

## The usual suspects



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Title: **The usual suspects**

Story Number: 7

Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: Waiting in Far Harad for a fair wind, Legolas and Eowyn encounter an old enemy.

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

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

### Elvish

*Lassui fain nín* ... 'my beautiful Lassui'.

*Tithen Dúlinn* ... 'little nightingale'.

*Hervess a hervenn* ... 'wife and husband'.

*Hervess nín* ... 'my wife'.

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

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

*Legolas i eneth nín* ... 'My name is Legolas'.

*No i Melain na le, mellon nín* ... 'May the Valar be with you, my friend'.

*Navaer, mellon nín. No baid lín galen a glor* ... 'Farewell, my friend. May your ways be green and golden'.

*Gûren ninnatha nanarad as achên len* ... 'My heart shall weep until it sees you again'.

*Sílo Anor bo men lín* ... 'May the sun shine on your road'.

*Navaer, híril velui. Avo aphado nín, meldis nín* ... 'Farewell, sweet lady. Do not follow me, my friend'.

*Nîr tôl erin baded lîn* ... 'I weep at your going' (literally, 'weeping comes on your going').

*Fanuilos, le linnathon* ... 'Ever-white, I will sing to thee

*nef aear, sí nef aearon* ... From this side of the ocean; from this side of the Great Ocean.'

### Dwarvish

*Rasup gamut* ... 'Farewell'.

*Tan menu selek lanun naman tak khaz meliku suz yenetu* ... 'May your forge burn bright until our travels cross again'.

### Naughty Elvish

*Ceredir fain* ... 'beautiful penis' (literally, 'beautiful maker').

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*Gerich veleth nín* ... 'you have my love' (from The Council of Elrond).

*Ceber daur chîn* ... 'your huge wooden stake'.

*Caro!* ... 'Do!, Make!' (and, therefore, 'Fuck!' or similar).

*Tynd* ... 'breasts' (literally, hills').

*Rond* ... 'vagina' (literally, 'cave').

*Pedo enethen* ... 'Say my name'.

*Ad* ... 'Again'.

### **Scorpus**

Scorpus was a real person, a charioteer whose epitaph was written by the poet Martial:  
*I am Scorpus, the glory of the noisy Circus, the much-applauded and short-lived darling of Rome. Envious Fate, counting my victories instead of my years, and so believing me old, carried me off in my twenty-sixth year.* He had won 2048 races.

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## Previously

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

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

...

She was wearing a deep blue gown that clung to every curve of her body. Wolfram watched her raise each arm in turn and undo the lacings down the sides, then slip her arms out of the sleeves and let the gown drop to the floor. Now she was wearing nothing but a short white shift and a pair of blue boots; Wolfram imagined using his knees to force those long, slim legs apart...

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

Now she had pinned up her hair, and was washing herself with a large, yellow sponge, dipping it in the soapy water and drawing it lightly over the curves and planes of her body, leaving the skin damp and taut and glistening.

She ran the sponge over her breasts, and Wolfram held his breath as a moan tried to escape his throat.

He reached into his breeches...

...

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

After a few moments, when he was sure that the woman had not wakened, Wolfram pulled the door open, stepped silently into the bedchamber, and approached her, stretching out his hand and drawing it—less than an inch above her skin—over her cheek, her throat and the shadowy cleft between her breasts. Then he lifted a single tendril of her golden hair and let it slide between his fingers and fall back upon her bare shoulder.

The woman stirred, but still did not wake.

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

...

Eowyn forced herself to go limp.

Wolfram laughed. "Not so dangerous without your sword, are you, my lady?" he gloated. "You will enjoy this—being ridden by a real man instead of a pretty-boy elf!" He lifted himself up, taking all his weight onto his knees, freeing his hands to unlace his breeches.

Eowyn seized her chance—with all the strength of a Shieldmaiden's sword arm she smashed

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the table leg into the side of his head and, at the same time, drove her fist deep into his groin.

Wolfram was taken by surprise; the pain was crippling—in his balls, his head, and his wounded leg. "You bitch," he screamed, "you elf-riding bitch!" He rolled onto his side and curled up in a ball, pressing both hands to his groin.

Eowyn scrambled to her feet and lifted the club.

*Wham!* Once. *Wham!* Twice. *Wham!* Three times. *Wham!* "This is for Legolas!" *Wham!* "This is for me!" *Wham!*

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### **"Who is Vardamir?" asked Eowyn.**

"After the Fellowship had left Imladris," said Finrod, "Lord Elrond discovered that there had been a plot amongst some of the elves of Imladris to steal the One Ring from the hobbit. They intended to overthrow Lord Elrond and use the ring to confront Sauron in battle. Vardamir was one of the plotters. I only saw him briefly—we returned to Mirkwood before he was put on trial."

"And you confronted him with this?" asked Haldir.

"Not exactly, sir. I had gone back to the castle to fetch something for the bowyer—and Vardamir must have followed me. He accused me of intending to blackmail him. I was foolish enough to turn my back on him."

"He must have thought you were dead," said Legolas, "and he tried to make it look as if the merman had attacked you. When we brought you back to the camp alive, he waited outside the healing cave, hoping to finish you off. But we kept you guarded, so he could not get near you, and his only option was to run..."

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## Chapter 1: The Silk Road

***"There's a somebody I'm longing to see  
I hope that he  
Turns out to be  
Someone to watch over me..."***

Tall and lovely, and with a voice like honey, the elleth drifted from table to table, teasing every man in the room with the suggestion that *he* might be that someone—the one to unleash the passions hidden beneath her serene exterior.

*"I'm a little lamb who's lost in the wood  
I know I would  
Always be good  
To one who'd watch over me..."*

Her song came to an end and, after briefly acknowledging the applause, she made her way to the bar—gracefully avoiding several drunken advances—and sought out a handsome, middle-aged man.

"I waited for you last night, Rib," she said. "Where were you?"

"That's so long ago I don't remember," replied the man.

"Will I see you tonight?"

"I never make plans that far ahead."

...

"Ohhhh..." The groan came from deep in Eowyn's chest.

Legolas, kneeling between her spread legs, smiled against the delicate skin of her inner thigh, and kissed it lightly.

"Please, Lassui."

"Shhhhh..." The elf turned his head—brushing her with his silky hair—and, whisper-soft, ran his tongue over her centre, probing gently.

"Ohhhh!" Clutching the coverlet in both hands, Eowyn arched her body, squeezing her muscles tight.

Legolas slid onto the bed and, holding her by the waist, turned her on her side with her back to his chest.

"What are you—"

"Shhhhh..." He pulled her close, softly biting her exposed neck, and gently kneading her breasts and belly.

It was all too much. "Please—*please* Lassui," she wailed, her body trembling, "I cannot bear it!"

He said nothing; but, without warning, he slipped his hand beneath her upper thigh, raised her leg, and drove himself inside her.

"Ohhhh!" she cried. She was so sensitive now, each deep thrust seemed to be touching—slicing

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through—every particle of her body. "Oh," she sobbed, from the tight cage of his arms, "ohhhh!"

She was already teetering on the brink when he suddenly rolled her over and, rising up on his knees, drew her onto all fours. "Come now, Melmenya," he whispered, "come for me..." He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her into the air and, for a few terrifying moments, she hung upon him, moaning in something close to agony.

But then *his* climax filled her belly and she, too, found release.

...

"Melmenya..." He kissed her hand.

In response, she drew their entwined fingers to her own lips. Then, "You look *tired*, my love," she said.

"That is your fault."

"No, it is more than that. You look... wan."

"I think it is this place, melmenya. A country where there are no trees—except in pots."

"Oh, my darling..." She took him in her arms, settling his head on her breast. "It will not be long now, Lassui. Captain Mutallu calls it the 'Raging Calm'. We have been unlucky—he says it does not normally happen at this time of year, and he is confident that the wind must return before the end of the month. Then we can sail."

"I suppose it will give us a chance to find Vardamir."

"There is still no sign of him?"

"No. Faramir has spoken to most of Captain Oliel's contacts but—although there is talk of an elleth singing in one of the taverns—no one will admit to knowing anything about an *elf*. Valandil is beginning to think that he imagined seeing him."

"Poor Valandil. Do you think the elleth might know something?"

Legolas smiled. "She might, melmenya. Faramir is looking into it now."

Eowyn stroked his hair. "There *must* be some trees here, Lassui," she said, "somewhere. Hentmirë will know..."

...

"*The Silk Road*," read Haldir, looking up at the painted sign.

"Mmm," said Faramir. "Apparently, the tavern is named after a caravan route. Its owner goes by the name of Ribhadda—"

"Goes by the name of?"

"Well, according to Captain Oliel, he is a northerner, like us, so that is clearly not his real name—he must have something to hide. But Oliel says he is a decent enough fellow, though a law unto himself."

"A human, then," said Haldir, softly. "Does the captain know anything about the elleth?"

"Only that she is tall and dark and very beautiful."

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"An elleth, then."

"Mm?"

"Let us go in."

The interior of the tavern was a pleasant surprise—a large, open chamber, spotlessly clean, lined with white marble and lit with a thousand candles.

Potted palm trees lent privacy to small clusters of tables grouped about the room, and ceiling fans—huge flaps of woven matting, operated by liveried boys pulling on ropes—created a gentle motion in the lightly perfumed air.

"The people of Gondor could learn a great deal here," said Haldir.

The patrons, he noticed, whether sitting at the tables or along the wide marble counter, or playing at the gaming tables to the right, were all facing a small stage at the left of the room, where a group of musicians had just finished tuning their instruments.

*She must be about to sing*, he thought.

There was a moment's expectant silence; then the little band began to play, and the elleth emerged from behind a translucent curtain, singing.

*"Are the stars out tonight?  
I don't know if it's cloudy or bright  
When I only have eyes  
For you..."*

She was, indeed, tall, and dark, and very, very beautiful. She was dressed, like Eowyn, in one of those tiny bodices and the soft, almost transparent, trousers that had given him so much trouble before the Magus had cured him. Over her long, lustrous hair she wore a jewelled headband, with strings of tiny bells that jingled as she moved.

She stopped at the edge of the stage and glanced around the room, surreptitiously inspecting the patrons but carefully avoiding eye contact with any of them.

Until her gaze fell on *him*.

*"The moon may be high  
But I can't see a thing in the sky  
When I only have eyes  
For you..."*

Haldir stared back at her. Emotions—desires—of a sort he had denied himself for so long, flooded his mind; physical sensations he had had to master, time and again, whenever he looked at Eowyn, suddenly surged through his body unchecked.

He collapsed into the nearest chair.

"March Warden?"

"It is hot..." said Haldir.

Faramir nodded. "I shall fetch you a drink. And I shall try to have a word with our host."

Haldir struggled to breathe. Besides the other feelings, there was a terrible sense of guilt. *You are betraying Eowyn by desiring another*, he thought.

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*But how can I feel so guilty, he wondered, when I have no memory of my love for Eowyn?*

...

Faramir approached the bar.

There were three men standing behind the counter. Two were obviously no more than bartenders. The third was a smallish, middle-aged man—handsome, but, on the face of it, nothing special.

*Except...*

The man was talking to a customer; Faramir moved a little closer and listened carefully.

"Too bad about those two couriers, wasn't it, Rib?"

"They got a lucky break," said the landlord. "Yesterday they were just two clerks. Today they're 'the honoured dead'."

"You are a very cynical person, Rib, if you'll forgive me for saying so."

Ribhadda paused for a heartbeat. "I forgive you."

"You despise me, don't you?" said the customer.

"If I gave you any thought, I probably would."

"But why—"

"Can I help you?"

It took Faramir—and the hapless customer—a full moment to realise that Ribhadda's attention had shifted to *him*.

The attention was surprisingly intimidating.

*He is entirely his own man*, thought Faramir. "May I buy you a drink?" he asked.

"I never drink with customers."

"Then may I have a word with you? Somewhere private."

"I never take customers anywhere private."

Faramir smiled. "Will you at least sit with me?"

"That," said Ribhadda, "I *will* do. Until my attention is required elsewhere." He indicated a nearby table with a sweep of his hand.

"Hiram," he said, as he walked out from behind the bar, "bring the gentleman a glass of spirits. Not too much water. Now," he said, sitting down opposite Faramir, "what is it you want to know?"

*This man cannot be bought*, thought Faramir, *not in the usual way. To deal with him you must simply be honest and hope that your aims coincide with his.*

"My name," he said, "is Faramir, son of Denethor. I am Steward to the King of Gondor." He showed Ribhadda his seal of office, mounted on a heavy gold ring. "Whilst visiting Carhivilven—for other reasons—it has come to my attention that a certain elf, wanted in my country for



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attempted murder, is hiding somewhere in the city. I want to take him back to stand trial. I am told that you may be able to help me."

"That's a pretty story," said Ribhadda. "But why would it be any concern of mine?"

"You are a man of honour."

"You're confusing me with someone else."

"I do not think so..."

"Who did he try to kill?"

"Another elf."

"Not a widowed mother or an orphaned child?"

In spite of himself, Faramir smiled. "I will leave it with you," he said, and knocked back his drink. "The elf's name is Vardamir. If you have anything to tell me you can reach me via your friend, Captain Oliel."

...

A small shadow of a man limped unnoticed past the brightly-lit stalls of the souk—past people haggling over piles of vegetables and joints of meat and sacks of beans and lentils; past people choosing colourful bolts of cloth and richly embroidered carpets; past people buying oil lamps and brass lanterns and enamelled candlesticks...

At the corner of Lamp Street he stopped to examine a pretty jewelled dagger. *Nice*, he thought. *She would like that*. He slipped the knife into his pocket, and moved on before the stall holder noticed him.

At the end of Garden Lane he paused again and casually glanced around. No one was paying him any attention; the closest stall holder was busy with a customer.

Satisfied that he had not been followed, the man slipped behind the stall and turned into the alley behind, counting his steps down the narrow, featureless passage—*One, two, three...* He glanced behind him. *Clear... Nine, ten, eleven...* Another glance. Still clear. *Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen*. He tapped lightly on the wooden wall to his right: one-two; one-two-three; one; one.

An invisible door opened to admit him.

Wolfram stepped inside. "Someone is looking for you," he said.

Vardamir closed and barred the door.

It was pitch black. Wolfram stretched out his hand, found the dresser, and felt around for a candle and tinderbox.

"Wait," said the elf, imperiously. "Let me do that. You cannot see—you will have the whole house alight." Moments later the room was lit by three candles. "Do you want a drink?"

They were an unlikely pair—the small, quick, rodent of a man, and the tall, graceful, arrogant elf—but, in truth, each was the closest thing to a friend the other had ever had.

Wolfram threw himself into a chair. "Did you not hear what I said?"

"Someone is looking for me." The elf poured two large goblets of wine. "So? It is not the first time that someone on the receiving end of our services has tried to track us down—"

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"They are looking for *Vardamir*," said Wolfram. "Not Elrond, not Glorfindel, not Legolas—not any of the other stupid elf-names you like to go by. *Vardamir*."

...

A ferocious scowl at the would-be door keeper was the only permission Haldir had needed to get backstage. He tapped lightly on the door and entered without a pause.

The elleth turned in surprise—in the midst of changing her clothes—her bodice open. "*You*," she said, softly.

In her presence Haldir felt dizzy. He leaned against the door; the space between them was charged with sexual desire.

"An *elf*..."

Haldir reached out to her.

It was short and urgent and very noisy, his cries accompanied by the sound of their bodies pounding against the door.

...

Faramir set Haldir's drink on the empty table. *Where has he gone?* The elleth had finished singing. *Perhaps he is questioning her...*

There was a small door beside the stage. Faramir approached it, smiling at the doorkeeper. "I should like to speak to the singer," he said, giving the man a glimpse of a gold coin nestling in the palm of his hand.

"And if it was up to me, you could," said the man, with a wink, "but she's already got company, if you know what I mean." He cocked his head to indicate the faint but unmistakable sounds of frantic sex, coming from somewhere down the corridor.

"I shall come back another time," said Faramir, handing the man the coin.

...

"What is your name?" asked Haldir.

"Cyllien," said the elleth. "Yours?"

"Haldir."

"Do you make a habit of *doing* strangers, Haldir?"

Haldir was taken aback. "Do *you*?"

The elleth sighed. "Do you smoke?"

"No."

She rose from the floor and walked over to her dressing table, sorting through the clutter until she found a small clay pipe. Haldir watched with a mixture of horror and fascination as she filled the bowl with pipe-weed, lit it, and took a long drag.

"Where did you learn to do that?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "What is it to you?" She exhaled a cloud of smoke.

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Haldir re-laced his trousers. "Do you want money?" he asked.

A vial of perfumed oil narrowly missed his head and smashed against the wall. "*Get out!*"

...

Bowing courteously, Ribhadda gestured a customer—a morbidly fat man with two massive bodyguards—towards one of the better tables. "Hello Abdi. How's business at the *Blue Parrot*?"

"Fine," said the man, "but I would like to buy your tavern."

"It's not for sale."

"You haven't heard my offer."

"It's not for sale at any price."

"What do you want for Cyllien?"

"I don't buy or sell people."

"That's too bad," said Abdi. "That's Carhilivren's leading commodity."

...

"It must be Elf Boy," said Wolfram, thinking aloud.

"No—I cannot believe that Legolas would bother to come after me—or even send anyone—not after all this time."

"Then who else could it be?"

Vardamir shrugged his shoulders. "Elrond and Celeborn have both sailed West; the King of Gondor has far bigger fish to catch."

"So, as I said, it must be Elf Boy. I wonder if *she* is with him." Wolfram reached into his pocket and drew out the dagger he had stolen earlier.

"What is that?"

"Just a little gift." He pulled the blade out of its scabbard. "Small and light," he said. "And pretty, like her."

He opened a door at the bottom of the dresser and added the knife to a pile of glittering objects—silver manacles complete with key, an enamelled collar and chain, a leather whip with a jewelled handle, and a thick golden rod, like a large phallus...

Vardamir shook his head. "You need your wits examined," he said.

Wolfram closed the door. "You can talk—following that singer around, begging like a puppy, instead of just taking what you want..." He shrugged his shoulders. "Anyway," he said, sitting down and taking a swig of wine. "What are we going to do about Elf Boy?" He dried his mouth with the back of his hand.

"We do not even know that he is here."

"I do," said Wolfram. "I can feel *her*. Here." He clutched his groin.

"So where is she?"

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Wolfram thought for a moment. "The souk. She will be in Tailor's Row, buying herself some golden drawers. Did I tell you—"

"About the pink gown? Many times."

Wolfram pulled a small piece of rose-coloured velvet from his breast pocket. "The metal on this would have fed *me* for a year," he said. "A year. My Lady is worth a lot of money."

"Only if *you* can control yourself."

"The trouble with Elves," said Wolfram, "is they don't understand the importance of timing."

"What are you talking about?"

Wolfram swung himself off the chair and crouched beside the Elf. "We collect My Lady; we collect the money. *Then* I have my way with her. *He* realises he's been duped and comes to rescue her; we have our way with him, too. Not the *same* way, of course—unless *you* are interested."

Vardamir shot him a murderous look.

"Tomorrow," said Wolfram, "I shall start looking for her. In the souk."

...

The sailor at the bottom of the *Hunter's* gang plank gave Faramir a courteous nod and stepped aside; in recent days the Prince of Ithilien had been a regular visitor.

The captain was in his cabin, sitting at his desk despite the late hour, and something about his posture immediately caught Faramir's attention. "You've had news," he said, "of your wife?"

"Perhaps."

"Not *bad* news?" The other man looked up, showing his face for the first time. "Oh, gods. What has happened?"

"I have just received these."

He dropped two objects into Faramir's hand. The first was a small silver ring, engraved with the word 'Forever'. The second was a strip of torn fabric, stained with blood.

"Are you sure these are hers?"

"The ring is. No doubt about it, my friend. I had it made for her in Minas Tirith. I don't recognise the cloth."

"What does the letter say?"

"Not much. She was found in Rihat—that's an oasis about fifty miles to the east—with a bad wound to her shoulder. She was still alive when the letter was written, six days ago."

"When are you leaving?"

"I will have to wait until tomorrow night—there's a caravan leaving at dusk. I am letting you down, my friend; I am sorry—"

"Do not be foolish," said Faramir. He squeezed the other man's shoulder. "But do not go alone Oriel. Take a friend, just in case. I would come with you myself, if I could."

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"He's very lucky," said Oliel.

"Who?"

"Your..." He gestured to indicate the man they had never discussed but that Oliel instinctively knew existed.

Faramir smiled. "I pray that you find her, Oliel," he said. "Alive and well."

...

### **Dawn**

"Good morning," said Eowyn, softly.

"Good morning."

"Today, we are going to find you some trees, my love."

She was leaning over him, supporting herself on her right arm, her left hand lying lightly on his chest. Smiling, she leaned down to kiss him...

And there was none of the adventurous coupling of the night before, just the sweet union of two people very much in love.

...

After long hours spent pacing the streets, telling himself that he was looking for Vardamir, Haldir approached the house, in a murderous mood, to find Eowyn standing in the courtyard garden, feeding kitchen scraps to a flock of brightly coloured birds. As he reached the gates, she turned and smiled at him, and his heart inexplicably lurched in his chest.

"Good morning, March Warden," she said. "Where is Faramir?"

"We—er—we split up." He cleared his throat. "In the tavern."

"I hope nothing has happened to him."

"I am sure he is fine."

"Did you speak to the elleth?"

Haldir turned to look at the birds. "Only briefly," he said. "And I did not get the chance to ask her anything about Vardamir."

"Perhaps another time," said Eowyn. She threw the last handful of bread on the ground.

"Haldir..."

"Yes?"

"I really have no right to say this—and I have no right to expect your friendship—"

"You have every right to expect my friendship, my Lady."

"It is just... You have changed, Haldir. Since we came back from Kuri, you are distant." She, too, looked down at the birds. "I know that things have often been difficult between us, but I had come to rely on you... I miss your advice."

"Eowyn..." He grasped her hands. "You will always have my friendship. You are the bravest,

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kindest, cleverest woman I have ever met."

"To my knowledge, you have only ever met *three* women," said Eowyn.

Haldir smiled. "Woman or elleth."

She looked into his eyes. "You are cured," she said.

"I... I no longer feel as I once did, it is true."

"That is a good thing," said Eowyn, gently. "You have been alone for far too long, March Warden."

But Haldir could say nothing in reply.

...

Eowyn returned indoors in time to witness what had become a daily ritual—Hentmirë was sitting on her day bed, her entire body rigid with fear. Legolas was looming over her, bottle in one hand, spoonful of iridescent green liquid in the other.

He set the bottle down on the table. "Open your mouth, gwendithen."

"Nnnnnn."

"The sooner you drink it, the sooner you and Eowyn can go shopping."

"Nnnnnn."

Legolas smiled, indulgently. Then, quicker than Hentmirë's senses could perceive, he shot out a hand and squeezed her waist.

"Oh!"

The water was in her mouth; she swallowed, gagging, and swallowed again, her eyes streaming.

"I am sorry," said Legolas, taking her in his arms and rubbing her back, soothingly. "I am so sorry, gwendithen. But just think of the effect it is having. Think of Eryn Carantaur, and how happy we will be there."

"I try," she whimpered. "I do try, Legolas. I know I am being ungrateful. But it is so horrid..."

...

Sitting on the deck of the *Hunter*, watching the sun rise, Faramir had come to a decision.

*There is no telling what might have happened to her in six days, he thought. Oriel could arrive in Rihat to find her already dead and buried. If I accompany him, at least there will be someone to make the necessary arrangements—and to get him back in one piece—if he is not capable himself.*

*Perhaps Legolas will let me take Haldir with me...*

...

Eowyn kissed Legolas' cheek.

"We shall be very quick," she said. "And, remember,"—she grinned, becoming more and more

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excited as she spoke—"this afternoon we are taking you to the Turquoise Gardens! Hentmirë says they look just like a real forest—you will be able to walk under the trees!" She hugged him tightly.

Legolas kissed the top of her head. "I shall look forward to it, melmenya," he said. "But *promise* me that you will be careful in the souk. If you are on foot, stay close to Rimush. These people have little respect for women."

"I promise." She climbed into the palanquin and sat down beside Hentmirë. "Good bye, Lassui." She waved. "Good bye, Haldir."

Legolas watched Hentmirë's attendants lift the litter and carry it down the dusty road. "Did you learn anything from the elleth, March Warden?" he asked.

"I... No... No, I did not," said Haldir. Then he added, quietly, "In fact, I did something very foolish."

Legolas gave Eowyn one final wave then turned to the other elf, expectantly.

"I *did* speak with her," admitted Haldir, "briefly, but I did not question her... I... I allowed desire to get the better of me."

"Desire?" Legolas stared at his March Warden's face, trying to make sense of his guilty expression. "What are you saying—oh Valar!—are you saying that you *lay* with her?"

Haldir did not reply, but his answer was obvious.

"No one could blame you for that, Haldir," said Legolas, generously. "You had been alone for far too long."

"I feel as though I have betrayed her."

"The elleth?"

"Eowyn. Please do not tell Eowyn."

"I thought you had no feelings for Eowyn."

"I do not; I cannot explain it..." He stared into the distance, at the palanquin bearing Eowyn away, then continued, softly, "But, sometimes I feel as though the memory has not been removed, just imprisoned in some dark corner of my mind. And, now and then, it rattles the bars of its cage..."

...

An hour or so later, as Faramir approached Hentmirë's house, he noticed two familiar-looking figures dismounting from a single horse.

*It cannot be!*

The first—stripped, incongruously, down to his underwear—was short and powerfully built, with a mane of coppery hair and a long, thick beard.

"Gimli!"

"Awwww, laddie!" cried the dwarf, running—bow-leggedly—towards him. "It is good to see you!" He threw his arms round Faramir's waist and almost crushed the life out of him. "Three weeks it has taken us to get here! Three weeks! We had to land up the coast and ride across the desert!"

### **The usual suspects**

"It is good to see you, too, Gimli," said Faramir. "Legolas will be overjoyed."

He looked up at the second person and smiled.

The dwarf's companion was tall and lean with wild, dark hair and a face that could break any heart in Middle-earth.

"Hello, Berengar," said Faramir.

\*\*\*\*\*



## Chapter 2: In the souk

**"How long will you be away?" asked Legolas.**

"It is two days' journey to Rihat on horseback," said Faramir. "So, depending on the woman's condition, we could be back in five days..."

"Or not," said Legolas.

"I will not go if you need me here."

"Of course you must go. Captain Oliel has been very good to us. Will you take Berengar with you?"

"If he is willing."

Legolas smiled. "Oh, I am *sure* he is willing! When do you leave?"

"Tonight at dusk. But I must speak to Oliel this morning."

...

Eowyn had been trying to find the djinn a new home since they had returned from the Land of Kuri. Though *she* was sure that the kettle she had found for him was perfectly serviceable, it seemed that the djinn had more refined tastes.

She had spent hours examining lamps of all shapes and sizes—earthenware lamps glazed with pastoral scenes, brass lamps chased with calligraphic patterns, enamelled lamps that shone with a subtle lustre, silver lamps with jewelled lids... Nothing seemed to meet the djinn's exacting requirements. Today's visit to a rather disreputable part of the souk, where Hentmirë had heard of a man selling novelties from the east, was a last resort.

"Look, Eowyn," cried Hentmirë, "there he is! Over there—and he has hundreds of lamps! You are *sure* to find one here. Take us closer, Rimush."

The bearers tried to cross to the other side of the narrow street, but the constant stream of people had suddenly coalesced into a procession, with musicians sounding trumpets and banging drums, and acrobats turning cartwheels, and groups of slaves carrying cages of wild animals. "I cannot, just now, my lady," he said.

"They are from the circus," said Hentmirë.

"I shall go on foot," said Eowyn.

"Are you sure? Remember what you promised Legolas..."

"I shall be fine," said Eowyn patting her hand. "I do not want this to take too long—Legolas is looking forward to seeing the gardens." Hentmirë still looked unsure. "It is just a few steps," Eowyn insisted. "And I am a warrior, remember."

"I remember..."

"Then do you mind if I stay here? The water sometimes makes my legs shaky and I do not think I could manage..."

"Of course."

"Please do not get lost, Eowyn. Legolas would be so cross with me."

## The usual suspects

Smiling, Eowyn climbed down from the palanquin. *As if Legolas would ever be cross with you!* She waited for a break in the river of people. *Just after those striped cats*, she thought.

*Gods, they are big! I wonder if Legolas would like to see the circus?*

*No, he could not bear to see animals confined. He might even set them free... Imagine the uproar.*

Seeing her chance, she stepped into the crowd, twisting and turning to avoid colliding with the acrobats, and she had almost reached the other side when a giant of a man—one of the performers—suddenly caught her round the waist.

"Come, pretty lady," he laughed, "this way. I shall make sure you get a good seat."

"Let me go!" she cried. "Please! Please!"

But her protests were swallowed up by the beat of the drums and the roar of the tigers—and within seconds she had left Hentmirë and Rimush far behind.

...

Gimli joined Legolas in the courtyard, washed and brushed, and wearing a robe of midnight blue silk that one of the maids had found for him—*And which probably*, the elf thought, *belongs to Hentmirë*. It was a trifle long.

"Ah. You look much better, *elvellon*. Sit down. I have had the servants bring you some food." Gimli perched on a floor cushion beside the low table. Legolas poured him a goblet of the local wine. "Help yourself."

The dwarf picked up a chicken leg. "It is good to see you, you crazy elf," he said, taking a bite. Then he shook his head, grinning. "Only an Elf could get himself bought by a woman. *'Property of a Lady...'*" He took a swig of wine. "No match for ale," he said, wiping his mouth.

"Hmm." Legolas smiled. "I think you will find it much *stronger* than ale, Gimli... "

"Where is Eowyn?"

"Out shopping with Hentmirë. They are looking for a lamp... Valar, Gimli, there is so much to tell you!" He settled back against the wall. "You will like Hentmirë, *elvellon*; she is like—not a mother, or a sister, exactly—more like a mother's sister. I am very fond of her."

"What does Eowyn think of that?"

"Eowyn loves her too. She is coming back to Eryn Carantaur with us, just as soon as the wind picks up. Quite a few people are."

As Gimli ate, Legolas described how Valandil and Wilawen had been snatched from the slave ship by the roc, and how, in the course of rescuing Figwit, they had fallen in love. "Valandil plans to marry her. Figwit is undecided about his future—whether to continue on to Valinor or to return with us to Eryn Carantaur—so Valandil and Wilawen have taken him back to the island for a few days, hoping that he will find it easier to make a decision in familiar surroundings."

Then, with a grin, he described how Camthalion and Orodreth had been bought by the brothel keeper, Arinna, and how they seemed to have fallen completely under her spell. "She must be a very inventive woman, Gimli," he said, "because in Mirkwood they both had reputations I envied. She will be coming with us, too, if they have their way."

### The usual suspects

Finally, Legolas described the djinn. "You will need to see him to believe in him, *elvellon*."

"How is the March Warden?" asked Gimli.

Legolas frowned. "In truth, Gimli, I am not sure."

"It is such a pity that Eowyn does not have a sister."

"*Gimli!*"

The dwarf shrugged. "We dwarves are a practical people," he said.

...

Faramir was packing a change of linen into his small travelling bag.

"Oliel could arrive in Rihat to find her already dead and buried," he said. "If that happens, he will need someone to make the necessary arrangements—and to make sure that he gets back here safely." Berengar's face was slightly averted. "You *will* come with me?"

"Of course."

"What is wrong?"

"You *like* this man."

"I *do*—I like his dedication to his purpose; his refusal to give in, no matter how long the odds—he reminds me of Boromir in so many ways." Faramir did not see the relief that suddenly lit up Berengar's face. "But there is something that worries me..."

He sat down on the bed. "For seven years, Berengar, he has done nothing but search for his wife—his every thought, his every action, has been dedicated to that purpose. The search has taken on a life of its own. I do not know how he will cope when it ends."

"So, even if there is a happy ending, it may not be happily ever after?"

Faramir nodded.

"He is not your responsibility, Faroth," said Berengar. "You are doing everything you can for him—more than anyone else would do. You cannot save the whole of Middle-earth." He sighed.

Then, "Your father has a lot to answer for," he added, softly.

...

By the time Eowyn had managed to free herself from the giant's arms, she was completely lost.

*There is no need to panic, she thought. Just find the Great Royal Road. From there you can easily walk back to Hentmirë's house.*

*Gods, Hentmirë will be panicking! I just hope that Rimush has managed to stop her running into the crowd after me. If anything were to happen to her Legolas would break his heart!*

*I must ask for directions.*

She scanned the nearby stalls, searching for a trustworthy-looking stallholder, and caught a glimpse of someone familiar...

## The usual suspects

*Gods!*

She slipped behind the nearest stall and peered out from under a swag of embroidered cloth. *Gods! Wolfram... Still alive and... and walking again*—though, she noticed with some satisfaction, moving with a pronounced limp.

"Beautiful isn't it?"

Eowyn jumped.

"Silk from *Chipangu*," said the stallholder. "The colours are exquisite—see." He reached towards the fabric, intending no more than to draw it into a better light. But Eowyn—her nerves on edge—instinctively shrank back, knocking over a bale of cloth. The first bale dislodged another, and that pushed over two more, and all the beautiful silks tumbled down onto the dusty cobbles. The stallholder swore loudly.

Wolfram turned towards the commotion.

Eowyn threw herself to the ground and—ignoring the irate stallholder and the other people milling around her—quickly crawled away. After several yards she found a doorway—a back entrance to something. She came up on her knees and tried the handle.

*Unlocked.*

She pushed the door open and fell inside.

For a few moments she lay, legs splayed, with her back to the door, trying to catch her breath. Then she rose to her feet and carefully turned the key in the lock.

"Can I help you, lady?"

The voice was not particularly deep, but it had a commanding quality that might have made Eowyn nervous had she not been so relieved to have—she hoped—escaped from Wolfram unseen. She turned. Her interrogator was a smallish man, middle-aged, but handsome, and still very attractive.

"I apologise for trespassing, sir—I—er—I was being followed," she said.

"That can hardly be a new experience for a pretty lady like you," said the man.

"This person is..." How much should she tell a stranger? "I think he is dangerous."

The man nodded, sagely, as if weighing some complex argument. Then—"Come,"—he gestured for her to follow, leading her down a narrow corridor and into a large, marble-lined chamber.

*Like a white Mead Hall*, Eowyn thought, taking in the tables, the barrels of ale and the bottles of wine and spirits.

"Sit down."

Eowyn perched on a stool before the marble counter.

The man poured out a large measure of spirits. "Here," he said. "You look like you need this."

Eowyn accepted it gratefully. "Thank you." She took a sip and, because it was strong, and because she felt slightly uncomfortable drinking it alone, she added, "Will you not join me?"

"Sure. Why not." The man poured himself a glass. "Tell me: what's a blonde doing wandering through the souk on her own?"

### The usual suspects

Eowyn gazed into her glass. "I was not on my own. But I got separated from my friends, and I was trying to find my way back to The Great Royal Road when—"

"He started following you."

"Yes."

"Did you know him?"

"Yes."

The man knocked back his drink. "Wait here," he said. "I'll get one of my barmen to take you home."

"That is very kind of you sir, but—"

"No buts. You walk into my bar, you're under my protection."

Eowyn smiled. "I am sure that is not the *general* rule, sir," she said.

"It's *my* rule."

"Thank you."

"I'll see if Cyllien has something you can put on—to cover up that golden hair—"

"Cyllien?"

"She sings here."

...

"Why are you helping her, Rib?" the elleth asked.

"I like her," said Ribhadda. "She's got class."

...

Captain Oliel looked up from his map. "Faramir! What are *you* doing here?"

Faramir spread his hands. "I thought it was time to repay you."

"That is not necessary, my friend—"

"I know you would never ask for it," said Faramir, "but, whatever happens, you will need help." He shrugged his shoulders. "Transporting an injured woman will not be easy. Berengar and I both have some skill at healing..."

Oliel glanced at the secretary. "You are looking on the bright side," he said, "but thank you. You too, Master Berengar." He turned back to the map. "I was just looking at the caravan route." He traced it with his finger. "This is Rihat. This is the Silk Road—it passes through the oasis and then continues east."

"Why does it meander so much?" asked Berengar.

"It runs from well to well—here—here—and here, and passes through the only gap in the Ripa'a Ridge, here—"

"That looks dangerous," said Berengar, pointing to the far end of the narrow pass, "perfect for

## The usual suspects

an ambush. On the way here, Gimli and I heard much talk of bandits, though we did not encounter any."

"Bandits are always a threat in the desert," said Oliel. "But they're less likely to attack a caravan than three men travelling on their own. Have either of you ridden a camel before?"

"No," said Faramir.

Berengar shook his head.

"Well... You will soon get used to it."

...

"Legolas! *Legolas!*" Hentmirë jumped from the moving palanquin, and collapsed into a heap as she hit the ground.

"Gwendithen!" Legolas was by her side in a second. "Whatever is the matter?"

"I have lost her! Someone took her away. We looked and looked but we could not find her. You must come back with me—"

"Eowyn?"

"She was caught up in the crowd! The circus! But when we got to the arena she was not there..."

Legolas turned to Rimush. "I do not think that the man who took her intended her any harm, Master Legolas," said the attendant. "He thought that she wanted to join in. I am sorry, sir, I should never have let her get out—"

"I shall fetch my knives," said Legolas. "Then you will take me back to where you lost her. Hentmirë, you will stay here. Gimli, will you join me, *elvellon?*"

"Of course."

"Bring your axe. And bring the March Warden. Do not worry, gwendithen," he said, lifting Hentmirë into his arms and carrying her swiftly indoors. "We shall find her."

...

Hearing the sound of a door closing, Eowyn looked up from her still-full glass of spirits.

Walking towards her, carrying a dark mantle, was the loveliest elleth she had ever seen—tall—taller even than Arwen—with a statuesque but slender figure, long sable hair, a beautiful, child-like face, and *such* an air of sadness!

*Rejection*, thought Eowyn. *But, then, she may be the only elleth for hundreds of miles. It must have been such a comfort to speak to Haldir last night. No wonder he did not have a chance to ask her about Vardamir...*

She smiled warmly. "Thank you," she said, accepting the mantle. She rose and draped it over her shoulders, and raised the hood.

"Almost invisible," said the elleth.

Eowyn, taking her comment as sincere, assumed that it was an offer of friendship. "I believe," she said, "that you spoke to one of my companions last night—Haldir? He is an elf, like—"

### The usual suspects

"Yes, I know Haldir," said Cyllien.

"My name is—"

"Eowyn."

"Yes! How did you know that?"

"Just a lucky guess."

"I suppose Haldir mentioned me."

"You *could* say that."

"Will you sit with me for a while? I shall not keep you long, but I do need to ask you—Haldir should have done so, last night, but I can understand why he did not—"

"Can you?"

"Have you ever met—or heard of—an elf called Vardamir?"

"Vardamir!" For the first time since the conversation had begun, Cyllien's supercilious manner slipped. "That *orc*! Why do you ask?"

"He is wanted, in South Ithilien, for attempted murder—"

"Murder!" The elleth shuddered. "I should have known. He is so... strange."

"Do you know where we can find him?" asked Eowyn.

"No. He used to come here regularly. But I have not seen him in weeks. And, now that I know what he is, I never want to see—"

She was interrupted by Ribhadda, who emerged from the back room with another man in tow. "This is Hiram, my lady. He will take you home."

"Thank you very much, sir," said Eowyn, clasping his hand. "If there is anything that I, or my husband, can do to repay you..."

Ribhadda shook his head. "The pleasure was all mine." He led her to the main doors.

"Madam," said Cyllien, as he was drawing back the bolts. "Is Haldir staying with you?"

"Yes," said Eowyn.

"Then I shall come with you. I need to talk to him. I'll be back before opening time, Rib."

...

"I tell you, it was *her*." Wolfram threw himself down in a chair. "And she was *this* close." He held out his hand and—in his mind's eye—closed his fist around a hank of golden hair. "I could have *had* her... In her tiny little bodice."

"Then why did you let her get away?" asked Vardamir. He handed his accomplice a goblet of wine.

Wolfram took a swig. "When will you get us something decent to drink?" he asked.

"When will *you* get us some money?"

### The usual suspects

"You can *steal* a bottle of wine!" cried Wolfram, in exasperation.

He set the goblet down with a clatter. "I didn't *let* her get away. You know her—she's resourceful. She threw a pile of cloth in my way and, by the time I'd got past the stall keeper, she'd disappeared. But the only way she could have gone was through the back door of *The Silk Road*, so I went round the front and climbed up to one of the windows. And there was old Ribhadda making her welcome—plying her with spirits so he could get a good look at her titties. Did I tell you—"

"You once saw her wash them."

"Like ripe melons..."

"Is she still in *The Silk Road*?"

"How should I know? There are limits to how long a man can hang from a window ledge unnoticed—with his prick standing to attention." He smiled at Vardamir wolfishly. "But *you* can go in there and have a good look—this afternoon, as soon as it opens. Even if she's not there you may be able to find out where she's staying. Ribhadda's always had a soft spot for you. And it will give you another chance to see your elleth. Who knows, today may even be your lucky day."

...

Eowyn and her escorts had left the souk behind them, reached the Great Royal Road without incident, and had just begun the long, pleasant walk past the private villas lining the sea shore, when—

"Melmenya!"

"Is that really Haldir," asked Cyllien, "with a dwarf and—oh Valar!—is that the Prince of Mirkwood? Why is the Prince of Mirkwood running towards us? By Eärendil, he's beautiful!"

"Yes," said Eowyn. "He is." She lowered the hood of her mantle. "Lassui!"

Legolas swept her into his arms, lifted her into the air, and whirled her round. Then he set her back on her feet and began kissing her, very thoroughly.

Gimli blushed under his beard. "Wait until you get her indoors, you crazy elf," he mumbled. He bowed to Cyllien. "I am Gimli, son of Gloin, at your service, my lady. My friend over there is Prince Legolas of the Woodland Realm, and that lady's husband—and this is March Warden Hal—"

"Haldir and I have already met," said Cyllien. "I am pleased to meet you Gimli, son of Gloin. I am Cyllien, daughter of Eluchíl, formerly of Imladris; and this is Hiram, son of Hanno."

Legolas gave Eowyn one final kiss and turned to greet her escorts. "Thank you, Mistress Cyllien, Master Hiram, for returning my wife to me," he said. He placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. Then, with elfling-like impetuosity, he seized the elleth's hand and kissed it.

The effect was remarkable. Cyllien melted in girlish embarrassment. "Oh—I—oh—your Highness—"

"Please," said the elf, treating her to one of his most potent, dimpled smiles, "call me Legolas. May I invite you both to take some refreshment with us?"

"Thank you, your highness," said Hiram, "but I must be getting back to *The Silk Road*." He



### The usual suspects

turned to Cyllien. "And so must *you*."

"I should be delighted, Prince Legolas," said Cyllien.

...

"Why did you come here?" hissed Haldir. "You were not concerned for *her*."

A quick glance at Eowyn showed him that she was not looking in their direction—she was sitting beside Legolas, watching with amusement as Hentmirë tried to referee the conversation between him and Gimli.

Haldir pulled Cyllien towards the study. "In here." He closed the door behind them. "What is all this 'Yes, Prince Legolas; no, Prince Legolas' nonsense?"

Cyllien drew herself up to her full height and looked him straight in the eye. "What was all that 'Eowyn, Eowyn; oh, sweet Valar, Eowyn' nonsense?"

"What?"

"Why, exactly, do you like to imagine you're *doing* the Prince of Mirkwood's wife?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Last night. You kept calling me 'Eowyn', you stupid orc."

"No!"

"Yes."

"Manwë's balls! That is not supposed to happen!"

"Well, quite."

"No—you—I had no idea..." He pulled up a chair. "Sit down. Please—I really did not know. And I am sorry." He ran his hand over his hair. "And you deserve an explanation."

