



Author: Ningloreth

Title: **The lady vanishes**

Story Number: 4

Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: Against a background of the Yuletide celebrations in Minas Tirith, Legolas and Eowyn investigate the disappearance of a young woman and uncover the villainy of a local crime lord.

Author's Note: Special edition with eighteen new scenes.

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

Gerich veleth nín ... 'I love you' (literally, 'you have my love').

Forod ... 'north'.

Harad ... 'south'.

Le cenithon ned lû thent ... 'I will see you in a short time'.

êgvor ... 'Darkthorn'.

Ai ceryn Manwë ... 'Oh, Manwë's balls'.

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

Nanarad agevedim, híril nín ... 'Until we meet again, my lady'.

Edenith ... 'mortal women' (my third attempt at the plural of *adaneth*).

Faug ... 'thirsty'

Sog ... 'drink'

Chapter 1: Mother Night

"Welcome, my lord," said the innkeeper of *The Four Ails*, stepping aside to allow Legolas to carry Eowyn through the door and into the parlour. "Everything is ready. My wife has prepared our best room for you and your lady—if you will follow her upstairs, the boy will carry your luggage for you.

"Lord Gimli, you are in the attic room—the girl will show you up.

"And you, gentlemen," he added, to Haldir and Dínendal, "are in the front rooms—please come with me."

...

Legolas followed the innkeeper's wife upstairs to a bedchamber at the back of the inn.

"Here we are, my lord, my lady," said the woman. "I've lit you a nice fire and aired your bed. The bathing room is through there"—she pointed to a door in the far corner of the chamber—"and there is already hot water in the bathtub if you want to bathe before the festivities start."

Legolas looked around the bedchamber. It was a simple room, but someone—presumably the innkeeper's wife herself—had worked hard to make it fit for royal guests. Two wooden settles and a small table were grouped around the large, open fireplace, and bowls of Yuletide herbs and spices—pine, ginger, rosemary and cedar shavings—sat on the table, the mantelpiece and the windowsills. The bed was covered with an ornate patchwork quilt, and its four posts were trimmed with red and green ribbons and with sprigs of mistletoe.

"The bedchamber is lovely, Mistress Hildë," said Eowyn. "Thank you."

"I am pleased you like it, my lady," said Hildë, curtsying. She turned to the young lad struggling through the door with Eowyn's luggage. "Put the chest over by the window, Norwas."

Legolas set Eowyn down on the bed, took a silver piece from his money pouch, and handed it to the boy.

"Thank you, Norwas," he said.

The boy bowed shyly and backed out of the chamber.

"We will be fetching the Yule Log home at half past two, my lord," said Hildë. "Would you like me to send the boy up to remind you?"

"Yes—thank you, mistress," said Legolas.

The woman curtsyed again. "I will leave you, then, my lord, my lady."

Legolas waited until the woman had closed the door, then sat down beside Eowyn. "Shall we bathe now, melmenya?" he asked. "Then I can change your dressings and help you put on your gown."

"Yes—thank you," Eowyn sighed. "Who would have thought that a few cuts on my feet would have left me so helpless?"

She looked up at Legolas, suspiciously. "Did you bribe Master Dínendal to *pretend* that I cannot walk? I am not at all sure I can trust you, Legolas."

The elf gathered her in his arms, smiling wickedly. "But you know you can trust Dínendal, melmenya," he said. "He is an honourable elf—and incorruptible."

Eowyn grinned. "You *have* tried to corrupt him, then?"

"I decline to answer that," said Legolas, carrying her into the bathing room. "But I do not deny," he added, "that these last few days have been very pleasurable." He set her down on a chair beside the bathtub and carefully removed her jerkin. "Mmmmm," he sighed, kissing the tender skin of her neck, and caressing her breasts through the soft silk of her tunic, "you cannot escape, melmenya..."

"Legolas!" cried Eowyn, laughing and pushing him away. "We will be late!"

Legolas laughed too. "You are right, *meleth nín*," he said. "Let us bathe." He helped her remove her tunic, her leggings, and the dressings from her feet, and lifted her into the warm, scented water.

...

An hour later, Legolas carried Eowyn downstairs into the parlour, where a large, noisy crowd—including Gimli, Haldir and Dínendal—had already gathered.

"A bowl of wassail, my lady, to warm you before we set out?" asked the innkeeper.

"Yes, please, Master Gerhal," she replied.

The man ladled a good measure of spiced ale into a drinking bowl, then pulled a poker from the hot embers of the fire and plunged it into the liquid. The wassail hissed and steamed. "Here you are, my lady," said Gerhal. "That will put hairs on your chest."

"I *hope* not," said Legolas.

Eowyn laughed, "It is just a saying, my love," she said. "It means that the wassail is strong."

"Good health, my lady!" cried one of the men.

Eowyn raised the bowl to him, then took a sip. "Goodness! It is *very* strong." She laughed again and handed the bowl to Legolas, who drained it.

"That," said Legolas, placing the empty bowl on the bar, "is very good, Master Gerhal—"

"*My lords and lady!* Masters and mistresses," cried the innkeeper's wife, throwing open the front door, "it is *time!*"

Outside, it was still light, and the snow-covered landscape glittered in the cool winter sun.

Eowyn raised her fur-lined hood, and pulled her cloak tightly round her body. Legolas lifted her into his arms and, together with their friends, they joined the throng of excited people spilling out of the inn.

"How far are we going?" asked Gimli.

"The oak grove is just a quarter mile hence, my lord," said one of the revellers. "This year's Yule Log is a fine old tree that fell last April, when the sap was rising."

"Very auspicious," said Legolas. "A gift from the Valar, Master, er...?"

"Ulsil, my lord," said the man.

Legolas nodded politely.

The cheery procession sang and danced and jostled its way to the oak grove where the chosen tree lay—partially covered in snow—with all but one of its branches neatly removed and its trunk already cut into several large lengths. Legolas bowed his head respectfully and whispered short prayer of thanks to the fallen tree. Eowyn squeezed his shoulder, gently.

"Lord Gimli," said Master Gerhal, "will you do us the honour of removing the final branch?" Gimli bowed, drew his axe and struck a single blow, and the crowd cheered as the branch came clean away.

Several of the village maidens then came forward with red, green and white ribbons and lovingly decorated the chosen piece of trunk. When they had finished, Mistress Hildë stepped up and poured a libation of wassail over the Yule Log, thanking the forest and its gods for providing warmth and good luck in the coming year.

Then eight able-bodied men, assisted by Haldir and Dínendal, lifted the Yule Log onto their shoulders and carried it, amidst much merrymaking, back to *The Four Alls* tavern.

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The revellers brought the decorated Log into the parlour and laid it on a carefully prepared bed of embers in the large open hearth. Mistress Hildë took the remains of the previous year's Yule Log from a silver tray and added it to the fire, pushing it beneath the new Log.

Master Gerhal stepped forward and offered Eowyn a lighted torch. "Will you set the Log alight for us, my lady?" he asked.

Smiling, Eowyn took the torch and—leaning forward in Legolas' arms—touched the flame to the piece of old Log. The dry wood caught quickly, and the revellers cheered as its fire spread upwards to kindle the new, which hissed and spat as its damp bark began to dry out.

"Thank you, my lady," said Gerhal taking the torch back from Eowyn. "Will you lead us to the dining table, my lord?" he asked Legolas.

"With pleasure, Master Gerhal."

The crowd parted and—followed by Gimli, Haldir, Dínendal and the rest of the revellers—Legolas carried Eowyn to the long trestle table at the far end of the parlour. Once everyone was seated, the innkeeper and his family brought in the festive fare. Gerhal himself carried a roasted boar's head, singing, in a resonant bass voice, the traditional Yule song,

*"The boar's head in hand bring I,
Bedecked with bays and rosemary.
I pray you, masters, merry be
As you feast so heartily."*

His wife, son, and daughter followed with trays of roast fowls, pease pudding, hot chestnuts, caraway bread, apples, pears, and a ripe blue cheese. Gerhal laid the boar's head on the table, and the rest of the revellers joined in the chorus,

*"Lo, behold the head I bring
And praises to the gods I sing."*

"Lord Gimli, will you carve the boar for us?" asked Gerhal.

Gimli removed the garlands of herbs from boar's head and took the roasted apple from its mouth, offering it to the lady of the house, who raised her plate to accept it. Then he whetted

the carving knife against the fork and began to cut thick slices of meat from the boar's cheeks.

Eowyn sighed softly.

"What is wrong, melmenya?"

"The boar looks so sad," she said.

Until she had come to live with the elves of Eryn Carantaur, Eowyn had never questioned the eating of meat and, at first, she had found something faintly ridiculous about fierce warriors—and implacable orc-hunters—refusing to kill animals. But Legolas believed that it was wrong to kill a sentient creature for food if something else could be eaten instead. He had taught her that all living things should be respected.

Legolas touched her hand. "Can I get you some of the other food, Eowyn *nín*?" he asked, gently.

She turned to him, smiling, "I love you," she said.

...

"Will you have some spiced cider, my lord?" asked Hildë.

"No—thank you," replied Haldir, "but I am sure that Lord Gimli would like some. In fact, I think that he would like a jug, or three..."

...

Having demolished the savoury courses, the revellers lolled contentedly in their chairs, eating Yule cake, fruit, and nuts, and drinking wassail.

"Time for some riddles," said Master Gerhal. "Ulsil, start us off."

Ulsil bowed. "I have one for Lord Gimli," he said.

*"I drive men mad
For love of me,
Easily beaten,
Never free."*

Gimli laughed. "Easily beaten," he said. "That sounds like gold!"

The revellers clapped and cheered.

"Now *I* have one for Mistress Hildë," said Gimli.

*"I am always hungry,
I must be fed,
The finger that I lick
Will soon turn red."*

Hildë laughed. "Always hungry—is it a dog?" she asked, playfully.

"No," said Gimli.

Hildë grinned. "It must be a family, then—a son?"

"No, no, my lady," said Gimli, laughing.

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"It is a fire," she admitted.

"Yes!"

"Well done, my dear," said Gerhal, patting her back. He turned to Haldir. "Will you give us one, my lord?"

Haldir thought for a moment, then said,

*"If you break me
I do not stop working,
If you touch me
I may be snared,
If you lose me
Nothing else matters."*

"The mind," said one of the men.

Haldir shook his head.

"The heart," said Legolas.

"Yes," said Haldir, glancing past him.

"Will you give us one, Lady Eowyn?" asked Norwas, timidly.

Eowyn laughed. "Let me see..." she said. "Yes, I know,

*"If a man carried my burden
He would break his back.
I am not rich,
But I leave silver in my track."*

"I know this one!" said Hildë.

"A donkey," said Norwas.

"That is a good guess, but no," said Eowyn, kindly.

"A dwarf," said Legolas, winking at Gimli.

Eowyn shook her head, laughing.

"Will you tell us the answer, Mistress Hildë?" asked Dínendal.

Hildë looked to Eowyn for permission—Eowyn nodded—then turned to her son. "A *snail!*" she said.

"Oh!" said Norwas. He smiled shyly at Eowyn as the guests applauded.

"We have heard much of the singing of elves," said the man sitting beside Haldir, suddenly. "Will you sing for us, my lords?"

"Legolas is the singer here, Master Torglar," said Haldir. "He is famous for his voice."

"Will you sing for us, then, Lord Legolas?" asked Torglar.

Legolas laughed. "You need never ask an elf that question twice, Master Torglar."

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"Sing a love song!" cried one of the women.

Legolas bowed graciously and began to sing, unaccompanied, a bitter-sweet melody,

*"Bird on a briar, bird, bird on a briar,
Mankind is come of love, love to crave.
Blissful bird, on me have pity,
Or build, love, build thou me my grave.*

*"I am so blithe, so bright, bird on briar,
When I see that maid in the hall.
She is white of limb, lovely, true,
She is fair and flower of all.*

*"Might I at will her have,
Steadfast of love, lovely, true,
Of my sorrow she might me save,
Then joy and bliss were ever to me new."*

Master Torglar wiped a tear from his eye. "That was beautiful, my lord," he said. "Truly beautiful.."

The other revellers murmured in agreement.

Legolas shook his head. "It was far too sad for this occasion," he said. "Perhaps Gimli will sing us a dwarven drinking song to cheer us up!"

...

By midnight, some of the revellers were beginning to leave.

"Come, melmenya," said Legolas, "let me carry you upstairs." He lifted her into his arms. "Good night, ladies and gentlemen," he called, merrily.

"Good night!" said Eowyn.

"Good night—good night, my lord, my lady," cried the remaining guests.

"Sweet dreams!" shouted Gimli, adding an empty tankard to the pile in front of him.

...

Legolas laid his embroidered tunic over the back of the settle and reached for the lacing of his leggings.

"No," said Eowyn.

Legolas looked at her questioningly.

"I want to undress you," she said. "Come here."

Legolas smiled. "I thought you would never ask," he said, climbing onto the bed beside her and taking her in his arms. Immediately, a fire welled up in him and spread through his limbs. "Oh," he gasped.

"My love?" asked Eowyn.

"I need you," he whispered.

Eowyn stroked his face. "I need *you* too."

"I want to take my time—"

"Then I will have to be patient."

"—that is, once I am *inside* you..."

Eowyn smiled at him, conspiratorially. Then she quickly unlaced his leggings and pushed them down. Legolas took her little hand and drew it to himself. "Guide me," he said.

"Oh Legolas..." She stroked her fingers along his length then curled her hand around him and pulled him gently between her thighs, sighing with pleasure as he brushed her flesh. "There," she whispered.

