

## The strange sea road



Author: Ningloreth

Title: **The strange sea road**

Story Number: 6

Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: Legolas and Eowyn are kidnapped by slavers from Far Harad. Can Faramir and Haldir rescue them?

Author's Note (from a review of *White Gold* by Giles Milton): Milton's lively account of the north African white slave trade in the 17th and 18th centuries includes a description of an attack on a Cornish fishing village by a fleet of Islamic corsairs. The warriors, wielding scimitars, stream into the cobbled streets and force their way into cottages, taverns and churches to seize the villagers and carry them off to the Moroccan port of Salé to be sold as slaves.

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

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

### Eryn Carantaur

The name means 'Great Red Forest'. *Eryn* means 'wood'. *Carantaur* is made from two words: *caran*, which means 'red' and *taur* which means 'great wood, forest' and also 'mighty, vast, overwhelming'.

### Elvish

*Carhílivren* ... 'Glittering House' (or 'Casablanca')

*Gerich veleth nín, edhel nín* ... 'you have my love, my elf'.

*Henion, hiril nín* ... 'I understand, my lady'.

*Hûn velui* ... 'sweet heart' (poor Valandil)

*hiril velui* ... 'sweet lady'.

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

*Hiro hyn hídh ab'wanath* ... 'May they find peace after death'.

*Eryn Dholt* ... 'Dark Forest'.

*Gynd Vyrn* ... 'Black Rocks'.

*Daro!* ... 'Stop!'

*Ceryn glam* ... 'orcs' balls'. (Glam is the collective noun for a group of orcs—pride of lions, glam of orcs).

*Hannon le* ... 'Thank you'.

*Gwendithen nín* ... I thought it was about time that Legolas gave Hentmirë an affectionate nickname. *Gwend* means 'maiden', but also 'bond, friendship', so there's a pun in there, somewhere. *Tithen* means 'little'.

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### **Naughty Elvish**

*Cuinon* ... literally, 'I live!'

*Ceryn Manwë* ... 'Manwë's balls'.

### **Hatja**

Hatja is my attempt at 'Englishing' the Ancient Egyptian word, HAtj-A, meaning 'foremost man, leader', and often, in older translations, rendered 'mayor'.

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## Chapter 1: Slavers

**The roc flew steadily, following the currents of warm, dry air along coast of Far Harad. To the west her sharp eyes could see nothing but water, sea green and empty; to the east nothing but sand, blinding and deadly.**

...

Eowyn awoke with a start and looked about her, momentarily confused. Yes—she remembered now—she was inside the shelter the elves had built for her to sleep in, on her way home to Eryn Carantaur.

*But...*

*Where is Legolas? He should be here, beside me.*

She pulled on her leggings and boots and crawled outside. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the darkness but, gradually, she managed to make out the shapes of Faramir, Lord Fingolfin, Berryn, Haldir, and several more elves, all lying in their bedrolls, clustered around the faintly glowing fire.

*Legolas must be checking the guards around the perimeter of the camp, she thought. But why? He did not seem worried at supper.*

Yawning, she turned back towards her little bedroom...

*What was that?*

Beyond the camp, deep in the forest—she could swear she had seen something move.

*Probably a deer, she thought, stooping to enter the shelter.*

To her right something glinted in the darkness.

*That looked like steel!*

In this part of the forest, close to the Anduin, the trees were small and widely spaced but there was a thick undergrowth of bushes and bracken that made it hard to move except along the track where they had set up camp.

Eowyn walked to the edge of the clearing. "Legolas," she whispered, "is that you?"

There was no answer.

*Perhaps I should go back for my sword, she thought. I could wake Haldir, and—Agh!*

Something dark and foul was covering her head and crushing her throat and she struggled, trying to shout, but it filled her mouth and she clawed at it in terror, because she could not breathe!

...

The sound of the oars dipping into the water was soothing.

"How is she?" The voice was quiet, and it took Eowyn a while to recognise it.

*Valandil.*

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"Her neck is bruised, but she is breathing steadily; I think she will be all right."

*Legolas!* Eowyn struggled to open her eyes. *Legolas!*

"I just wish that Dínendal were here..."

"What do you think they want with us?" asked Valandil.

"Nothing good," replied Legolas, grimly.

...

"Your Highness!"

Faramir awoke, instantly alert. "Yes Haldir. What is it?"

"Legolas and Lady Eowyn—and three of my guards—are missing."

Faramir struggled to his feet. He knew that Haldir was a capable March Warden—as capable as any Captain of Rangers—and he did not waste any time doubting his statement. "What has happened?" he asked.

"It appears they were taken in the night," said Haldir. "Over here," he explained, leading Faramir behind Eowyn's shelter, "there are signs of a struggle." He pointed to a patch of trampled ground surrounded by broken bracken.

Faramir crouched low and examined the marks. "These smaller footprints are Eowyn's," he said.

"Yes," Haldir agreed. "And she put up a considerable fight. Through here"—he led the man deeper into the undergrowth—"there was another struggle."

"Probably Legolas," said Faramir. "Yes, look." He reached down amongst the foliage and retrieved one of Legolas' white knives. "This is serious," he muttered. Then, "Where were your guards stationed?"

"In the trees." Haldir led him deeper into the forest. "Valandil was here," he said, pointing up into a large birch, now occupied by two elven guards, "Camthalion was about thirty yards to the left; and Orodreth was much closer—over in that big beech."

"And the Anduin is that way," said Faramir, pointing ahead. "It looks as though whoever it was came up from the river and attacked the guards. Legolas must have heard it and come out to investigate. And then Eowyn must have followed him." He shook his head. "Whoever these people were, they possessed considerable skill..."

"Why did they do it?"

Faramir shrugged his shoulders. "Has anyone threatened Legolas?"

"Not that I know of."

"Have you examined the river bank?"

"Only a superficial search."

"Then let us have a better look now."

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Eowyn sighed. Her head and neck and her shoulders hurt, and there was something cold gripping her wrists and pulling her arms awkwardly behind her back.

"Melmenya?"

She opened her eyes and waited for the strange, blurry shape hovering before her to come into focus. Then she smiled: it was Legolas, bending over her. *Why is he frowning?* she wondered. *Only he could look so beautiful frowning.*

"Hello," she said.

Legolas laughed and Eowyn smiled again, wondering why he sounded so relieved.

"Where am I?" she asked.

...

"Look—here," said Faramir. He pointed to a deep, narrow hole cut into the river bank. "I think this is the mark of a mooring stake. There should be another one... Yes, here." He walked about ten yards up the bank and crouched beside the second hole. "They came up the Anduin in a large vessel—something with a deep draught—then rowed ashore in a small boat—about thirty feet long. They drove two stakes into the ground and moored up."

He examined the footprints on the bank. "There were at least ten of them," he said. "And they spread out in three groups." He pointed to the faint traces of three separate passages that had recently been forced through the undergrowth.

"They must have attacked the guards simultaneously," said Haldir. "But how did they know where we were?"

Faramir pulled a small piece of fabric from a bramble thorn and showed it to the elf. It was silk—dirty and discoloured, but intricately embroidered—torn from a garment that had once belonged to someone rich and important. "I do not think they did, exactly," he said. "Their tactic is to swarm across a patch of land, taking anyone they find."

"Who are they?"

Faramir smiled grimly. "I had forgotten that you are new to these parts, March Warden," he said. "And I doubt that they ever venture as far north as Lorien."

"Your Highness?"

"They are Haradrim," said Faramir. "Slavers."

...

"We are on a ship, melmenya," said Legolas, softly. "We are heading towards the sea."

Despite the pain in her head and arms, Eowyn pushed herself up into a sitting position and looked around. There were twelve people—including Valandil, with a large gash on his forehead, Orodreth and Camthalion—besides herself and Legolas, all chained to the walls of the small hold. Most of the others were young women. "What is happening?" she asked.

"I am not sure," said Legolas. "Our captors are Haradrim. They seem to be kidnapping people—some of these were captured as much as a week ago."

"What do they want with us?"

"I do not know," said Legolas. "The man in the corner is a merchant from Minas Tirith. He was

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travelling near Eryn Arnem when they caught him. He thinks that they will ask our families for a ransom. But the woman in the green gown, lying beside him, is convinced that they will take us back to Far Harad."

"Why?"

"She has heard that there is a market for slaves from the north. And she says that the Haradrim prize fair-haired women—"

"Prize them?"

"Oh, melmenya..."

"Gods! They probably prize elves as well!"

"I want you to promise me something," said Legolas. With difficulty he shuffled closer and spoke very quietly. "You are immortal now," he said, "and I want you to remember it."

"I do not understand."

"If they do sell us..." He looked away. "Of course, we will do everything we can to escape before we reach Far Harad. But, if they do sell us, melmenya, we may well be parted. And if that happens, I want you to promise that you will not take any unnecessary risks. You are immortal, Eowyn, you can afford to wait."

"Are you saying—"

"I am saying that you will outlive whoever buys you. You will outlive your owner, you will outlive his son, and you will outlive his son's sons; you will outlive the port of Umbar; you will outlive the very idea—Valar willing—of slavery. However long we are separated, melmenya, however far we are apart, all we have to do is wait and eventually we will be reunited. This is the truth that all elves are taught as elflings. But it is something that *you* must learn as an grown woman... So I want you to promise me that whenever you make a decision you will remember what I have just told you and choose your actions wisely."

"Oh, Legolas," Eowyn whispered, and leaning forwards, she laid her forehead against his shoulder.

...

"Will they ask for a ransom?" asked Fingolfin.

Faramir shook his head. "I do not think so," he said. "The sister of one of my rangers was taken some years ago. Her family have never heard anything more of her. I would say that they will take them straight to Far Harad and sell them—either in Umbar or Carhilibren. I have heard they can get a good price for a strong man with plenty of work left in him. I imagine they will get even more for a beautiful woman. And as for an elf, well..."

"I must go after them," said Haldir, grimly. "Straight away."

"How?" asked Fingolfin. "The colony does not own any sea-going vessels."

"If we can get to Pelargir," said Faramir, "we can buy passage to Umbar. Elves are rare in Far Harad. If they have been seen there we shall soon hear about it. If not, we will continue south."

"Are you saying that you will come with me, your Highness?" asked Haldir.

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"Of course," said Faramir. "Legolas is my friend and Eowyn is—she means a great deal to me."

...

The coastline was running north easterly now, curving into the Bay of Belfalas. Fixing her eye on the isle of Tolfalas, the roc left the safety of the shore and flew out over the sea. She could already smell the wonders she had heard of.

...

"Food!"

The sailor threw a pile of stale bread into the middle of the floor. A second man banged a pitcher of water down beside it.

"How are we supposed to eat?" asked Valandil, turning slightly to indicate his hands, chained behind him.

"You use your mouth," said the first man.

"Grovel like a pig?" exclaimed Valandil.

The sailor picked up the heavy pitcher and, holding it as a weapon, advanced menacingly.

"Wait!" said Legolas, in an unexpectedly commanding voice.

The man stopped in mid stride and turned to look him. "What?" he asked, casually emptying the pitcher over Valandil's head.

"I want to speak to your captain."

The second man started to laugh—but stopped as soon as he realised that his companion was giving the elf's request serious consideration.

"What's in it for me?" asked the first man.

"Tabnit, you can't—"

"Shut up. *What's in it for me?*"

Legolas ran his thumb across the inside of his fingers. The Haradrim had taken his weapons and had torn the silver fastenings from his tunic but, surprisingly, had missed his betrothal ring. "I am sorry, Melmenya," he whispered. "My ring," he said.

"Let's see it."

Tabnit pushed the elf's shoulders forward and reached down to take the ring. But Legolas closed his hand into a fist. "At the captain's door," he said.

Grunting, the man stamped out of the cabin and returned with a bunch of keys.

"Tabnit! Why are you listening to him?"

"Shut up!"

Tabnit unlocked the hasp securing Legolas' chains to the wall and lifted the elf to his feet. "Come on, then," he said, dragging him towards the door.

"Please, sir, what are we to do for water?" asked one of the women, timidly.

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"Lick it off his face," said the second sailor, nodding towards Valandil. And he slammed the door behind him.

...

"Do not worry, my friend," said Faramir to Fingolfin as he swung himself up into the saddle. "We will bring them back home. Are you ready, March Warden?"

...

"Ring?" The sailor held out his hand.

Legolas turned and raised his hands, as best he could. Tabnit wrenched the ring from his finger and held it up to the light. "Not bad..." He hammered on the cabin door.

"Come!"

The man hastily pocketed his bribe before lifting the latch. "One of the prisoners wants to speak to you, sir," he said.

"*What?*"

Tabnit advanced further into the cabin, and Legolas noticed that his posture had suddenly become submissive. "He has a way with him, sir," said the man. "*Regal*-like. I thought it might be worth your while to hear what he has to say."

Legolas heard the captain sigh. "Bring him in."

"Straight away, sir." Tabnit jerked hard on the chain and Legolas, his legs cramped from hours of confinement, stumbled inside.

The cabin was tiny. The elf, being taller than either of the men, was forced to stoop. The captain was leaning over a small chart table, plotting his course on a large map of the coastline.

Legolas cleared his throat. "Captain er—"

"*Milkherem*," said Tabnit.

"Captain *Milkherem*," said Legolas, "I am Legolas of the Woodland Realm; my father is King Thranduil of Eryn Lasgalen—"

"I told you he was *regal*—"

"Be quiet."

"My wife is sister to the King of Rohan. Our families will pay handsomely to have us and our people returned to Eryn Carantaur."

"How much?"

"Name your price," said Legolas.

"Well now," said *Milkherem*. He carefully laid down his dividers and sat on the cabin's only chair. "I can get five hundred gold pieces for a strong man. Two thousand for a fair young woman. As many as five thousand for your wife if she's as tasty as my men say she is. And, as for you..." He grinned, showing a row of ugly black teeth. "Oh, there's more than one rich man in Far Harad that would pay ten thousand to have *you* in his bed. A couple of rich old women, too. Though whether you'd survive the night..." He picked his ear with his finger. "There are



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three more elves down there, you say?" he asked Tabnit.

"Yes sir."

"Good looking?"

"I suppose, so, sir," said Tabnit, uncomfortably.

"Fifty thousand—"

"Done," said Legolas.

"—*if* I was interested in a ransom. But I'm not."

Legolas was taken aback. "Why ever not?"

"Because I have regular customers," said Milkherem. "I've already promised them something special and I never break my word—at least, not where business is concerned." He turned to Tabnit. "Take him back to the hold."

Tabnit jerked Legolas from the cabin by his chain. "Pity about the ring," he said.

...

Eowyn watched anxiously as the man pushed Legolas down onto his knees and reattached his chain to the wall. Legolas waited until they were alone. "I am sorry, melmenya," he said, softly. "I tried to buy our freedom but the captain refused a ransom. It is as the woman said: he intends to sell us in Far Harad and he does not want to disappoint his customers." He struggled into a sitting position. "How are *you*, my love?"

Eowyn smiled. "I am still hungry and my arms ache. But I am fine otherwise," she said. "I have saved you some bread."

Legolas shuffled close and kissed her forehead. She laid her head on his shoulder. "I am sorry that I gave your ring away," he said.

"You did the right thing," said Eowyn firmly. "It might have worked—it was well worth the risk. And," she added, "I will replace it as soon as we are freed."

"Melmenya—"

"They will have missed us by now, Legolas. Haldir will be coming for us."

"If he can find us."

"*Faramir* will find us," said Eowyn, confidently. "Faramir is clever. He will realise what has happened and will follow our trail. *He* will find us."

...

"Who's knocking at this hour?"

"How should I know, my dear? *JUST A MINUTE*," the man shouted, pulling on his breeches, "*YES! I'M COMING!*" He stumbled over to the bedroom window and pushed open the shutters. "Yes? Who is it?"

"Captain Brentor? I once hired you to ferry me to Pelargir, and—I am sorry to disturb you at this hour, but I am in need of your services again."

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"Is that Prince Faramir?"

"Yes."

"Just a moment, your Highness; I'll be down straightaway."

Brentor shut the window and turned back to his wife but she had overheard his conversation and was already struggling to pull on her dress.

"Prince Faramir!" she said. "And with the place in such a state... Is there anybody with him?"

"Yes," said Brentor, lacing his jerkin, "an elf."

"Prince Legolas?"

"No. No, much bigger than him. Must be from the colony, though."

"I wonder why they're wanting to travel at this time of night?"

"That," said Brentor, "is not for us to ask."

"Make sure you get paid extra for the inconvenience."

Brentor grunted. He descended the stair and opened the heavy front door. "Come in, your Highness." He turned to Haldir, "Sir..."

"Please, sit down, your Highness, my lord," said his wife. "May I fetch you a drink?"

The man glanced at his elven companion. The elf nodded.

"Ale would be most welcome if you have it, Mistress," said Faramir.

"Of course, your Highness."

The prince turned back to Brentor. "We need to hire your boat, Captain Brentor, immediately. Some of our friends have been kidnapped by slavers—"

"Slavers!"

"—if we can get to Pelargir and find passage down to Umbar, we hope to get them back. We will, of course, pay you double for the inconvenience of the hour—"

"We would not hear of it, your Highness," said the woman, handing Faramir a tankard of ale with a curtsy.

...

### **Two days later**

"Can you smell it?" asked Legolas, softly.

"The rotten wood, the rats or the sewage?" said Eowyn.

Legolas smiled, sadly. "The sea, melmenya," he said. "We are crossing the Anduin delta, where the river mingles with the sea. I can smell the salt."

They were lying facing each other, as close as the chains would allow, but Eowyn tried to shuffle closer. "No, I cannot smell it," she said. "Are you going to be all right, my love?"

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Legolas smiled again. "I think so, Eowyn *nín*." Then he added, "Do you ever think about the light?"

"You mean... The light I saw when"—she smiled—"it sounds so foolish—when I was *dead*?"

He nodded.

"Sometimes, as I fall asleep, I dream I am seeing it again."

"Do you ever wish that you had walked into it?"

"No!" She pulled at her chains, trying to reach out to him. "Never!"

"I think that the sea is my light," said Legolas. "And I think that—as long as you are holding my hand, *melmenya*—I will always want to stay here, with you."

Eowyn smiled but her eyes were glistening with tears. With her wrists chained behind her back there was no possibility of holding his hand.

...

Flying towards the great river delta, littered with tiny black ships, the roc gazed in wonder at the landscape to the east—forests of tall, leafy trees; water spilling unchecked over rocks and rapids; and *grass*—acres and acres and acres of tall grass—not dry and burnt but green and sweet-smelling. And she knew that somewhere in this extraordinary land, which her master had called South Ithilien, she would find what she was looking for.

...

"Your Highness—it's time to wake up," said Brentor, tentatively shaking Faramir by the shoulder.

"Are we there?"

"Just coming into the harbour."

"Where is Haldir?"

"Already up on deck, your Highness. They don't sleep much do they?"

Faramir tried to rub some life back into his stiff limbs. "No—elves do not generally need to sleep unless they are injured. In fact, they hardly need to rest at all." He picked up his cloak and draped it over his shoulders.

"Wish I could say the same," said Brentor, leading him up the companionway. "Just think how much time I'd have in the tavern. And still be awake to listen to the wife."

Faramir laughed. "How much do I owe you, Captain?"

"Just the usual—ten gold pieces, sir."

"You are sure?" asked Faramir. "It was your wife who agreed to the standard fee."

"She'd skin me alive if I took any more from you, your Highness."

Faramir opened his money pouch and counted out the coins. The man accepted them with a courteous bow.

"Now, as I said, your Highness," he said, "look for Captain Oliel at the sign of the *Staggering*

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*Pirate*. Tell him I sent you. I'd take you to Umbar myself, if the *Sunlight* were a bit sturdier. But —though she's a lot of heart—she could easily break up if the weather's rough in the straits of Tolfalas."

"I understand, Captain Brentor," said Faramir. He shook the man's hand. "Thank you for your help, my friend."

...

Now that the slave ship had left the narrow confines of the River Anduin, the prisoners were allowed to walk around the deck—though chained together in pairs to deter them from jumping overboard and trying to swim ashore.

Valandil formally introduced himself to his companion.

"I know who you are," she said. "You are the one who had the water poured over his head."

"Yes. I am sorry," said Valandil.

"It is easy to provoke them," said the woman. "I do not think they like their work."

"No? It seems to me that they enjoy it immensely."

"They may enjoy threatening us," said the woman, "but their threats are empty. They cannot harm us or we will lose our value. I imagine that if they injured us, they would themselves be punished."

Valandil turned to her in surprise. "That is probably true. What is your name, my lady?"

"Wilawen, daughter of Geruil," said the woman. "My father is a lapidary in Minas Tirith. We were collecting figured stones on the bank of the Anduin when I was taken."

"Why did they not take your father?"

"They judge by appearances, Master Valandil," said the woman. "My father is neither strong enough to labour nor comely enough to bed. To them he was worthless."

"You speak plainly, Mistress Wilawen," said Valandil.

"I speak the truth," said Wilawen. Then she added, softly, "It will be *my* lot to labour."

...

Faramir looked along the wharf. Between the tall warehouses, the busy streets were filled with a riot of trade signs advertising boarding-houses, shops, breweries, and taverns. "Sailor's Row..." he muttered, scanning the street names.

"Over there," said Haldir. He led the way along the quay, threading between crowds of waiting passengers. "What was the tavern called?"

"The *Staggering Pirate*," said Faramir. "There it is, beside the pipe weed shop." They walked carefully down the narrow alley, stepping over piles of rubbish and horse manure.

Haldir pushed open the inn door and they stepped inside. "*Charming*," he said, softly.

Faramir approached the bar and, smiling at the landlord, rested his hand on the counter, making sure that the other man could see the gold piece 'hidden' between his finger and thumb. "I am looking for the friend of a friend," he said. "A Captain Oliel."

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The landlord laid his own hand, palm up, on the bar, waited for Faramir to drop the coin into it, then said, softly, "Over by the fire—a jug of sack, was that, sir?"

"Yes," said Faramir. "And three glasses."

"Very good sir. I'll bring it over."

Beckoning to Haldir, Faramir took a seat opposite the sleeping man. "Captain Oriel," he said, softly but firmly, "Captain Brentor recommends you."

The sea captain raised his head from his arms and stared at Faramir for a moment. Then he looked across at Haldir. "Don't see many elves in places like this," he said.

"Our friends have been kidnapped by slavers, Captain," said Faramir. "We need passage to Umbar—"

"Umbar, you say," said Oriel, suddenly alert. "Where were they taken? And when?"

"About forty miles south of Emyrn Arnen, before dawn, three days ago," said Haldir.

Oriel nodded. "The only slaver that's been through Pelargir in the past week is the *True Friend*—Captain Milkherem. He tried to sneak some of his men ashore without paying harbour dues. There was a right to-do."

"When was that?" asked Faramir. He poured the man a glass of sack.

"Night before last," said Oriel. "He's got about a day and a half on you."

"Will you take us to Umbar?" asked Haldir.

"He isn't going to Umbar, my friend," said the man. He took a large draught of sack. "Good stuff—Milkherem sells his cargo in Carhilibren. It's a port further south."

"Yes, I've heard of it," said Faramir. "What makes you so sure?"

"I know him," said Oriel. "Made it my business to know *all* of them, over the years," he added, darkly. "The price will be twenty gold, each. Now give me another glass of sack, my friends, and we'll make a start."

...

"The strange thing is," said Eowyn, as they walked along the deck, holding hands, "I have always wanted to see Umbar."

Legolas smiled. "Why is that, melmenya?"

"When I was young, a man came to Edoras—a merchant from the south. He sold embroidered rugs and jewelled lanterns and perfumes... and strange fruits packed in boxes of sugar. And he told such tales!"

"I love you, melmenya," said Legolas, softly.

She turned towards him, smiling, but, as her eye fell on the sky behind him, her reply died on her lips and, instead, she cried, "*Down!*" And she pushed him to the deck and lay over him, shielding him, as a giant bird swept down from the sky and, passing only inches above her, seized Valandil in its talons, and—together with his helpless companion—carried him away.

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## Chapter 2: The market

**"A bow," cried Legolas, scrambling to his feet and dragging Eowyn behind him. "Give me a bow, for pity's sake!"**

"Too late," said Captain Milkherem. Shading his eyes with his hand, he watched the bird as it disappeared into the distance. "Far too late. If you shot it now they would both drown. Gods' turds, that creature may have cost me five thousand gold!"

He looked at Legolas. "Are you *really* that good with a bow?"

Legolas did not answer.

"That might increase your value..." Milkherem turned to the rest of the prisoners. "There is nothing to be done," he said. "Keep walking or go back inside."

"What will happen to them?" asked Eowyn as they began to pace the deck again.

"I have no idea, *melmenya*," said Legolas. Then, suddenly remembering himself, he asked, anxiously: "Did I hurt you—dragging you like that?"

"Not really."

"That means 'yes'. Let me see your wrist. Oh, Eowyn *nín*, I am so sorry." Very gently, he wrapped his hand around the red marks.

...

The bird was flying steadily southwards, holding Valandil in its talons. The woman was hanging, by her unfettered hand, from his belt but the elf could already feel the leather beginning to give. *It is stretching*, he thought. *Soon it will snap...* With an effort, he pulled his arm free of the eagle's claw and reached down.

"Give me your hand," he cried.

"I cannot," the woman shouted, "I will fall!"

Leaning down against the talon's razor-sharp edge, Valandil grasped her arm and pulled her upwards. "Can you find a foothold?" he shouted.

"I—I think—yes, I *have*!"

"Good—let go of my belt—put your arm around my neck—yes—good!"

Straightening up at last, Valandil released the woman's arm, slid his hand behind her back, and pulled her close.

*We should be safe now*, he thought. *At least, until it lands.*

...

Haldir stood on the aft deck of the *Hunter*, gazing out to sea.

"Is it a woman?" asked Captain Oliel.

"A woman?"

"They took from you?"

## The strange sea road

"What makes you say that?"

"I've heard that elves are attracted to the sea," said Oliel, "but you're not interested in the water. And I've seen that look on my own face." He sighed. "Seven years ago they took my wife—the sweetest little thing you ever saw. Took her while I was away at sea. I've searched the entire coast of Near Harad, combed the streets of Umbar and Carhivren, followed every lead I was ever given. I've got to know all the slave captains, their routes, and most of their regular customers. I could run a slaving operation myself, if I wanted..."

"And still you have not found her?"

"No."

"Valar!"

"I have helped find others, but I have never found *her*. I wasn't soon enough, my friend," said Oliel. "She'd been gone three months before I started looking. And they keep no records, these people. You're relying on their memories—that, and their willingness to talk. But *you'll* be following close in your woman's footsteps. And you look like the sort who can afford to pay for information. Yes, I've helped a few like you get their women back."

"She is not *my* woman," said Haldir.

"No?" Oliel sounded surprised.

"No. But I once promised to be there if ever she needed me."

...

"Legolas," said Eowyn softly.

They were back in the hold, chained to the wall by the ankles, now, and able, at last, to lie in each other's arms.

"Mmm?"

"Do not despair."

Legolas raised his head. "What shall I do without you, *meleth nín*?" he asked, sadly.

"You will wait for me," said Eowyn.

Legolas smiled. "You put me to shame, *melmenya*."

Eowyn shook her head. "You worry about your people," she said. "That shows you are a good ruler. But Valandil is a strong, capable elf. He will escape from the bird and find his way back to Eryn Carantaur."

"I have seen eagles *tear* their prey..." said Legolas.

"*Shhhh!*" She pressed her fingers against his lips. "If it comes to that, it will be a quick death, my love," she said.

...

The roc was nearing home. Trees and grass and running water were just a memory now. *This* was her world: hot, dry and empty—

The attack came from above: sharp talons slicing past her head.

## The strange sea road

A male, out hunting. Just a warning. She kept flying.

The male threatened again—closer now—trying to scare her into giving up her prey. She picked up speed and flew low. But he was clever, shooting out of the sun to take her by surprise and scratch her breast with the tip of his claw.

Now she had no choice but to fight back.

Flying lower still, and crying out a prayer of protection, she dropped the little creatures into the sand. When she had dealt with the male roc she would come back for them.

...

Captain Oliel spread the chart out on the table. "We, my friends," he said, "are here, just west of Tolfalas. If the wind holds fair it will take us five or six days to round the coast and reach Carhivilven, *here*."

"By which time," said Faramir, "this Milkherem will already have been there for—what?—two days?"

Oliel shook his head. "Depends on the wind," he said. "If he hits a lull we might catch him up."

"And if we hit a lull," said Haldir, "we could lose him altogether."

"Will he sell them the moment he lands?" asked Faramir.

"Depends," said Oliel. "Sometimes they need cleaning up—then he takes them to a safe house on the edge of the desert until they're ready. That can take anything from a day to a week or two depending"—he glanced at Haldir—"well, depending. But he'll sell them as soon as he can."

"Is there a market every day?"

"Every day except holy days, my friend," said Oliel. "Very superstitious people, the Haradrim. But most days there's an auction of some sort, even if it's only cattle that's on sale."

"Gods!" muttered Faramir.

...

"Are you all right?" asked Wilawen.

Valandil tested each limb in turn. "Yes, thank the Valar," he said. "You?"

"I think so."

"Let us try to stand."

It took several attempts to co-ordinate their movements but, eventually, they managed to struggle to their feet.

"Which way shall we go?" asked Wilawen. "We need water. And shade."

"Towards the coast," said Valandil. "That way."

"How do you know?"

"I can smell the sea."



## The strange sea road

Wilawen looked dubious but did not contradict him. "Can you tell how far it is?"

"Not far. A few miles. The bird was following the shoreline."

"Do you think we can walk that far? In this heat? Without water?"

"I do not know, *hiril nin*," said Valandil. "But I do not think we have any choice."

...

Each night, the sailors snuffed out the lanterns, leaving the hold pitch dark. Eowyn could see nothing, but hear everything—the breathing, the sighing, the sobbing.

*This, she thought, is always the worst time.*

Except that, tonight, she could touch Legolas.

She slid her hand up his chest, his throat, over his chin, pressed her fingers to his mouth, and felt his lips kiss her fingertips in response. Smiling, she rolled onto her side and buried her face in his hair. Then, tracing her way up his jaw with her lips, she pressed her mouth to his ear—feeling his body shudder beneath her as her breath caressed his skin—and she whispered, "Can you see me?"

"No, *melmenya*," he whispered back.

"So no one else can see me, either.."

His hand, resting on her back, squeezed her gently.

"Keep quiet," she whispered. She slid her hand down his bare chest—the slavers had stolen the fastenings from his tunic—to the laces of his leggings, pulled them gently, then slipped her hand inside the fabric.

He was rock hard.

She smiled against his ear. "It has been a long time." She felt him nod his head.

Slowly, she pushed herself up and leaned across his body, lowering her mouth towards her hand. Her lips brushed his hot flesh and she smiled when it jerked.

"Shhhh," she whispered, licking the very tip of him.

He jerked again, and she giggled soundlessly. "I love you," she whispered, and she began to explore the head of his *ceber* with her lips, gently familiarising herself with its smooth, smooth curves and the beautiful deep crease down its centre. She pressed her tongue into its opening. *Oh gods, I want him*, she thought. And she reached down to unlace her own leggings but, before she could free herself, she felt Legolas grasp a handful of her hair and she knew he was close.

She could wait.

She cupped one hand round his *ceryn*, supporting their weight, and took the head of his *ceber* into her mouth, and sucked. Straight away his hips rose right off the floor and twisted, as though in pain, and she felt his hand move again and she knew that he had jammed it into his mouth to stifle his cry of release—but she still heard him gasp out loud as he came.

...

"Listen," said Valandil. "Running water!"

### **The strange sea road**

They had been walking, the elf judged, for almost two hours. Fortunately, the sun had set only moments after they had landed, disappearing suddenly—without warning or lingering sunset—leaving the air cooler. But the sand beneath their feet was still hot, and it crumbled away with each step, making the going hard, even for an elf.

"Thank the gods," Wilawen whispered. Her voice was almost gone.

Valandil did not know how long a woman could survive such hardship, and he was suddenly assailed by an image of what he would have to do if she were to die, chained to him by the wrist...

That decided it. Squandering his own strength, he lifted her over his shoulder and struggled towards a rocky ridge—the only feature he had seen in this featureless sea of sand. As he reached the crest, his legs gave way and he fell to his knees, and the weight of the woman carried him forwards, down onto his face.

He heard her head hit the ground with a sickening thud.

*Valar, no!*

But then he felt her move.

"Thank the gods," she said, again, and this time her voice seemed stronger. "Look, Valandil!"

He dragged himself up out of the sand, spitting the grains from his mouth, crawled alongside her and peered over the rocky edge into a hollow basin, perhaps a mile in diameter, filled with a forest of strange trees...

"I have read about places like this," said Wilawen, "they are called 'oases'."

"Can you stand?" asked Valandil.

"To reach water? I could dance," she said.

The elf laughed. "Come, then."

They could rise without much difficulty now, the long walk across the sand having given them practice, and they had tacitly agreed that Valandil should take the lead in any manoeuvre. "Follow in my footsteps," he said.

By the light of the moon they carefully picked their way down the slope, through a forest of date palms and fig trees—"These fruits are edible," said Wilawen—following the sound of the stream.

At last they emerged into a clearing.

"There," gasped Valandil, pointing to a small spring bubbling up from between the rocks.

Laughing, they fell to their knees and drank their fill.

And neither of them noticed the strange pairs of eyes, *watching*...

...

### **Three days later**

Eowyn sighed with something like contentment. As terrifying as the situation was, she could not remember ever having felt so loved as she did now, lying in Legolas' arms. *If only we could stay like this forever*, she thought.

## The strange sea road

"We are approaching land," said Legolas, softly. "I can hear it."

"Hear what, Lassui?"

"A city, melmenya," he said, "a city full of people."

"This may be it," she said softly.

"Remember what I told you," said Legolas. "All you have to do is wait." He kissed her temple.

...

"All right, you lot," cried Tabnit, throwing open the door. "Journey's end."

One by one he unlocked the prisoners and pushed them towards his companion, who chained them together in a long line and led them up on deck.

"All present and correct, sir," he said to Milkherem.

The captain examined his cargo critically. "Not in bad shape," he said. "Take them to Arinna's for a quick clean up. I want them sold tonight."

...

'Arinna's' was a bawdy house on the outskirts of town.

As the sailors dragged him through its wrought-iron gates, Legolas noted the heavy wooden doors, the patterned gratings covering the windows and the armed men lounging nonchalantly amongst the girls.

