing to wager," said Haldir running his fingers over the assortment of drow artifacts that Arador had left lying on the counter, "that they have other ways of sending messages."

"Yes," said Arador, taking a bite of bread, "I think I have read of spells..."

"Have you discovered anything more about the portal?"

"Lots, but nothing that really helps." He sighed. "There is still so much I do not know. I mean, we could try destroying the key—assuming that it *can* be destroyed—but ours is unlikely to be the only one. We could try building another wall, here, in the middle of the shop, because you cannot pass through a portal when there is a solid object at the other side, apparently. But there is nothing, as far as I can see, to stop them removing the wall magically—unless their magic cannot penetrate a portal —"

Haldir patted the boy's shoulder. "You are tired, Master Arador," he said. "When you have finished your meal, go and find yourself a bed in the boot-maker's shop. I will have the men build your wall—it cannot hurt." He walked to the door. "Keep the figurine with you, in case we need to summon the cat in a hurry."

...

The Palace

Legolas closed the door of the guest bedchamber "We leave for Eryn Arnem in six hours."

Eowyn smiled up at him. “He is fast asleep, Lassui,” she said, “all tucked up in his little bed. I had to tell him a story.”

“Oh, melmenya,”—the elf stretched out his arms—“come here.”

Eowyn rose and, sliding her arms around his waist, laid her head upon his shoulder.

“I want you to promise me something,” said Legolas, gently.

“I will *not* stay out of the battle, Lassui. Whatever dangers you face, I will face them with you.”

“No, it is not that—though perhaps it should be—no, it is little Meldon. I want you to promise me that you will remember he is not ours—*shh, shh*,”—he pressed his lips to her temple—“I want you to remember that, when all this is over, if we survive, *we* must return to our own world and *he* must stay here, with his real parents—or with Arwen and Aragorn.”

“I know, Lassui.”

“Yes,” he said, kissing her again, “but knowing and *knowing* are not the same thing; and I do not want to see your heart broken, melmenya.”

“Then what am I to do,” she asked, “if he comes running to me—if he grasps my hand—tell him to go away?”

“Oh, my darling, no! I just—”

“You are trying to protect me; I understand,” she admitted, “but you cannot, not this time.” She slipped from his arms and sat down on the bed. “It is already too late, Lassui—yes—I loved him the moment I saw his little face, and I think that you did too.”

“I did.” Legolas knelt down before her. “But he is not ours, my darling. One day, we *will* have a child of our own, Eowyn nín,”—he raised her hands to his lips—“and we will love *him* even more.”

“My elf,” said Eowyn, stroking his face, tears running down her own cheeks, “my beautiful elf...”

Legolas gave her fingers a final kiss. “Let me help you undress, melmenya. You will feel much better for a few hours’ sleep.”

“You will stay with me tonight?”

“There is nothing in this world that could drag me away, *meleth nín*.”

...

Next morning

“And I want you to be a good boy, and take care of your Nana and your *muindor*,” Eowyn whispered. She leaned into the cot and kissed him.

But Meldon was not asleep, and the smile that he gave her—and Legolas, standing beside her—was just as dazzling as his ‘other Ada’s’.

...

As the sun rose over the mountains of Mordor, the King of the Reunited Kingdom rode out from Minas Tirith at the head of his army.

By midday he had crossed the Great River—passage having been secured by an advance party he had sent out the some hours before—and at dusk, having seen no sign of the enemy on the eastern bank, he entered the shadow Eowyn's stronghold in the southern foothills of Emyr Arnen.

Eowyn's scouts had spotted him as he approached from the west, and the Shieldmaiden was already waiting on the plateau to receive him. "Your Majesty," she said, bowing deeply.

"Eowyn, my dear friend, you must not bow to me!" he said, dismounting and taking her by the hands. "It is good to see you again—I only wish that the circumstances were happier. Faramir was a wise counsellor and a good friend, and I shall miss him."

Eowyn nodded, her eyes glistening with tears.

Aragorn leaned closer, to speak privately. "If there is *anything* that Arwen or I can do..."

"Thank you." She smiled, sadly. "Perhaps, when this is over..."

"Yes,"—he squeezed her hands—"let us discuss your battle plan—Legolas,"—he placed his hand upon his heart to greet the shadow Legolas—"Mae govannen, mellon nín."

"*Gíl síla erin lû e-govaded vîn*, Aragorn."

"My headquarters are in the hills," said Eowyn.

"Lead the way."

...

As the procession reached the encampment, a plump little woman, dressed in trousers and boots, came blundering from the Healing Tent and hugged Legolas, Eowyn and Gimli.

...

Eowyn's tent

"After the fire," said Captain Alfgar, "we expected them to retaliate immediately."

"But they missed their chance," agreed Drago. "They sat in their camp, licking their wounds, and now our scouts report that their numbers are dwindling."

"The warriors belong to different noble houses," explained the shadow Eowyn. "According to our mercenary, the old woman is not their Queen but the 'matron mother' of the largest house. She holds the alliance together by little more than threats and promises, and the other matrons will rebel at the slightest sign of weakness—some of them have already deserted her, and taken their warriors with them."

Aragorn looked at the sketch map laid out on the table before him. "How accurate is this?" He indicated the positioning of the drow troops.

"It was updated at midday," said Eowyn. "These,"—she pointed to a ring of symbols running around the edge of the main clearing—"are all women. The men have been moved out into the

forest. Our mercenary says that the holy women are preparing to perform some sort of rite, seeking the aid of their goddess, and the men must be kept at a distance. The ceremony will begin at nightfall, and will last until they get an answer.”

“Whatever *that* might be,” muttered Drago. “But the male drow know that you are here, your Majesty. We have seen their scouts flitting through the trees; they are ready for us. *And...* They are brave warriors,” he added, grudgingly.

“But *we* know their strengths and weaknesses,” said Eowyn, “and now they are outnumbered.”

“Let us get some rest,” said Aragorn. “We will follow your plan, and attack at first light.”

...

As her captains were filing out of the tent, the shadow Eowyn drew her double aside. “Where is Haldir?” she asked. “Why did he not return with you?”

“He is safe,”—Eowyn smiled, placing a reassuring hand upon her arm—“he stayed in Minas Tirith to defend the city. Aragorn left him in command. But he will come back as soon as he can.”

The shadow Eowyn glanced at her Legolas. He was deep in conversation with his own double. “Did you,”—she hesitated—“did you see Arwen’s children?”

“Yes, I saw your son. He is beautiful.”

“My—you *know*? Did *he* see *you*?”

Eowyn nodded. Then she squeezed her double’s arm, and whispered, “He thought that I was you.”

“What do you mean?”

“He loves Arwen and Aragorn, and little Eldarion, and he is happy with them—you can rest assured of that—but he knows that they are not his real family. He came to *me*—he held *my* hand—when he was scared.” She smiled, her eyes bright with tears. “And Legolas and I just wanted to gather him up, and keep him safe with us forever.”

Chapter 27: Farewell

Drizzt set the black onyx figurine on the floor. Nothing that he had tried himself—with fists or swords—had penetrated the barrier. *But perhaps Guenhwyvar, he thought, can find a way through.*

Softly, he called the cat.

Nothing happened; staring at the polished stone, he searched in vain for the wisps of smoke that normally announced the creature's arrival.

...

"What do you mean, 'it *depends*'!" Wilawen slapped Pharaun's hand away. "Depends on what—*why am I even asking?* Whatever it is, *no.*" She pushed past the drow, and made for the door.

Behind her back, Pharaun smiled.

"I have already delivered my part of the bargain, in full," she continued, angrily, "and if you will not take me home, Drizzt will."

"How?"

"What do you mean, *how?*" Wilawen gestured through the open door—invisibly sealed—at Drizzt, crouching over the figurine of Guenhwyvar. "*He* knows the Underdark better than anyone."

"But we are walled in here," said the Mage, indicating the chambers with an elegant sweep of his arm. "You cannot reach Do'urden and he cannot reach you. So how is he going to take you home?"