Legolas entered her gradually, then began to thrust, slowly, gently, kissing her neck each time he eased himself into her. "Eowyn *nín*," he whispered against her skin, "Eowyn... Eowyn *nín*..."

But Eowyn seemed strangely unresponsive.

He raised himself up on his arms and looked down at her. She was grasping the bed sheet, her eyes tightly closed, and he knew that she was working hard to be patient.

Oh, he thought, *she is so sweet, so loving. And so beautiful*, and the desire that had been smouldering inside him suddenly burst into flame and he began to thrust hard—hard and fast.

Eowyn's eyes flew open. "Oh, yes," she gasped, "yes, my love, yes!"

Faster and faster he thrust, chasing an elusive bond with her, and Eowyn rose to meet each of his strokes, until the bed was rocking violently beneath them. And when, at last, he realised what he was doing it was too late—for Eowyn was coming around him and he had no choice but to join her...

"Oh, Valar, oh Eowyn *nín*, *Eowyn nín*!"

He collapsed, exhausted, on top of her, his face buried in the crook of her neck.

"You *lied* to me," Eowyn whispered, stroking his hair.

"Melmenya?" he asked weakly, unable to raise his head.

"You told me that it was not better, just *different*."

"I am sorry melmenya. I am so sorry." He withdrew from her gently, rolled over onto his back and looked upwards. Twelve sprigs of mistletoe hung from the canopy of the bed, marking out a sacred space charged with procreative power. No wonder he had lost control! Legolas reached for Eowyn and pulled her into his arms.

"I have spoiled everything," he said.

"No!" cried Eowyn, hugging him tightly. "No, my love! You have done nothing wrong, on this night, of all nights!" She kissed him passionately. "We must trust to the gods, as human lovers do. And if I *do* conceive," she added, "the child is their gift to us."

...

"*Legolas...*"

He was so tired he tried to ignore it, but the voice was insistent.

"Legolas Greenleaf..."

He forced his eyes open and stared at the being before him—a being of elven form surrounded by dazzling light. Legolas fell to his knees, his hand over his heart, his head bowed.

"Do not kneel, Legolas," said the being; "come—stand." It bent before him and gently raised him to his feet. "You have done us great service, my child, with no thought for your own safety nor that of your loved ones. You have risked everything for the well being of all. And such service should be repaid. Tell me, if you were to be granted one wish, what would you wish for?"

Legolas answered, without hesitation, "To be with Eowyn forever."

The being smiled and faded away.

...

Legolas awoke with a start.

Something had just happened; he could feel it.

But his sleep had been unnaturally deep, and he did not know what it was...

He looked around the bedchamber. The fire crackled comfortingly in the hearth, bathing the room in a rosy light. The bowls of Yuletide spices filled the air with a soothing fragrance. Eowyn lay in his arms, warm and soft.

He clasped her more tightly. He felt sure that whatever had happened had been no threat to them.

Legolas closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep.

...

They were awoken by a tap on the door.

"Dawn will be breaking in an hour, my lord, my lady," called Gerhal.

"Thank you, Master Gerhal," said Legolas. "We will be down presently."

He kissed Eowyn and laid his hand lightly on her stomach. Eowyn smiled, but placed her own hand over his. "Let us not worry just yet, my love," she whispered.

"If that is what you want, *meleth nín*," he said softly, kissing her again. "Come, then, melmenya, we must make sure that you will be warm enough."

Eowyn smiled. "There are times when being helpless is very pleasant..." She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"If it were permanent, you would soon tire of it, melmenya," said Legolas, helping her into her leggings. "You would ask Gimli to make you a set of wheels."

"That is a good idea," said Eowyn thoughtfully, "a chair with wheels. But how would I move it?"

Legolas laughed, holding out a very large black boot so that she could slip one of her bandaged feet into it. "I do not know, melmenya, but I am sure that Gimli would think of some mechanism. Though you will be back on your feet before he could build it." He laced the boot tightly to stop it falling off.

"I hope so," said Eowyn. "Because my feet do seem to be taking a very long time to heal."

...

By the time Legolas and Eowyn came downstairs, a large group of people, including Gimli, Haldir and Dínendal, had already collected outside the door of the tavern.

A light frost had whitened the hedgerows and crisped the snow underfoot, and the merry-makers' breath was steaming in the candlelight—the men and women were blowing on their hands, and stamping their feet to keep warm.

The innkeeper had set up a small table by the door and Mistress Hildë was handing out tankards of hot wassail, candles, and lighted tapers to the guests. "We do not have enough hands—we must share, *melmenya*," said Legolas, laughing.

He carried Eowyn over to Gimli, who was standing by the garden wall, draining his tankard. "Good morning, *elvellon*, have you recovered from last night's contest?"

"Good morning," said Gimli, wiping his moustache. "It would take more than a few tankards of cider to incapacitate me—though I am very grateful to the March Warden for keeping me company." The two friends exchanged knowing smiles, and Eowyn glanced across at Haldir, who did not seem quite himself.

"What did you do?" she asked Gimli.

"Nothing," replied the dwarf, with elaborate innocence. "If an elf is foolish enough to try to compete with a dwarf *again*..."

Eowyn shook her head. "Poor Haldir. You are wicked—both of you." She took a sip of wassail, then offered it to Legolas, holding the tankard to his lips.

"Mmm," said Legolas, "that is very good, *melmenya*, but perhaps a little potent for so early in the morning!"

The sky had started to lighten and the crowd suddenly fell silent, awaiting the reappearance of the sun with anticipation. Eowyn put her empty tankard on the garden wall, and prepared to light her candle.

Everyone waited.

At last, a tiny sliver of light appeared above the mountains of Mordor. Eowyn touched the lighted taper to the candlewick. The flame flared, died down as the wax melted and pooled, then rose up again, steady and strong.

Together with the other revellers, Eowyn lifted her candle to greet the rising sun.

And Legolas, his heart bursting with joy, hugged her to his chest.

...

After breakfast they settled the bill, thanking Gerhal and Hildë for their hospitality, and presented the family with Yuletide gifts—intricately wrought Elven hunting knives for Gerhal and Norwas, and exquisite Elven shawls, of jewel-bright silk, for Hildë and her daughter.

"Oh! Thank you, my lord, my lady," said Hildë, wrapping the shawl around her shoulders, "it is the loveliest thing I have ever owned."

As they were about to leave, Hildë came running up to Eowyn. "Here, my lady," she said,

"please—take this. It is not much, but it belonged to my mother, and I would like you to have it—take it as a Yuletide gift." She handed Eowyn a small silver flower on a fine silver chain.

"Oh, Mistress Hildë," she began, "I could not—" but Legolas stopped her by laying a hand on her arm.

"Thank you Mistress Hildë," he said. "It is beautiful. We will not forget the welcome you have given us—and you can rest assured that we will recommend your inn to all we meet travelling this way." He placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. "Farewell, mistress."

...

They left *The Four Alls* tavern, and the little town of Gobel Doron, and continued north west, along the eastern shore of the Anduin, skirting the hills of Eryn Arnen, to the hamlet of Edeb where they spent a rather less comfortable night in the local inn.

The next day they left at dawn, following the river until they reached the ford at Osgiliath, and approached and the snow-covered plain of The Pelennor, with the white city of Minas Tirith not a half day's ride distant.

...

It was such a small thing that no man would have noticed it, but little escaped the eyes of the March Warden of Eryn Carantaur—and certainly not a flock of black birds circling over the ruins of Osgiliath.

Crebain, he thought. *Carrion crows. And just what are they feasting upon?*

He reined in his horse and fell back until he was riding beside Legolas.

"You have seen them too," said Legolas.

"Should we investigate?" asked Haldir.

"It is probably some unfortunate animal that has died in the ruins," said Legolas, "but, given that city's unhappy history, it would be wise to make sure."

...

They rode through the shattered city gates and made their way through the once elegant streets, following the cawing of the birds. At length, they emerged into the ruins of a spacious courtyard.

"By the gods," said Haldir, softly, "look—over there."

Lying face-up in the snow, surrounded by small, black scavengers, was a body.

Legolas and Dínendal dismounted and approached the corpse.

A trail in the snow told them that some large animal—a dog or a wolf—had dragged it out from amongst the rubble, and had gnawed at its face and neck and torn off one of its legs at the knee. A partially eaten arm lay some yards away.

"The only footprints," said Legolas, "are of animals and birds. He must have come here before the last fall of snow."

Dínendal crouched beside the body and carefully lifted its head.

"Legolas," said Eowyn, suddenly, "I need to come down. I need to see his face."

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"No, my lady," said Dínendal, shaking his head, "this is no sight for you."

But Eowyn insisted, and Legolas lifted her from her horse and carried her to the dead man.

"Turn his head to the right," she said.

Reluctantly, Dínendal did as she asked.

The face was badly damaged but there was no missing the old, jagged scar that ran down its left side from cheek to chin.

"Dear gods," said Eowyn, "I know him."

Extra scene: [Two nights](#)

Chapter 2: The quarry

Aragorn and Eomer had risen early, breakfasted, and, as dawn was breaking, ridden northwards across The Pelennor to the Greywood on the edge of the Forest of Druadan, where the Woses had given King Elessar permission to hunt whenever he wished.

The royal trackers had, with the help of the Woses, already singled out a large, young boar that could be expected to show courage and stamina, and had stationed relays of hounds throughout the forest.

Aragorn and Eomer approached the boar's bed on horseback.

Eomer dismounted. "The bed is warm!" he called, feeling it with his hand. Around him, the hounds bayed and strained at their leashes. "The boar is close." He placed his hunting horn to his lips and blew for the release of the pack.

"They have the scent!" he cried—springing back onto his horse—as the dogs dashed off through the trees.

"There! There it is!" shouted Aragorn.

A huge, dark creature had emerged from the undergrowth, and it attacked the hounds, goring the foremost with its sharp tusks, then catching the next in its foaming mouth and breaking its back with a shake of its massive shoulders.

"It has spirit!" cried Eomer.

He blew for the chase and the horsemen surged forward, startling the boar into flight. The huntsmen followed on foot.

"More dogs," cried Eomer, sounding the horn again. "Release the next pack!"

...

Eowyn looked down at the dead man, sadly. "His name is—*was*—Banduil," she said. "He was a Rider of the Mark, one of Eomer's most trusted lieutenants. I know his wife, his children..."

Legolas carried her back to her horse. "We will take him to Minas Tirith, Eowyn *nín*," he said, gently. "And Eomer can perform the rites necessary to lay his spirit properly to rest."

Eowyn smiled gratefully. "Thank you," she said.

Then a disturbing thought struck her. "Legolas—he would not have been travelling alone. Where are the others?"

...

Haldir laid out a bedroll and they carefully lifted the body onto it. Then—as Eowyn watched in frustration from horseback—Dínendal, assisted by Haldir, tried to determine the cause of death whilst Legolas and Gimli searched the rest of the courtyard.

Gimli poked his axe into a drift of snow. "Nothing, thank Aulë," he said.

"No," said Legolas. "Whatever has happened to his companions, I do not think they are lying here—the wolves would already have found them—"

"My lord!" cried Dínendal.

"What is it?"

The healer had turned the body over. "Here, my lord," he said, pointing to the remains of three arrows, buried deep in the dead man's back. "These are what killed him. This one would have punctured his heart."

"Somebody shot him in the *back*," said Eowyn.

Legolas crouched beside the body and examined the arrows. "The shafts have been deliberately cut off," he said. "And look, here"—he pushed his fingers through a hole in the dead man's clothing—"there was a fourth arrow that was pulled out completely."

"Why would anyone do that?" asked Eowyn.

"I suspect they have taken the crestings, *melmenya*," said Legolas. "The men of Gondor mark their hunting arrows with crestings—coloured rings—to indicate ownership. Can you pull out one of the heads, Master Dínendal?"

The healer hesitated.

"It will do him no harm, now, *mellon nín*," said Legolas, gently.

Dínendal nodded. "March Warden," he said, "would you bring me the small pouch from the top of my pack? Thank you."

The healer selected a sharp, narrow-bladed knife and made two careful incisions, either side of one of the arrows, then gently pulled out the barbed head and handed it to Legolas.

"Yes," said the elf, "a broadhead—used for hunting game." He examined it carefully. "It is Gondorian but there is nothing particularly distinctive about it."

"But it *does* show that he was not killed by his companions," said Eowyn, relief evident in her voice.

...

They were met at the Great Gate of Minas Tirith by Aragorn's secretary. "Welcome, Lord Legolas, Lady Eowyn, Lord Gimli, gentlemen," he said, bowing low. "King Elessar and Eomer King are hunting—his Majesty asked me to escort you up to the Citadel and the King's House."

"Thank you, Master Halmant," said Legolas. "But I am afraid we have some sad news." He explained what they had found in the ruins of Osgiliath.

Halmant frowned. "And that is the body, there?" he asked, pointing to the bundle lying over one of the packhorses.

"Yes."

Halmant turned to Eowyn. "May I express my sorrow at the death of one of your countrymen, my lady," he said. He turned back to Legolas. "This is a complex matter, my lord, since the deceased lost his life within the realm of Gondor, and his sovereign lord is currently residing here as a guest... May I suggest that I have the body taken to the House of Healing, and that *you* might then inform their Majesties—together—of what you have found? And they can decide between them what must be done to find his killer."

Legolas could not help smiling at the secretary's neat solution to the problems of protocol. "Of course, Master Halmant," he said.

...

For several hours the hunters had pursued the boar, sometimes closing in on it, sometimes losing its scent in the showers of fresh snow. Five hounds had fallen to its cruel tusks. One tracker had been lightly gored.

By mid afternoon few riders still kept pace, and Eomer, ahead of the field, suddenly found himself facing the demon alone.