"I know." She sat down.

"Where do I start?" Haldir pulled up a second chair. "You have heard of the Battle of the Hornburg," he said.

"At Helm's Deep."

"Yes. I was wounded there. Twice, in fact—first in the arm, and then in the back—and the second was a grievous wound, all but fatal."

Cyllien's manner had softened. Haldir smiled, she smiled back—and the elf felt a sudden stirring of the desire that had overwhelmed him the previous night. He lowered his gaze.

"The casualties were heavy on that part of the wall—elves, orcs, men. By the time it was all over I was buried beneath a pile of bodies." He shook his head. "I could hear them getting closer—"

"Who?"

"The Rohirrim. They were searching for survivors and finding none, and they were dealing with the bodies of the elves with as much care and respect as they could muster, but..." He looked down at his hands. "I knew that they would not recognise my condition. I knew that I had to

### The usual suspects

tell them, somehow, that I was still alive. But I could not: I could not move, I could not reach them..."

"*Valar!*" whispered the elleth.

"They had built a huge pyre. I could smell the flesh burning."

"*Oh...*"

He turned to her. "They were burning *orcs*, Cyllien, but I did not know that."

"You must have been scared."

"I *was*," said Haldir softly. "I was very scared. Hopeless. And then I felt her little hand on my face. I felt her hair brush my skin as she bent over me. 'Here,' she cried. 'I think he is alive!'"

"Who would have thought it," said Cyllien.

Haldir turned to her questioningly.

"She seems so stu..." The change in his expression warned her not to continue.

"She dragged the orc off me herself—I am sure of that," said Haldir, "and had me carried to some sort of healing room—a tent, I think. The elven healers said I that was beyond saving. 'Let him go with dignity,' they said." He smiled. "But she would not! She may look like a faun but she is made of steel. She fetched a another healer, a man—someone she had no trouble intimidating—and, together, they cleaned and dressed my wounds. She helped him herself..."

"I do not know how long I lay in healing sleep. Or how much time she may have spent at my side—perhaps none." He shrugged. "But when I awoke she was sitting beside me. She was pale and tired, the way men get, sometimes—the way she gets now when she is pushing herself too hard to keep pace with Legolas. He does not always see it..."

"It is strange. I can remember thinking how beautiful she was, but I cannot remember how it felt to look at her—is that not strange? She had become an obsession, a *dangerous* obsession, and so I—"

"How did she come to marry the Prince of Mirkwood?"

"Legolas? He says he fell in love with her the moment he saw her. But *she* only had eyes for Aragorn—King Elessar—"

"She preferred King Elessar to the fairest elf in Middle-earth!"

"Aragorn was our captain, the one who could lead her people out of darkness. That is the reason she fell in love with him."

"You really do worship her."

"No. I had that removed. That is why last night happened." He turned to her. "I had a magician remove my love for Eowyn from my heart and mind. And it *must* have worked—for you are the first person I have desired—other than her—since the day I met her."

"You'd not... since before the Battle of Helm's Deep?"

"No."

"Well, that explains the sex," said Cyllien.

## The usual suspects

She rose to her feet. "You will never have her, Haldir, and you need to get over her—by yourself, not by magic. Growing up in Imladris, I dreamed of finding that somebody—a companion for eternity... But this is not the time of the Eldar, Haldir. This is the Fourth Age. And if we elves are to survive amongst men we must learn to live like them." She sighed. "You know where to find me if you want me."

Haldir watched her walk towards the door, admiring the light on her charcoal-black hair, the subtle curve of her waist, and the sway of her slender hips. She was not Eowyn and she never would be, but—in a way—her charms were more real to him than Eowyn's had ever been.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Cyllien turned and almost smiled. "You're an arrogant orc, Haldir, but you *do* know how to pleasure an elleth."

Haldir stretched out his arms.

...

"He is limping," said Eowyn. "But he is just as dangerous as ever." She had waited until Hentmirë had gone upstairs for her nap before telling Legolas about Wolfram.

"So now we must find *both* of them," said Legolas. "And find Wolfram before *he* finds *you*." He took her hands in his. "I know that you dislike my saying this sort of thing, melmenya, but I am going to say it anyway—"

"You do not need to," said Eowyn. "I shall be careful. I was scared Lassui..."

"In future, I want you to take the djinn with you wherever you go. Then, if you get into trouble, you can just rub the lamp—the *kettle*—no, that kettle is far too big for you to carry about. You will have to persuade the djinn to use one of Hentmirë's lamps for now. Just until our friends are under lock and key."

"Do you think they are together?"

"I think it likely, melmenya. Two criminals, both from the North, in a city this size—yes, I think that they will at least have come into contact."

"Perhaps the *Hatja* could help us find them."

Legolas shook his head. "Faramir and I did consider asking him to help us find Vardamir. But I think that a search by the *Hatja*'s men would only drive him further into hiding."

"Then what are we going to do? And without Faramir?"

Legolas smiled. "Are you trying to make me feel inadequate, melmenya?" He wrapped his arm around her. "Tonight, your *second* husband is going to *The Silk Road* to have a long talk with your *new* protector, Master Ribhadda—"

"Legolas!" She snuggled against him, grinning. "Yes. I am sure *he* will help us. But be careful, Lassui. People notice you. You are very conspicuous, my darling, especially here in the South."

They sat in silence for a while, enjoying a few moments of peace and quiet. Then Eowyn said, "Would you still like to see the Turquoise Gardens, Lassui? When Hentmirë has finished her nap? "

"I should like that very much," said Legolas. "One of the serving girls has told me all about them. They were built by the *Hatja*'s great grandfather for his wife—a woman of the North who missed the trees of her native land."

### The usual suspects

"What a lovely gift," said Eowyn.

"The girl thinks that Hentmirë has a book about it. Come, let us have a look."

...

Hand-in-hand they walked to the study. Legolas opened the door and, for a split second, they both stood transfixed. Then Legolas closed the door again.

"Did they see us?" asked Eowyn.

"No, Melmenya." He looked at her anxiously. "Are you all right, Eowyn *nín*?"

"No. I shall be blushing for a week."

Legolas smiled. "Come." He led her back into the sitting room.

"Do you think that we look like that?" asked Eowyn.

"No," he said. "We are more beautiful."

Eowyn giggled. "You are, Lassui *fain nín*." She came up on tiptoe and whispered in his ear, "And *bigger*."

"Melmenya!"

"*Ceber daur chîn*," she whispered.

Their eyes met.

"*Caro!*" gasped Legolas. "I certainly am *now*..."

\*\*\*\*\*

### Chapter 3: The Turquoise Gardens

**They scarcely made it through the door of their bed chamber.**

...

Afterwards, as Legolas lay on his back, briefly exhausted, Eowyn bent over him, and kissed him, lovingly. "*Ceredir fain*," she whispered, "*gerich veleth nín*."

"Melmenya..." Tired as he was, his body responded instantly.

Eowyn smiled. "Hentmirë's maid," she said, kissing him again, "the former whore,"—*kiss*—"says the *best* lovers,"—*long, lingering kiss*—"the very, *very* best lovers,"—*kiss*—"are just a little too big." She ran her tongue along his length and kissed his smooth, ruby head. "Just big enough to hurt, ever so slightly,"—*kiss*—"especially if they are very gentle to start with." She placed a tiny kiss on his precious opening. "*I said*—"

"You did *not* discuss my..." He sat bolt upright.

"*Shhhhh...*" She silenced him with a thorough kiss on the mouth. "I said that you were *perfect*," she whispered against his lips, "that is all..."

He pretended to be annoyed.

But, holding his gaze, Eowyn reached down and stroked him—measuring by feel the length and breadth of his sturdy shaft and the full roundness of his *ceryn*, until—

"I can see," he said, with a mock sigh, "that I shall have *no* peace until I give you what you want." He grabbed her and rolled her onto her back. "Yet *more* perfection."

Eowyn's merry laugh could be heard in the courtyard garden.

...

"Will I see you again?" asked Haldir, watching Cyllien dress.

"That's entirely up to you," she said. "*I shall not come looking for you.*"

He weighed her words for a moment, testing his own feelings. "I am not sure that I can do this..."

"You can do it very well. Especially when you keep your mouth shut."

"You know what I mean."

"Look: *you* will never have *her*, Haldir; *I* will never—well, let's just say that we *both* need to make do with what we can get. But, as I say, it's up to you. Will you see me out?"

"Mmm?"

"You could at least *pretend* to be considerate."

With a most un-elven weariness, Haldir struggled to his feet and escorted her into the courtyard. "Yassib will open the gate for you..."

"Valar!" cried Cyllien. "You really need to watch how Prince Legolas treats *her*."

...

## The usual suspects

"Come, melmenya," said Legolas, rousing Eowyn with a gentle kiss, "we must get you washed and looking presentable again."

She smiled up at him, stretching luxuriously.

He fetched a bowl of water and a towel from the bathing room, and helped her sit up, then he took his time, carefully sponging and drying her face and body, and combing the tangles from her long golden hair. "There. And if we can find you something more demure to wear, no one will have any idea what a dangerous wanton you are."

Eowyn hugged him tightly. "I love you, Lassui," she said. Then she added, thoughtfully, "Do you think *they* are in love?"

"No," said Legolas. "No. It is no more than physical desire at present. But that is a good start."

...

"So I asked for a single hair of her golden head," said Gimli. He took a swig of the ale Hentmirë had managed to find for him. "She gave me *three*."

"And now she is gone forever," said Hentmirë. "It is so sad..." She hesitated. "Gimli, what does it mean, to sail West? Do they... Do they go there to *die*?"

"Die? Oh no, my Lady. No. They go there to live with the Valar, in a land where everything is beautiful, and peaceful, and all the cares of this world no longer concern them."

"That sounds very *like* death," said Hentmirë, uncertainly.

"Perhaps to us," said Gimli, "because we are mortal. But not to them." He leaned forward and pressed her hand. "Elves are a fine people, but most of them lack *our* spirit."

"Not Legolas," said Hentmirë, loyally.

"Oh, no. Not Legolas." He took another swig of ale.

"But if Legolas heard the gulls' cry so many years ago, why has he not sailed? Why did he not go with your Lady?"

"He wanted to stay with his mortal friends."

"But what will happen when his friends die—"

"I am sorry we are late, gwendithen," said Legolas, leading Eowyn downstairs, "are you ready to leave?"

"Yes," said Hentmirë. She turned to the dwarf. "Legolas and Eowyn and I are going to visit the Turquoise Gardens. Would you like to join us, Gimli?"

Gimli rose to his feet. Standing beside him, Hentmirë was only a few inches taller than he was. With a slight bow, he proffered his arm. "I should like that very much, my lady."

...

"I want a certain job done," said Abdi, the owner of the *Blue Parrot*. "And I was told that you were the one to ask."

"'Certain jobs' *is* what I do," said Wolfram, cautiously.

"Take a seat."

## The usual suspects

Wolfram glanced around the room. There were two doors and three windows. The door he had just used was now blocked by two well-armed slaves; the other, behind the fat man, might lead anywhere—but almost certainly deeper into the building—hardly the best route in an emergency. The windows were big and their shutters were open—perfect exits, had they not been on the second floor. *Still*, he thought, *the middle window is my best option if things turn nasty*. He sat down.

"You know Ribhadda?" asked the fat man. "Owns *The Silk Road*."

"Yes."

"I want him to disappear."

Wolfram nodded, reflectively. "Disappear, as in—"

"Go, and never come back."

"That can be arranged. For a price."

"I've got a Kurian that'll do it for five hundred gold."

"Then use him," said Wolfram, "and, in future, don't waste my time." He rose, and took a few steps towards the door. The two slaves blocked his way, towering over him menacingly, but some instinct told Wolfram that the man on his right was the weak link. He bared his teeth. "You *don't* want to make an enemy of me," he hissed.

The slave backed away.

Behind him, Abdi laughed. "Zimri told me you had a pair. And he says you're an artist."

"He's right," said Wolfram, still glaring at the slave.

"A thousand."

"Make it twelve hundred and we have a deal."

"Two thousand if Ribhadda disappears *and* you bring me his Elf-woman—unharméd."

Wolfram sighed. *Not more pricking Elf-napping...* "That is an entirely different proposition," he said, turning back towards the fat man.

Abdi spread both hands, as if to say, *What can I do? That's the job*.

"I'll let you know," said Wolfram. He looked up at the slaves. "Move!"

"Don't leave it too long," shouted Abdi as Wolfram left. "Or I *will* use the Kurian."

...

Hentmirë had had a large, open carriage brought round from her stables. Legolas smiled at the sight of Eowyn making friends with the horses, four fine greys.

"Do you think I should ask March Warden Haldir if he would like to come with us?" asked Hentmirë quietly. "He is standing over there, by the thorn bushes, gazing out to sea..."

"I think that would be very kind, gwendithen *nín*," said Legolas.

...

## The usual suspects

"Where have you been?" asked Ribhadda.

"Seeing *her* home," said Cyllien. She glanced at her reflection in the mirrored wall. Her hair was tangled, and she had bruises on her neck and a love-bite just above her left breast. She smiled. *I shall have to cover those up...*

"Hiram was back hours ago."

"I dare say." She pushed past him. "I need to get ready."

He caught her arm. "Who have you been with?"

"Are you jealous?"

"No. I just don't want to see you beaten black and blue again. It upsets the customers."

"You're all heart." She shook off his hand. "Her husband wants to thank you personally. He is coming here tonight. He's an Elf—an elven *prince*."

*And he makes the rest of you look like baboons*, she thought.

...

The carriage came to a halt beside a massive rectangular enclosure, fortified with square bastions and crenellated battlements like a Northern castle, but decorated with glazed tiles—most of an intense turquoise-blue—that made it shine like a jewel against the dull red of the desert sand.

"Is it not beautiful?" said Hentmirë, clapping her hands together. "And I have not been here for years!"

She led them up a shallow ramp, to the guard post beside the gates, and—with a mixture of name dropping, innocent flirtation, and gold coin—she obtained permission for them to enter.

They passed quickly through the entrance hall, with its tree-shaped columns, painted and inlaid with coloured glass—"It reminds me of King Shamash's palace," said Eowyn to Gimli—and out into the Gardens themselves.

The enclosure was dominated by a huge artificial lake: broad, shallow and perfectly rectangular. At the nearer end, an elegant stone jetty stretched out into the deep blue of the water; towards the farther end, a small island of white stone—again, perfectly rectangular—offered the comfort of a shady pavilion.

Hentmirë turned to Legolas. "After you have walked under the trees, my dear," she said, "we could take one of the little boats out to the island."

The lake was surrounded on all sides by a broad stone path, but the rest of the garden was *filled* with trees; there were dates and sycamores and pomegranates, acacias and willows and tamarisks—the greens of their foliage and the reds and yellows of their fruits all contrasting charmingly with the turquoise blue of the towering walls. Beneath the branches, tiled flower beds were filled with daisies and cornflowers and sweet marjoram, with small yellow chrysanthemums, and with poppies.

As Legolas wandered along the path, gazing upwards in wonder, an orange and black bird wearing an enormous crown of striped feathers, alighted on a nearby branch and called down to him, "*Hoo-hoo-hoop, hoo-hoo-hoop, hoo-hoo-hoop...*"

Laughing, Legolas called back, "*Hoo-hoo-hoop!*"



### The usual suspects

"Oh, my dear," whispered Hentmirë. "We should have come here much, much sooner..."

...

"We've got a job," said Wolfram, stepping inside. He waited whilst Vardamir went through his customary ritual of barring the door and lighting the candles, then he threw himself down in his usual chair. "It will mean forgetting about My Lady for a couple of days... But it's a piece of cake: a removal and a relocation for two thousand gold."

"Removal..." said Vardamir, reluctantly. The Elf was not a career criminal, and he lacked the Man's pride in his work. "Who do we kill?"

Wolfram scowled. "I have told you before—"

"Don't use that word."

"Is it so hard to remember?"

"No," said Vardamir. "It's just ridiculous. Who do we *remove*?"

"Ribhadda."

"Manwë's balls, Wolfram!"

"Keep your voice down! Gods, anyone would think you'd never ki—removed anyone before."

"But I *know* him!"

"Exactly! And he trusts you. *That's* why it will be a piece of cake."

"I daren't ask who we have to relocate..."

Wolfram slipped out of his chair and crouched beside the Elf. "Remember it's two thousand gold," he said. "Our customer wants your elleth. Cyllien."

...

Haldir was standing beside the jetty—leaning over the handrail, gazing at a flock of geese swimming on the deep blue water—when Eowyn approached him. "Is it not wonderful here?" she asked. "Just look at Legolas!"

Haldir looked. The other elf—*Would you not know it?*—had coaxed the crowned bird onto his hand, so that Hentmirë could see it more clearly. "He is very happy here."

"Does it not affect you in the same way?"

"I am not a wood elf," said Haldir. Then, "Can we talk?"

"Of course."

He offered his arm, human fashion and, though she seemed surprised, she accepted it. He led her to a secluded bower, just off the main path, and they both sat down on a turquoise-tiled bench.

"Are you not jealous of Hentmirë?" he asked.

Eowyn smiled. "There were many things I thought you might say, but that was not one of them! Why should I be jealous?"

### The usual suspects

"Legolas cares for her."

"Legolas *loves* her."

"And that does not worry you?"

Eowyn shook her head. "There is room in his heart for both of us," she said. "It is not an *entirely* chaste love, like a mother and son—not on her side, at least—but it is still a very innocent love. I think they are more like a favourite aunt and nephew. Neither Legolas nor Hentmirë is capable of anything bad or ugly. Yes, there is room in his heart for both of us."

"As always, you put the rest of us to shame," said Haldir.

"Please do not say that."

There was a difficult silence, and—when it seemed to her that the elf did not intend to say anything more—very tentatively, Eowyn touched his hand. "Tell me about *her*."

"Oh, Eowyn!"

"Is that not what you wanted to talk about?"

"I want to talk to you about everything. You are the only person I feel I *can* talk to—"

"Then talk."

"I do not know what is happening to me."

"It *has* been very quick." Eowyn looked down at their hands. "Do you love her?"

"No."

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed."

"I want you to be happy, Haldir."

"Why?"

"Surely you know why?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"You need not answer..." He took hold of her hand. "If I had approached you, Eowyn, after Helm's Deep—before Faramir, before Legolas—if I had asked you—would you have said yes?"

Eowyn looked up into his hypnotic blue eyes. "I do not know," she said.

He carefully placed her hand back on her lap. Then he said, "But that is not a 'No'."

"It is *not* a 'No'." She blushed deeply. "I do care for you, Haldir. And you are very attractive."

He smiled. "We are like Legolas and Hentmirë."

"Not entirely chaste..." agreed Eowyn. "But I am not old enough to be your aunt."

His smile was almost a laugh. "I never intended to tell you this, but after these last few days—"

### The usual suspects

and because of what might happen in the future—I think you need to know. When we were in Kuri, I had the Magus Niqmaddu remove my love for you."

"I do not understand."

"He removed my love for you, by magic." His head was bowed, and he could not see that she was staring at him, appalled. "After what had happened," he said, "I had to do *something*."

"Did it work?"

"In that I have no memory of how I used to feel for you, yes. But in some ways it has only made things worse."

"And did it not occur to you that that was *likely* to be the outcome? Meddling with your mind! I am disappointed in the Magus."

"He did try to dissuade me."

"But, of course, *you* knew better. I *begged* you not to do anything foolish. I even sent Legolas—does *he* know?"

"He was too late to stop me."

"He *lied* to me!"

"Only to protect you, Eowyn; you know that."

"*How* are things worse now?"

Haldir sighed. "It seems I am still obsessed with you. I just do not remember why."

...

"If it was *your* Lady you would not do it," said Vardamir.

"Of course I would," said Wolfram. "Just not for two thousand. My Lady is a *princess*. I'd want at least ten. Maybe twenty."

"You might kidnap her, but you wouldn't hand her over. You would keep her for yourself."

"Not for twenty," said Wolfram. He turned his back on the elf; *conversation over*.

*I could warn Cyllien, thought Vardamir. I could get her out of The Silk Road... But where would I hide her?*

*Arinna's whorehouse! That place is like a fortress. And—since that business with the knife—Arinna won't let Wolfram through the door. Yes, she'd be safe at Arinna's...*

"Where are you going?" asked Wolfram.

"To get us some decent wine," Vardamir lied.

...

Eowyn watched Legolas, with Hentmirë and Gimli, walking under the trees, laying his hands upon the trunks, communing with them, and sharing their lore with his two companions.

*Yes, he lied to me, but how could I be angry with him?*

### The usual suspects

She could swear that the trees stood taller, held their leaves higher, and offered their fruits more willingly, after receiving his blessing.

*How could anyone ever be angry with him?*

It was hard to remember now the liberator who had dealt with Gríma's followers in the Golden Hall, the grim avenger she had seen dispatching fallen orcs at Helm's Deep, the fearsome warrior she had glimpsed conquering the mûmak on the Pelennor..

*Please, gods, she thought, let him have some peace now. Do not let Hentmirë ever have to see him like that. It would break her heart.*

And, all of a sudden, she needed to be near her beloved elf. She lifted her long, full skirts and ran across the stone paving to join him.

"Hello, Melmenya," he said, happily. "Come and listen to the pomegranate trees."

...

Vardamir entered *The Silk Road* the moment the door opened. "Hello Hiram," he said to the bar tender. "I just need a word with Cyl—"

"Vardamir!"

"Oh, hello, Rib."

"Come here." The man was behind the bar, inspecting his stocks of spirits.

"Oh—I, er—"

"*Here.*" It was not necessary for a man like Ribhadda to shout. Vardamir did as he was told.

Ribhadda poured him a drink. "On the house."

Vardamir looked, suspiciously, at the deep brown liquid.

"There was a man in here last night," said Ribhadda, "asking for you—a big noise from the North." He looked Vardamir in the eye. "Now I don't care what you did in the past—we've all made those mistakes—but I *do* care what you're doing now. I don't like that weasel friend of yours and I don't want to be playing host the day he destroys you. Your money's no longer accepted in here. Good bye Vardamir."

"But, Rib, I need to speak—"

"Good bye, Vardamir."

...

By the time the friends arrived back at Hentmirë's house, Faramir and Berengar were waiting, with Captain Oriel, to take their leave.

"We should reach Rihat the day after tomorrow," said Faramir. "If Gwirth can be moved, we will return immediately. If not, I shall send word."

"Good bye, Eowyn, my dear." He kissed her cheek. "Good bye, Legolas." He clasped the elf's hand. "Goodbye Gimli; Haldir. Good bye, Hent—"

Hentmirë threw her stout little arms around his waist. "You *promise* you will come back to us?" she said.

### The usual suspects

"Of course," he answered, smiling.

"Legolas and Eowyn are both very fond of you. They would miss you terribly if you did not. And so would I."

Faramir hugged her tightly. "I shall be back before you even know I have gone."

...

A strange silence fell over the house once Faramir and the others had left.

Hentmirë and Eowyn were sitting side-by-side on the day bed, sorting through Hentmirë's father's papers in preparation for selling the house; Legolas was sitting close by, listlessly turning the pages of a book; Gimli was perching at the bottom of the stairs, sharpening his axe; Haldir was standing by the doors, gazing out into the courtyard...

At last, as darkness began to fall, Legolas roused himself and beckoned Gimli and Haldir into the study. He described to Gimli the attempts that he and Faramir had made to find Vardamir, and told them both of Eowyn's brush with Wolfram in the souk.

"She does not know whether he saw her, but if he did..." He removed one of his white knives from its scabbard and checked the sharpness of its edge. "Eowyn never talks about what happened between them on that galley—all she will say is that she made him pay. But I will never forget the malice I sensed when he took her from me in the castle. I will never forget what he threatened to do to her when I was lying paralysed. And if he ever gets a chance for revenge—"

"Just let *me* find him," muttered Gimli, unconsciously gripping the haft of his axe. "The animal!"

"We must find *both* of them," said Legolas, replacing his knife and strapping on the holster, "and quickly. The three of us will pay a visit to *The Silk Road*. I shall speak to Ribhadda; Gimli—I suggest you see if you can charm any information out of the patrons, *elvellon*; Haldir—perhaps you can have a word with Cyllien? Eowyn will stay here with Hentmirë."

...

*The Silk Road* was buzzing. Ribhadda was behind the bar, passing the time with one of his regular customers, the Captain of the *Hatja's* Guards, Ramess.

"I have often speculated," said Ramess, "on why you've never returned to the North, Rib. Did you abscond with the Poor Relief funds? Did you run off with a Counsellor's wife? I like to think you killed a man. It's the romantic in me."

"It was a combination of all three," said Ribhadda, dryly.

"And what in god's name brought you to Carhilivren?"

"My health. I came to Carhilivren for the waters."

"Waters? What waters? We are in the desert."

"I was misinformed."

Five musicians had filed out onto the stage and, arranging themselves on a cluster of wooden stools, they began tuning their instruments.

"Cyllien is about to sing..." said Ramess, wistfully. "What I would give for a woman like that."

## The usual suspects

"You and ten thousand others," said Ribhadda, unimpressed.

A murmur of surprise, suddenly rippling through the bar, announced the arrival of three strange customers—two of them tall, otherworldly beings, and one a very short, powerful man wearing a woman's robe but carrying a lethal-looking axe strapped to his back.

"*Interesting*," said Ramess. He turned to Ribhadda, raising his eyebrows.

"Very interesting," said the other man. "Would you like a quick word with Cyllien before she sings?"

"You do not think she would mind?"

"No. Go on through."

Ribhadda waited until the Guardsman had disappeared before he approached the smaller of the two elves. "You must be Lady Eowyn's husband, Prince Legolas," he said.

"And you must be Master Ribhadda," said the elf, placing his hand on his heart and bowing. He raised his head, smiling. "I wanted to thank you for taking such good care of her."

His face reminded Ribhadda of those of the divine spirits carved on the walls of the Golden Hall of Eshmunazar. The man shook his head. "It was my privilege," he said. "She's a classy lady."

The elf leaned towards him, slightly. "Can I ask you—"

Out of the corner of his eye, Ribhadda saw Ramess emerging from the stage door. "Not just now," he said. "Cyllien's about to sing. I'll give you the nod when the coast is clear."

...

Haldir had found a seat beside the stage. He looked distastefully at the sweaty customers thronging the bar, all of them waiting for Cyllien and most of them *wanting* her—even some of the women...

*And I could have her*, he thought. *Valar, if only things were that simple.*

The musicians had begun to play and, just as on the previous night, the elleth emerged from behind the curtain, singing.

She scanned the audience, saw him, and fixed her eyes upon him.

*"Some day, when I'm very low,  
When the world is cold,  
I will feel a glow  
Just thinking of you...  
And the way you look tonight."*

...

Ribhadda beckoned to Legolas. "Follow me," he said. Unnoticed, the pair slipped through the door at the side of the stage. "I assume you want information about the man who was following your wife?"

"Yes," said Legolas.

"I didn't see him. But *she* said she knew him," said Ribhadda.

"Yes. We have had dealings with him before," said Legolas.

## The usual suspects

"Do you know his name?"

"In Dol Amroth he called himself 'Wolfram'."

"*Wolfram.*" Ribhadda smiled, cynically. "That piece of work. I barred him from *The Silk Road* after he lifted a necklace and earrings from one of my lady customers—right here, in front of two hundred people. Nobody saw him do it."

"Do you know where I can find him?"

There was a pile of packing crates in the corridor. Ribhadda leaned against them. From beyond the door, Legolas could hear Cyllien singing.

*"Rapture; I'm in rapture,  
And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak,  
And I seem to find the happiness I seek  
When we're here together  
Dancing cheek to cheek..."*

"I don't normally meddle in the affairs of my customers—not when they don't affect me, or *The Silk Road*, personally—"

*"Dance with me,  
I want my arms about you,  
The charms about you  
Will carry me through  
To  
Rapture; I'm in rapture..."*

"—but *he's* a dangerous animal and, as I say, your wife's a classy lady. I've heard he has a hideout on Garden Lane," said Ribhadda.

"Where?"

"In an alley behind one of the stalls. That's as much as I know."

"Thank you," said Legolas.

...

Cyllien wiped the colour from her lips, shrugged off her bodice and skirts, doused herself liberally in perfumed oil, slipped on her most seductive gown, and perched upon her dressing table, waiting...

Moments later, the door opened.

"You came!" she said, betraying far more of her feelings than she had intended.

"I came."

"I was not sure you would..." She twined her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him, expecting to arouse in him the same wild passion he had displayed the previous night.

But, this time, his body was unresponsive.

She placed her hand on his chin and pulled his face towards her. "You have been with *her*," she said.

"I have had a long talk with her, yes."

### The usual suspects

"About us."

"She wants us to be happy, Cyllien."

"That is very big of her." She gave up trying to arouse him and instead went over to her dressing table, searching for her clay pipe. "You should fuck *her*."

"What?"

She turned to face him, shouting angrily. "Yes, fuck *her*! That is your cure! Fuck her and fuck her and fuck her and be disappointed. Fuck her and find that her *tynd* are no bigger than mine! Fuck her and find that her *ron*d is no tighter than mine! Fuck her and fuck her and fuck her and—"

*Slap!*

"*Oh! Oh...*" With the hysteria gone she was left shaking, her hands covering her wet face.

"I am sorry," said Haldir. Then he added, with unconcealed distaste, "You have been amongst them too long, Cyllien. You are no longer an elleth and you will never be a woman; I do not know *what* you are." He walked to the door.

"And *she* would not disappoint me," he said. "Not *ever*."

\*\*\*\*\*



## Chapter 4: Good advice

**Cyllien examined her face in the mirror. The slap had stung, but it had done no damage—for it had never been intended to do anything more than calm her down.**

And it had certainly worked.

She sighed. *Why do you want him? Because he's big, strong, good-looking and a wonderful lover. Because he's passionate and honourable and—Valar!—if he fell in love with you, you would be everything in Middle-earth to him.*

*Could you make him fall in love with you?*

*No. Not while she's anywhere near him...*

For the briefest of moments, Cyllien imagined killing Eowyn, and the clarity with which she could see the woman falling down a flight of stone steps—see the light leaving her eyes as her head hit the ground and her neck snapped—left her trembling.

*What in Ilúvatar's name does that mean? she wondered. Do I want Haldir that much? Or do I just hate the woman?*

She was so troubled by her thoughts of violence that she did not notice the door open—did not realise that he was there until his hand touched her shoulder. But when he lifted her onto her dressing table—clearing away the clutter with a sweep of his hand—and made love to her, this time with tenderness as well as passion, she seemed to have the answer to all of her questions.

...

Wolfram sat at the table, reed pen in hand, writing laboriously on a sheet of papyrus.

*Agreed. Ecspect...*

He was interrupted by the familiar knock: one-two; one-two-three; one; one.

*About pricking time.* He carried his candle to the door and set it down on the dresser. Then he drew back the heavy metal bar and, after blowing out the light, opened the door.

"Where have you been?" he hissed. "I need to go out! How long does it take to steal a bottle of wine?" He closed and, in the complete darkness, managed to re-bar the door. "Are you going to light that candle or what?"

The elf said nothing but, a moment later, the room was filled with a dull glow. Wolfram lit two more candles. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"It was not my fault..."

*"What have you done?"*

The elf, though much taller than the man, flinched. "Rib has barred me from *The Silk Road*."

"Why?"

Vardamir retreated a few steps. "Because he doesn't trust *you*."

To the elf's surprise, Wolfram laughed. "Where's the wine?"

### The usual suspects

Vardamir removed a grimy bottle from a poacher's pocket inside his long robe.

"Could you not have taken a *clean* one?" Shaking his head, Wolfram returned to writing his note.

*Agreed. Ecspect...*

He must not be too explicit in case it fell into the wrong hands.

*... her toniht at the back door*

He added a full stop. He would not sign it.

He waved the papyrus in the air to dry the ink.

"This," said Vardamir, "is one of the finest reds from Dorwinion. It's over fifty years old." He handed Wolfram a goblet.

Wolfram knocked it back. "It doesn't really matter," he said. "I can deal with Ribhadda myself. You're not much help, anyway." He folded the note. "I'm going out. I'll deliver this to the *Blue Parrot*, then I'll relocate *her*—"

"Must you, Wolfram?"

"Just make sure you stay by the door. I may need to get back inside—*fast*."

...

"Over *here*," cried Gimli, waving enthusiastically. The dwarf was sitting at a large, circular table, surrounded by a bevy of admiring young women, and allowing one of them—sitting on his lap—to stroke the haft of his axe. "These fair ladies want to meet you," he cried.

*How did he get so drunk so fast?* Legolas wondered, taking a seat at the very far side of the table.

"Are you *really* an elf?" asked one of the girls, simpering.

Legolas smiled politely. "Yes."

"And is it true what they say about elves?" asked another—who seemed to have had more to drink than the rest—sliding towards him, from chair to chair.

"What do they say?" asked Legolas, gently removing her hand from his thigh.

"That you're all hung like horses!"

The girls giggled; Gimli roared with laughter. Legolas folded his hands over his lap.

"Well," said Gimli, "answer her!"

"Yes," said Legolas, straight-faced.

Gimli thumped the table with delight.

"Will you show me?" asked the girl, breathlessly. "I've never seen a *really* big one. We could go outside..."

"That's enough, Meryt, leave the gentleman alone." Ribhadda laid a restraining hand on the girl's shoulder. "Time to go home." He beckoned to one of the liveried boys. "Aqhat, walk her

## The usual suspects

back to her rooms."

"Oh, but, Rib, I don't want—"

The man lifted Meryt from her seat and handed her to the boy. "*Home*," he said, firmly. "And Aqhat—make sure *you* come straight back."

"Well," said Gimli, with a theatrical yawn, "*I* must be going, too." There was a chorus of disappointment. "Sorry ladies. But perhaps my friend, here, will stay and entertain you with tales of Northern parts?" He winked at the elf.

Legolas gave him a murderous look. But, seemingly oblivious, Gimli rolled off his chair, swaggered across the tavern and disappeared through the main doors.

The women moved in on the elf like sharks on an injured swimmer. "I am sorry," he said, scrambling to his feet, "my wife is expecting me. Good night, Master Ribhadda." He hurried after the dwarf. "Gimli? Gimli, where have you gone?—Gimli? *Gimli!*"

"Shhhhh," hissed the dwarf, suddenly sounding very sober. "For an elf you are making a terrible din! Come with me!"

...

As Ribhadda was watching the elf leave, one of his regular customers, a small, nervous man, plucked at his sleeve. "Rib, will you join me for a moment?"

"You know better than that, Ugarti," said Ribhadda, "I don't—"

"You don't drink with customers. I know. I just want to talk. And to ask you a small favour."

Ribhadda sighed. "Very well," he said, taking a seat.

Ugarti laid a document on the table—a roll of papyrus, tied with a red cord and sealed with a lump of red wax stamped with the *Hatja*'s emblem. "Look, Rib," he said, "do you know what this is? Something that even you have never seen." He played with the seal. "A Letter of Pardon, signed by the *Hatja*. It cannot be rescinded, not even questioned." He looked at Ribhadda, triumphantly. "Tonight I'll be selling it for more money than even *I* ever dreamed of. Then goodbye, Carhivilven." He smiled. "You know Rib, I have many friends in Carhivilven but, somehow, just because you despise me, you are the only one I trust. Will you keep it for me. Please?"

"For how long?"

"Perhaps an hour, perhaps a little longer."

"I don't want it here overnight."

"Don't be afraid of that." Ugarti picked up the scroll and held it out to the other man. "Please keep it for me." Ribhadda took it. "Thank you. I knew I could trust you." He rose to leave, but he could not resist adding, "I hope you are more impressed with me now, Rib."

Ribhadda caught his arm. "I heard that those dead couriers were carrying a Letter of Pardon."

"Uh. Yes," said Ugarti. "I heard that too. Poor devils."

Ribhadda stared at him for a long moment. "You're right Ugarti. I *am* a little more impressed with you."

...

### The usual suspects

"I am sorry, too," said Cyllien.

"For what?"

"Talking like that."

Haldir gathered her closer. "No, you were right," he said. "Not about *her*. But in what you said about me."

"What are you going to do? You cannot continue as you are."

He laughed, mirthlessly. "People have been telling me that for five years. Legolas never stops saying it."

"Prince Legolas *knows* how you feel about her?"

"It is hard not to notice when someone aims an arrow at your heart and tells you he intends to take your wife from you."

"You—"

"It is a long story, which I will no doubt tell you another time." Somewhat experimentally, he kissed the top of her head. "Will you come back to South Ithilien with me?"

"Of course."

"*She* will be there too. She is my Lady—not just Legolas' wife, but a warrior in her own right and I am her March Warden. We often work together."

"I will get used to that. And if I cannot, well, we must part, but at least I will be away from this place."

"What about Ribhadda?"

"He can manage without me."

"That is not what I meant."

"One can chase a dream, Haldir, or one can make do with reality," said Cyllien. "And, as reality goes, you are not all that bad."

...

"*Gimli!*" hissed Legolas.

The dwarf had stopped at the crossroads and flattened himself against the wall. He held up his hand for silence, then peered around the corner.

"Why are we following the woman?" asked Legolas.

"We are following Meryt because she has been to Vardamir's home," said Gimli, "lured there by talk of the extraordinary prowess of elves, apparently. But she never got to experience it, because his friend returned and the elf had to smuggle her out. Hence her interest in you." Gimli risked another look around the corner. "Come on," he said, "we must see where they go." The pair ran across the street, and dived into the shadows, then continued to follow the woman and her escort at a safe distance.

"I cannot believe she told you *that* about herself and Vardamir," whispered Legolas, as they watched the couple disappear into a lodging house.

### The usual suspects

"Never underestimate the advantages of a compact stature and a luxuriant beard when dealing with women."

"They treat you like a pet," said Legolas.

"As a *confidant*," Gimli corrected.

"Did she remember where this house was?"

"She would not tell me—he swore her to secrecy—but she did let slip that it was just around the corner from her own lodgings."

"Which corner?" asked Legolas. "There are four."

Gimli growled.

"Wait a minute," said Legolas. "Garden Lane. Come!"

Turning the corner, they found themselves on the very edge of the Souk. "We are looking for an alley," said Legolas, "behind one of the stalls."

"How do you know?" asked Gimli.

"Because, according to Ribhadda, that is where *Wolfram* has his hideout."

Most of the stalls had closed for the night and they had no trouble finding three alleys running off Garden Lane, all of them narrow, each one walled on both sides by a jumble of featureless mud brick and wood and, whilst Legolas kept watch, Gimli examined them in some detail, lightly tapping the walls, every few inches, with the butt of his axe.

"Anything?" asked Legolas.

Gimli shook his head. "All the mud brick is solid," he said. "But as for the wood—who knows?—all the wood is paper thin. It is impossible to recognise a concealed door."

"Perhaps, tomorrow, you should speak to the woman again," said Legolas as they retraced their steps around the corner. "And see if—"

"Hello boys," said Meryt. "Were you looking for me? How about coming up for a nightcap?"

...

*"I know I would  
Always be good  
To one who'd watch over me..."*

Singing softly to herself, Cyllien unlaced the bodice of her gown.

The door opened. "What did you forget, *melethron*?" She turned smiling.

The smile froze on her face.

"Not bad," said the intruder, nodding towards her breasts before she hastily pulled her gown closed. "But I've seen better." He shut the door behind him, picked up her dressing table chair—still lying where it had fallen earlier—and hooked it under the handle. "We wouldn't want to be *disturbed*, would we?"

"How did you get in here, *Wolfram*?" she asked, angrily. "Rib barred you."

## The usual suspects

"Well, now," said Wolfram, "one of the few advantages of *not* being tall, blond and handsome, like your elf stud, is that NOBODY EVER NOTICES ME." His eyes glittered. "*He* walked right past me and did not see me! Which is strange when you consider how often he has threatened to kill me on *her* account."

"What do you want?"

"You," said Wolfram. He smiled. "Oh, don't worry, I'm not planning to ride you—you're not my type. No. I have a customer who wants you."

"You sick orc." He had not moved since he had barred the door and his unnatural stillness was making Cyllien nervous. She thought of the pair of scissors somewhere on her dressing table and reached behind her, feeling for them... But the table was bare.

*Oh Valar!* In her mind's eye she remembered Haldir, sweeping it clear.

"What are you looking for, Cyllien? You are not thinking of resisting me are you? It will only make me hurt you more."

He drew back his arm.

"Do you really think," said Cyllien, haughtily, "that a mere man can overpower an elleth?"

But what Wolfram lacked in elven speed he more than made up for in cunning. The weapon, a small, lead-filled pouch, was concealed in his other hand, and she never saw it coming.

...

Confident that the Letter of Pardon was safe with Ribhadda, Ugarti made his way to the *Blue Parrot*, where he hoped to collect a few old debts before he left the city for good.

...

"Legolas?"

"I am sorry, melmenya, I did not mean to wake you."

"Where are you going?"

"I need to bathe."

There was something strange in his voice. Eowyn climbed out of bed, wrapped herself in a sheet and padded after him.

"What is wrong, my love? Oh..." Her breath caught in her throat.

He was standing with his back to her, bending slightly forwards to slip off his trousers. The candlelight was playing over his body, highlighting the perfect muscles of his back and arms, and the curve of his buttocks. Eowyn drank in the sight of him.

Oblivious to her, the elf dropped his silken clothing on the floor and, with a deep sigh, climbed into the still-running water. He took up a cake of soap and began scrubbing his lower body.

Eowyn picked up his discarded trousers and began to fold them. "What is this?" She held them up, examining a mouth-shaped smudge of red just below the waistband and several more marks at the groin. "Legolas?"

"She was drunk," said Legolas.

## The usual suspects

"What happened?"

"She made a grab for me and fell over. Nothing really happened, melmenya." He sighed. "I just feel dirty."

"Oh, my poor love!" Eowyn dropped the trousers and knelt beside him, catching his hand. "You will make yourself sore, my darling." She took the soap from him and kissed his hand. "Let me do it. I will wash her all away." She unwound her sheet and climbed in beside him, took a soft sponge, and gently stroked it over his stomach and his inner thighs, and then, when he had relaxed a little, over his *ceryn* and his *ceber*. "There..."

"Thank you, Eowyn *nín*." He hugged her close. Then, after a few moments, he took her hand and brought it to a very impressive erection.

...

Eowyn kissed the top of his head. "Stay still, my darling," she whispered, riding him slowly, "Stay... still and I shall take... good *care* of you—*ohhh*..."

He had drawn her breast into his mouth, and was sucking her like a greedy elfling.

"Oh, my love," she whispered, "my darling..." And, holding his head close, she matched the rise and fall of her hips to the rhythm of his tongue, "Yes, my love," she moaned, "I shall take *such* good care of you..."

...

He was so happy, so fulfilled—his eyes closed, his mouth full of her, his *ceber* safe in the sweet warmth of her gently rocking body—that he had almost forgotten there could be anything more until an orgasm crept up on him, and had its way with him, and he cried out in surprise as he suddenly burst inside her.

...

*Elves are so hard to move, thought Wolfram, as he limped towards the Blue Parrot. They may weigh next to nothing but they're too pricking long.*

He had learned as a youngster that the best way to do something dishonest was to do it openly, so—though he was taking the precaution of keeping to the quieter streets—he had simply wrapped the unconscious elleth in a dark mantle and thrown her over his shoulder. And, when anyone stared, he just smiled apologetically and mouthed the word 'Drunk'.

*Not much further now, he thought. And Abdi should have someone waiting at the back door to collect her...*

He turned the corner and stopped dead in his tracks.

Customers were pouring out of the rear entrance of the *Blue Parrot*, climbing over one another in their hurry to get away. From inside the building, Wolfram heard the sound of a hunting horn.