In the strange calm of the Archmage's newly restored chambers, his voice sounded loud—and extremely annoying. "You bastard," said Wilawen.

"No," replied Pharaun, unperturbed, "I know perfectly well who my father is, "—he smiled—"though I *can* be rather ruthless, it is true. However, on this occasion, I am inclined to do as you ask—just not from here."

"Then why did you say it depended?"

"To see you crackle and fizz."

"Oh, *you*—"

"Ow!"

...

Eryn Carantaur The Divor Rocks

"How is he?" asked Orophin, entering the leafy shelter—set a few yards from the foot of the cliffs—where Master Dínendal was tending his patient.

The healer laid Valandil's hand on his chest. "I believe that he will waken soon."

"Good. I will tell the others." He turned to leave.

"Orophin—*wait*."

Dínendal followed his friend outside. "We were wrong," he said, quietly, "quite wrong, to leave her there alone. I know that she did it for us—for Valandil—but one of us, at least, should have stayed with her,"—his voice grew even softer—"I should have stayed with her."

"Dínendal—"

"*Shhhhh!*" The healer gestured towards his sleeping patient.

"We are *not* going to leave her down there," whispered Orophin, grasping the other elf by the shoulders. "Olwë and Aistan have gone for reinforcements. It is not over yet, Master Healer, not by a long way, believe me."

...

Menzoberranzan

Pharaun raised his hands and, reciting a short spell, pushed his fingers into the magical seal and swept it aside, like invisible curtains. "There."

Wilawen stepped out into the corridor. "Drizzt,"—the drow, still crouching over the figurine, looked up at her—"what is wrong?"

"Guenhwyvar," he said, rising and seizing her hands. "It is good to see you again, O'Wilawen—but I have called, and Guenhwyvar does not answer."

Wilawen glared at Pharaun. "*Why?*" she demanded.

"How should I know?" The Mage closed the chamber door and, delicately running his hands up and down the carved frame, began replacing the Archmage's original wards.

"Try again," said Wilawen to Drizzt, "now that he has removed the barrier—"

"For Lloth's sake," hissed Pharaun, "do nothing more out here—unless you want to bring every master, student, and servant of Sorcere who fancies his chances of casting a spell of destruction, *running*." He offered the woman his arm. "Come."

"Where?"

"My chambers."

Wilawen frowned.

"I am hardly going to conjure up an entrance to the shadow world out here, in the corridor, am I?"

"Very well," said Wilawen, "lead on. Drizzt and I will follow."

...

Later

"Are you ready?" asked the Mage, pouring himself another glass of brandy, and downing it in one.

Wilawen glanced at Drizzt; he nodded. "Yes," she said.

"*You*," said Pharaun to Drizzt, "are no longer needed,"—the warrior's hands moved to his twin

sabres—"but suit yourself. Stand either side of me, and be quiet."

He started the incantation, and Wilawen, holding her breath, watched as the the dimly-lit chamber faded, its colours flowing like rivulets of oil from its walls and furnishings and gathering in a dull, black hole standing somewhere—it seemed—between herself and the wall ahead.

The spell ended. "Come," said Pharaun, and the single syllable stretched out into the distance, echoing and re-echoing. He grasped Wilawen's hand.

"Farewell Underdark," muttered the woman. "And good riddance—iddance—iddance."

Together, the trio stepped through the circular shadow.

...

They were standing in a smooth, grey tunnel.

Beyond its translucent walls, which stretched and puckered around them, worlds boiled, their fragments bubbling up to the surface and bursting open in a succession of sharp images—a dazzling gateway to a stone city here; a troop of dwarves mining a glittering cavern there; an ink-black lake; a carven labyrinth...

"We are everywhere at once—nce—nce," whispered Drizzt.

"We are nowhere—owhere—owhere," corrected Pharaun. "Time and place are flowing past us—ast us—ast us. Come, we must not linger. This way—iss way—iss way." He pulled Wilawen's hand.

But Wilawen had recognised something; and she slipped free of him and rushed towards it, crying, "Look—ook—ook!"

"NO!" shouted Pharaun. "Wilawen! No—o—OH!"

Chapter 28: The battle

Shadowland

Minas Tirith

An hour before dawn

Haldir, standing at the mouth of the alleyway, now sealed with a stout wall, was gazing up at the eastern sky. “Another night survived, Master Arador,” he said.

“How in Middle-earth did you know it was *me*?”

“You are quiet, for a human, but you drag your left foot.”

“I do not!” The boy came up beside him. “They will be attacking soon,” he said, “the King and Princess Eowyn—storming the drow encampment.”

Haldir nodded.

“She *will* be alright. Both of them will.”

The elf did not reply.

“I need to go back into the shop,” said the boy. “And I will need the portal key.”

...

Emyn Arnen

The battlefield

An hour before dawn, the combined forces of Gondor assembled on the fortified plateau south of Emyr Arnen.

Under King Elessar’s overall command, the troops were divided into four companies. The first, led by Aragorn himself, accompanied by Legolas, Eowyn and Gimli, would storm the main encampment from the north, with the aid—it was hoped—of the drow mercenaries. The second, led by the shadow Eowyn, would simultaneously deal with the smaller encampments sited in the clearings to the east. The third, led by the shadow Legolas, would strike from the south, cutting off the drow retreat, and protecting Eryn Carantaur from further invasion.

The fourth and smallest company, led by Captain Alfgar, would remain up on the plateau, to defend the weak and the wounded.

...

Minas Tirith

At a nod from Haldir the guards either side of the doorway raised their crossed spears, and the elf and the boy entered Geruil’s shop. Immediately, the portal transformed, the wall dissolving to a shimmering film of silver, though much of it was obscured by a rough stone cairn that had hastily been erected in the centre of the room.

Ignoring the portal, Arador crossed to the counter, took something from his pocket, and laid it on

the polished wood.

Haldir looked at the strange object—a shard of mirror, a silver thimble, a battered goose feather—all tied together with what looked to be a lock of drow hair. “What is that?”

Arador reached into another pocket, pulled out his waterskin and carefully filled the thimble. “The portal,” he said, drawing his pocket knife from its scabbard. “Or, rather, it will be, once I have added...”

He slipped into the space between the cairn and the translucent wall—“Be careful,” warned Haldir—and scratched a tiny quantity of dust from the stone surrounding the gateway.

“Once I have added *this*,” said Arador. Back at the counter, he dropped the dust into the thimble of water, then laid the drow brooch on top of the bundle. “This *is* the portal,” he said, “if I have got it right. The portal in miniature.”

“Are you saying that if you destroy *that*, the portal will be destroyed?”

“According to the book,” Arador sighed, “‘as above, so below’. In other words, whatever we do *here*, also happens over there. But this is not making bottles of spirits explode; this is magic; this is —*scary*.”

“I know.” Haldir patted his shoulder. “But we are at war, Arador, and we must each do what we are called upon to do.”

“I did not mean,” said the boy, “that I was afraid for *myself*. I meant that—well, have *you* never worried about the consequences of what you were doing?” He approached the portal. “That if you got it wrong, everything would be even worse—oh! Oh, gods, *look*,” —he pointed through the watery gateway—“look, Haldir! Can you see it? Is this *it*? Are they coming?”

“Get behind me,” said the elf, loosening his sword in its scabbard. “Get behind me, now! *Ailbric*,” he shouted to the guards outside, “get in here; *Richbert*, rouse the rest of the men!”

...

Eryn Arnen **The battlefield**

As dawn broke over the Mountains of Mordor, the gates of the barricade were hauled back, and the three companies moved out.

“All wrong, this,” muttered Gimli.

“What, *elvellon*?”

“Creeping about in daylight.”

Smiling, Legolas glanced at Eowyn, riding beside him, and she, feeling his gaze upon her, turned and smiled back—a smile filled with courage and determination mingled, in her eyes, with a deep sadness.