*This is no ordinary brothel, he thought. This is a gilded prison.*

*Eowyn does not belong in a place like this.*

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. He could think of no words to express how much he loved her and wanted to protect her, so he said nothing and, instead, pressed his lips to her temple.

"Stop that," yelled the sailor called Hasdrubal, roughly pulling them apart. He summoned a young woman with a jerk of his head. "Go with Ipi," he said to Legolas. "And don't try anything stupid. There's no way out of this house."

"I shall not go anywhere without my wife," said Legolas, firmly.

With a menacing smile, Hasdrubal drew his long, curved sword. "*You*," he said, "have just made my day. You have been asking for this ever since we left Gondor, you pretty-boy—"

"No!" cried Eowyn, throwing herself in front of Legolas. "No—please!" She laid her hand on the man's arm. "*Please*," she said softly.

"Leave it, Hasdrubal," said Tabnit. "You know he's worth more than the rest of them put together."

Reluctantly, Hasdrubal lowered his blade.

"Go with her, Legolas; I will be all right," said Eowyn.

The elf looked into her eyes. "Good bye," he mouthed.

## The strange sea road

...

Dazed with grief, Legolas allowed Ipi to lead him down the narrow corridor to an opulent bathroom at the back of the house. The girl closed and locked the door.

"You take off," she said, miming removing her own clothes.

When Legolas did not obey, she unlaced his leggings herself, pulling roughly at the fabric and giggling when her fingers brushed his penis.

"No!" cried Legolas, catching her hands.

The girl pointed to the bath. "You take off," she repeated.

"Yes. I will do it myself," he agreed. "You go."

But the girl showed no signs of leaving.

Sighing, Legolas slipped behind a filigree screen, slowly removed his tattered leggings and the remnants of his tunic, and began to climb, wearily, into the bath.

The girl stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"What?" he asked.

She looked down at his groin and giggled again, saying something in her own language and pointing.

Legolas shook his head in disbelief.

"I wash you," she said.

"No. I shall wash myself," said Legolas, firmly. And, sitting down in the water, he took a cake of scented soap and began to work it into a lather. When he glanced up again the girl had disappeared. With a sigh of relief, he leaned back against the cool marble and closed his eyes...

"Ipi didn't exaggerate," said a voice.

Legolas opened his eyes again, startled.

A crowd of young women had appeared from nowhere and were standing around the bath, gazing at him through the water. The speaker was a well-preserved older woman with an air of authority. "You *are* beautiful," she said. "And you *are* endowed like a horse..."

The girls giggled.

With elven speed, Legolas leaped out of the bathtub, grabbed a towel, and wrapped it around his waist.

"Pity," said the woman. "Off you go girls. There are two others..."

She turned back to Legolas. "Can I get you a drink, Master Elf?" She walked over to the sideboard and filled two frosted glass goblets with chilled cordial.

Legolas looked around for his leggings.

The woman handed him a glass. "My name is Arinna and this is my house," she said, smiling.

## The strange sea road

"Your *brothel*," said Legolas.

"Such a nasty word." She touched her goblet to his then took a sip. "Go on—drink—it isn't poisoned."

Legolas sighed. Naturally, he was suspicious but he had had practically nothing to drink for the last five days. He took a cautious sip—the cordial had a fresh, pleasant taste—then drained the goblet. "Where are my clothes, madam?" he asked.

"*You* are overdressed already," said the woman, playfully. She ran her cool fingertips down his bare chest. "Flawless," she said. Then, without warning, she thrust her hand inside his towel and cupped him. "Gods, that feels good. I may decide to keep you for myself."

Legolas caught her wrist and tried to pull her hand away but she was deceptively strong and he was painfully aware that a single squeeze would bring him to his knees...

"I am married, madam," he stammered.

Arinna laughed. "Not any more! You are whatever your master—or mistress—says you are."

"Where is my wife?"

"The woman dressed like a man? In the next room," she said.

Legolas' heart leaped. "May I see her?"

"If you're a *good* boy I may allow it." The woman moved her fingertips encouragingly, stroking him just behind his *ceryn*.

"Madam!"

"So polite," she said, standing on tiptoe to give his mouth a lingering kiss. "*Pleasure* me, Master Elf. I have a fancy for it. *Pleasure* me and, if I enjoy it, I'll let you see your wife."

"I love her," said Legolas. "I will not betray her."

"Now that's *not* being a good boy," said the woman. "I can see that I shall have to persuade you—one way or another." She curled her fingers around him and began to work him, expertly. "My skills are legendary," she purred in his ear. "I make strong men weep..."

"I am not a *man*, madam," said Legolas, a trifle breathlessly. "And we elves—we cannot be persuaded. Where there is no love, our bodies will not perform." But she was not lying about her prowess and he unconsciously gritted his teeth.

Encouraged, the woman smiled. "The impotent come to me for relief," she said.

Legolas was breathing hard now. He grasped her shoulder. "What did you give me in that drink?" he panted. "If I am forced against my will I will *die*, madam!"

The woman's hand stopped in mid stroke. "Is that true?"

"Yes." His voice sounded strange.

"By the gods," she whispered, "from *what*?"

"Violation tears an elf's spirit from his body," said Legolas. Then he added, plaintively, "Will you *please* remove your hand, madam?"

"What? Oh, yes. Yes, I'm sorry." She released him, and drew her hand out from under his

## The strange sea road

towel, carefully straightening the fabric. "What a disappointment," she said. "Does Milkherem know about this?"

Legolas was confused. "Milkherem? Why should it concern him?"

"What do you think his customers are paying for? Something exotic in the bedroom. You'd better pray that no one else finds out you're worthless."

Legolas said nothing.

"So you can only do it with your wife?"

Legolas nodded.

"But you could do it with others *before* you were married?"

Legolas blushed.

"I see," she said, thoughtfully. "*Hmm*. Here, put these on."

She handed him a pair of white silk trousers and watched as, his back turned to her, he stripped off his towel and stepped into them. "Gods," she said, "look at those thighs! I'd pay a thousand gold for an hour on the divan with you..."

She shook her head. "Come on—I must be getting soft in my old age—I'll take you to your wife. And you needn't worry about the cordial—it was just a few herbs to help you perform better. Quite harmless. Your wife will thank me."

...

"The wind's dropping," said Oriel.

"How far do we still have to travel?" asked Faramir.

"Almost two hundred miles. We'll add more sail and make the most of what there is. And if we find ourselves completely becalmed, we'll send out the boats—see if we can tow ourselves back into wind."

...

Arinna unlocked the door. "Go on," she said, standing aside, "you have half an hour."

"Thank you," said Legolas.

The woman smiled. "I *won't* say it's my pleasure," she said. She turned to Eowyn. "I do hope you realise what a lucky woman you are." She winked at Legolas as she closed the door.

"What did she mean?" asked Eowyn, hugging him tightly.

"Nothing, *melmenya*. Have they hurt you?"

"No. No; in fact, they have been quite kind." She took his hands and led him to a divan in the corner of the room. "There is no way out, is there?"

"Not from here," said Legolas. "But there may be an opportunity at the market."

"Legolas," said Eowyn, "I want you to promise me something; I want you to promise me that if you get the chance to escape on your own, you will take it—"

## The strange sea road

"Melmenya!"

"Think about it, my love. If you were free, you could get help. For all of us."

Legolas lifted her hands to his lips. "I will promise on one condition," he said.

"What?"

"That you promise the same." He took her in his arms. "Melmenya..."

"Mmmmm?"

"Our time together is very short."

"I know."

He hesitated. "I do not want to make love, Eowyn *nín*. Not now. I just want to hold you."

Eowyn raised her head from his shoulder and smiled at him. "*Gerich veleth nín, edhel nín*," she said.

...

"Out you go girls," cried Arinna. "Go on! Shoo!" She chased Ipi through the door and closed it behind her. "Now..."

She smoothed her hands over her close-fitting gown. "Good evening, gentlemen," she said, to the pair of dishevelled elves sitting on the divan. "My name is Arinna, and this is my house..."

...

As the sun was setting, the prisoners were loaded onto an ox cart.

"Where is Orodreth?" said Eowyn, looking round. "And Camthalion?"

"I do not know, melmenya... What have you done with our friends, the two elves?" he asked one of the more reasonable sailors.

"They are staying here," said the man.

"Why?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

The journey took them through the souk, along twisting, cobbled streets lined with wooden stalls—some crammed with carpets, others with fabrics, or exotic fruits, or with spices and unguents, and all lit by sparkling lanterns—until they reached the market place, a small open space lit with flaming torches and crowded with people.

Hasdrubal stopped the cart beside a low wooden platform.

"Get out," he grunted.

Still chained together, the prisoners scrambled awkwardly to the ground and, prodded by the sailors, clambered up onto the stage. Milkherem, already waiting, looked them over critically. "Where are the other elves?" he asked. Hasdrubal handed him a letter. Milkherem broke the seal, quickly read its contents, grunted, then turned to the man on his left. "Start the proceedings," he said.

## The strange sea road

The auctioneer stepped forward. "Ladies and gentlemen," he called, projecting his voice above the din.

Cries of "It's starting," and "*Shhhh, shhhh*," rippled through the crowd.

"Welcome!" began the auctioneer. He paused whilst four attendants carrying a curtained palanquin pushed their way to the front. They set their burden on the ground and one of them drew back the translucent draperies to reveal the occupant, an elderly but attractive woman clad in a magnificent jewelled robe.

The auctioneer nodded politely to the newcomer then began again. "Welcome, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "tonight we have some exceptionally fine merchandise to delight you." He gestured to Hasdrubal. The sailor pushed Legolas into the centre of the stage. An awed gasp arose from the crowd, and the rich woman in the palanquin clapped her hands with delight.

"Lot one," said the auctioneer, "a beautiful male elf, native of South Ithilien. Just take a moment to examine him, ladies and gentlemen..." He paused.

Legolas stood, tall and, despite his chains, graceful, clad in white silk trousers and a scarlet sash, his hair loose, his arms folded across his bare chest. "Suitable, as you can see, for the bedroom," said the auctioneer, "but also—I am told—an excellent archer. What am I bid for this perfect specimen?"

"A thousand gold!" cried a man standing at the back of the crowd.

"Two thousand!" shouted another.

The rich woman raised her fan. "The lady bids three thousand," said the auctioneer.

"Four thousand," said the first bidder.

"Five!"

The woman raised her fan again. "Six," said the auctioneer. "Any advance on six thousand gold pieces?"

"Seven."

"New bidder, on the right," said the auctioneer. "I have seven. Do I hear eight?"

The woman raised her fan.

"Eight. Do I hear nine?"

"Nine!" cried the first bidder.

The woman raised her fan.

"The lady bids ten. I have ten; do I hear eleven, gentlemen?"

"Eleven," said the man on the right.

"Twelve!" cried the woman.

"Fourteen!"

The woman leaped to her feet. "Sixteen!" she shouted, shrilly.

The crowd gasped.



## The strange sea road

"Do I hear seventeen? Seventeen, anybody? No? If there are no more bids the elf is sold." He looked around the crowd. "SOLD to the lady!"

Hasdrubal grasped Legolas' arm and dragged him over to his new owner.

"Do not hurt him!" cried the woman, anxiously. "Here, my dear," she said to Legolas, "here; sit beside me."

"Madam—"

"A moment, my dear; let me take these horrible things off your hands." She turned to Hasdrubal. "The key, if you please."

Grumbling something about the worthlessness of pretty-boy slaves, Hasdrubal removed the manacles himself.

"Be careful! Do not scratch him!" cried the woman. She waited until Hasdrubal had stamped away, then turned back to Legolas. "I am trusting you not to run away, my dear," she said. "Now, what was it you wanted to say?"

Legolas bit his lip. Begging did not come easily to the Prince of Mirkwood but, whilst he was hesitating, the auctioneer made a chilling announcement.

"Lots two and three have been withdrawn," he said. There was a murmur of disappointment. "So we'll move straight on to lot four, a golden-haired beauty, also of South Ithilien. Look at her, gentlemen!"

Arinna's girls had dressed Eowyn in a tiny pink bodice, which left her waist and most of her bosom bare, and a pair of soft, almost transparent, pink trousers. The lower half of her face was covered with a wispy veil, but her hair had been brushed until it shone and left loose about her shoulders.

The auctioneer removed her veil. "Just look at her! As pretty as a picture, as graceful as a gazelle. And I have it on good authority that she has never been with a man..."

"Buy her, my lady!" cried Legolas. "Please! Protect her from—from *them* and what they would do to her. I beg you! Please! I will do anything you ask of me, anything you want—"

"*Shhhhh, shhhhh,*" said the woman, patting his arm with genuine concern. "Who is she, my dear?"

Legolas considered lying to her. But something in the woman's gesture made him decide to trust to her good nature. "My wife," he said, quietly.

The woman lifted her hand and gently stroked his cheek.

"Do not be sad, my dear," she said. "I can go no higher than five thousand but we shall see what we can do."

\*\*\*\*\*

### Chapter 3: Balcony scene

**Valandil had misjudged the time, and the sun was already disappearing beneath the horizon.**

"Come on," cried Wilawen, desperately. "Hurry, Valandil! *Quickly!*"

The elf plucked two more figs and pushed them inside his tunic. Then he dropped to the ground and started running up the slope.

"They are behind you!" cried Wilawen.

Valandil kept running, all his senses straining. As he reached the narrow ledge, just below the cave mouth, one of the creatures attacked, narrowly missing the back of his leg. Valandil leaped forward, lost his footing, and stumbled...

*So this is it*, he thought.

But, when he looked up, Wilawen was standing beside him. "*Come on*," she urged, holding the vile things back with a flaming torch. "If they get inside the cave we are finished."

Valandil scrambled to his feet. Wilawen threw the torch into the midst of their tormentors and—whilst the monsters hissed and spat with anger—she grabbed Valandil's hand and, together, they threw themselves through the narrow opening and pushed the boulder into place.

...

At night, most of the *Hunter's* crew went down below to sleep. Tonight, with the ship becalmed, only a handful of sailors had been left on watch.

Haldir walked back and forth along the deck. The delay was unbearable.

*The True Friend could have landed this morning*, he thought. *They may have sold her already. And whoever buys her will only want one thing...*

He looked out across the empty sea. *Assuming, that is, that she is still alive*. He closed his eyes and tried to reach her with his mind—he knew that such things were possible amongst the High Elves...

*Nothing*. He shook his head. *But I would surely know if she were dead*, he thought. *I would sense her loss...*

Then another thought came to him, unbidden: *Legolas must be frantic*.

*Valar!* he thought, guiltily. *Imagine what he must be going through—unable to keep her safe from the sailors on the ship; unable to prevent them selling her to Mandos-knows-who when they reach land.*

*She may already have been violated. And Legolas too... If I ever get hold of the warg's members that took them!* He slammed his fist down on the ship's gunwale.

*That was foolish*, he thought, examining his hand.

He took a deep, calming breath.

*Flowers...*

*I can smell flowers; miles from anywhere...*

## The strange sea road

*Borne on the air! Is the wind picking up? He looked up at the sails. Could they be stirring? Yes! Yes, they are!* He looked to the men on watch, wondering why they were still so subdued. *The change is too slight for a man's senses to detect,* he thought. *They do not know yet.*

He hurried onto the aft deck. "What are your orders if the wind picks up?" he asked.

"We're to raise the Captain, immediately, sir."

"Then you had better do it," said Haldir. "You had better do it straight away!"

...

"Well, gentlemen," said the auctioneer, replacing Eowyn's veil. "You've seen the merchandise. Now, what am I bid for her?"

The woman who had bought Legolas began to raise her fan—

"Three thousand!"

"Three thousand from the gentleman at the front," said the auctioneer, nodding to the bidder.

"Four!" cried another voice.

"Four thousand from the back," said the auctioneer. "Any advance on four?"

"Five," said the woman, squeezing Legolas' hand.

"Six," said the man at the front. He was leaning on the stage, peering—Legolas was convinced—through Eowyn's almost transparent trousers.

"Any advance on six, ladies and gentlemen?" asked the auctioneer. "Do I hear seven? Seven, anyone?"

Legolas looked anxiously at Eowyn. She was holding her head high, staring bravely into the distance, but he knew that her indifference was only an act. Inside, she was terrified. He bit his lip; he was watching Eowyn so intently, he did not notice that the woman beside him was watching him with concern.

"I have seven!" cried the auctioneer. "Do I hear eight?"

Legolas wrung his hands in frustration. If only he had his bow... If only Gimli and Aragorn were with him...

"Are there any more bids, ladies and gentlemen? Any more bids for this lovely creature?" He looked around the crowd. The man at the front shook his head.

"SOLD! To the lady! You have bought a fine pair, madam."

Legolas turned to the woman in surprise.

"Well," she said, "I can always sell some jewellery. And it is worth an extra two thousand to see your lovely smile."

...

"We must leave tomorrow, at first light, after they have crawled back into their holes," said Wilawen, cutting the figs into quarters with the blade she had chipped from a stone. "We cannot risk another night. They know where we are hiding, now, and they have realised that we cannot fight back. I have been thinking—"

## The strange sea road

Valandil looked up from rubbing his twisted ankle. The courage and resourcefulness the woman had shown over the last three days—making the stone knife, using it to make fire, using the fire to help break their chains—were a constant source of amazement to him.

"Will you be fit to walk tomorrow?" Wilawen asked.

"Yes, it is only a slight strain."

"Could you walk without your boots?" She passed him his share of the figs, heaped on a flat stone.

"Without... Why?"

"Could you?"

"Yes."

"Over the hot sand?"

"Yes."

"And they are waterproof?"

He suddenly understood what she was about to suggest. "Of course! Though it will not be very pleasant."

"I think," said Wilawen, "that we can live with that—we can wash them out. They will carry enough water for, what, two days?"

"If we are careful. And provided we do not spill any."

"We can tie our belts around the tops to close them," she said. "We will start at dawn. We will pick enough dates and figs for two days—we can tear the hem off my skirt to carry them. The only question is, which way do we go?"

"To the coast," said Valandil. "I still think that is our best hope."

"Can you still smell the sea?"

"Faintly. It is over there." He pointed towards the back of the cave.

"That is settled then," said Wilawen. "Now *I* had better get some sleep."

"Here," said Valandil, slipping out of his tattered jerkin and folding it to form a pillow. He handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said, and she smiled for the first time in two days.

The elf watched over her until her breathing had slowed and steadied, and he was sure she was asleep. Then he leaned back against the cave wall and tried to rest.

*She is right, he thought. We were fortunate finding this cave that first night. But now they are getting too close. If it had not been for Wilawen and her torch, tonight, I would already be dragon food...*

...

"I am afraid that *you* will have to walk, my dear," said the woman to Legolas, "but your lady can ride beside me." She leaned towards him, as if about to share a confidence, "She does

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look very tired. *Rimush*," she called, to one of her attendants, "you must use the chains but be very careful—do not bruise his skin."

The attendant bowed.

"I am sorry, my dear, but I shall have to have you chained. It is only for form's sake and only until we reach the house. After that, you will be free to go wherever you like—as long as you promise, faithfully, to come back."

Legolas climbed down from the litter and helped Eowyn, who did, indeed, seem very tired, climb up beside the woman. "My lady," he said, tentatively, "what is your name?"

"My name is Hentmirë," said the woman, in her slightly child-like voice. "But I suppose you should call me 'mistress'."

The attendant, *Rimush*, slipped a pair of ornate, padded manacles over Legolas' wrists. The elf bit his lip. "Of course, mistress," he said. *Rimush* locked the manacles to the hand rail of the palanquin. "My name is Legolas. And this is Eowyn."

"Leg-o-las," said Hentmirë, experimentally.

The four attendants lifted the litter and began forcing their way through the crowd. Legolas walked beside them.

"It means Greenleaf," said Eowyn.

The other woman turned to her in surprise.

"Legolas," said Eowyn. "It means Greenleaf. Why did you buy him, my lady?"

"I..." Hentmirë shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose I was carried away by his beauty. And then I bought you to make him happy."

Eowyn smiled, sadly. "And how do you intend"—she cleared her throat—"to use him?"

"Use him? My dear, I would never *use* him!" Hentmirë smoothed the skirt of her jewelled robe. "No. I thought it would be nice to... to dress him in nice clothes and... and... sing with him—yes—I have heard that elves are *beautiful* singers—and to talk with him. And I can take him for walks..."

"And take him to *bed* with you?" asked Eowyn, very, very softly.

"My dear!"

"I am sorry, my lady," said Eowyn, bowing her head.

"And so you should be! Of course not," said Hentmirë. "I am a *maiden* lady. I do not... I *would* not..."

"I am sorry, my lady," Eowyn repeated.

"But he is so very beautiful," said Hentmirë, wistfully. "Perhaps, if I were younger..."

...

Hentmirë's house was in the most salubrious part of town—a strange collection of walls, and arches, and towers with onion-shaped roofs, all painted sugar-pink and wrapped around a large central courtyard—closed off from the road by high, wrought-iron gates. The attendants waited for the gatekeeper to open up, then carried the palanquin into the courtyard and set it

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down before the great double-doors.

"Unlock him, Rimush," said the lady of the house. "Come, my dear—and you, too, Eowyn—let me show you where you will be living."

She led them into the massive reception hall, waving away a serving girl who came running up to take her cloak and fan, and up the broad staircase to an open landing that ran around the four sides of the hall. "This," she said, pointing to one of the arched doors, "is *my* bedroom. And this one," she turned the corner and stopped beside the next door, "is yours."

She waited; then, after a few moments, she whispered to Legolas, "*Open the door, my dear.*"

"Oh..." Legolas opened the door, wondering whether he should bow.

"There," said Hentmirë. "You have your own bathing room, through there, and a balcony overlooking the garden—see."

"It is very nice, my lady," said Legolas, politely.

"I am so glad you like it," she said, beaming happily. "Now, I am sure that you would like to bathe, Eowyn, so we will give you some privacy. I just need to talk to Legolas"—she faltered slightly over his name—"about his duties tomorrow."

...

*What a strange situation, thought Eowyn, as she waited for the servant to draw her bath. We are her slaves and yet she is treating us like guests.*

*Treating Legolas like a guest. She is putting up with me for his sake.*

*And I wonder how long that will last.*

She walked over to the dressing table and examined the objects laid out on it—a mother of pearl comb, a carved, wooden hairbrush, and a silver hand mirror. *Legolas will like these.*

She picked up an ornate glass bottle and held it up to the light, watching the translucent glass, like an opal, change colour as she turned it this way and that.

*She obviously went to the slave market to buy herself an elf. And she fell in love with Legolas at first sight—I saw it happen.*

She pulled the leaf-shaped stopper from the bottle and sniffed its contents.

*But it is not the love of a woman for a man. At least, not yet. It is the love of a lonely little girl for a precious kitten. And that can be dangerous.*

The oil had a sharp, pleasant fragrance. *Lemons and spices but quite masculine...*

*We have no chains, no master cracking a whip, but—Gods!—what a strange situation.*

...

"Sit down," said Hentmirë, gesturing towards a low divan.

Legolas sat.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked, smiling.

Legolas hesitated. What did she want him to say? He decided to be honest. "No, my lady, it is

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late and I am concerned for Eowyn. She has been through a terrible ordeal."

The woman bit her lip. "Of course," she said. "I will not keep you long. It is just... My tailor will be coming tomorrow to measure you for your new clothes, so you will need to be dressed early. And then... Then, I thought it would be nice to go for a picnic. I shall have my cook prepare a meal for us and my men will carry us down to the sea." She smiled, "Is it true that elves love the sea?"

...

Legolas closed his bedroom door and leaned his back against it. *She has a good heart, he thought, kind and caring, and I do not want to hurt her.* To his surprise, he realised that he had begun to feel quite protective towards the strange, unworldly woman. *She treats me like a doll. But, then, she seems to know no better...*

*She rescued Eowyn from the slave market and for that I will always be in her debt.*

*But how can I live like this? How can Eowyn? What can—*

The sound of splashing water caught his attention. *Eowyn?* He followed the noise to the bathing room door and looked inside. *Yes, Eowyn.*

She was standing beside the bath, naked, her back turned towards him, her skin wet and glistening in the oil light, and his joy at the sight of her was so intense that he felt it, like a sharp stab, in his chest and his groin.

Still unaware of him, Eowyn leaned down gracefully, picked up a towel, and, singing softly to herself, began to dry her body, slowly stretching out each limb and patting it with the soft fabric. Legolas swallowed hard. Unconsciously, he untied his sash, unlaced his silk trousers and pulled them open.

Eowyn walked over to the dressing table, picked up an ornate glass bottle, poured a little lemon-scented oil into the palm of her hand, and began massaging it into her skin.

Already painfully aroused, Legolas approached her silently and, without warning, slipped his hands beneath her arms and pulled her back against his body, burying his face in the crook of her shoulder.

"OH!" Eowyn's cry was a heady mixture of surprise and pleasure.

Nipping the delicate skin of her neck, Legolas slid one hand down to her belly and pulled her closer. She began to struggle playfully, her buttocks rubbing against his impatient *ceber*. With a grunt of pure lust, Legolas exerted his elven strength and—still biting her neck—carried her out onto the balcony, laid her over the low marble wall, and sank himself deep inside her.

The night was warm and the air was filled with the heady scent of strange blossoms. A row of round paper lanterns glowed, like so many tiny suns, above Legolas' head. Familiar ripples of pleasure began to tease his *ceryn*.

*Sweet Eru, not yet!*

He drew himself out of her and breathed deeply, trying to will his climax away. But Eowyn had other ideas. Wriggling again, she brushed against his straining *ceber*, and Legolas, taken by surprise, exploded abruptly over her back and buttocks.

"Ai!" he cried with each groin-wrenching spasm, "Ai! AI!"

Eowyn lay quietly, waiting for him to recover.

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A split-second later Legolas pushed himself up on his arms and, still hard and now slick with seed, slipped back, full length, inside her.

"Yes," she whispered.

Slowly, he withdrew, and paused—enjoying the feel of the cool night air on his shaft and savouring the anticipation of his next thrust into her warmth. Then he entered her again, in one long, firm stroke.

"Gods!" she moaned.

Smiling, Legolas began to concentrate on pleasuring *her*, sliding his hand beneath her to caress her swollen flesh whilst he rode her masterfully, staying deep inside her, keeping his strokes hard, gradually varying his angle until he heard her gasp. *Oh yes!* he thought.

He withdrew one last time, and waited—still caressing her lightly—until she began to beg for release, then he plunged back inside her, smiling with satisfaction at her blood-curdling scream.

...

"You are *still* aroused," she whispered. They were lying, now, on the balcony floor. "And"—she curled her hand around him—"I *thought* it felt different. Gods, Lassui, what has happened to you?"

Legolas sighed. He had only just started to understand that himself. "The woman, Arinna, gave me a cordial," he said. "She told me it was harmless."

"But you are *bigger*—"

"I know."

"*Thicker*—"

"I know."

"Does it hurt?"

"It is certainly... insistent."

"Insistent?" Eowyn rolled over onto her stomach. "Then we had better give it what it wants," she said, stroking it. "Until it *stops* insisting."

"You are a wicked woman, melmenya."

"And you are lucky to have me."

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her fiercely. "I know that, Eowyn *nín*," he said. "I know!"

...

"No..." she said, dreamily, as he straddled her again. She wrapped her hand around him and held him, lovingly. "This time I want to see you. I want to watch you disappearing into my body."

The bed was too far away. He glanced around the balcony. There was only one answer. He lifted her to her feet and set her back on the marble wall. Then, standing between her spread legs, he took hold of himself, still stiffly upright and, watching her watch him, he entered her



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slowly, inch by inch.

"Oh, gods," she whimpered, reaching down to touch him.

He brushed her thick hair over her shoulder and pressed his lips to her ear. "Do you know how much I love you?" he asked. "And I told *you* to wait! I would not last an *hour* without you!"

"Nor I without you, Lassui," she whispered.

"I did not think we would be together again, like this, for a very long time." He kissed her cheek.

She closed her eyes and, arching her back, she began to ride him, her movements becoming more and more urgent until, suddenly, she stopped, with a violent shudder. "Gods," she moaned, laying her head on his shoulder.

"You almost came," he said, softly.

"But I did not want to," she said, "not yet. I want us to come together, Lassui."

He straightened up and, grasping her waist, began to thrust with a slow, steady rhythm. "Oh, that feels good," he whispered.

"You are so beautiful," said Eowyn tracing his features with her fingertip. "Your eyes, your sweet nose, your lips... *Oh...*" She closed her eyes and, leaning backwards, arched her back. "Harder," she whispered. "Harder, Lassui... Oh, my love... Yes, oh—yes. YES, LASSUI!"

...

Eowyn stroked him, gently. "Too tired to insist now," she said, smiling.

Legolas gathered her close.

...

## **Next morning**

"It is dawn," said Valandil, gently shaking Wilawen's shoulder.

She stared at him for a long moment, uncomprehending; then she sat up and stretched her limbs. "How is your ankle?" she asked, yawning.

"Better."

"Does it still seem like a good plan?"

Valandil nodded. "It is our only hope," he said. "Come."

Together, they rolled back the heavy stone and peered outside. During the night the creatures had been right outside the cave and, here and there, where the sand had been churned by their scaly bodies, there were slivers of shed skin.

Wilawen shuddered. "I never believed that such things existed," she said. "When we first found this place, I thought that the gods had blessed us."

"We had better hurry," said Valandil, "before the temperature begins to rise. Let me go out first."

Wilawen nodded.

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Slowly, the elf crawled through the narrow opening, stood, and looked down the slope into the trees. "It seems safe," he said.

Wilawen crawled out to join him. "We need enough fruit for two days," she said, tearing pieces of cloth from her skirt and handing him two. "Then we must wash out your boots and fill them with water."

Valandil nodded. "What is the other cloth for?" he asked.

"Something we can use if we ever find our way back to civilisation," she said, crawling back into the cave.

...

"Legolas?"

He was sitting on the balcony watching the sun rise, but his posture told her that his thoughts were troubled. Eowyn wrapped herself in a sheet and padded out to him.

"What is it, my love?" she asked, laying her hand on his back.

He turned his startling blue eyes on her, smiling sadly. "What am I to do, melmenya?" he asked, and it was not necessary for him to say anything more.

"For the time being," said Eowyn, "you must give her what she wants—"

"But—"

"Do not worry about *me*, Lassui. I trust you." She smiled, "Especially after last night—"

"Melmenya! Do not joke!" He sighed. "She wants to take me for a picnic today."

"Then let her. Flatter her; give her the attention she craves." She hugged him. "I know that you have begun to feel protective towards her, Legolas—*shhhh*, let me finish, my darling—I know. And I have said it before—it is in your nature to care for others, and I would not have you any other way." She rested her forehead against his. "How would she react, do you think, if you were to run away? Would she have her men pursue you, relentlessly? Or would she die of a broken heart? What do your instincts tell you?"

"That she is trustworthy but immature."

"Unpredictable."

"I do not think she would ever mean to hurt us."

"But she might lash out in pain."

Legolas nodded. "The depth of feeling I sense in her does make me nervous. But I do not want to hurt her. And I owe her so much—she saved you from those terrible men."

Eowyn nodded. "I owe her too."

"I do not know what to do, melmenya."

...

## Later

"Good morning, my lady," said the tailor, bowing deeply. His two assistants, standing slightly

## The strange sea road

behind him and each carrying a large book of fabric samples, followed his example.

"Good morning, Master Katuzili," said Hentmirë. "Please, sit down."

The tailor perched on a stool beside her daybed.

Hentmirë clasped her hands together, excitedly: "I have a very special task for you, Master Katuzili," she said, "one which I know you will enjoy—I have a new companion and he needs some clothes." She turned towards Legolas, who was standing, half hidden in the shadows, behind her. "Let Master Katuzili see you, my dear," she chided.

Legolas stepped forward.

"Gods preserve us!" gasped the tailor, who had clearly never seen an elf before. Then, quickly recovering his self possession, he said, "It will be an *honour*, my lady. If the gentleman will permit me, I shall begin by taking his measurements."

He opened a small pouch at his waist, took out a length of cord, and proceeded to measure Legolas, wrapping the cord around his chest, his waist, and hips, then draping it down his back, his arm and his leg, all the while calling out an arcane series of numbers to his assistants, one of whom made notes in the front of his sample book.

"Good," said Katuzili, when the measuring was over. "Now, as to colours, my Lady, may I suggest the pale blues and soft silvers and, perhaps, some darker greens and ambers?" One of his assistants stepped forward with the correct samples.

"Are you sure?" asked Hentmirë, "because that all sounds *very* dull to me. I thought he would look nice in a bright red..." She smiled at Legolas. "Yes, a bright red, and purple, and *gold*."

"I am sure you are right, my lady," said the tailor, tactfully, "but just allow me to show you..." He turned the pages. "*This*." He pointed to a silk brocade patterned in delicate shades of blue and lilac.

"Well..."

The tailor carefully detached the page and held the sample next to Legolas' face. "There!" he said, triumphantly.

Hentmirë studied the effect carefully. "We shall have that, too," she said.

Slowly, with the tailor's tactful guidance, Hentmirë ordered Legolas a complete wardrobe—full trousers with broad sashes; loose-fitting shirts; short, sleeveless jackets; full length robes of heavy brocade and damask for the town and of fine linen for the desert; embroidered slippers; and a magnificent pair of tooled leather riding boots.

"I want them by the end of the week," she said.

"Naturally, my lady."

"And," she added, "I shall need matching gowns for my new *lady* companion. You must measure her, too, before you leave."

...

"It cannot be *much* farther," said Valandil, wiping the sweat from his brow. The sun, which had been low in the sky when they left the oasis, was climbing rapidly. Wilawen had torn another piece of fabric from her skirt and had wrapped it around her head and shoulders, but he could see that she was already suffering the beginnings of heat stroke. "Here," he said, "have some

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more water."

"Thank you." She took a mouthful. "Are you sure we are going in the right direction?"

"Certain," said Valandil.

"How much further?"

"I do not know." He looked up at the sky.

"*Valandil—*"

The elf felt a sudden pang of fear. Something was coming towards them.

"—you must leave me."

"What?" he asked, vaguely. The thing was getting closer.

"I cannot go much further," said Wilawen, "and I am holding you back. Take the water and leave—"

"*RUN!*" cried the elf, grabbing her arm.

But there was nowhere for them to hide, and the roc swooped down from the sky and scooped them up once more.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 4: Haldir

**The roc flew along the shoreline—keeping a careful watch for other birds—until, at last, she spotted her destination and, sweeping in a gentle arc, struck out across the dark sea towards the tiny islet where she knew that her master—still saddened by her earlier failure—would be waiting in his lonely prison.**

...