*Is it a raid? What is Abdi selling in there?*

Two of the *Hatja*'s guards forced their way out of the door, grabbed one of the fleeing patrons, and threw him to the ground. As Wolfram watched, the man—who looked vaguely familiar—struggled to his feet and tried to run away—until one of the guardsmen ran him through with a dagger.

## The usual suspects

Then two more guards emerged from the *Parrot*, and a whole detachment of soldiers came running up—still in formation—from the far end of the alley, to back up their colleagues.

*Time to leave!* Wolfram turned—and, for once, took to his heels, the better to blend in with the crowd.

...

## Dawn

The great caravan had camped beside one of the water stations that punctuated the route to the East. Faramir had spent a comfortable but wakeful night under canvas, soothed by the familiar sound of Berengar's light, regular breathing, but worried by Oliel's nervous tossing and turning. They had struck camp at first light.

All around, people were preparing for the day's ten-hour journey: tending their camels, checking their packs, and queuing at the great cistern to fill their water skins. Faramir took a bite of dried meat. "It is beautiful," he said, gazing across the sands towards the Ripa'a Ridge, a mass of bluish-pink rock looming on the horizon. "The colours are muted, and yet they include every tint of the rainbow..."

Berengar smiled. "Just wait until the sun has been up for an hour or two, Faroeth," he said. "The sand will soon become monotonous, believe me; even to a romantic like you."

"I had forgotten that you were a seasoned desert traveller," said Faramir, offering him some dried fruit. "How are you finding the camel?"

Berengar waved the food away. "No, thank you—the camel is surprisingly well-mannered," he said. "The saddle, on the other hand, pinches front and back..."

Faramir grinned. He turned back to the Ripa'a Ridge. "The rocks look quite close, but there is really no way of telling—nothing to judge the distance by—what was that?"

"What did you see?"

"I am not sure; a flash of light."

"The sun glinting on metal, perhaps," said Berengar. Shielding his eyes with his hand, he scanned the rocks. "This is when we need an elf... There is nothing there now—no, *wait*... There it is again." He turned to Faramir. "It is probably just an innocent traveller. It would be a very poor bandit who gave himself away so easily."

"Still," said Faramir, "we had better warn the caravan driver."

...

"Good morning, Melmenya."

Eowyn pushed herself up on her elbows and smiled at Legolas. "Good morning, Lassui. *You* look very happy this morning."

Legolas, already dressed, sat beside her on the bed. "And so I should, Eowyn *nín*—I am a very lucky elf." He took her in his arms. "Last night, when I was deeply troubled, my beloved wife soothed me, body and spirit."

He kissed her tenderly—a long, slow, lingering kiss. "She gave herself to me without reserve; made me feel loved and cherished." He smiled. "And then she made me come like one of Mithrandir's rockets."



### The usual suspects

Eowyn laughed merrily, hugging him close. Then she asked, "What do we need to do today, Lassui?"

...

Haldir had found the house—with little more than Faramir's description to go on—hidden at the end of one of the twisting streets that surrounded the souk. After a moment's hesitation, he climbed the steps and knocked.

The door swung open.

"Hello?"

"Come in," called a familiar voice.

The elf followed the sound down a narrow, airy corridor lined with tall, potted palm trees, through an arched doorway, and into a large, but sparsely furnished, living room.

"Good morning, March Warden."

"Good morning, Magus."

"I was afraid I would see you again," said Niqmaddu. "Sit down. I take it that things have gone badly wrong?"

Haldir took a seat opposite the magician. "I would not say *badly* wrong... I am just not sure what is happening." He explained the strange persistence of his feelings—or some echo of his feelings—for Eowyn. And then, with some reluctance, he described his attempted relationship with Cyllien.

"I see," said Niqmaddu, "dear me." He rose to his feet and began to pace back and forth. "I have heard it said that, sometimes, when a man loses an arm or a leg, he may continue to feel it—to feel pain in the part that has been removed. It seems that you are experiencing something similar. Has there been any recurrence of the feelings of hatred towards Prince Legolas?"

"No."

"Well, that is something. Why did you come to *me*, March Warden?"

"I am sorry?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want help."

"I was afraid you would say that," said Niqmaddu. "Are you sure?"

"What do you mean?"

"The consequences of taking a step like this—of altering the mind—were always going to be far-reaching, affecting your thoughts and feelings in ways we could not predict. But the problems you are describing can easily be explained."

"I do not understand."

"You *know* that you used to have feelings; you are constantly wondering what they were; and, as a result, you can almost feel them still. You must curb your curiosity!"

## The usual suspects

He sat down beside Haldir and continued, very earnestly: "If you had fallen out of love with Princess Eowyn gradually, March Warden, there might still have been these echoes, as you call them, of your love left in your heart. You might still have felt that guilt, that sense of betrayal, you might still have compared your new love to the old, you might still have found the new love wanting in comparison... It is because the changes have been swift, and effected by magic, you assume these echoes to be abnormal. My advice now, March Warden, is to leave things well alone. You are no longer a danger to Prince Legolas—that is the most important thing—and you have plenty of time. Left alone, your feelings will resolve themselves. Naturally."

"That is a strange thing for a Magus to say."

"I have learned much in the past few weeks," admitted Niqmaddu. "Not least, an awareness of my own limitations."

"You are saying," said Haldir, "that my present condition is not permanent."

"Indeed," said the magician. "Since I am—in some respects—responsible for your distress, I am honour bound to help you if that is what you insist. And I *can* make you fall in love with the elleth, if you ask it. But I strongly—very strongly—recommend that, from now on, you let nature take its course. In any case, I will not do anything for seven days—that will give you time to make an informed decision—perhaps with the help of the lady herself?"

"Now, since my carpet has just been returned by the cleaners, would you like me to take you home?"

...

"That was most enjoyable," said Haldir, as the carpet began its slow, spiralling descent into Hentmirë's courtyard.

The few minutes it had taken them to fly from the magician's house had been the most carefree he had experienced in a very long time. "The motion itself is invigorating," he continued, "but it is seeing other people's journeys—seeing how those journeys interweave—that begins to put one's own life into some sort of perspective..." He smiled ruefully at his uncharacteristic lapse into philosophy. "And, of course," he added, in his normal, slightly arrogant tone, "this would be a most efficient way to patrol Eryn Carantaur."

"Of course," said Niqmaddu.

As they landed in the small garden, Eowyn, who—as had become her custom in the mornings—was feeding the birds with kitchen scraps, came forward, smiling, to greet them. "Magus," she said, holding out her hand, "how nice to see you again."

"Good morning, your Highness," said Niqmaddu, bowing in his usual quicksilver manner. "How fortunate that you are out here—I believe the March Warden has something to discuss with you." He turned to Haldir. "I am sure that Princess Eowyn's advice will be invaluable. Now, if you will both excuse me, I shall go and pay my respects to the Lady of the House—and to your husband, Princess Eowyn—before I leave."

"Well," said Eowyn, as they watched him disappear into the house, "*he* takes no prisoners!"

...

Vardamir opened the door.

"What took you so pricking long?" said Wolfram, angrily. He stumbled inside.

### The usual suspects

"I wasn't sure it was you," said the elf, barring the door, "what have you got there?"

"I thought we needed a new carpet—what do you *think* I've got, you pricking idiot? Light the candles!"

"You were supposed to deliver her—"

"*Don't* make me hurt you."

Wolfram dumped the unconscious elleth in his usual chair. "The *Blue Parrot* was being raided. I had to hide amongst the drunks in Hatja Square until all the fuss had died down." He opened the cupboard at the bottom of the dresser and, from his collection of pretty toys, selected a pair of silver manacles. "We'll have to keep her here until I find out what has happened to Abdi... Pity to waste these on *her*, though," he said, securing Cyllien's wrists—

He turned to Vardamir, suddenly. "What do you mean, you weren't sure it was *me*?"

"Someone was tapping at the door earlier. But he didn't give the right signal."

"Wonderful," said Wolfram. "Now we will have to move."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 5: The ragamuffin

**"I have asked Cyllien to come back to Eryn Carantaur with me," said Haldir.**

"That is wonderful news, Haldir! Has she agreed?" asked Eowyn.

They both took a seat on the edge of one of the raised flower beds.

"Yes, but..." He sighed. "We are neither of us under any illusions, Eowyn. We shall try to make it work but, if it does not, we will go our separate ways."

"Promise me that you will not give up too soon," said Eowyn, earnestly. "A deeper love *will* come in time, I am sure of it. Promise me that you will give it a chance."

"Perhaps Men are different from elves," said Haldir, "but in my—admittedly limited—experience, true love is instantaneous."

"No," said Eowyn. "No, we are not different. Men *do* fall in love at first sight, sometimes. But I have come to distrust a too-hasty love. I did not fall in love with Legolas until I had known him for some years."

"The Magus is willing to *make* me fall in love with Cyllien, if I ask it. But he advises me to let nature take its course."

"He is wise; I am sure he is. What does Cyllien say?"

"I have not spoken to her..."

"Haldir!"

The elf smiled. "I have not had the chance, Eowyn, that is all. I am not *quite* so insensitive as everyone thinks me."

"I am sorry..." Eowyn blushed. Then she said, quietly. "I really do not know whether I should say this, because I may be wrong... But I *think* I am right... In fact, I am sure I am right... Yes... When I first met Cyllien, Haldir, she was jealous of me—"

"I am sorry. It was my fault. I—"

"Haldir!" cried Eowyn in exasperation. "Do you really not know what that means?" She seized his hands to emphasise her words. "It means that she wanted you for her own. So go and speak to her. Go *now*."

...

### An hour later

"Ready?" asked Legolas. Gimli and Eowyn both nodded. "You have the djinn?" Eowyn held up a small carpet bag. "Good. Now, at the slightest sign of danger—Oh, *Hentmirë*..."

He walked over to the little woman, who had just descended the stairs dressed in trousers and boots, and put his hands on her shoulders. "Not today, *gwendithen*. I want you to stay here."

"But if this man is a danger to Eowyn," said Hentmirë, "we must all look for him—and find him as quickly as we can. I will be an extra pair of eyes."

"You have never seen him, *gwendithen*, so you would not recognise him. And you have just had your water, so you should be resting. Besides," he added, when neither of those

## The usual suspects

arguments appeared to be carrying any weight with her, "there is something I need you to do for me."

Hentmirë's expression showed that, whilst she did not entirely believe him, she could not bring herself to believe that he would actually *lie* to her. "What?" she asked.

*What indeed?* "If we catch him—them—both of them—I want to take them back to Eryn Carantaur to stand trial," he said. "So we will need two cells—absolutely escape-proof—on the *Early Bird*. I need you to arrange it with Captain Mutallu—to oversee it. You *must* impress on the Captain that they have to be escape-proof. Because we do not want to be murdered in our beds on the way home."

"But..." Hentmirë bit her lip. "Very well," she said.

"Good." He kissed the top of her head. "But get some rest first—come, Gimli, Eowyn."

Hentmirë watched them file out of the doors. Then—"Legolas!"—she ran out into the courtyard and threw her arms around his waist. "Promise me you will come home safely! All of you."

"We shall, lass," said Gimli. "I promise you that. And if *he* lets you down, he'll have my axe to deal with."

...

Haldir hammered loudly on the door of *The Silk Road* until it was opened by the barman, Hiram. "I need to speak to Cyllien."

"I am sorry, sir, but Rib does not allow anyone in the tavern outside opening hours—"

"It's all right, Hiram," said a male voice, "he's a friend."

The barman stepped aside and Haldir entered. Ribhadda was standing just inside the door. The elf placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. "Thank you," he said.

"Sit down," said the man.

"I need—"

"*Sit down.*" It was a command and Haldir was a warrior; he obeyed.

Ribhadda took a long, hard look at him. "What Cyllien does in her own time is no business of mine," he said, "unless someone starts to slap her around. And then I *make* it my business. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I think so."

"Good. Because there are more ways to slap a woman around than with the flat of your hand."

Haldir smiled. "She imagines you do not care for her."

"She knows I care," said Ribhadda. "What she *wants* is for me to stick my neck out for her. And I don't stick my neck out for anyone."

...

Legolas, Eowyn and Gimli had found a small tavern on Garden Lane—no more than ten yards from the alley Meryt had eventually identified—and had taken an outside table. A waiter brought them three glasses of herbal tea.

### The usual suspects

Without taking his eyes from the entrance to Lotus Alley, Gimli raised one of the glasses to his lips and drained it. "Uggggghh!" He shuddered at the taste, wiping the back of his hand over his mouth and beard.

"You are sure this is the alley she meant?" asked Legolas.

"Yes," said Gimli.

"She was very drunk," said Legolas. "You may have misheard her. Or she may have been mistaken. I should have stayed with you—"

"And let her carry on molesting you! Elves have no idea how to handle women..."

Eowyn squeezed Legolas' hand.

"I need to take a closer look," said Gimli. "You wait here."

...

### The ragamuffin

Passing through Garden Lane, at the half-way point of his daily round of the souk, the boy could hardly believe his eyes. He slipped behind the sausage stall to get a better look.

An elf, a dwarf and a golden-haired princess—all the people from the story his mother used to tell him—were sitting at a tavern table! *Of course*, he thought, *a story's just a story. No one can expect to be taken home to the Forest in real life. But who cares? The princess is real. And a princess means treasure, doesn't she?*

He quickly assessed the value of the dwarf's axe—*Nice*—and the elf's knives—*Even nicer*—with their curved white handles—*Ivory?*—inlaid with gold. But what really intrigued him was the princess's bag. *When does a princess carry her own bag?* he reasoned. *When she's got her treasure in it.*

"Here, Keret." The stall holder handed him a piece of sausage that had fallen on the ground.

Keret gave him a cheeky salute, wiped the meat on his shirt and took a bite.

*Not bad.*

So now he had food and all the time in the world—he settled down on a wooden box to watch the princess.

He did not have to wait long. The Dwarf drained his glass of herbal tea—*He won't do that again in a hurry!*—jumped down from his chair and stumped off into Lotus Alley—*Needs a pee*, thought Keret. *That stuff does the same to me*—and the princess put her bag down on his chair.

*Here we go! They say elves are fast, but not as fast as me!* He stuffed the remainder of his sausage into his pocket—*A bit of fluff won't hurt*—and darted for the chair.

...

Haldir knocked at Cyllien's door.

*Why are you smiling, you fool?*

He was not sure. *Because Eowyn has given you her blessing? Or because she thinks that Cyllien may actually care for you?* He tried to master his face but his new expression seemed

### **The usual suspects**

to be permanent.

He knocked again. "Cyllien?"

There was no reply. He opened the door. "Cyllien?" The room was empty.

And something was wrong.

Haldir stepped inside and surveyed the room. Cyllien's cosmetics and other knick-knacks were lying in a heap on the floor; the chair was on its side by the door; the rug was bunched up; the curtain had been pulled down; and the bedclothes were in complete disarray...

*Just as when I left.*

*So what is wrong?*

The wardrobe door was hanging open and several gowns were strewn across the floor. Haldir could not remember clearly, but something about *that* seemed wrong. *Cyllien takes pride in her appearance*, he thought. *She would no more leave her clothes lying in the dust than I would leave my bow...*

He crouched beside one of the gowns and ran his fingers over its fine silken fabric. There was something lying underneath—he lifted the silk—a small leather pouch, filled with pellets of lead. Haldir sprang to his feet and hurried back to the bar.

...

The princess was reaching for the bag.

But Keret already had it!

He ran down the street, weaving through the oncoming people, laughing with relief.

...

"The djinn!" cried Eowyn. She leaped to her feet and made to follow the child, but Legolas caught her arm.

"No Melmenya! No! It is far too crowded. We would never find the boy—and we might lose each other."

"But the djinn—"

"Remember what happened last time he was stolen? Hmm?" He pulled her into his arms. "The moment the boy rubs the lamp, the djinn will come back to *you*. All you have really lost is a bag and an old lamp. The important thing is for you to stay safe, here, with me."

"But what if the boy never rubs the lamp? What if the djinn never escapes?"

"He will, Melmenya. Eventually." He kissed her forehead. "Do not take any risks, my darling. Not here. Promise me."

"I promise," said Eowyn. "I do promise, Lassui. But I shall miss the djinn. I am missing him already."

...

"When did you last see Cyllien?"

## The usual suspects

Ribhadda, sitting at one of the tables, carefully inscribing his accounts on a papyrus scroll, looked up from his work. "Not since last night," he said. "Not since she sang her last song. Why?"

Haldir laid the cosh on the table. "She is missing."

Ribhadda picked up the weapon and examined it. "This belongs to a professional. Who would want to take her?" he asked.

"I was hoping *you* would know that."

Ribhadda sighed. "Every one of my male customers, and quite a few of the female." He thought for a moment. "Abdi... Abdi, the owner of the *Blue Parrot*. He wanted to buy *The Silk Road*. When I said I wasn't selling, he offered me money for Cyllien."

Haldir walked back towards the stage door.

"Where are you going?" asked Ribhadda. "The *Blue Parrot's* that way." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, indicating the main doors.

"Your evidence against this Abdi is hardly conclusive," said Haldir. "But *I* am an elf. If the kidnapper has left a trail *I* will find it."

Ribhadda sighed. *You don't stick your neck out for anyone*, he reminded himself, *but you don't put your faith in the Faeries, either*.

He rose from the table and followed the elf backstage.

...

"Come on," said Gimli, hurrying back to the table, "I have found a way in—what is the matter?"

"The djinn has been stolen, and Eowyn is very upset," said Legolas, giving her a comforting squeeze. "But it is only a matter of time before he finds his way back to her." He turned to the dwarf. "Are you saying you have found Wolfram's hideout?"

"Well—not yet, but as good as. I will show you." He pressed Eowyn's hand. "I am sorry about your friend, lass..."

He led them along the backs of the stalls until they reached Lotus Alley but, instead of turning the corner, he carried on down Garden Lane, to the building on the right. "In here," he said, climbing up the steps.

"Gimli! We cannot—"

"It is empty," said the dwarf. "Deserted. See." He pushed the door open and walked inside.

Legolas looked around, guiltily. "So many people," he said, softly, "and yet no one notices anything."

"Come on!" shouted Gimli.

Legolas and Eowyn followed him into the house.

"See," said the dwarf, waving his arms to indicate the room.

There was an open staircase running up the right-hand side, and a large window, overlooking the souk, but otherwise the place was bare.



### The usual suspects

"What are we seeing?" asked Legolas.

"Count the paces," said Gimli. He flattened his back to the right-hand wall, then—taking unnaturally large steps—walked over to the left, counting aloud.

"The room is too narrow," said Eowyn.

"Far too narrow," said the dwarf, "the window is off-centre; and look out of it—see how high we are. This house has a cellar, but there is no way into it..." He pulled his axe from its strap and swung it at the left-hand wall of the room.

"*Gimli!*" cried Legolas.

But the dwarf kept swinging.

...

"Anything?" asked Ribhadda.

The elf was crouching beside Cyllien's dressing table, examining a mark on the wooden floorboards. "Someone stepped in this red powder—"

"*Rouge.*"

"Do you employ anyone with a limp? A small man?"

"No. And, before you ask, I've no regular customers with a limp, either. But your friend, Wolfram—he has a limp. A bad one. And he's small."

"Wolfram?" said Haldir. "Why would Wolfram take Cyllien?"

"I can think of a hundred reasons," said Ribhadda, "chiefly to do with him being a man and her being..." He made a vague gesture. "But I have heard that that's how he makes a living—kidnapping and assassination. Which points us right back to Abdi. Let's pay a visit to the *Blue Parrot.*"

...

"There," cried Gimli, triumphantly.

Eowyn peered through the door-shaped hole. "A hidden room!"

"Let *me* go in first," said Legolas, drawing his white knives. "Gimli, you wait here with Eowyn." He gave the dwarf a significant look. Gimli nodded, instinctively tightening his grip on his axe.

Legolas stepped into Wolfram's lair.

It was a small space, furnished with two chairs, a dresser and a mattress. Beside the latter, a padlocked trap door presumably led to Gimli's cellar. Legolas checked the door to the alley. It was closed, but not barred—the occupants were clearly out.

"Come through," he called "it is safe."

There was a candle standing on the dresser; Legolas lit it and held it aloft, and, in the pale light, confirmed what he had already suspected—the doors of the dresser were open, the mattress askew, as though someone had hastily pulled off a blanket, and an open bottle of wine had been knocked over and left to empty itself across the floor...

"They have flown," he said. "*Caro!*"

## The usual suspects

Eowyn bent down beside one of the chairs and picked up a round object. "Legolas," she said, "bring the candle over here—let me see this better... Oh gods, look!"

It was a large silver brooch, of the sort used to fasten a cloak at the shoulder, and its design, like flowing water, was distinctively elven. "This is Cyllien's," she said. "It was pinned to the mantle she lent me... Oh, Lassui! What has Wolfram done to her? Haldir... Haldir was on his way to *The Silk Road*—to talk to her—to ask her to move into the house with us!"

Legolas caught her hands. "Melmenya, Melmenya, *shhh, shhh, shhhhhh*."

He hugged her, tightly. "We do not know that *anything* has happened to her! All we know is that Wolfram had her brooch. We shall go to *The Silk Road* now, Melmenya, and find out... Come, Gimli."

He led Eowyn to the steps but, as she started down them, Gimli caught his arm.

"What is it, *elv*—"

"*Shhhhhh*." The dwarf held out his hand. "Recognise this?" Lying in his palm was a small piece of rose-coloured velvet with a fragment of golden embroidery in one corner.

Legolas quickly covered it with his own hand.

"If we were not sure what the orc wanted before," Gimli whispered. "I think we are now."

...

The doors of the *Blue Parrot* were open, but two of the *Hatja's* guards, standing either side of the entrance, were turning people away.

"I wonder what's happened here," said Ribhadda. He approached one of the men. "Captain Ramess wants to talk to me," he said. "Is he inside?"

"He is, sir," replied the guard, "but he's—wait—*sir*—"

But the Man and the elf had already entered.

"What will you do if we encounter this Captain Ramess?" asked Haldir.

Ribhadda smiled. "I'm hoping we will. That line wasn't a lie—Ramess *will* want to talk to me. But who will get the most information from whom remains to be seen."

The *Blue Parrot* was very different from *The Silk Road*—small, cramped, and nowhere near as clean. Wooden screens divided the bar into separate cubicles. Haldir reached over one of the seats and, with the very tips of his fingers, picked up a piece of white fabric. A woman's bodice. He dropped it on the table.

"There are private rooms upstairs," said Ribhadda, seeing the elf's expression, "where patrons can smoke what they like, drink what they like, and do whatever—or *whoever*—they like."

"And this animal has Cyllien?"

"We don't know that for sure—ah—here's where we find out—good morning, Ramess."

"Good morning, Ribhadda, I was planning to call on you."

"I thought I'd save you the trouble. What do you want to know?"

The guardsman looked at him curiously. "Sit down," he said. "And you, too, sir."

### The usual suspects

They took the nearest cubicle. Haldir fastidiously pushed the bodice to the far end of the table.

"Do you know a man named Ugarti?" asked Ramess.

"You know I do," said Ribhadda. "You've seen him at *The Silk Road*—you've drunk with him on a number of occasions."

"When did you last see him?"

"Last night, about midnight."

"How did he seem?"

"Nervous, as always. Where's this going?"

"Ugarti died last night, resisting arrest."

"You don't say."

"I believe he was responsible for the theft of the *Hatja's* Letter of Pardon and for the death of the two couriers. The Letter, however, was not found on his person."

"I see."

"Nor was it in the safe here. Though, in the course of searching for it, my men and I uncovered evidence of certain *other* illegal activities."

"I'll bet you did."

"Shall I tell you what I think, Rib?" said Ramess, his manner suddenly becoming less formal. "I think that *you* have the Letter—no, don't say anything—I think that Ugarti left it with you. And—because I like you—I'm going to give you until the end of the week—that's almost five days—to hand it over. After that, I shall be forced to close you down. Something about trafficking in children, I should think."

"That's very fair," said Ribhadda, with only the faintest trace of irony. "I'll let you know if I find this Letter." He rose from the table. "Will you be coming to hear Cyllien sing tonight?"

"Of course," said Ramess. "Don't I always?"

...

"So Ramess did not find Cyllien in the *Blue Parrot*," said Haldir.

"Evidently not," said Ribhadda. "Nor any sign that she'd been there."

"Then where is she?"

Ribhadda shrugged his shoulders. "We need to ask our friend Wolfram that. Unfortunately, yesterday I barred the very person who could have led us straight to him."

"Who?"

"Someone of your type: a fellow named Vardamir."

"I thought you told Faramir that you did not know Vardamir?"

"I told Faramir nothing," said Ribhadda.

### The usual suspects

Haldir sighed. "Do you also have this Letter of Pardon Captain Ramess is looking for?"

Ribhadda did not reply.

"Are you going to hand it over to him?" asked the elf.

"That," said Ribhadda, "depends. Let's go back to *The Silk Road*. I still have a business to run, and *you* need to decide where to look next."

...

Hentmirë, dressed in her trousers and boots, was standing on the deck of the *Early Bird* almost *arguing* with Captain Mutallu. She was finding her special mission quite taxing.

"But if it rains," she said, "and they are on the deck, they will get all wet. I have heard that it rains every day in the North."

"They are *prisoners*, my lady," said Mutallu, "so it doesn't matter if they get a bit wet."

"But suppose they caught their deaths..."

"If we did put the cages in the hold, my lady," said Mutallu, "I wouldn't have the men to keep them guarded. And if the prisoners escaped below decks there are a thousand places they could hide. You and the other ladies would all be in danger. But if we put the cages up here—over by the heads—there are men on watch here twenty-four hours a day."

Hentmirë bit her lip. *What would Legolas do?* "Could we make cages with roofs?"

Mutallu smiled. "If you insist, my lady."

"I think that would be best. Do you have enough materials?"

She looked over the side of the boat, down to the wharf, where piles of supplies were waiting to be brought aboard.

"I shall need to hire a blacksmith," said Mutallu.

"Yes, of course. Hire the best one you can find, and—*Captain!*"

Hentmirë had begun to suspect that the water was improving her eyesight, but she still screwed up her eyes to get a better look. "Captain, come over here, quickly. Those two men—the tall one with the bundle and the short one with the limp," she said, excitedly. "Does the tall one *really* have pointed ears?"

...

By the time Ribhadda and Haldir reached *The Silk Road*, Legolas, Eowyn and Gimli had already been admitted by Hiram, who had decided that his boss would not want the classy lady left out on the street.

Eowyn ran up to Haldir and hugged him tightly. "We have some bad news," she said.

"Cyllien?"

"We found Wolfram's hideout—or, rather, Gimli did," said Legolas, "but he and Vardamir had already moved elsewhere. And we found this." He showed Haldir the elven brooch.

"It is Cyllien's" said Eowyn.

### The usual suspects

Gently, Haldir handed Eowyn over to Legolas. "I found her missing this morning," he said. "Master Ribhadda and I have been out looking for her."

"Any trace?" asked Legolas.

Haldir shook his head.

"What are we going to do?" asked Eowyn.

"We are going to take *you* home," said Legolas. "And then Haldir, Gimli and I are going back to the empty house to see if we can pick up her trail from there."

...

With a very reluctant Captain Mutallu in tow, Hentmirë had followed Wolfram and Vardamir to the south-western edge of the city. The area had been a thriving suburb in ancient times, but a combination of natural disaster, thrifty townspeople removing useful building materials, and the advancing sand had turned the once-splendid villas into heaps of painted rubble.

Any one of the empty shells might have been a safe refuge, but neither the elf nor the Man seemed interested in the buildings. Instead, keeping to the dirt road, they were heading towards the open desert, where any pursuers would find it hard to stay out of sight.

"Where can they be going?" whispered Hentmirë.

"The sea cliff along here is riddled with caves," said Mutallu. "One of those would make a good place to hide."

"What do you suppose the elf is carrying?"

"It looks like a carpet."

"No. It is far too lumpy to be a carpet. If only we could get closer—"

"Please, my lady," Mutallu begged, for the twentieth time, "please go back to the boat. I will follow them and tell you—"

"Legolas is relying on me," said Hentmirë.

"He is relying on you to build two cages, my lady, not to capture the worst rogue in Carhivilven. Prince Legolas would throw a fit if he knew what you were doing now. And he would have me hanged from the yardarm for allowing you to do it—"

"Where have they *gone*?"

"My lady?"

"A moment ago they were on the road; now they have gone."

Ignoring Mutallu's protests, she blundered along the dirt road to where—she was almost sure—she had last seen the pair. There was a low ridge of rock, like a tiny cliff, on the left, running more or less parallel to the road. *But they cannot have climbed up there*, she thought. *I would have seen them*. A little further west was a cluster of ancient graves, their tiny loaf-shaped chapels part-buried in sand. To her right there was a circular wall—a well—with spiralling steps leading down to a wide, dark hole. Hentmirë was about to drop a stone down the shaft—to see whether the well was dry—when Mutallu caught her wrist and pulled her back from the edge, clamping his hand over her mouth.

"I am taking you home *now*, my lady," he whispered. "You can tell Prince Legolas about this,

## The usual suspects

and leave the rest to him."

...

Keret was reasonably sure that the elf and the dwarf had not followed him out of Garden Lane.

*But you can never be too careful*, he thought, so he had gone home by a long, circuitous route and waited a good way off, until the two strangers had gone, before he darted for the door, pulled aside the ragged canvas curtain, and threw himself inside.

A quick glance round told him that nothing had been disturbed. He sat down on the brick bench and opened the bag.

*Gods' turds, a lamp. A stupid brass lamp! All that trouble for a brass lamp!* He almost threw it outside in disgust.

But then he started thinking: *Why is a princess carrying a brass lamp? It's broad daylight. And if it was dark she would be carrying a lantern not a lamp.* He looked at it more closely. *It has no wick. I'll bet there isn't even any oil in it.*

He gave the lamp a good shake. *Empty.*

There was only one explanation. *It looks like brass but it must be gold. I'll take it to Old Yarih and see what he'll give me for it...*

...

The djinn opened his eyes.

*I am summon—!*

His head banged repeatedly against the inside of the lamp—*Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh!*—before the motion, mercifully, stopped.

*Oh!*

*No.*

And, with a sigh of relief, he went back to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 6: Trapped

### Eowyn listened hard.

Judging by the amount of light that was leaking down the passage, and the apparent closeness of the quiet sobbing, Cyllien and Hentmirë—and, presumably, their captors—were just around the next corner, but she could hear no sound from Wolfram or his elven accomplice.

What should she do?

What *could* she do?

From what she had seen of Cyllien's earlier attempt to escape, the elleth would be in no condition to help her. Hentmirë had been unconscious; even if she had since revived, it was unlikely that she would be able to walk as yet—and Eowyn did not think that *she* would be able to carry the heavier woman.

Her only option was a bold attack.

*Vardamir is weak and easily led, she thought. And he does seem to care for Cyllien. Without Wolfram he is probably little threat.*

*I must be swift and accurate.*

Gripping her knife, she ran into the next cavern.

...

Keret hid the carpet bag under his blanket.

*Gods, it's getting busy round here! First the two kids. Then the man. And now two elves...*

He sat down on his mud brick bench and took the remains of the sausage out of his pocket. *Not that it's anything to do with me, he thought, wiping some fluff off the meat. If those kids want to get into trouble...*

*That fat one! What a stupid thing to do! Why not pick pockets like everyone else?*

He took a bite of sausage.

*Who are the elves looking for, anyway, he wondered. The man or the two boys? I've seen that thin kid before, but where? Not on the street...*

He chewed the sausage, mechanically. Where *had* he seen the boy before?

*Oh PIZZLE!* he thought. *Pizzle, pizzle, pizzle. It's the princess! And she may be in real trouble.*

He pulled back the blanket, took out the lamp, and held it up in the fading light.

*What's so special about this?*

*The Princess's elf saw me in the souk, so he knows I took it. He looks soft, but I bet that big one would give me a hiding—if he caught me. On the other hand, if I tell them where to find the princess, they might forget about the lamp.*

*They might even give me a reward...*

He put the lamp back in the bag, hid the bag safely under his blanket, and slipped out into the

## The usual suspects

darkness.

...

Eowyn stormed the cavern like an Uruk Hai berserker—weapon ready, mind and body entirely focussed on finding her quarry and killing him.

Her quarry was not there.

In the eerie light of two large oil lamps, she could see Cyllien, chained hand and foot, cowering against the cavern wall, and Hentmirë lying beside her, still unconscious.

But there was no sign of the elf, nor of the Man.

Slightly disoriented, Eowyn sheathed her knife and knelt down beside the elleth.

"Cyllien..." she whispered.

There was no response. Eowyn grasped her face. "Cyllien, where are the keys?"

"What are *you* doing here?"

Eowyn smiled. "I am here to rescue you. Where are the keys to your chains?"

"Vardamir... Vardamir has them."

Eowyn swore. "Where is he?" she asked, turning to Hentmirë and quickly checking her for any signs of serious injury. "Where is Wolfram?"

"They went through there," said Cyllien, pointing to another passage, which Eowyn had not noticed. "Did you come here for *me*?"

"Yes," said Eowyn. "We both did." Hentmirë's breathing was regular and her pulse seemed strong. Eowyn carefully rolled her onto her side, arranging her limbs to keep her in position.

"Why?" asked Cyllien.

Eowyn looked up from her task. "Why did we come for you? Because I know Wolfram—I know what he is like and I would not wish him on anyone. And, also, for Haldir's sake." Satisfied that Hentmirë was safe, she rose to her feet. "I am going after Wolfram," she said, drawing her knife. "Try to stay calm. And keep a watch on Hentmirë."

"What did you mean?" asked Cyllien. "About Haldir?"

But Eowyn was already running down the passage.

...

Legolas took another look at the map. "Wait," he said, "Eowyn's cross is *beyond* these buildings, further to the west—what is that, past the rock ridge?"

"Tombs," said Haldir. "I believe those are tombs. But surely—"

"That is exactly the sort of place that Wolfram *would* choose," said Legolas. "Come."

"No—wait a moment!" Haldir dropped to the ground and examined the surface of the road.

Legolas joined him. "I cannot make it out," he said. "This sand does not hold tracks well..."



### The usual suspects

"No," said Haldir. "But I think there was some sort of fight here." He followed the faint traces to the softer sand at the edge of the road. "And look at this!"

He was pointing to a mark—part of a footprint—most of it crumbled and indistinct, but a tiny patch of it miraculously preserved by a splash of fresh blood.

"Oh, no," whispered Legolas. "Oh, Melmenya, no!—I begged her to stay at home, Haldir. And she promised..."

Haldir squeezed his arm. "We do not know that it is Eowyn's blood, *mellon nín*," he said. "The print is small, but still too big, I think, to be hers, or Hentmirë's or—thank the Valar—Cyllien's. I think it is Wolfram's. And I think he *did* go this way..."

...

"So we'll let Cyllien go," said Vardamir.

He had drawn Wolfram to the mouth of the cave—a low, wide opening in the cliff wall—in the hope that he could keep the man from learning of the elleth's attempted escape.

"Don't be stupid!"

"But if Abdi is in prison, what else can we do with her—oh no! *No!*"

Wolfram sighed. "The moment we set her free she'd be singing to the *Hatja's* Guards."

"I'd make her promise—"

"*How old are you?*"

"Then I'd take her away," said Vardamir. "To Rihat... Yes, I'd take her to Rihat and keep her there—"

"She *hates* you," said Wolfram.

"What do you mean?"

"She may be all over you *now*, but that's only because she's afraid of *me*. If the two of you were alone, she'd knife you the moment you turned your back. Not that *I* care," he added, quickly. "But then she'd come back to Carhivilvren—back to Ribhadda. And one or the other of them would turn me in." He beckoned to the elf. "Come here."

"Why?"

Wolfram smiled, wolfishly. "You don't trust me do you?"

"You just said that you didn't care if I died."

"I just gave you some advice that will keep you alive," Wolfram corrected. "And I'm about to give you some more... Come over here." He led the reluctant elf out onto the shallow ledge and pointed to the foaming sea, thirty feet below. "One push at low tide. That's all it will take."

"No—you can't."

"Not me—you."

"Wolf—"

"*YAAAARRRRGGGGHHHH!*" Eowyn flew into the cavern, roaring like a orc. Wolfram, though

## The usual suspects

taken by surprise, instinctively dodged her blade. And Vardamir—moving, for once, with all the speed and precision of an elf—caught her about the waist and lifted her off her feet.

"Oh, My Lady!" cried Wolfram. "My beautiful, beautiful she-wolf! You have come *looking* for me!"

"Come anywhere near me and I shall slit your throat!" cried Eowyn. "Put me down," she yelled at Vardamir. "He is not your friend. He despises you. Let me deal with him. Let me set you free..." She struggled against his elven strength.

"Who would not love this woman?" said Wolfram. "Imagine being inside that! Gods' bollocks, she would suck your bones out through your prick! Let her go."

"Wolfram!"

"Let her go; I want her." He drew a short knife from the scabbard at his hip. "Come, My Lady, dance with me!"

Reluctantly, Vardamir dropped Eowyn to the ground.

"Leave us alone," said Wolfram.

"But—"

"Go!"

Vardamir left.

Eowyn and Wolfram, daggers raised, eyed one another. "Strike, My Lady," said Wolfram, "*both* my weapons are ready..."

"You—"

He dropped his knife and threw himself at her, catching her wrists and smashing her down on the sloping rock floor. Eowyn lay trapped beneath him, gasping for breath. Her knife fell from her hand.

"There is no one like you, is there?" said Wolfram. He leant down and devoured her mouth, at the same time pressing his erection against her belly. "God's prick, we're going to enjoy this! I can be *just* as wild as you are, and—Oh!"

Eowyn had brought her knee up between his legs but had missed her target.

"You're fighting dirty," he whispered. "Just like last time! But I like that. I like it very much. And, of course," he pressed his hips down, "it only makes me harder."

"You *pig!*"

"Wolf," he said. "I am a wolf and you are my bitch."

Eowyn smiled. "Real wolves do not wear breeches. And, the moment you let go of my wrists to open yours, I will rip your eyes out."

"Then I will fuck you blind."

"Wolfram..." Vardamir had returned.

"*I said go away!* Now, where were we?" Eowyn was still smiling. And, as Wolfram leaned down, and her smile broadened, his confidence suddenly wavered. "What are you—"

### The usual suspects

She arched her back, and rubbed herself against him. It did not take much.

"Oh!" He came hard, his body convulsing.

Then he relaxed, panting, and his grip slackened...

Eowyn pulled her hands from his grasp and, thrusting him away, rolled across the ground and snatched up her knife. Then she rose, a Shieldmaiden once more, and turned on him, her dagger raised.

But Wolfram had already recovered.

He pushed himself up from the rock, laughing. "*What* a woman!" he said, shaking his head with genuine admiration. "What a team we'd make! The wolf and his bitch!" And, ignoring the knife, he reached for her.

Eowyn took a step backwards.

"No!" cried Wolfram. "No, *no!*"

He lunged for her, but he was too late.

...

"Eowyn!" cried Legolas. "Something has happened to her! I can feel it. She is under water—sinking!—terrified! She cannot breathe!" He pressed his hand to his chest. "I can feel it!"

"Where?"

"I do not know—"

"Are you talking about the *princess?*" asked a small voice.

...

The desert at night was Keret's natural element and he had approached the elves so stealthily, neither had been aware of him until he spoke.

"Princess?" The smaller elf turned in surprise. Then, "You!" he cried. "Release the djinn! Quickly!"

"Djinn?" *Of course, you blockhead!* thought Keret. *The lamp has a djinn inside!* "What will you pay me for it?" he asked, cheekily.

"Anything you ask," cried the elf. "*Anything!* Just give it to me. Quickly!" He caught Keret by the arms.

"Hold your hair on! Let go of me and I'll fetch it..."

"No," said the elf. "Take me to it."

"All right. But you promise—anything I want."

"Eärendil is my witness—now, *please!*"

"Ear what?"

"Yes! Anything you want! Please! Eowyn—the princess—we must hurry—"

## The usual suspects

"Did you see the man fetch her?" asked the big elf, suddenly.

Keret looked from one elf to the other. "The princess? The princess went down by herself. The man took the fat kid."

"Which tomb?"

"The small one with the broken door."

"Go and release the djinn," said the big elf. "I shall go down into the tomb."

The smaller elf squeezed his friend's arm. "Thank you, *mellon nín*," he said. Then he turned to Keret. "Let us go. Quickly."

...

Wolfram's field of vision contracted to the tiny patch of water the woman had disappeared beneath.

*No! No, no, NO!*

*Not NOW!*

He jumped.

...

Side-by-side, the boy and the elf sprinted across the desert.

*It's true they're fast*, thought Keret. *This one could go faster than a horse...*

But, as they neared his hideout, the boy's instinct for self-preservation suddenly asserted itself.

*How do I know I can trust him?*

...

"Cyllien..." Haldir crouched beside the weeping elleth. "*Shhh, shhhhhh...*" He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "Just be brave for a few moments more," he said, softly. "Where is Eowyn?"

He felt her body stiffen. But she answered. "She went after Wolfram and Vardamir. Down there."

He lifted her chin. "Take care of Hentmirë, *Tithen Dúlinn*. I will be back for you soon, I promise."

...

Wolfram dived beneath the surface.

In the dim moonlight he could just make out the dark shape of Eowyn's body, floating, hands outstretched...

He swam over to her and, grasping her beneath the arms, pushed her head out of the water.

"You are not escaping me," he cried "Not again!" He pulled her over his shoulder and hammered his fist on her back until she took a great spluttering gulp of air.

### The usual suspects

"Yes!" he cried, pounding her back to keep her breathing. "Yes! Stay with me, my brave bitch, stay with me!"

...

"Remember what you promised," Keret panted, "with your friend Ear-something as a witness..."

"Anything you want," said the elf. "I swear it—on the princess's life."

*Good enough for me*, thought the boy. "In here!" He swerved off the road, jumped over a pile of mud bricks—the remains of a garden wall—ran across a chequerboard of sand and soil—dried-out flower beds—and ducked through the canvas curtain that served as the door to his dilapidated villa.

The elf followed.

Keret pulled back his blanket. "There."

The elf snatched up the bag, ripped it open, pulled out the lamp, and rubbed it vigorously.

A wisp of smoke curled from its spout.

The elf kept rubbing.

A great cloud exploded from the lamp, instantly forming itself into a head, two hands, and a body...

**"WHERE IS MY PRETTY LITTLE MISTRESS?"** roared the djinn.

"In the sea!" cried the elf. "Go and—"

But the djinn was already soaring into the sky.

...

Eowyn had begun to struggle. "Let me go! Let me *go*!"

"Stop it!" cried Wolfram, spitting out a mouthful of salt water. "God's prick, you have spirit, but, for once, let *me* be on top!"

He could swim like a fish but not with a struggling woman in his arms and, when he looked along the coast in either direction, he could see no way to get them both ashore. "Vardamir!" he shouted up at the cave, "Vardamir, where are you? Throw me a rope—"

As he was looking upwards, something appeared at the corner of his eye—something man-shaped, but vast—something with a head, and shoulders, with arms and hands—but with a body that tapered into nothing but smoke...

Wolfram shook his head, trying to clear the impossible vision from his sight, but the thing was still swooping down towards him, and shouting, **"Pretty little mistress! Pretty little mistress! Your wish is my command!"**

*Pretty little...?* Instinctively, Wolfram grasped Eowyn more tightly.

Eowyn raised her head from his shoulder, "Help me!" she croaked.

**"I hear and obey!"** The thing caught her by the shoulders. **"How, mistress?"**

### **The usual suspects**

"Take me to Legolas."

It tried to wrench her from Wolfram's arms.

"No!" cried Wolfram. "No! You shall not take her from me! She is mine. She—"

Like a parent with a naughty child, the thing raised its hand, and cuffed the side of his head.

...