It is at its most dangerous now, he thought. Tired, but not winded. And this is no time for hesitation. Drawing his sword, he prepared for the kill but, before he could spur his mount forward, the boar charged, ripping the horse's belly from end to end. The noble beast fell without a cry. Eomer rolled clear, and scrambled to his feet—he had seen fallen men split from groin to throat by a boar's tusks.

"Eomer! Eomer!" came Aragorn's voice, through the trees.

Help was at hand, but not close enough.

Eomer gripped his spear and watched his adversary carefully—he knew the signs—snout low to the ground, ears flat against the head, tusks clashing together. He raised his spear to waist height.

"Come on, then," he cried, "show me what you are made of! Come! Charge!" The boar rolled its eyes and pricked its ears, took several small steps, and—*This is it*, thought Eomer—it charged.

Eomer stood firm, one foot forward, leaning in towards the beast.

May the gods protect me, he thought. Now!

He struck—a perfect hit, his spear sinking deep into the beast's massive throat—then gripped the shaft under his arm and thrust hard.

But the boar was strong. And Eomer was forced dance with it, holding his weapon firm as the animal writhed and thrashed.

I must hold on, he thought, till either the gods give me more strength, or help arrives.

...

As they wound their way up the levels of Minas Tirith—past houses decorated with wreathes of evergreens and garlands of ribbons, and shops filled with Yuletide gifts, and busy market stalls loaded with baskets of cakes, and nuts, and exotic fruits—Eowyn could not help thinking how sad it was for a man to have lost his life when the rest of Middle-earth was joyfully celebrating the birth of the new year.

But, then, she thought, there are few good times to die, and there is no good time to be murdered.

At the sixth level they left Banduil's body at the House of Healing.

Then they continued up the long, lamp-lit slope to the seventh gate and emerged into the High Court. They skirted the Place of the Fountain and the White Tree, gleaming whiter than ever under its frosting of snow, and the dazzling Tower of Ecthelion, and entered through the gateway of the King's House just as another heavy snow shower began to fall.

Servants ran forward to greet them. Legolas sprang down from his horse and lifted Eowyn

from hers. "Follow me into the house, my lords, gentlemen," cried Halmant. "The servants will take care of the horses."

He led them swiftly, across the courtyard, through the massive arched door, and into the great entrance hall.

"Are you all right, melmenya?" asked Legolas, as his companions shook the snow from their clothes.

Eowyn had huddled herself against his chest, burying her face in the crook of his neck. She nodded against his shoulder. "I have no complaints," she whispered.

...

"EOMER!" called Aragorn, looking about him. He could hear the sounds of a struggle, but could not determine its direction. "Eomer! Where are you?"

"Here!" came Eomer's voice, from the west. "Quick! Quick! I have it!"

Aragorn urged his horse forward, through the dense thicket, and broke out into the small clearing where Eomer—close to exhaustion—was still wrestling for his life.

"Gods," muttered Aragorn, seizing his bow, "that creature is not of this world..." He nocked an arrow, drew, and waited for a clear shot. *Hold it still*, he thought. *Still, Eomer, still...*

Eomer, sensing Aragorn's intention, made one final effort and, summoning all of his remaining strength, braced his legs and held the boar steady.

"Now!" he cried.

"*Elbereth gilthoniel*," breathed Aragorn, and loosed.

His arrow pierced the beast's forehead, between its eyes, and it fell to its knees. Aragorn shot again, and again. Slowly, the animal's head drooped until its snout came to rest on the ground.

Eomer dropped his spear and stepped back from the carcass.

"There are times," he said, wiping his gauntlet across his forehead, "when a bow cannot be beaten. But do not tell the elf I said that."

...

Whilst the King's Steward showed Gimli, Haldir, and Dínendal to their own apartments, Master Halmant led Legolas and Eowyn to a spacious set of rooms overlooking the Queen's Garden, which—with its elven furnishings of swirling pale wood and richly embroidered fabrics, and its large balcony filled with tubs of evergreen shrubs, snowy crocuses and fragrant white hyacinths—immediately reminded Eowyn of home.

"The Queen hopes you will be comfortable here, my lord, my lady," said Halmant. "She invites you to join her in her sitting room, when you are rested from your journey."

"Thank you, Master Halmant," said Legolas. "Will you send word to me when King Elessar returns?"

"Of course, my lord," said Halmant. Then he bowed, and left them alone.

...

Eowyn was sitting in a chair before the fire whilst Legolas removed her boots.

"You sat with me," she said, suddenly. "You sang to me."

"Melmenya?"

"I did not remember," she said. "Not until I saw the House of Healing again. It was while I was sleeping. Before Aragorn's kingsfoil had begun to take effect—before he ordered me to wake and dragged me back into the world... You sang to me about the forest. About Eryn Carantaur —"

"About *Mirkwood*," Legolas corrected, softly.

"Why did you not remind me? Why did you keep it a secret?"

"It was not a secret, but it did not help you." He shook his head. "You needed Aragorn. You needed the touch of the king..."

"Legolas." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Look at me," she said. "*Please*."

He raised his head, sadly, and Eowyn thought that she had never seen him look more beautiful. "I *remember* it," she said. "You reached me before anyone else—when no one else *could*." She stroked his cheek. "I love you, Legolas."

He rose up on his knees and wrapped her in his arms.

"You have not made love to me since Mother Night," she whispered.

"I—"

"I know that you are afraid you will lose control again—"

"Elves do not have children by accident, melmenya. It was shameful—"

She took his face in her hands. "Other elves are not married to women," she said. "I know what they say about that, Legolas—I have heard them talking."

"Melmenya?"

"I overheard some of the warriors—in the stables—before we left Eryn Carantaur. You are greatly envied."

"I am sorry you had to hear that, melmenya."

"Is it true? Why did you not tell me?"

Legolas hesitated.

"Is it?"

He sighed. "Yes, Eowyn *nín*. It is true. With a woman things are far, far more intense." He sighed again. "But that is not the reason, melmenya—"

"I *know* that is not the reason you are with me!" She hugged him tightly. "I know that you love me, Legolas." Then she lifted her head and smiled, wickedly. "So *I* am the reason it is often over in moments?"

Legolas reached up and gently pushed a strand of hair back from her face. "Such—impatience—is not elven. But I am not complaining, melmenya," he said.

Eowyn laughed. Then she pressed her lips to his ear. "Show me some impatience now, my

love," she whispered. "Make love to me."

...

He carried her to the bed and helped her undress, then undressed himself and climbed up beside her. But as he reached for Eowyn, she suddenly pounced on him—pinning him to the bed with a hand on each wrist and a knee either side of his hips.

Legolas laughed. Then his expression became serious. "Be careful, melmenya," he began.

"I tire of being an invalid," said Eowyn. She grinned. "I crave excitement. And danger." She shifted her hips, began rubbing herself against his erection, and shivered. "Mmmmm... Oh Legolas!" She leaned forward to kiss him, whispering, "I cannot *look* at you without wanting you inside me."

Legolas smiled. Then—with no warning—he reared up from the bed, turned her onto her back, and entered her with a single, hard thrust.

"Oh gods!" she screamed. "Yes! Oh yes! Hard! HARD!" Her body arched to take him deeper, then she stayed still, her eyes closed, chanting, "Yes-yes-yes-yes!"

"Look at me, melmenya," gasped Legolas. "Open your eyes. I want to see your eyes. I want—oh!—oh sweet Eru! Eowyn—"

Eowyn's eyes flew open and she reached for his shoulders, lifting herself off the bed and wrapping her arms around his neck, and she clung to him, screaming deep in her throat, as his seed filled her body and set her limbs on fire.

...

The huntsmen lit a fire and began 'the unmaking'.

Servants handed Aragorn, Eomer, and the other horsemen, steaming cups of mulled ale, and the riders sat astride their horses and watched the men at work.

Whilst the dogs were held back on their leashes, the chief huntsman severed the boar's head from its shoulders—letting the blood flow into a bowl—and removed its feet. Then the carcass was threaded onto poles and suspended over the fire to singe off its bristles.

"It grows colder," said Eomer to Aragorn.

"Yes, there is a blizzard in those clouds. Once the dogs have had their reward we must hurry—we do not want to be caught on The Pelennor."

The carcass was lifted off the fire and turned onto its back.

The chief huntsman cut off its testicles, then sliced open its belly and cut out its kidneys.

"The umbels, your Majesty," he said, presenting them to Eomer, with a bow.

Eomer shook his head, graciously. "I fear I have not earned them today, Master Torael," he said. "Give them to the dogs." The huntsman bowed again.

He sliced out the boar's remaining organs and put the offal over the fire to boil. The dogs were baying impatiently.

A few snowflakes drifted down from the sky.

Master Torael soaked several great rounds of bread in the boar's blood and laid them on the

embers to roast.

The snowfall grew heavier.

"We are not far from the forest's edge," said Aragorn to Eomer. "And there are caves in the foot of Mount Mindolluin. If necessary, we can shelter there until the snow passes."

Master Torael butchered the remains of the carcass and his men packed up the joints for transport.

Then, at last, the dogs' food was ready. Torael mixed the chopped offal with the roasted bread and threw it amongst the pack. The handlers slipped the leashes and the entire company shouted encouragement as the ravenous hounds made short work of their reward.

...

"He was a man of courage and honour," said Legolas. "As Prince of Ithilien he served the world of men for fifty years. Then he came to live in Eryn Carantaur, and he served our colony for just as long. He was a wise ruler, a prudent counsellor and a good friend. He will be sadly missed."

Legolas stooped, took a handful of earth, and threw it over the shrouded body lying in the flower-lined grave.

"May your spirit dwell happily with your ancestors, mellon nín," he said softly.

Then each of the mourners took his or her turn to add a handful of earth to the grave—Aragorn, his hair and beard now completely grey but his body still sprightly; Arwen, still lovely but, somehow, older too; Alberich, the young Prince of Ithilien, his grandfather's successor; Elfwine King, the image of his late father; Gimli, still strong as an ox, thank the Valar; Lord Fingolfin and Lord Caranthir, both openly grieving the loss of their human friend; and, finally, Eowyn. She scattered her handful of earth over the body of her first husband, then turned to Legolas and raised her black veil.

And her face was as young and as beautiful as it had been on the very first day he had set eyes upon her...

...

As the riders left the shelter of the forest the snow began to fall in earnest. A brisk wind from the north east turned the flakes into a hail of tiny arrows that scoured the riders' exposed faces and necks and worked their way through the tiniest gaps in their clothes.

Deep drifts were quickly trapping men, horses and dogs alike.

Aragorn made a decision. "We cannot risk exposure on the plain. The nearest cave is only a few hundred yards distant," he cried. "Follow me!" He rode straight into the cave—ducking beneath the low ridge of rock at its mouth—followed by Eomer and the other riders, their servants, the huntsmen, and the yapping dogs.

Once out of the snow, the huntsmen lit a fire near the cave mouth, tethered and settled the dogs and tended the horses. The riders huddled around the fire, their damp clothes steaming in the warmth.

"How long do you think it will last?" asked Eomer.

Aragorn looked out into the blizzard. "I would be surprised if we can leave before morning," he said.

The lady vanishes

Eomer nodded. "Lothiriel will have my guts for a girdle for staying out all night." He smiled at Aragorn, who laughed, softly.

"You will have to make it up to her, Eomer." He turned to his servant. "Daelvist," he said, "tell the huntsmen to make themselves comfortable—we will be staying here tonight. And roast the boar's head and shoulders—we will have a proper Yuletide feast."

...

Legolas lay on his back, gazing up into the canopy of the bed.

Why had he started dreaming again? What did the dreams mean—he felt sure that he had had others, though he could not remember them. Should he tell Eowyn about them? He did not like keeping secrets from her. But, even though he had decided he would follow her in death, her ageing was still a difficult subject between them.

Unless the dream was a premonition...

No, that is foolish—just make-believe, he thought. He rolled over and clasped Eowyn tightly in his arms.

Eowyn sighed, softly, "No more, Legolas—not just yet—I am too tired..."

Legolas smiled. "You must wake up, *melmenya*."

"No."

He laughed. "It is time to bathe and dress, *meleth nín*. Arwen is waiting for us." He stroked her hair, playfully. "I thought a Shieldmaiden was made of stronger stuff than this."

"You are an insufferable elf," she began, but she was interrupted by someone knocking at the door.

"I will send them away, *melmenya*," said Legolas, patting her shoulder.

He slipped on his dressing robe and opened the door. "Hello," he said, surprised. "What brings you here?"

"Good evening, Lord Legolas. May I speak with Lady Eowyn?"

"I am afraid she is indisposed at the moment—"

"No, no; I am awake now," called Eowyn. "Let her come in."

Legolas stepped aside and gestured the young woman to enter.

"Hello, Senta," said Eowyn.

...

"Orin," said the chief huntsman, handing the stable boy two wooden buckets, "the horses need more water. Go and fetch some clean snow. We will melt it beside the fire."

Orin pulled the hood of his cloak down over his face and scrambled outside, muttering to himself. The wind had dropped, but a heavy shower of large flakes was still falling.

Gods, it is cold! Be careful—do not go too far, he thought, *or you may never be seen again. At least, not until the thaw...*

The lady vanishes

Keeping close to the foot of the cliff, he worked his way to a clean drift.

Keep your hands dry.

Holding the edge of one of the buckets, he carefully dipped it into the snow and scooped. The rim scraped against something hard—hard, but *not* rock.

Orin peered into the hole he had made.

"Tup *me!*" he whispered, and ran back to the cave, his buckets forgotten.

...