"Tell me more about your colony, my dear," said Hentmirë.

They were sitting on her balcony, drinking iced tea, and watching the sun set over the sea. To his right, through the windows of his own bedroom, Legolas could see Eowyn, dressed in her loose trousers, practising her sword techniques with a wooden dolly she had borrowed from the laundry. He smiled.

"It is called Eryn Carantaur," he said, "which means 'Great Red Forest'."

"The trees are *red*?"

"All year round. And tall," said Legolas. "The oldest are hundreds of feet high. Most of the city is built amongst their branches. Our homes are in the trees and the forest is a part of our lives."

"And *you* are its ruler? But you are so young!"

Legolas laughed. "I am almost three thousand years old, my lady."

"Three thousand years! I cannot imagine—"

Sensing a third presence on the balcony, both Hentmirë and Legolas turned towards the door. "What is it, Rimush?"

"A letter, my lady," said the servant, bowing, "addressed to you. It was not formally delivered, just pushed under the iron gates, and no one in the house saw the messenger."

"Thank you, Rimush." Hentmirë took the scroll from him. "There will be no answer. You may go." She broke the seal, unrolled the papyrus, and quickly scanned its contents.

Legolas watched her with interest. Though, outwardly, she appeared calm, he could sense her mounting anxiety. "My lady," he ventured, quietly, "what is it?"

"It is nothing," said the woman. "Nonsense." She screwed the letter into a ball and threw it on the floor. "But I am quite tired, now, my dear, so I think I would like to rest."

Though troubled by her change of mood, Legolas immediately rose to leave, but Hentmirë caught his arm. "You must promise me, faithfully, Legolas, that you will never leave the house at night."

"My lady," said Legolas, "Eowyn and I have already given you our word that we shall not run away..."

The woman looked confused. "Yes! Yes, you have." She released his arm.

Legolas bowed.

But then she caught his hand again. "No," she said. "No! This is *different*, Legolas. Please promise me."

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"What was in that letter?"

"Nothing," cried Hentmirë. "It was nothing, just—just leave me."

...

"Look at the island," shouted Valandil, pointing towards a tiny rock standing isolated in the deep blue ocean. "It looks as though there is some sort of building carved into the cliff." He peered intently, craning his head forward. "Yes! And I can see someone," he cried, "standing on top of the tower. I think he is calling to the bird! Can you see him?"

Wilawen did not respond.

Valandil turned to her anxiously, not knowing whether she was too exhausted to speak or whether she simply could not hear him over the beating of the bird's wings. "Wilawen?"

Still no response.

Then the roc stilled her wings and, fanning out her feathers to catch the air, began a rapid descent towards the mysterious island, and Valandil instinctively closed his eyes, so he did not see the precision with which the bird opened her claws at the critical moment, dropping him and Wilawen onto the stone terrace, nor how she turned abruptly, and rose again, and swooped a second time to land neatly on the low wall herself.

It was the bird's cry of joy that brought him back to his senses. He opened his eyes and stared at the graceful elf standing beside her.

"Figwit!" he cried. "What are *you* doing here?"

...

"Legolas—what is *wrong*?" asked Eowyn. She caught the elf by the arm and, partially supporting his weight, led him to the chair beside the dressing table and sat him down. "What is wrong, my love?" she repeated, gently sliding his short, embroidered waistcoat off his shoulders.

"It is not the physical confinement," said Legolas, shaking his head, bitterly. "It is the surrender of all responsibility that is unbearable. It is—*oh*..." His complaint turned into a sigh of pleasure as Eowyn began to massage his neck and shoulders. "Oh, do not stop..."

Eowyn smiled. "Just for a moment," she said. Carefully, she gathered Legolas' loose hair, twisted it, and secured it with his mother-of-pearl comb. Then she selected a small jar from the array of pretty bottles on the dressing table, uncorked it, and poured a little of its contents onto her hands.

"Your Hentmirë is a strange woman," she said, rubbing her hands together. "When she gave me this oil she told me that her mother used to use it to soothe her father's aches and pains. I told her that elves do not have aches and pains..." She began to knead the tense muscles in Legolas' neck. "It seems I was wrong. Tell me what has happened."

Legolas told her about the letter. "She will not talk about it, *melmenya*. I know she is being threatened—but if she will not speak to me, what can I do?"

"You are not responsible for her, my darling."

"But she is so unworldly, Eowyn *nín*. She only survives because she is rich."

"It is being *rich* that has made her unworldly, Legolas. Had she not been so rich, she would

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have had to learn to survive, like the rest of us." Eowyn sighed. "But I can see that you will not be reasoned with, my darling, so... What did she do with the letter?"

"She threw it on the floor."

"Of the balcony?"

"Yes."

"Then what are you waiting for? Go and get it!" She wiped her hands on a small towel then pulled him to his feet. "Go on," she said, pushing him out onto their own balcony. "It cannot be more than three yards. And I have seen you jump three times that."

Legolas grinned. "You exaggerate, *melmenya*, but you are right; it is not too far..."

He leaped onto the balcony wall, jumped across the gap, and dropped silently onto Hentmirë's balcony. Moments later he was back, empty-handed.

"It has gone," he said.

"Perhaps one of the servants has tidied it away," said Eowyn.

"No," said Legolas. "Hentmirë sent everyone away. She must have come back for it herself."

"So she *is* worried..." said Eowyn.

Legolas nodded.

Eowyn held out her hand. "Come," she said. "You can concern yourself with this again tomorrow. Tonight, I have plans for you."

"I am not sure that I am in the mood, *melmenya*—"

"*I will not have her come between us, Legolas.*"

The elf smiled, ruefully. "I cannot win, can I?"

"Oh, I do not know about that," said Eowyn, leading him back indoors. "I think that most elves would consider *me* a rare prize."

...

"*Melmenya...*"

"Shhhhh."

"*Valar, it glows.*"

"Mmm. It contains pepper oil," said Eowyn, massaging another of Hentmirë's balms into his buttocks and down the backs of his muscular thighs, "to relieve more severe aches." She leaned forwards and placed a soft kiss on the back of his neck. "But Hentmirë's maid, who worked at Arinna's in her younger days, tells me that a 'glow', as you called it, on the back of the legs has a very interesting effect certain other parts."

Legolas squirmed beneath her, rubbing himself against the bed. "She is right."

"That is why some men enjoy being *whipped*, apparently..."

"I am *quite* sure," said Legolas, "that being whipped is highly overrated."

### **The strange sea road**

"You never know," said Eowyn, "you may want to try it later." She nipped his ear.

"Oh..." His hips moved again. "I do not think I approve of your taking lessons from a former whore."

"You may change your mind about that, too. Turn over," she said, softly.

"Do *not* rub your oil there!"

Eowyn laughed. "Turn over!"

"There are far better ways to relieve *that* ache."

"I know." She leaned down and kissed his *ceber*, gently brushing her lips over its head. "But," she whispered, "since you will not allow me to touch it"—she wriggled her oily fingers—"you will have to help me."

Smiling up at her, and with a touch of pride on his beautiful face, Legolas used his hand to raise himself. Eowyn sank down upon him, rocking her hips, pressing his oiled buttocks into the bed. "How does that feel?" she asked. She leaned forwards and kissed his mouth.

"*Good*," he answered, through clenched teeth. "*Very good*."

"It is *quite* nice from where I am sitting. *Mmmm*." She smoothed her oily hands over his straining muscles, leaving a glistening trail on his arms, his chest and his taut belly. Then, grasping his wrists and pinning them to the bed, she began to slide up and down on him, grinding her hips, until the elf's sighs of pleasure had hardened into moans.

"Sweet Eru, melmenya," he sobbed, writhing in her fiery grip, "I am going to drown you!" He began to thrust, wildly. Eowyn drew herself upright and, still riding him hard, pressed her hands down on his belly, just above his golden curls.

"*Cuinon!*" screamed the elf. "*Cuinon! YES!*" And he let out a long, throaty roar as his body convulsed and, spasm after spasm, all the frustrations of the day burst out from him.

...

### **Two days later**

"Follow me," shouted Oriel, over his shoulder, a, barging through the crowds of people lining the wharf, he led the way, through narrow, twisting streets, to a noisy tavern on the very edge of the souk. "The *Black Beast*," he said. "*Most* of the slave captains come here—it's where they buy and sell amongst themselves—like a corn exchange for slaves. I have a very good contact here."

He reached for the door.

"Now remember: be discreet," he said. "Most of these animals would kill you as soon as look at you." He nodded at Haldir, waited until the elf had pulled his traditional Haradin headdress more securely over his ears, then shouldered his way through the heavy door. The tavern was heaving with sailors, talking, laughing and drinking with abandon, and Oriel greeted several men as he wound his way towards the bar. Faramir and Haldir followed him as best they could, Faramir nodding, in a curt, business-like way, to Oriel's acquaintances.

"Bodeshmun," cried Oriel, slapping one man on the back. "I believe you owe me a drink!"

The man turned to face him with a flash of anger in his eyes. Then, recognising his associate, he smiled. "Your memory is failing, Oriel," he replied, "for it is you, I assure you, that owes *me*



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a drink."

Oliel caught the landlord's eye. "A tankard of your best for Captain Bodeshmun, when you are ready, and three more for me and my friends." He drew Bodeshmun away from the bar. "I may have brought you a bit of business, Bodesh," he said.

The other man quickly downed the remainder of his ale and dumped the empty tankard on the counter. "You know I'm always open for business," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked appraisingly at Faramir and Haldir. "Hmmm," he said, "come with me." He led them into the much quieter parlour. "Now, what can I do for you, friends?"

Oliel gestured at Faramir.

"We are looking," said Faramir, "for four elves—"

"And a blonde woman," added Haldir.

"Yes." Faramir glanced at Haldir, silently ordering him to be careful. "They would have arrived on the *True Friend*, in the last day or so."

Bodeshmun nodded. "Three elves," he said, "but only one was auctioned. And a woman—a real heartbreaker, rumoured to be a princess—"

"That is she," said Haldir.

"Fancied *her* myself. What do you want with them?"

"We want them back," said Faramir.

Bodeshmun nodded. "Let's get out of here," he said.

...

*We could not be any more of a target if we were carrying a sign saying 'archery butts',* thought Legolas, as he and Hentmirë moved slowly through the souk, carried in the woman's palanquin by her four attendants.

The letter had been a threat. Legolas was certain of that now for, although Hentmirë was still refusing to talk about it, Eowyn had quizzed the servants and discovered that there had been many letters, all delivered by hand, all making Hentmirë behave strangely, insisting that no one leave the house after dark...

Legolas scanned the bustling crowd. *Any one these men could get close enough to use a knife on her. I would never see it coming,* he thought. *And if he used a bow...*

He scanned the buildings above the wooden stalls. *Windows, balconies, flat roofs... He could be waiting anywhere.*

He closed his eyes and tried to use his other senses to detect any immediate danger.

"Look!" cried Hentmirë.

Legolas automatically reached for his white knives.

"What are you *doing* my dear?" asked the woman, laughing.

"I—"

"I just wanted to show you the lovely saddles. Look," she said, happily, pointing to a stall

## The strange sea road

selling richly tooled leather ware, "would you like one of those?"

"Elves do not usually ride with a saddle," said Legolas, "and you have already given me more than enough gifts, my lady." He hesitated. "But, if you *will* buy me something more, what I need is a weapon—"

"A weapon!" Hentmirë shook her head. "No," she said. "A servant who carries a weapon is a target for his master's enemies. You are safer without, my dear."

"My lady, you are clearly being threatened—"

"My mind is made up, Legolas."

...

*"Wines! Wines! Come buy my wines!  
Lovely sweet whites from Harlindon;  
Robust ruby reds from Dorwinion..."*

"Come now, sir," said the wine seller, grasping Faramir by the arm, "you look like a man who knows his wines. Taste this and tell me what you think."

"Perhaps later, madam," said Faramir, smiling. He bowed politely and pushed his way back into the crowd, quickening his pace to catch up with the others.

Without warning, Bodeshmun ducked behind a tailor's stall, took a key from around his neck, unlocked the small, low door to what looked like a warehouse, and motioned them inside.

"Now gentlemen," he said, locking the door behind him, "we can talk. What do you want from me?"

Faramir looked around. His first impression had been right: it *was* a warehouse, stacked floor to ceiling with bales of cheap cloth. "We want—for want of a better word—to buy our friends back," he said. "Oliel tells us you can help us."

"Five thousand now, another five on delivery," said Bodeshmun. "In metal."

"Agreed," said Faramir. "But I do not carry so much with me, for obvious reasons."

"We cannot do business until you hand it over," said Bodeshmun, firmly.

"Sir," began Haldir, with a coldness that made the man's eyes widen, "if *you* know the whereabouts of Lady Eo—"

"They are good for it, Bodesh," said Oliel, suddenly. "I will vouch for them. And you can collect the money from *me*, tonight."

Bodeshmun sighed. "It's irregular," he said. "But, since Oliel trusts you... Sit down." He perched himself on a pile of cotton. "No? Suit yourselves." He took a deep breath. "Three elves, two men and seven women arrived on the *True Friend* two days ago and were taken to Arinna's—that's a whorehouse on the edge of town. Milkherem pays Arinna to prepare his goods for market—wash them, dress them up, and so on. Now," he said, "*three* elves went in but only *one* came out—"

"How do you know this?" asked Faramir.

"I make it my business to know. Only *one* came out—the pretty one that couldn't keep his hands off the blonde woman—"

## The strange sea road

"Legolas," said Haldir. "But there were *three* others. What happened to them?"

Bodeshmun shook his head. "Only two," he said. "And, word is, Arinna took a fancy to them and kept them. They will be easy to get out—if, that is"—he winked—"they want to leave their beautiful and, ahem, very talented new mistress."

"What happened to Legolas and Eowyn?" asked Faramir.

"The pretty elf and the woman were both bought by the same person."

Haldir sighed with relief.

"A rich spinster—very rich—Hentmirë, daughter of Mursilis. Said to be worth a cool ten million." He nodded, as if to confirm the sum. "The woman has not been seen since. The elf, on the other hand, is now old Hentmirë's prize possession and has been seen, on numerous occasions, riding in her palanquin with her, dressed up like a tart."

"Do you have a contact in the house?" asked Oriel.

"No one official," said Bodeshmun. "But I've never met a servant yet who can't be bought."

"Where is the *fourth* elf?" asked Faramir. "They took four."

"If you say so."

"Where is he?"

Bodeshmun shrugged his shoulders. "He never got off the ship," he said. "So he's either still on it—which is unlikely, since the only person who could afford him is Milkherem and *his* tastes are surprisingly conventional—or he left before the ship reached the harbour. Not our problem..."

"Yes it is," said Haldir. "We must find him. He is my responsibility. I left him on watch."

"Haldir," said Faramir, gently, "the others may be able to tell us where he is."

"Yes," said Haldir, "yes." He paced up and down in the small space, obviously trying to decide what to do next. "First," he said, "we must rescue Legolas and Eowyn."

He turned to Faramir. "Give the man his ten thousand. We will do it *ourselves*."

...

"Whatever did Eowyn do, to make you love her so?" asked Hentmirë, softly.

Legolas was taken aback. "Nothing, my lady—but *everything*. She is my heart's own choice, the companion of my spirit."

"Do you think that you might learn to love another, in time—"

Legolas shook his head. "No, my lady. An elf loves—truly loves—only once. He may care for others. But he loves only once."

"But Eowyn is a woman," said Hentmirë, "and you will live forever. What will happen when she dies?"

"When an elf's love dies," said Legolas, evasively, "he spends the rest of eternity alone, unless he dies too."

## The strange sea road

"Of a broken heart?"

"Yes my lady."

"Then we had better take good care of Eowyn..."

Legolas smiled. "May I ask you an impertinent question, my lady?"

"You may. But *I* need not answer it."

"How did you come to be left alone?"

The woman stared at him.

"I am sorry my lady; I have gone too far."

"No... No," said Hentmirë, quietly. "It is all right. My parents were quite old when I was born. My mother died when I was twelve and my father followed her a few weeks later—like an elf, you see. I had no brothers or sisters and I was left very rich—like the girl in the Fairy Tale"—she smiled—"but not, like her, beautiful—never beautiful. There was a man, once. But I knew that all he wanted was my money. So I sent him away. And then I waited."

"For what, my lady?" asked Legolas.

"For fate to bring me my heart's own choice, the companion of *my* spirit. But it never did. That is, until you came."

"My lady—"

"Do not say anything, Legolas. Let me pretend. Just for a few hours."

...

"Haldir!"

Faramir followed the big elf out of the building. "Where are you going?"

"To find this Lady Hentmirë," said Haldir.

"And do what?"

Haldir stopped. "From what we have just been told," he said, "that woman has Eowyn scrubbing floors and washing dishes and Legolas sharing her bed. What do you *think* I am going to do?"

He started walking again.

"Leave it to me," said Faramir.

Haldir shouldered his way through a group of men, clustered around a small stage, watching a woman discarding her—already flimsy—clothing. "Orc's breath, what a place!" he cried. "Leave *what* to you, your Highness?"

"Let me talk to her," said Faramir.

Haldir stopped again and, this time, turned to face the man. "Why?"

"Because you are a soldier. And this calls for a diplomat," said Faramir.

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"I am not leaving Eowyn in that house a second longer—"

"A moment ago we thought she might have been tortured and raped!" said Faramir. "Now you are angry because she may be scrubbing floors! Eowyn is not the type to baulk at a little menial labour. If you go at this like a bull at a gate you will get nothing—"

"It is not the menial labour I am concerned about," said Haldir. "It is the *other* thing that she is having to endure. Watching that woman with Legolas..." He shook his head. "And you will forgive me," he added, "if I question the judgement of a man who had his marriage to Eowyn *dissolved*."

"I shall pretend that I did not hear that, March Warden," said Faramir, with a distinct edge to his voice. "Look—what will you do? Hmm? Threaten the woman? *I* will negotiate."

Haldir sighed. "We shall both go," he said.

"Good. Then slow down. We need to find the Great Royal Road that runs along the sea shore. Bodeshmun said to take the first turning on the left, which would be over there..."

"Haldir! Look! Look over there!"

...

"My lady! Stop!"

"What? What is it?"

"My friends!" cried Legolas, jumping out of the palanquin, leaving Hentmirë's four attendants struggling to keep it upright.

"No, Legolas! It is getting late!" cried Hentmirë.

But the elf had already disappeared into the crowd.

"Help me out, Rimush," said Hentmirë, urgently.

"My lady, it is not safe here."

"You shall accompany me," said the woman. Taking her servant's hand, she climbed carefully down the steps of the palanquin and hurried in pursuit of Legolas, pausing impatiently when anyone blocked her path until he or she had the courtesy to step out of the way.

...

"Faramir! Haldir!" cried Legolas. He embraced Faramir. "Eowyn said that you that would find us. '*Faramir is clever,*' she said, '*and*'"—he greeted Haldir in a more elven fashion—"'*Haldir will never give up on us.*' It is so good to see you both!"

"Another elf!" cried a feminine voice behind him.

Legolas shot his friends a slightly rueful smile then turned and held out his arm. Hentmirë came forward and took his hand. "This," said Legolas, "is Lady Hentmirë, who showed me a kindness I can never repay when she rescued Eowyn from the slave market. I shall always be in her debt. My lady, this is my friend, Faramir, Prince of Ithilien—"

Hentmirë curtseyed, respectfully. "Your Highness," she said.

"And this," said Legolas, "is another friend—and the March Warden of Eryn Carantaur—Haldir of Lorien."

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Hentmirë hesitated for a split second, clearly unsure of the correct form address for an elven March Warden, then, "My lord," she said, curtsying again.

"Lady Hentmirë," said Faramir, bowing politely, "I know that I also speak for my companion"—he turned towards Haldir, and Haldir nodded—"when I say that there are not words sufficient to express our thanks for your humane treatment of our friends. Might we be permitted to see Lady Eowyn?"

"Come home with us? Of course, my dears," said Hentmirë. "Though we must hurry. And, I am afraid, you will have to walk."

"That will be no trouble, my lady," said Haldir, graciously, his earlier opinion of her apparently forgotten.

Beaming happily, Hentmirë allowed Legolas to lead her back to the palanquin and hold her hand whilst she climbed in. "But *you* will still ride beside me, my dear?" she asked, a brief moment of anxiety marring her excitement.

"Of course," said Legolas.

...

"It will be such fun," said Hentmirë, clapping her hands together. "How long do you think they will stay?"

Legolas smiled. "I do not think they intend to stay long, my lady," he said, gently.

"Oh, but they must at least let me show them around the city—the Great Palace, and the Tombs of the Ancients, and the Golden Hall of Eshmunazar—and we must visit my riding stables—we can all go riding, my dear! And then there is my ship!"

"I did not realise that you had a ship, my lady," said Legolas.

"Oh yes, with its own crew."

Legolas smiled. "I am sure they will stay for a few days," he said. "And who knows, they may decide to return your hospitality."

"What do you mean?"

"They may invite you to Ithilien."

"I could see your colony!"

Legolas nodded. "You could."

"Oh! But..." Hentmirë bit her lip. "You promised me, faithfully, Legolas, that you would never leave me," she said. "You and Eowyn both promised."

"And we shall keep our word," said Legolas. Then he added, softly, "Unless you choose to release us."

...

It was already growing dark when they left the souk, and Hentmirë's happiness was beginning to turn to anxiety. "Hurry, Rimush," she cried. "We must not be out of doors after dark."

"Why *is* that, my lady?" asked Legolas.

## The strange sea road

Hentmirë looked uncomfortable. "It is just... a superstition of mine," she said.

"Your face was not made to hide untruths, my lady."

Hentmirë did not reply. And, despite her urging, by the time they reached the house the sun had already disappeared beneath the horizon. The attendants lowered the palanquin and waited for the door keeper to open the gates.

"Hurry," muttered Hentmirë. "Hurry! Please, hurry!" She rose to her feet and climbed, without assistance, down onto the road. "Yassib," she cried, "Please hurry!"

The gate keeper emerged from his kiosk carrying a large bunch of keys. "I'm sorry, my lady," he said, shuffling forwards, trying to find the right key, "I must have dozed off."

Hentmirë turned to her guests. "I must apologise, your Highness, my lord, for keeping you both waiting like this..."

"Pray, do not trouble yourself, Lady Hentmirë," said Faramir, graciously.

Haldir placed his hand over his heart and bowed. "*Henion, hiril nín,*" he said.

A slight figure—almost invisible in jet black robes—emerged from the darkness and touched the elf's brow with a slender wand.

There was a bright flash.

And by the time the others had regained their sight, both Haldir and his mysterious assailant had disappeared. All that remained where they had been standing was a very angry baboon.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Figwit

Figwit is the elf who can be seen behind Frodo at The Council of Elrond, when Frodo says he will take the Ring to Mordor. His name is actually an acronym of 'Frodo Is Good, Who Is That?', but his Decipher card says it's an affectionate nickname given to him by the other Rivendell elves, and that his real name is Aegnor.

## Chapter 5: Hentmirë's secret

***What has happened to me? Haldir wondered. Why do I feel so strange... He looked down at his hands. No! he screamed. No! NO!***

...

Legolas looked around frantically, trying to find a weapon, but Rimush had already grabbed one of the palanquin's carrying poles and was brandishing it at the snarling animal.

"Back!" he shouted. "Go! Get away from my lady, you vile creature! Go!"

"No, Rimush! *No!*"

The voice was coming from inside the courtyard. Legolas turned towards it in surprise.

"Do not chase him away!" Eowyn cried, running barefoot across the mosaic floor. She caught hold of the metal bars and shook the gate. "Please, Yassib, open up, quickly. *Quickly!*"

The baboon ran towards her, chattering excitedly.

Legolas jumped down from the palanquin and seized another pole. "Melmenya," he said, "be careful!"

But the animal's anger had already vanished and, the moment the wrought-iron gate swung open, he bounded up to Eowyn and nuzzled her outstretched hand.

"It is *Haldir*," said Eowyn, holding the baboon's head. "I was watching from the balcony, Legolas. I saw him change shape—"

"No!" cried Hentmirë, wildly. "No! *I* am the one who has angered you! Punish *me!*"

...

"Women," said Valandil, filling a bowl with water, "are brave and resourceful but more fragile than ellith. You have to take much better care of them."

Figwit cut two thick slices of bread and laid them on a plate with a small piece of cheese and some dried fruits. "Do you think she is improving?"

"I am not sure," said Valandil. "The desert was very hard on her."

"I am sorry."

Valandil patted his arm. "Had the roc not taken us, who knows what would have become of her," he said, "either on that ship or, later, when we reached land?" He carried the bowl and a cloth through to Figwit's spartan bedroom and set it down on the nightstand.

Wilawen, lying on the narrow bed, was tossing and turning, and mumbling incoherently about the roc and the dragon-creatures. Valandil dipped the cloth in the water and, sitting down beside her, carefully dampened her face and neck.

Figwit placed the plate of food on the nightstand, beside the bowl. "Here," he said. "And do not forget to eat it this time."

...

"My lady?" said Legolas, softly.



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He had carried Hentmirë indoors and laid her on her daybed whilst Eowyn and Faramir, using a leather belt as a lead, had brought the baboon inside.

"My lady..." he repeated.

Hentmirë did not respond.

Legolas looked up at Faramir. "I knew there was something wrong," he said. "I knew that someone had threatened her. But she would not confide in me."

A serving girl, carrying a glass of steaming liquid, approached him respectfully. "Old Donatiya has made up a philtre to help soothe the mistress's nerves, Master Legolas," she said. "It usually works."

The elf took the glass from her, gratefully. "Thank you," he said. "Come, my lady." He slipped his arm behind her shoulders. "Drink some of this. It will make you feel better."

"Ask her to drink it for *you*," said Eowyn, quietly. The baboon was looking up at her, watching her intently; she stroked its head.

Legolas shot her a grateful smile. "Please, my lady," he said to Hentmirë, "take a sip—for *me*."

The woman turned to face him, her eyes wide and unfocussed, and said, sadly, "I *told* them it was not safe after dark."

"I know, my lady." He held the glass to her lips and helped her take a few sips.

"He thought it was *you*," she said.

"My lady?"

"It is all my fault. He threatened to take you away from me and I still refused to give him what he wanted. How could I have taken such a risk? And now your poor friend—oh, my dear, I am so sorry! Tell him I am sorry! If I could change places with him..." Tears ran down her face.

Legolas set the glass down on the side table and took her in his arms.

"You are not to blame for this, my lady," he said, firmly. "But now you have no choice—you *must* tell me everything you know about this man. I will not let him get away with this. Eowyn and I—and Faramir—we will find him and, when we have forced him to restore Haldir to his proper form, *I* will make sure that he is punished for whatever he has done to *you*."

...

"Vandalil? What are you doing in my bedroom?" Wilawen asked.

The elf—who had finally been overcome by exhaustion and, in spite of himself, slipped into reverie—awoke with a start. "We are not in your bedroom, *hûn velui*," he said, smiling. "Are you thirsty? Shall I fetch you a drink?"

"I am not an invalid." She tried to sit up. "Oh," she gasped.

Vandalil caught her shoulders and gently lowered her back onto the thin pillow. "Do not try to move just yet."

"It hurts to smile."

"Your face is burnt," he said, carefully pushing back her hair. "Chiefly on the right side—"

## The strange sea road

"We were travelling west," she said.

"Yes." He smiled again—her mind was as sharp as ever. "And your lips are cracked. But they are much better than they were. Let me fetch that water."

"Better than they were? Were *when*?"

"When we first arrived, Wilawen. Two days ago. You have been sleeping for two days."

...

"I told you," said Hentmirë, blushing deeply, "that, in my youth, I had a suitor and that—when I realised all he wanted was my money—I sent him away." Legolas nodded. "But what I did not tell you—"

She bit her lip. The elf stroked her hand, encouragingly.

"What I did not tell you, Legolas, is that, before I sent him away, I did something very, very foolish." She shook her head. "No, I cannot tell you!"

Legolas looked up at Faramir, appealing for support.

"What did you do, my lady?" asked the man, gently. "We need to know."

"I... I *married* him," said Hentmirë, and her tears began to fall again. "I married him, Legolas. I was young and I thought that he loved me. And it was such an adventure—we sailed to Umbar, where there was a magistrate willing to marry us without asking too many questions..."

Legolas squeezed her hand. "Oh, my lady," he said, softly.

"It was not until the journey home that I realised what a mistake I had made. Before the wedding he had been so kind and gentle, and so attentive. But afterwards..." She could not hold back a sob.

"When I refused to allow him into my cabin he struck me. Dear Captain Mutallu locked him in the hold and took me ashore as soon as we came into port. We planned for the Captain to take him back to Umbar and leave him there, but neither of us knew what a powerful magician he was—"

"He escaped?" asked Faramir.

Hentmirë nodded. "When I got back to the house, some sixth sense made me have the servants lock all the doors and windows. If I had not done that..." She shuddered. "Years later, another magician told me that no sorcerer, however powerful, can enter a house if its lady has forbidden it, and that—by locking the doors—that was exactly what I had done. We are safe in here, now that it is too late." She wrung her hands. "The magician said that Baalhanno's powers—that is his name, Baalhanno—are much weaker in the daylight. That is why we can go out during the day..."

"But," said Legolas, "you came to the slave market in the dark."

"I came because Captain Milkherem had told me about *you*," she said. "And it had been so long since Baalhanno's last threat that I had begun to think he had given up—but, in any case, I would have risked *anything* to see you."

"Where does he live, this Baalhanno?" asked Legolas. "Where can we find him?"

## The strange sea road

"I do not know, Legolas. Captain Mutallu cannot find him; the Hatja's guards could not; and nor could the magician. Oh! How shall we help your friend if we cannot find him?"

"Tell us about the letters," said Legolas, gently.

"Yes. At first they came every night," she said. "Sometimes he would float up to my window—*float!*—I had a room overlooking the Great Road then—and he would push the letters through the shutters, scratching his nails over the wood to scare me." Legolas squeezed her hand. "They were full of terrible threats—once he said that he would call up a tempest—knowing that dear Captain Mutallu and his crew were far out at sea. Another time he said that he would turn my servants into snakes and scorpions to bite and sting me. And, in the last letter, he said that he would take *you* away from me—"

"My lady," said Faramir, watching the baboon carefully, "do you still have that letter?"

"No," said Hentmirë. "I burnt it."

"Can you remember exactly what it said?"

Hentmirë bit her lip, thoughtfully. "He said that, if I did not allow him to take his rightful place in my house, he would turn Legolas into something so disgusting that I would no longer want to look at him; that he would take away his elven spirit, and with it—*Oh my dear!*" Her eyes widened and she turned to Legolas, remembering the exact nature of the threat. "He said that he would take away your elven spirit and, with it, your immortality!"

...

"How long do these creatures live?" asked Eowyn, stroking the animal's head.

"I believe it is called a baboon," said Faramir. "I do not know, Eowyn—twenty years, perhaps."

"He seems to be fully grown," said Eowyn, "so he has—what?—five or ten years left..."

Faramir shook his head. "We shall have him restored to his own body long before that, my dear! You *are* absolutely certain that this is Haldir?"

"Yes," said Eowyn firmly. "I told you: I saw him change."

"It could have been an illusion..."

"No."

The baboon tugged hard at his lead.

"What is it?" Eowyn asked. "Where do you want to go?"

She rose from her seat, and allowed him to pull her over to the fireplace. The servants had built a small fire to ward off the night's slight chill but, in the general commotion, it had been allowed to die out. Eowyn and Faramir watched in fascination as the animal carefully picked a piece of charred wood from the embers and scratched on the rough stone hearth, '*Haldir i eneth nín*'.

"My name is Haldir'," read Faramir, softly.

"That is his handwriting," said Eowyn, her voice wavering.

Faramir patted her back.

"What is wrong?" Legolas asked, from the top of the stair. He ran lightly down the steps and

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across the hall to Eowyn's side.

"Oh, Valar," he whispered, reading the scrawled Tengwar characters in the hearth. He crouched beside the baboon. "Trust us," he said. "You have friends here who would travel to the ends of the earth for you. We shall not rest until you are restored to your proper form. I swear it."

The baboon howled, and sat back on his haunches. Eowyn stroked his head.

"How is Hentmirë?" asked Faramir.

"I have left her with her ladies," said Legolas. "They will put her to bed with a sleeping draught and Old Donatiya has volunteered to stay with her, in case she wakes in the night."

"Good," said Faramir, "good." He looked from Legolas to Eowyn and back again. "So: what are we going to do?" He gestured towards the group of chairs arranged around the fire.

"The first thing we must do," said Eowyn, "is find the magician." She turned to Legolas. "Do you think that Hentmirë could know more than she is admitting?"

"Whatever makes you say that, melmenya?"

"I... I just... I think that she would do anything to protect *you*, Legolas."

The elf shook his head. "I do not think she is holding anything back now, melmenya," he said.

"Then how are we going to find him? And, when we do find him, how are we going to make him bring Haldir back?"

"I have been thinking," said Faramir, "that the men who helped us find *you* may know something of this villain. I shall talk to Captain Oliel at first light. I have also been thinking that we should rescue the other elves. Oliel's associate told us that two of them were bought by a brothel keeper..."

"Arinna," said Legolas. "It seems so."

"What happened to the other one?"

"Vandalil." Legolas sighed. "You will not believe me, Faramir," he said.

...

"Where is your friend?" asked Wilawen, handing her glass back to Vandalil. "With the strange name."

"Figwit?" Vandalil smiled. "That is his nickname. He is out on the terrace, with the bird."

"What *is* that bird? And why did it bring us here?"

"I have not had the chance to find out."

"Not had the chance? What have you been doing, for two days?"

Vandalil opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. He shrugged his shoulders.

Wilawen shook her head. "Let us go and talk to this Figwit, now," she said.

"You are too tired."

"I am fine." She tried to sit up. "Well—perhaps you could help me."

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With difficulty, fearing that he might accidentally overstep the boundaries of their friendship, Valandil helped her out of bed and supported her as she slowly made her way through Figwit's sparsely furnished sitting room, through the door, with its strange, onion-shaped arch, and out onto the terrace.

Figwit was bidding the roc farewell. "Good night, *hiril velui*," he cried, as the great bird rose up into the night sky. "*No i Melain na le*." He turned to his guests. "She lives on the mainland," he explained. "Where *She* cannot find her."

"Who is *She*?" asked Valandil. "And why does she want us?"

"She does not want *us*," said Wilawen. "It was your friend, Figwit, who brought *us* here."

Valandil turned to her in surprise.