We are doing this, he mouthed, *for him—to keep him safe*.

She nodded.

Beyond his beloved, Legolas could see her double, the shadow Eowyn, cutting sharply eastwards, followed by the loyal Captain Drago, and Lord Fingolfin, and a motley collection of soldiers and hastily-armed citizens, some of them women.

He looked west, but his own double had already vanished into the trees.

...

Minas Tirith

Within the portal, the now-familiar view of the passage into the Underdark had disappeared, blotted out by a dark shape, long and narrow, like the body of a massive worm. Shadowy figures moved inside its belly, one of them struggling, it seemed, to escape.

“Haldir,” muttered Arador, “that looks like a woman—it looks like—”

“Stay back.” The elf climbed up onto the pile of stones.

“*Sir—*” warned the guard, uneasily.

“Back!” cried Haldir, gesturing with his hand as he peered into the portal. The feminine figure had raised her hands and was pushing against the side of the worm, stretching it thinner.

“Oh gods,” gasped Arador, “it *is*. It is our Mistress Wilawen! Inside that thing!”

“Stay down there,” said Haldir, calmly.

“Is she alive?” asked the boy.

“Perhaps.” Haldir climbed higher, leaning forward, searching for confirmation that what he was seeing was real.

“Wait,” said Arador, “I will call the cat.”

But a second figure had seized ‘Wilawen’ from behind and, as she tried to break free, her small fist burst through the worm’s side and clenched convulsively, grasping at empty space—

Haldir leaped over the stone cairn and plunged into the portal.

...

Eryn Arnen The battlefield

A silent message passed from warrior to warrior until it reached Aragorn at the head of the main company: *Princess Eowyn and her troops are in position.*

“Sound the charge,” cried the King, drawing his sword, “for GONDOR!”

Left and right, the trumpets blared. Eowyn spurred her horse; Legolas urged his mount forward; side by side, they followed Aragorn through the sparse undergrowth, gathering speed and momentum, the army of mounted warriors and heavily-armed footsoldiers surging behind them.

“FOR GONDORRRR!”

As they raced on, Eowyn could hear nothing but the pounding of her own heart. Scanning ahead, she spotted the enemy soldiers lurking between the trees, their red eyes glowing, and she drew her sword, holding it high and leaning forward in the saddle, crying, “For Eryn Carantaur!”

Then the army of Gondor breached the forest, and the drow ran forward to meet them; and, suddenly, the noise of battle was deafening: steel clashing with steel; axe thundering on plate armour and slicing through mail; bowstrings whipping, arrows whistling...

Eowyn, guiding her horse with her legs, waded into enemy, wielding her sword with all her might, slashing at drow heads and necks, dodging their counter-blows, and shrugging off the tiny crossbow bolts that skidded over her elven armour.

...

“Good luck, laddie!” cried Gimli, slapping Legolas’ back as he rolled from their horse, drawing his axe in mid air, and hitting the ground running.

Straight ahead, Eowyn was laying into a crowd of drow—“Save some for me!”

But then, to his right, the dwarf spotted the lad—Berkin—already in trouble, his mount cut from under him by a huge drow swinging a broadsword. The boy, lying on the ground, one foot still in the stirrup, had gamely drawn his axe, and was watching the approaching warrior, awaiting his chance to strike.

The dwarf smiled. “Go on, laddie,” he shouted, “*now*,”—but his smile turned to a growl as the drow struck first, and he rushed forward, cutting the sword from the warrior’s hands, giving the boy time to swing his axe upwards, and slice his attacker from groin to chest.

The drow fell.

“Come on lad!” Gimli pulled Berkin to his feet as a shout went up to the east and a troop of lizard riders broke cover, rampaging across the battlefield, trampling all before them. “Bring your axe—there is sport enough for both of us!”

...

Fighting at Aragorn’s side, Legolas loosed arrow after arrow, picking off drow warriors as they crowded in on the King, dropping reinforcements as they scurried through the trees, taking out a lizard rider who passed too close—and, all the time, keeping a part of his elven senses trained on Eowyn, in case she should need him.

...

Minas Tirith

Wilawen’s hand had vanished, pulled back into the worm’s belly by her shadowy assailant. Haldir grasped the edges of the tear—

Arador had taken out the onyx cat.

Inside the portal, two ebony hands seized Haldir’s shoulders; the guard, Ailbric, drew his sword, but

the boy was faster.

“Shit,” he shouted, launching himself up the heap of stones, “*Haldir!*”

...

Ewyn Arnen **The battlefield**

All along the clearings to the east, the shadow Eowyn’s company was fighting like demons, her footsoldiers driving forward in close formation; her citizens following with pitchforks, hammers, and carving knives, pelting the lizard riders with stones and with improvised spears and, when all else failed, finishing off the better-armed but smaller drow with fists and feet.

Eowyn herself had dismounted and sent her horse back to safety; and, flanked by Captain Drago and Lord Fingolfin, was leading the attack on a troop of lizards, dodging their snapping jaws and their riders’ flashing swords, hacking at the beasts’ vulnerable throats and bellies.

She scored a lucky hit, goring one of the lizards and slicing through its saddle-straps, and its rider tumbled to the ground but, quickly releasing himself from his harness, the drow leaped to his feet, sword in hand, and lunged for her.

Eowyn parried.

The drow struck again.

Eowyn side-stepped and, bringing her sword up to shoulder height, deftly cut his head from his shoulders.

Then something heavy hit her squarely in the back, and she pitched forward, hitting the ground with a thud, and rolled over to find herself pinned beneath a drow; and she panicked, squirming backwards, trying to escape him—until she realised that his eyes, staring down at her, were dead, that an elven arrow was buried deep in his skull, and that Lord Fingolfin was running towards her, his bow still raised.

He held out a hand and she took it, and he helped her to her feet.

“Thank you, my Lord,” she said.

Then, “Give the signal,” she shouted to Captain Drago. “It is time that the mercenary earned his money. And call for the stretcher-bearers—have them take the casualties back to the camp.

“*We* must advance.”

...

Minas Tirith

“Aaagh, *gods!*” cried Arador.

There was a moment of unbearable pain—as though his entire body were being skinned with knives of ice—as he passed through the portal; then he landed on the other side.

“Master Arador,” gasped Haldir, his upper body buried inside the strange, grey worm, “help me!”

Taking a deep breath, the boy thrust his head and hands through the tear, grasped one of Wilawen's arms, and tugged. The woman, pulled between himself, the elf, and two drow, cried out, but Arador hung on. There was a brief struggle. Then one of the drow, shouting something that sounded like a command, released her. Wilawen stumbled forwards, Arador and Haldir staggered backwards, and the worm split from top to bottom, disgorging its contents onto the rocky ground.

...

"Out," cried Pharaun, scrambling to his feet. "Through the portal! Now! *Now!* Move, move, move!"

...

Eryn Arnen

The camp

Hentmirë blundered across the busy plateau as fast as her legs would carry her, narrowly missing a handcart laden with jars of water, and a boy carrying a sack of arrows. "Master Findecáno, Master Findecáaaaano!"

The elven healer, crossing in the opposite direction, caught her, gently. "Yes, my Lady, what is it?"

"They are arriving," she panted, "the wounded—"

"Take your time."

Hentmirë took a deep breath. "Some of them are badly injured—Master Berengar is having them brought up here, to the Healing Tent—"

"Yes." The elf nodded. "I am on my way there now."

Hentmirë grasped his arm. "But some have only been struck by sleeping darts," she said. "And they are being attended to beside the barricade. Master Ethelmar sent me to ask if you have any of that elven tonic—er—"

"Miruvor?"

"Yes. Yes—he wonders if it might be used to revive the soldiers, so that they can go back into the field."

The elf frowned, thoughtfully. "That is a good question, my Lady—yes, I think it might—not by itself, perhaps, but combined with certain other herbs... Yes, follow me." He led her quickly up the winding path to the elven encampment, further up the hillside. "Two or three drops on the tongue should be sufficient," he said, thinking aloud, "it can be dispensed from a waterskin. Will you administer it yourself, Lady Hentmirë?"