"I am sorry to disturb you, my lady, my lord," said Senta. "But Florestan is so worried, and I did not know who else to turn to." She wrung her hands together.

"Sit down," said Legolas, bringing a chair closer to the bed. "Would you like a drink?"

"Yes—yes, please."

Legolas poured three glasses of spiced fruit wine, handed one to Senta and one to Eowyn. "Now," he said, "tell us what is the matter."

Senta looked at each of them in turn. "I am to live at Edoras now, as one of Queen Lothiriel's maids."

"To be near to Florestan," said Eowyn. She remembered how her brother's secretary had met and fallen in love with Senta during his stay at Dol Amroth.

"Yes. We plan to marry—if Eomer King gives his permission."

"I am sure he will, Senta," said Eowyn, "Is that your problem?"

"No, my lady. No. It is Florestan's sister." She shook her head. "She has *disappeared*."

...

"Your Majesty," said Daelvist, softly, to Aragorn, "I am sorry to disturb you, but a delicate situation has arisen."

Aragorn glanced around his companions. They were drinking ale and sharing stories of past hunting adventures. Aragorn rose quietly and followed Daelvist to the mouth of the cave.

"Well?" he asked.

"Master Torael sent young Orin out to fetch some snow, your Majesty, for the horses. Tell King Elessar what you found, Orin."

The stable boy bowed low. "A dead body, your Majesty—dead for some days, I think." He held out a fine leather glove decorated with an ornate interlace border. "A woman of Rohan, your Majesty."

Extra scene: [The most handsome man she had ever seen](#)

Extra scene: [Come live with me](#)

Chapter 3: Family secrets

"What do you mean, she has disappeared?" asked Legolas.

"When Florestan and I went to visit her, yesterday morning," said Senta, "her husband's uncle, Lord Berodin, said that the couple were travelling, visiting family in Ithilien. But, at supper last night, the palace healer told Florestan that the young man does not have a wife—he has been confined to his rooms for years, sick of the wasting disease."

Eowyn and Legolas exchanged puzzled glances.

"You had better tell us everything you know, Senta," said Legolas. "What is the girl's name?"

"Lëonórwyn, my lord."

"And the boy?"

"Just a moment," said Eowyn. "Do you mind if I take notes, Senta?"

"No, my lady," said Senta.

Legolas set down his wineglass, opened Eowyn's small travelling pack, pulled out her wax tablet, and handed it to her with a smile. "All set?"

Eowyn smiled back. "Yes—thank you. *Lëonórwyn*," she said, inscribing the name on her tablet. "*Lord Berodin*. And the boy's name?"

"Master Berkin, my lady," said Senta.

"How did Lëonórwyn come to be in Minas Tirith?" asked Legolas.

"Florestan comes from a noble family on his mother's side," said Senta, "but his father was just a poor scholar—"

"My uncle's secretary," said Eowyn.

"Yes, my lady. Lady Silwyn's—Florestan's mother's—family would have nothing to do with Florestan's father. But Florestan and his sister were sometimes allowed to visit their grandparents, and Lëonórwyn was always her grandfather's favourite. When she was still a child he promised her hand in marriage to Master Berkin. And, when he died, he left her all his fortune."

As an elf, Legolas was unfamiliar with the rules of inheritance amongst men. "Is that usual?" he asked.

"No," said Eowyn. "Different lands have different laws, but in Rohan everything is usually left to the eldest son." And there was more than a trace of bitterness in her voice.

"Florestan says he would not have accepted a penny from his grandfather, anyway," said Senta. "He says it would have been an insult to the memory of his father."

Eowyn nodded. "Presumably," she said, "the inheritance was to be held in trust until Lëonórwyn married?"

"Yes, I believe so, my lady," said Senta.

Legolas looked at Eowyn, questioningly.

"Because women are so foolish and empty-headed," she explained, "even though the fortune

nominally belongs to the woman, it remains in the control of her male relatives until she marries. Then it is given to her husband to squander on horses or dogs or mistresses, as he sees fit. And *her* only hope is early widowhood."

"Melmenya!" Legolas chided. "Carry on, Senta."

"Lëonórwyn set off for Minas Tirith about three months ago, just after her eighteenth birthday," said Senta. "Florestan told me that he wanted to bring her himself, but Eomer King was preparing for the birth of his heir and could not spare him. So, instead, she had an escort of four Rohirrim, her lady's maid, and her old nurse. Florestan has not heard from her since she left..."

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances.

"Do you know the names of the Rohirrim who were with her, Senta?" asked Eowyn, softly.

"No, my lady, I do not."

Eowyn looked at Legolas—almost imperceptibly, Legolas shook his head: *Do not tell her just yet.*

"What do you want us to do, Senta?" he asked.

"I do not know, my lord. Florestan is so worried, and he does not know where to turn. I just thought—I thought—that if anyone could find Lëonórwyn it would be you and Lady Eowyn..."

"Oh, Senta," said Eowyn, softly, leaning forward to touch her hand. "We will certainly do our best."

...

"Eomer," said Aragorn, quietly. "I have some bad news."

Eomer rose from the fire and followed Aragorn to the mouth of the cave. Aragorn held out the glove. Eomer took it, examined it carefully, and frowned.

"This is familiar," he said, "I believe it was made by my own glove maker. Where did you get it?"

"Orin—the stable lad—has found the body of a young woman outside in the snow; she was wearing it," said Aragorn.

Eomer stared at him for a moment, then looked back at the glove. "By the gods, yes," he said, "my secretary's sister! I gave these gloves, and a pair of riding boots, to Florestan's sister as a wedding present. Where is she lying?"

Aragorn turned to Orin.

"She is in a deep snow drift, close beside the cliff, your Majesty, a few yards hence," said the stable boy, bowing. "I *think* I can find her again..."

"No." Aragorn shook his head. "It is already dark, and the wind has risen again. Conditions outside are treacherous. A few more hours in the snow will not hurt her now. I suggest we wait until morning."

...

"Where do we start?" said Eowyn, after Senta had left.

"I have no idea, melmenya."

"Was I wrong to say yes?"

"No, Eowyn *nín*. What else could you have said?"

"That we had no idea what to do," said Eowyn.

Legolas took her in his arms. "Arwen is waiting for us, melmenya. We can discuss this whilst we bathe."

"Hmmm," said Eowyn, "we seldom *talk* when we bathe..."

"Well, you will have to control yourself, Eowyn," said Legolas, lifting her off the bed and carrying her into the bathing room.

"I will have to control myself?"

"You are an insatiable woman, *meleth nín*."

"And you are an *elf*—"

Legolas laughed. "Irresistible to women," he said, lifting her into the water and climbing in beside her, "through no fault of my own."

Eowyn pursed her lips.

I cannot argue with that, she thought. She began unbraiding his hair. "How long should it have taken Lëonórwyn to reach Minas Tirith?" she asked.

"It is about four hundred and fifty miles, so, at between ten and twenty miles a day," said Legolas, "she should have been here more than a month ago."

"The body we found had not been dead that long."

"No; but it must surely be connected with her disappearance, melmenya. Unless someone is lying in wait for Rohirrim?"

Eowyn rubbed a small amount of soft, scented soap between her hands and began massaging it into Legolas' hair. "We need to know whether Banduil was part of her escort," said Eowyn. "We need to talk to Florestan."

"Mmmm," said Legolas.

"And we need to find out more about this Lord Berodin and his nephew—perhaps we can talk to somebody at the banquet tonight," she added. "And we need to find out whether the girl had any reasons of her own to disappear—"

"Harder," said Legolas.

"What? Oh..." Eowyn pressed her fingertips against his scalp; Legolas sighed with pleasure. "You have not been listening to a *word* I have said," she complained.

"Yes I have," said Legolas. "We will talk to Florestan before we join Arwen—and *she* may know something about Berodin."

Eowyn carefully rinsed the soap from his hair. "Will you wash mine?" she asked.

Legolas smiled. "With pleasure, melmenya," he said.

...

"She was to have married a man of Minas Tirith," said Eomer. "I cannot remember his name, but their families have a trading agreement."

Aragorn sighed. "They trade horses?" he asked.

"Yes," said Eomer. "Wild horses—from the Downs—noble animals distantly descended from the Mearas. I have tried to end the trade, but the agreement was approved by Helm, and there is nothing I can do. Do you know the Gondorian family?"

"I have heard of them," said Aragorn, "unfortunately."

...

Florestan was surprised to see them. "Come in, Lord Legolas, Princess Eowyn," he said, showing them into Eomer's apartment. "Please, sit down. I am afraid that Eomer King is still out hunting, and with the weather as it is I think he has probably taken shelter for the night. Queen Lothiriel and Prince Elfwine are visiting Queen Arwen."

"It is *you* we have come to see, Florestan," said Eowyn.

"I do not understand, my lady..."

"Senta told us about your sister, Florestan," said Legolas, "and asked us if we would help you find her."

"She should not have troubled you, my lord," said Florestan.

"She is worried about you, Florestan," said Eowyn. "And..." She glanced at Legolas for guidance; Legolas nodded. "We think we may *already* be involved. On our way here, we found the body of a man in the ruins of Osgiliath. I recognised him as one of Eomer's riders."

Florestan turned to Eowyn, alarmed. "Who was he, my lady?" he asked.

"His name was Banduil—"

Florestan sprang to his feet. "Oh gods!" he cried.

"Was he part of your sister's escort?" asked Legolas.

"Yes! Yes!" cried Florestan. He walked over to the window and gripped the sill. "I knew it! I *knew* I should have brought her myself!"

"Florestan," said Eowyn gently, "Legolas searched the area very thoroughly and found no other bodies. There is still hope that your sister is safe. Will you let us help you look for her?"

"Oh, my lady!" said Florestan, turning towards her. "I am sorry; I am behaving like a oaf." He lifted his hands to his face and took a deep breath.

"I would be very grateful for your help, my lord, my lady," he said.

"Do you mind if we ask you some questions?" asked Eowyn.

"No, my lady," he said, coming back to sit opposite her, "please do."

Eowyn took out her wax tablet, and thought for a moment. "Senta told us that your grandfather arranged your sister's marriage," she said. "Do you know why he chose Master Berkin?"

"I believe the two families have trading links, my lady. But I did not know my grandfather very well."

"How did Lëonórwyn feel about the marriage?"

Florestan hesitated. "I do not think she would have chosen to leave Edoras, my lady," said Florestan, "but she and her husband-to-be had been corresponding for a while and he seemed like a good sort. I would say that she accepted it. Yes, she was *resigned* to it."

"Did her fortune travel with her?"

"The plate and jewellery went with her, my lady, but the bloodstock is still in Rohan. And much of her fortune is tied up in property—"

"From which she will receive regular rents?"

"Yes, my lady, and tithes."

"Tithes?" asked Legolas.

"Once a year," said Eowyn, "her tenants must pay her one tenth of whatever they produce. It is a sort of tax."

"That is a heavy burden," said Legolas.

Eowyn nodded. "Life is hard for a peasant," she said. She turned back to Florestan. "So Lëonórwyn is a wealthy woman. Did she leave a sweetheart behind in Edoras?"

"I—I really do not know, my lady. She did not confide such things to me."

"But you have your suspicions?"

"I know that one of the men chosen to escort her was sweet on her, my lady, but whether Lëonórwyn returned his feelings, I do not know."

"What is his name?" asked Eowyn.

"Eowulf, my lady."

Eowyn made a note. "I know him; he is an honourable man. Who were the other riders?"

"There was Banduil, my lady; and Theodort, son of Halaël; and Ailhard, son of Ailhart. Then there was Lëonórwyn's lady's maid, Rosemant, and her nurse, Mistress Amarri. Gods, if they are *all* dead!" He buried his face in his hands.

Eowyn leaned forward and laid her hand on his arm.

"When did they leave Edoras?" asked Legolas, gently.

"On the twentieth day of Ivanneth, my lord," said Florestan. "Just over three months ago."

"Do you know which route they planned to take?"

"Along the highway from Edoras to Minas Tirith."

"They did not intend to make any detours on the way?"

"No, my lord, not that I know of."

The lady vanishes

Legolas nodded.

"How will we find her, my lord?" asked Florestan.

Legolas looked at Eowyn; she was deep in thought.

"At this moment, I do not know, Florestan," he said. "But we will think of something—"

"Servants!" said Eowyn.

"Melmenya?"

"Servants know everything." She began to rise to her feet.

"No melmenya!" cried Legolas, placing his hand on her knee, "you must not stand!"

"But it is so hard to think sitting down," said Eowyn, in frustration. "Very well—if Lord Berodin lied to Florestan about his nephew's whereabouts to cover up Lëonórwyn's disappearance—"

"Then he knows something about it—he may even have been responsible for it," said Legolas, following her train of thought.

"Yes. And whatever *he* knows about it, his servants know as well. So what we need to do is talk to the servants." She smiled. "A dishonourable man has dishonourable servants—or else servants who are badly treated. Either way, we should be able to bribe them. We just need to think of a way of approaching them without Lord Berodin's knowing."

...

The problem preoccupied Eowyn all through the hour she and Legolas spent with Arwen, all through dinner—so that she failed to notice that Legolas seemed to be flirting with the handsome woman on his right—and she was still oblivious as Legolas carried her back to their apartments.

"Melmenya?"

"Hmm?"

"I said, at least *now* we know how we can talk with Lord Berodin's servants."

Eowyn sat up in his arms, startled. "We do?"

"Oh! Careful, melmenya!" He settled her back against his chest. "Were you not listening?"

"I—no, I was thinking..."