"The bird," she said, gesturing up at the tiny silhouette, now hovering far above them, "belongs to him and he sent it to find us—or, rather, to find you."

"You are right, *hiril nín*," said Figwit, "though the roc does not *belong* to me. She is my friend. But I must apologise to you." He bowed, hand on heart. "As you say, it was never my intention for her to bring a woman, just another elf. But, please"—he offered to take Wilawen's other arm—"come back inside and I shall explain everything—or, at least, I shall explain as much as I know."

...

*As long as she is sitting beside me, thought Haldir, I can survive this.*

...

Legolas could not help smiling, for Eowyn had fallen asleep, curled up in her chair, with her hand still resting on the baboon's head. "Come, *melmenya*," he said, softly, "we must put you to bed."

He slipped one arm around her shoulders and the other under her knees.

The baboon growled.

Legolas looked up in surprise.

"I have been watching him," said Faramir, quietly. He edged towards the animal and slowly picked up its lead. "It is as though the baboon's nature is at war with Haldir's and, sometimes, the animal prevails. You take her up to bed. I shall find him some food and then tie him up outside for the night."

He stroked the baboon's head. "Come with me," he said, pulling gently on its improvised collar, but the creature was reluctant to leave Eowyn's side. "He will take good care of her," Faramir assured him. "And you will see her again in the morning."

Legolas scooped Eowyn into his arms. "Good night, Faramir," he said. "And thank you, *mellon nín*. Thank you for everything."

...

"I heard that you had sailed west," said Valandil. He turned to Wilawen. "To the Undying Lands," he said.

"Yes."

## The strange sea road

"I set out for the Grey Havens with Lady Arwen," said Figwit, "when Sauron's power was at its height. There were hundreds of us, all making our last, melancholy journey through Middle-earth together." He shook his head. "Lord Elrond had urged me to take good care of his daughter and, as I walked beside her, I could sense her conflicting emotions—her respect for her father just prevailing over her love for Estel. But then, as we neared The Last Bridge, she caught sight of something, deep in the forest—"

"Estel," said Valandil, turning to Wilawen, "is—"

"King Elessar," said Wilawen, with a touch of impatience. "Now her *husband*." She turned back to Figwit. "What did she see?"

"So she *did* marry Estel!" Figwit smiled. "I did not know... And I do not know what she saw, *hiril nín*, but, whatever it was, it took me some time to break the spell it had cast over her —'Lady Arwen,' I said, 'we cannot delay.' 'My future is here, Aegnor,' she said, 'in Middle-earth, with my husband and child.' Tears spilled from her eyes. 'I am to have a *child*.'"

"In a month or so," said Wilawen.

"A month! I have been confined here for so long..."

"What happened next?"

"She spurred her horse and set off at the gallop," he said. "Imagine it! Lord Elrond had entrusted her to me and I had no mount! I borrowed a horse from Lord Sárалondë and followed her." He took a sip of water. "But by the time I reached Rivendell, it had all been decided. Arwen Undómiel was no longer immortal."

"So did you go back?" asked Wilawen. "To the Grey Havens?"

"I did," said Figwit. "But when I arrived, the ships had already gone."

...

By the time they reached the bedroom, Eowyn had awoken and was crying.

Gently, Legolas laid her on the bed. "Oh, *melmenya*," he said, stroking her hair. "I would do anything to spare you this pain." He took her in his arms.

"I want to go home," she sobbed, against his shoulder. "I want everything back the way it was."

"You are tired, my darling," he said. "Exhausted. You must sleep and get your strength back." He began to rock her, gently. "I swear, *melmenya*, that we shall find the magician and make him release Haldir. And, as for home, I do not think it will be very long, now, before Hentmirë lets us go. Close your eyes..."

Eowyn took a deep, shuddering breath and did as she was told.

"That is better," said Legolas, rubbing her back. Then, very softly, he began to sing her favourite song.

*"I will give my love an apple without e'er a core,  
I will give my love a house without e'er a door,  
I will give my love a palace wherein she may be  
And she may unlock it without e'er a key..."*

*"My head is the apple without e'er a core,*

## The strange sea road

*My mind is the house without e'er a door,  
My heart is the palace wherein she may be  
And she may unlock it without e'er a key."*

He kissed the top of her head.

"We are so lucky," Eowyn muttered.

"Melmenya?"

"To be together like this."

Legolas smiled. "I love you, Shieldmaiden," he said, kissing her forehead. "Brave Eowyn *nín*."

...

"They came one morning, before the mist had risen," said Figwit. "They took five of us—all stray elves waiting on the shore for another ship to be built."

"They are *animals!*" said Wilawen.

"After days and days at sea we landed on the coast of Far Harad. The sailors chained us together and dragged us to a house on the very edge of the town. There, we were left waiting in the garden for hours—though, from time to time, some women would come out of doors and stare at us. Some of them would point. One of them even grabbed me..." Figwit cleared his throat.

"Then another woman, older than the rest, came out and—the only word is *examined*. She examined us. 'He is the best,' she said, pointing to me. 'She will enjoy *him*. Take him.' One of the sailors approached me and—and another must have clubbed me from behind, for I remember nothing more until I woke up here."

"What did she mean, 'She will enjoy him'," asked Wilawen. "Who would enjoy you?"

"I have no idea, *hiril nín*. I assume that She is my captor. But I have seen no one but you and Valandil in all the time I have been here. That is why I sent the roc to find another elf."

"Where does your food come from?"

"It appears," said Figwit. "In the cupboard. Fresh each day."

"Gods," said Wilawen, "*magic!*" She thought for a moment. "You are sure that those were her exact words? '*She will enjoy him.*'"

"Yes."

Wilawen turned to Valandil. The elf shrugged his shoulders.

"Could she have meant the bird?" asked Wilawen.

"I do not think so," said Figwit. "It took me months to befriend the roc. She is very independent."

"Why do you not fly away?" asked Valandil.

"Good question," said Wilawen, rewarding him with a smile.

"Because I cannot," said Figwit. "The roc can land on the terrace. She can bring things—she brought you. But *I* cannot cross the terrace wall. It is as though I am confined by some spell."

## The strange sea road

Wilawen turned to Valandil.

"I shall try it," he said.

...

"Be careful," said Wilawen. "Perhaps you should wait until dawn."

Valandil, with both hands on the terrace wall, gave her a dazzling smile. "Elves can see well enough in the dark," he said. He leaned forward and looked down. "It is a sheer drop."

"Use this."

She had made a 'rope' by twisting and knotting Figwit's bedclothes together. Valandil tied one end around his waist and threaded the other through the balustrade.

"Make sure that the knots are secure," said Wilawen. She slipped her hands around his waist and tested them. "They seem all right." She looked up at him. "Be careful," she repeated. "And remember that you will need to climb back up."

He bent his head towards her...

Then he remembered himself. "I shall," he said, lightly.

He swung his legs over the balcony wall and, gripping its inner edge tightly, reached down with his right foot, searching with his toes for a foothold. The cliff face was almost smooth, but, after a moment or two, he found a small vertical crack, off to his right. He jammed the toe of his boot into it and, taking a deep breath, moved each hand, in turn.

"Valar," he said, softly, "this is harder than climbing a tree!"

Slowly, he inched his way down the cliff—one foot; two feet; six feet; twelve... Then, with his hands and feet secure, he leaned back from the cliff face and looked across to his right.

His first impression of the island, whilst still in the bird's grasp, had been correct. The cliff was riddled with holes. *Square holes*, he thought. *Windows. How strange men are—even here, they must impose their own regularity on nature.*

"Valandil!" cried Wilawen, "are you all right? Can you see anything?"

"Yes!" shouted Valandil. "There are more rooms down here. I am going to climb into one."

"Be careful," she said again, and Valandil thought that, perhaps, there was a touch of affection in her voice.

He climbed down another six feet—he was nearly at the end of the rope—then began to work his way, sideways, towards the nearest window. *Could Wilawen do this?* he wondered, wiping an unusually sweaty hand on his tunic.

At last he reached the opening and, with both feet on the sill, peered inside. It was a small room, dark and empty, with a strong smell of bats but, on the back wall, Valandil could make out the shape of a door.

He untied the rope and secured its end in a crack at the side of the window. Then he dropped lightly to the floor and, fastidiously avoiding the piles of guano, walked over to the door and opened it.

...



## The strange sea road

"Eowyn?"

Legolas had emerged from reverie to find the bed beside him empty. He had searched the house with mounting panic, until he had found her in the courtyard, sitting beside the baboon.

"You should have roused me," he said, wrapping a silken shawl—that Hentmirë had insisted on buying for him to give to Eowyn—around her shoulders. He sat down beside her.

"I was not fit company," she said. Then she caught the expression on his face. "Oh, Lassui," she whispered, with genuine remorse, "I frightened you—I am sorry." She raised his hands to her lips and kissed his fingers. "I did not mean to frighten you..."

He hugged her tightly. "What are you doing out here?"

"I did not want to leave him alone," she said, stroking the baboon. "And I have been thinking."

"Tell me," he said.

"Why is he doing it?"

Legolas smiled. "You will have to tell me more, my darling," he said.

"The magician. He has been persecuting Hentmirë for years. Why?"

"He wants her money."

"No!" She turned to face him, fire in her eyes. "That is what Hentmirë assumes because the poor woman has always been convinced that she has no other value. But a man who can turn an elf into a baboon has no need of riches."

"You think that, in some perverse way, he loves her?"

"No..."

"Then what? He wants revenge?"

"Perhaps that is part of it. But I think..."

"Go on."

"I think that he wants to get into the house. I think that Hentmirë has something, here in the house, that he needs. Something that she, herself, is not aware of."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 6: New lamps for old

**"Good morning," said Faramir. "I saw you from the balcony. Do you mind if I join you?"**

"Of course not," Legolas replied, smiling up at him.

"I have asked the servants to fetch us some breakfast out here."

With the agility of a former ranger, Faramir sat down on the mosaic pavement. "How is she?" he asked, nodding towards Eowyn, who was sleeping, at last, in Legolas' arms.

"She is taking Haldir's condition very badly."

"Yes..." said Faramir. He hesitated. "*Legolas...*"

"Yes, Faramir, I am fully aware of his feelings for her—and of hers for him," said the elf. "And I wish it were not so. But what can I do? It is a difficult situation."

The baboon began to chatter.

"Just so long as you know," said Faramir. "Ah, my dear, good morning."

Eowyn sighed, and rubbed her eyes. "I fell asleep..." She turned towards the baboon, sitting quietly beside her. "Oh, gods, it is true..."

"Melmenya..." Legolas pulled her close, kissing her forehead. "Faramir has organised some breakfast for you," he said, gently. "And *I* want you to eat it." He kissed her again. "But, in the meantime, I think you should tell him your theory."

"My theory? Oh, yes..." Eowyn repeated her earlier speculations about the magician's motives. "If we could find this thing, whatever it is, we could use it to bribe him—make him take his spell off Haldir."

"Would that be wise, my dear?" asked Faramir.

"Wise?"

"If you are right about this—object, presumably—why would he want it so badly? What additional powers would it give him? What would we be letting loose?"

"We would be saving *Haldir*," Eowyn cried.

"*Shhhh, shhhh, melmenya*," said Legolas, hugging her tightly. "Faramir is right to be concerned. But we *will* do whatever it takes to save Haldir, my darling, I promise."

...

*Be careful, meleth nín. Listen to Faramir*, thought Haldir, sadly. He nuzzled Eowyn's hand.

...

Valandil opened the door and stepped out into a narrow corridor running parallel to the cliff face. It was dark—the torch sitting in the sconce opposite had burned out long ago—and, with some trepidation, he turned right and began walking.

The next door was open and, Valandil realised, the room was not empty. Someone was lying, scarcely visible, on a low rock shelf beneath the window, and the elf could just make out the glint of a chain running from the sleeping form to a ring in the rock wall.

## The strange sea road

"Hello?" he said, softly.

There was no answer.

Valandil walked over to the window. "Are you all right, *mellon nín*?" He reached down and touched the man's shoulder.

Outside, the sun was, at last, rising; a shaft of pale light spilled through the window. And staring up at Valandil were the empty eye sockets of a mummified corpse.

...

The servants had brought out a low table laden with breakfast—sweet bread, honey, and a cold, milky porridge filled with nuts and dried fruit.

"I am sorry, Eowyn," said Faramir, handing her a glass of fruit cordial. "I always did have a knack for riding rough-shod over your feelings..."

Eowyn looked into her glass. "You were right about the magician," she said, reluctantly.

The baboon softly howled, as if in agreement.

Legolas squeezed her hand. "We shall find some way to persuade him, *melmenya*, when the time comes," he said. "And I do think you are right—he wants something. But what is it? And how are we to find it?"

"We need to talk to Hentmirë," said Eowyn. "We need to know everything the magician has said to her over the years—what did he do on the boat to frighten her—why did she flee from him? And we need to know much more about his letters. I wonder if she has destroyed all of them?"

"It will not be easy to persuade her to talk," said Faramir. "I think that Legolas is the only person she is likely to be candid with." He spread some honey on a piece of bread and offered it to the baboon.

The animal accepted it politely, and, holding it daintily in its hand, took a small bite.

"Gods," whispered Eowyn. She bit her lip.

"I shall speak to Hentmirë as soon as I can," said Legolas, "with Eowyn—you have a far better idea of what to ask than I, *melmenya*."

"Good," said Faramir. "And, whilst you are doing that, I shall speak to Captain Oliel. Then, this afternoon, I think that you and I, Legolas, should pay a visit to the brothel."

...

*Let me come with you, thought Haldir. Let me do something.*

...

Valandil reeled back, gagging.

*Death, decay!*

He staggered out of the room, and bent over, hands on knees, trying desperately to control the bile rising in his throat.

*How could anyone do that? He wondered. Leaving the poor creature chained to the wall like*

## The strange sea road

*that, to die like an animal in a trap...*

He looked along the corridor. *More doors. Twenty? Thirty? Does every one of these cells contain a corpse?*

Taking a deep breath, and swallowing hard, he turned back towards the unfortunate prisoner, placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. "*Hiro hyn hîdh ab'wanath,*" he whispered.

He had no idea what happened to the spirits of men after they died. But if they remained beside their bodies, he could only hope that his prayer would be enough to appease them.

...

Legolas tapped lightly on Hentmirë's bedroom door.

Old Donatiya opened it. "The mistress is indisposed, Master Legolas," she said.

"We have brought her some breakfast," said Legolas. "She must *eat*."

"Who is it, Donatiya?" called Hentmirë.

"It's Master Legolas and Eowyn, my lady," said the old woman. "They've brought you some breakfast."

There were a few moments' silence. Then Hentmirë said, "Let Eowyn in."

Eowyn looked up at Legolas in surprise.

"Go on," he said, quietly. "Talk to her. I will be just outside."

Eowyn took the tray and stepped through the door.

Hentmirë, wearing an old nightgown and with her coarse brown hair falling, undressed, about her shoulders, seemed to have aged twenty years overnight.

*She does not want Legolas to see her like this,* Eowyn thought, and she suddenly felt an unbearable sadness for the woman.

"Good morning, my lady," she said, with a genuine smile. "I have brought you some bread and honey. But perhaps you would like me to help you dress before you eat."

Hentmirë looked undecided.

Eowyn laid the tray on the nightstand. "Legolas is waiting outside," she said. "He is worried sick about you."

"He must think me such a fool."

"He thinks you an innocent victim, my lady," Eowyn insisted. "And he wants to help you."

"How *can* he help me? How can anyone help me?"

Eowyn sat down on the edge of the bed. "First," she said, "let us make you presentable. Then we shall ask Legolas to come in. Do you trust him, my lady?"

"Trust him? Of course I trust him," said Hentmirë. "He is the most honest, most honourable person I have ever met... He is an *elf*."

Eowyn smiled. "Yes, he is. He is going to ask you some questions," she said, "and some of

## The strange sea road

them will be painful. But you know that he—that he *and* I—want only to rid you of this terrible persecution and to return our friend to his proper form."

...

The end of the corridor was sealed with a wrought-iron grating.

Valandil took hold of the bars and pushed hard.

The door was solid, and he growled in frustration, resting his forehead against the metal. *After all this effort!*

Then he smiled.

The grating might be solid, but the door was unlocked. He reached between the bars, slid back the bolt, pushed it open and stepped out onto a spiral staircase.

*Should I go up or down?*

*Down first.*

...

"Good morning, my dear," said Hentmirë, greeting Legolas with something approaching her usual good humour.

Eowyn—who, it had to be admitted, made a very poor lady's maid—had washed her face and carefully arranged her hair and had helped her choose a flattering gown of deep wine red that went some way towards restoring the colour to her cheeks.

Legolas smiled. "Good morning, my lady." He sat down beside her. "Thank you for agreeing to talk to me about this. I shall try not to intrude too far upon your private feelings." He paused to collect his thoughts. "How did you meet Baalhanno?"

Hentmirë looked down at her clasped hands. "He sent me a letter, introducing himself. He said he was one of my late father's business partners, and he asked if he might visit me."

"Did he say why he wanted to see you?"

"He said that he had heard all about me from my father and felt that he knew me already." Hentmirë sighed. "So I invited him to tea. He arrived with flowers... And he talked about the sea, and sailing, and about his recent visit to Dol Amroth. He seemed charming."

"Did he ask you for anything?" asked Eowyn. "Something of your father's, perhaps?"

*"How did you know that?"*

"What did he want?" asked Legolas.

"He asked if I still had all of my father's belongings—and, of course, I had—then he asked whether he might have some token to remember my father by. I took him into the study—I had kept it exactly as my father had left it—and asked him to choose. I should have known that he was untrustworthy *then*..."

"Why, my lady?" said Legolas.

"Because he got angry," said Hentmirë. "Oh, he hid it. He behaved like a perfect gentleman. He looked around the room and, eventually, he chose my father's inkstand. But he *was* angry; I could feel it." She shook her head. "I could feel it, but I thought I must be mistaken."

## The strange sea road

"Were *all* of your father's belongings in the study?" asked Legolas.

"And are they there still?" asked Eowyn.

"Yes, they were," said Hentmirë. "All except his clothing, which I had given to the poor. But everything is stored in the cellar now, packed in boxes. Why do you ask?"

"Because we think that your father had something that Baalhanno wants," said Legolas. "We think that if we can find it, we can make him go away."

...

"I wasn't sure I'd ever see *you* again," said Captain Oliel. "A handsome foreigner shouldn't run off into the souk like that—it isn't safe."

Faramir smiled at the compliment. "Did you pay your friend?" he asked.

"I took the liberty of doing so, yes," said Oliel. "And the rest of your money is still safe in my strongbox—though I have to tell you that I should have made good use of it if you hadn't shown up by the end of the week."

"Of course," said Faramir.

He sat down on the captain's bunk. "I have found my friends," he said, "but another problem has arisen." He told Oliel about Baalhanno, and his persecution of Hentmirë, but did not mention what the magician had done to Haldir. "I thought that you might know something about this man," he said. "Or, perhaps, know someone else who might know something..."

Oliel scratched his head. "A magician," he said. "And a powerful one, from what you say—take great care dealing with that sort, my friend." He thought for a moment. "Yes... Yes, I do know someone. Someone of the same sort. Come with me."

...

"Be careful, my dear," said Hentmirë. "The floor is very uneven..."

Legolas lifted his oil lamp and looked around the cellar in dismay. The room was stacked, from floor to ceiling, with wooden boxes.

"Are all of these your father's belongings?" he asked.

"Yes, my dear."

"It could take us weeks to sort through them," said Eowyn. She opened out the folding chair that Hentmirë had insisted on bringing downstairs and helped the woman sit down. "Did Baalhanno *say* anything while he was searching through your father's things? Did he give you any impression of what it was he wanted?"

"It is such a long time ago," said Hentmirë. She thought hard. "No," she said.

"Perhaps *he* did not know exactly what it was, either," said Legolas. He sighed. "With your permission, my lady, I shall have all of these boxes brought upstairs into the hall. Then we can spread them out and search them properly."

...

Valandil had lost count of the number of floors he had passed—all with narrow corridors lined with tiny cells, and all of those, he had no doubt, tombs to their unfortunate occupants.

## The strange sea road

And the dead *were* still there.

He could sense them.

But they were not hostile—at least, not towards *him*. In fact, they seemed to be looking on him as some sort of saviour.

Valandil was a brave, seasoned warrior, but he felt distinctly uncomfortable with *that* idea, and it was some time before he realised that the spiral staircase had turned into a featureless shaft—that he had left the prison behind some time ago—and that he was now—he was almost certain—close to sea level.

*This is clearly not a way out, he thought. I must go back.*

He turned on his heel, and an overwhelming feeling of sorrow—of *someone else's* raw emotions—assailed him. He peered into the darkness above. Wisps of green mist floated before him, here and there forming themselves into faces, with eyes imploring, and into hands, clasped together, begging.

*The dead, he thought. The dead want me to keep going down.*

So down he went—not daring to wonder why they wanted it—down, down, down, until, at last, the stairs came to an end and he stepped through a doorway and into a vast, vaulted hall.

...

"I should have gone with him," said Wilawen, peering over the balcony wall. "He is not very practical. He does not always make the right decision."

"You like him," said Figwit.

"Like him?" She straightened up and turned towards the elf. "You mean *like* him?" Wilawen shook her head. "No," she said, "look at me!"

Figwit did as she asked, starting at her head and working his way down to her toes. "What am I looking for?"

"He is an elf; I am a woman," she said, barely containing her exasperation. "A woman who has been sitting on the shelf for many years."

"Why would where you normally sit affect whether or not you like him?" asked Figwit.

"Are all elves *idiots*?" cried Wilawen, throwing up her hands.

...

Valandil walked into the vast space.

Two rows of massive stone columns, carved to look like bunches of reeds, ran its entire length. Slowly, he made his way down the central aisle, towards the only object in the hall—a huge block of stone, engraved with strange images, standing on a low, stepped platform.

The elf knelt on the steps and traced the carved figures with his fingers—a woman, seated on a chair—no, a *throne*—three men, raising their hands in supplication before her. He rose to his feet and climbed up the steps.

The block was not solid but hollow—a stone box holding yet another corpse.

But this one was different from the rest.

## The strange sea road

This one was a woman with long black hair and smooth skin—remarkably well-preserved—dressed in a close-fitting robe of woven gold encrusted with red gems.

*Who is she?* Valandil wondered. *Why did the other dead want me to see her? She looks peaceful. Like Wilawen when she is sleeping...*

He leaned forward to take a closer look.

The woman opened her eyes.

And, for the first time in his long, elven life, Valandil lost consciousness.

...

The house they were seeking was hidden at the end of one of the twisting streets that surrounded the souk—a tall, narrow building with no obvious defences. Oliel knocked at the door and spoke briefly to the doorkeeper, handing him one of Faramir's gold coins.

The man bowed and closed the door.

"How do you know this magician?" asked Faramir.

"Not long after my wife was taken, I heard rumours that there was a slave in this house—a pretty woman from the north. It was one of the best leads I'd ever had." He nodded towards the door. "It took me a month's persistence to get inside, but it turned out that it wasn't her."

"I am sorry," said Faramir.

The door swung open.

"Go on," said Oliel. "That's your invitation. I'll leave you to it—but, if you need me again, you know where to find me. And, remember," he added, as he began to walk away, "I sail with the tide tomorrow week, wind permitting. If you and your friends want to return to Pelargir with me, you will need to be aboard before dawn."

"Thank you," called Faramir, raising his hand. "And, if we do not meet again, Captain, I wish you every success in your search for your wife."

He watched until the man had disappeared around the corner; then he picked up his carpet bag, climbed the steps, and entered the house.

He found himself in a narrow but airy corridor, lined with tall, potted palm trees. There was no longer any sign of a doorkeeper—the small wooden sentry-box on his left was empty—but, through the archway ahead, Faramir thought he saw a movement.

"Hello?"

"Come in!" called a voice.

Faramir walked slowly along the marble floor—wondering why he felt so nervous—paused before the arched doorway and took deep breath, then stepped inside the room and looked around.

In the centre of the otherwise empty space there was a small living area—two low couches, a low table, some stools and more potted plants, all arranged around a brazier. A half empty glass of iced tea and several open books lay on the table.

But there was no sign of the owner of the voice.



## **The strange sea road**

"Sir?" called Faramir, uncertainly.

"Sit down!" said the voice, cheerfully; it sounded quite close.

Intrigued and, for some reason, no longer nervous, Faramir sat on one of the couches.

"What can I do for you?" asked the voice.

"I need some advice," said Faramir, and, when there was no immediate response, he added, "and I am willing and able to pay you."

The voice laughed. "What is troubling you?"

Faramir hesitated. "Might I see you, sir?"

"See me? Why?"

"I find your invisibility disconcerting," said Faramir.

"Very well," said the voice, merrily, "but materialisation will cost you extra."

"Of course—"

The voice laughed again. "You are easy to tease," it said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes..."

There was a bright flash accompanied by a loud bang. Faramir threw himself down on the couch, his arms folded protectively over his head.

"Rather louder than I had intended," said the voice. "But impressive, do you not think?"

Faramir raised his head. Sitting cross-legged on the other couch, dressed in a tunic and trousers of vivid pink silk, was a small man with laughing eyes.

"Very impressive," said Faramir. "How do you do it?"

"Ah—that is a secret," said the man.

Faramir smiled. "Good morning," he said.

"And good morning to you. What can I do for you?"

Faramir decided that they had wasted enough time. "Are you familiar with a magician by the name of Baalhanno?" he asked.

"Baalhanno. Yes—my best and my worst pupil."

"Best in ability, I assume," said Faramir.

"Indeed," said the magician. "Quick and very able. But a man with no conscience."

"He has turned one of my friends—an elf—into a baboon," said Faramir. "Can you undo his spell?"

"Oh, yes."

Faramir sighed with relief. "That is good news," he said. "Will you come with me, now, and do it?"

## The strange sea road

The magician thought for a moment. "I have no pressing plans," he said, "and I have never seen an elf, so I think I shall. But, first, tell me: why did he do it?"

Faramir described Baalhanno's persecution of Hentmire and Eowyn's theory that he wanted something from the house. "What could it be?" he asked.

"I have no idea," said the magician. "You say that he has been threatening her for years and yet this is the first time he has ever acted on one of his threats?"

"As far as I am aware," said Faramir.

"That is interesting," said the magician. "Yes, I shall come with you—come." He rose from the couch and walked to an intricately patterned carpet, lying at the far end of the room. He sat down at its centre.

"Sir—"

"Come along!" cried the magician. He patted the carpet. "Sit beside me."

"I thought we were leaving."

"And so we are. Come, sit down."

Reluctantly, Faramir obeyed.

"Rise, skyward!" cried the magician.

Immediately, the edges of the carpet lifted from the floor.

"By the gods!" Faramir clasped his bag to his chest.

The carpet flew slowly, once around the room, then suddenly shot out through the open windows, and climbed up into the sky.

...

"There," said Eowyn, giving the baboon a slice of bread and honey. "This seems to be your favourite." She stroked its head. "Do you understand me?" she asked, softly.

The baboon nodded.

"Oh, gods! Is there *anything* I can do to make things easier for you—"

The baboon growled.

"What is wrong?"

"Good morning, my lady!" cried a cheerful voice. Eowyn glanced up to see a pedlar standing just outside the wrought-iron gates. "What a fine looking beast!"

The baboon growled again, baring its teeth.

"Good morning, sir," said Eowyn. Her tone was polite but at the same time, she hoped, discouraging, and she carefully turned her back on the stranger as she tried to calm the animal, stroking it and murmuring softly.

"Will you not come and see my wares?"

"No, thank you."

## The strange sea road

"Such golden hair deserves to be tied in ribbons. Here, my pretty lady: a gift from me to you..."

"I really do not..." Eowyn began.

But there was something in his voice that reminded her of the pedlar who had visited Edoras all those years ago. *Why not take a look?* She slipped her fingers under the baboon's collar and led it to the gate. "I do not wear ribbons," she said. "What else do you have?"

"Fine jet beads from the north, red coral combs from the south, and shiny brass lamps from here in Carhiliwren." He held a lamp up to the bars. "See the engraving—such fine workmanship. And I would be willing to exchange it for an old one... Why not open the gates and let me show it to you properly?"

"My mistress would not allow that," said Eowyn.

"*Your* mistress? I do not think so, pretty lady. No one is *your* mistress. Come here, my sweet," he said, his voice now soft and caressing, "open the gates, and let me in..."

Slowly, his free hand reached towards her forehead—

With a screech the baboon flew at him, forcing its snout through the bars and snapping at the offending fingers.

...

*Get away from her, you animal! Get away from her! Do not touch her! DO NOT TOUCH HER!*

...

"Leave her!" cried Legolas, running out from the house. "Get away from her, *now!*" He seized a garden hoe and advanced on the stranger.

The pedlar, who had drawn back from the gates and was rapidly gathering up his wares, stared at Legolas. "Two!" he cried. "There are *two* of them!"

Then he fled, disappearing into the cultivation on the other side of the road.

"Melmenya?" Legolas put down the hoe and took her by the arm.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I do not know. I heard Hal—the baboon screaming, and came out to see what was wrong."

Gently, he led her into the house, guiding her through the piles of wooden crates, to Hentmirë's daybed. The baboon followed them, chattering loudly.

"Sit down, melmenya."

He poured her a glass of chilled cordial. "Here," he said, "drink this." He sat down beside her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "Tell me what you *do* remember, *meleth nín.*"

"I think he was trying to sell me something," said Eowyn. "Yes... Yes, he was trying to sell me a lamp. It was just like this one." She reached into the box beside her feet and lifted out a brass lamp with a large looped handle and a long spout.

"Yes," she said, showing it to Legolas, "it was very like this one. Oh..." Her thumb, sticky with the honey she had given the baboon, had left an ugly mark on the lamp's otherwise mirror-bright surface; she tried to rub it away with her fingers.

## The strange sea road

A fine curl of smoke emerged from the spout of the lamp.

"What is that?" asked Legolas.

"I do not know," said Eowyn. She had stopped rubbing, but the smoke was still flowing—pouring now—and creeping along the floor..

"Put it down, *melmenya*," said Legolas, calmly, "and come with me." He took her by the hand, drew her to her feet and led her, backwards, towards the door.

The baboon ran into the smoke, chattering excitedly.

"Haldir!" cried Eowyn.

"Come with *us*," said Legolas firmly.

The baboon ignored them.

"We cannot leave him," said Eowyn.

"Go outside," said Legolas. "I shall fetch him."

"I am not leaving you."

"Wait here for me then." Legolas darted into the smoke, seized the baboon's collar and began dragging the shrieking creature towards the door.

"*Legolas*," Eowyn screamed, "*Legolas, help me!*"

*Melmenya?* The elf turned...

The smoke was no longer lying, like a thick white blanket, on the floor: above the daybed it had formed itself into a shoulder, bare and heavily muscled; beside the chandelier it had become a perfect ear, rounded and pierced with a gold earring; hovering over the wooden crates it was a powerful forearm, tattooed and lightly sprinkled with dark hair. And curled around Eowyn's waist, it was a *hand*...

Legolas dropped the baboon's leash and walked, determinedly, back to Eowyn, grasped the huge little finger, and pulled hard. The hand sprang open and Eowyn fell into his arms.

"**Ow**," cried a booming voice, "**that hurt!**"

Legolas looked upwards. The ear was now attached to a cheek, and above that there was already the suggestion of a twinkling blue eye. Then, as the elf continued to watch, still holding Eowyn against his chest, another eye appeared, and a mouth—smiling—and another ear, and the shoulder became *two* shoulders, and a muscular torso, and, below that, a massive—

*Dear Valar!* thought Legolas, *I cannot let Hentmirë see that.*

"**Who rubbed my lamp?**" asked the strange being.

Much to Legolas' consternation, Eowyn turned to face the naked creature. "I did," she said.

The being smiled proudly. "**I am the Djinn of the Lamp**," he said. "**Your wish is my command.**" He bent towards her—his strange, mutable body flowing into its new posture—and peered at her, closely. "**Well**," he added, "**the gods have blessed me this time, pretty little mistress.**"

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 7: The sleeper

### It took Valandil a few moments to remember where he was...

Then he leaped to his feet and ran—across the hall, through the door, up the spiral stairs—apologising to the dead for his cowardice as he flew past their wispy forms—along the corridor—past the room in which he had discovered the first corpse—and through the door—

A female figure was standing, silhouetted, before the window.

"*Ilúvatar preserve me!*" he cried.

"Gods, Valandil," said the woman, pressing her hand to her breast, "you almost scared me to death!"

"Wilawen!" He threw his arms around her. "Wilawen!"

"What has happened?" she asked. "Why have you been so long? I thought that something had *happened*..."

She came up on tip toe and looked over his shoulder. "What is this place? Where does that door lead?"

"It is not the way out," said Valandil. "Come, we must leave. Quickly."

"Why?"

"I will tell you when we are safe."

The sheet-rope was already tied around her waist. Ignoring her protests, the elf threw her over his shoulder, jumped up onto the window sill and climbed rapidly back to Figwit's terrace.

...

"Who are you?" asked Eowyn, from the safety of Legolas' arms. "*What* are you?"

**"I am the Djinn of the Lamp. Your wish is my command."**

"What does that mean?" she asked.

**"Bid me turn back the tide, or change the course of the River Bodmelqart, or ask me to level Mount Khillettzbaal,"** said the djinn, loftily, **"and it is done. Your *wish* is my *command*."**

"Can you turn our friend back to his proper form?" Eowyn pointed to the baboon.

**"Er—no."**

"Can you find the magician Baalhanno for us?"

**"No."**

"Well, at least, you can cover yourself up," said Legolas, pulling a silk throw off the daybed. "Here—quickly, before Hentmirë comes down from her nap and sees you."

**"It is only my *mistress's* wish that is my command,"** said the djinn.

"Please, do it," said Eowyn.

### The strange sea road

The djinn took the fabric from Legolas and draped it over his shoulders.

"No," said Eowyn. She mimed tying it around her waist.

"Ah..."

"Do you think," said Eowyn to Legolas, "that that was Baalhanno at the gate—and that this is what he wants?"

"I cannot imagine why." Legolas turned to the djinn, who had settled himself on the daybed. "Who was your last master?" he asked.

The djinn folded his arms across his massive chest.

"My wish," said Eowyn, "is that you answer Legolas' question. In fact, I want you to answer *all* of his questions."

**"I hear and obey,"** said the djinn, doubtfully. **"My last master was Mursilis, son of Anittas."**

"Hentmirë's father," said Eowyn. "So he *did* know about the—what is he called?—the Djinn of the Lamp. But he never told Hentmirë about him."