The little woman nodded. "Yes. But prepare two waterskins, Master Findecáno," she said. "Then Arador's mother can help."

...

"Master Ethelmar asks for more water, and wood for the fires," said Berryn, counting the items off on his fingers, "salt for cleansing, and a good, strong man to help with bone setting and amputation."

“The water is already organised,” replied Berengar, directing a team of stretcher-bearers towards the gate, “and I have sent some of the young boys up the hillside foraging for firewood but, if the worst comes to the worst, we can demolish one of the sheds. Salt is in short supply, but I will make sure that what we do have is delivered to the Healing Tent. As for the other,”—he drew Berryn aside—“there is a young man working with one of the blacksmiths. He is simple, but good-hearted, and strong. You will need to persuade him to help you.”

Berryn nodded. “I will,” he said, quietly.

Berengar patted his shoulder. “Good man.”

...

Minas Tirith

“*MOVE*,” bellowed Pharaun, elbowing the big elf aside and pushing Wilawen towards the gateway, “*go*,”—he shoved her through—“move, Do’Urden! Move, you fools!”

Then he realised why the elf and the human were behaving like idiots and, as he dived through the portal himself, he yelled at them in Westron, “Come now or be sucked into nowhere.”

...

Emyn Arnen

The battlefield

The sun was high now, flooding through the trees in shafts of searing white light and only the lizard riders, reckless young bucks, were still pressing forward on the left flank. The rest of the drow, blinded and outmanoeuvred, were retreating towards the main encampment.

The temptation for the human soldiers was to break ranks and hunt them down.

“Sound the recall,” shouted Aragorn to the trumpeters; and, raising his sword, he cried, “To me, to me!”

All over the battlefield, soldiers heard their orders and obeyed, falling back to their King’s side, and regrouping.

Legolas brought his horse up beside Eowyn’s.

His beloved sat upright in her saddle, her helm lost, her golden hair falling loose about her shoulders, her face smeared with blood and grime, her eyes shining with battle fury.

Legolas felt an inappropriate stirring in his loins as he looked at her, and he laughed, his heart suddenly full of love and pride, and the exhilaration of being alive amidst so much death. “Stay beside me, melmenya,” he said, “in this next push.”

“Sound the charge,” shouted Aragorn.

The trumpets blasted; and the army of Gondor surged forward once more.

...

Working together, Gimli and Berkin were stalking their third lizard, a tired, nervous beast that had

somehow got separated from what was left of the main troop. Its rider—brave but exhausted and, now, blinded by the sunlight—was still struggling valiantly to control it, to force it to charge. But the pair, banging their axes against their shields, shouting, and caterwauling, had driven it steadily backwards, and trapped it within a narrow funnel of trees.

“Now lad!” cried Gimli.

Crouching, Berkin darted forward, ducked under the beast’s drooping head, rose, raised his axe above his shoulders, and with two strokes, forward and back, hacked out its throat. At the same time, the dwarf, having first dismounted the rider by cutting through his saddle straps, dispatched him.

A rousing fanfare echoed across the battlefield.

Berkin wiped the lizard blood from his face. “What was that?” he asked.

“The charge,” said Gimli. “Come on, lad!”

...

Further east, the shadow Eowyn had already regrouped her men and was preparing to storm the clearings.

Having fled to the camp seeking safety, both lizards and drow—unused to sunlight and finding no shelter in the wide spaces—were openly panicking, the riders struggling to control their mounts, the beasts snapping at their handlers—one or two of them breaking free and running down anything that stood in their path.

“There is no sign of the mercenary,” said Eowyn to Drago.

“No, my lady. It seems that he took the money and ran.”

“Well, we cannot wait. Sound the attack.”

“Very well, my—”

Eowyn recognised the sound—a hiss and a dull thud—and, eyes wide, she turned to her second-in-command.

A single arrow had pierced his forehead.

For a moment, he simply stared at her, and she thought, against all sense, that he might still live. Then his body sagged, and he slid sideways, and fell from his horse.

“No!” she cried. “*Noooooooooo!*” Her head whipped round, and she saw a drow with a longbow—a human bow stolen from one of her own fallen men—and she spurred her horse and, drawing her sword, she dashed into the clearing like Túrin Turambar, and cut him down as he tried to run away.

“*Charge!*” shouted Lord Fingolfin, raising his sword high, “*chaaaarge!* PROTECT YOUR LADY!” And the people of North Ithilien, following the elf, thundered to the rescue.

...

Minas Tirith

One-by-one, they scrambled through the icy teeth of the portal and, aided by Ailbric climbed down the cairn into Geruil's shop.

At a sign from Haldir, the other guards lowered their weapons, and withdrew.

"Which *genius* blocked the way out?" asked the tall drow, running a hand through his dishevelled hair.

"I—er..." Arador blushed. "I thought that it might stop people getting through."

"Obviously." The drow scanned the shop, his fiery eyes immediately drawn to the boy's model of the portal, still sitting upon the counter. "If that really works," he said, "you had better use it. Now."

...

Eryn Arnen **The battlefield**

On and on, the army of Gondor advanced, driving the last of the drow back through the trees.

"Something is happening," cried Legolas, "up ahead—look—the drow are being slaughtered by their own men!"

"The mercenaries," shouted Aragorn. "They must have struck, at last. Sound the delay," he called, "send men west to surround the encampment—they are to kill all who run; let us hope, Legolas, that your double is in position, and ready to deal with any who flee south."

"No, it is the *women*, Aragorn," said Eowyn, suddenly. "The women are killing the men!"

...

"My Lady,"—Lord Fingolfin rode up beside Eowyn—"we must pull out."

"Sound the retreat," said Eowyn. She wheeled her horse. "Look at them, my Lord, look at them! Falling upon each other like animals!"

"Is it not the men you hired?"

"No, my Lord—it is the women. Do you remember my map—how, at the last moment, the women forced the men out of the camp, and formed a ring around the perimeter? It was because they were preparing to perform some holy rite—and now, it seems, they are killing the men to maintain their secrecy. Let us leave them to it!"

She turned her horse northwards but, as she swept round, something caught her eye, and she turned back.

At the far edge of the clearing, a familiar figure, wearing a ridiculous plumed hat, emerged from the trees and favoured her with an elaborate bow. Then he raised his hand and, at that signal, more than fifty male drow ran from the forest and, quickly and methodically, began slaying the drow women.

...

Minas Tirith

“*Use it?*” Arador looked from the drow to Haldir and back again. “You mean—use it to destroy the portal?”

“Llolth, what kind of idiot are you?”

“I am not—I—I just copied it from a book,” said the boy. “I do not know how to make it work—I was just going to—you know—try, and hope for the best.”

“Can *you* close it?” asked Haldir. He glanced at Drizzt. The warrior’s hands were resting on the hilts of his twin swords, but he appeared to be guarding Wilawen, and Haldir doubted that he would bother to defend the other drow, whom he did not appear to like. He moved closer. “*Close it,*” he commanded.

The tall drow backed away with an arrogant snort.

Then Wilawen spoke; and Haldir had no idea what she was saying.

...

“What will happen if it is not closed?” she asked.

“Things will fall into it,” replied Pharaun, speaking in Westron, so that the others could understand. “Look.” He pointed through the portal, to where the torn ends of the shadow-tunnel were flapping, as if in a brisk breeze, and two steady streams of dust and rock were rising from the ground and disappearing into them.

“Not another of your holes!” cried Wilawen.

“*My* holes! *Mine?* This is *your* fault, you idiot woman,” replied Pharaun, indignantly. “Not content with dragging the shadow world into this world with all your running and your peering, and your ‘Oh, look over there-ing’, *you* had to tear a great big hole in the boundary and invite your friends inside!” He glared at Haldir. “So now, anything—anything big enough and strong enough to fight the current—that happens to be shadow walking can simply,”—he waved his slender hands—“step out.”