"Wolfram!" cried Vardamir. He turned to Haldir, who had just arrived at the cave mouth. "That thing has killed Wolfram."

"I doubt it," said Haldir, watching the djinn carry Eowyn away, leaving Wolfram floating, face down, on the surface of the water. "That man is immortal.

"Come, Vardamir," he added, "you can surrender or you can force me to overpower you—the choice is yours."

...

### **Three hours later**

"Lady Hentmire appears to have suffered no permanent harm, sir," said the healer, rather stiffly, to Legolas, "in fact...

"In *fact*, she seems healthier than I can remember seeing her for some years... *Younger*." He peered at the elf, as if expecting an explanation.

Legolas smiled. "That is good news, sir."

"The—er—elf-lady—"

"*Elleth*."

"Elleth is clearly distressed, but I can find no sign of illness or injury in her—though I am, of course, unfamiliar with people of your kind."

Legolas nodded. "And my wife?"

"The young lady was, I understand, submerged beneath the sea for several minutes," said the healer.

"Yes, I believe so."

"And that was three hours ago?"

"Yes."

"Then the next five hours are of most concern. Give her sweet cordial; keep her temperature normal: if she feels cold, cover her up, if she feels warm, cool her down—sponge her with cold water, if necessary—and, if she wants to lie down, try to keep her head and shoulders raised. If she feels no worse after five hours, I think you can assume that she is fully recovered."

...

"What is wrong, Melmenya?" asked Legolas, gently.

He laid her carefully on their bed, arranging the cushions behind her head, then sat down

### The usual suspects

beside her and took her hand in his. "I am not angry with you..."

"*Angry?*" she turned to him in alarm. "What do you mean? How do you know—"

"Well, you did break your promise to me—"

"Oh, *that...*" Eowyn sighed. "I thought you would understand *that*."

"Of course I understand—you went to rescue Cyllien," said Legolas. "I would rather you had kept your promise, but I *do* understand."

He gathered her into his arms. "I do not think I will ever let you out of my sight again, Eowyn *nín*. In fact, I think I am going to ask Gimli to make you a collar and chain so that I can keep you attached to my belt."

Eowyn's body was shaking in his arms and he smiled down at her, thinking that she was laughing...

"Melmenya! What is wrong?"

She was sobbing, silently, against his shoulder. He lifted her chin and tried to catch her gaze but she avoided his eyes, and began to cry out loud: "I am sorry, Lassui! I am so, so sorry!"

It was hard to hear beyond the roaring in his ears. "He raped you," he whispered; then louder, and angrily: "The bastard raped you! Oh, Melmenya..." He pulled her close. "*You* have nothing to be sorry for. *Nothing...*" He rocked her to and fro, rubbing her back soothingly, tears falling from his eyes. "Shhhhhh, *shhhhhh*, Melmenya—"

"No!" wailed Eowyn. "I raped *him*."

"Melmenya?" Legolas stopped rocking. "Whatever do you mean?"

Haltingly, she explained what had happened between her and Wolfram in the cavern. "I do not know why I did it, Legolas," she whispered. "I did not even think. I just did it."

Legolas bit his lip. "It was very clever," he said.

"Do you hate me?"

"Hate you!" He hugged her tightly. "Am I angry? Yes—with him! Do I want to kill him? Yes—after I have gelded him! Are you the most remarkable woman—the most remarkable *person*—I have ever met? Yes! Do I love you? More and more each day..." He buried his face in her hair. "You *beat* him, Melmenya. You beat him—"

"I descended to his level. I am ashamed."

"Could you have escaped him any other way?"

"I do not think so, but—"

"But what?"

"It was not honourable. It was not"—she searched for the right word—"manly."

"Oh, Melmenya." He kissed the top of her head. "No man would have been put to such a test—at least, not by him. You did what you had to do. And it worked."

"No." Eowyn shook her head. "It gave him what he wanted. And it made him want me more."

## The usual suspects

"It may have given him a taste of what he cannot have, Melmenya. But think of this: if you are feeling dishonourable now, how much more dishonourable would you be feeling if your courage had failed you? If you had given in, and allowed him to take *everything* he wanted?"

"I cannot bear to imagine it."

"Then do not." He kissed her again. "Tell me what I can do, Melmenya. Tell me how I can make it better..."

Eowyn snuggled closer. "Sing to me," she whispered.

...

*"...Fanuilos, le linnathon  
nef aear, sí nef aearon..."*

...

The five hours had passed without incident; Legolas had taken Eowyn out onto the balcony, and now they were lying, side-by-side on a low divan, gazing up at Varda's creation.

"Legolas..." whispered Eowyn, as his song died softly away.

"Mmmm?"

"Do you want to make love to me?"

He turned to face her. "Oh, Melmenya," he stroked her cheek, "*always*. If you feel well enough."

"Even—"

"*Shhhhh*." He kissed her tenderly, gently pulling at her nightgown, sliding his hand up her thigh and over her hip. Then, still kissing her, he opened his own leggings, and pulled her close.

Eowyn tried to roll onto her back.

"No," he whispered, "like this. Side by side, and slowly, *hervess a hervenn*."

Eowyn buried her face in his hair and wept.

...

He held her until her tears had ended. Then he felt her little hand touch him tentatively, and stroke him, gently fondling him, exploring his hardness. And he waited, letting her take her time, letting *her* decide.

"Ah..." he sighed. She was pulling him—still gently—drawing him towards her, taking him inside her. "*Hervess nín*," he whispered.

Slowly, sensitively, he took over, holding her lightly by the waist, and moving, with long, smooth strokes, inside her, soothing her, until her body relaxed and she settled against him.

"Oh Lassui," she whispered. "My beautiful, beautiful Legolas."

He reached for her with his mind...

"Legolas!"



## The usual suspects

"You can feel *me*, too," he whispered, smiling.

"How?"

"*Shhhhh*. Later."

He kissed her forehead. And, gathering her close, he continued to thrust, slowly, gently, opening his mind to her, laying bare his love for her, and letting her explore it—timidly at first but then, with his encouragement, boldly and joyfully—and, all the while, he was patiently drawing her—drawing them both—towards fulfilment, and a union that nothing and no one would ever sunder.

...

## Dawn

"You need some sleep, Melmenya." He kissed her, tenderly.

"No," said Eowyn, "I am not tired at all. What happened between us, Lassui?"

Legolas smiled. "I am not sure, Eowyn *nín*. Some elves, as you know, can talk from mind to mind, without words. And I have felt your feelings before—"

"When?"

"The first time we made love, during the Harvest Rite. But last night, when you fell in the sea, I felt *everything*—the physical sensations of drowning, the fear—"

"I *was* afraid," said Eowyn, with embarrassment.

"Oh, Melmenya, anyone would have been afraid! That terrible pain—the longing to breathe where there was no air..." He hugged her tightly. "I do not know why it has happened to us, Melmenya. I do not know if it is permanent—"

"Did you share it with—with *them*?"

"No..."

"Not with Arwen?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because she is Lord Elrond's daughter. And because you are lying to me—and I do not think you would lie about any of the others."

"Do you say that because you are feeling my thoughts or because you know me?"

Eowyn shook her head. "Because it is written on your face, Legolas." She smiled. "I cannot feel you now, but there would be nothing to fear if I could," she said. "You have never been able to lie to me, even before this."

He stroked her cheek. "Perhaps it happened a *little* with Arwen," he said. "Vague impressions. It was certainly not the bond that we seem to have."

"Do you think we can control it?"

"I have no idea, Melmenya. Time will tell."

"Life is certainly never dull with an elf," said Eowyn.

### The usual suspects

Legolas laughed. "Is that good?"

"I think so," she said, grinning. "Shall we go downstairs, Lassui, and see if Hentmirë is recovered?"

"Yes."

"And find out if Wolfram has been captured?"

"Yes."

"And"—Eowyn took his hand, —"shall we go back to the Turquoise Gardens this afternoon? I am sure it would do Hentmirë good. And Cyllien, too. And if you and I are going to try to share our feelings again, I should like it to be amongst the trees."

...

### Rihat

Faramir clung to the saddle as his camel dropped, jerkily, to its knees, then gratefully swung his leg over the pommel and dropped to the ground. "Gods," he gasped, trying to work his stiff legs.

"May I never have to ride a camel again!" Berengar staggered towards him, stretching his back and rubbing his injured shoulder.

"Be careful!" cried Faramir. He checked the younger man's dressing. "This needs changing. And, I am sorry to have to break this to you," he added, "but you must ride all the way back to Carhivilven."

Berengar shook his head. "Oh no," he said. "No, Faroath—I will have to make a new life for myself here."

He looked past the water station, to where the city itself began. The strange buildings of mud brick—tall, many-storied, and peppered with tiny windows—were hung with all the trappings of daily life in a town—potted plants, birdcages, strings of colourful washing—and the streets between were filled with bustle—women traders crouching beside heaps of food laid out on cloths, animals foraging, and groups of noisy children playing with knucklebones.

"It does not look so bad."

Faramir laughed. He turned to Oliel. "How are *you*?"

Oliel smiled. "I shall be better when I have seen her, my friend."

"Of course. Let us find somewhere to stay and clean up Berengar's wound. Then you and I will go straight to the place mentioned in the letter—that is, if you are happy for me to accompany you."

"I would be most grateful, Faramir," said Oliel.

"My lords..."

The three men turned towards the owner of the voice—the woman who had dressed Berengar's wound in the Ripa'a Pass. She placed her hands together and bowed.

"My lady would be honoured," she said, addressing herself directly to Berengar, "if you will accept *this*, my lord, as a token of her gratitude." She handed him a small item, wrapped in a silken cloth. "And she requests, once more, that you will wait upon her father..."

### **The usual suspects**

"We shall, Mistress," said Faramir. And for some reason, he felt compelled to place his hand upon his heart and bow, elven-fashion.

The woman returned his courtesy, and backed away.

"Oh gods, Faroth," whispered Berengar.

"What is it?"

"A ring," said the younger man. "It is a gold ring."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 7: The sacrifice

### Eowyn listened hard.

Judging by the amount of light that was leaking down the passage, and the apparent closeness of the quiet sobbing, Cyllien and Hentmirë—and, presumably, their captors—were just around the next corner, but she could hear no sound from Wolfram or his Elven accomplice.

What should she do?

What *could* she do?

From what she had seen of Cyllien's earlier attempt to escape, the elleth would be in no condition to help her. Hentmirë had been unconscious; even if she had since revived, it was unlikely that she would be able to walk as yet—and Eowyn did not think that *she* would be able to carry the heavier woman.

Her only option was a bold attack.

*Vardamir is weak and easily led, she thought. And he does seem to care for Cyllien. Without Wolfram he is probably little threat.*

*I must be swift and accurate.*

Gripping her knife, she ran into the next cavern.

...

Keret hid the carpet bag under his blanket.

*Gods, it's getting busy round here! First the two kids. Then the man. And now two Elves...*

He sat down on his mud brick bench and took the remains of the sausage out of his pocket. *Not that it's anything to do with me, he thought, wiping some fluff off the meat. If those kids want to get into trouble...*

*That fat one! What a stupid thing to do! Why not pick pockets like everyone else?*

He took a bite of sausage.

*Who are the Elves looking for, he wondered, the man or the two boys? I've seen that thin kid before, but where? Not on the street...*

He chewed the sausage, mechanically. Where *had* he seen the boy before?

*Oh PIZZLE!* he thought. *Pizzle, pizzle, pizzle. It's the princess! And she may be in real trouble.*

He pulled back the blanket, took out the lamp, and held it up in the fading light.

*What's so special about this?*

*The Princess's Elf saw me in the souk, so he knows I took it. He looks soft, but I bet that big one would give me a hiding—if he caught me. On the other hand, if I tell them where to find the princess, they might forget about the lamp.*

*They might even give me a reward...*

He put the lamp back in the bag, hid the bag safely under his blanket, and slipped out into the

## The usual suspects

darkness.

...

Eowyn stormed the cavern like an Uruk Hai berserker—weapon ready, mind and body entirely focussed on finding her quarry and killing him.

But her quarry was not there.

In the eerie light of two large oil lamps, she could see Cyllien, chained hand and foot, cowering against the cavern wall, and Hentmirë lying beside her, still unconscious.

But there was no sign of the Elf, nor of the Man.

Slightly disoriented, Eowyn sheathed her knife and knelt down beside the elleth.

"Cyllien..." she whispered. There was no response. Eowyn grasped her face. "Cyllien, where are the keys?"

"What are *you* doing here?"

Eowyn smiled. "I am here to rescue you. Where are the keys to your chains?"

"Vardamir... Vardamir has them."

Eowyn swore. "Where is he?" she asked, turning to Hentmirë and quickly checking her for any signs of serious injury. "Where is Wolfram?"

"They went through there," said Cyllien, pointing to another passage, which Eowyn had not noticed. "Did you come here for *me*?"

"Yes," said Eowyn. "We both did." Hentmirë's breathing was regular and her pulse seemed strong. Eowyn carefully rolled her onto her side, arranging her limbs to keep her in position.

"Why?" asked Cyllien.

Eowyn looked up from her task. "Why did we come for you? Because I know Wolfram—I know what he is like and I would not wish him on anyone. And, also, for Haldir's sake." Satisfied that Hentmirë was safe, she rose to her feet. "I am going after Wolfram," she said, drawing her knife. "Try to stay calm. And keep a watch on Hentmirë."

"What did you mean?" asked Cyllien. "About Haldir?"

But Eowyn was already running down the passage.

...

Legolas took another look at the map. "Wait," he said, "Eowyn's cross is *beyond* these buildings, further to the west—what is that, past the rock ridge?"

"Tombs," said Haldir. "I believe those are tombs. But surely—"

"That is exactly the sort of place that Wolfram *would* choose," said Legolas. "Come..."

"No—wait a moment!" Haldir dropped to the ground and examined the surface of the road.

Legolas joined him. "I cannot make it out," he said. "This sand does not hold tracks well..."

"No," said Haldir. "But I think there was some sort of fight here." He followed the faint traces to

## The usual suspects

the softer sand at the edge of the road. "And look at this!"

He was pointing to a mark—part of a footprint—most of it crumbled and indistinct, but a tiny patch of it miraculously preserved by a splash of fresh blood.

"Oh no," whispered Legolas. "Oh, Melmenya, no!—I begged her to stay at home, Haldir. And she promised..."

Haldir squeezed his arm. "We do not know that it *is* Eowyn's blood, mellon nín," he said. "And the print is small, but still too big, I think, to be hers, or Hentmirë's or—thank the Valar—Cyllien's. I think it is Wolfram's. And I think he *did* go this way—"

...

"So we'll let Cyllien go," said Vardamir.

He had drawn Wolfram to the mouth of the cave—a low, wide opening in the cliff wall—in the hope that he could keep the man from learning of the elleth's attempted escape.

"Don't be stupid!"

"But if Abdi is in prison, what else can we do with her—oh no! *No!*"

Wolfram sighed. "The moment we set her free she'd be singing to the *Hatja's* Guards."

"I'd make her promise—"

"*How* old are you?"

"Then I'd take her away," said Vardamir. "To Rihat... Yes, I'd take her to Rihat and keep her there—"

"She *hates* you," said Wolfram.

"What do you mean?"

"She may be all over you now, but that's only because she's afraid of *me*. If the two of you were alone, she'd knife you the moment you turned your back. Not that *I* care," he added, quickly. "But then she'd come back to Carhivilvren—back to Ribhadda. And one or the other of them would turn me in." He beckoned to the Elf. "Come here."

"Why?"

Wolfram smiled, wolfishly. "You don't trust me do you?"

"You just said you didn't care if I died."

"I just gave you some advice that will keep you alive," Wolfram corrected. "And I'm about to give you some more... Come over here." He led the reluctant Elf out onto the shallow terrace and pointed to the foaming sea, thirty feet below. "One push at low tide. That's all it will take."

"No—you can't."

"Not me—you."

"Wolf—"

"*YAAAARRRRGGGGHHHH!*" Eowyn flew into the cavern, roaring like a orc. Wolfram, though taken by surprise, instinctively dodged her blade. And Vardamir—moving, for once, with all the

## The usual suspects

speed and precision of an Elf—caught her about the waist and lifted her off her feet.

"Oh, My Lady!" cried Wolfram. "My beautiful, beautiful she-wolf! You have come *looking* for me!"

"Come anywhere near me and I shall slit your throat!" cried Eowyn. "Put me down," she yelled at Vardamir. "He is not your friend. He despises you. Let me deal with him. Let me set you free..." She struggled against his Elven strength.

"Who would not love this woman?" asked Wolfram. "Imagine being inside that! Gods' bollocks, she'd suck your bones out through your prick! Let her go."

"Wolfram!"

"Let her go; I want her." He drew a short knife from the scabbard at his hip. "Come, My Lady, dance with me!"

Reluctantly, Vardamir dropped Eowyn to the ground.

"Leave us alone," said Wolfram.

"But—"

"Go!"

Vardamir left.

Eowyn and Wolfram, daggers raised, eyed one another. "Strike, My Lady," said Wolfram, "*both* my weapons are ready..."

"You—"

He dropped his knife and threw himself at her, catching her wrists and smashing her down on the sloping rock floor. Eowyn lay trapped beneath him, gasping for breath. Her knife fell from her hand.

"There is no one like you, is there?" said Wolfram. He leant down and devoured her mouth, at the same time pressing his erection against her belly. "God's prick, we're going to enjoy this! I can be *just* as wild as you are, and—Oh!"

Eowyn had brought her knee up between his legs but had missed her target.

"You're fighting dirty," he whispered. "Just like last time! But I like that. I like it very much. And, of course," he pressed his hips down, "it only makes me harder."

"You *pig!*"

"Wolf," he said. "I am a wolf and you are my bitch."

Eowyn smiled. "Real wolves do not wear breeches. And, the moment you let go of my wrists to open yours, I will rip your eyes out."

"Then I will fuck you blind."

"Wolfram..." Vardamir had returned.

"*I said go away!* Now, where were we?" Eowyn was still smiling. And, as Wolfram leaned down, and her smile broadened, his confidence suddenly wavered. "What are you—"

### The usual suspects

She arched her back, and rubbed herself against him. It did not take much.

"Oh!" He came hard, his spine almost snapping as his body convulsed; then he relaxed, panting, and his grip slackened...

Eowyn pulled her hands from his grasp and thrust him away, rolled across the ground and snatched up her knife. Then she rose, a Shieldmaiden once more, and turned on him, her dagger raised.

But Wolfram had already recovered.

He pushed himself up from the rock, laughing. "*What* a woman!" he said, shaking his head with genuine admiration. "What a team we'll make! The wolf and his bitch!" And, ignoring the knife, he reached for her.

Confused, Eowyn took a step backwards.

"No!" cried Wolfram. "No, *no!*" He lunged for her. But it was too late.

...

"Eowyn!" cried Legolas. "Something has happened to her! I can feel it. She is under water—sinking!—terrified! She cannot breathe!" He pressed his hand to his chest. "I can feel it—"

"Where?—"

"I do not know!—"

"Are you talking about the *princess?*" asked a small voice.

...

The desert at night was Keret's natural element and he had approached the Elves so stealthily that neither had been aware of him until he spoke.

"Princess?" The smaller elf turned in surprise. Then, "You!" he cried. "Release the djinn! Quickly!"

"Djinn?—" *Of course, you blockhead!* thought Keret. *The lamp has a djinn inside!* "What will you pay me for it?" he asked, cheekily.

"Anything you ask," cried the elf. "*Anything!* Just give it to me. Quickly!" He caught Keret by the arms.

"Hold your hair on! Let go of me and I'll fetch it..."

"No," said the elf. "Take me to it."

"All right. But you promise—anything I want."

"Eärendil is my witness—now *please!*"

"Ear what?"

"Yes! Anything you want! Please! Eowyn—the princess—we must hurry—"

"Did you see the man fetch her?" asked the big Elf, suddenly.

Keret looked from one Elf to the other. "The princess? The princess went down by herself. The



### The usual suspects

man took the fat kid."

"Which tomb?"

"The small one with the broken door."

"Go and release the djinn," said the big Elf. "I shall go down into the tomb."

The smaller Elf squeezed his friend's arm. "Thank you, mellon nín," he said. Then he turned to Keret. "Let us go. Quickly."

...

Wolfram's field of vision contracted to the tiny patch of water that Eowyn had disappeared beneath.

*No! No, no, NO!*

*Not NOW!*

He jumped.

...

Side-by-side, the boy and the Elf sprinted across the desert.

*It's true they're fast, thought Keret. This one could go faster than a horse...*

But, as they neared his hideout, the boy's instinct for self-preservation suddenly asserted itself.

*How do I know I can trust him?*

...

"Cyllien..." Haldir crouched beside the weeping elleth. "*Shhh, shhhhhh...*" He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "Just be brave for a few moments more," he said, softly. "Where is Eowyn?"

He felt her body stiffen. But she answered. "She went after Wolfram and Vardamir. Down there."

He lifted her chin. "Take care of Hentmirë, Tithen Dúlinn. I will be back for you soon, I promise."

...

Wolfram dived beneath the surface.

In the dim moonlight he could just make out the dark shape of Eowyn's body, floating, hands outstretched...

He swam over to her and, grasping her beneath the arms, thrust her head out of the water.

"You are not escaping me," he cried "Not again!" He pulled her head over his shoulder and hammered his fist on her back until she took a great spluttering gulp of air.

"Yes!" he cried, pounding her back to keep her breathing. "Yes! Stay with me, my brave bitch, stay with me!"

## The usual suspects

...

"Remember what you promised," Keret panted, "with your friend Ear-something as a witness..."

"Anything you want," said the Elf. "I swear it—on the princess's life."

*Good enough for me*, thought the boy. "In here!" He swerved off the road, jumped over a pile of mud bricks—the remains of a garden wall—ran across a chequerboard of sand and soil—dried-out flower beds—and ducked through the canvas curtain that served as the door to his dilapidated villa.

The Elf followed.

Keret pulled back his blanket. "There."

The Elf snatched up the bag, ripped it open, pulled out the lamp, and rubbed it vigorously.

A wisp of smoke curled from its spout.

The Elf kept rubbing.

A great cloud exploded from the lamp, instantly forming itself into a head, two hands, and a body...

**"WHERE IS MY PRETTY LITTLE MISTRESS?"** roared the djinn.

"In the sea!" cried the Elf. "Go and—"

But the djinn was already soaring into the sky.

...

Eowyn had begun to struggle. "Let me go! Let me *go*!"

"Stop it!" cried Wolfram, spitting out a mouthful of salt water. "God's prick, you have spirit, but, for once, let *me* be on top!"

He could swim like a fish but not with a struggling woman in his arms and, when he looked along the coast in either direction, he could see no way to get them both ashore. "Vardamir!" he shouted up at the cave, "Vardamir, where are you? Throw me a rope—"

As he was looking upwards, something appeared at the corner of his eye—something man-shaped, but vast—something with a head, and shoulders, with arms and hands—but with a body that tapered into nothing but smoke...

Wolfram shook his head, trying to clear the impossible vision from his sight.

But the thing was still swooping down towards him, and shouting, **"Pretty little mistress! Pretty little mistress! Your wish is my command!"**

*Pretty little...?* Instinctively, Wolfram grasped Eowyn more tightly.

Eowyn raised her head from his shoulder, "Help me!" she croaked.

**"I hear and obey!"** The thing caught her by the shoulders. **"How, mistress?"**

"Take me to Legolas."

### **The usual suspects**

It tried to wrench her from Wolfram's arms.

"No!" cried Wolfram. "No! You shall not take her from me! She is mine. She—"

Like a parent with a naughty child, the thing raised its hand, and cuffed the side of his head.

...

"Wolfram!" cried Vardamir. He turned to Haldir, who had just arrived at the cave mouth. "That thing has killed Wolfram."

"I doubt it," said Haldir, watching the djinn carry Eowyn away, leaving Wolfram floating, face down, on the surface of the water. "That man is immortal. Come, Vardamir," he added, "you can surrender or you can force me to overpower you—the choice is yours."

...

### **Three hours later**

"Lady Hentmire appears to have suffered no permanent harm, sir," said the healer, rather stiffly, to Legolas, "in fact..."

"In *fact*, she seems healthier than I can remember seeing her for some years... *Younger*." He peered at the elf, as if expecting an explanation.

Legolas smiled. "That is good news, sir."

"The—er—elf-lady—"

"*Elleth*."

"Elleth is clearly distressed, but I can find no sign of illness or injury in her—though I am, of course, unfamiliar with people of your kind."

Legolas nodded. "And my wife?"

"The young lady was, I understand, submerged beneath the sea for several minutes," said the healer.

"Yes, I believe so."

"And that was three hours ago?"

"Yes."

"Then the next five hours are of most concern. Give her sweet cordial; keep her temperature normal: if she feels cold, cover her up, if she feels warm, cool her down—sponge her with cold water, if necessary; and, if she wants to lie down, try to keep her head and shoulders raised. If she feels no worse after five hours, I think you can assume that she is fully recovered."

...

"What is wrong, Melmenya?" asked Legolas, gently.

He laid her carefully on their bed, arranging the cushions behind her head, then sat down beside her and took her hand in his. "I am not angry with you..."

"*Angry*?" she turned to him in alarm. "What do you mean? How do you know—"

## The usual suspects

"Well, you did break your promise to me—"

"Oh, *that*..." Eowyn sighed. "I thought you would understand *that*."

"Of course I understand—you went to rescue Cyllien," said Legolas. "I would rather you had kept your promise, but I *do* understand."

He gathered her into his arms. "I do not think I will ever let you out of my sight again, Eowyn nín. In fact, I think I am going to ask Gimli to make you a collar and chain so that I can keep you attached to my belt." Eowyn's body was shaking in his arms and he smiled down at her, thinking that she was laughing...

"Melmenya! What is wrong?"

She was sobbing, silently, against his shoulder. He lifted her chin and tried to catch her gaze but she avoided his eyes, and began to cry out loud: "I am sorry, Lassui! I am so, so sorry!"

It was hard to hear beyond the roaring in his ears. "He raped you..." he whispered; then louder, and angrily, "The bastard raped you! Oh, Melmenya..." He pulled her close. "*You* have nothing to be sorry for. *Nothing*..." He rocked her to and fro, rubbing her back soothingly, tears falling from his own eyes. "Shhhhhh, *shhhhhh*, Melmenya—"

"No!" wailed Eowyn. "I raped *him*."

"Melmenya?" He stopped rocking. "Whatever do you mean?"

Haltingly, she explained what had happened between her and Wolfram in the cavern. "I do not know why I did it, Legolas," she whispered. "I did not even think. I just did it."

Legolas bit his lip. "It was very clever," he said.

"Do you hate me?"

"Hate you!" He hugged her tightly. "Am I angry? Yes—with him! Do I want to kill him? Yes—after I have gelded him! Are you the most remarkable woman—the most remarkable *person*—I have ever met? Yes! Do I love you? More and more each day..." He buried his face in her hair. "You *beat* him, Melmenya. You beat him—"

"I descended to his level. I am ashamed."

"Could you have escaped him any other way?"

"I do not think so, but—"

"But what?"

"It was not honourable. It was not," she searched for the right word, "*manly*."

"Oh, Melmenya." He kissed the top of her head. "No man would have been put to such a test—at least, not by him. You did what you had to do. And it worked."

"No." Eowyn shook her head. "It gave him what he wanted. And it made him want me more."

"It may have given him a taste of what he cannot have, Melmenya. But think of this: if you are feeling dishonourable now, how much more dishonourable would you feel if your courage had failed you? If you had given in, and allowed him to take *everything* he wanted?"

"I cannot bear to imagine it."

### The usual suspects

"Then do not." He kissed her again. "Tell me what I can do, Melmenya. Tell me how I can make it better..."

Eowyn snuggled closer. "Sing to me," she whispered.

...

"...*Fanuilos, le linnathon  
nef aear, sí nef aearon...*"

...

The five hours had passed without incident; Legolas had taken Eowyn out onto the balcony, and now they were lying, side-by-side on a low divan, gazing up at Varda's creation.

"Legolas..." whispered Eowyn, as his song died softly away.

"Mmmm?"

"Do you want to make love to me?"

He turned to face her. "Oh, Melmenya," he stroked her cheek, "*a/ways*. If you feel well enough."

"Even—"

"*Shhhhh*." He kissed her tenderly, gently pulling at her nightgown, sliding his hand up her thigh and over her hip. Then, still kissing her, he opened his own leggings, and pulled her close.

Eowyn tried to roll onto her back.

"No," he whispered, "like this. Side by side, and slowly, *hervess a hervenn*."

Eowyn buried her face in his hair and wept.

...

He held her until her tears had ended. Then he felt her little hand touch him tentatively, and stroke him, gently fondling him, exploring his hardness. And he waited, letting her take her time, letting *her* decide.

"Ah..." he sighed. She was pulling him—still gently—drawing him towards her, taking him inside her. "*Hervess nín*," he whispered.

Slowly, sensitively, he took over, holding her lightly by the waist, and moving, with long, smooth strokes, inside her, soothing her, until her body relaxed and she settled against him.

"Oh Lassui," she whispered. "My beautiful, beautiful Legolas."

He reached for her with his mind...

"Legolas!"

"You can feel *me*, too," he whispered, smiling.

"How?"

"Shhhhhh. Later."

## The usual suspects

He kissed her forehead. And, gathering her close, he continued to thrust, slowly, gently, opening his mind to her, laying bare his love for her, and letting her explore it—timidly at first but then, with his encouragement, boldly and joyfully—and, all the while, he was patiently drawing her—drawing them both—towards fulfilment, and a union that nothing and no one would ever sunder.

...

## Dawn

"You need some sleep, Melmenya." He kissed her, tenderly.

"No," said Eowyn, "I am not tired at all. What happened between us, Lassui?"

Legolas smiled. "I am not sure, Eowyn nín. Some elves, as you know, can talk from mind to mind, without words. And I have felt your feelings before—"

"When?"

"The first time we made love, during the Harvest Rite. But last night, when you fell in the sea, I felt *everything*—the physical sensations of drowning, the fear—"

"I *was* afraid," said Eowyn, with embarrassment.

"Oh, Melmenya, anyone would have been afraid! That terrible pain—the longing to breathe where there was no air.." He hugged her tightly. "I do not know why it has happened to us, Melmenya. I do not know if it is permanent—"

"Did you share it with—with *them*?"

"No..."

"Not with Arwen?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because she is Lord Elrond's daughter. And because you are lying to me—and I do not think you would lie about any of the others."

"Do you say that because you are feeling my thoughts or because you know me?"

Eowyn shook her head. "Because it is written on your face, Legolas." She smiled. "I cannot feel you now, but there would be nothing to fear if I could," she said. "You have never been able to lie to me, even before this."

He stroked her cheek. "Perhaps it happened a *little* with Arwen," he said. "Vague impressions. It was certainly not the bond that we seem to have."

"Do you think we can control it?"

"I have no idea, Melmenya. Time will tell."

"Life is certainly never dull with an elf," said Eowyn.

Legolas laughed. "Is that good?"

"I think so," she said, grinning. "Shall we go downstairs, Lassui, and see if Hentmirë is recovered?"

## The usual suspects

"Yes."

"And find out if Wolfram has been captured?"

"Yes."

"And," Eowyn took his hand, "shall we go back to the Turquoise Gardens this afternoon? I am sure it would do Hentmirë good. And Cyllien too. And if you and I are going to try to share our feelings again, I should like it to be amongst the trees."

...

## Rihat

Faramir clung to the saddle as his camel dropped, jerkily, to its knees, then he gratefully swung his leg over the pommel and dropped to the ground. "Gods," he gasped, trying to work his stiff legs.

"May I never have to ride a camel again!" Berengar staggered towards him, stretching his back and rubbing his injured shoulder.

"Be careful!" cried Faramir. He checked the younger man's dressing. "This needs changing. And, I am sorry to have to tell you," he added, "but you must ride all the way back to Carhivilven."

Berengar shook his head. "Oh no," he said. "No, Faroth—I will make a new life for myself here." He looked past the water station to where the city itself began. The strange buildings of mud brick—tall, many-storied, and peppered with tiny windows—were hung with all the trappings of daily life in a town—potted plants, birdcages, strings of colourful washing. And the streets between were filled with bustle—women traders crouched beside heaps of food laid out on cloths, animals foraged, and groups of noisy children played with knucklebones. "It does not look so bad."

Faramir laughed. He turned to Oliel. "How are *you*?"

Oliel smiled. "I shall be better when I have seen her, my friend."

"Of course. Let us find somewhere to stay and clean up Berengar's wound. Then you and I will go straight to the place mentioned in the letter—that is, if you are happy for me to accompany you."

"I would be most grateful, Faramir," said Oliel.

"My lords..."

The three men turned towards the owner of the voice—the woman who had dressed Berengar's wound in the Ripa'a Pass. She placed her hands together and bowed. "My lady would be honoured," she said, addressing herself directly to Berengar, "if you will accept *this*, my lord, as a token of her gratitude." She handed him a small item, wrapped in a silken cloth. "And she requests, once more, that you will wait upon her father..."

"We shall, Mistress," said Faramir. And for some reason, he felt compelled to place his hand upon his heart and bow, elven-fashion.

The woman returned his courtesy, and backed away.

"Oh gods, Faroth," whispered Berengar.

**The usual suspects**

"What is it?"

"A ring," said the younger man. "It is a gold ring."

\*\*\*\*\*



## Chapter 8: Painful truths

**"The moment I knew that Eowyn was safe," said Haldir, "I took Vardamir back to the main part of the cave and made him free Cyllien and help me carry her and Hentmirë out of the tomb. The last I saw of Wolfram, he was floating, face down, in the sea."**

Legolas, Gimli and the March Warden were eating breakfast in the courtyard. Eowyn was standing beside the gates, feeding her flock of birds with scraps. Haldir spread a slice of bread with honey. "It is strange," he said; "I did not like honey before..."

Legolas, his mind still focussed on Wolfram, said, gravely, "When the djinn went back for him, he had disappeared."

"Do you think he drowned?" asked Gimli.

"No, *elvellon*," said Legolas. "No. Had he drowned, I think the djinn would have found him floating; I think he swam ashore."

"Yes," agreed Haldir. "But where? The cliff face extends for at least a quarter mile in each direction. I think," he continued, "that we should involve the *Hatja*'s Guards in this. I have met their Captain—Rames— and, although he does not seem a particularly honourable person, I do think that he will want to investigate an attack on one of Carhivilven's richest citizens. And he has enough men to carry out a thorough search."

"You are right," said Legolas. "But we must be careful what Hentmirë says about her own part in the incident—hitting Wolfram with a stone! She really has no idea of her limits."

Gimli smiled. "The lass has spirit," he said. "She was only trying to protect Eowyn." He leaned closer to Legolas, and added, "And to live up to *your* example."

"Then I shall have to have a good talk with her," said Legolas. "She is taking far too many risks." He turned to Haldir. "How is Cyllien?"

"Still very quiet. She has taken it all much harder than I would have expected."

"Well—she is nowhere near as tough or as worldly as she likes to pretend," said Legolas. "Is there anything we can do to help her? Perhaps if Eowyn were to spend some time with her?"

"No. She... I think she is intimidated by Eowyn."

They both glanced across the courtyard, to where Eowyn was surrounded by her coloured birds. Legolas smiled. "That is hard to believe! Has Cyllien ever told you how she came to be in Carhivilven?"

"No. We, er..." Haldir cleared his throat. "We have never had much time to talk."

Legolas and Gimli exchanged glances; Legolas tactfully changed the subject. "What are we going to do with Vardamir?"

"I have absolutely no idea," said Haldir.

"We cannot keep him locked in the cellar," said Legolas. "It is too cruel. Eowyn thinks—"

"What do I think?" asked Eowyn, joining them at the table.

"That Vardamir is no longer a threat, Melmenya."

"Well, I..." She sat down on a cushion, beside him. "I think that he is just very easily led—first

### The usual suspects

by the rebels at Imladris, and then by Wolfram. But, if he were set a *good* example—"

"He did attack Finrod," said Haldir, gently.

"Yes, he did..."

"And would have finished him off, given the chance."

"Perhaps he would... I do not know," said Eowyn. "It was just a feeling I had, in the cave, that there might be some good in him still..."

Legolas wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "What do *you* think Gimli?" he asked. "Is there any way to restrain him that does not involve locking him in a cage?"

"You mean chains?"

"I suppose so."

"Something light but strong. A deterrent. I shall give it some thought," said the dwarf. "I am more concerned about the young lad. *He* is the one who needs to be set a good example."

"Where is he?" asked Haldir.

"He spent the night in the room next to mine—quietly enough," replied Gimli. "But he is no doubt making an inventory of the valuables this morning."

Legolas smiled. "I shall talk to him, Gimli; after all, he and I made a bargain. Melmenya, I want you to ask the djinn to take me back to the sea cliff to have one last look for Wolfram. Haldir, I think *you* should go and speak to Captain Ramess."

"Immediately," said the March Warden.

"But do not forget," said Eowyn, "that this afternoon we are all going back to the Turquoise Gardens."

...

"Put it down!" said Legolas, sternly.

The boy set the small statuette back on the table and turned to the elf with a cheeky grin. "I was only *looking* at it! Do you know how much Yarih would give for it? At least two gold—and lots more if it was made by someone famous! That old woman must be rolling in it!"

"Sit down," said Legolas.

The boy hesitated for just a second, then threw himself on Hentmirë's day bed.

"Now," said Legolas. "First of all, you do not call Lady Hentmirë 'that old woman'—she has been very kind to you—you call her 'Lady Hentmirë'. Do you understand?"

The boy nodded.

"Secondly, if you ever steal *anything* from this house—if I so much as hear that one of Lady Hentmirë's hairpins is missing—our deal is cancelled—"

"You can't do that!"

"Oh yes I can," said Legolas, firmly.

### The usual suspects

"You're worse than Old Dagon," grumbled the boy.

"Far worse. Now, I trust that you have had breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Then you do not need your pockets filled with food. Empty them."

That was too much for Keret. "No! I'll need this when I go home tonight!"

"You will be staying here tonight," said Legolas. "And you will eat your supper with the rest of us."

Keret looked dubious. "Is that what the old—what Lady Hentmirë says?"

Legolas smiled. "It is. So—your pockets."

Shaking his head, and muttering something about 'waste', Keret emptied each pocket in turn, dumping his store of food on the table—three slices of bread, a piece of cheese, an apple, a pile of nuts, and some very sticky honey cake; the boy took one last bite from the cake before he abandoned it.

"Good," said Legolas. "Now, in a moment, I shall ask one of the servants to take you upstairs for a bath and to find you some clean clothes but, first, you and I made a deal."

"You bet we did," said Keret.

Legolas brought a stool closer to the daybed and sat down. "Anything you want," he said.

"Three wishes," said Keret.

...

"Oh, good morning!"

Eowyn had been about to knock at Hentmirë's door when she noticed Cyllien emerging, pale and weary-looking, from one of the guest bedchambers. "How are you feeling this morning?" she asked, cheerfully. "I am afraid you have missed breakfast, but I can easily arrange—"

Cyllien shook her head. "I never eat in the morning."

"You should," said Eowyn coming forward to help her down the stairs. "Especially after what you have just been through. You need to build up your strength. For an elf, you are looking very tired."

"Do you ever stop?" asked Cyllien.

"Stop what?"

"Bullying!"

Eowyn opened her mouth to reply, but Cyllien did not give her the chance. "I just want to get back to *The Silk Road*—"

"Haldir—"

"What Haldir and I do is none of your business!"

"I was merely going to say," said Eowyn, with firm dignity, "*in case you were hoping to speak*"

### The usual suspects

to him before you left, that Haldir has already gone out."

Cyllien wrenched her arm from Eowyn's grasp. "He knows were to find me if he wants me."

"What does that mean?" Eowyn asked. Then she added. "I am sorry. Perhaps it *is* none of my business, but I cannot help caring—"

"You just like to meddle!"

"Is it because Haldir saw you," said Eowyn, undeterred, "last night, in the cave, broken and frightened? Are you trying to push him away—"

"You arrogant *adaneth*—"

"Do not lose him, Cyllien. Men—elves—like Haldir do not come along every day. And you love him. I know you do. You would not be so jealous if you did not—"

"Jealous?"

"Of me. Of what Haldir used to feel for me. But that is in the past. Please, Cyllien, this is not bullying, it is begging—*please* do not just walk away. At least come with us to the Turquoise Gardens this afternoon—"

"The Turquoise Gardens!" Cyllien laughed.

"It is beautiful there," said Eowyn. "You could have some time amongst the trees alone, or you could walk with Haldir and talk... Legolas is so happy there."

"I," said Cyllien, contemptuously, "am not a *wood* elf."

"Well perhaps that is your problem," said Eowyn, finally losing her temper. "Oh, go if you must! As you say, Haldir knows were to find you—if he thinks you worth the trouble." And she swept back upstairs and knocked, rather loudly, on the door to Hentmirè's bedchamber.

...

Legolas stared at the boy. "Three wishes?"

"Yes. One from each of you," said Keret; "the elf, the dwarf and the golden-haired princess, like in the story."

"Which story?"

"The one my mother used to tell me."

"I see," said Legolas. "You had better tell me the story."

The boy sighed. "You must know it; you're in it." Legolas shook his head. "Oh, all *right!*" He settled himself more comfortably. "Once upon a time there was an orphan boy—"

"Where are *your* parents?" asked Legolas.

Keret shrugged his shoulders. "I never had a dad," he said. "Do *you* have a dad?"

"Yes," said Legolas, smiling fondly. "What about your mother?"

"She went away."

"When?"

## The usual suspects

"Don't know. Years ago."

Legolas hesitated for a moment, then asked, delicately, "Will she be coming back?"

"Of course she will. When she *can*."

Legolas wondered what that might mean. "Carry on with your story."

"Like I said, once upon a time there was an orphan boy and, one day, when he was walking through the Forest, he saw an elf, a dwarf, and a golden-haired princess, just like I did—"

"What were they doing?" asked Legolas.

"You were drinking herbal tea."

"In the story?"

"I'm coming to that. 'Hello,' says the elf—how do elves say 'hello'?"

"*Mae govannen*," said Legolas.

"*Mae govannen*,' says the elf. 'You look like a fine, strong boy. Perhaps you can help us settle an argument.'"

"He was arguing with the dwarf?"

"Yes. And the princess. 'What's the problem?' asks the boy. 'This fool of an elf,' says the dwarf—sorry about that—'this *fool* of an elf thinks he is stronger than I am!' 'And than I am!' says the princess. 'When everyone knows that dwarves are stronger than elves.' 'And so are princesses.'"

Keret spoke the dwarf's words in a deep, chesty voice and the princess's in a piping falsetto.

Legolas laughed. "What did they ask you—the boy—to do?"

"I'm just coming to that. The elf holds out a rope. 'Take the end of this,' he says. 'The dwarf is going to pull you past that big tree, over there, but if you are strong enough to stop him, he will grant you a wish.'

"So the boy looks at the dwarf, and he looks at the tree, and he looks at the dwarf again, and it doesn't look that hard. 'What's so special about the tree?' he asks. 'Nothing,' says the elf, 'but when the dwarf has failed, *I* will pull you past the tree.' 'And if you are strong enough to stop him,' said the dwarf, '*he* will grant you a wish.'

"'Oh,' says the boy, '*and* you will know which of you is strongest—'

"'Yes,' says the elf.

"'No,' says the princess, 'because when these two have failed, *I* will pull you past the tree.' 'And will you grant me a wish too?' asks the boy. 'Oh yes,' says the princess, with a wink, 'if you can stop me.'"

"So the princess won?"

"Now you've *spoiled* it!"

Legolas laughed. "I think the princess knew that the boy would be so tired after beating the elf and the dwarf, she could pull him easily," he said. "Am I right?" Keret nodded. "She deserved to win. But that means the boy was only granted *two* wishes."