"She was only a child, melmenya," said Legolas. "What did Mursilis command you to do?" he asked the djinn.

**"Many things."**

Legolas sighed. "Tell us," he said.

**"I cut a channel through the Sharruma plateau, so that his ships might avoid the corsairs in the bay of Estan; I summoned fair winds when his ships were becalmed and I quelled tempests when they were beleaguered—"**

"No wonder Hentmirë is so rich," said Eowyn. "A merchant could desire no better servant."

The djinn bowed, proudly.

"But why would a *magician* want you?" asked Legolas. "What could you do for him that he could not do himself—"

The baboon suddenly bounded out into the courtyard, howling.

"What is it?" asked Eowyn.

"Someone is arriving, melmenya," said Legolas, "with Faramir."

"Go back into the lamp," said Eowyn to the djinn. "Please. Just until we are sure it is safe."

**"I hear and obey,"** said the djinn, and he disappeared down the spout of the lamp, taking his silken loin cloth with him.

...

"You are *sure* that she opened her eyes?" Wilawen asked.

"Yes."

"And you *fainted*."

## The strange sea road

"I was briefly stunned," said Valandil.

"You descended, with no qualms, into the depths of the underworld, accompanied by the spirits of the dead, but the sight of a living woman 'stunned' you?"

"She was not living, Wilawen."

"What do you mean?" asked Figwit. "Here." He handed Valandil a glass of water.

"She was..." Valandil searched for the right word. "She was not living, but not dead. By some trickery her body has cheated death and she appears to live. But her spirit is..." He shook his head. "Her spirit decays."

"So she is a woman who has somehow become immortal," said Wilawen.

"Not immortal, *meleth nín*," said Valandil. "Undead."

"How do you know?" asked Wilawen.

"I felt it. The moment she opened her eyes, I felt it."

"And what she has done is bad?"

"It is very bad," said Figwit. "To defy Ilúvatar in that way is the most grievous of transgressions. If she has done that, she is capable of doing anything."

"Then why does she not do it?" asked Wilawen. "Why does she not come up here and—Oh gods," she cried, turning to Figwit, "you were chosen to be her paramour! And now Valandil has awoken her, and she has seen *him*, too!"

...

"What a strange place this is," said Legolas softly.

He watched, open-mouthed, as what looked like a carpet, carrying Faramir and a small stranger dressed in a suit of vivid pink silk, spiralled slowly down from the sky. It circled twice around the courtyard and landed gently before them.

The baboon howled.

"Is this the bewitched elf?" asked the small man, springing to his feet.

"Yes," said Faramir.

"Well, well." Bending slightly, the man peered into the baboon's eyes. "Yes..."

"Can you release him from the spell?" asked Eowyn, anxiously. "Can you restore his immortality?"

"It is little more than a cunning illusion, your Highness," said the magician, bowing, "and it will be my pleasure to reverse it.

"I am Niqmaddu, son of the great Niqmepa; you must be Princess Eowyn and Prince Legolas—your friend has told me all about you. May we go inside?"

"Please." Legolas gestured towards the door.

The magician stepped into the reception hall, looked curiously at the piles of wooden boxes, and then at the lamp, now sitting on a small side table beside the daybed, and sniffed the air

## The strange sea road

deeply.

"Ah," he said, with a twinkling smile, "I see that you have found what Baalhanno is looking for!"

"Yes," said Legolas, "we think we have. But how did you know?"

"I can smell the smoke... Who awakened the djinn?"

"I did," said Eowyn.

"Oh dear."

"What is wrong?" asked Legolas.

"The djinn is now Princess Eowyn's slave," said Niqmaddu. "He can obey no other—"

"We know," said Legolas.

"—until the Princess *dies*." He bowed. "I am sorry, your Highness."

"You are saying that, to get what he wants, Baalhanno must kill me," said Eowyn.

"Yes."

"Just let him try," said Eowyn. "I have seen him now, and I shall not be tricked by him again!"

"I am sure you will not," said the magician. "But do not underestimate him, your Highness."

He looked from Faramir to Legolas and back again. "You must both keep a very close watch on her."

"Of course we shall," said Legolas.

...

"Do you think she is dangerous?" asked Wilawen.

"She has no conscience," said Valandil. "If she cannot be killed, there is nothing to stop her."

"Then we must get you away from here," said Wilawen, "both of you, before"—she shuddered—"before she comes to claim you."

She began pacing up and down the terrace. "Valandil and I could fly away, but Figwit cannot leave... We need to break the spell that holds him here... But how? I know nothing of magic," she said.

"Nor do I," said Valandil. He looked at Figwit; the other elf shook his head.

"Then what *do* we know?" asked Wilawen.

There was no answer from either of the elves.

"We know that there is a mainland," she said. "How far away?"

Valandil closed his eyes and tried to remember how long it had taken the roc to cross the sea. "Ten, twenty miles," he said.

"So: not far," said Wilawen. "And, Figwit, you say that you were taken to a city—a seaport—which is probably where our ship was heading, too." She leaned over the terrace wall, looking



## The strange sea road

out over the empty blue sea. "Who else was on that ship? Vandalil—you knew some of the others."

"Prince Legolas and Lady Eowyn," said Vandalil. "Camthalion and Orodreth."

"*That* was the Lady of the Shield Arm? I had no idea!"

She began pacing again. "If I could find *her*, and Prince Legolas, and free them, and find someone who *does* know about magic, we would have a chance. But I would have to be quick."

"You would never find them," said Figwit. "There must be thousands of people in that city. A million..."

"But you have trained the roc to find elves," said Wilawen. "And there will not be many of those. Of course, I shall need to—"

"Why do you keep saying 'I'," asked Vandalil, "instead of 'we'?"

"Because you must stay here," said Wilawen.

"What? No! Why?"

"We cannot both leave. What if the woman were to come for Figwit whilst we were gone?"

Vandalil looked from Wilawen to his friend and back again in frustration. "You cannot go alone," he said, firmly.

"We have no choice," she replied. "You must stay. *I* could not defend Figwit!"

"Both go," said Figwit. "Vandalil is right, Wilawen—it is too dangerous for you to go alone. I will manage. After all, the woman has waited five years—why would she come for me now? Both go. But come back. Come back *soon*."

...

The baboon was struggling on its leash.

"Hold him still," cried the magician, raising his wand.

"He is afraid of the stick," said Eowyn. "*Shhhhh, shhhhh*." Gently, she grasped the back of the baboon's head, pulled it into her lap and covered its eyes with her other hand. "Now," she said.

Skipping forward, almost like a dancer, the magician touched his wand to the animal's forehead.

There was another bright flash.

Then, tactfully, Legolas took a second throw from the daybed and draped it over Haldir's naked body.

"How do you feel?" asked Eowyn, gently.

"Better," said Haldir, "much better." He smiled. "Almost myself."

He raised his head from her lap and sat back on his heels, swiftly wrapping the throw around his lower body. Then he looked up, apologetically, at Legolas. "Thank you," he said. "All of you. Thank you." His eyes were bright.

"We are just glad to have you back," said Legolas, laying his hand on the bigger elf's shoulder.

## The strange sea road

"Faramir, will you take care of Master Niqmaddu whilst Haldir and I see whether there is anything in my extensive new wardrobe that will fit him?"

He turned to the magician. "I shall tell Lady Hentmirë that you are here, sir. I am sure that she will want to thank you personally."

...

"You look like Lady Eowyn," said Valandil.

They had cut the full skirt from Wilawen's dress and she was wearing the bodice with a pair of trousers and some boots she had borrowed from Figwit. She slung a small cloth pouch across her shoulders.

"What is that?" asked the elf.

"Something useful I found in the desert—"

"Are you ready?" cried Figwit. "The roc is coming!" He cupped his hands to his mouth and whistled a long, plaintive melody.

The bird responded with the same call and, swooping down, landed lightly on the terrace wall.

"*Mae govannen, hiril velui*," said Figwit. "I have a favour to ask."

The bird made a purring sound, deep in her throat.

"I want you to take my friends to the mainland—to the nearest city—and help them find another elf. Will you do that for me, *hiril velui*?"

The bird cried loudly.

"Thank you." Figwit turned to Valandil and Wilawen. "Come and stand by the wall," he said.

The roc turned carefully on the parapet, crossing her large, ungainly feet one over the other, then spread her wings and took off, climbing, gracefully, high into the sky.

For a terrible moment, Wilawen was afraid that bird had not understood Figwit's request. But then the roc turned and swooped back towards them, faster and faster. And Wilawen shut her eyes and hardly felt the talons close around her—felt nothing but a moment of sickening weightlessness as the bird lifted her from the ground...

And then she was flying!

Wilawen opened her eyes and smiled across at Valandil. "I am getting used to this," she shouted.

...

"Magus Niqmaddu," cried Hentmirë, holding out her hand, "how lovely to see you again. And you have rescued Legolas' friend from the malice of that terrible man! However can I repay you?"

The magician took her plump little fingers in his own and raised them to his lips. "Your smile is as enchanting as ever, Lady Hentmirë," he said. "No further payment is necessary."

Hentmirë smiled again, happily. "Will you join us for lunch, Magus?"

"I shall be delighted to, my lady."

## The strange sea road

...

"Look!" cried Valandil. "The city!"

Wilawen screwed up her eyes—trying to see like an elf—and the blur of grey, green and brown slowly turned into clusters of buildings, surrounded by cultivation, nestling beneath a range of sandy mountains.

As they crossed the harbour, the roc swooped down, passing close to the bows of a three-masted carvel moored on its eastern fringe.

"That is the slave ship," shouted Wilawen, "we are in the right place!"

Up the bird rose, clearing the tall warehouses lining the wharves, and hovered for a moment over the bustling souk. Then she continued south east, to where the great town gave way to desert and only a few strange buildings stood isolated in the sand. There, she circled one of the sprawling villas, showing Valandil two elves lazing beside an artificial pool.

*Camthalion and Orodreth*, he thought, *blessed as ever...* "No," he cried, "not those elves. Find me another."

The bird flew out into the desert, climbing on the warm air rising up the mountain side, then turned, and, heading more northerly now, zigzagged over the poorest quarter, where the crowded streets were filled with cramped, misshapen tenements.

There, she circled again, showing Valandil a third elf, sitting with a gang of thieves.

*Vardamir!* he thought. *Vardamir the murdering orc! What is he doing here?* "No," he cried, "not now! I will deal with him later. Find me another!"

Banking to the west, the roc flew back along the sea shore, following a broad, straight road lined with palatial villas. "Yes!" cried Valandil, "Yes! On the balcony of the pink house—look!—Prince Legolas and March Warden Haldir! Leave us here!"

Instantly the bird obeyed him, dropping low, and reaching for the ground, opening her claws just before her feet touched, leaving Valandil and Wilawen standing in the sandy road, then she climbed back into the clear blue sky and, with slow, steady strokes, flew out across the sea.

"Will you be able to call her back when we want to leave?" asked Wilawen.

...

"Well," said Legolas, "it is a little short, and very tight, but it *will* stop you scaring the ladies of Carhivilvren—"

"Look," cried Haldir, "Valandil!"

Legolas turned towards the road just in time to see the roc swoop down and set the missing elf—and the woman who had been taken with him—gently on the ground.

"This land is *truly* full of wonders," he said.

...

"And then," said Valandil, "she opened her eyes." He took a sip of wine.

"Whatever did you do?" asked Hentmirë.

## The strange sea road

"I—er..."

"He was stunned," said Wilawen.

"I went back to the prison, found Wilawen, and we both climbed up to the terrace."

"You are *sure* that you saw her eyes move?" asked Niqmaddu.

"Absolutely," said Valandil.

"Tell him what you sensed," said Wilawen.

"I sensed her spirit, decaying," said Valandil.

"It would be," said the magician, his twinkling smile absent, for once. "It certainly would be." He looked down at his untouched food. "We thought the prison impregnable. But it seems we were wrong..."

"Who *is* this woman, Magus?" asked Legolas. "And why is she imprisoned?"

"She is a prisoner of war, your Highness," said Niqmaddu. "Thirty years ago, she attacked Carhivilven and was narrowly defeated, and I helped the Hatja build a prison to hold her—her and all of her unfortunate followers—securely."

He laid his knife beside his plate and, leaning on his elbows, clasped his hands together. "Her name is Naqiya-Zakutu but her people called her 'Naqiya the Terrible' and 'She who is feared'. She was a woman without conscience and without mercy, and she ruled the land of Kuri for over two hundred years."

"Kuri..." said Hentmirë. "I thought that the land of Kuri was a myth."

"It is best that people think so," said Niqmaddu. He turned to Legolas and Faramir. "But Kuri is all too real—a barren, featureless desert land, many leagues to the south, with no trees, no mines, no natural resources of any kind, save one. And that one resource has made it fabulously wealthy."

"What is it?" asked Faramir.

"Water," said Niqmaddu.

"I do not understand."

"A fountain of youth!" said Hentmirë.

Niqmaddu nodded. "Deep in the rocks below the royal palace," he said, "there is a spring. Its water is charged—whether by some property of the surrounding stone or whether by ancient magic, I do not know—with a restorative power. And whoever drinks from the spring ceases—for a time—to age. Some even say that the water can *reverse* aging. People travel from all over Far Harad to drink it."

"What a terrible thing," said Faramir. "It must enslave all who touch it, for once they have experienced its power, they will surely crave more."

"And some of them have killed to get it," said the magician, "for Naqiya's guards took an oath to defend it with their lives."

"But does it really work?" asked Wilawen. "It sounds more likely that people are being swindled to me."

## The strange sea road

"It is always wise to be sceptical, young lady," said Niqmaddu, shaking his head, "but, in this case, your friend, Valandil, has seen proof of its effects. Queen Naqiya drank the water every day; it is said that she even bathed in it. And, as a result, her body will never die."

"But her spirit has," said Valandil. "I felt it decaying."

"The water is poison to the spirit," the magician agreed. "And, as the spirit dies, all humanity dies with it..."

"How sad," said Hentmirë. "I wonder if she knew that before she used it?"

Legolas patted her hand. "But surely," he said to the magician, "*you* did not leave this woman's followers to die in your prison?"

Niqmaddu shook his head.

"Then why are they dead?"

"And why can Naqiya open her eyes?" asked Niqmaddu. "For I placed the strongest of all sleeping spells upon her. Who has released her? And why? Was it her successor? If it was, is he planning to resume the war on Carhivilven? Does he have an army? Or..."

"It is such a strange co-incidence... Could it have been Baalhanno?"

"Baalhanno! What would he have to gain by releasing this woman?" asked Faramir.

"I have no idea," said the magician. "I do not know the answer to *any* of these questions, your Highness."

Wilawen cleared her throat. "Well, whoever it was," she said, "we need to get back to the island. And quickly, for Figwit is there all alone."

...

It was decided that Valandil and Wilawen would return to the island immediately, Niqmaddu would go back to his house for supplies then follow on his carpet, taking Legolas and Eowyn with him, and Faramir and Haldir would go to Arinna's, 'rescue' Orodreth and Camthalion, then sail to the island on Hentmirë's ship.

"She is very fast," said Hentmirë, "and dear Captain Mutallu is an excellent sailor. He will have us there in no time."

Legolas drew her aside. "You must leave this to *us*, my lady," he said.

"But *I* can help."

Legolas smiled.

"I can! I can cook—a little. And I can dress wounds. I am very good at making bandages."

Legolas could not stop himself hugging her.

*But would she really be any safer here, alone, he wondered, than on the ship with Faramir and Haldir and her dear Captain Mutallu?*

He sighed. "I want you to make me a promise," he said, sternly. "I want you to promise that you will stay with Faramir or Haldir or with Captain Mutallu at all times; that you will never wander off alone; and that, if you are scared, you will stay on the ship. Do you promise?"

## The strange sea road

"Yes."

"Show me your hands."

Hentmirë brought both hands out from behind her back, hastily uncrossing her plump fingers.

"Promise again."

She bit her lip. "I promise," she said. "But I will not be scared."

*Valar*, thought Legolas. *Now I have two Shieldmaidens to worry about!*

...

"Look," said Eowyn, handing Legolas a small bow and a quiver of heavy arrows. "I found these amongst Hentmirë's father's things."

Legolas raised the bow and tested its draw weight.

"How is it?"

"It is heavy for its size," he said, "and I am very much out of practice." He smiled, "But it is good to feel the pull of a bowstring again. Thank you *melmenya*."

"I have also found some swords." She showed him two scimitars with broad, curved blades. "They are decorative, really, but quite sharp and surprisingly well-balanced..."

She began performing the basic guards, moving fluidly from one to the next. *Ox*—she raised the sword above her head and held it horizontal, pointing at her imaginary opponent's head—*Plough*—she brought the hilt of the sword down to her hip, blade pointing upwards—*Fool*—she lowered sword point, inviting her enemy to strike—*Over the roof*—then raised her hands above her shoulders, ready to slice downwards—*Tail*—and brought the blade down to her side, then began again...

"These people do not seem to use scabbards, so we must be careful how we carry them, but I am sure they will be useful. I have given Valandil the best one—"

Legolas snatched up the other sword and struck.

Eowyn parried, but the elf ducked beneath her blade and caught her round the waist. Their swords dropped to the floor and they grappled, Legolas exerting his superior strength to hold her still whilst he leaned in and kissed her mouth, hard.

"That was an interesting move," said Eowyn. "I am not sure that it would work with an orc, but an undead woman might certainly be conquered—provided"—she slid her hand down between their bodies—"she did not realise how vulnerable it left you, *here*." She grasped his *ceryn*, though very gently.

Legolas nuzzled her neck.

"We should not be doing this, Lassui," said Eowyn.

"Why not, *melmenya*?"

"We are about to go into battle."

"That is precisely when a warrior needs it most, Eowyn *nín*."

He rubbed himself against her belly.

## The strange sea road

"Impressive weapon," said Eowyn, softly. "Very impressive."

...

"Oh—yes!" cried Eowyn.

Her hands, which had been clawing at the coverlet, suddenly flew behind her head and grabbed the bedstead, and her body bowed upwards, and Legolas, holding her by the hips, rammed himself into her again and again.

...

"Gods, that was... *vigorous*," said Eowyn. She rolled onto her stomach and leaned over him. "Sometimes, Lassui, you surprise me."

"What do you mean?"

"Most of the time I feel like I have known you all my life." She stroked his face. "But, in truth, we have been together for less than a year. And there are sides to you that I do not know."

"Did I hurt you?"

"Did I say it hurt?"

"No..."

She smiled. "You are a *wonderful* lover, *edhel nín*, even excited by the thought of battle," she said. "No: it is the warrior in you that I do not know. I caught a glimpse of him at Helm's Deep, finishing off wounded orcs, and then again, leading the elves at Minas Athrad—I fought beside him there. But I have never really seen the fearsome elven warrior the Rohirrim so revere. He is not a part of *my* Lassui."

"Melmenya..."

"Did you do it before Helm's Deep? Or Pelennor Field?"

"Do what?"

"Have a woman?"

"Melmenya! You *know* I did not! From the moment I saw you, Eowyn *nín*, to have made love with anyone else would have been impossible!"

"You should have come to me then."

"And what would you have said?"

Eowyn thought for a moment. "I do not know... I think I would have been flattered. But I think I would have said no." She slipped her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. "More fool me."

"Are you afraid, melmenya?"

"Of the woman?"

"Of what you might see in *me*."

"I do not know..."

## The strange sea road

He stroked her back. "When you slew the Witch King, what did you feel?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did killing him make you feel?"

She laid her head on his chest. "I was angry," she said, "and frightened... My uncle was lying helpless beneath Snowmane... The Witch King had shattered my shield arm, and I could see no way to defeat him. Then Merry attacked him from behind and he was left off guard. The only weakness in his armour was at the mouth, so I stabbed him there. And the moment my sword entered him I felt his evil poison me. But I also felt...

"Elation. Yes, *elation*. I felt him die, Lassui. It had been him or me, and I had survived."

"And did that feeling make you any less Eowyn? Or did it make you more Eowyn?"

After a moment, she raised her head and smiled at him. "More Eowyn," she said.

"So, although I did not see it happen," said Legolas, "killing the Witch King made you *my* Eowyn."

"Yes."

"And I am your Legolas."

"Yes."

He brushed back her hair and kissed her tenderly. "Now our only worry," he said, "is: when I see you using your sword, will I be able to fight beside you? Or will I have to drag you off into some quiet corner and ravish you?"

...

*Thud!*

It had been going on for several minutes now.

*Thud!*

Valandil had said that the spiral staircase came up as well as down, and they had all wondered where it might end...

*Thud!*

Now Figwit knew.

*Thud!*

The door was hidden behind the wooden panelling in his bedroom. And someone—*She?*—had opened it, found the way barred, and was trying to break through.

*Thud!*

There was something chilling about the slow, relentless pounding. Something...

*Lifeless.*

*Thud!*



## **The strange sea road**

Figwit had never been much of a fighter. He tried to formulate a plan.

*The planks will not hold much longer, he thought. They are dry and brittle. I need to reinforce them. He ran into the sitting room. If I pile the chest and the table against them and then jam them in place with the couch and the bed...*

From the bedroom came the sound of splintering wood. *I must be quick. And I need to find a club.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 8: Cat and mouse

**"Eowyn... Let me help you."**

Haldir caught up the hem of the thick woollen cloak she was trying to pack and folded it with her—in half, then quarters, then eighths—like a blanket.

"Thank you," she said, stowing it in a large, cloth travelling bag. "How are you feeling now? Are you... Er..." She smiled, holding up her hands, helplessly.

"What you mean," said Haldir, "is will there be any lasting effects?"

"That is part of what I meant. But do you know if... I mean, can you feel whether..."

"What?" he prompted, gently.

"Baalhanno said that he had taken away your immortality. Can you tell whether is has been restored?"

Haldir shook his head.

"I cannot imagine what it must have been like." She began wrapping her sword in a silk cloth.

"Physically uncomfortable—I longed to stand upright! Mentally... Mentally, I was at constant war with the beast. Sometimes, I had thoughts that did not seem my own."

"What kind of thoughts?"

"Anger, hatred." He shrugged his shoulders. "A desire to chase cats..."

Eowyn smiled. Then she asked, softly, "Hatred towards whom?"

"Legolas."

*"Haldir..."*

"By baboon standards," said Haldir, "he is small and weak. By baboon standards, he is not good enough for you."

"By elven standards," said Eowyn, "he has no rival."

Haldir nodded. "Take care on the island," he said.

...

"Figwit!" shouted Valandil. "Figwit! We are back!"

"I thought he would be waiting for us," said Wilawen. "Out here on the terrace..."

"Mmm." Valandil caught her arm. "Wait here," he said.

"Why? What do you sense?"

"Just... Just wait here. I will look inside."

"No," said Wilawen. She took out the knife Eowyn had given her. "I am ready," she said.

Valandil sighed. "Then stay behind me." He drew his scimitar and, together, they crept towards Figwit's small apartment. "Can you be quieter?" he whispered.

## The strange sea road

"No."

Valandil shook his head. *Four thousand years I wait, and the Valar send me a woman.* "Let me go in first," he whispered.

Wilawen nodded.

Valandil slipped silently—and almost invisibly—through the door. As he had feared, the room had been ransacked—the table turned over, crockery broken, food scattered over the floor. Someone—*Figwit*, he thought—had tried to barricade the bedroom door with the couch. Valandil placed one hand on its back and hopped over.

The bedroom was empty but, beside the bed, the wooden panelling had been demolished and, through the gaps in the planks, Valandil could see an open door—

"She has taken him."

"*Ceryn Manwë*, Wilawen!" cried Valandil. "I did not hear you come in!"

"You told me to be quiet." She picked up a thick splinter of wood and held it, in her left hand, like another dagger. "We had better go after them."

"*You* do not have to," said Valandil, without any real hope of dissuading her.

"Do you expect me to wait here alone, going out of my mind?" She shook her head. "Besides, you may need me. Especially if she *stuns* you again."

...

"Are you *sure* that it will carry all three of us?"

"Quite sure, your Highness," said Niqmaddu.

Eowyn checked the contents of her bag one last time—her sword, wrapped in silk, some food, her warm cloak, and, of course, the djinn in his lamp. She stepped nervously onto the carpet and sat down.

"How long will it take?" she asked.

"Less than an hour," said Niqmaddu.

Eowyn bit her lip. Legolas sat down beside her.

"Ready?" asked the magician.

Legolas wrapped his arm around Eowyn's shoulders and squeezed her gently. "Yes," he said.

...

"Open up!" cried Faramir, hammering on the door of the brothel.

"The house is closed until four o'clock," said a gruff voice, from inside. "You'll have to use your hand."

"I have business with Arinna," said Faramir. "Open the door."

"The mistress said nothing to me about visitors."

"Ten gold pieces if you open the door."

## The strange sea road

"Ten gold will be no use when she cuts my balls off."

"Twenty!"

There was a pause. Then the door opened a narrow crack and a hand appeared through the gap.

"Here is five," said Faramir, dropping the coins into the outstretched palm. "You will get the rest when we are inside."

There was another pause, whilst the man stowed his money, then the door opened and Faramir and Haldir stepped inside. Faramir handed over the rest of the bribe. "Where is she?" he asked, walking down the corridor.

"Wait," said the doorkeeper. "You haven't seen me, right? You got in through the garden, *right?*"

"Right," said Haldir. "Now, where are those useless orcs—the two elves?"

"They'll be with her. End of the corridor, right, then first left."

Faramir paused before the door. "Are you ready for this?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Just do not kill them. We may need them." He pushed the door open. "Gods..."

The room was filled with steam. At its centre, Arinna lay, face down, on a wooden table. The two elves, dressed in nothing but silk loincloths, were massaging scented oil into her back and buttocks.

One of the elves glanced towards the open door. "Haldir!" he cried. "We knew it was only a matter of time!"

Arinna raised her head. "Who are you?" she asked. "Gods, another elf!" She drew herself up, naked but unembarrassed, and looked at Haldir.

"Now you *are* something," she said. "Are you looking for a job?"

"Madam," said Faramir, "we are here to free our friends." He gestured towards Orodreth and Camthalion. "Name your price. I will pay it."

"Ori and Cami are not for sale."

"Then we shall have to take *Ori* and *Cami* by force," said Haldir. With flawless elven grace, he nocked an arrow and drew his bow.

Arinna's admiration was undisguised. "Are you *sure* you do not want a job?"

Cat-like, she rose from the couch and, ignoring the arrow pointing at her breast, stalked towards him. "There are rich matrons all over Carhivilvren gagging for it. You could make discreet house calls. They would pay us a fortune." She smiled. "Put that bow down. You do not want to hurt *me*..."

As if mesmerised, Haldir slowly lowered his bow.

Arinna grasped his drawing arm, feeling his muscles. "*Mmmm*," she said, appreciatively. "I shall never sell my elves but, since you are their friend, I may just let them out to play with you."

## The strange sea road

Faramir cleared his throat. "Madam," he said, "if you will be serious for one moment."

"Sir..." Arinna turned towards him. "I am never anything *but* serious. And I will not sell."

Faramir looked across to the elves. "Come with us," he said.

"I shall call my guards!"

"And where *are* your guards, madam?" asked Faramir, suddenly losing all patience. "Why did they did not stop us entering? They are no doubt sleeping off last night's excesses." He shook her hand from his arm. "Come gentlemen." He turned to leave.

"Sodomite," Arinna hissed.

"You shall not provoke me, madam," said Faramir, calmly.

She turned to the elves. "Ori? Cami?"

"It has been fun, my lady," said Camthalion. "And we have enjoyed every moment of it. But, now, our duty calls, and we must go."

"Come with us," said Orodreth. "Come with us, my lady."

Arinna shook her head. "I have my house..."

Smiling sadly, Orodreth raised his hand in farewell and followed his friends through the door. Open mouthed, Arinna watched him leave.

"Oh gods," she cried. "Wait! Wait for me!"

...

"I should have brought a candle," said Wilawen.

"Do you want to go back?"

"No. Can *you* see?"

"Yes. Put your hand on my shoulder."

Slowly, he led her down the stairs, past the prison.

"Where, exactly, did you see the spirits of the dead?" she asked, peering down one of the corridors.

"They were lower. They will not hurt us."

"Good."

Downwards they climbed, deeper and deeper into the rock—Wilawen's grip on Valandil's shoulder growing tighter and tighter—until, at last, they reached the bottom. Valandil stopped outside the door of the great burial chamber.

"This is it," he said. "Are you ready?"

"Where is the light coming from?"

"There are windows along the top of the outer wall. Are you ready?"

Wilawen clutched her knife and her wooden stake. "Yes," she said.

## The strange sea road

"Follow me."

They stepped through the door.

"It is empty," whispered Wilawen, peering into the gloom.

"She may be lying inside that box," said Valandil, pointing to the huge stone sarcophagus. "That is where I saw her before."

"Can you sense her?"

"No..."

Silently, they crept down the aisle, climbed up the stepped plinth and looked down into the coffin.

...

"What is that, up ahead?" whispered Eowyn. She was clinging to Legolas for dear life.

"Storm clouds," said Legolas.

"Nothing to worry about," said Niqmaddu. "Though we may get a little wet."

...

The stone box was empty.

"Now what?" asked Wilawen, deflated. She looked around the walls. "Are there any side chambers?"

"None that I can see."

"There could be a concealed door," she said, "but I do not know how we would find it." She sat down on the stone steps. "Or she could be hiding him somewhere in the prison. There could be another shaft, at the far end of the corridors—there could be a whole other wing over there.

"Or..." She sighed.

"Or what?"

"She could have taken him off the island."

"How?"

"I do not know," admitted Wilawen, "but this woman does not have normal limits." She smiled up at him, suddenly. "But, then, neither do you. Can you sense anything?"

Valandil shook his head.

"What about the dead?"

"They are surrounding us."

"Really?" Wilawen looked around the hall. "Strange—I can neither see them nor feel them," she said, "and I was sure that I would feel them. I was afraid I would be scared..." She looked up at Valandil. "What do *they* say?"

"What do you mean?"

## The strange sea road

"You told me they were looking for a saviour. Well—here you are. Ask them where the woman is."

...

***...nature thunder'd in his opening ears,  
And stunn'd him with the music of the spheres...***

Alexander Pope

"This is no ordinary storm!" cried Legolas.

Directly above them, the sky was pitch black; torrential rain and a fierce crosswind were buffeting the carpet, making it jerk and flap beneath them, and threatening to blow them far out into the Great Sea. But less than twenty yards away in any direction, all was bright and clear. The storm was like a huge, seething ball with the carpet at its centre.

"Someone does not want us to reach that island," shouted Niqmaddu. He looked up into the clouds.

"Storm," he cried, "desist!"

Nothing happened.

"Oh well," he shouted, "it was worth a try. Hold on tightly. The bottom of a pocket of magic is often weak—I shall try to fly out of it."

Eowyn's hands were locked around Legolas' arm in a death grip. He hugged her closer. "Hold on, melmenya," he shouted, kissing her wet cheek.

She mumbled a reply.

Legolas pressed his ear to her lips. "I love you," she was saying, over and over, "I love you..."

Expertly, Niqmaddu turned the carpet downwards, and swooped towards the sea.

The storm followed.

And now there was a new threat: by some sixth sense, the magician dodged a bright spear of lightning that flashed down from the clouds, but he could do nothing to avoid the thunder.

It exploded over the carpet—its energy reflected and multiplied within the storm bubble—making Legolas' organs vibrate inside his body. With a cry of pain, the elf clamped his hands over his ears.

And, at that very moment, a terrific gust of wind blew the carpet out from under him.

...

"Legolas!" screamed Eowyn.

Her fear of flying conquered by an even greater fear, she lunged for him, her fingers missing his arm by a fraction of an inch, as he disappeared over the carpet's edge. Lying flat on her belly she gazed down through the storm. The elf was floating in the sea, a hundred feet below.

But whether he was alive, or...

She could not tell.

"I will try to land on the water," shouted Niqmaddu, dodging another lightning bolt.

## The strange sea road

As the carpet spiralled downwards, followed by the storm, Eowyn suddenly remembered the djinn's proud boast. Hands shaking, she reached inside her bag and rubbed the lamp until the smoke began to pour.

"Save Legolas," she cried, the moment the creature's face had materialised.

"**How, mistress?**" he asked, pulling his arm from the spout.

"I do not know! Stop the storm! Take us down to him!"

"**I hear and obey.**"

With a majestic wave of his hand, the djinn dispersed the clouds, and the storm vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Then, holding the carpet before him, like a tray, he sailed down through the bright blue sky, towards the floating elf.

...

Valandil looked at the wispy forms. "I have never actually *spoken* to them before," he said.

"Dead," said Wilawen, with unconcealed exasperation, "this is Valandil; Valandil, this is the dead. Now you have been properly introduced. Speak away."

Valandil laughed. "I *love* you!" he said.

Then, when he saw the expression on her face, he added, "I am sorry. I should not have said..." He turned back to the ghostly spirits, clearing his throat. "Do you want us to find the woman, Naqiya-Zakutu?" he asked.

Their reply flooded his mind: Yes.

"Then you must help us."

*Follow us.*

"Come, Wilawen," he said, catching her by the arm. "They are going to take us to her."

...

"Legolas..." Eowyn reached out and touched his face. "He is unconscious," she said.

"Rise," said Niqmaddu.

As if lifted by invisible hands, Legolas' body rose, shoulders first, out of the water.

"Lie."

The elf, now horizontal, hovered for a moment, then drifted slowly down onto the carpet.

"I suggest you use your body to warm him," said Niqmaddu.

"Can you not help him?" asked Eowyn, pulling the woollen cloak out of her bag. She draped it over Legolas, then, stretching out beside him, pulled him into her arms.

"His condition is not the result of a spell, your Highness," said Niqmaddu. "And I know very little about healing. Tell the djinn to escort us to the island. We shall be able to take better care of him once we are there."

...



## The strange sea road

Hentmirë was waiting at the bottom of the gang plank, dressed in trousers and boots and looking like a stout little Shieldmaiden.

"The ship is all ready," she called to Faramir, as he came down the wharf, "with supplies and everything. Captain Mutallu says that we can sail immediately—the wind is fair for the island and we should arrive in less than an hour. Are you going to introduce your friends, my dear?"

"Of course," said Faramir smiling. "This is Camthalion... And Orodreth..." The elves bowed, graciously. "And this is Arinna."

"Welcome aboard," said Hentmirë. She waited until the woman had climbed up on deck before she asked, quietly, "Who is *she*?"

"She is the woman who bought them. She—er—works for Captain Milkherem," said Faramir.

"She is the one who molested Legolas."

"He told you that?"