“That sounds bad,” said Arador.

“It is chaos,” agreed Pharaun, with a acidic smile. “Things being sucked in, other things leaping out, right here; right in this—this—”

“My father’s *shop*,” said Wilawen.

“Really?” The drow looked around, unimpressed.

“Close it,” said Haldir. “Repair the tear and close the portal. Now.”

Pharaun seemed to consider it. Then, “No,” he said, folding his arms across his chest.

“I can force you.”

“You can try. But,”—he raised an elegant hand—“let me see: I have so many spells to choose from—yes, I could turn you into glass and shatter you long before you managed to do anything with that sword you are fondling.”

“Be careful, Haldir,” said Wilawen, turning to the elf, “he is telling the truth—at least, about that.” To her surprise, Haldir stared at her blankly.

“Do it, Mizzrym,” said Drizzt, suddenly. “The tear threatens our world as much as theirs. What have you to gain by refusing?”

“He has a price,” said Wilawen. She turned back to Pharaun. “He *always* has a price. Yes, he is afraid, all ‘move, move, move,’”—the drow sneered—“but he is gambling that we are *more* afraid. What do you want this time?”

“Very little,” said Pharaun, suddenly reverting to his own language. “In fact, hardly anything at all. Just a few hairs from your pretty li—from your head.”

“To do what with?”

“Oh...” He shrugged. “Various spells.”

Wilawen glanced at the others. “Why *my* hair?”

“Why not?”

“Are you saying that you cannot take it without my permission—*ow!*” She clapped a hand to her scalp. Drizzt and Haldir moved to protect her, but she waved them away.

“Of course I can *take* it,” said Pharaun, brandishing the stolen hairs as proof. “But I cannot use it—not for this particular spell—without your consent.”

“You said ‘spells’ before. *Various* spells.”

“Spell, spells; particular, various—does it make any difference?”

“It might.” Wilawen sighed. “With you, yes, it probably does. But I no longer care. Close that portal, put everyone back where they should be, make me speak Westron again, and you can shave my entire head if you want to.”

...

Eryn Arnen **The battlefield**

Still smiling at the audacity of the mercenary, the shadow Eowyn stationed her men around the clearings, ready to capture any drow that managed to escape the slaughter.

“Thank you, my Lord,” she said to Fingolfin, as they lay in wait, “for proving a most efficient second-in-command—besides saving my life, *twice*.” She smiled, sadly. “Poor Drago. He will be buried with honours.”

“He was a fine soldier,” said Fingolfin, “and a good man.”

“It must be hard for you,” she said, “seeing death like this.”

The elf smiled. “I am old, my Lady, though I may not look it to men. I fought with Lord Elrond in the Last Alliance of Elves and Men, and with King Thranduil during the Ring War. So death is, sadly, no novelty to me.”

“What about old age?”

“My Lady?”

“Are you used to old age? How would you deal with me, in my dotage? How would Legolas?”

“We elves, my Lady, venerate—”

“Legolas...” said Eowyn.

“My Lady?”

“*Legolas!* Something is happening to Legolas, somewhere to the south! Come, Fingolfin,” she cried, spurring her horse, “rally the troops! We must ride south!”

...

Minas Tirith

Pharaun had insisted that everyone leave the shop whilst he sealed the shadow-tunnel and destroyed the portal, so Arador never discovered whether *his* method worked, though—when he was finally allowed to return inside—he found the elements of his model completely fused together, and the drow brooch missing, though he had certain suspicions as to the likely whereabouts of *that* object.

...

“What was the other thing?” asked Pharaun.

“There were *two* more things,” corrected Wilawen. “Stop me speaking drow—”

The Mage snapped his fingers.

“What was that?”

“Try your big friend.”

Wilawen walked to the door. “Haldir,” she called, “can you understand me?” A moment later she returned. “Very well,”—the drow bowed—“now, put everyone back where they are supposed to be—but let me say goodbye to Drizzt first.”

...

The drow warrior was sitting quietly by the lantern shop, gazing in fascination at the sky.

“Does it not *hurt*?” asked Arador.

The drow turned to him, uncomprehending, so the boy pointed to his own eyes, and screwed his face up against the light, grimacing in mock pain. The drow smiled and nodded.

“But you like it anyway? Here,” he said, digging into his pocket, “I will miss the cat, but I think it is best for you to have this,”—he handed Drizzt the onyx figurine—“and keep safe.”

The drow took it from him with a bow of the head.

“Now I think that Mistress Wilawen wants to speak to you.” Arador bowed, backing away, and went

to find Haldir.

The drow turned to the woman.

“Goodbye,” said Wilawen, holding out her hands, “and thank you, for everything.”

Drizzt grasped them gently, and raised them to his lips, saying something in his own language.

“Well,” said Wilawen, “goodbye.”

As she walked away, the drow suddenly called to her—“O’ Wilawen!”—and he held up the coin she had given him in the starlit cave, and kissed it, then dropped it back into his pouch.

...

“Will we feel anything?” asked Wilawen.

“Oh,”—Pharaun shrugged—“perhaps a slight disorientation.”

Wilawen frowned. “In other words, it will be most unpleasant.”

The drow grinned and, suddenly; he reached out and, grasping her around the waist, pulled her close and kissed her passionately.

Wilawen, taken by surprise, did not protest until he released her. “Oh, gods, what was that?” she sputtered, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

Pharaun dug into one of the pockets of his robe. “You cannot blame me for being curious.”

“*Curious*, you—you—oh! *You!* I actually think that I shall *miss* you! Yes, you are like the infuriating older brother I never had.”

“Lloth, no,” said the drow. “My sisters are all homicidal,”—he drew out a flat, curved wand—“and, besides, incest is really not to my taste. Now, are you ready?”

“Yes,” said Wilawen. Then, “*No!* No, wait!” She wiped her mouth again. “Put everybody back where they *want* to be—yes, where their *hearts* tell them they should be. Then I will give you the consent you need.”

Chapter 29: Sunshine and shadow

Shadowland

“Put your hand on this.” Pharaun held out a wooden wand, curved like a bow and carved with intricate runes.

Wilawen’s eyes narrowed. “*Why?*”

“You say you want your friends to be wherever they want to be?”

“Yes.”

“And how am *I* to know who your friends are?”

Wilawen sighed.

“So put your hand on the wand—*lightly!* Then close your eyes, and let my words fill your mind...”

...

Eryn Arnen **The battlefield**

“Your Majesty,”—the messenger bowed before Aragorn—“Captain Berctuald bids me report that the drow are defeated, sire; those that remain alive are fleeing south; the women are taking their Queen to safety, the captain believes; the men are either dead or—or vanished, your Majesty.”

“Your double can take care of the women, Legolas,” said Aragorn. He turned back to the messenger. “Tell Captain Berctuald to make a thorough search of the Forest. Any survivors are to be brought to Caras Arnen; when we have freed the City they will be allowed to slither back through the rocks they came from—before we stop up the cracks for good. The dead,” he added, “are to be burned, like orcs.”

“At once, your Majesty.” The messenger set off at a gallop.

Aragorn turned to Legolas. “You will ride north with me?”

“Of course.”

The King called for another messenger. “Take word to Princess Eowyn,” he said. “We will fall back to her stronghold in the hills to prepare for the final attack—”

A strange noise—quiet at first, but rapidly growing louder—cut him short, and he turned to face it; something was rushing through the forest towards them; something big enough to shake the trees as it passed.

“*Scatter,*” roared Aragorn, “*SCATTERRR!*”

Then the trees parted—and a river of thick, inky darkness burst through the gap.

The men shouted in horror, riders spurring their terrified horses, footsoldiers running. Aragorn, calm amidst the chaos, struggled to hold his mount in check, watching the wave of blackness flow

harmlessly between his warriors and sweep towards the elf and the woman riding beside him.