### The usual suspects

"Yes," said Keret. "But *I* should get three."

"Keret," said Legolas, quietly. "Whatever you wish, Gimli, Eowyn and I will try to make it come true. But you must realise that we have no special magical powers."

"You do have a djinn," Keret corrected, "if you need him."

"What is your first wish?"

"I wish," said the boy, unconsciously closing his eyes, "that my mother would come home."

...

"There," said Faramir, carefully tying the ends of the bandage. "I will check again in a few hours; we must be extra careful in this heat. Now lie down and get some rest—"

"Yes, Faroth," said Berengar, with a mischievous grin.

"I am sounding like your mother again."

"Like Legolas with his Lady Hentmirë."

Faramir sat down on the edge of the bed. "I am sorry. But I cannot *begin* to describe the terror I felt when I saw you fighting those bandits."

"You make it sound as though I did not know what I was doing," said Berengar.

Now it was Faramir's turn to grin. "Oh, you were doing well enough—considering—but I shall not be making you a Ranger *just* yet." There was a knock at the door. "Come in, Oriel! I am ready—just let me rinse my hands."

The sea captain had washed his hair—or, at least, slicked it down with water—and changed into a clean, if slightly crumpled, pair of trousers and a loose shirt.

"You look smart," said Berengar, smiling. "She will fall in love with you all over again." Then his expression suddenly became serious, and he added, very simply, "Good luck, Oriel."

"Thank you, Berengar; thank you, my friend."

...

"You want us to find your mother?"

"Can you?"

"Wait here," said Legolas. "Do not move."

...

Having asked at the Boarding House for directions, Faramir and Oriel had little trouble finding the address mentioned in the letter, a large, public House of Healing on the Northern edge of the town.

Oriel paused uncertainly before the tall double doors.

"Take your time," said Faramir, patting his shoulder.

"Best to get things over with, I always think."

### The usual suspects

"Yes, if you can manage it..."

"Let's go in then."

They climbed the steps and entered a cool, quiet reception hall. Ahead of them, a wide corridor stretched into the distance, its white marble walls broken at regular intervals by doors leading to separate healing rooms.

Oliel approached a veiled woman sitting at a desk by the door. "Good morning, madam," he said, in a hushed voice. "I am looking for my wife, a woman from the North. I am told that she is being treated here—for a wound in the shoulder." He showed her the letter.

The woman read the details. "Ah, yes. Please, take a seat," she said. "I shall not be a moment."

Faramir sat down. Oliel paced nervously, back and forth, until the other man caught his eye, then he forced himself to stand, one hand on the back of Faramir's chair, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

After a few moments, the woman returned with a companion, also veiled, but older and, judging by her bearing, in a position of some authority. Faramir noticed that two large men had followed her and were hovering at a discreet distance.

"You say that you are the patient's husband," said the older woman quietly. "Can you prove it?"

Oliel was at a loss.

"A piece of jewellery, perhaps?" she prompted.

"My wedding ring..." Oliel removed the ring from his finger and handed it to her; then he took its companion, which had been sent with the letter, from his pocket. "If it was you who wrote the letter, you will know that this is hers," he said, "and you can see that the two match."

The doctor examined the rings closely. "Very well," she said, "follow me." She led them to a healing room at the farthest end of the corridor. "In here."

With a nervous glance at Faramir, Oliel entered the room. There were three beds, all ranged along the right-hand wall, each draped with a curtain of translucent fabric, to keep out dust and insects. The doctor drew back the curtain on the first bed.

The patient was a woman—tall, angular, far too thin, her body almost invisible under the white sheet—with raggedly-cropped dark hair, and a face which, though clearly once beautiful, was prematurely aged by suffering.

Oliel gasped. Then he whispered, "Gwirth?"

The patient raised her head. "Oh, Oliel! Why have you come after all this time?" she cried. "You must leave now! I am warning you!"

...

Hentmirë settled herself on the daybed beside the boy; Eowyn found a cushion and made herself comfortable on the floor; Gimli drew up another stool.

"Keret," said Legolas, "has asked us to help him find his mother."

"When did you last see her?" asked Eowyn.

### The usual suspects

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

"Years ago," said Legolas.

"*Years?* You have lived by yourself for *years?*" said Hentmirë.

"I had a kitten, but he ran away."

The little woman bit her lip. "Would you like a sweetmeat...?"

Legolas smiled. "I am sure that Keret will ask if he needs anything, *gwendithen.*" He turned to the boy. "Tell us everything you remember about your mother."

"She looked quite like that elf lady," said Keret. He nodded to Hentmirë; she removed the lid from a small wooden box and held it out to him, and he took a piece of candied fruit. "She sang, and she told me stories."

"Where did you live?" asked Eowyn.

"At the Circus. Under one of the arches. It was good there because Uncle Balashi used to come and give me half-a-silver to go and see the animals—"

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances; Hentmirë offered the boy another sweetmeat.

"Do you still see your Uncle Balashi?" asked Eowyn.

"No," said Keret, biting the head off a marzipan bird, "someone killed him. Stabbed him right in front of me. He didn't see *me*, though. I was behind the Tiger cage."

Hentmirë placed the box of sweetmeats on the boy's lap.

"Did your mother see the murder?" asked Legolas.

"No," said Keret, selecting another marzipan bird.

"Did you tell her about it?"

"Of course! She wanted to know why I was so late."

"Think carefully, Keret," said Legolas. "How soon after that did your mother leave?"

"The next day."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, because that's where she went—to see the man."

"The murderer?"

Keret nodded.

"She knew him?"

"Yes. *He* used to bring me apples. And shoes. And he gave me a bird whistle. He still gives me stuff sometimes."

"But your mother never came back from seeing him?" asked Gimli.

The boy shook his head.



### The usual suspects

"Keret," said Eowyn, "do you know the man's name?"

"Of course," said Keret. "Uncle Ribhadda."

...

Faramir drew the doctor into the corridor. "Why did you ask Captain Oliel to show you his ring?" he asked.

The woman glanced along the corridor, as if to make sure that they could not be overheard. "The Captain contacted me some time ago, asking me to send word if ever his wife was brought in for treatment. I recognised her straight away—a dark-haired woman, obviously from the North—but when I questioned Gwirth, to make sure that it was indeed she, she begged me to keep her whereabouts a secret. And I got the impression that she was deliberately hiding from him..."

"Why would she do that?"

"She would not say. I assumed that he had beaten her. But she insisted that he was a good man, and she always—in unguarded moments—speaks of him very fondly. She was still wearing his ring, on a chain around her neck."

"So you sent him the letter."

"I persuaded her to let me write, yes, and she gave me the ring and a piece of cloth from her bodice to send with the letter. Four days later, her husband arrived to collect her. But when I brought him into the healing room, she had disappeared. She was gone for almost two days, and when she finally came back—after dark, crawling up the steps—it was only because her wound had re-opened and become infected."

"Where had she been?"

"From her condition, I would say that she had been hiding amongst the rubbish heaps."

"Gods!" Faramir shook his head in disbelief. "The man was an impostor."

"So I gathered."

"Did he ever come back?"

"No..."

"But?"

The doctor cleared her throat. "When Gwirth first returned, she had a high fever and, in her delirium... In her delirium, I believe I may have heard her confess to killing him."

...

Oliel took a seat beside his wife's bed.

"I have been searching for you for the best part of seven years, Gwirth," he said, gently. "Where have you been?"

The woman did not reply.

"Gwirth?"

"Go away, Oliel. Go back to Pelargir."

### The usual suspects

"What?"

"Go away, while you still can."

"I am not leaving without you. You are sick—"

The woman laughed. "Sick? Yes, sick! Sick of being pursued! Leave me alone!"

"Gwirth—"

"I am no longer the little girl you married, Oriel. I have seen things—done things, in order to survive—that you could not possibly forgive. That *I* cannot forgive—"

"Why talk of needing forgiveness? You were kidnapped—a *victim*—"

"That was so many years ago. I think that that was somebody else..." Gwirth sighed. Then she continued, more calmly, "The woman you want, Oriel—the woman you think you love—is just a memory—an image in your own mind. You would not want *me*—"

"Do not say such things!"

"Why will you not *listen*?" she cried. "I am giving you a *chance*! Leave now, before it is too late."

"Too late for what?" asked Faramir, drawn back into the room by the commotion.

"Who is this?" asked Gwirth.

"A friend," said Oriel. "A good friend. He has come to help me take you home."

"I have no home!" cried the woman. "I have told you—"

"Gentlemen," interrupted the doctor, "I must insist that you leave now. Please, sir," she added, when Oriel began to protest, "you are distressing your wife. You may return tomorrow morning."

"No!" cried Gwirth, as the two men were ushered from the room, "No, Oriel! Do not come back!"

...

"Well, what are we going to do now?" asked Hentmirë. She had sent Keret upstairs with Old Donatiya, promising that she would take him to see the *Early Bird* if he would have a bath. "Master Ribhadda sounded like *such* a nice man, rescuing Eowyn and everything, but if he *did* kill Keret's uncle, we must tell the *Hatja's* Guards..."

"No," said Eowyn. "Ribhadda did not do it. He is a man of honour."

"But why would the lad lie?" asked Gimli.

"Perhaps..." said Legolas. "Perhaps Keret did not understand what he was seeing. Perhaps Ribhadda killed this Balashi in self defence?"

"That would certainly put a different complexion on it," said Gimli. "But then why did he do away with the lad's mother?"

"Gimli!" cried Eowyn. "He did *not* 'do away with the lad's mother'! We do not even know that the lad's mother is dead! Keret certainly thinks she is still alive."

## The usual suspects

"I am not sure that is reliable evidence, Melmenya," said Legolas, gently. He patted her arm. "This is what we are going to do," he said. "Gimli, Hentmirë, you are going to take the boy to the boat, and see if you can help him remember anything more—his mother's *name* would be useful. Eowyn, you are going to command the djinn to take me back to the sea cliff for one final search—"

"Take *us*," Eowyn corrected.

"I shall be flying along the cliff face, Eowyn, close to the water—"

"I am not afraid of the water, Legolas. And I want to go. I *want* Wolfram caught. Besides, the djinn needs constant supervision—he can be very obtuse—and he will not listen to *you*. You will need me."

"Well, if you are sure..." Legolas kissed her forehead. "I do not hold out much hope of finding him, Melmenya, but it is certainly worth looking. And then we will visit Ribhadda. Whatever he may or may not have done, he is our only link with Keret's mother. So we will ask him a few tactful questions."

...

Haldir had been waiting for almost an hour. "You *have* told Captain Ramess that I am here?" he asked the young man sitting at the desk beside the door.

"Yes, sir."

"And that I have important information about a crime?"

"Yes sir."

The smell inside the Guards' headquarters—stale air, sweat, urine, and far worse, from the row of prison cells—was oppressive. Haldir sighed. "I shall return in ten minutes," he said. "I need some air."

"Most of us use the back alley for that, sir; turn left at the door, left, and left again..."

*Men!* thought Haldir.

Outside, the smell was, if anything, worse. Three filthy young men were making their way down the street, slowly collecting rubbish from the shops and houses and piling it onto an ox cart. It was at times like these that Haldir most regretted having stayed in Middle-earth. *What became of rubbish in Lorien?* he wondered. *There must have been rubbish...*

Without thinking, he fled down the alley to his left—the alley that ran alongside the Guardhouse—and, despite what the young man had told him of its use, found the atmosphere there rather less unpleasant. The house on his right had a garden courtyard and, through the wrought-iron fencing, Haldir could see greenery—tall, spiky-leaved bushes with bright red flowers. *Jealously guarded*, he thought. *Men are strange creatures. They hide what should be shared and share what should be kept private.* He had reached the junction of the two alleys and—filled with a morbid curiosity—he stopped and glanced down the 'latrine'.

A door was opening in the back of the Guardhouse and something about the movement—slow, stealthy, as if the person inside was afraid of being seen—caught Haldir's attention. He drew back against the garden wall and hid himself in the shadow.

As he watched, two men came out into the alley—both, Haldir noticed, taking great care where they stepped. The first, he recognised as Captain Ramess; the second was a stranger—tall, but vastly overweight.

### **The usual suspects**

Haldir strained to hear their conversation.

"Make it look good," said Ramess.

The fat man, who was not—it was obvious—used to exerting himself, raised his hand and hit Ramess on the chin. It was nothing, but the Captain of the Guard rolled with the punch and fell backwards through the door, leaving his surprised 'attacker' with nothing to do but run away.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 9: Some answers

**Stepping carefully over the urine-soaked sand, Haldir approached the Guardhouse door. Captain Ramess was still lying on his back, but his eyes were open and he was clearly conscious.**

"Good morning," said the elf. "That was an interesting performance."

The man scrambled to his feet and attempted to draw his knife, but Haldir—too quick and too strong for him—caught him by the wrists.

"I have no interest," he said, "in your friend—I daresay he paid well for his freedom. All I want is a chance to bargain for your services."

"Let me go, then," said Ramess, calmly.

"Provided you understand," said Haldir, "that I can restrain you again whenever I want." He released the captain's arms. "Shall we go to your office?"

Reluctantly, Ramess led the way, down a twisting corridor, to a door within sight of the entrance hall.

"In here," he said.

"Perhaps you want to inform your men of the prisoner's escape before we speak?" Haldir suggested, helpfully.

Ramess opened the door. "*Wait for me here.*"

With a polite nod, Haldir entered the office.

The room was bare apart from a worn carpet, a table strewn with papers, and two chairs. There were no personal touches. *Not someone who enjoys his work*, thought Haldir.

He sat down.

A few moments later, a troupe of men jogged past the door—*Do not search too hard, mellyn nín*—then Captain Ramess entered the office, carefully closing the door behind him.

"Now," he said, "what do you want from me, Master Elf?"

Haldir described the events of the previous evening.

The man's attitude changed the moment Cyllien's name was mentioned. "Is she—?"

"She is shaken," said Haldir, "but she has not, I believe, suffered any lasting harm. She insists that she will sing at *The Silk Road* tonight. Prince Legolas has the elf, Vardamir, under lock and key and will be taking him back to Eryn Carantaur to stand trial."

"But Wolfram is still at large?"

"Yes. I do not believe that he drowned," said Haldir. "The man is a survivor. And, as long as he is free, Lady Eowyn is in danger—and possibly Cyllien, too." Haldir leaned forward. "Prince Legolas and Prince Faramir have recently rendered the *Hatja* a great service. They have—how would you put it?—they have his *ear*." He waited for Ramess to show that he understood. "In return for my silence—about what I witnessed today—I want you to mount a search for Wolfram. And I want Cyllien protected, discreetly, whenever she is at *The Silk Road*."

### The usual suspects

Ramess nodded. "I will watch her myself."

"I thought you might."

"Anything else?"

"No." Haldir rose, placed his hand over his heart, and bowed his head. Then another thought occurred to him. "Except..." he said. "The man who escaped; who was he?"

"His name is Abdi. He owns—"

"The *Blue Parrot*."

"Yes."

Haldir swore in Elvish. "Then there *is* something else. Something you should know." He leaned on the table. "Wolfram's interest in Lady Eowyn is personal," he said, "and his attack on Lady Hentmirë was opportunistic. But he told Cyllien that he had a *customer* who wanted her."

"Did he say who?"

"No. But I happen to know that—shortly before Cyllien was kidnapped—your friend, Abdi, offered Ribhadda a considerable sum of money for her."

...

"Are you sure that this is the right place?" shouted Legolas, across the djinn's chest.

Eowyn raked her streaming hair back from her face. "I think so..." she replied. "Yes—that is where I fell." She pointed to the cave mouth.

"Sweet Eru, Melmenya, it is a long way down..."

"Yes. But I think the tide was higher last night. TAKE US LOWER," she called to the djinn.

Grasping them more tightly, the djinn swooped down and hovered over the gently swelling surface of the sea. Legolas scanned the foot of the cliff.

"Can you see anything, Lassui?"

"I am not sure... Do you see that darker patch? I think it might be the mouth of another cave."

"Beneath the water?"

"Yes." He addressed the djinn. "CAN YOU FLY UNDER WATER?"

The djinn sighed. "**Mistress?**"

"ANSWER LEGOLAS."

"**Yes.**"

"Could you bear it, melmenya?"

"Of course—if it is over quickly."

Legolas smiled. "Then ask him to take us down to the dark patch," he shouted. "Tell him that if the rock is solid he must bring us up immediately. And then take a deep breath!"

...

## The usual suspects

*You saved her, thought Wolfram, for the hundredth time. You saved her, and that pricking thing stole her and took her back to elf-boy!*

He grabbed a pebble and threw it into the sea with a *thunk*.

Stunned by the djinn's blow, he had—for some moments—floated helplessly in the water. But then his predator's nature had asserted itself. He had revived, and dived beneath the waves, and, in that uncanny way he had when acting on pure instinct, he had followed his nose along the cliff face until, lungs bursting, he had swum into another cave, and broken the surface, and found himself in a pocket of sweet air.

He threw another pebble.

*Gods, the relief!* He had scrambled onto a rocky ledge, collapsed, and lain there all night.

*The truth, he thought, is that, somehow, My Lady has got you by the prick. And she will always have you by the prick. It's her or nothing.*

*So you must get out of here.* He struggled to his feet and looked down into the water.

*Oh shit...*

...

Eowyn felt a moment of heart-stopping fear as her body was engulfed by water, but she forced herself to open her eyes.

Down below her, all along the cliff foot, rocky flowerbeds were filled with sea-plants that rippled in a water-breeze, their fingery leaves home to brightly coloured fish. To her right a big sea-serpent, dark and velvety, with tiny white eyes, paused in his undulating journey to peer at her inquisitively. Beside her head, a strange bat-like creature flapped its pointed wings—

Then the djinn swept her through the cave mouth and up, up, out of the water, and into the cavern. She gasped for breath.

Legolas held a finger to his lips.

Eowyn looked around the chamber. It was small—perhaps forty feet across—and quite shallow, its rear wall and ceiling smoothly curved. There was no sign of Wolfram. And nowhere for him to hide.

"Ask the djinn to take us to that ledge, melmenya," said Legolas softly.

Eowyn relayed the instructions and they hovered over the rock. "Can you see any trace of him?" she asked.

"No. But the entire ledge is wet..." Legolas took one last look around the empty cave. "Ask the djinn to take us back, melmenya."

...

*Oh, gods' bollocks!*

Wolfram tried to relax. *Calm down; calm down; yes... That's it. Calm... Calm...* He was loose! *Oh, thank you, gods!*

He wriggled out of the narrow fissure, kicked his legs and bobbed to the surface.

*I will throttle that pricking elf!*

## The usual suspects

He shoved the gold tube he had been breathing through back into his pocket and pulled himself up onto the ledge. *Lucky elf-boy always underestimates me. He might have seen me if he'd looked a bit harder...*

He sat down, took out the tube and several other parts, and carefully reassembled it, screwing on the distinctively-shaped head, inserting the tiny sprung mechanism, adding the ridged base —

He glanced across the glittering water.

During the night he had watched the sea fall, then rise again, and now—he was sure—it was falling once more. *If I wait a few hours, he thought, until the cave is only part-flooded, I can swim out and make my way back towards the town. There are several places along the Great Royal Road where I can climb up unseen...*

*And then, My Lady, he thought, winding up the toy, I have some unfinished business with you.*

The golden phallus vibrated in his hand.

...

## Rihat

Faramir had taken Oliel into a nearby tavern. "Here," he said, removing the seal from a jar of beer. "Drink this; it will do you good."

Mechanically, the other man raised the soupy liquid to his mouth and took a swig. "Thank you."

"Eat some bread."

Oliel smiled. "Berengar is right," he said.

"Berengar?"

"You *would* make a good mother." He took another mouthful. "Did you see how she looked at me, Faramir?"

Faramir laid his hand on his friend's arm. "Yes," he said. "But do not make too much of this first meeting. She was trying to protect you."

"Protect me from what?"

Faramir told Oliel what he had learned of the man who had posed as Gwirth's husband. "It seems he was sent to capture her—or to kill her."

"But *she* killed *him*?"

"That is what the doctor believes." Faramir took a draught of beer.

"No wonder she says she has changed. All this time, when I thought *I* was plumbing the depths—breaking laws, befriending slavers, turning a blind eye to... to *everything*..." He shook his head. "All this time, my sweet wife was outdoing me..."

"She has survived in this—this nightmare world—for *seven* years, Oliel," said Faramir. "She has shown remarkable courage and tenacity."

"What shall I do, Faramir? What would *you* do?"

"Me? I would take her back to Gondor, as soon as possible," said Faramir. "Even if..." He



## The usual suspects

pressed the man's arm. "Even if it does not turn out as you hoped—even if you can no longer be together as man and wife—she will be safer in Gondor. We can still find her a refuge—with Berengar and me in Caras Arnen, perhaps, or in Eryn Carantaur with Legolas... No one could touch her *there*."

"Yes," said Oliel. "Yes, of course—thank you, Faramir." Then he sighed. "But it will not be easy to persuade her, my friend. And we can hardly force her—we would more than likely find our throats cut."

He might have intended it as a joke, but Faramir answered in deadly earnest. "No," he said, grimly, "we cannot force her; so you must find some way to persuade her."

...

## Carhilivren

"Is this really *yours*?" asked Keret, staring up at the *Early Bird*.

"Yes," said Hentmirë. She took the boy's hand and led him up the gang plank, with Gimli following behind. "Good morning, Captain Mutallu," she called, brightly.

"Good morning, my Lady!" The man immediately finished giving the Mate his orders and came over to greet her. "How are you feeling this morning, my Lady?"

"Very well, thank you," said Hentmirë. She leaned forward and added, quietly. "It is the water, you know."

"Ah—yes."

"This is Keret," she continued. "Would you mind if I took him to sit up there," she pointed to a wooden locker on the aft deck, "so that we can watch the boats for a while?"

"Of course not, my Lady. I will ask the cook to bring you some refreshments."

They settled themselves on the locker—Hentmirë to the left, Gimli to the right, and Keret sandwiched between—and looked out across the bay.

Since the 'Raging Calm' had descended on Carhilivren, many ships had been forced to extend their stay and now languished at anchor—their sails stowed, their colours hanging limply in the still air—whilst their crews took the opportunity to clean, paint and refit them. In the next berth, kilted Kurians were patching the great sail of a long, papyrus cargo ship, helped and hindered by two tame baboons.

"Look at the monkeys!" cried Keret, laughing.

Hentmire handed him a tankard of lemonade. "Tell us about your mother, my dear," she said, passing another to Gimli.

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, what was her name?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "I called her Mummy."

...

The djinn swept Legolas and Eowyn through the balmy air and deposited them, still damp, at the end of the Great Royal Road, where the private villas gave way to tenements, and the bustle of the city began. Eowyn carefully stowed him, inside his lamp, in her carpet bag. Then,

## The usual suspects

hand-in-hand, she and Legolas wound their way through the busy streets to *The Silk Road*, where Hiram admitted them immediately.

Ribhadda was behind the bar, checking—as was usual in the morning—his inventory of spirits. “Please,” he said, gesturing to one of the tables, “sit down. Is this about Cyllien?” He took a seat opposite them. “She came back about an hour ago, but I haven’t had a chance to speak to her.”

“No,” said Legolas. “This is something else. This concerns a young boy that we—for want of a better word—rescued yesterday. His name is Keret.”

“Keret...”

“Yes. He says he knows you.”

“Ah,” said Ribhadda, but whether he was admitting that he knew Keret, or merely acknowledging the question, Legolas could not tell.

Eowyn tried a different approach. “The boy has asked us to help him find his mother,” she said.

“I see.”

“He says that she disappeared on her way to see you.”

*Oh, Melmenya!* thought Legolas. *Now he will lie to us!*

But Ribhadda seemed genuinely surprised by the information. “On her way *here*?”

“Did she arrive?” asked Legolas.

“No. No, I don’t believe she did. When was this, exactly?”

Legolas decided to follow Eowyn’s lead. “Keret says that he saw you—the night before his mother disappeared—kill someone at the Circus. A man called Balashi.”

Ribhadda rose to his feet. Legolas and Eowyn looked up at him in surprise. “You are saying that Riya disappeared the next day?”

“Riya?”

“The boy’s mother. I did not realise it was so soon after.”

“You *did* kill this man, then?” asked Eowyn, softly.

Ribhadda replied with perfect frankness: “Yes, my Lady. I *did* kill him, because I thought it would protect Riya and the boy. It seems I was wrong.”

Eowyn sighed with relief.

Beneath the table, Legolas sought her hand and squeezed it, gently. “Protect them from what?” he asked.

“Let me fetch us all a drink,” said Ribhadda. He walked over to the bar and poured out three glasses of spirits.

“Here—I thought that Balashi was planning to hand them over to Abdi.” He knocked back his drink. “Riya was Abdi’s slave—he paid a mint for her. She was quite beautiful then—tall, slender, face like...” He sighed. “She looked a lot like Cyllien. Pretty soon, Abdi was treating her like a wife—he got careless around her—let her see too much of his operation—and he

### The usual suspects

underestimated her. She saw so much, she went to the authorities."

"What did they do?" asked Legolas.

"What they were paid to do—they told Abdi. Riya managed to escape—don't ask me how—and hid herself at the Circus. That's where she found Keret."

"Found him?"

"He is not her natural son."

"I do not think that Keret knows that," said Legolas.

"No, probably not." Ribhadda returned to the bar to refill his glass. "Anyway," he said, "that's how I got to know her—the boy broke into my storeroom, I found him, locked him up to teach him a lesson, and she came looking for him... She had a real way with her, in spite of how she made a living—real classy way."

He gave Eowyn one of his rare smiles, letting his eyes linger on her for a moment. "Some women just have it."

He knocked back his drink. "After that, I saw a good deal of both of them."

"But she was still seeing other men, too?" asked Legolas.

"That was her choice," said Ribhadda. "One day, I went down to the Circus and ran into another of her regular customers. And I recognised him."

"Balashi."

"Yes. Abdi's new right-hand man."

"Did he know who Riya was?" asked Eowyn.

Ribhadda nodded. "I don't know what he thought he was doing—he'd been visiting her for a week or two. Maybe he'd taken a liking to her, maybe it was his way of interrogating her—I couldn't take the risk. I threatened him; we fought; I killed him."

"Keret saw you, and told his mother," said Legolas.

"And she came to see you the next day," said Eowyn.

"She never arrived. Though, of course, I can't prove it."

"We believe you," said Legolas.

"Keret is convinced that his mother is still alive," added Eowyn.

"But would she really have abandoned the boy?" asked Legolas.

Ribhadda thought for a moment. "Like I say, Riya had class. And there's no doubt she loved that boy. But she also had something else—the strongest instinct for survival I've ever come across—*excuse me*—"

Someone had begun hammering at the main doors. Ribhadda went to investigate.

Eowyn turned to Legolas. "If Riya was a slave," she said, quietly, "do you think she came from Gondor?"

## The usual suspects

...

"Good morning," said Haldir. "I am sorry to disturb you, but I have some important news and—ah, *Legolas*—"

"Do you want a drink?" asked Ribhadda, indicating that the elf should join the others at the table.

"No—no, thank you."

Haldir told them what he had seen in the alley behind the Guardhouse, and of the deal he had struck with Captain Ramess. "Of course," he said, "if Wolfram is—as we suspect—working for Abdi, there is little chance that Ramess's men will ever 'find' him." He turned to Ribhadda. "I think that Cyllien is still at risk."

"Yes," said the man, "so do I—I did even before this—that's why the back door's locked, the windows are barred, and Aqhat is camped outside her dressing room."

"Has she told you that she has agreed to come North with us?"

"No," said Ribhadda, "she hasn't told me that."

"I am sorry," said Haldir. "I know she attracts customers—"

"I think I'll survive," replied Ribhadda. In his own laconic way he was giving the two elves his blessing.

Haldir met his gaze, and smiled, gratefully. "Is she here? Do you mind if I have a word with her?"

Ribhadda gestured towards the stage door. "Be my guest." He turned back to Legolas and Eowyn. "You say you promised Keret you'd find his mother?"

"If we can," said Eowyn.

Ribhadda nodded, gravely. "Be careful. Abdi has eyes all over Carhivilvren, and if Riya *is* still alive she has good reason to be in hiding. If you go asking round for her—"

"We could expose her," said Legolas. "We understand. Do not worry, Master Ribhadda. We shall be very discreet."

...

"Who is it?"

"Haldir."

"You had better come in."

Haldir entered; Cyllien spoke to his reflection in her dressing table mirror. "You left my bed without saying goodbye." She leaned forward, and applied some stain to her lips with a fine brush.

"You were sleeping," said Haldir, "and I thought you needed the chance to heal..."

"What do you want?"

"Oh, Cyllien!" Haldir pulled up a chair and sat, watching intently as she applied paint to her eyelids.

### The usual suspects

"It is not going to work," she said.

"That depends on what you mean by work," said Haldir. "I care for you, Cyllien, I do—"

"But there's a 'but' coming."

"I have no idea how *you* feel; and I am finding it hard to trust my own feelings."

"I've said it before—you need to get away from *her*."

"Eowyn?"

"Mistress Perfect."

Haldir grinned. "*Cyllien!*"

For the first time, the elleth turned and looked at him directly. "That expression does not suit you, Haldir," she said. "You look better angry—I imagine you look very good killing orcs." Haldir's smile broadened. "I don't think that Ilúvatar ever intended you to be happy—you just don't have the face for it. And I am quite sure he never intended *me* to be happy."

She laid down her kohl pot and walked over to the wardrobe, stepping carefully over the gowns that Wolfram had thrown on the floor. "*They* will have to go. Perhaps Mistress Perfect would like them..." She took two more from the cupboard. "Which one," she asked, holding up each in turn.

"Dark blue," said Haldir. "Dark colours suit you." Then he added, "And I think I *could* be happy. I think I would enjoy sharing my life—"

"Of course," said Cyllien. "But would you enjoy sharing it with *me*?"

"If you had asked me, before I met you," said Haldir, "to describe the woman—the elleth—I wanted, I would have said a comrade; a warrior; someone strong and resilient; someone who carried her femininity *lightly*—"

"Mistress Perfect."

"But, this morning, watching you paint your lips and choose your gown, I realise that I enjoy it. You are very feminine, Cyllien—the way you look, the way you behave—and I enjoy it—"

"That," said Cyllien, "is lust talking."

"Perhaps," said Haldir. "But there is more. Last night, seeing you in the cave, so helpless, so frightened, I wanted to protect you."

"And that's why you left me and went to find *her*?"

"I went to find her because I had promised Legolas I would. He is my commander, my ruler, she is his lady, and she was in immediate danger. Had that not been the case, I would never have left your side."

"Haldir..." She draped her dark blue gown over the back of her dressing table chair and settled herself on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Whatever I may feel for you," she said, "I will not share you. So—can you ever be free of her?"

"I shall always care for her, Cyllien. And admire her. And I shall always owe her my life. But I no longer love her. She is my past."

"Am I your future?"

### The usual suspects

"Do you want to be?"

Cyllien did not reply.

"We are two damaged elves, *Tithen Dúlinn*; all we can do is try to—"

"Yes," said Cyllien. "Yes, I do. I *do* want to come back to Eryn Carantaur with you. I *do* want to share your *talan*. I *do* want to braid your hair in the morning and unlace your boots at night." She sighed. "So Mistress Perfect was right, and now she is going to be so full of herself."

Laughing, Haldir drew her against his chest, and held her close.

...

### Rihat: the war lord's palace

"Must we, Faroth?" asked Berengar. "Could we not—"

"We must," said Faramir.

"I have not even seen her face!"

"Would that make a difference?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On whether I have to marry her or not."

Faramir patted his arm. "I will not let it come to that. I promise."

The war lord's palace—in contrast to the tall, narrow buildings surrounding it—was wide, and low, and surrounded on all four sides by a walled enclosure filled with carefully-tended greenery.

"Her father has money," said Berengar.

"Her father has *power*," said Faramir. "Give me the ring." He approached the gate and summoned the gatekeeper, showing him the token.

The man bowed. "You are expected, my Lords," he said, opening the gate. "Please make your way to the house, without stepping from the path."

Faramir guided the reluctant suitor along the pure white paving stones.

"Thank the gods I cleaned my boots," whispered Berengar.

They were greeted at the palace doors by a doorkeeper, who led them into the reception hall. At one end of the chamber, on a low dais, sat two elaborate thrones; two simple chairs had been positioned before them.

"Take a seat, my Lords," said the servant. "My Lord Abdosir will join you presently."

Ten minutes passed. Then a liveried servant emerged from a door beside the dais. "Stand!" he cried.

Berengar glanced at Faramir. Both men rose to their feet.

### **The usual suspects**

The servant stepped aside to admit four warriors, armed with drawn scimitars, who swept into the chamber and took up position, either side of the dais, swords raised.

"Oh no," whispered Berengar.

Then two heralds climbed onto the platform and, standing at either side of the thrones, raised their trumpets and blew a fanfare, whilst slave girls, wearing nothing but jewelled belts, showered the waiting men with petals.

"Oh, *Faroth*—"

At last, a small, rotund man, wearing a magnificent robe of red and gold, and a jewelled headdress surmounted by a peacock feather crest, entered the chamber, climbed, with great dignity, onto the dais, and seated himself on the right-hand throne.

He studied them with shrewd, dark eyes. "Which of you is Berengar?"

The secretary froze, eyes fixed on the floor until, at a nudge from Faramir, his head shot up and he stared back at the war lord, looking confused and, for once, something less than beautiful.

"So," said Abdosir, "you are the young villain that thinks he will steal my daughter."

...

### **Carhilivren: the bedroom...**

"Ah!" Eowyn collapsed upon Legolas' chest.

The elf, reaching his climax a moment later, arched his back, stayed rigid—"AI!"—then relaxed. He gathered her close. "Melmenya... You will kill me..." he murmured.

"I? It was you who pounced on *me*."

"You had taken all your clothes off."

"To *bathe*."

Legolas laughed, and nuzzled her cheek.

"At least," said Eowyn, raising her head, "we have lifted your black mood."

She pushed herself up on her hands and gazed down at him, her cheeks still flushed from lovemaking, her skin glistening in the sunlight, tendrils of damp hair clinging to her shoulders.

Legolas reached up and touched her cheek. "You are *glowing*, Melmenya..." Then, "What do you mean, black mood?"

"Are you worried about Keret's mother?"

He shook his head. "I am worried about Keret—I think the woman is dead." He came up on his elbows and licked away a bead of sweat as it ran down her throat. He was still hard inside her.

"Oh..." Eowyn closed her eyes. "Why do you think that?"

"Why else would she have abandoned a small boy?"

"There could be many reasons—"

### The usual suspects

"It is not natural for an adult to desert a child." He brushed his lips over her breast and kissed a damp, hard nipple. "Mmmm."

"Ah..." Eowyn arched her back in response. "No. But Abdi could have threatened the boy: '*Come back to me or I will kill him*'."

"If she went back to Abdi," said Legolas, kissing the other nipple, "then she *is* dead. Do we stop looking?"

"Mmmm? No—we made Keret a promise."

"Suppose we find her," he slid his hands down to her waist, pulling her hips closer, "and she no longer wants anything to do with him?"

Eowyn bent over him, bearing down on him. "Could we take him home with us?"

"Of course." He grasped her buttocks, and began to thrust. "But are you sure..."

"I do not mean adopt him—*oh*—but we could find him somewhere safe to live—find them both—*oh*—if it came to that..." They were making love in earnest now. "Oh, my *elf!*" She leaned down and pressed her lips to his ear, "You are a *stallion*, Lassui."

\*\*\*\*\*



## Chapter 10: The suitor

**"Well?" said Abdosir, "What do you have to say for yourself?"**

Berengar stared up at him, dumbly.

"You *can* speak?"

Faramir cleared his throat. "My Lord Abdosir..."

"Who are you?"

"I am Lord Berengar's friend," said Faramir, cautiously.

"Why does he not speak?"

"I believe he is overwhelmed, my Lord."

Abdosir waved his hand. Immediately, his retinue—including the naked slave girls—disappeared. "Come here," he said, beckoning to Berengar, and indicating the throne beside him. "*Here.*"

Berengar stumbled onto the dais and—after a moment's hesitation—perched uneasily on the edge of the seat. The war lord, who was, it seemed, short-sighted, peered into his face. "Yes," he said, "yes—you are just the sort of handsome ne'er-do-well that *would* steal a young girl's heart."

"With respect, my Lord," said Faramir, "Berengar rescued your daughter from bandits, who attacked the caravan with—I am convinced—the sole aim of kidnapping her. No doubt they are known to you?"

Abdosir inclined his head, as if to say, *They may be...*

"In single-handedly defending your daughter and her women—who were otherwise unprotected—Lord Berengar showed great courage. And it was his gallantry that led her"—he caught sight of the father's expression, and changed course, slightly—"graciously to bestow her favour upon him."

"What are you saying?" asked Abdosir, his eyes, narrowing.

"I... I do not want..." stammered Berengar.

"Lord Berengar has a previous attachment," said Faramir.

"That means nothing," said Abdosir. He rose from his throne, exuding such a sense of his own worth—despite his small size—that Berengar automatically leaped to his feet.

"Sit down!" said the war lord, impatiently. He walked to the window and, gazing out over his precious garden, he said, in businesslike way, "My Bint-Anath is also betrothed, Lord Berengar—to the Lord of Ar Khalba. And their alliance would give *me* undisputed control of the Silk Road from Ar Khalba to Rihat—the final and most lucrative stage of the journey from the East."

He turned his back to the window. "Until she met you, Lord Berengar, my daughter was perfectly content with the prospect. She is a sensible girl—and she could see that the man is far too old to trouble her much beyond the wedding night, and more than rich enough to keep her in the manner to which she's accustomed."

He sighed. "But the moment *you* appeared, Lord Berengar, all that changed. You are a menace,

## The usual suspects

sir. *A menace.*"

"My lord—" began Faramir.

Abdosir held up his hand. "Let me finish. Bint-Anath refuses to marry her betrothed. No doubt I could force her, but that has never been my way. So *you* must marry her, Lord Berengar; you must marry her and make her happy. And, if the fates should choose to make her a *widow*—"

"Oh gods," whispered Faramir.

"—she will mourn; and then remarry. I shall send her to receive your proposal."

He left the chamber.

...

"Faroth..."

"*Trust* me, Berengar," said Faramir. "Trust me, and stay *behind* me."

...

The liveried servant emerged, once more, from the door beside the dais. The warrior escort swept in again, scimitars drawn, and took up their positions. They were followed, this time, by a group of veiled women who climbed gracefully onto the platform and sat cross-legged beside the two thrones.

Then the lady herself appeared, dressed from head to foot in cloth-of-gold, and wearing a fine golden veil that clearly revealed her strong, but attractive, features.

She seated herself on the left-hand throne. Faramir scanned her entourage, looking for the woman who had previously acted as interpreter. "You may speak directly to me, my Lord," said the lady, correctly reading his actions, "I do understand your language."

"Ah..." Faramir placed his hand upon his heart. "My Lady Bint-Anath," he said, with a low, sweeping bow, "may the gods bless you and keep you in health." He raised his eyes and studied her face. "Your beauty is praised the length and breadth of Rihat, my Lady, but I can see that mere words cannot do it justice."

He approached the throne. Berengar followed at his heels.

"Thank you my Lord." Bint-Anath seemed unconvinced, but she accepted his compliment with a gracious bow of the head. Then, unconsciously, she craned her neck, trying to see past his shoulder to Berengar.

Faramir shifted his weight slightly, and blocked her view. "Your father," he continued, "has granted me permission to declare my love—"

"*Your* love, my lord?" The young woman frowned.

"If you would consent to be my wife, Lady Bint-Anath," said Faramir, grasping her hand and impetuously raising it to his lips, "it would make me the happiest man in Middle-earth."

There was a chorus of gasps from the seated women.

"My Lord," said Bint-Anath, "your proposal is unexpected. Most unexpected." She withdrew her hand. "I am, of course, honoured to receive it... But I cannot accept it. My heart, my Lord, already belongs to another."

### The usual suspects

Faramir's smile vanished. "May I ask to whom?" he said, coldly.

The woman rose from the throne, stepped down from the dais and, cunningly side-stepping Faramir, approached Berengar, one hand outstretched, like a virgin trying to tame a unicorn. "Have *you* nothing to say to me, my Lord?" she asked, softly.

"Oh, my Lady..." whispered Berengar.

"What is this?" demanded Faramir. "Am I to understand that you refuse *me* because you prefer my *servant*?"

Bint-Anath was clearly shaken by this last revelation but, to her credit, she recovered almost immediately. "Perhaps Master Berengar *is* lowly born," she said, "but he has the courage of a king. And, as my husband, he would have the love and respect of both his wife and her people."

"I will kill him, Lady, before I permit him to marry you," said Faramir.

Berengar, entirely absorbed by the drama unfolding around him, cried out in dismay. Bint-Anath immediately came to his rescue. "You shall not!" she said, stepping between them, arms outstretched, ready to take the imaginary dagger in her own breast.

"My Lady," said Berengar, finally finding his voice. "This cannot be..."

"My Lord?" Lowering her arms, the woman turned to face him.

"I am too far below you, my Lady; much too far. And I have sworn an oath of fealty to my Lord..." He nodded towards Faramir. "My life belongs to him."

"But can you trust him, Berengar? Shall you be safe with him?"

"I believe I will, my Lady." He took her ring from his pocket and held it out to her.

"Oh!" Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh no! Keep it my Lord! Please! Keep it!"

And fled she from the room, followed by her ladies.

...

"You're a canny one," said Abdosir, entering by a concealed door on the far side of the dais. "Very canny. Who are you—someone important?"

"Faramir, Prince of Ithilien, Steward of Gondor, at your service, my Lord," said Faramir, with a bow.

"*Prince?*" Abdosir came up close and peered, short-sightedly, at the taller man's face. "A prince—but *still* not to my girl's liking—shame." With a shrewd smile, he stepped back, and bowed, stiffly. "I am fully aware, Prince of Ithilien, of the service you have just rendered me. If, during your stay in Rihat, you have need of my protection, you need only use my name."

...

"*What* a woman," said Berengar, as they walked slowly back to the Boarding House.

Faramir gave him a sharp glance.

"I *mean*," said the secretary, "I mean... What a *woman*, Faroth. The way she stood up to you! The way she protected *me*! She deserves—"

## The usual suspects

"A virile young husband," said Faramir. "I know. But she will marry this elderly Lord and she will find herself a virile young lover instead. Trust me."

...

## Carhiliwren

Legolas descended the cellar steps with a heavy heart.

The small, square room had been turned into a cell, simply furnished with a bed, a table, and two chairs, but someone—*Hentmirë*, he thought—had also provided a pretty blue coverlet, a few books, and a box of sweetmeats.

The elf was sitting at the table, reading.

Legolas took the other chair. "How did it ever come to this, *mellon*?" he asked, softly.

Vardamir laid down his book. "What do you mean?"

"You should have come to me, at Minas Athrad, when Finrod first recognised you—I would have —"

"You would have *what*? Sent me back to Rivendell to clean latrines until the end of days? I am a *craftsman*."

"It was a punishment," said Legolas. "It was already lenient and, if you had worked hard and shown remorse, your lot would have improved, in time."

"Would *you* have submitted to that?"

"I like to think," said Legolas, "that if I were found guilty of a crime, then, yes, I would serve my sentence with dignity."

Vardamir smiled. "And do you imagine that Lady Eowyn would be so eager to lie with you if you smelled of other elves' urine?"

Legolas ignored him. "When you ran away from Rivendell and came to Eryn Carantaur, did it never occur to you that someone would recognise you?"

Vardamir said nothing.

"And when Finrod *did* recognise you, you tried to kill him."

"That," said Vardamir, very quietly, "was a moment of madness."

"Then you waited by the Healing Cave, hoping to finish him off."

"No."

"You were seen—"

"I just wanted to be sure that he was all right—before I left."