"Not in so many words." Hentmirë eyed the woman, suspiciously. "It was wicked. But I shall not hold it against her," she said. "We must all pull together."

...

"What do they expect us to do? When we find her?" asked Wilawen.

"I do not know, *Faer vara*," said the elf.

"Then you had better ask," she said. "We need to know. And what does that mean? *Faer vara*?"

"Fiery spirit."

"Oh..."

Valandil addressed the wispy forms. "What must we do when we find Naqiya-Zakutu?" he asked.

*Lay her to rest. Set us free.*

"What did they say?" Wilawen asked.

...

As the *Early Bird* sailed majestically out of the harbour and into open sea, Haldir sat on deck, restringing a Galadhrim longbow.

"Is that *Legolas'* bow?" asked Faramir.

The elf nodded.

"Where did you get it?"

Haldir carefully reattached one end of the bowstring. "'Ori and Cami' found it—together with his quiver and his other white knife—on a stall in the souk. The stall owner had quite a collection of Gondorian weapons, apparently. The slavers must keep him well supplied. Arinna bought it for them."

"Legolas will be glad to have it back."

## The strange sea road

"Yes." Haldir looked up from his task. "Is it true—what Arinna said about you?" he asked.

Faramir sighed. "That is none of your business," he said.

"No," said Haldir. "But I am asking anyway."

Faramir picked up Legolas' second white knife and turned it in his hand. "Do I love another man?" he asked. "Yes. Am I promiscuous? No. And I would be grateful if you kept this to yourself."

"Does Eowyn know?"

"Of course Eowyn knows!"

Haldir shook his head in disbelief. "Orc's breath!" he said. "Why did you marry her? How could you have done that to her?"

"I did not do anything to her. I loved her. And I still love her. Just not as a wife." Faramir sat down beside the elf. "I did not understand what was wrong with our marriage until I met *him*. Then everything became clear... And that is why I sent Eowyn to Legolas—"

"You *sent* her!"

"I knew that she loved him, Haldir. I can tell you the exact day she fell in love with him, because it transformed her." He smiled, fondly. "But I knew that she would never leave *me*—she is just not the sort to break a promise. And he, of course, would never have approached her. I thought they would both suffer in silence until she died—until they both died. But then I heard about the harvest rite..."

He smiled. "And I thought: *Send her. Who knows what might happen?* Of course, it meant playing god—had the Valar not chosen her for him, she would have been forced to watch him... perform it... with someone else. So I risked breaking her heart. But the Valar did smile on them."

"I had to watch him perform it with *her*," said Haldir, softly. "The first night. I was there."

"I am sorry." Faramir sighed. "You must find yourself a companion, Haldir."

"I cannot." Haldir looked at the bow in his hands. "He is my best friend," he said, "and yet, recently, more and more..."

"I do not think he is good enough for her, Faramir."

...

"We are almost at the island," said Niqmaddu. "From what your friends told us I believe that the unfortunate Figwit is being kept prisoner in the governor's apartment, at the summit of the cliff. I shall take us straight there."

Eowyn kissed the top of Legolas' head. "It will not be long now, my love," she said. The elf was conscious at last, and sitting up in her arms, but shivering. "We will light a fire to warm you..."

She scanned the island for any sign of Valandil and his companions. *Where are they?* she wondered. *I thought they would be waiting for us.*

"Hold on tightly," cried the magician, "we are about to land."

He took the carpet up high—a good thirty feet above the cliff top—and then began a slow, spiralling descent until, more than ten feet above the terrace, the carpet came to a sudden

## The strange sea road

stop and lay flat in the air, as if sitting on an invisible floor.

Niqmaddu leaned forward and examined the transparent barrier.

"It is a powerful spell," he said, "and, doubtless, what is holding the elf prisoner. It will not let *me* pass but I do not think it will affect *you*. Can you jump?"

Eowyn looked down at the ground. "No," she said "I cannot; and nor can Legolas in this condition."

"Can the djinn carry you?"

Eowyn looked across the terrace. There was still no sign of Valandil and the others... and Legolas would be safer with the magician. "No," she said, "we will stay with you."

"Then I will take us to the main entrance, at the foot of the cliff," said Niqmaddu. "We can climb up from there."

...

"Can you tell where we are?" Wilawen was shuffling along behind the elf, one hand on his belt, her forehead almost touching his back.

"We are on the lowest floor of the prison," said Valandil. "It is as you thought, I can see another staircase up ahead."

"What is that light?"

"One of the cell doors is open, and sunlight is coming in through the window. When we pass the door, Wilawen," he added, "do not look."

"Why? *Oh*." She patted his back. "I have seen dead bodies before, Valandil; I have laid them out for burial."

"Laid them out?"

"Washed them, dressed them, arranged their limbs. Made them fit for their families to see. It is easier for people," she explained, "if their loved ones look dignified."

"That is a noble undertaking," said Valandil. He drew her quickly past the open cell. "These dead, though, are decayed. And their bodies are dried, *twisted*..."

Wilawen patted his back again. "I understand," she said, softly.

They slipped past several more open doors before coming, at last, to the end of the corridor and stepping into the well of the spiral stair.

"Up or down?" Valandil asked the spirits.

*Down.*

"We are going down," he said.

"I do wish," said Wilawen, "that I had thought to ask the magician to draw us a map."

Valandil smiled. "You would not be able to see it."

"It would have reminded me to bring a candle—"

## The strange sea road

"*Shhhh!* There is something up ahead!"

...

The carpet landed on a broad wharf at the foot of the cliff.

Beside the quay, a massive flight of stone steps, cut from the living rock, led to an impressive gateway fitted with an iron portcullis and flanked by a stone guardhouse.

There was no sign of any guards.

Niqmaddu turned to Legolas, who was now fully conscious. "Can you walk, your Highness?" he asked.

"Yes," said the elf, with a weak smile. "The noise affected my balance and I hit the water unprepared, but I am quite recovered now."

Eowyn helped him to his feet and the three companions slowly made their way to the entrance, ducked under the partially raised portcullis, and stared into the hall beyond.

A fall of rubble had filled the passage from floor to ceiling and, here and there, crushed amongst the rocks, the remains of the unfortunate prison guards still held their useless weapons.

"Dear gods," whispered Eowyn.

"This would explain why the prisoners were left to die," said Legolas. He turned to the magician. "But why has the rubble not been cleared? Why have the guards not been replaced?"

"I do not know," said Niqmaddu, overcome by the sight. "Let us go back outside..."

Eowyn helped him down the stone steps. "Sit down," she said. "Put your head between your knees. It will stop you fainting." She smiled up at Legolas.

"I do not believe that the Hatja knows about this," said the magician, after a few moments. "But a supply ship comes here every month. Why have they not reported it?"

...

"Stay here," whispered Valandil.

"No."

"Wilawen," he hissed, "you do not need to show me how brave—"

"I am *not* staying here alone."

"Hold my hand, then."

The staircase had opened into a wide entrance hall with a gently sloping floor. To the right Wilawen could make out a wooden counter covered with writing materials, official seals, and piles of dusty parchment—all the paraphernalia associated with processing prisoners. Directly ahead, blocking the hall from floor to ceiling, she could see a solid wall of rubble. And to the left—

Wilawen swallowed hard. Spilling from the doorway to the left, which appeared to lead to some sort of accommodation wing, was a pale shaft of light. And moving back and forth within the beam was a shadow.

### The strange sea road

"Is that *her*?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"What is she doing?"

"I do not know."

"Is Figwit with her?"

"I think so."

"We must help him."

"I must. But *you* do not have to come with me."

"Yes, I do," said Wilawen, softly. "We are in this together."

Valandil squeezed her hand. "Can you see well enough to follow me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Have your dagger ready."

Wilawen drew her short blade and—for good measure—pulled the wooden stake out of her belt. *I must be careful not to stab Figwit*, she thought.

"Come on," whispered Valandil.

Silently they crossed the hall. The elf motioned her to wait at one side of the guard room door then slipped—invisibly—past the opening and stood at the other.

*Ready?* he mouthed.

Wilawen nodded.

"Now!"

By some miracle, Wilawen found herself inside the guardroom, just a fraction of a second behind Valandil, her weapons raised.

*Gods...*

They were surrounded by corpses.

There were men in armour, lying about the floor like toy soldiers scattered by an angry child; there were men in shirt sleeves, sitting at a large wooden table, their decaying heads sunk upon their platters; and there were several naked men, evidently slain as they had left the bathhouse at the end of a hard day's work...

Wilawen fought to stay in control. Valandil was beckoning her. Carefully, she picked her way through the pitiful scene, following the elf towards the source of light.

*Where has the shadow gone...?*

Wailing like a mandrake, Naqiya-Zakutu flew out from behind a rack of weapons, leaped onto Valandil's back, and locked her hands around his throat. The elf staggered, his arms flailing, trying to shake her off.

### **The strange sea road**

Almost hysterical, Wilawen rushed forward and, with a desperate cry, sank her dagger into the woman's shoulder.

The creature roared with anger, but did not loosen her grip.

Wilawen stabbed again, using both weapons this time, the wooden stake in her weaker hand not penetrating but gouging the woman's back.

"Stop it," Wilawen cried. "Stop it! Get off him! Get *off* him!"

She stabbed and stabbed, but the woman did not loosen her grip, even when Valandil sank to his knees.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 9: Outwitted

**"Go—find some firewood, and bring it back, here," said Eowyn, pointing to the ground.**

"**I hear and obey,**" said the djinn, favouring her with an elaborate bow. Then he soared up into the sky, and disappeared towards the mainland, leaving a faint trail of smoke behind him.

Eowyn shook her head. "What am I going to do with him?" she asked Legolas. "We can hardly take a djinn back to Eryn Carantaur with us."

She crouched beside him and carefully pulled the woollen cloak up around his shoulders. "We should soon be able to light a fire, my love..."

Legolas smiled. "Stop worrying, melmenya," he said. "I am quite warm enough."

"How *can* I stop?" asked Eowyn. "The fall could have killed you. And it was my fault. If I had not been so foolish about flying—"

"Eowyn! I fell because of the storm!" He stroked her cheek. "*Who* rescued me, using her very own magical being?" He leaned closer, and whispered in her ear: "And who warmed me, using her very own magical body?"

Reluctantly, Eowyn grinned. "Stop it," she whispered. "Anyway," she added, "I think the Magus will find a fire comforting. I have never seen a man so shaken by the sight of—"

She stopped in mid sentence at a tiny sign from Legolas and turned to look behind her. The magician was coming towards them.

"Your Highnesses," he said, urgently, "I do not believe the rubble is a natural rock fall. Someone deliberately blocked the prison entrance and left everyone to die—and Queen Naqiya does not have the power to move matter. Something extraordinarily malevolent is going on in there, and your friends are still trapped inside." He drew out his wand. "I must go back inside. Will you accompany me?"

"Valar!" said Legolas, springing to his feet. "Of course!" He held out his hand to Eowyn. "Come, melmenya."

...

Wilawen's stake sank into Naqiya-Zakutu's back like a hot knife into butter, but the undead woman simply reached behind her, drew it out, and dashed it to the floor.

Then she rose from Valandil and, with a strange, spider-like motion, turned on Wilawen, whose presence she seemed to be registering for the first time.

"*Gods, preserve me,*" whispered Wilawen, backing away—until a few steps brought her up against something solid.

*Oh, no!* Without taking her eyes off the woman, Wilawen felt behind her. *One of the weapons racks.* Her hands searched blindly for a knife or a sword...

The rack was empty.

*Nothing. Oh gods...*

Queen Naqiya's hands reached for her throat.

## The strange sea road

Wilawen, her strength suddenly spent, slid to the floor.

Valandil moaned. "Run, *meleth nín*, run..."

But Wilawen could no longer move, and she knew she would not have run had she been able.

*How could I leave him? My life was empty before I met him...* She stared defiantly into the queen's dead eyes. "Do your worst, you she-orc," she whispered.

...

"I cannot move the rock," said Niqmaddu, as they climbed the steps, "but I may be able to protect Valandil and Wilawen, at least for the time being. Then, perhaps, if your djinn can remove the rubble for us, we—oh..."

He faltered, once more, at the sight of the dead guards, but Legolas squeezed his arm.

"When the djinn returns, we will free their bodies and help their spirits find rest," he said. "In the meantime, the *living* need you."

"Yes," said Niqmaddu, "yes." He raised his right hand, pointing his wand at the rubble, paused for one, two, three heartbeats, then cried, "Shield them!"

...

For a split-second, confusion flickered across Naqiya-Zakutu's hitherto impassive face. Then she drew back her hands, curled them into fists, and hammered them down on Wilawen's head.

But the blows ended harmlessly, in mid air, inches from her victim's temples.

Wilawen stared at the queen's grazed knuckles. *What is happening?*

She reached up and tried to touch the woman's hands, but could not. A smooth, hard surface—an invisible wall—was standing between them. Wilawen ran her fingers over it, following its contours. It seemed to surround her completely.

"Valandil!"

Ignoring Naqiya's relentless attempts to reach her, Wilawen crawled, on all fours, towards the elf. "Valandil..."

Her head hit something solid—*Of course, he is surrounded too!*

She came up on her knees and, for a moment, hung in mid air, hands spread, pushing against the magical barrier with all her might. Then the walls gave way and she fell through.

But Valandil was there to catch her.

...

"Something is happening," said Niqmaddu. "My spell is active. Your friends are in danger!"

"What can we do?" asked Legolas.

Eowyn turned, and ran out of the prison door. "DJINN," she shouted across the sea, "DJINN! COME HERE! NOW!"

...



### The strange sea road

Valandil crushed her against his chest. "*Meleth nín*," he whispered, his lips pressed to her temple, "I thought she would kill you."

Wilawen hugged him back, fiercely. "And I thought she would kill you. But your friends must have arrived with the magician," she said, "just in time."

Valandil kissed her forehead. "Just in time."

"Where has she gone?"

"I do not know—"

"*Figwit!*"

"Valar! I had forgotten about him!"

"Can you stand?"

"Yes—I think so..."

They scrambled to their feet and, hand in hand, followed the trail of Naqiya-Zakutu's blood.

...

"Here he comes," said Legolas.

The djinn swooped down, somersaulting flamboyantly, before landing on his wispy tail and bowing to Eowyn, laying two large armfuls of wood on the ground before her. "**You called me, pretty little mistress,**" he said, "**and your wish is my command.**"

"Through there," said Eowyn, pointing towards the prison entrance, "there is a pile of rocks. I want you to move the rocks out here," she pointed to the sea, "as quickly as you can."

"**I hear and obey,**" said the djinn, leaping into the air.

He flew through the prison door, seized a massive boulder from the top of the wall and, turning in the air like a swimmer, skimmed back long the ground, dumping the rock in the sea; then he turned again and flowed back inside.

Faster and faster he moved, carrying one rock after another, until—to Eowyn's eyes—his actions dissolved into a continuous blur of colour, surrounded by a halo of dust.

...

"Oh no," whispered Wilawen, "*no...*"

Figwit was lying, pale and still, on a wooden bench, like a corpse on a marble slab. Queen Naqiya-Zakutu was bending over him, her face buried in the crook of his neck.

"Leave him!" cried Valandil.

The queen raised her head and stared at them; her mouth was dripping with blood.

The elf squeezed Wilawen's hand. "I will get her away from him," he said, "then we must use our bodies to shield him with the spell."

Wilawen nodded. "Say when."

Valandil squeezed her hand again. "Now!"

## The strange sea road

Co-ordinating their movements by instinct, they ran to the bench.

Valandil released Wilawen's hand and jumped, swinging his feet up and over the wooden surface and slamming them into Naqiya's face. At the same time, Wilawen threw herself on top of Figwit, stretching out to cover as much of him as possible. A moment later, Valandil joined her.

She felt his hand on her waist and turned to face him, smiling slightly.

He smiled back. Then, "What is that noise?" he asked.

"Someone is breaking through the rubble."

"No," said Valandil. "The *other* noise."

...

"Stop!" cried Eowyn.

The djinn froze, mid cartwheel, his arm outstretched, his head pointing downwards. "**Does my work not please you, pretty little mistress?**" he asked.

"Your work is excellent," said Eowyn, "but the gap is big enough. You may return to your lamp now."

**"I hear and obey."**

He took a moment to right himself, then disappeared down the narrow spout. Eowyn carefully placed the lamp in her bag and drew out her sword.

"All set," she said.

Legolas had already strapped on Hentmirë's father's quiver and his one white knife. He picked up the small, heavy bow. "Perhaps," he said to Niqmaddu, "*you* should stay out here, Magus."

The magician shook his head. "As much as I would like to do exactly that, your Highness," he said, "I think that you and your friends may need me in there."

"Then take care—stay by the entrance until we tell you it is safe," said the elf. "Come, melmenya."

As they were clambering through the gap in the rubble wall, Legolas suddenly held up his hand and listened intently. "They are in a side chamber, to the right," he said, "and we had better hurry!"

...

"What other noise?" asked Wilawen. Then, "Oh..."

She turned her head slowly and looked in the direction of the strange crackling sounds. "Oh, gods!"

Several of the mummified corpses had risen from the floor and were advancing on them with the same relentless determination Naqiya-Zakutu had shown.

"Courage, Wilawen," said Valandil, softly.

"But..."

## The strange sea road

"Some magic re-animates their empty shells, *meleth nín*," he said, "but their spirits stand beside us and *they* wish us no harm. Remember, the spell will protect us. *We* must protect Figwit."

"I'll remember," she whispered, closing her eyes tightly.

...

The bow's range was short and the arrows were heavy but Legolas judged the shot perfectly, piercing the skull of the leading corpse, from back to front. For a split-second the creature staggered. Then it continued advancing as before.

Legolas drew two arrows and loosed them simultaneously, with exactly the same result.

"They are already dead," cried Eowyn. "But perhaps we can dismember them!" She ran forward, sword raised, and struck at one of the stragglers, severing its spine—and the creature fell to the ground, its legs still walking where they lay.

Following her lead, Legolas drew his white knife and began removing heads and arms with surgical precision; Eowyn, at his side, continued hacking and slashing with her scimitar.

Rapidly, they cut a path to their friends.

"Quickly, Valandil," said Legolas, "see if you can get Figwit outside—the Magus will help you—we will hold them back."

Valandil swung himself off the bench. Wilawen followed and, together, they pulled the semi-conscious Figwit to his feet and began dragging him towards the entrance. Legolas and Eowyn, fighting on the left and right flanks, tried to keep the way clear but, as they passed, more and more corpses rose up, brandishing weapons, and pieces of wood, and dismembered limbs.

The odds were becoming insuperable.

Suddenly, Niqmaddu stepped through the door and raised his wand. "Be still!" he cried.

The corpses froze.

Everyone waited, nervously...

But the spell held.

With a sigh of relief, Eowyn let her sword hand fall to her side.

And at that very moment—with the magician's attention completely focussed on the dead—a slender figure swathed in black robes flew through the guardroom door on Niqmaddu's own carpet. He skimmed over the rescuers, dipped behind the wooden bench, and raised up Naqiya-Zakutu, who was still lying where Valandil had left her. Then he swept out of the chamber, bidding Niqmaddu farewell with an insolent salute.

"That was the pedlar!" cried Eowyn. "That was Baalhanno! And he has my bag! *He has the djinn!*"

...

They ran out onto the wharf, but Baalhanno was already gone.

Valandil and Wilawen set Figwit down on the stone steps. Valandil crouched before him, chafing his hands.

## The strange sea road

Wilawen examined his neck. "Dear gods, she has bitten him," she said. "It is quite superficial, but I wish we had some water and clean cloths..."

Eowyn, sitting hunched forward on the steps, buried her face in her hands. "Why did I leave the lamp out here?"

"Do not blame yourself, melmenya." Legolas sat down beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "None of us imagined he was close by..."

"But now he has the *djinn*," said Eowyn. "He has what he has wanted all along—"

"No," said Niqmaddu. "No; the djinn is *your* slave, your Highness; he is yours for the rest of your life. He will not obey Baalhanno."

"Does Baalhanno know that?" asked Legolas.

The magician shrugged. "He must know it."

"Then why did he take it? Unless—"

The elf and the magician stared at each other in alarm, both coming to the same conclusion at the same instant.

"He does not expect Princess Eowyn to live much longer," said Niqmaddu, softly.

A small stone bounced down the cliff face.

"We are sitting targets," said Legolas, leaping to his feet, "but for what?" He raised his bow, looking about the wharf. "There is nothing out here..."

"Perhaps that is the danger," said Niqmaddu. "Perhaps he intends for us to die of thirst, like the prisoners. Perhaps that is why he took my carpet."

Another stone clattered to the ground.

Legolas shook his head. "That would surely take too long," he said. "Besides, Hentmirë will be here at any moment, with her ship."

A handful of pebbles rained down onto the wharf. The elf looked up at the cliff. High above him, thousands of small stones were pouring down its face, like a waterfall, and, here and there, jagged cracks were appearing in the rock behind.

*Oh Valar! Yes, sitting targets...* "Into the sea!" he cried "Quickly, quickly! Into the water!"

...

Legolas broke the surface and looked around wildly.

*Where is Eowyn?*

The rocks were falling in a thundering curtain now—the wharf was buried in debris and the prison entrance already invisible—and massive blocks were breaking off the cliff and bouncing into the water.

*Where is she?*

He heard a splash behind him, and turned.

*Thank the Valar!*

## The strange sea road

But Eowyn was not a strong swimmer and she was working far too hard to stay afloat. Legolas swam towards her. "Keep calm, melmenya," he said. "Let me help you..."

Somehow, he managed to slip his hands beneath her arms and pull her head and shoulders against his chest.

"Prince Legolas!" cried Valandil, suddenly. "To the east! There is a cove—we can climb ashore!"

"Good! Lead on!" Legolas spat out a mouthful of salty water. "Relax, melmenya," he said, softly. "Keep still and leave it to me. I will soon have you back on dry land."

...

The cove was a semi-circular shelf of barren rock, backed by vertical cliffs. There was no obvious way out.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Wilawen, helping Figwit out of the water.

"Hentmirë and the others will soon be here," said Legolas, reassuringly. "But we must think of some way to attract their attention."

"I still have my wand," said Niqmaddu. "I should be able to conjure up a few fireworks—"

"*Look!*" cried Valandil, pointing out to sea.

Legolas turned, and stared. Rolling across the vivid blue water was a huge black ball, its boiling core spiked with flashes of lightning, like a giant Palantír.

"Could it be..." Eowyn began.

"It is the ship, melmenya," said Legolas. "It is Hentmirë's ship!"

...

"Hold on!" cried Captain Mutallu.

A mass of white, foaming water burst over the *Early Bird*'s bows and rushed towards the stern. With a split-second to spare, Faramir grabbed the taffrail with one hand, and Hentmirë's arm with the other, and clung desperately to both as the water surged over and under and through them.

*Gods!*

Then another wave, helped by the shrieking wind, laid the *Bird* over to port, with her deck almost vertical and, for a few terrifying moments, Faramir's right hand—slipping on the wet wood—was all that prevented both him and the little woman from falling overboard...

The next instant the boat had righted herself.

"Tie my lady to the mainmast!" shouted Mutallu.

Faramir tried to estimate the distance: *Thirty feet, perhaps. Can we make it?*

*No!*

Another massive wave, higher than the Great Gates of Minas Tirith, was approaching the starboard bow, moving faster than a running man. As Faramir braced himself for the impact, he felt Hentmirë's hand squeeze his own—she had caught the taffrail and was doing her very best to pull her weight.

### The strange sea road

Faramir squeezed back. "Ready?" he shouted.

She nodded, her plump face grimly determined.

Then the boat dropped out from under them, just as the wave broke, and the water hit them like a charging warg, turning Faramir around and smashing him into the rail, leaving him hunched over the wood, struggling to fill his lungs.

...

A spot of red, like a dragon's eye, opened in the black depths of the storm-tossed ball, glowed menacingly, then flared orange—yellow—white—

And the ball blew apart with a dull boom.

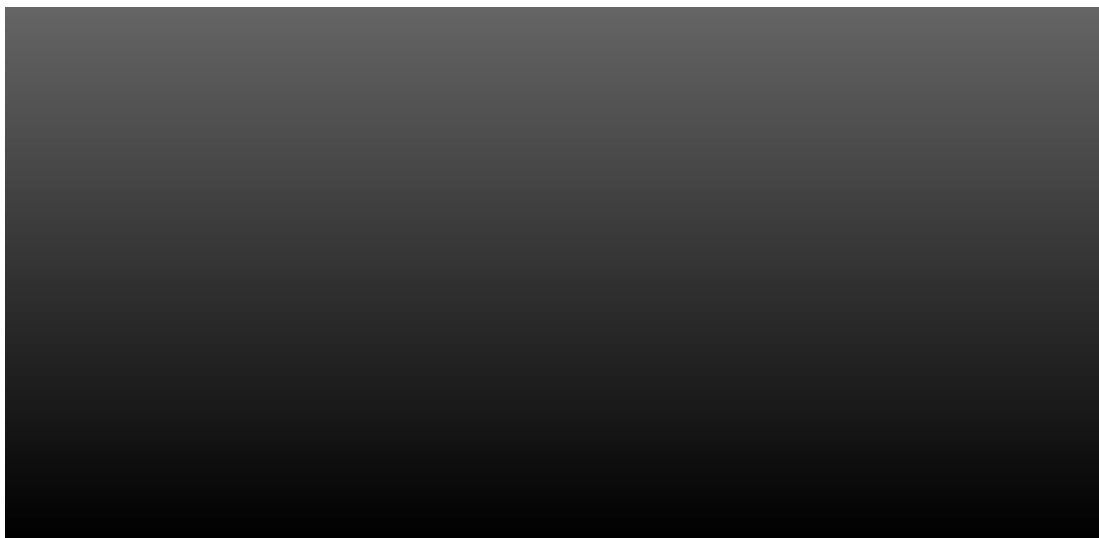
...

"No!" cried Eowyn. "No! Faramir! *Faramir! Haldir!*"

She ran towards the water, but Legolas caught her in his arms and pulled her against his chest, shielding her eyes from the sight of the broken ship.

"*Shhhh, melmenya,*" he whispered, hugging her close. "*Shhhh, shhhh...*" He bowed his head to hers and prayed for both of them, "*Hiro hyn hîdh ab'wanath.*"

"No..." sobbed Eowyn.



...

Dragged from oblivion by something grinding insistently against the wall, he opened his eyes and peered into the airless dark. The vessel was shaking violently around him. It was time to leave...

The moment some life had returned to his limbs, he pushed himself towards the pinprick of light, wriggling his way through the narrow space, until, at last, his head emerged into the open, and his hands grasped the edges of the hole.

And then—with a glorious sense of relief—he pulled himself free.

## The strange sea road

"**Who rubbed my lamp?**" he demanded, bending his fluid body and peering into the face of the stranger. "**You are not my pretty little mistress.**"

"Your mistress is dead. I am your master now."

"**Bulls' shit,**" said the djinn, haughtily. And, abandoning his ancient brass home, he took off into the sky.

...

"*Shhhh, shhhh,*" whispered Legolas, rocking Eowyn in his arms. "There may be some survivors, my love. Valandil and I shall swim—"

"What is that?" asked Wilawen, suddenly. "Up there?"

A strange ribbon of white smoke was curling its way down from the cloudless blue sky.

"Valar," said Legolas. "Melmenya! Look!" Gently, he turned her round to face it. "Look! The djinn has escaped! He is coming back to you!"

"**Greetings, pretty little mistress,**" said the djinn, touching his hand to his forehead, lips and heart. "**I am pleased to find—**"

"*The ship!*" cried Eowyn. "The ship!" She pointed out to sea with both hands. "Go to the ship! Bring everyone here! Do not leave anyone behind!"

...

Flying over the *Early Bird*—dismasted, and with most of her superstructure ripped away and floating beside her hull—the djinn waved cheerily to a plump little woman, trying to pull a sleeping man out of the sea.

### Strange...

Suddenly, he remembered his mistress's command and, swooping low, he grasped the hull with both hands, lifted it—and all the noisy little people clinging to it—and carried it back to the shore on his shoulder.

...

Two hours later, the *Bird* was lying at anchor in the cove. The djinn had salvaged her masts, sails and rigging, and had retrieved a substantial part of her accommodation—the deckhouse, forecabin and galley—which he had arranged, like a small village, on the stone shelf.

Wilawen and the Mirkwood elves had helped the boat's barber-surgeon turn the deckhouse into a Healing Room, where the injured, including Faramir and Figwit, and the woman, Arinna, were now being tended. Eowyn—despite Legolas' tactful attempts to dissuade her—was helping the boat's cook prepare some hot food. Legolas and Haldir were deep in conference with Hentmirë, Niqmaddu and Captain Mutallu.

"Can it be repaired," asked Legolas, "here and now, with the help of the djinn? We *must* follow Baalhanno."

"Why? You have already rescued your friend," said Captain Mutallu. "Why risk sailing through another of that villain's storms?"

"Because one of my warriors has promised to free the spirits of the dead," said Legolas. "And to do that, he must lay Naqiya-Zakutu to rest. As Valandil's lord—my father's proxy—I am

## The strange sea road

obliged to honour his promise—though, in truth, I would do so even if I were not."

"And *I*," said Niqmaddu, "must make amends for the failure of my prison—and for awakening Baalhanno's powers in the first place." He turned to Legolas. "It seems I am a mere novice compared to my former pupil, your Highness, but such skills as I have are yours to command."

Legolas placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. "*Hannon le, mellon nín*," he said.

"*Legolas...*" said Hentmirë, uncertainly.

The elf turned to face her, his expression grave. "I know, my lady—Eowyn and I promised that we would never leave you. But—I beg you—give me your permission to pursue Baalhanno. I swear that I shall return to your service as soon as my duty is discharged."

"That is not what I was going to say," said Hentmirë. She looked down at her hands. "You do not belong to me, Legolas. That was a dream I had, nothing more—"

"Oh, my lady..." Legolas' tone was infinitely gentle.

"But I cannot bear to think of you in danger, my dearest—nor any of my new friends. I cannot *bear* it."

Legolas grasped her hands. "I am a warrior, *gwendithen nín*," he said. "All of your new friends are warriors. And danger is a part of our lives."

"Can I come with you?"

Legolas looked deep into her eyes. She had already proved her worth, on the ship, with Faramir. "If you make me the same promise as before," he said.

Hentmirë withdrew her hands and held them up, spreading her fingers wide. "I promise," she said.

Smiling, Legolas turned to Mutallu.

"I will go wherever my lady goes," said the sea captain.

"Take good care of her for me."

The man nodded. "I shall. And, as for the *Bird*, we will see what can be done with her tomorrow, at first light."

...

"**Little mistress!**" The djinn's face appeared at the hole in the galley wall.

"Do you eat?" asked Eowyn. "I have made some stew—"

"**No, mistress. But I need to rest.**"

"You have earned it."

"**I have no lamp.**"

"Oh! No—of course." Eowyn looked around. There were no lamps on the boat—only wooden lanterns, and they were all in use. "What about a kettle," she asked. "Will this do?"

Cautiously, the djinn took it from her, removed its lid and peered inside. "**It is wet**," he said.



## The strange sea road

Eowyn took a cloth and carefully dried it out. "When we return ashore," she said, "I will buy you a beautiful new lamp. With jewels on the lid. I have seen some in the souk."

...

"You *must* stop now, *meleth nín*," said Valandil, gently removing a cleaning cloth from Wilawen's hands. "Others will do this. It is your turn to rest. Come, I have made you a bed, over here."

Too tired, for once, to protest, Wilawen allowed him to lead her to a small alcove in the rock wall, which he had curtained off with a piece of sail and furnished with a bedroll and a dressing table—made from a wooden box—with a hand mirror, a comb, and a bowl of soapy water.

Wilawen smiled. "Thank you," she said. She picked up the mirror, looked at herself in it for a split-second, then hastily laid it back on the box, face down.

"What does that mean," she asked, "'*meleth nín*'?"

"My love."

"Valandil..."

"Shhhh. We shall talk about the future tomorrow, Wilawen. You need some sleep now." He kissed her forehead. "Good night, *meleth nín*."

...

"How do you feel?" asked Eowyn.

Faramir smiled. "Fine," he said. "I have absolutely no recollection of what hit me." He touched his bandaged head. "But had it not been for Hentmirë, I think I would have drowned."

"Are you well enough to eat? I have made some stew. It is not much, but it is warm."

"Er..."

She held out a wooden bowl.

"Thank you." Faramir took a cautious sip. Then his entire body relaxed. "Oh," he said, "this is good."

"Really? I did have a lot of help—with the seasoning and so on. Do you think Legolas will like it?"

"I am sure he will."

Eowyn perched on the edge of his bunk. "I have not really had a chance before," she said, "to thank you for coming after us—and for finding the Magus—and then rescuing Camthalion and Orodreth—"

"*Anyone* would have done the same."

"No." Eowyn shook her head. "No; you have been a rock, Faramir, as always. It is your nature—strong and steady." She smiled. "It is what I have always loved about you."

Faramir laid down the empty bowl and took her in his arms.

...

## The strange sea road

At last, the shipwrecked adventurers were settling down for the night.

"You look exhausted, *melmenya*," said Legolas, softly. "Come: Valandil and Orodreth have made you a bedroom in the forecabin." He guided her to a cabin, a little way apart from the rest of the wreckage, and sat her down on the 'bed' the elves had built for her out of wooden crates.

Eowyn smiled. "I *am* tired," she said. "Will you stay with me?"

"For a while, *meleth nín*." He unlaced her bodice. "But I need to talk to Valandil about the woman, and"—he slid the fabric over her shoulders—"oh, *melmenya*..."

Gently pushing her down onto the bed, he kissed her breasts, sucking each nipple in turn, and grazing them with his teeth.

Eowyn gasped.

"I am sorry, *melmenya*," he said, raising his head, "you are *far* too tired for this."

"No!" She caught his hands and brought them back to her breasts. "No," she said, "I want you, Lassui. Please."

The elf needed no further encouragement. With a mischievous smile, he straddled her torso and quickly unlaced his trousers. Then he lowered himself and stroked his broad *ceber* along the cleft between her breasts.

Smiling, too, Eowyn kissed its tip, and sucked it, cupping his warm, full *ceryn*.

"*Melmenya*..." he gasped.

Eowyn felt his climax start in her hand, felt his shaft jerk, released him, and watched in wonder as his seed burst over her throat.

Her own body was on fire. "Please," she begged.

Without a moment's pause, Legolas slipped between her legs, hooked his hands under her knees, and, bringing them up to her waist, spread her wide open. Then he sank himself, still rock hard, deep into her body.