Aragorn heard Eowyn cry out as the darkness splashed up her body and he leaped from his horse and ran to help her. Legolas—already covered from head to foot—was with her, trying to pull her clear. But, even as Aragorn approached them, he could see that the stuff was solidifying, and—despite his attempts to tear it away—he was forced to watch it shape itself, shrinking here, thickening there, quickly forming itself into the semblance of a dark being, with arms and legs and a crudely shaped head, and a pair of massive, bat-like wings sprouting from its shoulders.

And—grasping its prisoners tightly—the creature took flight.

“NO,” cried Aragorn, “Legolas! *Eowyn!*”

...

“*Gimli!*” roared Berkin, lunging for the dwarf. But his hands missed his friend’s kicking feet, and closed on empty air.

...

Further south

The shadow Eowyn galloped through the Forest, scanning the company of elves for something that would explain the anxiety she was feeling for the father of her child. She knew that it had nothing to do with the neat line of elven dead lying upon the ground, nor with the elven wounded awaiting the attention of the healers, nor with the gaggle of drow prisoners chained between the trees...

It was something else.

She spotted Captain Golradir, emerging from a thicket to the north and, dismounting, ran over to him. “Where is Prince Legolas?”

The elf seemed dazed.

“What is wrong, Golradir?” asked Lord Fingolfin. Since Drago’s death, he had remained faithfully at Eowyn’s side; he laid a hand upon the March Warden’s arm. “What has happened, *mellon nín?*”

“It took him.”

“*What* took whom?”

“I think... It was darkness. Just darkness.”

Eowyn glanced at Fingolfin. The elf seemed as perplexed as she was. “Show us, Captain!” she said.

Golradir gestured towards the thicket. “I tried to stop it. I did. But it was no use.”

“Master Elerossë,” shouted Fingolfin to one of the healers, “take care of the March Warden—no, my Lady, *wait!*”

But Eowyn had already run into the trees.

...

Minas Tirith

“What is *happening*?” cried Wilawen.

Pharaun stepped nimbly aside. “Best to keep your mouth closed,” he advised her, as the darkness reached her face. “It will all be over in a moment.” More cries of alarm came from outside, and he turned towards the shop door, shouting, “I said: keep your mouths *closed*!”

“*What* will be over?” Wilawen scraped away a handful of inky fluid. “What have you done to us?”

“Exactly what you asked,” replied Pharaun. “It is quite harmless, and I know of no more efficient way to move a body from one place to another—*oh*—oh, Lloth,”—he backed against the wall, staring down at the blackness rising up his own long legs—“*surely* not!”

...

Hanging beside Eowyn in the shadow-creature’s massive arms, Legolas squeezed her hand. He had no idea what the thing was, nor where it might be taking them, but his elven instincts told him that, repulsive as it seemed, it did not mean to harm them.

He felt Eowyn’s fingers move in response to his caress, and he turned to her with a reassuring smile.

Her eyes were bright with tears. “Look, Lassui,” she said, nodding at something lying far below them.

Legolas looked.

They were hovering over a bedchamber—little Meldon’s, he quickly realised—and, as they gazed, the chamber door opened and the elfling, with a squeal of joy, leaped from his bed and ran towards an unseen visitor.

Legolas smiled, but there were tears in his eyes, too. “He is safe, melmenya,” he whispered, gently. “Safe and happy. He does not need us now.”

“I know,” she answered bravely.

At once, the vision faded; and then they were looking down, through the boughs of a mighty carantaur tree, upon a small, open flet, with a table and chairs at its centre, and a romantic, canopied bed tucked in a corner.

“Our garden,” said Legolas.

“Our *home*,” said Eowyn. She wiped her eyes. “Do you think that it is still safe, Lassui? What if the drow have invaded *our* world, too?” And, as she spoke, the shadow-creature descended through the red trees, and set them down in a clearing. “Where are we?”

“I think,” said Legolas, examining the trampled ground, “that we are where it all began, melmenya; in Eryn Laeg, close to where the bodies were found—yes—listen.”

Behind them, unnoticed, the shadow-creature was dissolving into nothing.

“I cannot hear anything,” said Eowyn, but her hand automatically reached for her sword.

The elf smiled at her. “Border guards, melmenya,” he said. “Nibenon and Eruvelui, if I am not mistaken—in the trees, over there.”

...

Minas Tirith

The shadow Legolas reached for the door latch. He did not know why he was standing in a corridor in Minas Tirith, he did not know what was inside the chamber, but his heart told him to open the door...

And he did.

There was a cry of surprise, then a long wail of delight—"Adaaaaaa!"—and a tiny blond elfling scrambled from his bed, and flew into his arms.

Legolas lifted his little son onto his shoulder, and held him tightly, burying his face in the boy's soft, pale hair; he smelled of fresh, green leaves.

"Where is Nana?" asked the child.

"Nana?" Legolas sniffed back his tears. "I do not know ion nin,"—his voice wavered—"but we will find her, and we will take her home to live with us." He felt the child relax against him, and he smiled.

Then, "Can Eldarion come and live with us, too?" asked Meldon. "And Nana Arwen?"

...

The shadow Eowyn turned to Lord Fingolfin. "I must go through that door, my Lord," she said. "There is something in there that I must see."

She lifted the door latch and pushed open the door.

From inside the chamber, Fingolfin heard a sharp intake of breath, then a child's voice, crying, "Nana! *Nana!*"

"I will wait out here," he said, smiling.

...

"You have found him," said the shadow Eowyn, softly.

Legolas, still hugging little Meldon, turned to face her. "Something brought me to him, Eowyn," he said. "Something that means us to be together—all three of us—as a family."

"And what of Ala—" She stopped short, partly in response to Legolas' warning frown but also because her own maternal instincts had suddenly asserted themselves.

"You *must* know," said Legolas, carefully, "that *that* no longer stands between us. Meldon is coming home with me, and we want you to come with us."

Eowyn shook her head. "I must return to Emyr Arnen," she said. "When my duty is done, and my people are safely back in the City on the Hills,"—she smiled at the little elfling—"when your mummy has done what she must do, Meldon, she will come and see you,"—she looked at Legolas—"and we will talk."

She turned to leave.

“Eowyn,” said Legolas, gently but firmly, “come here. Come and hold your son.”

...

Middle-earth

Legolas and Eowyn were escorted into Orodreth’s encampment.

“My Lord,” said the Mirkwood elf, greeting his commander with a formal bow, “I was told that you had gone into The Aelvorn, to rescue Lady Eowyn.”

“I did,” said Legolas. “And *that* tells me that we are home.” He smiled at Eowyn.

Orodreth gave him a brief report. “There has been no sign of the dark people since that second attack,” he explained. “And all but the March Warden, the boy from Newhome, and Mistress Wilawen have been returned.”

“Haldir died in the caves, Legolas,” said Orophin, suddenly. “He drowned, trying to save the boy.”

“No,” cried Eowyn. “No, Orophin! We have seen Haldir! He is alive!”

...

Shadowland

Floating above Meldon’s bedchamber, Haldir gazed down at the small family—Eowyn hugging her little son whilst shadow Legolas stood beside them, tears streaming down his fair face.

The big elf’s heart was torn with conflicting emotions, for—though he would have served her faithfully and, in time, a deep, true love might have blossomed between them—Eowyn was reunited with her child, and *he* would no longer have to choose between the shadow and her double—

“Come on,” said an annoying voice, “think of something else.”

Haldir glared at the boy hanging beside him. “What do you mean?”

“It is as Mistress Wilawen said,” said Arador. “This—*thing*,”—he jerked his head over his shoulder at the shadow-creature that held them—“will take us wherever we want to go. So think of something else.”

“What about you,” countered Haldir, angrily, “have *you* nowhere to go?”

“My parents’ house? No, thank you.” The vision of Eowyn and her son had suddenly changed to one of a sparse forest, choked with fallen trees and backed by a line of jagged rocks. “I will come to the colony with you. I have developed a taste for adventure.”

“No, absolutely not,” said Haldir, “your parents would flay me alive.”