"That might be more credible had you not immediately allied yourself with Wolfram."

"He was my friend."

"Vardamir!" Legolas sighed. "When we return to Eryn Carantaur, you will be charged with attempted murder and you will be put on trial—but I am willing to speak on your behalf—"

### The usual suspects

"Provided?"

"Provided you tell me where to find Wolfram."

"He is dead."

"No."

Vardamir looked up sharply. "You did not find him?"

"No. Where is he hiding?"

Vardamir shook his head. "He is my friend."

"Do you honestly think that *he* would protect *you*? He is a liar, a thief and a murderer; he cares only for himself."

Vardamir looked Legolas straight in the eye. "He may be everything you say he is," he said. "But he is my friend. And I am an elf."

...

In the hours that Wolfram had spent waiting for tide to go out, he had devised a foolproof plan.

*First, I have to get out of the cave.*

That had proved much easier than expected, and he had had no difficulty getting ashore, climbing out where the old dirt road curved away from the sea and threaded its way through the jumble of brick, wood and palm-frond shacks that were home to the majority Carhivilvren's poor.

*Then, I have to disguise myself well enough to get close to her without elf-boy seeing me.*

That had been where his true genius had shown itself. Once on dry land, he had made his way through the patchwork of messy gardens, looking for something very particular...

*Yes!* With a quick glance about him—just to make sure that anyone who *was* looking did not care—he had grabbed a handful of washing and tucked it under his arm. Then he had followed the smell of urine to the nearest public 'latrine' and, in relative privacy, slipped the clothes on over his own.

*Now, he thought, my own mother wouldn't recognise me—not that my mother would have recognised me before...*

...

Hentmirë bustled through the house, rounding up the stragglers. "The picnic is ready," she called, "the carriage is waiting for us!"

"If that water gives you any more energy, *gwendithen*," said Legolas, "I shall have to tie you to a chair..."

...

*Next, thought Wolfram, I must find the house.*

He shuffled along, slowly making his way towards the Great Royal Road, ignored by everyone but the occasional kindly soul who stepped aside to let him pass.

## The usual suspects

*I should have worked a bit harder on Cyllien, he thought. I should have made her describe the house... Still, all that golden hair should be easy enough to spot.*

Starting on the very edge of the town he hobbled past each villa, scanning the windows, the balconies, and the courtyard gardens for any sign of his prey. Several times, after catching a glimpse of a slender, graceful figure, he bought himself a few more minutes by leaning against the garden wall to catch his breath and exchange a few words with the gatekeeper, until he was certain that it was not her.

But his disguise was hot, and hiding his limp was tiring, and he had just started looking for somewhere to sit down when Lady Luck chose to smile on him yet again.

A large open carriage, drawn by four grey horses, came gliding past and drew smartly to a halt a few yards further down the road. Wolfram laid a hand on the wall beside him and—genuinely breathless now—waited.

Moments passed...

Then the villa gates opened and a noisy party emerged and climbed aboard—a small boy dragging a familiar-looking dwarf, then Cyllien with her big elf, and then pricking elf-boy, with the fat little woman on one arm, and My Lady herself on the other.

Wolfram watched her, dressed in a tiny golden bodice and pair of filmy red trousers—*Those things cannot be legal*—and carrying a parasol, board the carriage. Then elf-boy followed her, closed the door, and they set off.

*Now, thought Wolfram, all I have to do is wait for an opportunity.*

...

The second visit to the Turquoise Gardens proved just as soothing to the spirit as the first. This time, the friends rowed out across the shallow lake to the little island, and ate their picnic beneath its sunshades. Then—after Keret had told them the story of the elf, the dwarf, and the golden-haired princess, and Gimli had described his first encounter with The Lady, and Legolas and Cyllien had sung the *Song of Nimrodel*—they crossed back to the jetty, and spent the remainder of the afternoon strolling amongst the trees.

...

"I have been thinking," said Eowyn, as Legolas helped her step from the rowing boat, "that we should visit the Circus and see if we can find out what happened to Riya. There may be someone there who knows something. We should go tonight, and take Keret with us."

"Will it not be very late for a child to be out?" asked Legolas, turning to help Hentmirë. "In such a place?"

Eowyn laughed. "He has been living in that and similar places, all by himself, ever since his mother disappeared, my love. And tonight he will be with us. Nothing will happen to him with us."

...

"Is this the Forest?" asked Keret, throwing his arms wide and whirling around.

"The Forest? No, lad. No, this is a garden." Gimli looked around. "A Forest has no walls: its trees are wild things."

"Do *you* live in the Forest?"

### The usual suspects

"No lad," Gimli chuckled, "I live in a cave, like any sensible dwarf—though I do, on occasion visit Legolas."

"And *he* lives in the Forest?"

"Oh yes. In a great *aerial* city, built high in the trees—"

"I would like to see the Forest," said Keret.

...

"Are you glad you came after all?" asked Legolas, joining Cyllien, who was leaning on the fence beside the jetty.

The elleth smiled. "It is very pleasant; but I am not a wood elf."

Legolas laughed. "So I have heard."

"Ah. Where *is* Miss—Eowyn?"

"She has gone with Hentmirë to find a rest room. Where is Haldir?"

"He has gone back to the carriage to fetch me a parasol."

"Does an elleth need a parasol?"

"No. But he was anxious to do something for me."

Legolas grinned. "Shall we wait for them over here?"

He led her to one of the tiled benches that threaded their way through the fig groves. "It is always good to be amongst trees," said Legolas, "even if it is only in a garden."

"Haldir tells me that the trees of Eryn Carantaur are like mallorns," said Cyllien.

Legolas shook his head. "They are neither quite so old nor quite so tall as mallorns," he admitted, "and their leaves turn a deep blood red as they mature. But they are beautiful, and we do enjoy living amongst their branches. Of course, *you* are used to the sophistication of Rivendell—"

"No," said Cyllien. "Not now. It is many years since I lived in Rivendell."

"Why did you leave?"

"To sail West."

"Were you taken by slavers?"

"No, I..." She smiled, sadly. "On the way to the Grey Havens, I met a Man."

"A *mortal*?"

"Yes. A fine man—handsome, strong, brave—an adventurer. So full of *life*..."

"But he died."

"Yes."

"I am sorry."

### The usual suspects

"And *I* did not die," said Cyllien. "I thought I would. But I didn't."

"How long ago?" asked Legolas, gently.

"A hundred years... Perhaps less... I do not know."

"I am so sorry."

"So it is time," said the elleth, after a few moments. "Time for a new start."

"With Haldir."

"Yes. We are neither of us young, Prince Legolas, and we have both had our hearts broken. Perhaps that will help us make a future together."

"I do hope so, Cyllien."

"Thank you." She turned towards him and said, very quietly, "What of *you*, Prince Legolas? What will happen to you when Eowyn—when she—?"

"Do you not sense it?"

"Sense what?"

"Eowyn is no longer mortal."

"I do not understand."

"She has been transformed—a gift of the Valar." He smiled. "She is not quite as *we* are, but, barring a fatal wound, she will never be taken from me. I thought that another elf might sense it."

"No," said Cyllien, softly. "So she really *is* perfect."

...

They returned just after sunset, still laughing and joking—Wolfram caught a few snatches of the dwarf's tale about the big elf's inability to hold his liquor.

He watched them all go inside the house, then he watched the doorkeeper turn the key in the gate lock, and shuffle back to his little hut.

*Ten minutes and he will be fast asleep, he thought. Completely useless.*

He waited.

An hour passed.

Two.

Then a big slave slipped out through the gates, and crossed the road, coming straight towards him.

*Surely they have not recognised me...?*

*No, if elf-boy had seen me he would be coming out himself. With his fancy knives.*

The slave approached him warily. "Here," he said, holding out a small basket, "my lady saw you from the window. She wants you to have this..." He handed it to Wolfram, then took a



## The usual suspects

folded blanket from under his arm. "And this."

Carefully keeping his face hidden, Wolfram accepted the charity graciously. "Give your lady my thanks," he said, disguising his voice. "May the gods smile upon her."

He waited until the slave was safely back inside the villa, then examined the contents of his basket. There was bread and cheese, chicken, olives, some dried fruits and a jug of ale.

He shook his head. *Like taking sweetmeats from a baby.*

...

"Are we going now?" cried Keret, jumping up and down with excitement.

"In a minute," said Eowyn.

"Why can't *Gimli* come with us?"

"Because you wore him out this afternoon. He needs to rest..."

Hentmirë came downstairs wearing a thick mantle and carrying a blanket. Keret bounded up to her. "Are we going now?"

"Yes!" She took his hand and led him out into the courtyard.

With a grin, Legolas offered Eowyn his arm, and they followed. The carriage was already waiting at the gates.

"Can I have a flag?" asked Keret, jumping up the carriage steps.

"We will all have flags," said Hentmirë, climbing up behind him. "Which colour do you want?"

"Red," said Keret. He waved his hands in the air. "Come on the Reds!"

...

*The Reds? Wolfram watched the carriage roll away. They're going to the Circus... Pity I can't follow them—it would be a good place to get her alone—*

"Do you want a ride?"

Startled, Wolfram turned towards the voice.

*Gods' bollocks!* Preoccupied with his prey, he had wandered out into the middle of the road and forced the traffic—a horse and cart laden with fruit and vegetables—to stop behind him.

"Thank you, young man," he said, disguising his voice. "To the Circus."

"The Circus! I'm only going as far as the souk..." The farmer looked down at Wolfram for a moment or two, then sighed. "All right, I suppose it will only take a few minutes more. Can you get up by yourself or do you need a hand?"

Wolfram climbed up by himself.

"You know," said the farmer, as he jerked the reins, "you really need to watch where you're going. I nearly ran over you in the dark."

...

## The usual suspects

"Why is everybody so excited?" asked Legolas. He leaned out of the carriage and gazed at the massive building up ahead.

All around its oval wall, queues of people were waiting—to enter its cavernous gates, or to buy savouries and sweetmeats and jugs of ale from the food stalls beneath its arches, or to waste their money on souvenirs from its little shops. Everyone was talking and laughing and greeting friends. And everyone seemed to be waving a coloured flag—red or green or white or blue.

"They are all expecting their team to win tonight," said Hentmirë. "But most of them will be very disappointed when the races are over."

Legolas shook his head in disbelief. "Where did you live, Keret?" he asked.

"Round the back," said the boy. "Near the animal sheds. Do you want to go now? Only, we're not supposed to go there before the races."

"Why not?" asked Eowyn.

Keret shrugged his shoulders. "The uncles don't like it."

Legolas cleared his throat. "We will wait until afterwards," he said.

...

*The Silk Road* was buzzing.

Cyllien's absence on the previous night had disappointed many patrons but today the story of her daring rescue by elves from the North had spread through the town like wildfire, and Ribhadda's regulars had been joined by many members of Carhivilvren's fashionable set—all anxious to see and be seen whilst watching the exotic singer.

From his privileged position in front of the stage, Haldir scanned the room. True to his word, Captain Ramess, standing beside Ribhadda at the bar, was personally watching over Cyllien. In addition, two of his men, dressed like ordinary patrons, but still instantly recognisable, were sitting close to the stage door.

There had been no sign of Wolfram. *But, then, the man is invisible when he wants to be,* thought Haldir. *If he were not such a poisonous warg, I would suspect he had elven ancestry.*

As if by magic, the crowd fell silent. Haldir turned back towards the stage. The musicians began to play and Cyllien emerged from behind her curtain, wearing the dark blue gown he had chosen, and singing.

*"Night and day, you are the one  
Only you beneath the moon or under the sun  
Whether near to me, or far  
It's no matter darling where you are  
I think of you...  
Day and night,  
Night and day..."*

Haldir smiled. Cyllien smiled back, mouthing, *Later.*

*"Night and day, why is it so  
That this longing for you follows wherever I go..."*

...

## The usual suspects

### Rihat

Berengar opened his eyes.

Someone was tapping at the door. *Faroth? No—he would not knock. Oriel perhaps.*

There was no light in the room, but the sky outside was cloudless and the moon almost full. Berengar threw back the sheet, swung his legs off the bed and reached for his shirt.

"Master Berengar..."

The voice was familiar. Low and—*Oh gods!—female.* Berengar dropped his shirt back on the bed and walked over to the door. "Lady Bint-Anath?"

"Please—open the door..."

Berengar lifted the latch and opened the door a narrow crack. "My lady, what are you doing here?"

She was smaller than he remembered, and younger looking, and she had cropped her hair and dressed herself like a boy, in dark trousers and a loose shirt.

"Come with me," she whispered, holding out her hand.

Berengar's heart sank under a welter of conflicting emotions. "Oh, my Lady! I thought we had agreed—"

"You are in danger."

"No, my Lady. No." He opened the door fully. "Come in here, and I will explain."

"Into your *bedroom*?" She hesitated for just a moment; then she stepped inside.

"Sit down, my Lady," said Berengar, gesturing towards the bed. He closed and bolted the door and lit a candle. "Where do I start?"

He sat down beside her. "You are beautiful and brave and truly, far, far above my station," he said. "And yet you have chosen to bestow your favour on me..."

"You saved my life, Berengar," said Bint-Anath.

"Without my friends I would soon have been bested, my lady. I am no fighter—"

"I could see that, my love. That only makes your courage more noble."

Berengar smiled. "Thank you, my Lady. But... There is no way to explain this without risk of offending you, so I will simply say it. If I *could* love a woman—if I could *make* love to a woman—it would be you, my Lady. *If.*"

"*If?*" Confused, Bint-Anath stared at his face, as if the answer were written in his features. Then her hands flew up to her face. "Oh!"

"I am sorry my Lady."

Bint-Anath's eyes filled with tears. "But I... Could you not... *Many* of your kind marry..."

"No, my Lady."

"I do not want to marry an old man," she whispered. "I want *you.*"

### **The usual suspects**

"I am so sorry."

She ran her hand through her dark locks. "I have cut off my hair..."

"I know." Berengar smiled. "It looks nice."

"What am I to do, Berengar?"

Berengar shook his head. "I do not know, my Lady. But if there is anything that I—"

He turned towards the door. Someone was rattling the handle.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 11: The race

**By the time Wolfram arrived at the Circus there was no sign of My Lady's carriage.**

*Too late, he thought. Too pricking late... I'll never find her—not in this crowd.* He climbed down from the cart, thanking the young farmer, and shuffled towards the nearest gate. *What do I do now?*

"Did you see him?" cried a breathless voice at his elbow. "Did you see his *face*? And those *eyes*?"

Wolfram instinctively turned his own face—though shrouded—away, but it was not *him* the woman was talking to.

"I saw his *arse*!" said her friend.

"Not *my* type," said a third voice. "All that pretty blond hair. I like a man to *look* like a man. Sweat and stubble."

"He isn't a *man*," replied the first woman. "He's an elf. And you know what they say about elves..."

Her friends laughed, dirtily.

"Did you say an elf?" asked Wolfram, keeping his head lowered and his voice disguised. "Can you still see him? Where is he?"

"Er—he's over there—there, by the olive stall," said the first woman. "Why? Do you fancy your chances?"

...

"Four red flags, please."

Skilfully, Hentmirë worked herself to the front of each queue—"Four Race Lists... Four jars of olives, please,"—then led her friends through one of the arched gates and up the stairs to the first tier of seats, where she handed the attendant a silver coin.

"I thought you said it was free," whispered Legolas.

"Nothing is ever *quite* free," she replied.

The attendant gave them cushions and showed them to the front row of benches. Legolas gazed down at the enormous oval track—long and narrow with a central stone barrier forming a tight turn at each end.

"Those," said Hentmirë, pointing to a row of arches running along the southern wall, "are the starting gates. When the magistrate drops his white handkerchief, the doors open, and the chariots race out—the drivers must stay in the lanes," she pointed to the markings incised in the hard dirt surface, "until they reach the spine..."

...

The attendant showed Wolfram to a seat at the end of a bench. "Handy if you need the privy," he said.

*And only three rows behind My Lady, thought Wolfram.*

## The usual suspects

...

## The Silk Road

"Well, well, *what have we here?*" asked Ramess. He nodded towards a tall, dark man, with long braided hair, staring up at the stage.

Ribhadda followed the Guardsman's gaze. "A Kurian," he said. "A new face. There are lots of new faces here tonight."

The Kurian turned—as though he had overheard their conversation—and fixed Ribhadda with his dark, painted eyes; then he turned back to watch Cyllien.

"They're a good-looking people," said Ramess. He knocked back his drink. "By the way Rib, have you had any success finding that Letter of Pardon?"

"No, Ramess. Have *you* had any success finding Abdi?"

...

## Rihat

Berengar froze, mid-sentence, raised his hand—warning Bint-Anath to be silent—then quietly moved to the door and listened intently.

*Is it Faroth?* He could not tell until the newcomer spoke.

"Berengar?"

The secretary slid back the bolt and opened the door. Smiling, Faramir stepped inside—and stopped dead as Bint-Anath threw herself at him, pressing a small dagger to his throat.

"No!" cried Berengar.

"Lower the weapon, my Lady," said Faramir, calmly.

"Never!" cried Bint-Anath. "I may only be a woman, but I *will* defend him, sir, if need be!"

"Please," said Berengar, "please, Bint-Anath—remember what I explained earlier! *Please!* Do not *hurt* him! Please..."

It took a moment for his words to register. Then, "What you *explained?*" Her hand dropped to her side. "Are you saying... You and he... Oh *Berengar...*" The knife fell from her fingers, forgotten.

"I am sorry," said Berengar. "I should have told you everything."

But Bint-Anath had already joined her dagger on the floor.

...

"Is there something I should know?" asked Faramir.

Berengar was bathing Bint-Anath's temples with a damp cloth. "What do you mean?"

"What was she doing in your bedroom? With the door locked?"

"*Faroth!* She came to *rescue* me, after *you* convinced her that you were about to kill me." He dipped the cloth in water, wrung it out, and laid it over her forehead. "I told her the truth about

### The usual suspects

myself, but I did not mention you."

"Why not?"

"To protect you." He lifted Bint-Anath's hand and checked her pulse. The woman stirred and curled a little closer. "Lie still, my Lady." He stroked her hair, soothingly.

Faramir sat down with a weary sigh. "We must get her back to her father as soon as we can and—somehow—persuade him that her honour is still intact. You do realise that he will probably have us killed anyway." He raked his hand through his hair.

"Faroth..."

"Mmmm? Something in Berengar's tone slowly penetrated Faramir's troubled thoughts. He looked up. "Oh gods, what *ludicrous* idea have you had now?"

The secretary, still stroking the woman's hair, did not reply immediately. Then he said, very quietly, "Why can *you* not find her a husband?"

"That *has* to be your best yet."

"I mean it, Faroth. We know many eligible men in Gondor—the son of that spice merchant, for one—what is his name?"

"Artamir," said Faramir, reluctantly. "Artamir, son of Angbor."

"Yes—he is young, handsome, and the sole heir to a massive fortune. Or, if her father insists on a noble, there is Lord Valacar's son—or that widower, Lord Minastan. He is still quite young — "

"He has two children."

"They are both babies—Bint-Anath would soon grow to love them. Why not, Faroth?"

Faramir sighed. "Let me get dressed. We will talk to her when she wakes up, and see what *she* thinks of your harebrained idea."

He paused at the door. "And Berengar? Before she does wake up, put a shirt on."

...

### The Circus

The tiers had filled with excited spectators, all drinking ale and eating olives and waving their coloured flags—and all looking impatiently towards a massive arch in the northern wall of the arena.

"What are they waiting for?" asked Legolas.

"The procession!" cried Keret waving his little flag. "Look!"

As Legolas looked, a company of guards, with long, curved trumpets, marched out onto the track and blew a rousing fanfare.

The crowd cheered.

Then an important-looking man, on a magnificent white stallion, emerged from the arch—"He is the Chief Magistrate," shouted Hentmirë, "he will be starting the races,"—followed by a troupe of acrobats, performing somersaults and cart-wheels and forming themselves into

## The usual suspects

human pyramids as they passed, and trainers leading exotic animals—big, striped cats, straining at the leash, and tame mûmakil, and a massive, fur-covered wild man, riding in a metal cage, who gazed sadly at the shrieking crowd (whilst Legolas' heart broke for him).

And then, at last, amidst a deafening roar, the chariots rolled out! The drivers, wearing their colours, entered one-by-one, manoeuvred their vehicles into groups of three and joined the procession—Reds, then Blues, then Whites and, finally, Greens.

"The Reds won last time," shouted Hentmirë. "That is why they are coming out first. And that is Scopus. He drives for the Reds."

"Scopus!" cried a young woman behind Legolas' shoulder, "Scopus! Look over here! Oh, *Scopus!*"

Legolas slipped his arm around Eowyn's waist. *Anything could happen in this place*, he thought.

...

Cyllien had left the stage with a final *searing* look in Haldir's direction. Impatiently, he forced his way through the applauding crowd.

"Good evening, sir," said the stage doorkeeper, with a grin. "Nice to see you again. She *is* expecting you."

The elf scowled.

The corridor, and the storeroom beyond, was dark and, as he raised his hand to knock at Cyllien's door, Haldir sensed a presence in the shadows—*Is that the boy, Aqhat...?*

Then Cyllien called, "Come in," and he opened the door, and she was sitting on her dressing table wearing little more than a very provocative smile, and everything else was instantly forgotten.

...

## Rihat

"My Lady?" Berengar leaned over Bint-Anath. "How are you feeling?"

Bint-Anath sighed. "What happened?—I... *Oh!*"

She tried to sit up. Gently, Berengar lowered her down again.

She gazed up at him. "Is it true, Berengar? You and him? Or is that another lie?"

The man sat down beside her and took her hand. "It is true, my Lady. And I am sorry that we misled you before. But it is not something we can safely make public. In our own country—"

"You could be flogged," said Bint-Anath. "*Here*. You could be flogged for it."

"We are in your hands, my Lady."

"You think that *I* would report you? I would never hurt you!"

Berengar smiled. "Thank you, my Lady."

"I like it better when you use my name," said Bint-Anath. She curled up into a ball. "What am I to do, Berengar?"



### The usual suspects

"Faroth and I will take you back to your father—"

"No!"

"You must go back, Bint-Anath." He patted her hand. "Shhhh. You must. At least, for now."

"What do you mean? For now?"

"Well... Your father wants you to make a strategic marriage—"

"But I do not want to—"

"I know... But suppose Faroth and I were to find you someone else? A *young* man, of our country, the son of someone rich and powerful—"

"But I want *you*! Or—"

"Or?"

Bint-Anath sighed. "Or someone else who cannot marry me."

"Who?"

"Aperel."

"Who is Aperel?"

"The *Hatja's* son."

"And you like him?"

"Yes." She gave a great, shuddering sigh. "We were betrothed," she said, "but then his older brother was killed and Aperel became his father's heir."

"And, suddenly, you were not good enough for him," said Faramir, entering without knocking. He sat down on a chair beside the bed, and finished lacing his shirt and fastening his cuffs.

"You are *not* a nice man," said Bint-Anath, coldly.

Faramir smiled. "I did not mean it as an insult, my Lady. Would you be happy with this Aperel?"

"The *Hatja* would never—"

Faramir held up his hand. "*Would you be happy to marry him?*"

"Yes."

"Then we must arrange it. Berengar insists."

...

All eyes were on the Chief Magistrate. He lifted his white handkerchief—waited—and let it drop.

There was a moment of eerie silence as it slowly drifted down...

It touched the floor.

And the crowd erupted as the starting gates flew open and twelve chariots surged onto the track. Neck-and-neck, they disappeared behind the spine. Seconds later, they reappeared—

### The usual suspects

jostling each other round the turn—and thundered down the straight.

One of the Greens, lashing his horses hard, tried to move up the field, hit the wall, and was thrown from his chariot.

The spectators leaped to their feet.

“Dear gods...” whispered Eowyn, closing her eyes.

High up on the spine, the lap-keeper lowered a golden dolphin—one lap completed.

*One driver dead.*

“Scorpus!” cried the girl behind Legolas.

“Scorpus! *Scorpus!*” screamed half the crowd.

“Scorpus!” shouted Keret, waving his little flag.

“Look!” cried Eowyn. “Look at the Blue chariot, Lassui! It has knives on its wheels!” Her hands flew to her mouth as the Blue aimed his blades at his neighbour’s horses. But his victim veered away—and their serrated edges ripped into his wheel.

“*Oh no!*”

The chariot had collapsed but the horses were dashing on, dragging their driver behind them. Frantically, he pulled out a knife, cut himself free, and struggled to his knees—only to be hit from behind by one of his team mates.

The crowd cried out in sympathy.

The stretcher bearers whisked the bodies away, riders caught the loose horses, and a group of slaves was dragging the shattered chariot off the track—but the drivers were already thundering round the turn.

The slaves fled to safety.

Scorpus, wedged against the wall by the bladed Blue chariot, was hurtling towards the wreckage. In desperation he hauled back his reins and his horses jumped. His chariot rose and fell...

And the crowd went wild as he rounded the turn, clinging for his life to its flimsy framework.

*One lap to go.*

Somehow, Scorpus climbed back on board, but now the Blue was using his whip, lashing his opponent round the head and shoulders. The leather thong curled round Scorpus’s forearm, he closed his hand on it, and pulled hard...

Scorpus dashed on to one more victory while horse after horse trampled the dying Blue driver.

“I do not want to see any more, Lassui,” whispered Eowyn, against Legolas’ chest.

“No, Melmenya. We will go down to the animal sheds and ask about Riya.” He turned to Hentmirë. “Eowyn and I are going outside, *gwendithen*. Do you want to come with us?”

Hentmirë wiped her eyes and nose with the back of her hand. “No... Keret and I will wait for you in the carriage.” She hugged the boy.

### **The usual suspects**

"Why do people come to these terrible races, Hentmirë?"

The little woman looked around the crowd. "We come to see life and death, Legolas," she said.

...

Wolfram was watching the performing oliphaunts when he spotted elf-boy and My Lady making their way down the stairs.

*Where are they going now?*

With a sigh, he dumped his bowl of nuts on the next seat, got up, and shuffled after them. *If they're not careful we'll miss the next pricking race.*

...

### **The war lord's palace**

"How did you get out unseen?" asked Faramir, scanning the gates.

"The gatekeeper is sweet on one of my ladies," said Bint-Anath. "She kept him—er—occupied whilst another opened the gate for me."

"That was selfless of her."

"I would not have asked her had she not been willing," said Bint-Anath, coldly. "It was not the first time she had lain with him." Berengar squeezed her shoulder.

"Well," said Faramir, "we cannot use the same method to get you back in..."

"I thought you were going to speak to my father?"

"In the morning," said Berengar. "We are going to call on him—"

"That makes no sense," said Bint-Anath.

"What do you mean?" asked Faramir.

"Why would you suddenly visit him and suggest a suitor? No. You must take me back now, explain what I did, and tell him your plan."

"That will get us killed," said Faramir.

"What are you talking about?"

"He is your father," explained Berengar. "He is bound to defend your honour."

"*Balls,*" said the young woman.

"Bint-Anath!" Berengar was genuinely shocked.

"Well it is. Come on!" She slipped from his grasp and ran across the street. "Nirari," she cried, "Nirari! Open the gates!"

"What is it about us that attracts so much trouble, Berengar?" asked Faramir, with a sigh.

...

"Are you *mad*?" The war lord, wearing his nightshirt, and with his hair in curlers, stormed into the reception hall.

### **The usual suspects**

"Do not be angry, papa," cried Bint-Anath. She threw her arms around his neck.

"Bint-Anath! What have you done to your hair?"

"I cut it off, papa. I was running away. But Lo—*Master* Berengar and his friend have brought me back."

Abdosir peered up at Faramir. "Is this true?"

"Er—yes."

"And *Master* Berengar has a proposal, papa," said Bint-Anath. "One you will like."

Abdosir manoeuvred his daughter onto the dais and set her on one the thrones. He turned to Berengar. "Well?"

"It is really Faro—Prince Faramir's idea."

The war lord sat down heavily. "I can see that this will take all night... What is your wonderful proposal, Prince Faramir?"

"Your daughter has told me that she would prefer to marry the *Hatja's* son—"

"We would *all* prefer her to marry the *Hatja's* son," said Abdosir, with a dismissive wave of the hand.

"Suppose *I* could arrange it?"

"How?"

"I am not without influence," said Faramir, "with the *Hatja*, and with several rulers from the North. It should be possible for me to negotiate a triangular trading agreement in which your daughter's hand would play a significant a part—"

"Why would you go to so much trouble?"

"Because we want Bint-Anath to be happy," said Berengar.

"Thank you, Berengar," said Bint-Anath, smiling at him fondly.

"Will you give me leave to approach the *Hatja* on your behalf?" asked Faramir.

Abdosir sighed. "Why not?"

"I still have some business in Rihat," said Faramir. "But when that is completed, Berengar and I shall return to Carhiliivren by the first caravan, and request an audience."

...

### **Underneath the arches**

Legolas and Eowyn walked slowly round the outside of the Circus to the animal sheds on south west corner. For a few moments they paused, watching the trainers at work, herding the oliphants back to their small cages, and feeding the striped cats with joints of meat.

"It is strange," whispered Legolas, "to see so much cruelty and yet feel so much love..."

"Love?"

### The usual suspects

"Though they deny them their freedom, Melmenya, these men love their animals; and the animals love them back."

Squeezing her hand, he drew her to the wild man's cage.

"*Heniach nin?*" he asked softly.

The creature considered him for a moment, its deep, unfathomable eyes full of sadness, then it grunted a reply.

"*Man eneth lín?*" asked Legolas.

More grunts.

"Legolas *i eneth nín—*"

"Hey, you! Get away from him!" cried one of the men.

"*No i Melain na le, mellon nín,*" said Legolas, before he and Eowyn moved on.

Behind the sheds, where the noise and the smells and the insects kept respectable people away, the Circus arches were home to ladies of the night, who had furnished them, as best they could, with rugs and cushions and closed them off with bits of curtain.

The couple walked slowly by. Noises from the first arch told them its owner was hard at work and could not be disturbed. The owner of the second arch—lolling, legs still spread—swigged spirits from a bottle and waved drunkenly. Legolas squeezed Eowyn's hand and they carried on. The third arch housed a thin, bitter-looking woman, sitting cross-legged, displaying her hard little breasts—with painted nipples—for the benefit of potential customers.

"Couples cost extra," said the woman.

"How much?" asked Legolas.

"Two gold."

He raised his eyebrows. "For what?"

"Anything you like."

Legolas looked to Eowyn for guidance. "How long have you lived here?" she asked.

"What does that matter?" asked the woman.

"It adds to the experience," said Eowyn.

"I came here during Scopus's first season, so—three years..."

The couple stepped into the arch. Legolas dropped the curtain.

"Money first," said the woman.

Eowyn opened a small beaded purse at her hip, took out two gold coins, and handed them over.

"He makes *you* pay?"

Eowyn nodded. "He is a brute. What is your name?"

### The usual suspects

"Call me anything you like."

"I would like to use your real name."

"Elissa." She turned to Legolas. "What do you want? One of us on your cock and the other working your balls? Or are you the type that likes to feel himself while he watches two women?"

Legolas cleared his throat. "We just want to talk."

"Talk?" She narrowed her eyes, shrewdly. "Talk can get a girl beaten—or *killed*. Talk costs extra."

"How much?"

"Ten gold. *Extra*."

Eowyn gave her the money.

"Ask away."

"Do you know a little boy called Keret?" asked Legolas. "He is about—how old, *melmenya*?"

"He would have been seven or eight when he lived here."

The woman gasped. "*This is about Riya...*"

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances. "Yes," said Legolas. "Do you—"

"A hundred gold."

"We do not have that much with us," said Legolas. "But we can give it to you later—"

"A hundred gold and passage out of Carhivilven."

"Done," said Legolas.

"And protection while I wait for the wind."

"Done."

"And some new clothes. Like hers." She nodded towards Eowyn.

"Anything you want," said Legolas. "Where is Riya?"

The woman checked that her curtain was fully closed, then crawled into the very back of the arch, pulled a knife from under her skirt and, using its blade, removed a stone from the wall.

"I always knew that Riya would come back to haunt me," she said, taking out a leather pouch. She replaced the stone. "She gave me this the day she left Carhivilven."

"Where did she go?" asked Eowyn.

"East, along the Silk Road." Elissa opened the pouch. "She asked me to take care of Keret but the little bugger ran off. He *never* liked me." She tipped something out into her palm. "The number of times I could have spent this on myself!"

"Why didn't you?"

"Riya would have slit my throat!"

### The usual suspects

She handed the object to Legolas.

It was an elven ring.

...

*Where have they gone? How could they just disappear? Wolfram shuffled past the arches. They must be in here...*

Cautiously, he pulled back the ragged curtain.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

A very big, very angry, and very aroused man shot out from the arch, caught Wolfram by the headdress, grabbed his arm and shook him hard. He raised his hand to strike. "Filthy old bi—"

"LEAVE HER ALONE!" roared a familiar voice, and a slender figure darted forward, grasped the man's hand and broke his grip. "Does it make you feel *manly* to attack an old woman?" My Lady demanded.

"What is happening, Melmenya?"

"This *real* man," said My Lady, "is bullying a woman three times his age and a quarter of his size."

The real man was hastily fastening his trousers. "The old bitch was spying on me," he complained, "watching me with—her." He gestured towards the arch.

"Do not be ridiculous!" cried My Lady.

"She was lurking outside—"

"She was walking past. She is slow on her feet! And who would care that *you* were with a whore—?"

The man took to his heels.

"I do not think that any real harm has been done, Melmenya," said elf-boy, soothingly. "Has it madam?"

"Oh—er—no," said Wolfram, hunching over a little more, and making his voice sound a little higher.

"Will you be all right now?" asked My Lady. "Can we take you anywhere?"

*The gods are laughing at someone tonight*, thought Wolfram. *Do I dare?* "No, my dear," he said. "Now that the brute has left, I shall be safe."

"Well, if you are sure, madam," said elf-boy. "Good night, then. Come, Melmenya; Elissa."

*Elissa?* Cautiously, Wolfram raised his head and watched them leave. *Now what would that pair be doing with a whore?*

...

Ribhadda closed the door behind the last patron. *The Silk Road* was quiet at last. Cyllien emerged from the stage door carrying a dark mantle.

Ribhadda smiled. "I hear you're going back North with him," he said.

### The usual suspects

Cyllien slipped the mantle over her shoulders. "Yes." She fastened the pin. "Rib..."

"Don't worry about me, kid. I'll be fine."

"I know you will—we were never meant to be, Rib." She came closer. "I just wish," she said, quietly, "that *she'd* come back."

"Who?"

"You *know* who—"

"Are you ready?" called Haldir.

Cyllien smiled. "Yes, *melethron*. Good night, Ribhadda." She squeezed his arm.

...

Keret had sulked all the way home. "I don't *like* her," he said to Hentmirë. "She hits me."

"She will not hit you *here*, Keret. *I* shall not let her," said Hentmirë, firmly. "Now, wash your hands and face, clean your teeth, and get into bed—and I will bring you a surprise..."

...

Legolas handed Elissa a glass of fruit cordial.

"Don't you have anything stronger?"

"No."

She sighed. "I gave you the ring. What more do you want?"

"Why did Riya leave Carhilivren?"

Elissa shrugged her shoulders.

Eowyn took a bottle from the sideboard, removed the stopper, and poured a large measure of brown liquid into the woman's drink. "What did she say when she was leaving?"

Elissa drained the spirits, shuddered with relief, and held out the glass for more. Ignoring Legolas' expression, Eowyn poured. "Well?"

"It's a long time ago."

Eowyn stopped pouring.

"Oh, all right! She said she had to leave Carhilivren because of the *Hatja's* son."

"Explain."

"Well, he was *murdered*—in some tavern over by the souk—and *she* was with him. *She knows the man who did it.*"

...

Legolas found Hentmirë searching for something in her father's study.

"I am sorry, *gwendithen*," he said. "We have filled your house with waifs and strays, and criminals, and now a prostitute—"



## The usual suspects

"Oh, that does not matter," said Hentmirë. "I have had a bed made up for her in the servants' quarters. Though there *is* one thing—"

"What? What is worrying you, *gwendithen*?"

"I shall deal with it, Legolas—ah, *here* it is!" She held up a small wooden *mûmak*. "Has she told you where to find Keret's mother?"

"No. But we now know why Riya went into hiding... *That* looks like one of the animals we saw tonight, *gwendithen*."

...

Hentmirë paused on her way to the stairs. "I will see Elissa to her room," she said. "Come: this way."

As she led the woman into the servants' wing, she said, quietly, "You are welcome to stay in my house for as long as you need. But you are *never* to lay a hand on Keret again."

...

"Lassui," said Eowyn, laying down her hair brush and turning towards him, "I have had an idea."

Legolas, already sitting in bed, held his arms out to her.

Eowyn sighed. "This is so hard on you," she said, slipping out of her dressing robe and climbing in beside him. "Mortal life, with all its ugliness—but we shall soon be back home, Lassui; safe in Eryn Carantaur." She snuggled in his arms.

Legolas buried his face in her hair. "What was your idea, Melmenya?"

"I was thinking that we should go to Rihat, and see if we can find Riya there. If not, then I think we can honestly say that we have done our best—and stop looking."

"It is two days' journey, to Rihat, Eowyn *nín*."

"Not if the djinn takes us."

...

*Gods, I love that woman!* thought Wolfram, as he settled down opposite the house to resume his watch. *The way she stood up to that big prick!* He grinned at the unintentional pun. *She has bigger balls than the rest of them put together.*

He made himself comfortable. *She is wasted on elf-boy. What she needs is a wolf...*

And with that happy thought, he closed his eyes and got some well-earned sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 12: More answers

**"Leave those, Hiram," said Ribhadda. "Go on home now."**

The barman dried another tankard. "It's no trouble boss."

"They'll still be here in the morning. And you've worked hard tonight. Go home to your lady."

Hiram dried his hands on the cloth. "Well... Good night, then, boss."

"Good night," said Ribhadda, absently. He locked the door behind the barman and, moving the odd chair as he went, made his way to the stage door.

*"We were never meant to be, Rib; I just wish that she'd come back..."*

Ribhadda sighed. *And then what?* he wondered. *She couldn't stay here. We'd have to sell The Silk Road and leave Carhilivren. But go where? And would we take the boy?*

*No, she's better off wherever she is, and the boy has landed on his feet...*

He walked slowly down the dark corridor, paused beside Cyllien's empty room, and laid his hand on the wooden door. *Everybody moves on,* he thought.

*Gods, Ribhadda, you'll be drowning your sorrows with customers next...*

His own room was farther down the corridor—just before the storeroom—and he kept it locked. He stood beside the door, feeling for his key—

And someone moved behind him.

It had been a long time since Ribhadda had hunted orcs—and men—through the wilds of Ered Mithrin, but his instincts had not dulled with the years and he went straight for the throat. His assailant was younger, taller and physically stronger, but Ribhadda possessed a steel the other lacked; he also knew his storeroom like the back of his hand.

Caught unprepared by his victim's resistance, the assassin dropped his knife. Ribhadda reached for a bottle of spirits and, without hesitation, smashed it into his face.

By the moonlight filtering through the storeroom's high windows, Ribhadda peered at his would-be murderer. *Not so good looking now are we, Master Kurian?* he thought.

...

### Dawn

"Mmmmm?"

"Shhhhh." Legolas scooped Eowyn into his arms and turned her onto her stomach.

"Oh..."

Gathering her thick hair to one side, he kissed the back of her neck.

She squirmed against the bed. "What are you *doing?*"

Legolas laughed against her skin and, straddling her, let his hard penis brush between her thighs.

## The usual suspects

"But we are going to Rihat..."

"Later, Melmenya..." he whispered. "Later... Come up on your hands and knees." He slid his hands under her hips and lifted her, gently. Then, lightly kneading her belly, he pressed himself against her. She was ready, and he slipped smoothly inside her. "Ah..."

His sighs, coming from deep within his throat, were a mixture of pleasure and relief, and accompanied each body-tingling thrust.

Eowyn's head sank down on her crossed arms. "Oh, Lassui," she moaned. "Oh... There... Oh, ye—ohhh—yes, *THERE*..."

...

"But how will you *find* Prince Faramir?" asked Hentmirë, at breakfast.

"We will start at the House of Healing," said Eowyn. She poured a glass of cordial and handed it to Legolas with a smile.

"And if they have not seen him, we will try the taverns," said the elf.

"At the same time," added Eowyn, pouring another glass for Gimli, "we will make discreet enquiries about Riya."

"You have thought it all out," said Hentmirë, stirring her porridge.

"What is wrong, gwendithen?" asked Legolas, gently.

"Nothing..."

"Hentmirë?"

She set down her spoon. "It is just... I have been to Rihat, Legolas. It is a horrible, horrible place—you cannot trust anyone there. Promise me you will be careful—all of you. Is Gimli going with you?"

"No," said the dwarf. "I am staying here, to protect you and Keret."

Hentmirë bit her lip. "Then take Rimush with you. He comes from Rihat—you could stay with his family."

"We plan to be back by nightfall, gwendithen," said Legolas. "But it might be useful to have a guide. Do you think the djinn could carry all three of us, Melmenya?"

"Oh, yes," said Eowyn. "If he can be persuaded."

"What shall I tell Keret?" asked Hentmirë.

"Where is he?"

"Upstairs with Donatiya, refusing to bathe," said Hentmirë. "Shall I tell him you are still looking for his mother?"

"Yes," said Legolas. "If he asks. But try not to raise his hopes too high, gwendithen."

...

Rimush climbed into Hentmirë's palanquin. "I have never been inside it before," he said, smiling. He sat down opposite Legolas.

### **The usual suspects**

Eowyn summoned the djinn. "I want you to carry this," she pointed to the palanquin, "to Rihat. Can you do that?"

"**Yes, mistress,**" said the djinn, obviously puzzled by her question.

"It is not too heavy for you?"

The djinn flowed down and peered through the curtains at its occupants. "**No, mistress.**"

"Good. And Rihat is not too far?"

"**No...**"

"And you know where it is?"

"**Yes...**"

"Good. Let me climb aboard, then take us there."

"**Your wish is my command, pretty little mistress.**"

"What you have to do," said Eowyn, taking her seat beside Legolas, "is anticipate all of his objections."

The djinn scooped them up and carried them off.

"Goodbye," shouted Hentmirë, waving, "come home safe..." She walked back into the house with a sigh. *Children to wash, dwarves to find ale, prisoners to exercise, singers to rouse, prostitutes to put to work, beggars to feed...*

And a huge smile spread across her plump little face.

...

"What the...?"

Wolfram almost pulled off his headdress to get a better look at the palanquin as it disappeared towards the east. *Now I've seen everything!*

He sat down. *What do I do now?—Gods' turds, if I've lost her after all this waiting—*

Another slave was leaving the house, carrying a basket of food. *Can this be breakfast?* he wondered.

The slave crossed the road and approached him, smiling. *Yes, it's breakfast. Well, here's as good a place to stay as any. And My Lady may be back later.*

...

### **Rihat: the House of Healing**

"Ready?" asked Faramir.

"No," said Oriel. He straightened the collar of his shirt. "But let's go in."

They climbed the steps and, once again, entered the cool, quiet reception hall. Ahead of them, the broad corridor, with its marble walls, and doors leading to the separate healing rooms, made Faramir feel suddenly nervous. *There is nothing to stop a patient walking out of here, he thought. Or someone else walking in. We should have stayed the night...*

## The usual suspects

Oliel asked to see the doctor.

She appeared immediately. "Ah, Captain—sir..." She drew them aside, and spoke quietly. "I have had to do something rather unconventional."

"Ma'am?"

"Gwirith tried to leave yesterday—after you had gone—so I locked her in my study." She sighed. "She was entirely within her rights to leave—I have no power to keep a patient here against her will. But... I am placing a great deal of trust in you—in both of you—now." She drew them further down the corridor. "Gwirith's spirit is exhausted. She will not last much longer out there on her own."