Legolas laughed, and kissed her cheek. "The charming Lady Emliet," he said, referring to the woman who had been sitting beside him at dinner, "who, incidentally, seems to be a reliable source of information on *all* the noble families of Gondor, tells me that, since the death of our friend's wife, his household has been most disorderly. And that half his servants squander their time and money in the *Golden Goose* tavern on Cocks Alley. Which is, incidentally, a notorious stew. And Aragorn should have closed it down years ago to preserve the health and morals of all the men of Minas Tirith."

Eowyn hugged him tightly. "Legolas," she cried, "you are a genius!" Then she added, "It is a pity that Berryn is not with us."

"Berryn! Why melmenya?"

"Because he is a man."

"I do not understand."

"He could walk into the tavern without arousing any suspicion. Whereas an elf or a dwarf, or a woman with no feet—"

"*You* are not going in there, *melmenya*," said Legolas, firmly.

"Why ever not? I might make us some money. *You* could pose as my pimp—"

Legolas made a strange, unelven sound, almost like a dwarven battle cry. "I am *serious*, Eowyn!"

...

"You must take Haldir and Gimli with you," said Eowyn as Legolas laid her on the bed. "There is safety in numbers. Dínendal is far too unworldly—he would set up a healing room for the women and we would never get him home. And Florestan is too emotional at present. But perhaps you could take Eomer—and Faramir too—"

"Lothiriel would never allow Eomer to visit a brothel, *melmenya*. Besides, he is too—too—*big*—"

"Big?"

"Obvious. With all that hair. And I cannot take Faramir, either."

"Why not?"

Legolas raised his eyebrows.

"We are not asking him to sleep with anyone, Legolas," said Eowyn. "Just to talk to them. And Faramir is very good at talking to women."

"It would be better if I went in alone," he said, helping her out of her beautiful red gown.

"No, no. As I said, there is safety in numbers. On your own you would look suspicious, but with companions you will just look as if you are having a drunken adventure—even if somebody recognises you, it will look innocent. Besides, Gimli has a gift for making unlikely friends, and —"

"What does *that* mean?"

Eowyn smiled. "And Haldir will distract the women—give them something to look at—"

Legolas shot her a suspicious glance.

"And *you* promise that you will not try to follow us, *melmenya*?" he demanded.

Eowyn sighed. "I promise," she said, slipping out of her shift. "On one condition."

"What is that?" asked Legolas.

She reached behind him and began unlacing the broad red sash around his waist. "That *you* make me scream," she whispered.

...

"*Please*," Eowyn whimpered.

"*Shhhhh.*" Slowly, he withdrew, inch by tortuous inch, every part of him stroking every part of her swollen inner flesh. He paused, smiling down at her, then gradually entered her again.

"*I cannot bear it...*"

"Yes you can, *melmenya,*" he whispered, kissing her face. "You can bear it. For me."

"*No...*"

"Yes, my darling." He drew himself out of her again, and paused.

"I love you," he whispered, then slowly, oh so slowly, he entered her again, filling her, pushing deep inside her, pressing against her womb. And he held himself there.

"*Oh gods, no...*" She arched beneath him, desperately trying to release the pressure he had built in her. But then he reached down between them and gently brushed her with his fingertips and it was all over.

...

Eomer sighed. What would otherwise have been a very pleasant night—sharing good food and ale and tall stories around the fire with his hunting companions—had been turned into an interminable vigil by the discovery of Florestan's poor sister.

What in Middle Earth had happened to her? And what had happened to the escort he had sent with her? He peered out of the cave mouth. A faint glow was appearing over the horizon—it would soon be dawn and, thank the gods, it had stopped snowing.

Eomer turned to Aragorn. "Let us go and find her," he said.

Aragorn agreed. "Orin," he called softly. The stable boy, also awake, sprang immediately to his feet and bowed, hastily. "Take us to the lady," said Aragorn.

Orin led them out of the cave and, keeping close to the cliff face, tried to retrace his steps of the previous night. "I left the buckets behind, your Majesty," he said, "so it should be easy to find her, but there is so much more snow now." He looked around. "It was near here, I think, next to the—oh!" He tripped and fell, full length. "Be careful, your Majesty," he said, pushing himself up on his knees and wiping the snow from his face, "that was one of my buckets.

"She must be here..."

He pulled the bucket out of the snow and—very carefully—began digging with it. Eomer retrieved the other bucket and joined him.

"Oh, gods," said Orin softly, "here, your Majesty, I have found her." He dropped the bucket and began scraping the snow away with his hands. "*Tup a duck!*" he suddenly exclaimed. Then, "Sorry, your Majesty—"

"What is it?" asked Eomer, peering over his shoulder.

"It is another one," said Orin. "A man in armour."

Eomer looked up at Aragorn. "One of the riders who escorted her," he said. "We will need some help."

...

Legolas took one last look at Middle-earth.

How he would miss it—the mountains of Gondor, the plains of Rohan, the beloved trees of Eryn Carantaur.

But it was all in safe hands. Eldarion would carry on his father's work with wisdom and honour. Elfwine King had been ruling Rohan in peace and prosperity for many years. And his own son had taken over the guardianship of Eryn Carantaur, with the help of Lord Fingolfin and Lord Caranthir.

"Are you ready, my love?" asked a voice beside him.

"Are you ready?" he replied.

"I have said my good byes," she said. "And though I shall miss Meldon every moment of every day, I know that he will join us when it is his time." Then she added, in a whisper, "Haldir is growing impatient and I think Gimli is getting tired, Lassui."

"Of course," he said. "Let us go."

And he took Eowyn's small, smooth hand upon his own, elven fashion, and led her down the steps and along the quay, and onto the grey ship.

...

After almost an hour of careful digging, Eomer, Orin, and two of the huntsman, had uncovered the bodies of Florestan's sister, the rider, and another man.

Reverently, Eomer laid a blanket over each body.

"Theodort, son of Halaël," he said, "and Ailhard, son of Ailhart—forgive me, I sent you both to dishonourable death. Lady Lëonórwyn—your life should have been blessed with a husband and children..." Aragorn placed a hand on his shoulder. Eomer looked up at him. "If the others are also here," he said, "we will not find them until the snow thaws."

Aragorn shook his head. "No," he agreed. "We will take these bodies back to Minas Tirith and I will instruct the Gondorian Guard to search for the others as soon as conditions permit."

"Do you think they froze to death?" asked Eomer.

"I have seen no obvious wounds," said Aragorn. "But we will ask the royal healer to examine them. And if there *is* any sign of foul play, the Gondorian Guard will investigate."

...

Legolas awoke late. He had been dreaming again—something about Eowyn; something that had filled him with so much joy he wanted to sing—but he could not remember it.

Should he tell her about the dreams?

He rolled onto his side and looked at her. She was already wide-awake, and the radiant smile she was giving him promised him something very, very wicked.

Legolas decided that the dreams could wait until later. He reached for her—

And someone rapped at the door.

"Sweet *Eru!* Perfect timing, as ever!" Legolas threw on his dressing robe and, pulling it closed across the front of his body, opened the door. "Yes?"

The servant bowed nervously. "Master Halmant sends word that King Elessar has returned, my

lord, and awaits you, with the King of Rohan, Prince Faramir, and Lord Gimli, in his study."

Legolas sighed. "Thank you." He closed the door. "Come melmenya," he said, "it seems we are wanted."

...

"You took your time," said Eomer, turning towards the door. "By the gods! What is wrong?"

"It is nothing, Eomer," said Eowyn, as Legolas set her down on a couch by the fire, "just a few cuts on my feet. Do not fuss."

"Those are honourable wounds," said Gimli, "received when protecting Legolas from an extremely nasty creature that was trying to break his neck. Very useful in a tight spot is your sister, Eomer," he added. "She saved *me* from a stampeding warg, and the March Warden from an Uruk Hai..."

Eomer looked pointedly at Legolas: *I will speak to you later.*

"It is good to see you Legolas, Eowyn," said Aragorn, clasping Legolas' shoulders and giving Eowyn a brief bow of the head.

"We are both very pleased to be here," said Legolas, returning his friend's embrace. "I assume that Gimli has told you of the body we found in the ruins of Osgiliath?"

"Yes," said Aragorn. "He said that Eowyn recognised him."

"It was Banduil, son of Falemi," said Eowyn to Eomer. "He had been shot in the back. Florestan has told us that he was one of the riders who escorted his sister to Minas Tirith, but—fortunately—we found no sign of her, or of the rest of her party, so we assume that they...." She noticed that Eomer and Aragorn were exchanging glances. "What is it?" she asked.

"This morning, we found the bodies of Lëonórwyn and two riders," said Eomer.

"No!" cried Eowyn.

Legolas sat down beside her, took her hand, and pressed it gently. "Have you told Florestan?" he asked.

"Yes," said Eomer.

"How is he taking it?"

"Badly," said Eomer. "Very badly."

"How did she die?" asked Eowyn.

"We do not know as yet," said Aragorn. "I have asked the royal healer to examine all three bodies."

"If Master Dínendal can be of any assistance," said Legolas, "I am sure he will be happy to help."

"Thank you, *mellon nín*," said Aragorn. "Since the man you found was clearly murdered, and by a Gondorian archer, I will be instructing the Gondorian Guard to investigate."

"There is still one rider missing," said Eowyn. "And the two women servants."

Eomer nodded. "They may still be buried in the snow. We will not know until the thaw."

The lady vanishes

"We will send out search parties as soon as possible," said Aragorn. "As for the Yuletide celebrations, Eomer—"

"They must continue, of course," said Eomer. "No one would expect you to cancel rites intended to ensure the future prosperity of your people. It would be seen as a bad omen."

...

"Would you mind if I spent a few hours in the archery practice hall, melmenya?" asked Legolas as he carried Eowyn back to their apartment. "I need to clear my head."

"Of course not," said Eowyn. "But can I come too? I like watching you."

Legolas smiled. "I would enjoy your company Eowyn *nín*—it is a pity you did not bring your bow, or I could have taught you how to shoot from a sitting position."

"Of course I brought my bow, and my sword! I would never travel without them."

Legolas hugged her. "Then let us fetch it, melmenya, and perhaps we can put this terrible business from our minds for a short while."

...

"Once more, melmenya," said Legolas. He was crouching beside her, with his right hand on her back, to make sure that she was using the correct muscles.

"You are a slave driver," said Eowyn, drawing her bow.

Legolas laughed. "Yes, that is much better. Remember how that feels—and tomorrow we will progress to shooting..."

"Can I join you?" asked a familiar voice.

"Certainly, March Warden," said Legolas. "Best of fifty?"

Eowyn smiled. She had no idea why Haldir still bothered to compete. *But perhaps he thinks that, one day, he will win*, she thought.

"Will you be all right melmenya?" asked Legolas.

"Of course I will. Go ahead."

Eowyn watched Legolas' graceful body, working with a perfect blend of power and precision, as he loosed all fifty arrows without a moment's hesitation.

It is so arousing, she thought, smiling. *If all women were to watch their husbands practice the bow—or the sword—the average marriage bed would be a far livelier place—*

"Might I have a word, my lady? With you and Lord Legolas, in private?"

Eowyn turned towards the newcomer. "Florestan," she said, "I am so sorry—"

"The thing is, my lady," said Florestan, leaning towards her and speaking very quietly, "the woman lying in the House of Healing is *not* my sister."

Extra scene: [The charming Lady Emliet](#)

Extra scene: [The contest](#)

Chapter 4: The dressing of the Yule Tree

"The woman lying dead in the House of Healing is poor Rosemant, my sister's lady's maid," said Florestan.

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances.

"Have you told Eomer?" asked Eowyn.

"No my lady—and I would be grateful if you did not."

He looked cautiously around the room, as if afraid that someone might be hiding behind one of the tapestries, listening. He had refused to speak to them in a public place, so they had brought him back to their apartment, and it had taken them some time to persuade him to allow Haldir to join them.

"Surely you cannot suspect my brother—"

"Of course not, my lady," said Florestan. "Few know better than I that Eomer King would never behave dishonourably. But, once the investigation begins, all eyes will be upon him and King Elessar. Rosemant was disguised as my sister," he explained. "Wearing her clothes and her jewellery. Whoever killed her probably thinks that he has killed Lëonórwyn. And the fewer people who know the truth—"

"The safer your sister will be," said Legolas, "assuming that she is still alive."

"Yes, my lord."

"You are sure," said Haldir, "that the maid did not *steal* your sister's belongings?"

"Yes, sir," said Florestan. "Rosemant was devoted to Lëonórwyn." He turned to Legolas and Eowyn. "Are you still willing to help me find her, my lord, my lady? It would mean acting in secret."

Legolas looked at Eowyn. "I do not like the idea of going behind Eomer's back," she said.

"Then we will not, melmenya—"

"But I have no doubt at all," she continued, "that Eomer would happily leave *me* in the dark if our positions were reversed."

Legolas smiled, ruefully; she was right.

"Let us do what we can," she said. Legolas squeezed her hand.

"You have your answer," he said to Florestan, "but, with your permission, I would like to ask Lord Gimli to join us. Dwarves are very practical, resourceful people—Gimli more so than most. And, like us, he will slip by unnoticed whilst the crowd is busy watching Aragorn and Eomer."

"Of course, my lord," said Florestan, after a moment's hesitation.

"Good," said Legolas. "This evening, we must all be seen at the dressing of the Yule Tree. But, after that, Haldir, Gimli and I will be paying a visit to the whorehouse."

...

"Ready, melmenya?" asked Legolas. He took one last look at himself in the mirror and straightened the broad sash of his long green robe; then he wrapped Eowyn's fur-lined cloak around her shoulders, and fastened the clasp.

"Legolas," she protested, "I am not a *complete* invalid!"

The elf laughed. "Those words will come back to haunt you tonight, when you have had too much wine and I am not here to carry you to the privy."