But they were already approaching the ground.

“I have been missing for—what—a week?” Arador’s feet touched the grass. “So, if my father is in a flaying mood, you are already doomed. But Prince Legolas will soon talk him round.”

“Legolas will send you straight back home,” said Haldir.

"We shall see."

...

Eryn Carantaur

"There he is! *Haldir!*" cried Eowyn, running to the big elf.

Haldir caught her hands and raised them to his lips. "Eowyn! You are safe and sound!" He turned to her husband. "Legolas!"

His friend embraced him, human-fashion. "It is good to see you, too, March Warden."

"Is Wilawen here?"

"Wilawen?" Legolas looked from the March Warden to Orodreth and back again. "Was she with *you?*"

"Yes—in Minas Tirith. It was she who arranged our escape." He explained the bargain the woman had made with the drow Mage. "It seems he did not keep his word," said Haldir, looking round. "I *knew* that he was reluctant to let her go."

"Though if he *has* sent her back," said Arador, suddenly, "she will not be *here*. Do you not remember what she said?"

"Master Arador wants to join the colony," said the March Warden.

"Yes, sir. I am a scholar," said the boy to Legolas, bowing slightly. "I work hard and learn quickly. I am sure that I can earn my keep here."

Legolas smiled. "We will see what your father says," he said, holding up a hand when Arador tried to protest. "But tell us," he added, "where will we find Mistress Wilawen?"

The boy shrugged. "With Valandil; wherever *he* is."

...

Lying in the haven of the healing tent, Valandil snatched a sudden breath, opened his eyes, and smiled up at the woman who was quietly watching over him. "Good morning, Faer Vara," he muttered.

Wilawen laughed. "It is the middle of the afternoon, as near as I can tell," she said, "but that does not matter,"—she grasped his hand and raised it to her cheek—"because we are both safe, my love, and we are together, at last. That is all that matters."

The elf stretched out his fingers, and gently caught the tear running down her face.

...

"*Legolaaas!*" Hentmirë crashed to the ground.

"Gwendithen!" The elf bounded over to her, lifted her into his arms and hugged her tightly. "Thank the Valar that you are back too! Are you all right?"

"Yes," she mumbled.

Legolas looked around, suddenly. "Is there any sign of Gimli?"

...

The Grey Havens

Soaring high over Mithlond, shielding his eyes from the evening sun, Gimli stared into the West.

"Time I went home," he sighed.

He thought of the Glittering Caves, of their 'gems and crystals and veins of precious ore'; of the light glowing 'through folded marbles'; of the 'columns of white and saffron and dawn-rose'...

Then he thought of Legolas and Eowyn, of the March Warden and of little Hentmirë, of evenings spent merrily, before a cheery fire...

...

"Gimli!"

"Put me down, you crazy elf!"

...

Southern Mirkwood

Berryn son of Hador watched the girl with the red-gold hair wrap her mantle round her shoulders, pick up her basket of bread, cheese, and other comforts for the poor, and leave her father's mead hall, followed by her faithful servant.

Something told him that, were he to say the word, the shadow-creature would set him down beside her.

But, no, he thought. I made Gunnhildr a promise; and I will keep it.

...

The Underdark

Deep in the tunnels surrounding Menzoberranzan, Drizzt Do'Urden set an onyx figurine on the ground, and called to Guenhwyvar.

Sometime soon, he would have to deal with the second statuette.

He could not destroy it, for he had no idea what that might do to the cat, but nor could he let it fall into unscrupulous hands. He would have to find somewhere to hide it—somewhere where it would never be found.

"Come, Guenhwyvar," he said, "we have the Dark Dominion to patrol."

He slipped the first figurine back into his pouch, and his fingers brushed against something cold and hard—the coin that Wilawen had given him as a keepsake; he smiled, fondly.

...

Pharaun Mizzrym folded back his elegant cuffs.

One of her friends! Who would have thought it?

Despite the magical energy it had taken to power Wilawen's relocation spell, the Mage did not feel tired at all—rather, infused with excitement. He lit the candles on his desk, extracted a

folded handkerchief from one of his pockets, and opened it. A dozen pale brown hairs lay shining on the black fabric. Smiling, he removed six and laid them on his desk. Then he refolded the handkerchief and returned it to his pocket—if he took the extra half-dozen hairs down to the Bazaar, and sold them to the right people, he would make more than enough money to pay off his tailor, his wine merchant, and to purchase a few exotic supplies besides.

From the chosen six hairs, he separated five, coiled them, and popped them into a glass storage jar.

Now I must be quick, he thought, taking up the remaining hair, *in case she changes her mind*.

He wound the filament around his little finger, knotted it, and set it aside. Then he selected a lump of soft, pinkish-white wax and, with all the dexterity that had made him one of the most capable Wizards in Menzoberranzan, he fashioned a tiny female figure.

Shadowland

It took three days of bitter, hand-to-hand fighting for the combined forces of Gondor, led by Aragorn, Eowyn, and Legolas, to recapture Caras Arnen and, even then, the drow forces might have held out longer had Eomer King not galloped to his sister's aid towards the evening of the third day.

True to his word, Aragorn allowed the survivors to return, through the rocks, to their homeland in the Underdark.

Then, at Eowyn's suggestion, and with the help of Gimli's dwarves, the walls and pavements of the City on the Hills were permanently secured—lined with fresh stone quarried from the gorge to the south of Emyr Arnen—the stone that had kept the people of Ithilien safe throughout the siege.

...

Two months later

Turning off the main walkway, Legolas went quickly down the quiet path until he reached a narrow flight of stairs, well-concealed by thick red foliage, and climbed up.

He had chosen the dwelling because it was small and isolated and, most of all, pretty, with a tiny, walled garden where she might sit beneath the trees. He had even had a swing built for her.

He tapped lightly at the door, and it was opened by an elderly elleth.

"How is she, Mistress?" he asked.

"Quieter today, my Lord."

"May I see her?"

"I do not think that would be fair to her, my Lord."

"No... No, I do understand, Mistress. But I—"

"Legolas Greenleaf!" From inside the house, a plaintive voice called out, "Have you come for me, Legolas Greenleaf? Is today the day?"

“Oh, sweet Eru!”

“Please, sir,” said the elleth, gently pushing Legolas back through the door. “I must see to her.”

“Of course, Mistress. Take good care of her...” He turned to leave.

But the elleth caught his arm. “If I may say so, sir,” she whispered, urgently, “this place—though it is lovely—is not right for her. Send her to the prison house at Doro Lanthron—”

“The prison house!”

“To be with her father, sir. I know you believe that he is responsible for her present state and, in part, I agree; but he does love her, sir, for all his faults; and he is the only person she cares for, excepting yourself. I honestly believe that his company is the only thing that can bring her peace now.”

Legolas patted her hand. “Thank you, Mistress,” he said, “for opening my eyes. Yes. I shall do as you ask.”

...

Sitting at the dressing table, in the bedchamber she would soon be sharing with Legolas, Eowyn lifted a small silver clasp from her jewel box. She had found it beside her camp bed, shortly after Haldir had left for Minas Tirith, and had kept it safe.

“Farewell,” she whispered, fingering it fondly, “may you find the love you deserve—and may you sometimes remember *me* with affection.”

There was a brisk knock at the door and, recognising it, Eowyn smiled. She put the clasp back into the box, together with the ring that Faramir had given her, so many years ago. “Come in, Eomer.”

“Are you ready?” asked her brother.

“Yes.” She rose, turned to face him, and laughed. “I never thought to see you in Elven robes.”

“Legolas insisted,” said Eomer.

“He was right. You look—almost—tame.”

“Eowyn, are you sure about this?”

“Yes; I am very sure.”

“Even though...” He waved his hand, but she knew what he meant.

“Even though I will age and he will not? Even though I will die and he will sail to Valinor? Yes, Eomer. He has proved himself, and won my love and trust. He is the father of my child, and he is about to make an honest woman of me.” Eomer held out his arm and she took it. “Have you forgiven us?”