"Oh..." Oliel shook his head, unable to say more.

"We are grateful, madam," said Faramir. "Very grateful."

"This must not become public knowledge, sir," said the doctor. "Or I could lose my position."

"I understand."

She handed Faramir a small key. "This is my study, here. Leave the key at the desk when you go." She turned to Oliel. "I have done all I can for your wife, Captain. Her body is on the mend, but *you* must heal her spirit." She squeezed his arm. "Now I must see to my other patients." She hurried away.

"Faramir... I cannot..."

"Would you like *me* to speak to her?" asked Faramir.

"What would you say?"

"I am not sure—I suppose I would start by offering to rescue her from this nightmare, whatever it is."

"And persuade her to come back with us?"

"Yes."

"Do it. I shall wait out here."

Faramir fitted the key in the lock.

"Faramir? When we get back to the *Hunter*, I will return everything you have paid me, my friend..."

"Oh. *No.*" Faramir waved his hand.

"How else can I thank you?" asked Oliel.

...

Faramir opened the door. The study was empty.

*No!*

*Wait...*

*She is behind the door*, he thought. He glanced around the room. *Desk, chairs, bookcase...*

### The usual suspects

Ah... The row of statuettes on the bookcase had a suspicious gap at its centre. *She is armed.*

He threw the door wide—

“Agh!”

—and, drawing his sword, rounded on the woman, who had dropped the statue and was clutching her wrist.

Faramir pushed the door closed and, keeping his sword trained upon her, said, “I am sorry, madam. Shall I call the doctor?”

Gingerly, Gwirth moved her hand back and forth. “It’s not broken,” she said, sullenly.

“Good. Then sit down,” said Faramir, “and I will bathe it for you.”

“What?” Her head came up and she stared at him, eyes narrowed, her opinion of him clearly written on her face: *Fool!*

“Truce?” asked Faramir.

“*What?*” she repeated.

“If I lower my sword, will you promise not to attack? At least for now?”

“Where did Oliel find *you?*”

Faramir smiled. “Sit down, let me bathe your wrist, and hear me out. Then, if we have not come to an agreement, you can take up the statue again. How does that sound?”

“Patronising.” Warily, she dragged herself to one of the chairs, sat down, and held out her wrist, supporting it with her other hand. “What agreement?”

Faramir sheathed his sword. “Come with us. Let us take you back to Gondor.” At one end of the room there was a small consulting area with a couch, and a sideboard holding a ewer and basin, several bottles of coloured liquids, and some jars of powdered herbs.

“Is that *all?*” asked Gwirth.

Faramir poured water into the basin. “What more do you want?” He ran his fingers over the jars. “Ah, this looks like,”—he removed the stopper and sniffed—“yes, this is *iârloth*.” He sprinkled a little into the water, then took up a piece of linen and soaked it in the mixture. “She must import this from the North...”

“I *want* to be safe.”

“Then come with us.” Faramir knelt beside her.

“You do not understand.”

“What?” He wrung out the cloth and wrapped it around her wrist. “There—how is that? What do I not understand?”

“Can you keep me hidden? Can you? Because, the moment anyone sees me, I am a dead woman and *you* are a dead man, if you are with me.”

“Who is ‘anyone?’” asked Faramir.

“My... My owner. And...”

### The usual suspects

"And who?"

"The Hatja's Guards."

"Why? What did you do?" Faramir unwrapped the cloth and dipped it back in the water, pressing it down to soak up the healing herbs.

"Nothing."

"*Nothing?*" His tone made it clear that he did not believe her.

"I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time," said Gwirth.

"And?"

"And I saw something."

"You saw someone commit a crime?"

She nodded.

"Then you are a valuable witness. Why are you afraid of the Hatja's Guards?"

"Because he made me help him."

...

The journey to Rihat had taken less than two hours.

They had followed the Silk Road across the vast sea of sand, passed a slow-moving camel caravan—waving to its astonished travellers as they flew by—and soared over the Ripaa Ridge, winding their way along the narrow gorge that cleft the rocks in two; swooped down low over the open desert, taking a small detour to marvel at a tiny oasis to the south; then swept northwards into Rihat, the city of towers.

"**We are here, mistress,**" said the djinn.

"Take us to the House of Healing," said Eowyn.

...

"Made you help him *how?*" asked Faramir. "What did you do?"

"He liked me—the victim. You wouldn't think so, to look at me now," she said, unconsciously running her good hand through her ragged hair, "but I was beautiful, and he *wanted* me. On that night, I pretended to want *him...*"

"You got him alone?"

She nodded.

"You distracted him whilst someone—what?"

"Killed him. While he was inside me..." whispered Gwirth.

"Oh, gods!" Faramir laid a comforting hand on her back.

...

The House of Healing was on the Northern edge of the town. The djinn set down the palanquin

### The usual suspects

in a narrow alley running along its western side, close enough to open ground to be quiet, but sufficiently overlooked to be safe from thieves.

"I will stay here and watch over it," said Rimush.

Legolas patted his arm. "Thank you. Are you ready Melmenya?"

Eowyn stowed the djinn's lamp in her bag and they made their way to the front door.

...

"I knew I wouldn't last long without protection, so I went to the Hatja's Guards—to Captain Ramess. He told me I was an accessory to murder and would hang for it. But his eyes were all over me."

Her face hardened. "And when he rolled off and fell asleep I slipped out of the Guardhouse and hid myself at the docks. I tried to get passage on a ship, but then..."

"What?"

She shrugged. "I decided to stay. I thought we'd be safe if we just kept moving... But I was a danger to anybody I cared about. So I left Carhilivren and came to Rihat, where I didn't know anyone." She turned to Faramir. "What's your name?"

"Faramir. Why?"

"I've never told anyone the whole story before. Thank you, Faramir."

Faramir bowed his head. "You are welcome, Gwirth," he said. "What are you going to do about Oliel?"

"Oh..."

"You know that he has been searching for you for seven years?"

Gwirth shook her head. "No. He has been searching for the little girl he married for seven years; and the truth is..." She looked at him closely. "You don't *like* women, do you, Faramir?"

"Some of my best friends—"

"You know what I mean."

"No."

"That's why it's so easy to talk to you about this," she said. "Oliel thought I was a virgin when he married me. But I'd had men before—many men—my father's foreman, the farm hands, the migrant workers—I was never the innocent little girl he wanted for a wife. It was not that hard to fool him. He'd spent most of his life at sea and the only women he'd ever known were whores. So, with a little reluctance—"

"He is my friend, Gwirth. *Please* do not tell me any more." Faramir got up off his knees and settled himself on the chair beside her. "I have promised to plead his case."

...

The cool, white marble was a strange contrast to the dusty mud brick of the outside walls. Legolas scanned the hallway for any sign of Faramir. To his left, at a desk beside the door, a veiled woman was rising to greet them. Ahead, more veiled women flitted from room to room carrying bottles of tinctures, and jars of unguents, and pitchers of water. To his right...



### The usual suspects

Just inside a narrow corridor, leading off to the east, sat Captain Oriel, nervously drumming his fingers on his thighs.

Legolas turned to the veiled woman. "We have a message for our friend," he said, quietly, nodding towards the Gondorian. "May we speak with him?"

The woman bowed her head, graciously.

"Thank you." He led Eowyn into the corridor. "Hello, Captain Oriel," he said quietly, "is there any news of your wife?"

...

"Why did you marry Oriel?"

"What do you mean?"

"You could have had any man you wanted but you chose to marry *him*. Why?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"The doctor told me you were still wearing his ring when you arrived here. How did you hide it from the slavers?"

"You don't want to know." She shifted uncomfortably on her seat.

"You did that just to keep Oriel's ring?"

"It's valuable."

"It is *silver*," corrected Faramir. "Practically worthless. A worthless little ring from a worthless little—"

"No! It is not! *He* is not..."

"Not what?"

"You are very clever."

Faramir bowed. "Thank you," he said. "And so are you. And there is a way out of this mess, Gwirth; you and I are going to find it."

"You are wasted on a man."

"I shall take that as a compliment. Now—have you noticed how the ladies dress here—Lady Bint-Anath, for instance?"

"Abdosir's daughter? She decorates herself like a Yule Tree."

"Not when she is travelling," said Faramir. "She wears black—a heavy black veil that completely covers her face. With one of those, and an armed escort, we can pass you off as a Lady from the East, take the first camel caravan back to Carhivilven, and keep you hidden until Oriel is ready to sail."

"What if it doesn't work, Faramir?"

"It *will*—"

"Not the disguise. Oriel and me—what if *that* doesn't work? He's in love with an innocent girl

### **The usual suspects**

and I'm in love with a dashing sailor, when—the truth is—I'm a broken old hag and he's—he's what? *You* know him better than I do..."

"He..." Faramir smiled. "He reminds me of my older brother."

"Is that good? Do you love your brother?"

"I did. Very much."

"Did?"

"He died in battle. Bravely."

"I am sorry..." She was silent for a moment, then she asked, "Did *he* prefer men?"

Faramir laughed. "Boromir? No, not at all!"

"Good."

"Shall I ask Oriel to come in, then?"

Gwirth bit her lip. "Yes," she said. "Quickly, Faramir, before I lose my nerve."

...

The door opened and Faramir came out. He smiled warmly at Legolas and Eowyn then turned to Oriel. "She has agreed to return with us," he said. "Go in and speak to her."

"What should I say?" whispered Oriel.

"Say whatever your heart tells you to say." He pushed Oriel through the door and closed it behind him, but not before Legolas had caught the briefest glimpse of Gwirth as she rose to greet her husband.

"*Strange,*" he murmured.

...

### **The Silk Road**

"Are you *sure* you want to stay with me all day?" asked Cyllien, playfully. "I shall be *surrounded* by men—by Rib and Hiram and Aqhat. No one could touch me in here, not even Wolfram." She knocked on the door of *The Silk Road*.

Haldir shook his head. "We Lorien elves prefer to take care of our own ellith."

Laughing, Cyllien kissed his cheek. "I *love* it when you act like a Beorning—Ah, Hiram—Valar, Hiram! What's wrong?"

"The boss was attacked last night."

"Attacked—" Cyllien pushed past the barman and ran inside. "Rib? *Rib?*"

"That's quite a row you're making," said Ribhadda, with one of his rare smiles.

He was standing behind the bar, checking his spirits as usual, but, to Haldir, he looked changed. *Older*. "What happened?" the elf asked.

"Nothing I couldn't handle."

### The usual suspects

"Tell us," demanded Cyllien.

Ribhadda shrugged. "I closed up, went backstage to my room, noticed someone lurking in the shadows, and hit him with a bottle of spirits. The healer's still sewing his head back together."

"Oh, *Rib...*"

"Who was it?" asked Haldir.

"A Kurian," said Ribhadda. "Probably hired especially for the job."

"Was it a robbery?" asked Cyllien.

Ribhadda shook his head. "No, kid. It was attempted murder."

"Who would want you dead?" asked Haldir.

"That's something I'd very much like to know myself," said Ribhadda. "You sticking around?"

The elf nodded.

"Good. Then when the healer's finished with him, you and I can ask Master Kurian a few questions."

...

"Good morning," said Hentmirë, hoping that her nerves were not showing.

The elf responded with an enigmatic smile.

"I thought," she said, "that you might like to spend some time outside in the garden. There are no big trees out there, but there are some nice little perseas, and daisies, and cornflowers..."

The elf smiled again, and this time his expression seemed quite friendly.

"But I would have to put these on you, to stop you running away." She held up the padded manacles she had used on Legolas at the slave market, which Gimli had examined and pronounced sufficiently sturdy. "Legolas would never forgive me if I let you escape—"

The elf laughed.

"Why is that funny?" asked Hentmirë.

The elf shook his head.

"*Would* you like to go outside?"

"If you will sit with me."

"Sit with you?" Hentmirë was taken aback—and, with her new, busy life to cope with, not at all sure that she really had the time. "For a little while," she said.

"Then, yes, I *would* like to go outside," said Vardamir.

"Hold out your hands." She slipped the manacles around his wrists and closed them. "You must go up the stairs first," she said, remembering Gimli's instructions: *Never let them get behind you, lass...*

...

## The usual suspects

The garden was cool and shaded. Vardamir dutifully examined the perseas and the daisies, then sat down on one of the raised flower beds and smelled the air. *Salt*, he thought. *The sea. Strange that I should have no desire to sail West, even now. I never was a proper elf...*

He sensed the little woman watching him, anxiously. "I will not try to run away, my lady," he said. "You have my word."

"Good," said the woman. "But..."

"But?"

"You have broken *that* before," she said.

Vardamir smiled. "You are right, my lady." He turned to her. "I am not trustworthy."

"But you are an *elf!*"

*An elf...* She was so innocent, so ready to think the best of everyone—but especially of an elf—that it touched his heart. "And you," he said, softly, "are a very special adaneth." And, for a moment, something like decency stirred within him.

But then another presence, lurking somewhere towards the sea, came forward to quash it. *Wolfram?* he thought. *Yes! Wolfram has come to rescue me!*

...

*Vardamir!* thought Wolfram, as he watched the elf sniffing the flowers with the fat little woman. *You prick!*

...

## Rihat

"Gwirth."

"Hello Oliel."

"Here..." He caught her by the elbows. "Sit down, you look exhausted."

She laughed as he eased her back into her seat. "This is how I am, now, Oliel. Old and haggard."

Oliel took the seat beside her and gazed at her, unflinchingly. "You look tired," he said. "But you are still the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, Gwirth." He reached out and stroked her cheek. "*Beautiful...*"

"Oh!" She buried her face in her hands and wept.

"My love, what is wrong?" He fell to his knees beside her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Shhhh, *shhhh*." He held her against his chest.

"I have been with men," she whispered. "Other men..."

He stroked her hair. "And I have been with other women," he admitted, "a few times—more than a few... But none of them could give me what I needed, Gwirth. None of them was *you*."

"Will it work, Oliel? *Can* it work, after all this time?"

"We will not know unless we try." He kissed the top of her head. "I will give up the sea..."

### The usual suspects

"No!"

"I must, my love. If we are to have any chance after all the lost years, we must be together."

"Then *I* shall come to sea with you."

He lifted her chin. "It's a hard life for a woman, Gwirth..."

His wife smiled. And, for a moment, the terrible scars of seven years seemed to fall away. "You," she said, "have no idea what it's like to live on a rubbish heap."

...

Whilst Faramir waited for Oriel and Gwirth in the House of Healing, Legolas and Eowyn returned to the palanquin and Eowyn persuaded the djinn to take it to the Boarding House. Then, accompanied by Rimush, the couple set out in search of Riya.

"Where do you go if you want to hire a prostitute?" Eowyn asked the slave.

"My *Lady!*"

Legolas shot him a sympathetic smile. "Suppose a man wanted to hire a prostitute," he corrected, "where would he go?"

"Down by the water station," said Rimush. "Or so I've *heard...*"

He had heard correctly. All along the town's outer wall, provocatively-dressed women lounged upon piles of mud brick, trying to persuade the male travellers to sample their wares.

Legolas sighed. "Stay here with Rimush, Melmenya."

"No," said Eowyn, catching his arm. "No, Lassui, I think they are more likely to speak to me than to you. You keep watch." And before Legolas could stop her, she had approached the first group of women.

"You're in the wrong place, love," said one of the whores, not unkindly.

Eowyn shook her head. "I am looking for my sister," she said. "She was kidnapped by slavers some years ago, and our parents have never recovered. I just want to find her and take her home..."

The women were sympathetic and made several suggestions, which the couple pursued. But no one in Rihat would admit to knowing, or having heard of, a tall, dark woman called Riya.

...

By the time Legolas, Eowyn and Rimush reached the Boarding House it was dark. The men were sitting in the lobby, drinking fruit cordial and eating savouries. Gwirth was upstairs, sleeping.

"She is exhausted," explained Oriel. "Now that she is safe, I think she will sleep for days."

Faramir called for more glasses. "Did *you* have any luck?" he asked, pouring three drinks.

Legolas shook his head. "We must tell the boy that we have failed."

"Let us hope," said Eowyn, wearily, "that his other wishes will be easier to grant." She took a sip of cordial.

### The usual suspects

"Eowyn," said Faramir, "we need to get Gwirth out of Rihat, and safely hidden aboard the *Hunter*—Captain Oliel's ship—as quickly as possible. I was wondering..."

"We can take her in the palanquin," said Legolas. "And you, too, Captain."

"Of course," said Eowyn. She smiled at Faramir. "Then I shall send the djinn back for you and Berengar, and Rimush."

"Thank you, my dear."

Eowyn turned to Oliel. "But could we not hide your wife at Hentmirë's house until the wind returns? That way she could sleep in a proper bed, with a maid to take care of her, until she is feeling stronger."

"That would be wonderful, my lady," said Oliel, "if Lady Hentmirë would not mind."

Eowyn glanced at Legolas.

"Hentmirë seems to thrive on having guests," he said. "Especially guests who need special attention. But I shall speak to her as soon as we arrive, to make sure."

...

An hour later, Oliel carried the still-sleeping Gwirth down to the palanquin, and the first group of friends set off for Carhivilven.

"What is wrong, Lassui?" whispered Eowyn, as they sped across the desert.

"Wrong?"

"You keep staring at Gwirth."

"Do I?" He glanced at Oliel, who was dozing beside his sleeping wife. "She reminds me of someone, Melmenya."

"Who?"

"Prince Imrahil..."

Ahead of them they could see the lights of Carhivilven—at first as a faint glow on the horizon, then gradually brighter, and then resolved into hundreds of dazzling points.

Swooping down into the city, the djinn flew low along the Great Royal Road, slipped over the wrought-iron gates, and deposited the palanquin in Hentmirë's garden.

...

"Legolas is back!" cried Hentmirë, happily. "Come Keret, come Gimli!"

Keret dumped his wooden *mûmak* on the table. *There's no arguing when she's like this*, he thought. He took her hand and allowed her to lead him into the garden, where Legolas and a strange man were helping a very tired woman to climb down from the palanquin.

Keret stared at the woman...

"Mummy," he whispered. Then he shouted, running towards her, arms outstretched, "Mummy! MY MUMMY!"

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 13: Ribhadda's choice

**"Keret," whispered Gwirith, "oh, Keret!" She hugged him tightly. Then, "Let me look at you..." Keret stepped back. "How you've grown!" She held out her arms again.**

"Let us take you inside," said Legolas, gently separating them. "Captain Oliel..."

Oliel lifted Gwirith and carried her into the house.

"Bring her over here," said Hentmirë, indicating her day bed. She caught Keret's arm as he followed his mother. "You must be very good now, Keret, and help us look after her. Start by asking if she would like a drink..."

Outside, Eowyn was already sending the djinn back to Rihat, to collect Faramir and the others.

...

The healer had insisted that the Kurian be allowed to rest before he was questioned.

*"I have given him something to make him sleep. He has been fortunate—the glass missed his eye and, although there will be some scarring, most of the damage is above the hairline. There is, however, a deep laceration along the jaw, so he must be fed, very carefully, on liquids until it heals—and, of course, he must not speak..."*

*Ribhadda sighed. "I understand. How much?"*

*"Five gold pieces. It was a very skilled job."*

*Ribhadda paid the healer. Then he sent Aqhat out to fetch a woman.*

*"Find Meryt or Bet, or one of the others," he said. "Tell her I'll pay her five silver a day to take care of Master Kurian—feed him and change his dressings—in her own lodgings. I don't want him here."*

*"Yes, boss."*

By the time the Kurian awoke, *The Silk Road* was open and customers were already drinking at the bar and sitting at the gaming tables. Leaving Hiram in charge, Ribhadda took Haldir backstage to his own room.

"He's in here..." he said, unlocking the door.

The injured man was lying on the divan, his face and his left hand heavily bandaged. Ribhadda drew up a chair and indicated that Haldir should do the same.

"The healer tells me you can't speak," said Ribhadda. "So I want you to answer by moving your hand. One tap for 'yes', two taps for 'no'. Do you understand?"

No response.

Ribhadda sighed. "You're a professional," he said. "And this fiasco will have left you out of pocket. I will pay you for information. Do you understand *that*?"

There was a long pause. Then, Yes.

"Good. Now, I want to know who hired you. I'm going to say some names, and I want you to tell me 'yes' or 'no' after each one." He recited a list of names, deliberately starting with people he was sure had nothing to do with the attack. Each one elicited a 'no', until he said, "Abdi."

### The usual suspects

Yes.

Ribhadda glanced at Haldir.

"Did he say why he wanted Ribhadda dead?" asked the elf.

Yes.

Ribhadda was surprised. "Can you write, Master Kurian?"

Yes.

He walked over to his desk and found a writing board and a piece of chalk. "Here," he said, "tell me why."

With help, the Kurian wrote, *He think you know something will get him hanged.*

Ribhadda frowned. "Did he say what?"

Two taps. *No.*

"Did he mention Cyllien?" asked Haldir. "The elleth—the female elf who sings here? Were you to do anything to her?"

Yes.

"Take her back to him?"

Yes.

"He does not give up," said Haldir.

"He doesn't know how," replied Ribhadda. To the Kurian, he said, "I've arranged for someone to nurse you until you're back on your feet. Then I *strongly* suggest you get yourself back to Kuri."

With great care, the Kurian turned towards him, and assessed him with his one unbandaged—and still-painted—eye. Yes, he tapped.

"We'll leave you now. I'll send you a drink."

The Kurian moved his hand, indicating that he wanted to write something else. Ribhadda held the board for him. *No more spirits.*

Ribhadda almost laughed. "You should never have got into this line of work," he said. "You're not cut out for it."

"Why did you not kill him?" asked the elf, as Ribhadda locked the door.

The man shrugged his shoulders. "He was only doing his job."

"A job that *you* used to do?"

"Similar," said Ribhadda. "Once upon a time. Somewhere far, far, away."

...

"We will have to go inside *soon*, gwendithen," said Legolas.

"It is a pleasant evening," said Hentmirë. "Just give them a few moments more."



### The usual suspects

"But it is getting cold!" said Legolas, hugging her. "Look—Eowyn is shivering and Gimli is turning blue!"

"*Elves,*" growled Gimli, following his remark with a large swig of ale, for he had taken the sensible precaution of bringing a tankard outside with him.

"I am fine," said Eowyn, laughing. "If I need a wrap, I will go in through the kitchen and—oh, look!" She pointed skywards. "Is that the djinn?"

...

Keret was asleep, sitting on the floor beside the day bed, his head resting on the mattress beside Gwirth's hand.

"Why does he call you 'mummy'?" asked Oliel, very quietly.

"Because he thinks I'm his mother."

"But you're not..."

"Oliel! He is *far* too old."

"That is what I thought..."

"I found him by the docks," said Gwirth. "I was about to..." She bit her lip. "I must be honest with you Oliel, I was about to find a sailor and fuck my way home."

"Gods..."

Her husband laid his hand upon her knee, supportively, and she smiled gratefully. "But then I found Keret, lying behind a pile of rubbish. He had a raging fever—it didn't seem that he could possibly live, but—I don't know why—I suppose because he was so helpless, like a kitten in a sack—I took care of him, and he *recovered!*

"It took days, but he recovered, Oliel, and—because he had no memory of his past—he thought that I was his mother. So I named him Keret."

"And *he* is why you stayed."

She nodded.

Oliel looked at the boy. "Whatever else you may have done, Gwirth—however bad you think you've been—taking care of him has more than made up for it. It will be strange, suddenly being a father—and to a grown boy. I'll have a lot to learn, and quickly." He reached over Keret's head and touched his wife's cheek. "Just answer me one thing, Gwirth. Did you know that I was looking for you? Did you hide from *me*?"

"Not at first," she said. "At first I hid from everybody because I couldn't take the risk—when I heard of someone asking for me, I never knew if he'd been sent by you or by someone else, and I couldn't risk being found by *him*. But, later, I did deliberately hide from you, because I didn't think I could bear for you to see what I'd become..."

...

"Well," said Berengar, climbing down from the palanquin, "that was more comfortable than a camel! Why is everyone sitting outside?"

Legolas explained what had happened when Keret had seen Gwirth. "Hentmirë wants to give them some time alone together."

### The usual suspects

"Gwirth is Keret's mother? You are saying that Gwirth is *Riya*?" Faramir sat on the wall of one of the raised flower beds. "That is why she did not leave Carhivilven when she had the chance," he said. "That is who she meant by 'we'."

"What did she tell you Faramir?" asked Legolas. "Who is she hiding from?"

"She did not say. But it has something to do with a murder."

"The *Hatja's* son!" said Eowyn, suddenly. "Remember Lassui? Elissa—that is the prostitute from the Circus," she explained to Faramir, "she told us that Riya was with the *Hatja's* son when he was murdered, and that she knew the man who did it."

"From what Gwirth told me," said Faramir, "technically, she was an accomplice. It was her job to keep the man, er, occupied whilst the killer struck. But I have the impression that she did it under duress. She did not say so, but I think that the killer was her owner."

"But that was Abdi!" said Legolas. "According to Ribhadda, her owner was Abdi—the man who hired Wolfram to kidnap Cyllien..."

...

Under Hentmirë's supervision, Keret was carried upstairs and put to bed, and the room adjoining his was prepared for Gwirth. "It will just take me a few moments to arrange it. Would you mind, my dear," she said to Oliel, "coming up with me? Then you can tell me what your wife needs..."

Legolas—though not convinced that Oliel would know what his estranged wife might need—was grateful for the opportunity to exchange a few quiet words with Gwirth. "I believe that this," he said, taking the elven ring Elissa had given him from a money pouch at his hip, "is yours."

"My mother's ring! How did *you* come by it, your Highness?"

"Keret ran away from your friend, so she kept it in case you came back for it." He handed it to her. "Did you say it was your mother's?"

"Yes."

"It is a very special ring."

"She gave it to me just before she died," said Gwirth. She slipped it onto her finger, beside the wedding ring that Oliel had already returned to her, and held up her hand to admire it. "She couldn't wear it herself."

"Why not?" asked Legolas, softly.

"It wasn't my father's—it was given to her by her *first* love." She smiled. "'My prince'—that's what she always called him. 'My prince'."

"There," said Hentmirë, coming downstairs with Oliel still in tow, "everything is ready. Would you like to go up now, my dear?"

Gwirth immediately turned to the little woman and—displaying the 'class' that Ribhadda had so admired—said, with a gracious bow of the head, "Thank you again, my Lady, for making me so welcome in your home. I *would* like to retire now, yes."

...

As Gwirth was being carried upstairs, Faramir drew Legolas aside. "I have undertaken—I will

### The usual suspects

not go into the details of why: suffice to say that Berengar had a hand in it,"—Legolas smiled —"to attempt to arrange a marriage between the daughter of Lord Abdosir of Rihat and the *Hatja's* heir..."

"Valar! Do you think you will succeed?"

"I really do not know. It is a ludicrous idea." Legolas smiled again. "I had planned to offer the *Hatja* a trading agreement," said Faramir. "Trees are scarce here, and I thought that the timber of North Ithilien might prove attractive. But now..."

"You could offer him the man who killed his son?"

"But not without endangering Gwirth."

"Do you really think the *Hatja* would punish her?"

Faramir shrugged his shoulders. "He is an honourable man, I think, but not a kind one. He might easily decide that justice required it—and the penalty for murder is hanging."

"We cannot expose her."

"No..."

"But *something* must be done about Abdi." Legolas described what Haldir had witnessed behind the Guardhouse.

"So Abdi bribed Captain Ramess to let him escape? If he has Ramess on a regular retainer—"

"Which Ribhadda believes he has—"

"That would explain Ramess's treatment of Gwirth when she went to him for help." Faramir sighed. "The *Hatja* is not a likeable man," he said, "but I cannot, in good conscience, hide the identity of his son's killer from him. I really do not know what to do."

...

Eowyn yawned. "You are saying that Gwirth is Imrahil's *daughter*?" She unbuttoned her bodice.

"Yes—I am almost sure of it, melmenya. I recognised her elven blood the moment I saw her." He removed the stopper from a jar of scented oil and sniffed. "I cannot imagine how Hentmirë ever came to buy *this*," he said, pouring a few drops of the sensual, musky perfume into the bath water.

"She cannot say 'no' to pedlars, Lassui," said Eowyn, slipping out of her skirt. "She takes pity on them and buys whatever they show her. The house is full of things that she does not need and cannot take to Eryn Carantaur. We are going to sell them and give the money to the poor—*So*," she said, returning to the previous topic, "that would make Gwirth Faramir's cousin..."

"Yes—and Lothíriel's sister," said Legolas.

"Oh, dear gods!"

They both laughed. Eowyn climbed into the bath and sank down into the water. "Will you tell Gwirth?"

"I am not sure."

"If her father—her late mother's husband—does not know..."

### The usual suspects

"You think it would be better to say nothing," Legolas finished. "So do I. She and Oliel will face enough problems without that." He untied his sash and slipped out of his trousers.

Eowyn watched him walk to the dressing table and drape his clothes over the chair. There was something about the way he moved—about the combination of power, and grace, and effortless control—that made her feel...

"Come here," she said, stretching out her arms. "Come here, Lassui!"

...

"You are all slippery," Eowyn whispered. "Wet... And oily... And—oh..." She leaned forward, squeezing him tight, and kissed his mouth. "Big," she whispered.

"And you," said Legolas, raking his oily hands through her hair, "are a vixen. My beautiful vixen." He returned her kiss, exerting his elven strength to hold her close whilst he crushed his mouth against hers. Then he slid his hands down her shoulders, past her waist, grasped her hips, and began to thrust upwards, slow but hard.

"Oh! No," cried Eowyn, "no, no!"

But she did not mean 'no', and the elf did not stop—not until her body suddenly arched and she threw back her head. And then he held her upright, and let her climax—sobbing with gratitude—until she wilted in his arms. Then he drew her close, and cradled her against his chest.

...

Ribhadda bade his last customer goodnight and locked the doors of *The Silk Road* behind him.

"Promise me you won't stay here alone tonight, Rib," said Cyllien. "It's too dangerous."

"You don't need to worry about me, kid—"

"Cyllien is right," said Haldir. "You know that Abdi will try again, and you cannot look to Captain Ramess for protection. Come back with us."

"No," said Ribhadda. "No, I can't impose upon your friend like that." He turned to Cyllien. "If it will make you happy, I'll ask Hiram and Aqhat to stay with me—"

"Haldir will stay," said Cyllien, "won't you, Haldir? And so will I."

"You are not staying, *Tithen Dúlinn*," said Haldir. "Let me take Cyllien home," he said to Ribhadda. "Keep Hiram here with you until I return."

"It really isn't necessary."

"I insist," said Haldir.

...

Wolfram watched Cyllien and her big elf try to rouse the useless gatekeeper without waking the rest of the house. *That place*, he thought, *has more beds than a brothel...*

He finished his supper of leftovers and settled down to sleep.

*Tomorrow, I must look for a way to get inside.*

...

## The usual suspects

*"Tinúviel, Tinúviel.  
Still unafraid the birds now dwell  
and sing on boughs amid the snow  
where Lúthien and Beren go..."*

Legolas let the last note die away. Eowyn was asleep.

At first he had found it difficult, spending his nights with someone who needed as much sleep as she did. But, gradually, he had come to enjoy it. *To lie, gazing at the stars, with his immortal wife in his arms—what more could any elf want?*

His happy thoughts were interrupted by the lightest of taps at the door.

*That must be Haldir.*

Carefully, without waking her, he settled Eowyn on the mattress, climbed out of bed, slipped on his dressing robe, and answered the door.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Legolas," said Haldir, "but Gimli was sure that you would want to join us."

"Doing what?"

Haldir described the attack on Ribhadda and their subsequent interrogation of the Kurian. "We plan to spend the night at *The Silk Road*. If there is another attempt, we will try to capture the assassin and persuade him to take us to Abdi."

"Abdi," said Legolas. "That man is at the centre of everything. You had better let Faramir know what we are doing. I shall dress and write a note for Eowyn."

...

Ribhadda opened the door cautiously, knife in hand.

"I see you've brought the Five Armies with you," he said, to Haldir, as he stood aside to allow the two elves, the dwarf, and the man to enter.

Apart from the moonlight filtering through the windows, the place was in darkness.

"We all have a stake in this," said Legolas. He waited until the man had re-barred the door. "And we have some news for you. You may want to sit down to hear it."

"Why?" asked Ribhadda.

Legolas gestured towards the nearest chair. With a wry smile, Ribhadda sat.

"We have found Riya," said Legolas.

"And she's *dead*," said Ribhadda.

"No."

"Then what?"

"She is married," said Legolas.

"Ah..."

"To your friend, Captain Oliel."

### The usual suspects

"Oliel! Oliel's wife is... Well I'll *be*..." Ribhadda shook his head, laughing.

It was not the reaction Legolas had expected. "I thought he would be disappointed," he whispered to Faramir.

"He *is*," said Faramir, squeezing his arm. "Gwirth—*Riya*," he said to Ribhadda, taking the seat beside him, "saw Abdi murder the *Hatja's* son—"

"The *Hatja's* son? No wonder Abdi wants her dead."

"Unfortunately," continued Faramir, "he forced her to help him. So, when she went to report the crime to your friend, Captain Ramess—"

"Abdi's puppet..."

"So I have heard—Ramess threatened her with hanging."

"What evidence do *you* have against Abdi?" asked Legolas, suddenly. "Why does he want *you* dead?"

"I have spent most of the night wondering about that," said Ribhadda. "And I still have no idea."

...

"A dwarf," said Legolas softly, "can sleep on a galloping horse."

Faramir smiled. "Gimli's snoring may just work in our favour," he said. "If anyone does come for Ribhadda, he will be convinced that his victim is asleep."

"But will we hear him break in—?"

Legolas held up his hand. His question had just been answered. "There is someone at the back door," he said softly, "forcing the lock; and I think..."

"Someone at the front, too," said Haldir. "They are quiet, for Men."

"They are professionals," said Faramir. "Haldir, shall you and I take the front?"

Legolas turned to Ribhadda. "That leaves us with the back..." He laid his hand on Gimli's shoulder. "It is time, *elvellon*."

...

There were three intruders at the back entrance.

"One each!" cried Gimli.

He felled the first with a mighty blow from the flat of his axe; Ribhadda, stationed beside the door, hit the second with his own weapon of choice, a bottle of spirits; and Legolas brought down the third, who had turned to flee, with two carefully placed arrows in the back of the leg.

"More healer's bills," Ribhadda complained.

They dragged their prisoners into the bar—where Haldir and Faramir had already captured two more intruders—and Gimli tied them to chairs.

"Did anyone escape?" asked Ribhadda.

### The usual suspects

"Not as far as I am aware," said Faramir.

"Good." Ribhadda lit one of the candelabras and scrutinised each prisoner in turn, stopping before the man with the arrow wounds. "Well, well," he said, "Thuya. We *have* fallen on hard times."

"It's nothing personal, Rib."

"No; it never is," said Ribhadda. "But, just in case, I'm barring you from *The Silk Road*." He set the candelabra down on one of the tables. "That leg looks painful..."

"It is, Rib."

"It's important," said Ribhadda, "to get that sort of wound cleaned and dressed, before it starts to fester..."

"I know, Rib."

"I knew a man with a wound like that, high up in the thigh—his leg started to fester; he had it amputated—too late—he had his private parts amputated—too late—he—"

"For pity's sake!"

"There's a healer just next door," said Ribhadda. "A good man—knows his craft. Who sent you, Thuya?"

"Don't tell him!" cried another prisoner.

Ribhadda rounded on him, "*You* don't need a healer—who sent you, Thu—?"

"Abdi! Abdi sent us!"

"Are you supposed to meet with him? To collect your payoff?"

"Huy is, this afternoon."

Ribhadda turned to Huy—the man that Gimli had stunned with his axe. "I want," he said, "a personal introduction to Abdi. And I'm willing to pay."

"How much?"

"How much is Abdi paying?"

"A hundred gold. Each."

"I'll double it," said Ribhadda. "*And* you get the services of a healer thrown in free."

...

### Dawn

Eowyn awoke expecting to find Legolas lying beside her.

Instead, she found a note on his pillow.

*Melmenya, it said, I have been kidnapped by an elf and a dwarf and do not expect to be released until the morning,*

L

### The usual suspects

Eowyn smiled. Then she turned the papyrus over.

*We are spending the night at The Silk Road with Ribhadda. I will explain when I return.*

"Oh, Lassui! How could you go without waking me?" she cried.

...

"You should consider keeping me on a retainer," said the healer, "it would be cheaper for you in the long run."

Ribhadda shot him a sarcastic smile. "Will Thuya live—the man with the arrow wounds?"

"Oh yes. Provided he keeps the wounds clean."

"Thanks." Ribhadda closed the door behind him.

"So, gentlemen," he said to Faramir, Gimli, and the elves, "what I suggest is that we accompany Huy to the meeting with Abdi and take the bastard prisoner. Once we've got him safely locked up we can free the others." He nodded towards the storeroom, where the prisoners were being held.

"What do you intend to do with Abdi?" asked Legolas.

"Well," said Ribhadda, "we know there's no point in turning him over to Ramess—"

"We take him straight to the *Hatja*," said Gimli. "He will surely not be bought by the man who killed his own lad."

Faramir shook his head, "We cannot do that, Gimli—it would endanger Gwirth."

"Then let my axe deal with him."

"No," said Ribhadda. "We *will* hand him over to the *Hatja*, but I need to speak to Riya first."

"Why?" asked Legolas, gently. "You are not..."

"Not what?" Ribhadda's face crumpled into a smile—almost a laugh. "Planning to take the fall for her? No!"

"What, then?"

"Let me tell *her* first."

...

Wolfram accepted the basket of food with effusive thanks, heaping good wishes on the Lady of the House and ending his performance with a cocky little squeeze of the slave's hand. Then he settled back with a slice of fruited bread, and watched as the man made his way from villa to villa, delivering small pieces of papyrus.

*What can they be?*

The slave was arguing with the gatekeeper at the big yellow villa—*The surly prick*—who was refusing to accept whatever it was. Wolfram grinned when My Lady's man had the last laugh, pushing the note into the clipped hedge as he left. He waited until the slave had returned to the house, carefully hid his food, then shuffled over to the yellow house, and—taking care that he was not seen by the gatekeeper—retrieved the papyrus.



## The usual suspects

Reading was not one of Wolfram's talents, but even he could make out most of the carefully written words:

*SALE  
AT THE VILLA OF MURSILIS  
HALF-PAST TWO TODAY  
ALL MONIES TO THE HOME FOR LOST CHILDREN*

Wolfram could have danced! *They are bound to leave the gates open! All I need do is walk in!*

Hardly able to wait until the afternoon, he shuffled—a little too nimbly at first, but he checked himself—along the road, to the pink villa, where he peered through the wrought-iron gates. My Lady was in the courtyard, feeding kitchen scraps to a flock of coloured birds. Wolfram quickly turned away—but not before he had seen her bend forwards, in her tiny little bodice.

*Just give them that, he thought. There's enough gold and beads on it to feed ten homes for lost children...*

...

By the time Legolas and the others arrived at the house, Eowyn had been joined in the courtyard by Gwirth, Keret, and Hentmirë, who were sitting together in a shady corner, eating breakfast.

"So you will be living on the ship?" asked Hentmirë.

"Yes," said Gwirth. "Most of the time."

"Oh, you will enjoy it!" said the little woman. "The sea is wonderful! But where will Keret live—" She broke off at the sound of the gates opening. "*Legolas!*"

...

Eowyn immediately dumped her plate of scraps on one of the raised flower beds and—scattering the flock of birds as she went—walked angrily over to the gate.

"You," she said, ignoring everyone but Legolas, "have some explaining to do."

"I left a note..."

"*Kidnapped by an elf an a dwarf!*" She grabbed his arm and pulled him into the house—allowing him no time to reply to Hentmirë's cheery greeting.

...

Ribhadda approached Hentmirë with a bow. "Good morning, my lady. I hope I'm not disturbing you too early."

"Of course not—Master Ribhadda, is it not?" asked Hentmirë. "You are most welcome. But, if you'll excuse me, I still have some preparations to make for a sale I am holding this afternoon. Come along, Keret: come and help me."

"Aaaw—"

"*Keret.*" She took the boy into the house, with Haldir, Gimli and Faramir tactfully following. Ribhadda watched them go, then turned to Gwirth. "Hello, Riya."

"Rib."

### **The usual suspects**

"You're looking good."

"Rib, I—"

Ribhadda held up his hands. "I know Riya, they've told me about Oliel."

He sat down beside her. "He's a good man. He'll take care of you—and the boy. I'm here for a different reason—to give you this." He handed her a scroll, tied with a red cord and sealed with a lump of red wax stamped with the *Hatja's* emblem.

"Don't open it—it's a Letter of Pardon," he explained. "Signed by the *Hatja*. It can't be rescinded, not even by the *Hatja* himself. Whatever happens now, Riya, you're safe."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 14: Destiny

**"You think," said Eowyn, "that tugging can get you out of *any* trouble."**

Legolas laughed, nuzzling her neck. He had pushed her onto the bed the moment they had entered their chamber and, arms wrapped around her waist, was wrestling with her, completely ignoring her attempts to argue.

"Legolas! I am *angry* with you."

He bit her neck.

"Ow! Stop it!"

He devoured her mouth.

"Mmmm, mmmm... Nnnnn!"

He lifted his head. "What are you saying, Melmenya?"

"Aaagh!" yelled Eowyn, with frustration. "Will you—will you—ah—will... will... *oh...*" But he had finally got her where he wanted her. And he was right—tugging *could* get him out of any trouble. At least, with her.

...

Eowyn struggled against his rhythm—whether because of her earlier anger or the emotional exhaustion that had replaced it, she could not find release. She shifted her hips, trying to reach that elusive place...

"Stop, melmenya," gasped Legolas, catching her face in his hands—"Stop, Eowyn *nín!*" He kissed her fiercely, holding her still until she surrendered to him. Then he lifted himself up on his hands and, smiling down at her, he began to thrust with firm, hard strokes, grinding his hips each time he filled her—

"Oh yes! There! There, Lassui! There—oh—yes, THERE!" She twisted suddenly, her words sliding from nonsense into one long, heartrending wail.

Her elf collapsed on top of her, his head coming to rest on her shoulder.

And Eowyn held him, happily, in arms still flickering with pleasure.

...

"I tried to reach you," she said, stroking his silken hair; "I tried to find you with my thoughts. But it did not work."

"I think it takes powerful emotions to form that bond, melmenya."

"There were powerful emotions," said Eowyn. "Anger and fear. Suppose something had happened to you, Lassui? Suppose you..." She could not say it. Instead she pulled him closer. "I would never have seen you again. All I would have had of you was your silly note. And I would have had to endure eternity without you."

Legolas raised his head. "That is a fear you must learn to live with now that you are immortal, melmenya," he said, softly.

"I know."

### The usual suspects

"Immortality is not the simple blessing most mortals imagine it."

Eowyn reached up and tucked a loose lock of hair behind his ear. "It will be, Lassui. It will be, provided you never leave me," she said.

...

"You survived, then?" said Gimli.

Legolas grinned.

"Aww!" Gimli threw up his hands. "I do not want to hear anything about *that!*"

"Where is Faramir, *elvellon?*"

"In the garden making plans with Ribhadda and Oliel."

"And Hentmirë?"

"Spinning through the house like a whirlwind, dragging young Keret behind her."

Legolas walked over to a tall, ornately painted dresser and, taking a key from around his neck, opened one of its small cupboards and removed a brown glass bottle.

"Is that *it?*" asked Gimli.

"Yes." Legolas held the bottle up to the light. "Just one more spoonful, I think."

"What was she like before?"

"Slower," said Legolas. "But, otherwise, much the same."

"How long will the effect last?"

"I have no idea."