Eowyn swatted his arm. "I will crawl," she said. Then she added, "You will be careful tonight?"

"Of course, *melmenya*. Now that we know that Lëonórwyn is probably hiding somewhere, it is even more important to be discreet—"

"That is not what I meant. Those places can be dangerous. Sometimes, the women keep the men—er—*occupied* whilst their pimps steal from them. Or worse..."

"And how do *you* know that, *melmenya*?"

"I am a Shieldmaiden," said Eowyn, "and warriors talk."

Legolas kissed her forehead. "Come," he said, lifting her into his arms. Then, as he carried her out of their apartment and they joined the crowd of excited guests descending the main staircase of the King's House, he added, "You need not worry, Eowyn *nín*, for this will not be the first time I have been in a brothel. And do not forget that I will have Gimli to protect me. And, besides, all the women will be looking at Haldir, apparently."

"When have you been in a brothel?" whispered Eowyn. "You have never mentioned that before!"

"A husband must have some secrets, *melmenya*."

"Legolas," she began but, at that moment, he stepped out through the massive doors and into the courtyard at the centre of the house. "Oh, *look!*" she gasped.

The scene was magical. Strings of lanterns were sparkling like stars around the snowy courtyard. Servants were handing out hot spiced wine and festive sweetmeats. And, at the centre of everything, the Yule Tree, a noble fir, stood in a huge wooden barrel, awaiting decoration.

Legolas gazed at the tree. "Evergreens are a refuge for the woodland spirits throughout the winter months," he said softly.

"Do the spirits mind being brought here?" asked Eowyn.

Legolas smiled. "No, *melmenya*," he replied, "they enjoy a celebration as much as we do."

"And the tree?"

"The tree is happy."

Eowyn kissed his cheek, her worries about his past sexual adventures forgotten.

"Gingerbread, my lord, my lady?" asked a passing servant, carrying a large tray.

"Thank you," said Eowyn, taking a piece. She held it up to the light and laughed. It was shaped like a woman, with a face and hair drawn in icing. She took a bite, then offered it to Legolas.

"*Shhhhh, shhhhh*," hissed some of the crowd. Legolas turned towards the sound. Aragorn and Arwen were standing beneath the Yule Tree.

"Welcome, friends," said Aragorn. "This is the fifth time the Queen and I have celebrated Yule at Minas Tirith—for almost five years we have all worked hard to achieve peace and prosperity."

Let us join together now to dress the Yule Tree; let us thank the gods, and the spirits of our ancestors, for the blessings they have given us; and let us always remember those less fortunate than we are."

One by one, the guests came forward and hung their decorations on the tree—lights to honour the sun, moon, and stars, and to greet the spirits of the dead, and small offerings of wood and glass for the land wights, the sprites of earth and forest. Then, when the tree was covered, and the royal guests were returning indoors for their Yuletide feast, an army of servants was sent out from the palace to distribute parcels of food and warm clothing to the poor and needy.

...

Arwen had arranged the seating so that the friends of the Ring could sit together, sharing their Yuletide meal and exchanging their gifts in private.

"Gimli," said Eowyn, unable to wait until after the feast, "this is for you." She grinned at Legolas and handed Gimli a small, spherical object covered in rose-pink gauze and decorated with a large rose-gold bow. "I helped choose it, but Legolas wrapped it..."

Gimli gave Legolas a slightly strange look, then carefully opened the gauze. "What beautiful workmanship," he said, holding the golden ball up to the light and admiring a sun, moon and stars engraved on its surface. "Made by men?"

"Yes," said Legolas.

"Open it," said Eowyn, excitedly.

Gimli peered at the gift for a moment, then pressed an almost invisible button with his thumb. The sphere slowly opened to reveal a tiny, intricately detailed timepiece, complete with folding gnomon.

"By Aulë!" he exclaimed, "it is wondrous!"

"It is a travelling sundial," said Eowyn. "It will work anywhere in Middle-earth—though not, of course," she admitted, "underground."

Gimli smiled at his friends. "A dwarf always knows the time when he is underground," he said. "It is above the ground that he can get confused. Thank you; I shall treasure it."

He hesitated for a moment, before saying: "Let me give you your gifts, though these are nothing so special." He reached into a leather bag hanging from the back of his chair and handed them each a small, rectangular wooden box.

Legolas opened his box. Inside it was a hair ornament, made from interlocking green leaves of delicately enamelled mithril. "Gimli," he whispered, "you *made* this for me?" He gave Gimli the most beautiful smile the dwarf had ever seen.

"For shame, you crazy elf," said Gimli. "It is just a hair clip."

Legolas shook his head. "No Gimli, it is exquisite. Open yours, *melmenya*."

Eowyn removed the lid of her box, and gasped. "Oh Gimli! Thank you!"

"May I see it, Eowyn *nín*?" asked Legolas.

It was another hair ornament, of enamelled gold, depicting the white flowers of Rohan embraced by the green leaves of Eryn Lasgalen.

"Yes, thank you Gimli," said Legolas, softly. "Thank you for the gift, and for the sentiment it expresses, *elvellon*. Let me put it in your hair, *melmenya*. The green matches your gown exactly."

...

Later in the evening, the party broke into smaller groups and the guests of honour began to mingle with the citizens of Gondor.

Gimli and Haldir had instructions to discover as much as they could about Lord Berodin and his nephew and, whilst talking to Lord Olivan, the Mayor of Minas Tirith, Gimli managed to mention, quite casually, that he had heard that Lord Berodin possessed the best stables in all of Gondor.

"I would dearly like to see his horses, and so would my friend, Legolas."

"I can introduce you to Lord Berodin, if you would like, my lord," said Olivan. "I confess we are only passing acquaintances, but my dear late wife was a close friend of both Lord Berodin's wife, and her sister, his nephew's mother."

"He has a nephew?" asked Gimli, innocently.

"Oh, yes, my lord. The boy lives with his uncle. He is a good-hearted young lad. My dear late wife was very fond of him."

"Does he attend court?"

"No, my lord." Olivan thought for a moment. "No. In truth, I have not seen him in years..."

"What happened to his parents?" asked Gimli.

"It was a tragedy, my lord. His father and mother were set upon by orcs in the Forest of Druadan; no one was sure what they were doing there. Fortunately, Lord Berodin adopted the boy. But then, shortly afterwards, Berodin's wife died—fell down *stairs*, I believe..."

"I would very much like to meet this Lord Berodin," said Gimli, quietly.

"Then come with me, my lord," said Olivan. He led Gimli across the Banqueting Hall, towards a tall, dark figure with a hawk-like face.

"Lord Berodin," he said, bowing slightly, "may I introduce Lord Gimli? Lord Gimli—Lord Berodin. Lord Gimli was interested to hear that you own some fine wild horses of Rohan, my lord."

"I did not know that dwarves had any interest in horse flesh, Lord Gimli," said Berodin haughtily, placing a peculiar emphasis on the word 'lord'.

"As a rule, no, we do not," said Gimli, "but I have had much experience of riding—especially during the Ring war—and I appreciate a good horse. My current mount was bred in Eomer King's own stable. Arod is as fine a horse as you will find this side of Rivendell—almost a match for the Mearas themselves—with a light, smart gait, intelligent eye and gentle temperament, though in no way lacking courage," he added, quoting Legolas almost too the letter, and hoping that Berodin would not think to test his knowledge of horse flesh *too* deeply.

But Berodin had no interest in conversing with a dwarf, and rudely turned his back on Gimli. "Do you think that the thaw will come before Twelfth Night, Lord Olivan?" he asked.

Appalled by Berodin's behaviour, Olivan tried to make amends: "Come, my lord Berodin," he

said, "will you not invite Lord Gimli, and his friend Prince Legolas, to view your stables?"

"My stables are not open to visitors," said Berodin, coldly, and walked away.

...

"I hear my wife was talking to you last night, Prince Legolas," said a slightly drunken guest, dropping into the empty seat beside the elf, "about her favourite subject, the *Golden Goose* tavern."

"Oh—er—yes, Lady Emliet. Lord—er?"

"Glarimar," said the man. "She hopes that you will use your influence with the king to have it closed down." He leaned closer. "But I beg you to reconsider, for the *Golden Goose* is the best stew in the city. Many married men frequent it, myself included. *You* should try it, your Highness—escape the leash for a few hours," he added, inclining his head towards Eowyn, who was talking animatedly to the man sitting opposite.

Legolas smiled, politely—and felt Eowyn lay her hand on his thigh.

"A man may do things with whore that he cannot do with his wife," said Glarimar, drunkenly.

Legolas felt Eowyn's hand slide down between his legs and her fingertips press against his rapidly hardening flesh.

"Such as?" he asked, his voice sounding strange.

"Adventurous things."

Eowyn's fingers traced his penis upwards then began, gently but firmly, to circle its sensitive head. Legolas grasped the edge of the table and risked taking a glance at her. She was still talking—quite naturally—to the man opposite.

"A wife's duty is to bear children. It is not necessary for her to *please* her husband," said Glarimar.

Eowyn's fingers became more insistent.

"In fact, it is better if she has no interest in the physical act at all. That way, she is unlikely to stray—"

"Oh *Valar*," moaned Legolas.

"I am sorry?"

Legolas shook his head and smiled weakly. "Please continue, Lord—er..."

Eowyn's fingers began to move faster.

"A whore will do the unexpected, if you ask her with coin!"

"Ah!" gasped Legolas.

"Exactly. A man needs a wife to give him heirs, but he needs a whore to pleasure him." He leaned towards Legolas and whispered, conspiratorially, "You would enjoy yourself in the *Golden Goose*." A small movement caught his eye and he glanced down at Legolas' lap. "By the gods!" he exclaimed.

"I—er—I—ah—I must take my wife—er—please excuse me, Lord Glari—*mar*," Legolas yelped.

And—thankful for his long, flowing robe—he rose from the table, lifted Eowyn into his arms and fled from the banqueting hall.

...

Eowyn fastened her mouth to the tip of his ear and sucked mercilessly.

"Sweet Eru!" cried Legolas, setting her down on the pedestal of a statue. He pulled open his robe and reached for her skirts. But Eowyn pushed him away. Then, smiling wickedly, she leaned forward, took him in her little hand and began to stroke him, hard and fast.

"Oh," cried Legolas, burying his face in her shoulder, his body meeting her movements, "*Ai!—Ai!—Ai!—Oh! Na vedui!*" And he came—across her gown, and the statue, and the marble floor.

"*Will* you enjoy whoring, Legolas?" Eowyn asked, nuzzling his neck.

"No!" he hissed, pushing up her skirts. "But I *will* enjoy taking you, *meleth nín*—right here, right now, in this corridor. Then the whole of Middle-earth can see what a wanton woman you are!"

"Oh!" gasped Eowyn, as he entered her, roughly. "Oh gods!"

She wrapped her arms and legs around him, and pressed her lips to his ear, "You are so big," she whispered, her body arching to take him deeper, "oh yes, so big..."

And her cries filled the vaulted ceiling.

...

Legolas was wearing his usual travelling clothes of green suede jerkin, grey tunic and leggings—with a single white knife at his waist—but Eowyn had decided that his costume was not drab enough for a visit to a whorehouse.

"You promise me that you will be careful?" she said, pulling his Lorien cloak around his shoulders and fastening his mallorn-leaf brooch. Then she raised the hood over his shining blond hair.

"*There*," she said, tucking a stray lock beneath the fabric.

"*Melmenya*," he said, softly, catching her hands, "what are you afraid of?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think that, for some inexplicable reason, you have got it into your head that I am going to bed a whore—"

"No—"

"Yes. That is why you had to molest me amidst the entire Gondorian court." He smiled. "And I am not complaining about that, Eowyn *nín*—but how could you possibly think that I would betray you?"

Eowyn's eyes filled with tears, and she quickly looked away. "You have so much past experience," she said. "And you are leaving me behind. I feel so, so—"

"*Shhhhh melmenya!*" he chided. "You have had far too much to drink, *meleth nín*." He sighed. "I have heard it said that a man will have sex at any opportunity," he said, lifting her chin, "though I do not believe it, but—however it may be—the same is not true of an elf, Eowyn *nín*. I *could* not betray you. My body would not do it."

Eowyn stared at him.

He lifted her hand and placed it between his thighs. "Only you can do this, my love," he said. "My heart and body are yours. You have no rivals. You need have no worries." He leaned forward and kissed her cheek, and she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him fiercely.

"Now," he said, laying her gently on the bed and covering her with the quilt, "get some sleep." He kissed her forehead. "I will be back soon. And let us hope that when I return I will have a better idea of what is going on."

...

"It could, of course, be a coincidence," said Legolas, as he rode slowly down to Rath Amrûn, on the fourth level of Minas Tirith, with Gimli and Haldir.

"Oh yes," said the dwarf, "*sheer* coincidence—the poor lad's very rich mother and father just happen to ride out to the Forest of Druadan for no purpose other than to get killed by orcs. Then his aunt just happens to fall down stairs and leave him completely at the mercy of his uncle, who then just happens to move into his parents' house and 'adopt' him. And, finally, not five hundred yards from where his parents died, the poor young lass posing as his wife just happens to meet her death in the snow."

"I must admit that, when you put it like that, *elvellon*, it does sound suspicious," said Legolas. "I do wish that Eowyn were here—"

"She does have a way of asking the right questions," agreed Haldir.

"Well, we will just have to do our best without her," said Gimli. "We can hardly take a lady into a brothel."

...

"That," said Gimli, as they made their way along Rath Amrûn, "is Lord Berodin's house."

He pointed to an imposing building with a large square tower, like a castle keep, rising over the main entrance, and crenellated battlements—apparently added quite recently—defending the high pitched roof.