"Yes," she wailed, "oh, yes."

His thrusts were everything Eowyn loved—hard and vigorous—but she was far too tangled in his arms to meet them. Instead, she lay still, entirely at his mercy. He built her release quickly, lunge after heart-wrenching lunge, then slowed to a mere rocking motion, holding her just on the brink, showing her the joy of being possessed by him, until, with one deep, merciful thrust, he pushed her over the edge.

And only his mouth, locked on hers, could stop up the scream that would have brought the wood elves running to her rescue.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 10: The sea and Sindbad's ship

### "Melmenya..."

"Mmmmm?" Eowyn stretched, languidly, on her bed of wooden crates and, pening her eyes, smiled up at him, wickedly. "Good morning."

"Good morning, *meleth nín*. How are you feeling this morning?"

Her smile broadened.

Legolas laughed. "We have no time now, Eowyn *nín*," he said, taking her in his arms. "Much as I would like to." He kissed her forehead. "Captain Mutallu and the crew are ready to rebuild the boat, with the help of the djinn, and they need you to give him his orders. Let me help you dress..."

...

By mid morning the repairs were well under way.

The djinn, at Mutallu's direction and under Eowyn's direct command, fetched and carried and, in some cases, found replacement parts, whilst the men on shore hammered caulking into the boat's seams, and the men on deck nailed planking and secured fixings, and the men up in the rigging renewed sheets and shrouds.

"Ship to starboard!" cried one of the sailors working aloft.

Legolas jumped onto the boat's gunwale and, shielding his eyes with his hand, scrutinised the approaching vessel. "She is flying a silver *mûmak* on a red ground," he said.

"The Hatja's colours," said Mutallu. "And she's making for the wharf."

"It must be the supply ship," said Niqmaddu.

The elf and the two men watched with mounting disbelief as, seemingly oblivious to the recent rock fall, the ship moored up at the prison harbour and its crew, climbing awkwardly over the rubble, began unloading supplies.

"What are they doing?" asked Mutallu. "Can they not see what has happened?"

"No," said Niqmaddu, "I do not believe they can..."

"Captain, might I borrow one of your rowing boats? And would *you*, your Highness, be so good as to accompany me?"

...

"Wilawen—"

"Not just now, Valandil," said Wilawen, turning away, "Lady Eowyn wants to move this part of the cabin next, so I need to help Arinna outside."

Valandil bit his lip. "Very well. Let me help you," he said. "But, then, we must talk."

...

Rowed by Orodreth and Camthalion, the small boat skimmed across the water.

"Please," said Niqmaddu, "whatever you see happening on the quayside, keep absolutely

## The strange sea road

silent."

They rounded a small promontory, came up alongside the supply ship, then passed under her bows. Legolas gazed up at the wharf. The Hatja's men had formed themselves into a chain—starting at the ship and ending close to where the prison door should have been—and were swiftly unloading sacks and wooden crates, passing them from hand to hand in time to a cheerful sea shanty. Beside the buried guardhouse, an official-looking man in a red headdress was talking to thin air, gesturing towards the supplies and holding out a pen and a writing board to an imaginary colleague.

Niqmaddu motioned the elves to disembark.

Making no sound, Legolas and the others hopped onto the stone quay and helped the magician ashore.

Skirting around the men, Niqmaddu picked his way to the official's side. He raised his wand and pointed it directly at the man's forehead.

"Reveal!" he said, softly.

For an instant the man's body froze. Then his arms dropped uselessly to his sides and—though a smile still lingered around his mouth—his eyes opened wide in astonishment. "What the...?"

"Good morning, Master Ubar," said Niqmaddu, patting his arm, supportively. "Do you remember me? We have met several times in the Hatja's council room."

The man dragged his eyes from the rubble.

"Magus..." he said. "What is happening?"

"Let us go aboard, and I will explain," said Niqmaddu. "But first I must release your men, and *you* must be ready to reassure them." He turned to Legolas. "Are you ready, your Highness?"

Legolas and the other elves had already positioned themselves beside the chain of sailors.

Niqmaddu raised his wand and cried, loudly this time, "Reveal!"

Several of the men continued unloading the ship, still oblivious to the chaos surrounding them, but for the majority of the sailors, the wharf was instantly transformed. Some lost their balance and fell to the ground; some panicked, dropped their supplies and ran towards the sea—but the elves were ready to catch them; some looked around them, wildly, crying out to the gods for mercy.

"Master Ubar..." Niqmaddu prompted.

"*Hold fast!*" Ubar shouted, with remarkable authority.

When the men had calmed, he called them all together. "Load the supplies back onto the boat," he said. "We will return to Carhivilven immediately, and fetch help for our colleagues in there.

"At the double!" He turned the magician. "Magus Niqmaddu, I believe you promised me an explanation."

...

"Is *she* the last?" asked Eowyn.

"Yes," said Wilawen. "All the cabins are clear now."

## The strange sea road

"Good—lift the deckhouse and take it over to the boat," she called to the djinn. "Place it exactly where Captain Mutallu tells you."

She turned to Valandil, ignoring the djinn's customary flourishing bow. "Bring Arinna over here." She led him to an area by the cliff face, well away from the repair crews, that had been set aside for the injured. Valandil laid the—very appreciative—woman on the empty bedroll beside Figwit.

"How are you feeling, Figwit?" asked Wilawen.

The elf turned towards her, smiling. "Much better. In fact, I think—" His eyes fell on Arinna. "You!" he cried.

"Do I know you, lover?" the woman asked.

"*Do you know me!* This—this is the one who examined me—who selected me—for that—that *creature!*" cried Figwit. And he tried to rise, but Valandil caught him by the shoulders and held him down.

Eowyn, who had turned to leave, stopped in mid stride. "Are you *sure?*" she asked.

"Yes!"

Eowyn turned to Arinna. "Who bought him?"

"How do you expect me to remem—"

"Come now," said Eowyn. "You cannot have handled many elves. Who bought him?"

Arinna sighed. "I never knew his name," she said. "He told Milkherem that he was from a land to the south, and that he wanted an elf to take back as a gift for his Queen." She turned to Figwit. "I honestly thought you would be treated like a prince. Fucked within an inch of your life—yes—but pampered, spoiled, treated the way I treat Ori and Cami..."

Figwit sighed. "Let me go, Valandil," he said. "I will not harm her. Let me go."

"Did this customer tell you anything more?" asked Eowyn. "Anything about himself or about where he lived?"

"No," said Arinna. "No. He was very mysterious. In fact, he came to me at night. I never even saw his face."

...

"You are wrong," said Ubar. "You have to be wrong. I spoke to the governor only last month—"

"The men inside that prison have been dead for some years," said Niqmaddu. "Is that not right, your Highness?"

"I am afraid it is," said Legolas, gently. "The governor, the guards and the prisoners are all dead—save one," he added.

"The *woman*," said Ubar. "I'll wager *she* is still alive, the poisonous bitch."

"Indeed," said Niqmaddu. "And we believe that she and her magician accomplice are now returning to Kuri. We plan to follow her as soon as our boat is repaired. We need *you* to go back to Carhivilven, inform the Hatja of what has happened here, and persuade him to send an army to aid us. I shall write a letter for you to give to him..."

## The strange sea road

...

"Wilawen!" Valandil caught her round the waist and, ignoring her protests, pulled her into her 'bedroom'. He lowered the sailcloth. "Why are you avoiding me?" he asked.

"Avoiding you! How *can* I avoid you? You are dogging my every step!"

"Wilawen..."

His tone was so gentle, and so full of pain, that she was forced give in. She sat down on the bedroll with a sigh. "I cannot," she said.

The elf crouched beside her. "Cannot what?"

"Let this go any further."

"How much further can it go?"

"What do you mean?"

"I love you, you love me. How much further—"

"I never said I *loved*—"

"*Wilawen*—"

"Will you stop saying that! It is very annoying."

Valandil grinned. "*Meleth nín*," he said.

"Do you know how old I am?" she asked, bleakly.

Valandil shook his head.

"I shall be thirty-eight, next birthday."

Valandil, unsure whether that was young or old for a woman, said, "I believe I shall be four thousand and twenty-four on my next conception day."

Wilawen shook her head in exasperation. "You *idiot*!" She turned to face him. "I look like your mother."

"No, my mother—"

"Shut up! I have already lived half my allotted span. I am probably too old to have children—assuming that an elf and a woman can have children. And—and—I have never—never—oh, no, I cannot say it..."

"What? Never what?"

She did not reply.

"Never what, Wilawen?" Gently, he raised her chin until their eyes met. "What?"

She looked away, her face flushed crimson. "I have never been with a man," she said, softly.

"Good," said Valandil. "Because *I* shall be a very jealous husband."

...

## The strange sea road

"I have brought you some lunch, my dear," said Hentmirë. She handed Faramir a plate of food, then sat down beside him, perching on a flat boulder. "There is bread and cheese and some roasted fowl—I got you the best pieces I could—and some ale—it is far healthier than the water from the barrels."

"Thank you, my lady," said Faramir smiling.

"This is so exciting!" said Hentmirë, looking round the cove. "I have been helping the sailors mend the rigging, passing them their tools—those long, pointed things are called 'fids'."

"Are they really?"

"Yes. And I have learned to tie a midshipman's loop and to make a jar sling."

Faramir waited, patiently.

"Do you live with Legolas?" she asked, at last.

"I? No, my lady. I live to the north of Eryn Carantaur, in a city called Caras Arnen, the City on the Hills. But I visit Legolas quite often."

"Do you think he would let *me* visit him?"

"I think he would be very sad if you did not visit him, my lady."

Hentmirë beamed at him. Then her smile suddenly faded and she said, earnestly, "Do you think he would let me live with him? With *them*? Permanently?"

Faramir looked up from his meal, surprised. "You would leave your home, my lady?"

"My *house*," she corrected. "It is a nice house, but it is only mud brick and plaster. My home is where my friends are."

Faramir smiled. "Yes," he said, "where your friends are."

"I do not suppose..." She looked up at him, timidly. "I do not suppose that *you* would ask him for me?"

"Oh, I think I could do that," said Faramir.

...

"My lady, might I have a word?"

Eowyn, snatching a few moments' rest whilst the sailors were eating their rations, smiled up at Wilawen. "Do call me 'Eowyn'," she said. "Sit down—is this about Valandil?"

"Thank you. How did you know?"

Eowyn smiled. "I just assumed that you would be having all the same thoughts that I once had: *How can an elf want a woman? What will happen when I age? How shall I bear it when he does not age? What will happen to him when I die?*

"All those thoughts."

"Yes."

"Do you love him?"

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"I..." Wilawen looked down at her hands. "Yes," she said, very, very softly, "but..."

"Elves are not like men," said Eowyn. "When an elf gives his heart he gives it for eternity. You cannot protect him, now, by rejecting him. It is too late."

"Oh, gods!" Wilawen's head sank into her hands. Then she said, very quietly, "Has he had many lovers, do you know?"

"You must ask him that."

"I feel so inadequate."

"Wilawen," said Eowyn, "elves *admire* us." The other woman looked up in surprise. "Yes, they do. To them we are full of life. Even those who mistrust us admire our vitality. And Valandil loves you—your strength, your intelligence."

"He says that the Valar sent me to him," said Wilawen. "He thinks that women and eldar will come together more and more, in the Fourth Age..."

"He may be right."

"I wish I knew what to do! How did *you* know? With Lord Legolas?"

Eowyn thought for a moment. "I knew because I could not imagine any future without him," she said.

...

By the time Niqmaddu and Legolas had returned to the *Early Bird* the repairs were complete—her holes had been plugged and her seams caulked and pitched, her forecabin repaired and, with the djinn's help, her deckhouse remounted. The djinn had pulled out the broken stump of her mizzenmast as easily as drawing a tooth, and had just as effortlessly slid a new spar through her main deck and into the step. Finally, the men had renewed her rigging and patched her sails.

"We are all ready to weigh anchor, my lady, your Highness," said Mutallu to Hentmirë and Legolas.

He laid out his charts on the cabin table. "We are *here*," he said. "And Kuri is *here*..." He measured the distance with his dividers. "Four hundred miles."

"But how can we be sure that he has gone to Kuri?" asked Hentmirë.

"We cannot," said Niqmaddu.

Legolas turned to Eowyn. "You say that Arinna knew nothing?" he asked.

"Nothing at all."

"But we do know that he has taken Niqiya with him," said the magician. "And Kuri is where the water is."

"Do you think that that is what he wants?" asked Legolas. "The water?"

"Kuri has little else to offer."

Legolas nodded, thoughtfully. "But if all he wants is the water, why does he need the djinn? The creature's 'powers' seem to be nothing but brute force."



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"Perhaps he does not *need* the djinn so much as want him," said Eowyn. She looked down at the kettle on her lap. "I wonder..." She rubbed the kettle's side until the djinn's head emerged from the spout.

"Your wi—"

"Can you find your lamp?" asked Eowyn.

The djinn sighed. "**I am *tired, mistress,***" he said.

"I know. Just do this one thing for me and then I will let you rest—find your lamp, then come back to me and tell me who has it, and where it is. But if you see the stranger, do not let him see you."

**"I hear and obey, little mistress,"** said the djinn, wearily. **"But, *please, carry my kettle up onto the deck for me. Flying around these small cabins is very hard on my back.***"

...

Several hours later, the djinn returned with important news. **"You cannot go to the Land of Kuri, mistress,"** he said. **"Boils would mar your pretty little face..."**

Gradually, Eowyn's careful questioning revealed that, by the time the djinn had arrived in Kuri, Baalhanno had already cast the lamp away, somewhere in the Bay. But whilst attempting, unsuccessfully, to retrieve his home, the djinn had overheard a rumour, spreading rapidly amongst the pearl fishers, that Naqiya-Zakutu had been seen alive in the city—and that everyone in the Royal Palace was now afflicted with a terrible plague.

"How can that be?" asked Legolas, who found the idea of pestilence difficult to grasp.

"Baalhanno must have conjured it," said Niqmaddu grimly. "The sooner we get to Kuri the better."

...

### The sea and Sindbad's ship

The djinn had claimed that the boat was too heavy for him to carry, but had condescended to call up a fair wind, and the *Early Bird* was now well underway.

"It is becoming harder and harder to persuade him to do anything," said Eowyn, as she and Legolas strolled along the deck together. "Do you think I should be firmer with him?"

"How would you do that, melmenya?" said Legolas, smiling. "I do not think that your sword would make much impression on him."

"Perhaps I should get angry with him."

"Now that might work, since he is sweet on you."

"*You* think that everyone is sweet on me."

They stopped beside the taffrail and looked out across the water. Low in the vast midnight-blue sky, the sun was painting the horizon with a splash of raspberry red and tinting the foaming ocean a pale rose.

"It is very beautiful," said Eowyn, "in its own way. But I do miss home."

Legolas took her in his arms. "It will not be long, now, melmenya," he said, kissing the top of

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her head. "Hentmirë has already told Faramir that she wants to come and live with us in Eryn Carantaur. I am just waiting for the right moment to talk to her."

"Oh, Lassui!" Eowyn hugged him tightly. "That is wonderful news," she said. "Wonderful!"

"Mmmm." He slid his hand down to her buttocks and pulled her close.

"Legolas!"

"An elf cannot help being stirred by thoughts of the forest, melmenya—and of what he might do there." He bit her neck.

"Ow!" Eowyn could not say whether it was pain or pleasure shooting through her limbs, but her body writhed in response, rubbing itself against him. "Tell me—tell me what you will do," she whispered.

He pressed his lips to her ear, "I shall take you to *Eryn Dholt*," he said, "where the forest is thick and dark, and a branch of the Anduin cuts through the *Gynd Vyrn*. At the water's edge, I shall sit on the rocks and make you kneel at my feet." He nipped the lobe of her ear. "I shall unlace my leggings and you shall take me in your mouth—oh, melmenya!—I shall hold your head and urge you: *Harder*," he whispered, "*suck me harder...*"

"Oh..."

"I shall burst in your mouth, melmenya."

Eowyn moaned.

"And then I shall strip you naked, and lay you on the rocks, and stroke myself over your face and lips, and your throat and breasts. I shall tease your belly and torment your *criss*. I shall make you beg, Eowyn *nín*—whilst I come again, between your thighs..."

"Oh..." Eowyn squirmed in frustration, pressing herself against his leg.

"Only when I am absolutely sure that you have earned it, melmenya, shall I turn you over on the wet rocks and take you, on all fours, squealing like a vixen, while the waterfall cascades around you and the sound of rushing water fills your mind..."

"Gods," wailed Eowyn. "Take me! Take me now!"

Legolas swept her up in his arms and rushed her to the privacy of their cabin.

Neither of them had noticed the lonely figure of the March Warden, standing in the shadow of the deckhouse.

...

## Two days later

They slipped into the Bay of Kuri under cover of dusk and dropped anchor well out to sea. Niqmaddu shrouded the boat to protect her from prying eyes but, when pressed on the matter, admitted that he could not be sure the spell would hold at close quarters, his confidence obviously shaken by the events of the previous few days.

Legolas convened a council of war on the main deck.

"The only things that we know for certain," said the magician, "is that Naqiya-Zakutu was seen in the Royal Palace, that there was subsequently an outbreak of 'plague', that the Palace is quarantined, and that the magical spring can only be reached—I am told—from Naqiya's

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private apartments.

"What we can *surmise*, however," he continued, "is that Baalhanno's intentions are entirely evil, and that he must, therefore, be stopped as quickly as possible—I do not think we can wait for the Hatja's army. Besides..." His voice trailed away.

"Magus?" Legolas prompted.

"The last war between Kuri and Carhivilvren lasted for more than five years. Many, many lives were lost. So if we can possibly stop Baalhanno without resorting to obvious military action—"

"Yes," said Legolas. "I understand. But the people of Kuri are hardly going to welcome us—"

"We must go *secretly*," said Hentmirë. "After all, we have a Magus, a djinn and four elves on our side. Besides, the Palace is quarantined—so, even if they see us, the citizens will not risk trying to stop us."

Legolas smiled. "I cannot argue with that reasoning," he said. "It is decided, then. Magus, March Warden, Valandil, Eowyn: we shall wait until there is less activity on the quay, then row ashore in one of the small boats. Faramir—we shall aim to return by daybreak. If we do not, the next move is yours, *mellon nín*. I shall leave you Camthalion and Orodreth, and I am sure that Captain Mutallu will place some of his crew at your disposal."

The captain grunted in agreement.

"Very well," said Faramir. "But take care over there. *All of you.*"

Hentmirë cleared her throat.

"You must stay here with Faramir, *gwendithen nín.*"

"Oh, but—"

"No *buts*," said Legolas, sternly. "This is not a game, Hentmirë. And, if you are to be one of my warriors, you must obey my orders."

...

They were awkward with each other—Valandil unsure of what to say, Wilawen afraid to get too close.

"Be careful," she said. "And take this." She handed him her dagger.

"Thank you."

There was another uncomfortable silence.

"Well..." said Valandil.

"Yes," said Wilawen.

"I had better join the others."

"Yes."

With a final brief nod, Valandil turned to leave.

Wilawen watched him walk away—past the foremast, past the mainmast, past the mizzen—

## The strange sea road

"Wait!" she cried, "Wait! Wait!"

By the time he had turned back she was already running.

He held out his arms and she threw herself at him, and they clung to each other until Haldir dragged them apart.

...

The rowing boat slipped silently between the moored vessels.

As they reached the quayside, Legolas, holding the painter in his hand, rose to his feet and, timing it perfectly, jumped lightly onto the wharf, and wound the rope around a mooring bollard.

Valandil helped Niqmaddu climb ashore, then Eowyn with the djinn, and then hopped up onto the wharf himself.

Haldir, still in the rowing boat, passed up three bundles of arrows, reached down for three more, and a tiny movement of the boat's tarpaulin caught his eye...

Holding his finger to his lips for silence, the elf drew his knife, grasped a corner of the sheet, and lifted it.

"Oh!" cried a familiar voice.

"Hentmirë," hissed Legolas. "I told you to stay aboard the *Early Bird*."

"Yes," said the woman, "you did. But I thought I could be more useful here. I can speak the language, a little."

Legolas sighed. "Well, there is no time to take you back."

He held out his hands and—with considerable assistance from Haldir at the rear—helped her ashore. "Be sure to stay behind me or behind Eowyn," he said. "And do not wander off. I shall not come back for you if you get lost."

...

They crossed the wharf and made their way to the Palace, which stood on a natural rise at the centre of the city. The route was deserted, but the improvised barricades, the broken windows, and the boarded-up doors all told the same story.

"Looting," said Niqmaddu. "Without the palace, the people have no confidence in the future. Law has broken down. Anarchy prevails."

Two dead guards lay at the sentry posts beside the Great Gates, another hung from one of the lookout towers above the Gatehouse, and two more sprawled over the fortified walls. The gates themselves had been hastily barred from the outside, and a large, yellow quarantine flag had been hung beside them.

"Are the bodies contagious?" asked Hentmirë.

"No," said Niqmaddu. "They are just a clever illusion to scare the townspeople."

Haldir took a length of elven rope from his pack and threw it over the battlements, pulling until it caught and held. Then Legolas climbed nimbly to the top of the wall, and disappeared over.

"He is very athletic," whispered Hentmirë.

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A few moments later, a small door opened in the Great Gate and Legolas beckoned them inside. The broad Palace courtyard was completely deserted but, here and there, piles of clothing lay on the ground, as though hastily discarded.

"Where has everyone gone?" said Legolas, picking up a scimitar. "Surely an illness cannot make them disappear."

"Perhaps the plague makes people very hot," said Hentmirë.

"There *is* no plague," said Niqmaddu. "This is Baalhanno's work. Come." He led them across the open space, up an imposing flight of steps, and through the great double doors into the Audience Chamber.

There, they all stopped and stared.

"It is beautiful..." gasped Eowyn.

"Exactly as they say in the stories," said Hentmirë.

The floor was a meadow of polished malachite, scattered with delicate mosaic flowers; the ceiling was a sky of fine lapis lazuli, inlaid with golden sunlight and sparkling marble clouds; the four rows of slender columns were a forest of young trees, their branches home to animals, birds and insects so lifelike—

"It is Mirkwood!" cried Legolas. "It is just like Mirkwood!"

"The king has turned his back on the desert," said Niqmaddu, "and created an oasis indoors." He walked up to the dais at the far end of the chamber, and looked thoughtfully at the massive golden throne.

Immediately, a rat scurried over his foot, climbed up onto the seat, and sat, on its haunches, sniffing at him inquisitively.

"Oh," cried Hentmirë, hiding behind Legolas. "This palace needs a cat or two!"

Four more rats appeared from behind the columns, scampered onto the dais, and stood, like tiny guards, either side of the throne.

Niqmaddu stared intently at the first rat.

"Magus?" said Legolas. "What is it?"

"I am not sure..." The magician drew out his wand, pointed it at the animal's head and said, "Restore!"

There was a blinding flash...

And sitting on the throne, completely naked, was a handsome young man.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 11: The land of Kuri

**Captain Mutallu rapped on the door of Faramir's cabin and opened it without waiting for permission to enter. Faramir looked up from the chart he was studying.**

"What is it, Captain?"

"The Hatja's fleet sir," said Mutallu, in a low voice. "Closing fast."

"Much sooner than expected."

"Yes, sir. What are we going to do?"

"You fear an incident?"

"I fear *war*, sir."

Faramir nodded. "Are we flying recognisable colours?"

"Yes sir. The *Bird*'s registered as a merchantman of Carhivilven."

"Good. Then take us in close, Captain. We need to find some way to penetrate the shroud and show them our ensign. Then the elves and I will row over to the flagship, and try to buy Legolas some time..."

...

"Goodness gracious," gasped Hentmirë, averting her eyes from the naked man. She slipped off her cloak. "Here," she said to Legolas. "Give him this."

"Thank you, my lady," said the young man, draping the cloak over his lap. "And thank you, Magus. Might I trouble you to do the same for my Court? Starting with my personal bodyguard, here?" He indicated the rats standing on the dais.

Then, as the magician lifted his wand, he added, "You may prefer to look away, ladies."

Hentmirë turned her back. Eowyn, smiling, lowered her eyes.

There was another flash of light, and the four rats became four men.

"You may leave us," said the king to his guards. "Return when you are properly attired."

With a brief nod of acknowledgement, the naked men jogged from the chamber.

"May I look now, your Majesty?" asked Hentmirë.

"Indeed, you may, my lady," said the King of Kuri. He gestured towards a row of benches grouped in front of the dais. "Please," he said, "make yourselves comfortable. I am afraid I cannot offer you refreshments at present."

...

"They're still not seeing us, sir," said Mutallu, "despite the extra lights."

"No," said Faramir. "Lower the boat. We shall row away from the *Bird* and, with luck, become visible after a few feet. We shall take the ensign with us."

"Very good, sir," said Mutallu. He turned to his first officer. "Lower the boat, Taru. His Highness will need six rowers in addition to the two elf-gentlemen. Take the helm yourself..." A thought

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occurred to him. "How will you find your way back to us, sir?" he asked.

"I have no idea," Faramir admitted.

"Leave that with me, then, sir," said Mutallu. "I will think of something."

...

"When did it happen, your Majesty?" asked Niqmaddu. "The transformation?"

"I am not sure, Magus," said the king. "Some time in the night... Two or three days ago, I think."

"Do you know who was responsible?"

"No."

"We are looking for a man, your Majesty," said Legolas, "a magician, who has, we believe, taken refuge in the Palace."

"That is impossible," said the king. "The Palace is too well-guarded."

"Under normal circumstances, your Majesty," Legolas agreed, "but since the transformation... My friends and I, for example, were able to enter unchallenged."

"You may not have been *challenged*, sir," said the king, with a touch of impatience, "but you *were* observed and followed."

"Of course," said Legolas, remembering the rats.

"Now," said the king, "might I ask who has come to my aid?"

Niqmaddu glanced at Legolas for permission to take the lead.

"Please," said the elf.

"I am Niqmaddu, son of the great Niqmepa," said the magician, "advisor to the Hatja of Carhivilven. This is Prince Legolas of the Woodland Realm; Princess Eowyn; and the warriors Haldir and Valandil. And this is Lady Hentmirë, daughter of Mursilis."

"Ah," said the king, looking at Hentmirë with interest. "The mistress of the famous djinn."

...

"They have seen our lights," said Camthalion. "And they are nervous. They have sent bowmen to the forecastle."

Faramir nodded, gravely. "Show them the ensign, Master Taru."

"Very good sir." The man rose to his feet and, bracing himself against the bobbing of the boat, lifted the flag aloft and waved it back and forth. Faramir raised his lantern and directed its beam at the colours.

"That has caught their attention," said the elf. "The bowmen are standing down. The officers are in conference."

"Good," said Faramir. "Take us up close, Master Taru, as quickly as possible."

...

## The strange sea road

"Your Majesty," said Niqmaddu, "may I ask how you know about the djinn?"

"There was a time, Magus," said the king, "before the Great War, when my aunt spoke of little else."

"Your *aunt*, your Majesty?" said Legolas.

"The former queen, Naqiya-Zakutu," said the king.

"But... I do not understand," said Niqmaddu. "The Great War ended thirty years ago, and you are scarcely thirty years old."

The king smiled his sad smile. "I am one hundred and ninety-three, Magus," he said.

"You drank the water," said Eowyn.

"My mother *immersed* me in the water, my lady," said the king. "She thought it was only way to protect me from Naqiya after the Queen had killed my father—her own brother—and Naqiya had her executed for it." He shook his head.

Clearly, the pain of losing his mother was still fresh, even after two hundred years.

"I am sorry, your Majesty," said Eowyn, softly.

"But," said Valandil, suddenly, "your spirit..."

"*Your* spirit lives; it is healthy, whereas your aunt's spirit decays."

The king turned to the elf. "You refer to her strange condition?" he asked. "Yes; I suppose you *could* call it decay of the spirit. She is certainly not the vivacious woman she once was."

"I understood that to be the effect of the water, your Majesty," said Niqmaddu. "I had heard that the water was poison."

"Good," said the king. "Good."

"Your Majesty?"

"That is a rumour *I* started, Magus. One of many, I confess."

"To stop people wanting it," said Eowyn.

"Indeed, my lady." He acknowledged her deduction with a bow of the head, then he smiled at her, his eyes lingering on her face for a moment.

Legolas took hold of her hand.

"There was no hope," said the king, "of building a vigorous country whilst my people's only interest was in a Fountain of Youth. Now that the water is *poison* we have a thriving economy—we fish for pearls in the bay of Kuri and we mine for precious stones and metals in the hills of Kurigalzu. We are famous for our craftsmanship." He waved his hand, indicating the Audience Chamber's sumptuous decoration. "We have trading links with several countries to the south and east. My realm is prosperous."

...

The Hatja's sailors threw down a rope ladder.

Faramir, anxious to appear a credible statesman from the outset, sent the elves up first and



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watched their method carefully. Then, when his own turn came, he climbed aboard without any loss of dignity.

Bowing to what he assumed was the captain of the ship, he said, "I am Faramir, Prince of Ithilien, friend of the Magus Niqmaddu, advisor to the Hatja. I come to speak with the commander of the fleet."

He held out his hand, showing the captain a heavy gold ring lying in his palm. "I carry the Hatja's seal."

"Wait here," said the captain.

A few moments later, he returned. "The Hatja will see you, your Highness," he said, bowing slightly. "But the elves are to remain here."

...

"Then what happened to your aunt, your Majesty?" asked Niqmaddu. "Why is she a mere shell of a woman?"

"I believe," said the king, "that the wretch—her accomplice—did it to her. At any rate, it did not happen until after they had fallen out—and then he betrayed her to the Hatja of Carhiliivren."

Legolas and Niqmaddu exchanged glances.

"We think, your Majesty," said Legolas, "that the person you describe as 'the wretch' may be the very man we are seeking—and the person responsible for your transformation—a magician named Baalhanno."

"That is the wretch," the king confirmed. "And I should have known that this was his doing!" He paused, as if trying to decide whether to share a confidence. Then he continued, "When he first appeared here—some forty years ago—and immediately bought his way into my aunt's presence, I thought nothing of it, for he was a tiny, ugly, slip of a man and I knew that my aunt had no time for anyone less than six feet tall and strikingly handsome."

He glanced at the elves.

"But I was wrong: the wretch offered her something far more seductive than a beautiful body. He offered her power. Unlimited *power*."

"What do you mean?" asked Niqmaddu.

"I did not hear all the details," said the king, "and much of what I did hear, I did not understand. It involved the Art of Transmutation."

"Alchemy," said Niqmaddu.

"Yes. The water, it seems, can be used to transmute base metal into a substance so powerful that the smallest quantity will destroy an entire country. It will incinerate its people, raze its cities to the ground, and leave its soil tainted for centuries to come..."

"How?" asked Legolas.

The king shook his head. "I do not know."

"But you believe it to be true?"

"I have no doubt."

## The strange sea road

...

The Hatja wasted no time on polite greetings. "The Magus mentioned you in his letter," he said. "Sit down." He gestured towards a low divan. "Tell me what is happening."

Faramir explained everything they had pieced together. "We believe that Baalhanno is responsible for the 'plague'," he said, "and *I* suspect that he intends to restore Queen Naqiya to the throne, as his puppet, and rule—"

"He wants more than *that*," said the Hatja with a dismissive gesture. "Kuri is our natural enemy. He intends to use her against us. He wants *Carhivilvren*."

...

"But why does Baalhanno want the djinn?" asked Eowyn.

"The djinn," said the king, "once belonged to the wretch's mother, a beautiful sorceress—"

"Muttенbaal," said Niqmaddu.

"Yes. She seduced the Hatja of Carhivilvren—your present Hatja's father—and the wretch was the result."

"He is the Hatja's brother!"

"Older, but illegitimate. Muttенbaal assumed that her son would inherit the throne of Carhivilvren but, shortly after his birth, the Hatja's wife, who had been believed barren, conceived and presented the Hatja with a legitimate son. The sorceress and her child were banished."

"But how did my *father* obtain the djinn, your Majesty?" asked Hentmirë.

"I believe he tricked the sorceress into selling him the lamp," said the king.

"My father always was a cunning negotiator," said Hentmirë, proudly. "Many of his associates have told me so."

"By coincidence, Muttенbaal died shortly afterwards and, when your father summoned the djinn, he became its master."

"He was known for his luck, too," said Hentmirë.

"So Baalhanno lost his mother and his birthright in a single moment," said Niqmaddu. "That explains a great deal. And his powers were always quiescent within him. All it took was a few lessons from me to awaken them..." He shook his head, sadly. "I should have sensed it."

"You must not blame yourself, Magus," said Legolas, gently.

"But does Baalhanno have a *use* for the djinn, your Majesty?" asked Eowyn, unconsciously hugging her bag to her chest. "Does he mean to force the djinn to take part in his wickedness?"

"As I say," the king replied, "I did not understand much of what I heard. But I am convinced that the evil I told you of is a physical object. And I believe he intends to use the djinn to deliver it."

"Deliver it where?" asked Legolas.

"Carhivilvren."

## The strange sea road

...

"The bastard must be stopped," muttered the Hatja. He turned to the captain of the ship. "Signal the rest of the fleet. We shall land in one hour."

"Yes, Excellency—"

"No!" cried Faramir, leaping to his feet and blocking the cabin door, physically preventing the captain from leaving. "You will start a war! And it is not necessary. The Magus and my friends will find Naqiya-Zakutu. Once she has been laid to rest, Baalhanno's plans will come to nothing."

"Sit *down*," said the Hatja, imperiously. "Sit down or—Prince or no Prince—I will have you thrown overboard!"

Faramir remained where he was. "I counsel you to wait," he said, calmly.

...

"May we see the spring, your Majesty?" asked Niqmaddu.

"The spring? Why?" asked the king.

The magician thought for a moment. "If you are certain, your Majesty, quite certain, that Baalhanno is not hiding in the Palace—"

"I am."

"Then we must begin by looking in the cave. When a place is closely associated with a particular magic," he said, exchanging the tiniest glance with Legolas, "it is sometimes possible, by visiting the place, to sense the magic's source..."

"I have never heard of that," said the king. "Very well. But I must take you there myself. Perhaps you would turn your backs for a moment, my ladies?" He took up a pleated linen kilt from the floor, wrapped it around his hips and knotted the belt at the front.

"You may look now," he said, smiling at Eowyn as her eyes met his. "Come..."

...

"I see no immediate threat to Carhivilvren," said Faramir. "Give the Magus until daybreak—give him and Legolas the chance to settle the matter bloodlessly. If they have not returned by dawn, we will know that they have failed.