"Let us hope it lasts a long while..."

...

"Gwirth is *not* going to the Palace with you," said Oliel, firmly.

"How many times do I have to tell you she's *safe?*" said Ribhadda.

"Faramir, you are with *me* on this—"

"She has a Letter of *Pardon*—"

"Will you stop talking about me as if I were not *here!*" cried Gwirth, suddenly. "I *am* going to the Palace. No—hear me out, Oliel!" She held up a slender hand. "I have spent the best part of four years fending for myself, or looking after Keret; I have learned to take control of my own life. If I did not go with you—if I were not there to plead my own case—how could I live with it afterwards? Whatever the outcome—life or death—I *must* be there to hear it decided."

Faramir acknowledged her argument with a courteous bow of the head. "It is agreed, then," he said.

"You are going to have your hands full with her," said Ribhadda, quietly, to Oliel. And he tried to hide his envy with one of his rare smiles.

## The usual suspects

...

### An hour later

"Move it a little more to the left," said Hentmirë.

"I do not think your customers will notice the position of the tables, gwendithen," said Legolas, but he and Gimli did as instructed.

"But we must give them enough space to move around and look at things properly," said Hentmirë. "Now, where are the cloths—Keret, what are you doing?"

The boy was rummaging through one of the boxes of knickknacks. "How much do you want for this?" he asked, holding up a tiny bronze figure of a dancing god.

"You do not have any money," said Gimli.

"No," said Keret, "not yet. But if you let me take it to Old Yarih, I can probably get more than you thought, and we can split the extra, half-and-half."

"Why would you need money, now?" asked Legolas.

"People *always* need money," said Keret, polishing the statuette with his shirt sleeve, "in case something happens..." He set the little figure on one of the tables, admiring his handiwork, then he picked up the cloth Hentmirë had asked for, and began unfolding it.

Hentmirë glanced at Legolas. "*What* could happen, Keret?" she asked.

The boy shrugged his shoulders; he spread the cloth over a table.

"Your mother has a Letter of Pardon," said Hentmirë. "You are not going to lose her again."

"*He* might not want me," said Keret, smoothing out the creases.

"Of course he wants you," said Hentmirë.

"If he doesn't, can I live in the Forest with you?"

"Oh! Come here!" Hentmirë hugged him. "Your mother and your father both want you, and you are going to be sailing on the sea with them. But you can come and stay with me—and with Legolas and Eowyn and Gimli—whenever you like—provided your mother agrees."

"That's my second wish," Keret mumbled, from the confines of her bosom.

"What is your third wish?" asked Legolas, smiling.

"I'm going to save that until I really need it."

"Very wise," said Gimli.

"Well," said Hentmirë, "now that is settled, shall we set up our stalls?"

...

Expecting to have to talk his way into the *Hatja's* presence, Faramir was pleasantly surprised to find that the Palace Guards had standing orders to admit him. With Haldir, Ribhadda, Oliel and Gwirith following, he was escorted to the main Reception Hall, where he was greeted by a slightly flustered secretary.

### The usual suspects

"His Excellency has exactly ten minutes, your Highness," said the man with a nervous bow. "Had you come on any other day..." He spread his hands, helplessly. "But today he receives the Kurian ambassador..."

Faramir returned his bow, politely. "Ten minutes will be sufficient," he said.

The secretary led them to the *Hatja's* private apartments and opened the double doors. The *Hatja*, his head wrapped in towels, was being shaved by the Palace barber. Waving the servant aside, the secretary bent over his master and whispered in his ear.

"Prince Faramir," said the *Hatja*, without moving, "please take a seat. Who are your companions?"

This was no time for tact. "Witnesses," said Faramir.

The barber had already resumed his work, but he paused to allow the *Hatja* to speak. "Witnesses to what?"

"Your son's murder," said Faramir.

The *Hatja* threw up his hands—and the barber stepped back with a cry of dismay: he had nicked the Excellent chin.

"Leave us," said the *Hatja* to the terrified man, "wait outside—no, no, you are pardoned," he added, when the man attempted to throw himself to the ground in contrition.

Dabbing his face with a towel, the ruler turned to Faramir. "What do *you* know of my son's murder?"

"I can give you the name of his killer," said Faramir. "And, this afternoon, if all goes well, I will capture him and deliver him to you."

"If all goes well?"

"We are here because we need the assistance of some of your Guards," said Faramir. "Good, reliable men..."

"What does that mean?"

"Not Captain Ramess or anyone loyal to him," said Ribhadda.

"Who are you?" asked the *Hatja*.

"One of your citizens," replied Ribhadda.

"You are from the North."

"Yes—but I have been paying your taxes for more than ten years," said Ribhadda.

The *Hatja* studied him shrewdly. "Very well." He turned to Faramir. "What do you want in return for this murderer?"

"We can discuss that later," said Faramir.

"Tell me now."

"Since you insist—a marriage," said Faramir, "between your second son and his former betrothed, the daughter of Lord Abdosir of Rihat."

### The usual suspects

"Impossible!"

Faramir was taken aback. "Are you saying you do not want to know who killed your son?"

The *Hatja* did not reply.

"And to whom else would you marry your heir? The King of Kuri has no daughter; Umbar is still ruled by pirates; the King of Gondor is only recently married... To whom would you marry him but Lady Bint-Anath? The alliance would give you joint control of the Silk Road to Rihat and beyond. And..."

"And?"

"And, if the marriage takes place, *I* am willing to enter into a trading agreement."

"You! What do *you* have to trade?" asked the *Hatja*.

"Timber," said Faramir. "Tall, straight oaks for ship-building; cedars for house-building; walnuts and birches for cabinet making..."

"And what would you want in return—*I will not export bullion.*"

"Perfumes and spices," said Faramir, "cordials and candied fruits. Such luxuries are as rare in my country as timber is in yours—"

The *Hatja* held up his hand. "My secretary will draft an agreement," he said. "Now, tell me everything you know of my son's murder, starting with the name of the man who killed him."

...

Wolfram was watching the fat little woman, elf-boy and the dwarf slowly turn the courtyard garden into a souk...

He glanced to his right.

Another beggar had taken up residence on his patch of wasteland, not ten yards away. *Planning to live off the little woman's charity*, he thought.

It was annoying, but it did not matter.

*Two hours*, thought Wolfram. *Two hours and I will be inside the house, claiming my prize.*

He would pleasure My Lady in her own bedchamber, then leave Carhivren, follow the Silk Road, and try his chances in the East.

*Unless...* He smiled, wolfishly. *Unless, that is, My Lady decides to come with me.*

Either way, he would not be sitting outside the house much longer.

...

The Circus was already busy, with crowds of spectators arriving early to watch the drivers exercise their horses in the arena. Faramir, Haldir and Ribhadda entered through one of the arched gates and climbed up to the first tier of seats. Oliel and Gwirth remained outside in Hentmiré's carriage.

The meeting with Abdi was set for half past two. Huy, already in position, was sitting at the bottom of the first tier, next to the *Hatja's* own private box, surrounded by ten members of the *Hatja's* personal bodyguard, all convincingly disguised as ordinary spectators.

## The usual suspects

Faramir and his companions climbed higher up the tier. "Abdi has chosen the place well," he said, glancing around the stadium. "There are three staircases close by and, if he cannot reach those, he can easily drop to the track and disappear through one of those hatches."

Ribhadda shook his head, "One of *us* could do that, perhaps, but not Abdi—Abdi's breathless after raising a glass of spirits to his lips. In fact, I'm beginning to doubt that he'll come here in person. He'd be too conspicuous..." Ribhadda's eyes narrowed. "Unless... See the man in the yellow headdress?" He pointed to fat man waddling up the nearest staircase.

"Is that Abdi?"

"He is the right size," Haldir confirmed, "but I cannot see his face."

"And he is going in the wrong direction..."

They looked down at Huy. The villain had already risen to his feet and was pushing his way past the bodyguards. The Hatja's men, clearly confused by the change of plan, all remained in their places—until two of them, sitting on the ends of the benches, finally decided to take the initiative and follow their charge.

"Come on," said Ribhadda.

They forced their way down the tier.

The man in the bright yellow headdress had found a seat on the far side of the staircase. The two bodyguards were watching him from a distance. "Where is Huy?" asked Haldir.

"Oh gods," muttered Ribhadda, "that's not Abdi."

"Down the stairs!" cried Faramir, summoning the bodyguards with an angry wave of his hand.

...

"I need the room of easement," said Gwirith.

...

The gates to the pink house had been open for a quarter of an hour but, as yet, only a handful of customers had arrived. Wolfram watched them walking slowly round the tables, picking things up and putting them down, the men staring at the dwarf and the women fluttering their eyelashes at elf-boy.

My Lady was nowhere to be seen. *She must be staying indoors*, thought Wolfram. *Perfect!*

He was still waiting for more people to gather—*Safety in numbers*—when his new neighbour, the other beggar, suddenly stood up and began striding—*Striding!*—towards the house. Watching him, open mouthed, Wolfram caught a glimpse of something glinting beneath his ragged robes as he moved.

*A knife! What's he going to do with a pricking-great knife...?*

*Gods' turds! My Lady!*

Wolfram leaped to his feet and, despite the cramp in his limbs, sprinted after the stranger.

...

Battling against the tide of people, Faramir and Haldir followed Ribhadda down the steps and out into the open space surrounding the Circus. Here, the crowds were thinner, but they looked



### The usual suspects

in vain for any sign of Huy.

"He hasn't had time to go far," Ribhadda reasoned. "He must have gone into one of the shops."

"Where do we start?" asked Faramir.

"With the closest." Ribhadda set off towards a small pipe weed shop. Faramir turned to Haldir. "Take the bodyguards and search the rest," he said. "Tell them to arrest Huy and anyone they find with him." He followed Ribhadda.

The pipe weed shop was closed, but the next store, a much larger establishment selling perfumed oils, was not—and there they found Huy, standing just inside the doorway, staring at something in the room beyond.

Silently, Faramir drew his sword and Ribhadda pulled out his knife, and the two men advanced. Sensing their presence, Huy turned and raised his hands in surrender. Ribhadda grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the shop.

And Faramir entered, just in time to see Gwirth cut Abdi's throat from ear to ear.

...

It had taken Wolfram several minutes to push his way through the small crowd of bargain hunters blocking the gate. But, once inside the courtyard, he had slipped easily past elf-boy—who was showing two simpering women how to draw a bow—and past the dwarf—who was haggling loudly over the price of a meat cleaver—and entered the house.

There was no sign of the man with the knife.

*If that bastard touches My Lady... Which way?*

The place was vast, but Wolfram's instincts had never failed him in the past.

*Up.*

He threw off his headdress and his enveloping robes, and approached the stairs.

...

Eowyn picked up her scimitar and examined its curved blade. It had served her well on the prison island. *But it would be silly, she thought, to keep it, for I will not need it in Eryn Carantaur. I shall take it downstairs.*

She wrapped it in its silken cover, tucked it—carefully—under her arm and, closing the bedchamber door behind her, made her way to the top of the stairs. As she placed her hand on the rail, she heard a voice say, *"You are coming with me."*

Eowyn turned, startled; there was no one in sight.

*"Stand up—that's it,"* said the voice.

One of the chamber doors was open. *Cyllien's door...*

*"Take my arm—keep smiling."* The voice did not belong to Haldir.

Eowyn crept along the landing.

*"Now—remember—if anyone asks, Ribhadda sent me and I'm taking you to The Silk Road. Make any other sound and I'll cut that pretty face in two..."*

### The usual suspects

Cyllien sobbed.

*"Don't start that!"*

Calmly, Eowyn pulled the silken cover from her scimitar and let it fall to the ground. Then, grasping the sword in both hands, she took up position beside the door, her feet spread, her back to the wall, her blade ready.

...

Wolfram reached the top of the stairs—and froze. My Lady was lying in wait beside one of the chamber doors...

*For the stranger?*

*What a woman!*

Sensing his presence, My Lady turned and—as though his being there were the most natural thing in the world—she lifted a finger to her lips in a silent *Shhhh*.

*What a woman!* Wolfram felt a thrill of excitement. *What a pair we make!*

He had no weapon. He had no idea who the stranger was nor what he was doing. But he tiptoed along the corridor and stood at My Lady's side.

...

"It's over," said Gwirth, staring down at Abdi's lifeless body, "at last. I am free..." She began to sway.

Faramir quickly put away his sword. "Give me the knife," he said, taking it from her hands and, calling "Ribhadda," putting an arm around her.

The other man pushed Huy into the shop. "What's—oh gods, *Riya!*"

"Take her," said Faramir. He crouched beside Abdi's massive corpse and closed the staring eyes.

"You surely took *him* by surprise," said Ribhadda to Gwirth. "Where's Oriel? *Riya?*" He shook her gently. "Where's your husband?"

"Waiting in the carriage..."

Faramir rose to his feet. "Take her to Oriel; I will find the *Hatja's* bodyguards." He turned to Huy. "You, come with me."

"Abdi outwitted us," said Ribhadda, gently guiding the woman outside. "But—once again—he underestimated *you*, *Riya.*"

...

Eowyn tightened her grip on the scimitar. How Wolfram came to be standing beside her she did not know, but she had no time now to worry about it; the door was opening.

She took a deep breath.

Out stumbled Cyllien, head bowed, oblivious to her surroundings. Out came the stranger, chest to Cyllien's back, his left hand grasping her elbow, his right inside his robes—presumably holding a knife.

### The usual suspects

Eowyn pressed her blade to the back of his neck. "Let her go!"

Taken by surprise, the villain did as he was told. But, without the support of his hand, Cyllien's legs gave way. She fell back against the man's chest; he fell against Eowyn; Wolfram lunged forward to pull Eowyn out of the way; and somehow, in the confusion, the stranger ripped Eowyn from Wolfram's arms and got his knife to her throat.

...

"*Melmenya!*" Legolas' hand flew to his neck...

He gasped. "I am sorry," he said to his startled customer, "I must... I... Gimli will take care of you!"

Clumsily pushing his way through the crowd, he rushed into the house.

...

"What are you doing, you *prick!*" hissed Wolfram. "It's all turned to *shit*. You'll never get the elf woman out of here now. Give My Lady to me and take off before her elf-boy catches you."

He took a cautious step closer.

"The door at the top of the stairs is your best chance." He pointed to Hentmirë's chamber: he had not wasted the hours he had spent staring at the house. "Go out onto the balcony. It's only a couple of feet to the next villa—and next door's gates have no spikes."

He took another slow step.

"Go on. Give My Lady to me..." He held out his hands.

The stranger was almost convinced—Wolfram could see his knife hand relaxing—and My Lady knew it, too, because her expression had suddenly taken on a new determination.

*That's right*, Wolfram thought, *get yourself ready...* "Give her to me," he repeated, firmly.

Slowly, the man pushed Eowyn forward—

"MELMENYA!" Legolas came flying up the stairs.

The man pulled Eowyn back, digging the point of his knife into her flesh.

"NO!" cried Wolfram.

His left hand flew out, catching the knife and holding it firm—though the blade was cutting through to the bone—whilst his right hand ripped Eowyn from the man's arms and threw her towards Legolas.

Wolfram turned back to the stranger with a triumphant smile.

The man pulled the blade from Wolfram's fingers and plunged it into his chest.

...

Guiding her through the crowd, Ribhadda escorted the now exhausted Gwirth back to Hentmirë's carriage.

"What happened?" asked Oliel, climbing down to help her up into her seat. "You were gone so long I was about to come and find you and—*Gods!*" He turned to Ribhadda. "Why is she

### The usual suspects

covered in blood?"

"Abdi's dead," said Ribhadda, simply.

"And Gwirth saw it happen?"

Ribhadda sighed. "She—"

"I killed him, Oriel," said Gwirth. Her voice sounded distant, but strong—full of cold determination. "I saw him send his substitute into the arena, and I knew everyone would be fooled, so I followed him..."

"Why didn't you tell me the truth? Why did you tell me you needed the room of easement?"

Gwirth smiled, sadly. "It was something that *I* had to do, Oriel. With my own hands." With great effort, she lifted her hands and laid them on top of his. "He was waiting in the oil shop," she continued. "I knew that Huy would be coming soon—I knew I didn't have much time. I told Abdi what I was going to do to him and I told him why. He didn't believe me. I took out my knife—"

"You were carrying a knife?"

"I always carry a knife, Oriel. How do you think I survived in Rihat? I took out my knife and said, 'Look at me. Look at this ruined face! I want this face to be the last thing you ever see!' And then I cut out his throat..."

...

*Strange that it doesn't hurt*, thought Wolfram.

All he could feel was My Lady's little hands, pressing down on his chest.

He stared up at her through the mist.

Around her lovely head, the stars were shining. *She's not a woman after all*, he thought. *She's a god...*



...

Legolas drove his fist into the intruder's face—and, by the time the inert body had hit the floor, he was already at Eowyn's side. "Melmenya?"

"He is dead."

Legolas crouched beside her. "I know, Eowyn *nín*. But are *you* all right?"

"I did not think he *could* die," said Eowyn, softly. "I thought..."

"What Melmenya?" Legolas brushed her hair aside and carefully examined her throat. The skin

### The usual suspects

was reddened but not broken. He pulled her into his arms. "What did you think, my darling?"

"I thought that I was doomed to spar with him forever."

...

### Later

"Once again, Prince Faramir, you bring me a dead body and deprive me of my revenge."

Faramir shook his head. "*Circumstances* have deprived you of an opportunity to dispense *justice* publicly," he said.

The *Hatja* almost smiled. "How do I know that this man really was my son's killer?" he asked.

"I have a witness," said Faramir. "Mistress Gwirth. But before she tells you what she knows, I must give you this on her behalf."

"A Letter of Pardon."

Faramir nodded.

"How did she obtain this?"

"I understood," said Faramir, "that that question was never asked, since an Order of Pardon cannot be rescinded."

With a sigh, the *Hatja* broke his own seal, untied the cord, unrolled the papyrus—and cried out in dismay. Pushed into the centre of the scroll, each tied with a length of ribbon, were two locks of reddish brown hair.

...

"Tell me how my son died," said the *Hatja*.

"He owed Abdi money," said Gwirth, "a lot of money. He'd lost heavily at the gaming tables, and he refused to pay. 'I am the *Hatja's* son and heir,' he said. 'How are you going to *make* me?'—"

The *Hatja* sighed; Gwirth's story clearly rang true.

"Abdi was furious. He decided to hold your son hostage and demand a ransom. It was just a matter of getting him away from his bodyguards—"

"Which is where *you* came in, no doubt," said the *Hatja*.

"Yes. But something went wrong—I don't know what, exactly—Abdi lost his temper and your son died."

"But the villain still demanded his ransom."

Gwirth nodded. "He had me cut off three locks of your son's hair."

"Why did he not send these?" The *Hatja* pointed to the hair that had been hidden in the scroll.

"They disappeared. Stolen... I do not know who took them—"

"Ugarti," said Ribhadda. Then, clearly deciding that it was safest to hide his own role in the theft of the Letter of Pardon, he added, "I *think* they may have been stolen by a small time

### **The usual suspects**

criminal called Ugarti, your Excellency. I always had the impression that he was blackmailing Abdi..."

The *Hatja* turned to Gwirth. "Where is my son's body?" he asked.

...

Oliel helped Gwirth climb into Hentmirë's carriage, then took a seat beside her. He had not said a word since hearing her describe how she had killed Abdi.

Gwirth stared down at her hands. "Oliel..."

Her husband did not respond.

"Oliel," she persisted, "I have changed my mind. I am not coming back to Gondor with you. I am going to stay here, in Carhivren, with Keret."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 15: Two funerals, a wedding, and the journey home

**Captain Oliel was on deck, supervising repairs to the main mast. "Good morning, my friend," he said to Faramir. "Come below; I have not forgotten my promise to you."**

"Your promise?"

"To return your money."

"Oliel! That is not why I have come! But I..."

Faramir glanced around. Several of the sailors, though busy, were listening to their Captain's business with interest. "I *would* like to speak to you in confidence," he said.

"If it's about—"

"Just ten minutes of your time, Oliel," said Faramir. "Please?"

"Come below, then."

...

Oliel closed the door of the small cabin. "Is this about Gwirth?"

"Of course." Faramir sat down on the narrow bunk bed. "Why, Oliel? After all these years of searching, why hand her to another man?"

"It was Gwirth's decision, Faramir. And Ribhadda's a *good* man." Oliel uncorked a bottle of spirits and poured two large measures.

"Yes, he is. And he loves her. But *she* loves you."

"Then why did she change her mind? Why did she decide to stay?" He held out one of the glasses.

"Do you *really* not know?" said Faramir, accepting the drink.

For a long moment, he stared into the brown liquid, then, with a shrug, he knocked it back—"Gods!"—and shuddered, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. "Gwirth needed reassurance, Oliel; when she told you how she had killed Abdi, she needed... Something. Anything. Anything would have been better than silence."

"I am not a demonstrative man, Faramir. I can't help—"

"But you searched for *seven years!*"

"That was the easy part."

"Do you want to lose her?"

"It's too late."

"No, it is not too late! But it *is* time to make a decision. If you want her—if you can live with the woman she has become—go to her. Go to her, and tell her, and make her believe it."

...

### The funerals

## The usual suspects

There were two funerals that morning.

The first, attended by the *Hatja*, his heir, Lord Aperel, his Court, and various visiting dignitaries, was held in the Valley of Tombs, the traditional resting place of the rulers of Carhivilven.

The second, attended by just four mourners (one of them under guard), took place in the commoner's cemetery, close to where Hentmirë's parents lay buried.

...

Eowyn watched the gravedigger as he slowly shovelled sand onto Wolfram's coffin. "Do you think he is with his ancestors, Lassui?"

"I am not sure that a man like that *has* ancestors, Melmenya," said Legolas, gently taking her arm and trying to draw her away, but Eowyn resisted, slipping her mantle from her shoulders and dropping it into the grave.

"Melmenya?"

"It may be cold there, Lassui," she said.

"Oh, do not feel guilty, *meleth nín*," said Legolas, wrapping his arm around her. "Sooner or later, someone would have killed him—I would have killed him."

"I know... But..."

"But he saved your life."

Eowyn shook her head. "It is not just that..." She slid her arm around his waist. "I wanted him dead, Lassui. In my mind, he was a monster. But in reality, he was just a man. And when he died, he was smiling. I think that the gods had forgiven him."

"For saving *you*, my darling." He kissed her forehead. "Come, Eowyn *nín*. There is nothing you can do now..."

...

"*Navaer, mellon nín*," whispered Vardamir, his head bowed, his hand upon his heart. "*No baid lín galen a glor...*" He raised his head. "He was the only friend I ever had."

Hentmirë bit her lip. "I am sorry."

"And he loved *her*. In his own way."

"But she was not meant for him, Master Vardamir," said Hentmirë. "We must pray that his spirit has found peace at last. And that you..."

She looked up at the elf. "When my parents died, Master Vardamir, I thought I would be alone forever. And I *was* alone for a very long time. But then *Legolas* came, and Eowyn, and Prince Faramir and his friend, and March Warden Haldir and *his* friend, and suddenly..."

She patted his arm. "Never give up hope, Master Vardamir. Be brave and do the best you can, and do not give up hope..."

...

## The wedding



### The usual suspects

Since the official period of mourning had already been observed—two years earlier—the *Hatja* decreed that his son's funeral would be followed by just seven days of prayer and fasting, and that the marriage of his heir, Lord Aperell, would take place on the eighth day.

Five days after the burial, Lord Abdosir and his daughter arrived on the outskirts of Carhivilven, where they camped for two nights, awaiting the hour when Lady Bint-Anath, dressed in her golden wedding gown, would make her joyful entry into the city.

...

"You have a visitor, my Lady."

"Tonight?" Bint-Anath looked up from her book. "Who is it, Aneksi?"

"The other young man, my Lady—the secretary."

"*Berengar?*" Bint-Anath leaped to her feet. "Does my father know he is here?"

"Lord Abdosir has given his permission, my Lady. I am to stay here with you—"

"Oh."

"And there will be guards outside the door."

"That will not be necessary."

"Those are your father's orders, my Lady."

"But Berengar has already *proved*—oh, very well, if my father insists. Show him in, Aneksi." Bint-Anath closed her book and laid it on her bed, then turned to greet her visitor.

"My Lady." Berengar bowed low. He was dressed in loose trousers, and a waistcoat of midnight blue silk spangled with silver stars, and his unruly dark hair, framing his bronzed face, fell about his bare, lightly muscled shoulders.

Bint-Anath ran forward, and caught his hands. "Berengar! It *is* good to see you!"

"Hello, Bint-Anath." He kissed her hand. "I wanted to wish you joy," —he smiled—"and to give you *this*." He handed her a tiny object wrapped in silk.

"What is it?" Bint-Anath pulled open the wrapping and examined the gift closely.

"It is a gold ten-piece, from my own country, Gondor."

"Your king is handsome. But not so handsome as you."

Berengar smiled. "It is a pledge," he said. "If ever you should need a champion, Bint-Anath, return it to me and I shall come immediately—though I should point out that, since my skills lie more in the administrative sphere than in warfare or diplomacy, I may have to bring Prince Faramir along to assist me."

Bint-Anath laughed. "Thank you, Berengar. I shall treasure it always." She kissed his cheek. Then she crossed to her dressing table and carefully locked the coin in a small casket. "Will you drink a toast with me?"

"I would be honoured."

"Aneksi?"

### The usual suspects

The woman hesitated, mindful of Lord Abdosir's orders, but—at a frown from her mistress—she left to fetch some wine.

"Good," said Bint-Anath. "I did not want her listening." She motioned Berengar to sit down. "I can never thank you enough for what you have done for me," she said. "A less honourable man would have thrown me out—or taken advantage—or, perhaps, have demanded a ransom. But *you* went out of your way to help a girl who had caused you nothing but trouble—"

"It was Faroth—"

"No," said Bint-Anath. "No. It was *you*. Whatever Prince Faramir may have done, he did for your sake. Thank you Berengar."

Berengar looked away, embarrassed by her praise. "It was nothing, really. I, er, I just—oh, what are you reading?" He picked up her book.

"No..."

But he had already opened it, at random, and was studying a beautifully painted miniature of a man and a woman (on her hands and knees)...

He closed the book.

Bint-Anath blushed. "I thought I should find out... Because I know so little; I know less than my *maids*..."

Berengar smiled at her, fondly.

"It was a good idea," he reassured her. "But you already know everything you need to know, in *here*." He patted his own chest. "You love Aperel and he loves you. So just listen to your heart, Bint-Anath. It will tell you what to do."

...

The following morning, Lady Bint-Anath, carrying a Gondorian coin for good luck, entered Carhivren in a golden palanquin, with her father at her side.

She was received at the gates of the Palace by her future father-in-law, the *Hatja*, and escorted into his private temple, where, before a host of courtiers and foreign dignitaries, she was married to Lord Aperel.

Then the young couple descended the temple steps, and walked slowly round the great Central Court of the Palace, greeting the throngs of people who had gathered to congratulate their popular young lord and his lady.

Hentmirë, standing just outside the temple, amongst the guests of honour, threw a handful of petals at the bride as she passed. The pale flakes rose in the air, swirled in the lightest of breezes, and fell back upon the thrower.

Legolas laughed. "You look like an elleth at her coming of age ceremony, gwendithen," he said, giving her a hug. "But more surprised!"

...

### Dawn, the next day

Eowyn awoke and stretched her limbs. Beside her, the bed was empty.

"Legolas?"

### **The usual suspects**

Wrapping herself in a sheet, she padded out onto the balcony. Legolas was leaning over the wall, gazing out to sea. "Can you feel it, melmenya?"

"Feel what?" She came up beside him and let him gather her close.

"The wind," said Legolas. "Coming from the south west." He looked down at her, smiling. "I think we shall soon be leaving, melmenya. I think we can go home at last!"

...

### **Setting sail**

The *Early Bird* was due to sail with the tide, at half past two.

At eleven, the roc arrived carrying Valandil and Wilawen; shortly afterwards she returned with Figwit.

"Tell Prince Legolas what you have decided," said Wilawen, excitedly.

"I should like to come back with you," said Figwit. "If you will allow me."

Legolas placed his hand on his heart and bowed his head in a formal greeting. "You are most welcome, Aegnor," he said. Then, with a smile—and much to Figwit's surprise—he embraced the Rivendell elf, human fashion.

"See," said Wilawen, "we told you."

At midday, when the final preparations were complete and the friends and their luggage had been installed in the cabins, and Vardamir had been found a small room below decks, Faramir received a visitor.

"I've come to say good bye," said Oliel.

"You are leaving without her?"

Oliel nodded. "I did go to see her," he said, "as ordered. But she seemed so—I don't know, Faramir—so *happy* with him—I couldn't speak."

"I am so sorry, Oliel."

"Do not be, my friend," said the Sea Captain. "We found her, and now she is safe—that is the main thing."

"What will you do?"

"I'll keep doing what I'm good at," said Oliel, "carrying passengers, helping people rescue their loved ones—if *you* should ever want to return to Far Harad, my friend—"

"I will come straight to you."

Faramir removed a heavy ring from his finger. "This is my seal," he said, "take it. I shall soon be needing someone I trust to make regular runs from here to North Ithilien with cargoes of small items—perfumes, cordials, candied fruits. Come and visit me in Caras Arnen, Oliel, and we will make a formal contract."

"I shall, Faramir. Thank you."

The two men embraced. Less than an hour later, Faramir watched the *Hunter* sail out into open sea, heading northwards.

## The usual suspects

...

"You really didn't need to come with us, Rib," said Gwirth.

Looking up at the *Early Bird*, she waved to Legolas and Hentmirë. "Keret has come to say good bye to you," she called.

"And to *Gimli!*" shouted the boy.

The three friends came down the gang plank, followed by Eowyn.

"Good bye, Keret," said Hentmirë, hugging him tightly. "Remember to be good for your mother." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Take good care of him," she said to Gwirth.

"I shall, Lady Hentmirë."

Keret turned to Legolas. "How do elves say good bye?" he asked.

Legolas smiled. "You put your hand on your heart like this, bow your head, and say '*Navaer. Gûren ninnatha nanarad as achên len*'."

"*Navarr*," purred Keret. "*Gurren nin atha nana-akken-len*..." He hugged Legolas for good measure.

Then he turned to Gimli.

"*Rasup gamut*," said Gimli. "*Tan menu selek lanun naman, tak khaz meliku suz yenetu*. Now come here, laddie!" He smothered Keret—who was no taller than himself—in a great bear hug. "Remember to visit us in the Forest when you are older, lad. We shall all be waiting."

"Good bye, Ribhadda," said Eowyn, quietly. "Thank you for the kindness you showed me when I invaded your storeroom—it seems so long ago, now—and for the help you have given us since."

Ribhadda kissed her hand. "The pleasure was mine, my Lady."

"Would you like me to fetch Cyllien?"

Ribhadda shook his head. "I've said my good byes to her and Haldir," he said, "but..." He turned to Legolas. "Can I ask you both a favour?"

"Of course."

"Do you have room for two more passengers? A woman and a boy?"

Legolas looked from Ribhadda to Gwirth and Keret, and back again. "We can find room for them, of course," he said, "but—"

"What are you saying, Rib?" asked Gwirth.

Ribhadda took her by the hands and drew her a little way apart. "You belong with these people, Riya. I wasn't sure before... But now I can see it. You belong with them and with your husband. *Shhhhh*—you've got to listen to me.

"Do you have any idea what you'd have to look forward to if you stayed here, Riya? Nine chances out of ten we'd both wind up in the *Hatja's* prison. And then who would look after the boy?"

## The usual suspects

"You're saying this only to make me go."

"I'm saying it because it's true," Ribhadda corrected. "Inside of us we both know you belong with Oliel. You're a part of his work, the thing that keeps him going. If you're not with him you'll regret it."

"No."

"Oh, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow. But soon, Riya. And for the rest of your life."

"But what about us?"

"We'll always have what we had. We didn't; we'd lost it until you came back to Carhivilven. We got it back in the last few days."

"I said I would never leave you."

"And you never will. Go with them, Riya; go and find Oliel, and let the boy live somewhere clean."

Gwirth raised her eyes to his, and a look of understanding passed between them. Then, "Good bye Rib," she said, softly. "May the gods bless you."

...

Ribhadda watched the *Early Bird* sail out of the harbour. *Everybody moves on*, he thought; he turned to leave.

Standing in his path, regarding him with dark, painted eyes, was a familiar, kilted figure.

"Master Kurian."

"Master Ribhadda," said the Kurian.

"You're leaving?"

"No. I have missed ship. I must wait."

Ribhadda looked him up and down, thoughtfully. "You looking for a job?"

"To do what?"

"Oh—this and that. Captain Ramess's replacement's a new broom, and he's sweeping Carhivilven clean with a vengeance. It might be useful to have someone around who can keep his eyes and ears open. Someone, you understand, who doesn't speak the language."

The Kurian smiled—and Ribhadda noted that the healer had done an extremely skilled job on his face. *He'll attract a different sort of customer, that's for sure, but, in his own way, he'll be as big a draw as Cyllien was...*

"I understand," said the other man, "but why you trust me?"

"I'll be paying your wages."

"I take your job."

"Good." They shook hands. "Master Kurian," said Ribhadda, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

## The usual suspects

...

## Farewell, sweet lady

As Hentmirë's boat rounded the rocks at the harbour mouth and caught the wind in her sails, a giant bird swooped down from the sky and crossed her bows, crying plaintively.

Figwit ran along the deck and climbed atop the forecastle. "*Navaer, híril velui,*" he called, waving his hand in farewell. "*Avo aphado nin, meldis nín!*"

The roc circled her beloved master one last time, then rose up into the cloudless blue sky and, with steady wing beats, cut out across the sea, back towards her mysterious home.

"*Nîr tôl erin baded lîn,*" whispered Figwit.

The elf dropped lightly to the deck and walked to the stern, never taking his eyes from the bird's silhouette.

And there he remained, standing at the taff rail, staring back towards Carhilivren, until—long after sunset—Valandil and Wilawen persuaded him to join the others below decks.

...

## An honest woman

"You knew him before he was kidnapped," said Wilawen, closing the cabin door; "was he always so unworldly...?" She looked around the narrow, corridor-like cabin, then down at the elf, who was sitting on the lower of two bunks. "Valandil?"

"Yes?"

"This is a very small room."

"I believe it is called a cabin."

"I *know* it is called a cabin, Valandil. That does not change the fact that there is nowhere for us—for *me*—to wash or undress."

Valandil smiled. "Would you like me to move in with Figwit, *meleth?*"

Wilawen bit her lip. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course." Valandil patted the lumpy mattress.

Wilawen sat down beside him. "I told you that I have never—er—" She waved her hand, giving Valandil the opportunity to catch it and draw it to his lips.

"Yes." *Kiss.*

"Well—what about *you*? You have never said." She watched him—kissing her hand—as though the hand did not belong to her. "Do elves wait, Valandil? You have been so patient with *me*..."

"Elves do frown upon making love before marriage," said the elf. "But, if the couple is reasonably discreet..."

"So you are the same as humans," said Wilawen. "And *you* have..."

Valandil nodded. *Kiss.*

### The usual suspects

"Often?"

"Wilawen!" His tone was gentle, amused. But he did not answer her question.

"I was never given the chance," said Wilawen, quietly. "No one ever wanted me."

Valandil looked up from her hand in surprise. "The men of Gondor are fools," he said.

Wilawen smiled. "Unlike elves, who can charm the birds down from the trees—and no doubt *do*, all the time, in Eryn Carantaur," she said, "where everything is perfect and everyone is happy..."

"You will love it there, Wilawen."

"If I come to live there."

"You will." He smiled. "I shall make sure of it."

"Do you want to, Valandil?"

"Live in Eryn Carantaur?"

"Make love. Tonight."

"Oh, *faer vara!* Do you want to?"

"I want it to be two years hence, when we are an old married couple, and completely at ease with one another—"

"Wilawen! Are you finally agreeing to marry me?"

She blushed. "I suppose I am."

"And your father?"

"I will help you persuade him."

Valandil leaped to his feet and held out both of his hands. "Come, *meleth nín!*"

"Where?" Wilawen frowned. "I thought you were going to seduce me?"

"No, Wilawen," said Valandil. "I am going to take you up on deck so that we can make our vows under the stars. Then we will come back here," he kissed her hands, "and we will *make love.*"

...

### Next morning

"Well, it is about time," whispered Legolas.

He nodded towards one of the rope lockers, where Valandil and Wilawen sat gazing out across the shimmering water, the woman's head resting on the elf's shoulder, a contented smile lighting her face.

Eowyn squeezed Legolas' hand. "Let us give them some privacy."

The couple climbed the steps to the aft deck, where Faramir and Berengar were having a lesson in seamanship from Captain Mutallu.

### The usual suspects

"Don't screw up your left eye, sir," the Captain was saying, "or you'll strain it. Just let it relax, and look through the glass with your right... Yes, like that."

Berengar swept the spyglass along the horizon. "Oh!" He moved it back a little. "I can see something, Captain. I think—"

"Ship to port!" cried a lookout, from up in the rigging.

Berengar handed Mutallu the glass.

"She's a three master," confirmed the Captain, "and she's fast, like a slaver—or a pirate. Beat to quarters, Master Taru. I want the *Early Bird* ready to withstand an assault."

"Very good, sir."

"Wait!" said Faramir, who was leaning over the gunwale. "I think she may be the *Hunter*! May I use the glass?" He peered through the misty lenses, examining the ship from stern to stem, until he found the ship's figurehead, a leaping wolfhound. "Yes," he cried. "It *is* the *Hunter*!"

He returned the spyglass to Mutallu and turned to Eowyn, smiling. "Would you mind waking Gwirth, my dear?"

Eowyn smiled back. "Of course not."

...

Captain Mutallu signalled for the *Hunter* to come alongside and invited Captain Oriel aboard.

Faramir greeted his friend cordially. "This is sooner than expected," he said.

"I could not leave her behind, Faramir. You were right, my friend, I should have spoken up before. But it's better late than never—and I shall be back in Carhivilven by midday tomorrow."

"That will not be necessary, Oriel," said Faramir, smiling. "Come with me."

...

Gwirth was waiting in Legolas and Eowyn's cabin. Faramir left Oriel at the door.

"Go in," he said, "and tell her what you have just told me."

Oriel opened the door. "Gwirth—"

"I cannot change, Oriel," said his wife, before he had had the chance to enter the room. "If you want an innocent young girl, who will be content to do nothing but cook your food and clean your clothes, and climb into your bed at night—"

"I don't." Oriel closed the door. "I want *you* Riya. Why do you think I was coming back for you?" He held out his arms.

Gwirth shook her head. "Just answer me this, Oriel: what would you have done if I had told you that I had seen Abdi outside the Circus—and that I intended to kill him? What would you have done?"

"I have asked myself that a thousand times," said Oriel, overcoming his wife's resistance and gathering her into his arms. "And every time, the answer is the same..."

"What?"



### The usual suspects

"I would have come with you," he said, kissing her forehead, "and—may the gods forgive us both—I would have held him down whilst you cut his throat."

...

Keret pulled the wooden mûmak from his pocket. "Do you want him back?" he asked.

"Of course not," said Hentmirë, "he is yours, Keret.

"Oh..." She threw her stout little arms around the boy and hugged him fiercely. "Do not forget to visit us. Legolas and Gimli... Legolas and... and I... I want you to visit..."

"I will." He hugged her back. "Anyway," he said, sniffing hard, "I still have my third wish to ask for."

With a final wobbly smile he climbed down the rope ladder and joined his mother and father in the *Hunter's* rowing boat.

"It is so much harder," said Hentmirë, as she watched the little boat pull away, "to say good bye a second time."

...

### Hentmirë's new home

The *Early Bird* reached Pelargir ten days later. Legolas and Faramir hired horses, and carts for the luggage, and a carriage for Gimli and the ladies.

Slowly the friends made their way north east along the Forest trail, watching the birches give way to elms, and the elms give way to oaks, and then, on the morning of the fourth day of travel, the oaks give way to mighty carantaurs.

Hentmirë climbed down from the carriage and picked up a huge red leaf.

"We are almost there, gwendithen," said Legolas, smiling.

Hentmirë slipped the beautiful leaf inside the cover of her book, for safekeeping.

...

"Time to wake up," said Legolas, gently shaking Hentmirë's shoulder. "We are here."

Hentmirë rubbed her eyes. The carriage had come to a halt in a broad clearing. To her right stood a large, circular pavilion with an intricately carved roof; to her left, a wooden staircase wound its way up one of the massive tree trunks.

"Do we go up there?" she asked.

Legolas laughed. "You do not need to whisper, gwendithen. Come."

With Legolas on one side and Eowyn on the other, Hentmirë climbed the spiralling staircase, pausing now and then to catch her breath—"I shall need to be fit!"—and to look up into the Forest canopy, where elegant wooden buildings nestled amongst the branches.

"It is like a fairy tale!" she whispered. "Oh, how Keret will love it!"

At the top of the staircase all three stopped (waiting for Hentmirë to recover from the climb) and gazed along the main walkway, Legolas pointing out buildings of interest—the Council Chamber, the Library, his own chambers, his garden flet. "And *this* will be your home,

### The usual suspects

gwendithen," he said, leading her to a single-storey apartment, built around one of the massive carantaur trunks.

Hentmirë looked at the wooden doors, carved in flowing, interwoven curves—*Like syrup pouring from a spoon*, she thought—with their frosted glass etched with pointed leaves, at the pale green paintwork, and at the white canvas sunshades stretched over the wide windows.

"It is *exquisite*, Legolas," she said. "The whole city is exquisite..."

"And our door is just here," said Eowyn, pointing across the walkway. "So it will not seem so different from your old house."

Tears of happiness filled Hentmirë's eyes. "Thank you, she said, softly. "Thank you for letting me come here to live with you."

...

### And so, to bed...

It had been a long, hard journey back from Mirkwood but, at last, they were home: darkness had fallen and the sky, clear and moonless, shimmered beyond a mesh of silver stars. Legolas, perching on the windowsill, watched with lazy pleasure as Eowyn slipped off her dressing robe and put on her white nightdress, carefully fastening its tiny buttons one by one, then picked up her dark velvet mantle and draped it around her shoulders.

She smiled at him. "All ready." She held out her hands.

"Are you *sure* you want to do this, melmenya?"

"Of course," she said, "it was *my* idea."

She led him from their chambers and up the steps to their garden flet where, in their absence, Lord Caranthir had overseen the building of a canopied bed—to Eowyn's specifications—with a covering that, on warm nights such as this, could be rolled back to allow its occupants to gaze up at the stars.

"Thank you, *meleth nín*."

Legolas slid the mantle from her shoulders and let it drop to the floor, then he lifted her into his arms, and—in a subtle show of elven strength—carried her effortlessly across the flet.

"Make love to me," Eowyn whispered, brushing her lips against his ear and making him shiver. "In our own home."

Legolas settled her on the bed and straddled her. Then, taking his weight on his hands, he lowered himself upon her, letting his hard *ceber* brush between her thighs.

Eowyn shifted her hips beneath him, and Legolas entered her slowly, making every inch count.

"*Pedo enethen*," he whispered.

"Legolas." Her voice was husky with desire.

He pushed himself deeper, arching his back to fill her completely. "Ad..."

"*Legolas*."

Gazing down at her now, he began to thrust, his strokes gradually growing harder, faster, more urgent, his hips grinding, his thick shaft stroking some secret part of her, hidden deep inside

### **The usual suspects**

her—

“*Legolas!*”

Eowyn clawed the bed, her body arching and twisting. “OH!”

...

Legolas stilled, and cried out her name as though in pain; and Eowyn felt him come, warm and wet inside her.

She stretched out her arms and let him sink into their comfort, and bury his face in the crook of her neck. “We are home, Melmenya,” he whispered. “We are *home at last.*”

**THE END**