"What do you think the architect was trying to say there?" asked Legolas.

"Keep out," said Haldir.

"I wonder where the poor wee laddie is?" said Gimli. "In the top of that tower, I should not wonder."

"We do not know that the boy is a prisoner," said Legolas. "He may be an accomplice."

"Hmmmph," said Gimli. "He must have been all of eight years old when his parents died. Even for a man, that is a mere child."

Legolas nodded. "But he is twenty now," he said, "almost of age."

They passed Berodin's house and turned the corner into Ostrad Tinnu, where the buildings were noticeably shabbier than on the main rath, then turned again, under an archway, into Cocks Alley, where the jumble of tenements was stacked haphazardly against the Hill of Guard, like a pile of children's toy bricks.

The riders slowly picked their way down the narrow stone lane, through piles of dirty snow,

household rubbish and—Legolas suspected—raw sewage.

"Orc's breath!" said Haldir. "How do they live like this?"

"Men have a surprising affinity with filth," said Gimli. "Lady Eowyn excepted," he added hastily. "Look, that must be the *Golden Goose*, there." He pointed to a brightly-lit tavern with two large bay windows. "Hmmm. Interesting interpretation of the word 'goose'," he added, looking up at the sign as they rode to the front door. "I have never heard it called that before..."

"It *does* look like a goose's head and neck," said Haldir, "emerging from a pair of breeches. But why is it so small?"

Legolas cleared his throat. "I get the impression that men *are* generally somewhat smaller," he said.

Haldir and Gimli looked interested, but Legolas did not elaborate.

"Well," he said, springing down from Arod and tying his reins to a tethering post, "let us go in."

...

The smell was overpowering.

Ale, thought Legolas. Ale and wood smoke, and candle wax, and sweat, and... And sex. Thank the gods I did not let Eowyn persuade me to bring her here.

But, sweet Eru, I miss carrying her in my arms.

He lowered the hood of his cloak and looked around.

The tavern was almost empty. Three elderly men were sitting around the fire, drinking tankards of ale and telling tall tales, paying no attention to the three scantily clad young women draped over the bar.

Perhaps there are more customers upstairs, Legolas thought.

"Welcome, gentlemen," cried the landlord. "It is not often we see the fair folk in these parts—nor dwarves, neither. What can I get you?"

"Three tankards of your finest ale," said Gimli.

Haldir opened his mouth to protest but Legolas stopped him with a hand laid lightly on his arm, then smiled at the landlord. "Perhaps you will join us, Master...?"

"Silrim," replied the man. "Thank you. I will have a tankard too, Master—er—?"

"Caranthir," said Legolas, wishing that they had had the wit to agree on aliases beforehand. "This is Fingolfin," he said, ignoring the expression on Haldir's face, "and Norin," he added, pointing to Gimli.

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen," said Silrim. "And what brings you to the *Golden Goose*?"

"We have heard," said Gimli, "that this is the best place in the city for strong ale and—er—good company." He smiled and bowed towards the young women.

"Hello," said one of the women, rising from the bar and walking towards him. She smiled—a charming, innocent smile. "Come with me, my little lord," she said, taking Gimli by the arm and leading him over to the stairs. "You can bring your ale to my room. We'll take off your boots and jerkin and make you comfortable." She bent over him, her almost-bare breasts

brushing his shoulder, and whispered, "I have never been with a dwarf before, but I have heard much of the stoutness of their *hearts*..."

"Er," said Gimli, glancing at Legolas, but Legolas only shrugged his shoulders, unhelpfully. "Er... I would be honoured," he said, and followed her upstairs.

"Well, *you're* a pretty one," said another woman, twining herself around Legolas.

She ran her fingers, seductively, down his cheek, and chest and stomach, then thrust her hand between his legs and held him. When she felt no response, she stepped away and stared up at him. "Are you sure it's a *woman* you're looking for, love?"

Legolas considered saying no. *Perhaps if I pretend to prefer men*, he thought, *they will leave me alone. After all, Eowyn would have been be devastated by—*

"If you *do* prefer male company, sir, I have just the thing," said Silrim. "Fidélin! Come here!" he called. "A new boy, sir. Never been with anyone, man or woman. Still waiting to learn the ropes, so to speak."

No, no, no, thought Legolas.

But then he saw the boy. *By the gods!*

"Thank you, Master Silrim," he said. "Do you have a room we can use?"

"Of course, sir. Fidélin, take Master—er—Caranthir into the front room."

"Do you have any wine?" asked Legolas.

"Indeed, I do, sir, a good Ithilien red, kept for discerning clients, like yourself."

"Then we will have a bottle of good Ithilien red, Master Silrim," said Legolas. "Are you ready, Fidélin?" he asked, deliberately ignoring the terror in the boy's eyes. "Come." And, as Fidélin reluctantly led him to the stairs, Legolas risked a glance at Haldir.

If I were to stay down here a moment longer, he thought, *the poor March Warden would slaughter me.*

...

Haldir stood gripping the handrail of the stairs, his right hand crushing the hilt of his sword, staring after Legolas and the boy.

What is he doing?

He has the loveliest creature in all of Middle-earth—a woman who is warm and generous and sensual, and a brave and honourable warrior. And she thinks that Anor shines out of his backside. How could he?

How could he?

"What's wrong with *you*, love?" asked the woman. "Did you want the boy yourself?"

"Certainly not!" said Haldir.

"Oh, it's *him* you want."

He gave her a withering look. "It is his wife I—" He took a deep breath. "It is his wife I feel sorry for."

The lady vanishes

"Then maybe you should poke her."

"Madam—"

"Marglyn. In the meantime, why not buy me a drink?"

"What?"

"Whilst you're here, love, you might as well buy me a drink."

"Mistress Marglyn, I..."

Haldir remembered that he was supposed to be asking questions, and finding out about Lord Berodin. "Oh—very well. Please give her whatever she wants, landlord," he said.

The landlord poured a measure of clear spirit into a horn tumbler and handed it to the woman. She perched on a stool next to the bar and took a large mouthful, washing it around her teeth then letting it slip slowly down her throat.

"What is she like?" she asked.

"Who?"

"His wife."

"Tall, slender, beautiful, with a body like a fawn, hair like a river of gold, eyes like—"

"I'll imagine the rest! What's her name?"

Haldir hesitated. Did he really want to hear that precious name on this trollop's lips? He sighed, "Eowyn."

"*Princess* Eowyn, the one who ran off with"—she looked upstairs—"the elf?" She laughed. "Two of them! Some women have no luck!" She took another mouthful of spirit. "Well, love, you can call *me* Eowyn if it would make it more fun for you," she said, looking into the empty tumbler.

"Madam," said Haldir, "I would cut my tongue out before I called *you* anything."

Extra scene: [This will not be the first time](#)

Chapter 5: In the whorehouse

"Sit down, my lord," said the woman, pointing to an easy chair by the fire, "and let me take off your boots."

Gimli sat down but, when the woman knelt before him, he put his hand on her shoulder and said, gently, "That is not necessary, lass.

"What is your name?"

"Esmarë, my lord."

"That is a pretty name."

Gimli looked deeply into her doe eyes, and saw something that made him trust her. "The truth is," he said, "I did not come here seeking company, Esmarë. The truth is, I came here looking for information." Since that seemed to make her nervous, he kept talking: "The young sister of a friend of mine has gone missing, here in Minas Tirith and he is frantic with worry. She is a wealthy girl, but she had no money with her, so I thought she might have ended up here—or somewhere like it."

The woman bit her lip. "How old is she, my lord?" she asked.

"Just eighteen. An inexperienced country girl."

"I was only fourteen when I arrived here," said Esmarë. "It was far too young, but the customers like them tender." She raised her head. "There are no new girls here, my lord—just a new boy, Fidélín."

"Have any of your customers mentioned a new girl elsewhere?"

She shook her head. "No—but then, they would not."

Gimli decided it was time to take the bull by the horns. "Have you ever heard of a Lord Berodin, lass?" he asked. "The girl was betrothed to his nephew."

"Betrothed to poor Berkin?"

"You know the boy?"

"No, my lord, not personally, but I do know one of Lord Berodin's servants," she said, "and he often talks about Berkin."

"What does he say?"

"That he is a kind, gentle lad. That it would reduce Sauron himself to tears to see the way Berodin treats him. That Berodin wants him dead."

"Dead?"

"Something to do with inheritance, I think," said Esmarë. "He believes..." She hesitated.

"What?" asked Gimli.

"I dare not say it, my lord."

"Please, Esmarë. I will pay double your fee, directly to *you*, on top of whatever I pay to your pimp, if you tell me."

The lady vanishes

"It is not the money, my lord."

"No one will ever know where I heard it."

She bit her lip again. "He believes that Berkin does not really have the wasting disease. He believes that Berodin is poisoning him."

"By Aulë, I knew it!" said Gimli, punching his fist into his hand.

"But this does not help the girl, my lord."

"No," said Gimli. He thought for a moment. "When does Berodin's servant next visit you, Esmarë?"

"He will be coming tomorrow evening, my lord. Why?"

"I would like to talk to him—he may know something about the girl."

"No!"

"Do not worry, lass, he will come to no harm. And if he is as concerned about Berkin as you think he is, he may welcome the opportunity to help. How much do you charge?"

"Silrim charges ten silver for services rendered, my lord, but I see only two."

"Two silver pieces for *this* job?" Gimli shook his head as he handed her twenty. "Hide it well, Esmarë," he said, and he rose to leave.

"My lord?"

"Yes?"

"Do you not want me to *earn* the money?"

Gimli stared at her. "Are you offering to lie with me?" he asked.

"Do you find me unattractive, my lord?"

Gimli shook his head. Beneath the dirt and the pallor and the provocative, though grubby, clothes, were the remains of a lovely young woman. "You are beautiful, Esmarë," he said.

...

Haldir was drinking ale at a rate that would have impressed Gimli, and—although he had stopped trying to send her away—he was still valiantly attempting to keep Marglyn's hands above his belt.

When he comes down, he thought, I shall flog him. Flog him and his—his catamite.

And then Eowyn will need..

Oh no! No! Do not think that!

...

Legolas had followed the boy, Fidélin, into an opulent—and surprisingly clean—bedroom at the front of the tavern. He glanced around. There was an ornate bathtub in the corner, a set of manacles, a horsewhip, various other objects displayed on a wall-mounted frame, and a large mirror hanging over the bed.

The lady vanishes

"I keep this room for my most distinguished customers, sir," said the landlord. "Men who are used to a certain level of service, if you understand me."

He placed the wine, which he had decanted into a glass carafe, and two glass goblets, on the nightstand. "There we are, sir. Now do not hesitate to call me if you require anything else." He looked meaningfully at Fidélin. "Do exactly as the gentleman asks, lad," he said.

He turned back to Legolas, bowed briefly, and left the room.

Legolas locked the door.

The boy was sitting awkwardly on the bed.

"Take off your clothes," said Legolas, his words sounding unnaturally loud in the quiet of the room.

The boy hunched forward and buried his face in his hands. "My lord..." he began, his high-pitched voice full of tears.

"Hush," said Legolas, firmly. "Take off your clothes and come over here to me."

The boy raised his head. Tears were running down his cheeks. He opened his mouth to speak again, but Legolas held up his hand and turned his head, listening to something behind the locked door. Then he dropped his hand.

"He has gone," he said. "Do not be afraid, Lady Lëonórwyn. I am here to rescue you."

...

Lëonórwyn began to sob loudly.

"I am sorry, my lady, but as the landlord clearly had no idea who you were, I thought it best to continue with the deception until I was sure that we were completely alone."

He sat down beside her and patted her back in a brotherly fashion.

"How—how—how did you know?" she asked.

Legolas smiled. "I have a wife who sometimes disguises herself as a boy, and there are certain tell-tale signs—the throat, the small hands, the slender ankles and feet. Besides," he added, "you look like Florestan."

Lëonórwyn wiped her wet face with her hands.

"I suggest we wait up here for a while," said Legolas. "Then we will go downstairs and I will 'buy' you from Master Silrim. And then—if the poor March Warden does not kill me immediately—I will take you back to the King's House. Your brother will be relieved to see you."

"It is not safe—"

"You are hardly safe here, my lady," said Legolas. "And even Lord Berodin cannot touch you in the king's own house."

"I did not mean for me," said Lëonórwyn. "There is Berkin to think of. He is in that place alone. And there are the others..."

She does not know about the murders, thought Legolas. "You can stay with Eowyn and me, in your disguise," he said, "then Berodin will be none the wiser—we will say you are our groom."

The lady vanishes

Lëonórwyn shook her head, sadly. "I have no skill with horses, my lord."

"A musician?"

"I cannot play or sing."

"Well, what *can* you do?"

"I can draw..."

"We will think of something."

"Thank you, my lord."

"And, once you are safe, and you have explained to us what is going on, we will think of a way to rescue Berkin. And any others who are still alive," he added, quietly.

...

An hour later, Legolas led Fidélin downstairs and into the bar. Haldir immediately began to rise to his feet, but Legolas stopped him with a surprisingly imperious gesture.

"Was he not to your liking, sir?" asked the landlord, anxiously.

"On the contrary, Master Silrim," said Legolas, "he was most satisfactory, and I want to buy him from you as a gift for my wife." He ignored the strange noises coming from Haldir. "How much do you want for him?"

The landlord smirked. "I had heard that elves have—er—interesting tastes. Five hundred gold pieces."

"Two hundred and fifty."

"Sir, you insult me! *Four* hundred and fifty."

Legolas shook his head. "I will have to feed and clothe him," he said.