“Forgiven *him*, you mean?” Eomer shrugged. “Would it really matter if I had not?”

“Yes.” She looked up at him. “Yes, it would, to me. ”

Eomer said nothing, but gently laid his hand upon hers. Then, “Come,” he said, leading her towards the door, “it must be time. Er—do you know the way?”

“The way?” Eowyn laughed. “Yes!”

“Good, because I find this place—”

Berengar appeared in the doorway. “My lady,” he said, breathlessly, “you—gods, you look beautiful but, please, *hurry*—you are late, and everyone is already waiting. And King Thranduil’s face looks like thunder.”

...

“Make your vow, ion nín,” said the Elvenking.

Legolas slipped his ring onto Eowyn’s finger. “*Im hervenn chîn; no hervess nín.*” He raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it.

“Eowyn, daughter of Eomund, make your vow.”

“I am your wife,” said Eowyn. “Be my husband.”

“*An-uir*,” said Legolas. *Forever...*

“Grand-Adar,” shouted a small but very loud voice, proudly, “that is my Nana and Ada.”

And everyone, even King Thranduil, laughed heartily.

...

Today was a most happy day, both for the colony and its founder, wrote Lord Fingolfin.

Lord Legolas has a worthy consort—a co-ruler whose courage, intelligence and political experience more than match his own; a woman whose gentle love will succour him, repairing the damage to his spirit wrought by his previous attachment; the mother of his child (whose mixed heritage will prove a valuable bridge between elves and men).

They love each with that deep regard and respect that, as I previously remarked, were missing from his feelings for Alatárië.

But who would not love Princess Eowyn?

Fingolfin scratched out the final sentence, and laid down his pen.

The future of the colony was assured. Of his own foolish fondness for the new Lady of Eryn Carantaur, he would write nothing.

Middle-earth Eryn Carantaur

"A gold piece for your thoughts, melmenya," said Legolas, softly.

Eowyn shifted in his arms. "I was thinking," she said, "of little Meldon."

Legolas pulled her closer, and kissed the crown of her head.

"It is just—I wanted so much to say goodbye to him, Lassui, and I never got the chance."

"I know, my darling." He kissed her again. "I know."

The pain would pass—soon, if the Valar blessed them with a child of their own—but the waiting would be harder for her, and so he resolved to keep her safe, and to make sure that she was given the time and the space to grieve however she must.

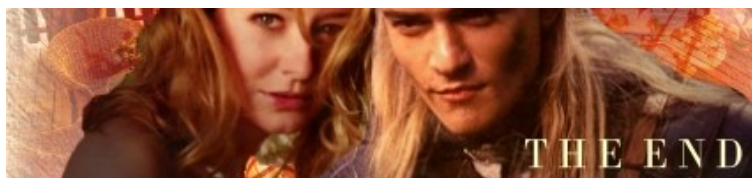
"Legolas?"

He sensed her mind, hesitantly trying to join with his, and he opened himself to her, and let her share his thoughts.

And, suddenly, she slid her little hand over his chest, and her leg over his hips and, hugging him with all her strength, she whispered, fiercely, "I love you, Lassui! I /ove you! Do not think that this foolish desire for a child could ever come between *us*!"

And then she kissed him.

And, later, when she grasped him, and guided him inside herself, he felt her overwhelming love for him, and he knew that she was telling him the truth.



Epilogue

Elvish

Some of the following are taken from the [Council of Elrond's Useful Elvish Phrases](#), some from [Hithanaur.net](#), and some have been cobbled together by me!

Man le? ... 'Who are you?'

Mas i noss lín? ... 'Where is your family?'

Aviston ... 'I don't know.'

Avo 'osto ... 'Don't be afraid.'

El mae? ... 'Do you feel well?'

Mas etholich? ... 'Where are you from?'

Dôr chaeron ... 'Far place.'

Niben i eneth ín ... 'His name is Niben.' ('Small').

...

"Perhaps, if you were to eat less, melmenya..." said Legolas, stepping past Eowyn and walking on ahead, his booted feet leaving no impression at the edge of the road.

Eowyn, tramping calf-deep through the rutted slush, stuck out her tongue—then, thinking better of it, she scooped up a handful of snow, formed it roughly into a ball, and threw it, hitting him just below his quiver.

"Agh!" Legolas turned, eyes narrowed menacingly, though the effect was somewhat ruined by the flailing of his hands as he tried to wipe the wet snow from his seat. "I will make you pay for that, woman!" he hissed.

Eowyn laughed and, as always, her laughter made her elf smile. "Come," he said, drying his hands on his jerkin, and holding them out to her, "I will help you."

Smiling back at him, she placed her hands in his, and—

"Wait," she said. "What was that?"

Legolas, assuming that she was trying to catch him out, grinned.

"No, Lassui, I really heard something. Listen."

Legolas listened.

"There," she whispered.

The elf nodded. "*Behind here*," he mouthed, pointing to the hawthorn hedge, north of the road.

Hand in hand, the couple crept up to the bushes, and peered over.

"Oh, dear gods," murmured Eowyn.

...

The elfling was sitting in the snow, his little knees drawn up under his chin, and he was crying—or, rather, he was rocking back and forth trying bravely *not* to cry, and the sounds they had heard had been his attempts to snuffle back his tears.

"Oh, Lassui, go to him!"

The elf sprang over the hedgerow, and crouched down beside the boy. "Hello..." he said.

Eowyn, meanwhile, had drawn her sword and, with its help, was forcing her way through the hawthorn, scratching her face and hands, and ripping her leggings in her hurry.

The child stared up at Legolas with huge, round eyes. His little face was blank, and he said nothing so, assuming that he could not understand Westron, Legolas asked, "*Man le?*"

The elfling gulped. "Melannen," he said.

Legolas glanced back at Eowyn. "He says that his name is Melannen—take care, melmenya."

"Ask him where his parents are." She wrenched herself free of the thorns.

"*Mas i noss lín?*" asked Legolas.

"*Aviston.*"

"He does not know."

Eowyn re-sheathed her sword, and crouched down beside Legolas. "*Avo 'osto*, Melannen," she said, softly. "We will not hurt you."

The child looked up at her and, suddenly, he smiled. And, raising a tiny hand, he gently touched one of the scratches on her face. "*El mae?*"

"He is asking if *that* hurts, melmenya."

"Yes." Eowyn nodded, smiling back—but the smile immediately turned into a wince. "Yes, it does, Melannen." She took his hand in her own. "Oh, he is so cold, Lassui. And wet." Her other hand went to the fastening of her cloak.

"No," said Legolas, "he can have mine." He slipped off his cloak and wrapped it around the boy's shoulders. "There is no sign of any footprints except his and ours, so he must have wandered here by himself. *Mas etholich*, Melannen?"

"*Dôr chaeron.*"

"He says that he is from 'far away'."

"To a child," said Eowyn, carefully re-arranging the elfling's cloak, "even the next house might seem far away."

There was a little basket at the boy's side, covered with a checked cloth. "Perhaps there is something in here that will tell us more," said Legolas, pulling aside the cover and searching through its contents. "Some lembas; a waterskin; a half-eaten apple; a toy rabbit—"

"*Niben i eneth ín,*" said Melannen.

Legolas smiled. "—whose name is Niben, melmenya; and a piece of parchment." He unfolded the note and read its message.

"It says," he said, "'Please take care of this child.'"

Postscript

Many months later

"I have cleaned your study, master, and locked away your materials. Will that be all?"

Pharaun smiled. Hearing her address him as 'master' always gave him a profound pleasure.
"Yes, you may retire now."

"Thank you, master." She curtsied.

The drow waited until her hand was on the door latch, then, "*No*," he said. She turned. "I have changed my mind."

He saw something wild flicker in her pale eyes and he smiled, thinking of the night of verbal and physical jousting that would follow the order he was about to give.

"Take off your gown, Wilawen, and come to me..."

THE END