"And then it will be up to us."

...

Queen Naqiya's private apartments were decorated with exquisite refinement, but the furnishings were covered with a thick layer of sandy dust.

"I permit no one to enter," said the king, "not even to clean. The water is too great a temptation."

Legolas looked carefully at the marble floor. "The dust has been disturbed," he said, very softly, to Niqmaddu. "Swept—or moved magically, perhaps—to hide footprints." He glanced at the other elves; Haldir nodded in agreement. "We must be prepared."

"This way, sirs, Lady Eowyn, Lady Hentmirë," said the king, throwing open a pair of elaborately

## The strange sea road

decorated doors.

Several of the party gasped. Inside the bedchamber, all was sophisticated—coloured stones, marble and granite, cut into intricate shapes, polished, and laid in neat patterns. Beyond the doors all was wild—ragged rock walls, dripping with iridescent green water and infested with monstrous creepers whose huge, spiked leaves and thick, trailing tendrils seemed to reach towards the open door...

"Stay well away from those," the king warned.

The small cavern ended in a narrow shaft that plunged deep into the rock beneath. Legolas stared anxiously into the darkness. There was a sound, too faint for men's ears—a strange, continuous hum, like a hive of angry bees—coming from the far end of the tunnel. "Can you use a sword, your Majesty?"

"I can," said the king. "Why do you ask?"

Legolas drew his white knives.

...

"If you act with the consent of the people of Kuri—"

"This is wasting time!" cried the Hatja. "Baalhanno has King Shamash under his thumb—"

...

"Wait for me here, *gwendithen nín*," said Legolas. "When this is over, I will take you back to Eryn Carantaur and you can live there with us for as long as you wish. I promise. But stay here." He kissed Hentmirë's forehead.

"I shall," she said.

Legolas turned to the king, who had found himself a scimitar. "Let us elves go first, your Majesty. Eowyn, Magus, stay close behind."

He led them into the narrow, steeply sloping corridor and followed it downwards, all his senses straining. With each step the humming noise grew louder, and now a strange orange light was casting lurid shadows on the walls and lending the trails of water a fiery glow...

At last, the tunnel opened into a natural hall.

Legolas halted at the cave mouth, sheathed his knives, and pulled his bow from its strap. "Ready?" he whispered to Haldir and Valandil. "*Now!*"

The three elves sprang into the larger space, their weapons raised.

There was no sign of Baalhanno or the woman, but none of them was aware of that, and neither did they notice the 'Fountain of Youth', with its evil-green water, cascading into the natural rock pool opposite the entrance.

Instead, their entire attention was fixed on the strange object at the centre of the cave.

...

Faramir had one card left to play. "Send the elves," he said.

"What?"

### The strange sea road

"To see what is happening. Elves are like shadows—they can pass amongst men without being seen. Send them to scout the city. If troops are being mustered they will signal and you can invade immediately. If not, they will gather valuable intelligence that you can use at daybreak."

There was a pause.

"One of my men goes with you," said the Hatja.

"We men lack the necessary stealth—"

"You, my man, and the elves," said the Hatja. "And if there is any hint of deception, my man will kill you."

...

### ***I am become death, the destroyer of worlds...***

Robert Oppenheimer, quoting the *Bhagavad Gita*

"It looks," said Eowyn, coming up behind Legolas, "like a tiny sun."

Floating above an open shell of pure mithril, two hemispheres of vivid orange were surrounded by a containing spell so powerful that—like a curtain of transparent fabric—its limits were visible to the naked eye as a distortion of the light.

"Keep well away from it, melmenya," said Legolas. "Magus—what is it?"

"I do not know..."

"It is the thing that destroys," said the king. "The wretch has created it."

...

"It seems I have underestimated you, daughter of Mursilis."

Hentmirë—peering anxiously through the cavern doors for any sign of Legolas' return—froze with her back to the speaker.

"You and your precious elf! It would be more fitting to kill you together. But no matter."

Hentmirë heard his robes rustle as he raised his wand. She bit her lip. *Good bye, Legolas—*

The blast hit her upper body, squeezing her internal organs mercilessly.

*Good... Bye.*

...

"Can we destroy it?" asked Legolas.

"No," said Niqmaddu. "I cannot penetrate the protective spell. And, even if I could, I would not know *how* to destroy it."

"Then what can we do—"

"Legolas," said Haldir, quietly but urgently, "someone is coming."

"Your Majesty, Magus, Eowyn: stand either side of the door!"

## The strange sea road

The elves trained their bows on the tunnel entrance. A moment later, a small, plump figure appeared in the archway.

Legolas swore. "I told you to wait in the Palace!" he cried.

"What is that?" asked Hentmirë, walking towards the strange object.

"We do not know—do not get too close!" Legolas caught her arm and pulled her back. "Go over there. Stand beside Valandil!"

...

The elves leaped up onto the wharf and disappeared into the shadows.

"Remember I have orders to kill you if they try anything foolish," said the Hatja's man, quietly.

Faramir shook his head. "For the hundredth time: we are both on the same side," he said. "And *you* will best serve your master by co-operating with us. Now, *come*."

...

Hentmirë glanced at Legolas, deep in discussion with Niqmaddu and King Shamash.

His back was turned.

She sidled closer to Valandil. "Go to sleep," she said, smiling as his body sagged, and his eyes closed.

She edged closer to Eowyn. "You cannot move; not one muscle," she whispered, nodding callously as the other woman's eyes suddenly filled with terror.

Silently, she worked her way round to Haldir. "He is not good enough for her," she said, softly. "But *you* cannot have her until *he* is dead."

...

Faramir and his three companions drew their swords and slipped into the Palace through an open door in the Great Gates.

Orodreth dropped to the ground and examined it carefully, tracing a faint mark with his fingertips. "These are Lady Eowyn's footprints," he said. "She went this way. Follow me."

...

"Soon after my aunt declared war on Carhivilren," said the king, "there was some sort of falling out. I think the wretch attempted to seduce her; at any rate, he betrayed her battle plans to the Hatja and she and her army were ambushed."

Niqmaddu shook his head. "It was not seduction," he said, "but a part of the Alchemy. He is the Sun, the male principle; she is the Moon, the female principle and his perfect sister. And that would explain why he has released her from the prison now. He is ready to perform the Transmutation, and needs her."

"You mean they created this by..." King Shamash made a vague gesture, shaking his head in disgust.

"Possibly. Possibly not," said Niqmaddu. "A powerful natural magician, like Baalhanno, risks losing his powers by lying with a woman. And I suspect that the work is still incomplete. A yolk does not fill its shell—"

## The strange sea road

"The white is missing!" said Legolas.

"Indeed."

"So all we need do is stop him creating the final part?" said the king.

"Unfortunately, I do not think that will be sufficient," said Niqmaddu. "The spell that surrounds this—this *sun*—is far more powerful than it would need to be were his aim merely to keep us out. I suspect that, without it, we would all burn up in its presence."

"Then what will happen if we kill Baalhanno?" asked Legolas.

...

"*Kill Legolas, Haldir,*" said Hentmirë, softly. "*Kill him now.*"

...

"STOP!" The king's personal bodyguards came running down the corridor, swords drawn.

"*Hold them back,*" cried Faramir, pushing the Hatja's man towards them and following the elves into Queen Naqiya's apartments.

He barred the door behind him.

...

"It is possible," said Niqmaddu, "that if Baalhanno were to die, the sun would simply transmute back to its original matter. On the other hand—"

He was interrupted by the chilling sound of a great Galadhrim bow being fully drawn.

"Turn," said Haldir, "and face death like an elf."

"March Warden?" Legolas raised his hands in a peacemaking gesture. "Something has happened to you, Haldir: you are not yourself." He took a step forward. "Lower your bow."

"You are not good enough for her," said Haldir, taking a step back. "You were never good enough for her. She deserves so much more than you—"

Sitting motionless on the rock beside him, Eowyn began to make a strange keening sound.

"It will soon be over, *meleth nín,*" said Haldir, "and then we will be together."

"Haldir," said Legolas, quietly, "these are not your own thoughts. Baalhanno is still inside your mind. Fight him."

"He is lying, Haldir," said Hentmirë. "Kill him."

"What? Oh, *gwendithen nín!*" cried Legolas.

He turned towards the little woman in disbelief, just as Haldir loosed the arrow.

...

"Down here," cried Orodreth, racing into the cavern.

"Ai!" He ducked as one of the plants reached for him, but did not notice a second thick tendril approaching from behind until it wrapped itself around his neck, and pulled his face towards a

## The strange sea road

ring of waiting leaves. "*Daro! Daro!*"

But Faramir was already hacking through the green limb—it fell to the ground, twitching like a severed arm.

"*Ai, ceryn glam!*" gasped the Orodreth, rubbing his throat. "*Hannon le!* Thank you, your Highness."

Faramir shook his head with a deprecating smile.

"Look!" cried Camthalion, pointing down the tunnel.

Faramir peered into the faint orange glow. A familiar small figure, obviously in great pain, was crawling laboriously towards the light.

"Hentmirë!" Avoiding another tendril, Faramir ran to her side and lifted her, gently, into his arms.

"No!" she sobbed. "No! He is pretending to be me! And he is going to kill Legolas! I must warn Legolas!"

"We shall stop him, my dear," said Faramir. "Do not worry."

...

As Legolas turned to the false Hentmirë, Haldir's first arrow missed its target and, instead, hit King Shamash in the shoulder.

The March Warden nocked a second.

"*Nooooooooooooo!*" wailed Eowyn, through her frozen lips.

"Yes!" cried the false Hentmirë. "Yes! Kill him, Haldir!" She moved closer to Niqmaddu.

"Listen to Eowyn, Haldir," said a steady voice from the mouth of the cave. "*She loves Legolas. She does not want you to hurt him. She will never love you if you hurt him...*" Faramir gestured to Orodreth and Camthalion, meaning, *Restrain him the moment Legolas is no longer in danger.*

Haldir began to lower his bow.

"No," cried the false Hentmirë, taking another step towards the magician. "No! He is lying! Your Eowyn wants to be free of him!"

Haldir took aim again.

"That is *not* Hentmirë, Haldir," said Faramir, emphatically. "The real Hentmirë loves Legolas. This creature almost killed her, but I found her crawling down the tunnel, still trying to reach him, to protect him."

"Haldir," began the false Hentmirë, at the same time reaching for Niqmaddu—

"*NO,*" cried Legolas, drawing his white knives and slicing through both of her wrists.

...

Everything happened at once.

Haldir fell to the ground, clutching his head.



## **The strange sea road**

Valandil awoke with a blood-curdling cry.

Eowyn sprang to her feet, screaming, "Legolas! Legolas!"

And the tiny sun went out.

...

Baalhanno, thrown abruptly into his own form, had scarcely enough magic left to stem the bleeding, but he managed, in the dark, to evade Legolas, slip past Faramir, and make his way up the tunnel.

With luck, he would still have enough power to seal them in the cavern, then he would find somewhere to hide until his body was rested and he could restore his hands...

As he reached the top of the slope something small caught his ankle, and held it fast, and, trying to pull himself free, he stumbled, and fell against the wall, hitting his head on a jagged outcrop.

Dazed, he slid to the ground.

And a thick green limb, snaking down from the wall, wrapped itself around his neck, and pulled his face towards a ring of waiting leaves.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 12: Just deserts

"**Melmenya,**" cried Legolas, "**melmenya, where are you?**"

"Here! I am here!"

Somehow, in the darkness, he found her and took her in his arms.

"I could not move," she whispered. "I could not help you!"

"*Shhhhh*, my darling." He held her tightly, as though afraid she might still be stolen from him, "Oh, Eowyn *nín*." Without the tiny sun, the cavern was dark and eerily quiet. "Magus?"

"Yes..."

"Can you give us some light?"

"A moment..."

There was a rustling of robes, then Legolas heard the word "Burn!" and all the torches in the cavern simultaneously burst into flame.

"The sun?" he said, "is it...?"

The Magus bent towards the Mithril shell, and sighed with relief. "It is water and earth," he said.

...

"I must find Hentmirë," said Legolas.

"Yes, go to her," said Faramir, "both of you. I will see to things down here."

Legolas seized a torch from the cavern wall and he and Eowyn ran up the tunnel. Hentmirë was still crawling downwards, her movements slow and painful. "I was not *me*," she sobbed.

"Oh, *gwendithen nín!*" Handing the torch to Eowyn, Legolas fell to his knees beside her.

"I was staying in the room, like you said."

"I know you were, *mell nín*," said Legolas. "I know you were. Come, I shall carry you up to the Palace and then the Magus will help you."

"I am too heavy," she wailed.

"No, you are not, *gwendithen*." He scooped her into his arms and rose effortlessly to his feet. "I am an elf."

Hentmirë grasped his waistcoat and, leaning close to his ear, whispered, "I killed him."

"Killed whom?"

"Baalhanno. I killed him."

...

They found the magician lying further up the tunnel—arms and legs stretched out in agony—his lifeless body crushed in the plant's thick, green coils, his face already partially devoured by its spiked leaves.

## The strange sea road

"Dear gods," whispered Eowyn.

"Do not get too close, melmenya," said Legolas. "We shall have him cut free and his remains sent back to the Hatja. Faramir will deal with it."

...

Slowly, the others filed past Baalhanno's body: King Shamash supported by Faramir; Valandil, helped by Niqmaddu; and a very disoriented Haldir, escorted by Orodreth and Camthalion.

At Shamash's suggestion, Legolas carried Hentmirë to the king's private chambers, where Niqmaddu quickly reversed the damage Baalhanno had inflicted on her heart and lungs. Then the magician also excised all remnants of magic from Eowyn, Valandil, and Haldir, before beginning the long, slow task of visiting every room in the palace and restoring the rats to their human forms.

"Do you require," asked Legolas, quietly, "that my March Warden be punished for this, your Majesty?"

The king shook his head. "Without you and your companions, Prince Legolas, I might have spent the rest of eternity as vermin! And the wretch would undoubtedly have destroyed my land and my people. You have rendered me a service beyond price," he said, "*all of you*, and I would be churlish to seek retribution." He lifted his hand from his shoulder and examined the wound. "Besides," he added, "it is already healing. It will be gone in moments."

He smiled, sadly.

...

Before daybreak, Faramir, the two elves, and the Hatja's assassin—who had survived his epic battle with the king's bodyguards unscathed—escorted the King of Kuri's Ambassador to the Hatja's flagship.

"Welcome, Excellency," said the Ambassador, bowing low. "His Majesty, Shamash III, King of Kuri, presents his cordial greetings and begs that you and your retinue vouchsafe to accept his hospitality..."

Whilst the formal arrangements were being made, Faramir apprised the Hatja of his half-brother's plans and of his sorry fate.

"So I was right, and you were wrong," said the Hatja.

"Indeed," said Faramir. "It seems that, since he could not rule it legitimately, he did intend to destroy Carhilivren. We have brought his body back to you, to dispose of as you see fit."

The Hatja nodded, gravely. "And the woman?"

"She has not been found," said Faramir. "But the Palace guards are gradually being restored and the Palace is being searched. It is only a matter of time."

...

"Do you have *any* weaknesses, your Majesty?" asked Legolas.

"Weaknesses?"

"When we find your aunt," said the elf, slowly, "we must kill her—or, rather, kill her body, for Baalhanno has already destroyed her spirit. It will be a mercy to lay her to rest, both to her

## The strange sea road

and to her followers."

"To her followers... You mean her soldiers? I thought you said they died in the prison."

"They did, and their spirits are there still," said Legolas. He described the despair that Velandil had sensed, and the promise he had made.

The king listened gravely. "She made them swear allegiance for as long as she lived," he said. "I thought it was just words..."

He looked up at the elf. "In the last two hundred years, Prince Legolas, I have been stabbed, strangled, beaten senseless twice and shot three times and, in every case, I recovered in a matter of hours. I have no idea how to kill my aunt."

...

Searching for some wine to help Hentmirë sleep, Eowyn came unexpectedly upon Haldir, standing by one of the great glazed windows, gazing out across the City of Kuri.

"March Warden," she said, softly, "are you well? In the cave, you seemed to be in pain."

Haldir could not bring himself to look at her. "It was nothing..."

He sighed. "Eowyn," he said, his eyes still averted, "I can think of no words to express my remorse to you, and, especially, to Legolas, for he has never shown me anything but understanding. All I can do is apologise—"

Eowyn placed her small hand on his arm. "You were not yourself."

"You think not? You are kind, as always. But I think that I was *more* myself—"

"No!"

"No matter," said Haldir. "It will soon be put right."

"What do you mean?"

"I—I cannot say."

"Please," said Eowyn, "do not do anything foolish, Haldir. Not on my account. Promise me!"

At last, the elf turned his face to her, and smiled, sadly. "Trust me, Eowyn," he said. "And forgive me."

...

Faramir's next task was to find the *Early Bird*.

True to his word, Captain Mutallu had sent out a second rowing boat to act as a marker buoy—tethered to the *Bird*, but far enough away to be visible.

Faramir's boat slipped inside the shroud. "We are to moor the *Early Bird* on the north dock," he shouted to the captain. "The Magus will come down to the wharf and lift the spell as soon as his work in the Palace is complete."

...

Troubled by Haldir's words, Eowyn had to pause and steel herself before opening the door.

## The strange sea road

"Here we are," she said, laying her tray on the small table beside Hentmirë's bed. "This is made, I am told, from one of the local flowers, and it tastes like violets." She handed the other woman a glass of pale, rose-pink wine.

Legolas, sitting on the opposite side of the bed, reached out to steady Hentmirë's hand and help her take a sip. "How are you feeling, *gwendithen*?" he asked.

Hentmirë smiled. "Much better, thank you," she said. "Whatever the Magus did, all that terrible pain just drained away. In fact, I feel better than ever!"

She took another sip. "Legolas..."

The elf smiled. "I know that look," he said, "what is worrying you now, *gwendithen nín*?"

"Did you mean it?"

"Of course he meant it," said Eowyn.

"And *you* do not mind?" asked Hentmirë.

"Of course not."

"Then when can we go?" she asked, beaming. "Soon?"

Legolas laughed. "As soon as we can settle your affairs, and book passage—"

"Oh no, my dear," cried Hentmirë. "Captain Mutallu will take us."

...

"WILAWEN!" Valandil ran along the wharf. The berth seemed empty, but from the direction of the sea he could hear the sounds of a ship lying at anchor. "WILAWEN!" he cried, "WILAWEN! CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

"The people of Minas Tirith can hear you," said a female voice. "Wait: they are about to lower a gang plank."

A few moments later, she appeared from nowhere, on the quay beside him. Valandil swept her into his arms.

"You survived, then," she said, burying her face in his hair.

"Only just," said the elf, kissing the top of her head. Then he lifted her into the air and whirled her round, laughing.

"Put me down, you idiot elf!" cried Wilawen.

But she did not mean it.

...

Hentmirë had settled down to sleep.

Eowyn drew Legolas away from the bed. "I am worried about Haldir," she said, softly. "He is behaving strangely."

"You think he is still enchanted?"

"No... No, I am sure he is free of that, at last. But I think he feels a need to pay, somehow, for

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what he did."

Legolas sighed. "Stay with Hentmirë, melmenya. I shall go and find him."

...

"You are *certain* that you want me to do this?" asked Niqmaddu.

"Yes."

"Perhaps you should discuss it with Prince Legolas first—"

"No."

The magician sighed. "You are placing great trust in me—trust that is, perhaps, unwarranted."

"You seem to get it right *most* of the time."

Niqmaddu smiled. Then he said, "Have you really considered what the absence of feeling might entail?"

"I have no choice. Things cannot be left as they are. What happened down there must never happen again."

"Very well, then. Sit down and lean forwards." The magician touched his wand to the back of elf's head. "Forget."

There was no bang, no flash, no fanfare. But when Haldir raised his head, his face was wet with tears.

...

Once the Court had been restored, and the Palace was once more running smoothly, and the route from the port to the Great Gates had been cleared of its barricades, and all the broken doors and windows had been covered over, King Shamash and his Inner Council went down to the quayside and formally bid the Hatja of Carhivilvren welcome.

"Too long," said the king, "have our countries been sundered by the malice of one individual. Tonight, we shall seal our new friendship with a Great Feast.

"And, tomorrow, we shall confirm our alliance with a formal Treaty."

...

"He has done *what?*" cried Legolas.

"He has had his love for Princess Eowyn removed from his heart and his mind," said Niqmaddu.

"And what effect will that have?"

"I do not know, exactly."

"Why did he not talk to me first?" asked Legolas.

"He did not want to burden you or, especially, Princess Eowyn. And, of course, he was afraid that you might talk him out of it."

"Please—do not tell Eowyn what he has done."

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"Of course not."

Legolas turned to leave—then another thought occurred to him: "Magus," he said, "what is to stop him falling in love with her again the moment he sees her?"

"Nothing, your Highness," said the magician. "Absolutely nothing."

...

"I want the woman dealt with," said the Hatja, quietly, as he preceded King Shamash into the king's palanquin. He waved graciously to the cheering crowd.

"Naturally," said Shamash, taking the seat opposite.

"Will you return her to Carhivren to complete her sentence?"

Shamash shook his head. "My poor aunt is beyond the laws of men, Excellency. It is time she was sent to make peace with the gods."

"You intend to execute her?"

Shamash waved to the crowd. "Nothing public. She will be treated mercifully and with compassion."

...

"Haldir!"

The big elf was sitting on a stone bench just outside the king's apartments, leaning back against the marble wall, staring at the Lapis ceiling.

Legolas threw himself down on the seat. "Do not tell Eowyn what you have done."

"You have spoken to the Magus."

"Yes. *Do not tell Eowyn.*"

"Of course not." Haldir looked down at his hands. "I was not an innocent victim in this, Legolas," he said. "Baalhanno took my feelings and distorted them, yes, but the feelings were already there."

"Do you think," said Legolas, "that when Eowyn was married to Faramir, I did not feel the same thing? That *he* was not good enough for her?"

"But did you try to kill him?"

"*Ceryn Manwë, edhel,*" cried Legolas, "if I had, I should not have missed!"

There was moment's stunned silence. Then Haldir laughed.

Legolas grinned. "Why are you sitting outside the door?" he asked.

"I need to know if it has worked."

"Come inside."

"I cannot."

Legolas nodded. "Either way, you lose," he said.

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...

Legolas quietly closed the door behind him.

Hentmirë was asleep, snoring lightly. Eowyn rose from her chair and joined him.

"Did you find Haldir?" she whispered.

"I did," said Legolas.

"And?"

"He is still blaming himself. But I do not think he will do anything foolish now." It was not exactly a lie.

"Are you sure?"

Legolas nodded.

Eowyn squeezed his arm, gratefully. "Thank you." Then, "There is another thing," she said. "What am I to do with the djinn?"

"He is your slave, melmenya," said Legolas, "for as long as you live. So I do not think you have any choice but to take him back to Eryn Carantaur with you. But I doubt that he will object. Especially if you buy him a nice new lamp and leave him undisturbed inside it."

...

King Shamash held the Great Feast that same night, with Legolas, Eowyn, and the others seated at his own table and treated like his own family.

And when the formal part of the evening was over, and the guests had relaxed and begun to mingle, the people of the North found themselves much in demand.

...

Haldir, sitting alone at the end of the table, glanced at Eowyn, testing, for the hundredth time, the strange emptiness that flooded his heart whenever he looked at her. *She is beautiful, he thought, so fragile and yet so strong—it is no wonder I loved her. And, in time, I could easily fall in love with her again...*

He sighed. *Are things any better than before?*

One of the king's eunuchs was singing:

*"The men in yon forest, they ask it of me,  
'How many strawberries grow in the salt sea?'  
And I answer them all with a tear in my eye,  
'How many ships sail in the forest?'"*

*Oh dig me a grave and dig it so deep,  
And cover it over with flowers so sweet.  
And I'll lay me down to take a long sleep  
And maybe in time I'll forget her.*

Haldir rose from his seat and left the Hall.

...



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"Your small friend is very happy tonight," said King Shamash.

Eowyn looked across the chamber to where Hentmirë was learning—with little natural grace but with great determination—to dance like an elf.

"I think she has everything she has ever wanted," she said, smiling. "And she deserves it."

"That is a very generous sentiment," said Shamash. Then he asked, softly, "You are like me, are you not?"

"Your Majesty?"

"You are no longer mortal, either."

"What makes you say that?"

"You are the only person here—apart from the elves—who does not want the water." He smiled his sad smile. "Some of them want it so fiercely that, given the chance, they would kill to get it. And none understands what a burden it is... Tell me: how can a woman who was born mortal be so calm at the prospect of never-ending life?"

"I shall be with Legolas."

"Ah."

"Your Majesty... Did he—Baalhanno—did he approach *you*? With the same promise of power that corrupted your aunt?"

"How perceptive you are! Yes, he did. He was another who misunderstood the nature of man."

He turned to face her and spoke vehemently: "I already have what most desire, Princess Eowyn—I do not age; I shall not die. But a man is not equipped to outlive his allotted span. He was never intended to see his childhood friends grow senile; to feel his beloved wife age in his arms; to outlive his children, and his children's children... And that is why I knew, without a moment's thought, that power beyond the normal reach of man was a thing to be feared, not welcomed. I sent him away."

Hentmirë, who had just returned to her seat, breathless, caught the end of his answer. "Your Majesty," she asked, "why did you not give your wife and children some water?"

"If a man is not immersed in the spring immediately after birth, as I was, my lady," said the king, "he must drink the water continually, over many years, to achieve the same result. And my aunt guarded the source like a roc guards her eggs, making her soldiers swear, on pain of death, to prevent anyone but her from entering the cave. She would sell small quantities to the rich and powerful, and allow her lovers to drink it—whilst they remained in her favour—but she deliberately kept it from my wife and children. And by the time I became king, they were dead."

"How sad," said Hentmirë, sincerely. "And you have never met another wo—ow!"

Eowyn had given her a sharp dig in the ribs.

Hentmirë changed the subject. "I would not want to be immortal," she said. She dipped the tip of her finger in a patch of spilled sugar. "But I do hope that the gods grant me a long life." She drew a star in the white powder. "I have already lived—oh, a good many years—but now that I have met Legolas and am going home with him—and with you, too, Eowyn, and the others—I should like a little more time."

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...

"So, you are saying that I must live in Minas Tirith with you?" said Valandil. He followed Wilawen out onto the terrace.

"I am saying that I cannot leave my father there alone."

"Then bring him to Eryn Carantaur."

"He will not move, Valandil. He is far too set in his ways."

"Wilawen—"

"You are doing it again!"

"*Meleth nín*," Valandil corrected, "let me take you back to Minas Tirith and ask your father for your hand. I will talk to him, elf-to-man. And either I shall persuade him to come back with us, or I shall persuade myself to stay there with you. We shall be together, Wilawen. I promise you."

...

Figwit, quite unaccustomed to crowds after his long isolation in the prison, slipped out of the Banqueting Hall and wandered, shyly, along the cooler, quieter corridors, admiring the artificial forests adorning their walls.

He paused for a moment beside a fine mural, depicting some golden age when men and strange beasts—big, fierce cats, and huge, tusked pigs, and water-dwelling dragons—lived together in harmony.

"There is something unwholesome in the way they counterfeit nature, do you not think?" asked a familiar voice. "The dwarves, at least, are *honest* in their use of stone..."

Figwit smiled. "I find it charming, March Warden," he said, "that a people who have so little chance to see trees should love them so much, and depict them with such—"

He stopped, mid sentence, his face frozen with horror.

"Aegnor," said Haldir, softly, "what is it?" He turned, slowly, following the other elf's gaze. "Oh Valar!"

A woman—tall, slender, with long black hair—was emerging from a field of ripe corn. She crossed the corridor, seemingly oblivious to the two elves, and disappeared into the tangled undergrowth between two mighty trees.

"Is that *her*?"

Figwit nodded.

"The doors she is using are hidden by some spell. That is why they could not find her... Come! I think I know where she is going!"

The doors to Naqiya-Zakutu's apartments were locked, but Haldir prised them open with his sword and led Figwit through the chambers and down the sloping tunnel to the mouth of the cavern.

Figwit caught his arm. "Perhaps we should go back and get help," he whispered.

"No. She has no magician to help her now." Haldir stepped into the cave, sword drawn.

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Naqiya-Zakutu was standing beside the rock pool, staring down into the green water. It would have been easy to attack her from behind—to take off her head with a single blow—but, now that it came to it, Haldir could not bring himself to strike her without warning.

"Madam," he said, quietly.

The woman turned, and stared at him with dead, unseeing eyes.

Then her gaze shifted. "Fig-wit," she said, and smiled. Her voice was a dry rattle, and her smile was contorted, but there was a grotesque affection in her manner...

"Oh Valar," gasped Figwit.

Naqiya took a few steps towards him.

"Back!" cried Haldir, stepping between them. "I said—"

A single blow from Naqiya's small fist sent the March Warden reeling.

Figwit panicked. "No!" He cried, "No! I shall not submit to you! No!" He flew at her, pushing her with all his strength. "No, no, no..."

She collided with the low wall of the enchanted pool and, as she fell backwards—so slowly—into the water's evil-green depths, the expression on her face seemed to turn from love, to dismay, and then to immense sadness.

"Oh no," sobbed Figwit, "no..." but, still, he held her head beneath the water.

She hardly struggled.

And very soon her movements ceased altogether.

"I am sorry," sobbed Figwit. "I am sorry."

...

The elves carried Naqiya-Zakutu's body to her own apartments and laid her upon her bed, then Haldir returned to the Banqueting Hall to inform King Shamash of his aunt's death.

Accompanied by Eowyn, the king came to see her for himself.

"She looks at peace," he said, softly. "May the gods be merciful to her..." He turned to Figwit. "I must apologise, sir, for the horrors you have endured at her hands and those of her accomplice. I am told that you were waiting to sail West when you were taken. I cannot replace the years you have lost, but my personal shipwrights are at your disposal, should you wish to build another ship and continue your journey."

Figwit placed his hand upon his heart and bowed his head. "Thank you, your Majesty," he said, "you are most kind."

The king offered his arm to Eowyn. "Strange," he said, as he led her through the door, "that the water should be its own cure. If I had known—"

"Please, your Majesty," said Eowyn. "Do not do it."

"Would it really be so wicked, my lady? When I am so, so tired? After all, the elves leave the world when they tire of it."

"But *you* are a man," said Eowyn. "And a good king."

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They walked slowly down the corridor. "Not all of the elves have left, your Majesty," she said. "Legolas is restoring the forests of South Ithilien and his father is protecting Eryn Lasgalen—both are doing important work." She did not mention that Legolas would also stay for her. "You inherited a similar duty. And your country—your people—need your leadership—now, more than ever."

Shamash sighed. "You shame me, my lady."

Eowyn smiled. "No, your Majesty. You carry a heavy burden, and you carry it alone. But it may not always be so. Perhaps—"

She hesitated a moment, then continued: "Yes, I know I can speak for Legolas in this. Whenever you need time to rest, and reflect, there will always be a place for you amongst the immortals of Eryn Carantaur."

"Thank you," said Shamash, "thank you, my lady." He kissed her hand. "Your husband is a lucky elf."

...

## Later

Eowyn slipped off her embroidered shoes and, hand-in-hand, she and Legolas walked along the deserted beach.

"It is doing my spirit good to see the sea," said Legolas.

"Does it still call to you?"

Legolas smiled. "Yes..."

"I am so sorry, Lassui."

"For what?"

"When I was changed," she said, "you lost any chance of sailing West."

"Melmenya!" He was taken aback. "How could you say that to me? How could you think it?"

"I—"

"I thought we understood each other! Come!" he said. "Come!"

He pulled her across the sand and, at the water's edge, grabbed her by the waist and—quite roughly—pushed her to the ground.

A small wave broke, spread up the shallow slope, then ebbed away—and Eowyn gasped as its cold water touched her bare back and shoulders.

Legolas pulled up her skirts.

"Lassui!"

"*Shhhhh*." He leaned forward and covered her mouth with his own, and she felt his body lift up, and his hand fumble with his own lacings, and then he was crushing her again and his hard *ceber* was pressing against her sensitive flesh, and it felt beautiful.

She opened her legs wider and—

## **The strange sea road**

Another wave broke and surrounded her, soaking her skin and floating her hair.

—and then *he was inside her*.

"Lassui..."

He rose up on his hands, and she watched him—glowing faintly against the night sky, his face transformed by passion—her wild, beautiful wood elf, possessed by the sea, fucking her with its ebb and flow.

She stretched out her hands, and joined him, at one with the sea, catching each wave as it broke and releasing it as it slipped away.

There was no sudden climax for her this time but, instead, a long, slow kindling—of her core, and her belly, her breasts, and all her limbs—and a prolonged, almost unbearably sweet, burning, and then a gradual dying away...

And then she felt *him* come, without a sound, his face buried in the crook of her neck.

"Oh, Lassui." She stroked his hair.

"Do not think I will ever leave you," he whispered. "The sea is part of me, *melmenya*. But *you* are my life."

**THE END**

## Epilogue: The following morning

**"Farewell, my lady." King Shamash lifted Eowyn's hand to his lips. "May your years be blessed." He smiled. "I look forward to our next meeting..."**

Eowyn curtsied. "Good bye, your Majesty." She laid her hand on Legolas' and, together, they walked up the gang plank and joined Hentmirë and Niqmaddu on the deck of the *Early Bird*.

"Farewell, March Warden," said the king, clasping Haldir's arm. "May you soon replace what you have lost."

Their eyes met.

"Thank you, your Majesty," said Haldir, placing his hand on his heart and bowing his head. "May you do the same."

"Farewell, Prince of Ithilien..."

As Shamash spoke to Faramir, two of his servants hurried up the gang plank. The first approached Hentmirë, bowing deeply. "A gift, my lady," he said, "from his Majesty, King Shamash. But he asks that you do not open it until you have left the harbour."

"Thank you," said Hentmirë. She looked curiously at the wooden box. "Please give King Shamash my sincere thanks, and assure him that I shall not."

The servant bowed again, and backed away.

"I wonder what it is?" she asked Legolas.

"I do not know, *gwendithen*," said the elf. "But Valandil's lady has been given one, too."

...

The moment the *Early Bird* was in open sea, Hentmirë excitedly unfastened the box.

"What is it?" asked Eowyn.

"A bottle, and a note..." She broke the seal, unfolded the piece of papyrus, and read aloud, slowly,

*"Take one spoonful of water, each day, until the bottle is empty. It will not make you immortal, my lady, but it will grant you the extra years with your loved ones you so richly deserve.*

*"Shamash."*