"Four hundred and I will throw in a case of the Ithilien red," said the landlord.

"Done," said Legolas. "How much do I owe you, in total, Master Silrim?"

"Four hundred gold for the boy, then there's fifty silver for the use of the best room, twenty for the wine and ten for services rendered. Call it four hundred and eight gold, sir."

Legolas removed a leather pouch from his belt and counted out the coin. "There," he said. "Will you ask G—Norin to come home when he has finished, Master Silrim? Thank you."

He took Fidélin by the elbow and led him outside.

...

"I do not believe that you *bartered* for me," began Lëonórwyn.

"What are you doing, you warg's member?" yelled Haldir, following Legolas out of the tavern, grabbing him by the shoulders and turning him around, bodily.

The Crown Prince of Mirkwood gave his March Warden a look that might have frightened a Nazgûl. "Have I ever," he asked, coldly, "complained about your obsession with my wife? Have I ever said that you must either stop lusting after her or leave Eryn Carantaur?"

The lady vanishes

Haldir was taken aback. "No..." he said.

"Then get on your horse and follow me up to the next level."

...

When they had passed through the fifth gate and into Rath Bein, Legolas brought Arod to a halt and turned to Haldir.

"Now it is safe," he said quietly. "March Warden, may I present Lady Lëonórwyn? Lady Lëonórwyn, this uncouth fellow is Haldir, March Warden of the elven colony of Eryn Carantaur, and the devoted champion of Eomer King's sister—"

"Princess Eowyn?"

"Yes; my wife. Which explains both his drunkenness and his earlier uncharacteristic behaviour.

"Now, if we can proceed up to the Citadel, March Warden, we need to get Lady Lëonórwyn back to her brother and then safely hidden."

...

"You will not tell him that *I* told you?"

"No, lass," said Gimli. "I will simply settle myself in front of the fire, drink a few tankards of ale, admire the ladies—and gossip with the patrons..."

He tied off the end of his belt and smiled. "I will no doubt see you tomorrow afternoon. Good bye, Esmarë. Take good care of yourself."

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it and—with all the skill of a conjuror—slipped a gold piece into her palm.

...

"You are back," said Eowyn. "Did you learn anything?"

Legolas looked up from unlacing his leggings; he had been trying to undress without disturbing her.

Eowyn pushed herself up on the pillows and smiled at him. Legolas swallowed hard. Her hair was loose, and gloriously tangled with sleep, and her soft white night gown had slipped down from her shoulders leaving her lovely breasts bare. Already aroused, he walked to the end of the bed and pulled his leggings open.

Laughing merrily, Eowyn crawled towards him and, grasping him, leaned down and—like a sword swallower—took him deep in her mouth.

"Oh Valar!" Legolas stretched out his arms and grabbed the bedposts. "Melmenya," he moaned.

Through half-closed eyes he watched himself disappear and reappear and disappear as Eowyn's whole body moved rhythmically back and forth. His baser instincts told him to take hold of her and thrust, but his heart cried, *No, no, if you lose control, you will hurt her*, and, instead, he tightened his grip on the bedposts, crushing the wood beneath his fingers. Tension spread through the muscles of his arms and shoulders, down his spine and into his groin. He arched his back and spread his legs, trying to relieve it, but Eowyn's mouth, soft and warm, was calling out his very spirit.

Sweet Eru, I cannot bear this, he thought, *I cannot...* "I CANNOT!" he screamed and his body exploded.

...

When he came back to himself she was coughing.

"Melmenya, I am sorry!"

He lifted her into his arms and looked anxiously into her face, but she was beaming at him, triumphantly.

"Oh, my darling," he whispered, kissing her gently. Then he leaned back and shook his head. "It does not taste pleasant, melmenya."

Eowyn smiled, "Salty," she said, sounding slightly hoarse.

"Do you need a drink?"

"No." She nuzzled his neck. "I need *you*," she said. "I ache for you. Take me."

...

"Yes! Oh, yes, YES!"

...

"*Did* you learn anything?" asked Eowyn, snuggling against his chest.

Legolas laughed. "My wonderful Shieldmaiden," he said, kissing the top of her head. "Your body may be sated, but your mind is always hungry."

"Did you?"

"I did better than that, melmenya, I found Lëonórwyn hiding in the brothel and brought her back—she is with Florestan now. I have arranged for us all to meet here for breakfast, so that we can hear her story, and plan our next move."

"Next move?"

"She is concerned about her betrothed and about the remainder of her retinue."

"Yes. Of course..." said Eowyn. Then, "*Breakfast!*" She sat bolt upright. "I need to bathe. And to air the room. And arrange for food!"

"Calm down, melmenya. You need to bathe, yes—in about three hours. But the food is already ordered and the servants will clean and air the room." He reached for her. "I would not call a meeting and expect *you* to make all the preparations, *meleth nín*."

Smiling, Eowyn settled down again, slipping her arms around his waist. "Three hours," she said.

"Yes, melmenya."

"What makes you think that my body is *sated*?"

Laughing, Legolas rolled her onto her back and tickled her mercilessly.

...

"Why did you invite Aragorn and Eomer—and *Faramir*?" asked Eowyn, quietly.

"You will see in a moment how difficult the situation is, *melmenya*. Let me take you over to the table." He lifted her from the bed. "Come, Aragorn, Eomer, ladies and gentlemen," he called, "let us have some breakfast."

He set Eowyn down in the chair next to Aragorn then seated himself beside her. "Please, everyone," he said, pointing to the baskets of warm bread, fruits, and cheeses, the dish of porridge, and the jars of jam and honey laid out on the table, "help yourselves to food."

Eowyn looked around their guests. "Are you going to introduce us, Legolas?" she asked.

"Of course, *meleth nín*," he replied. "Aragorn, Eomer, Eowyn, may I present Lady Lëonórwyn?"

The 'boy' sitting beside Florestan raised her head. Eomer gasped. Aragorn had stopped buttering his bread and was looking to Legolas for an explanation.

"The woman you and Eomer found in the snow was not Lëonórwyn, but her unfortunate lady's maid, Rosemant," said the elf.

"Why was she wearing Lëonórwyn's clothes?" asked Aragorn. "And who killed her?"

"We will come to that in a moment, *mellon nín*," said Legolas, adding some more honey to his porridge. "First let me finish the introductions. Lëonórwyn, this is King Elessar, though his friends call him Aragorn." Lëonórwyn bowed respectfully. "Eomer King you already know. You met Haldir last night and, no doubt, Florestan will have introduced you to Senta. This is Lord Gimli"—Gimli bowed his head—"who was also at the *Golden Goose* with us. Faramir, Prince of Ithilien. Master Dínendal, Eryn Carantaur's foremost healer." Dínendal blushed and bowed his head. "And this," he said, turning and smiling, "is Lady Eowyn, my wife.

"Now, will you tell us how you came to be hiding in the *Golden Goose*?"

Blushing, Lëonórwyn looked around the table. Then she lowered her eyes and nervously began wringing her hands in her lap as she explained. "As you know," she said, "I inherited my grandfather's fortune, and he arranged my betrothal to Berkin when we were children. Berkin and I had always corresponded but, just before my eighteenth birthday, he sent me a strange letter."

"Strange in what way?" asked Aragorn.

"It was not really a proper letter, more of a note. He asked me to write to him care of the *Golden Goose* tavern and not to use his real name, either in the letter or the address, but to call him 'Admant'."

Eowyn made a note on her wax tablet.

"Did you write?" asked Aragorn.

"Yes, and he replied. It was another strange letter—he said that marrying him would be dangerous, and he told me not to come to Minas Tirith."

"You did not tell *me* that!" said Florestan.

"It was not like Berkin to be so—so melodramatic," said Lëonórwyn. "He was clearly in some sort of trouble and needed help. I had no intention of not coming."

Eowyn smiled.

"When we arrived, Berkin's uncle, Lord Berodin, refused to allow the men escorting me to enter the house. He said that the Rohirrim were known to be drunken scoundrels"—Eomer growled—"and he sent them away. He shut me, Amarri, and poor Rosemant, in a room at the top of the house. It was two days before he let me see Berkin."

"Where was the lad being kept?" asked Gimli.

"He was high up in a tower, my lord," said Lëonórwyn. "We had to come downstairs to the main entrance, then we climbed up a separate staircase, at the back of the lobby, I think. And," she added, softly, "his door was locked, from the outside."

"How did Berodin explain that?" asked Gimli.

"He did not bother, my lord."

"Technically," said Aragorn, "Berkin is still a minor, and the laws of Gondor offer children little protection. It is quite acceptable for a parent—or guardian—to keep a child under lock and key—for his own good, of course."

"The callous way that some men treat their children never ceases to amaze me," said Legolas. Eowyn turned to him in surprise.

"I was not allowed to spend much time with Berkin but we got on well, straight away," said Lëonórwyn. "I suppose we already knew each other through our letters. His uncle stayed in the room whilst we were talking, but Berkin managed to distract him for a moment and tell me that he had asked the Rohirrim to stay nearby—at the *Golden Goose*, my lord," she said to Legolas.

"How did he manage that, if he was locked up?" asked Eowyn.

"I do not know, my lady."

"Perhaps one of the servants is sympathetic," said Legolas.

"Yes, indeed," said Gimli. "Young Esmarë told me that one of her regulars is a servant in that house and is very concerned about Berkin—he thinks that the lad is being poisoned. I am hoping to speak to him this evening."

"Esmarë?" asked Eowyn, softly.

"I will explain later, melmenya," said Legolas.

"Esmarë is a kind soul," said Lëonórwyn. "She did her best to protect me—or, rather, to protect Fidélin."

"Did you actually marry Berkin, Lëonórwyn?" asked Aragorn.

"Yes, your Majesty—at least, I believe so. A few days later, Berodin took me back to Berkin's room. There was a notary, who asked me to sign several documents, which were all witnessed by two of the servants. One of the documents was a marriage contract. Another was my will..."

"Did you read the will?" asked Faramir.

"They did not give me time to read it properly, your Highness, but I think that everything is to go to Berkin."

"Who has no doubt been forced to leave his fortune to his uncle," said Faramir. "That demon almost certainly intends to kill the boy."

"How did you get away?" asked Eomer.

"After the—the wedding, Berodin had me taken back to my room. About two weeks later, one of the servants brought me a note from Berkin. He said we must be ready to leave at midnight and the Rohirrim would be waiting outside to take us away. He said that he had found someone in the city to hide Amarri, since she was too old to travel quickly. And he said we should split into two groups to confuse anyone who tried to follow." Lëonórwyn paused. "It was Rosemant who suggested that she should also wear my clothes, to confuse them further..."

She sniffed.

"At midnight, the servant smuggled us out of the house and the Rohirrim were waiting with horses. Rosemant, Theodort and Ailhard rode northwards; Banduil, Eowulf and I rode towards Osgiliath."

"Why?" asked Legolas.

"Theodort and Ailhard thought they could draw any pursuers away, and we could watch until they had gone and then follow at a distance. But someone tracked us to Osgiliath, and Banduil was shot in the back." She sniffed again. "Eowulf and I managed to get away. We spent the day hiding in the ruins and then, when darkness fell, we came back to the city. Eowulf found me some boy's clothes, and cut off my hair, and we hid in the *Golden Goose*."

"Where is Eowulf now?" asked Eomer.

"I do not know, your Majesty. One night he went out to visit Amarri and he never came back."

"By the gods," whispered Gimli.

"How long were you in the tavern?" asked Eowyn.

"Five days, my lady."

"And you managed to avoid being, um, used all that time?"

"Master Silrim was saving me for an important customer—for you, my lord," she said to Legolas.

"I will explain that later, melmenya," said Legolas, pre-empting her question.

"Do you know where Amarri is hiding, Lëonórwyn?" asked Aragorn.

"No, your Majesty. Eowulf said it was safer if I did not know."

"So, what do we do next?" asked Legolas. He turned to Aragorn. "Can you send the Gondorian Guard to arrest Berodin?"

Aragorn looked to Faramir, "What do you think, my friend?" he asked.

Faramir shook his head. "There is nothing in what Lady Lëonórwyn has told us that proves Berodin guilty of any crime. He has clearly been treating his nephew cruelly for years and his behaviour towards Lëonórwyn was dishonourable—to say the least—but, as the boy's guardian he was within his rights. Even the marriage, though unconventional, does not appear to have been performed against her will..." He looked to Lëonórwyn for confirmation.

"No," she said, softly, "Berkin is a good person."

"Forcing you to sign the will was illegal but, since its provisions are almost certainly in line with your own wishes, we cannot prove that. We need more evidence."

"I have heard things about this Berodin," began Gimli.

"So have I," said Aragorn, nodding. "That he killed his own wife—"

"And his sister-in-law, and her husband, Berkin's parents," the dwarf added. "I will try to talk to the servant tonight, and see what he knows."

There was a murmur of agreement around the table.

"I think," Eowyn began, then she stopped.

"What melmenya?"

"I was thinking two things," she said, rubbing her forehead, "but now I can only remember one..."

Legolas laid his hand over hers. "And what is that, Eowyn *nín*?"

"That the key to all of this is Berkin," she said. "How is he doing what he is doing?"

"The servant," said Gimli.

"No," said Eowyn, shaking her head. "No. A servant's loyalty will only take him so far. Sending messages, yes. But using the *Golden Goose* as an address, or obtaining information about the outside world, or hiding Mistress Amarri somewhere in the City—all those things take money. Where is he getting it? How is he keeping it from his uncle?"

Legolas squeezed her hand. "You are right, melmenya," he said. "As usual, you have seen something the rest of us had missed. What was the other thing?"

Eowyn shook her head. "I still cannot remember," she said.

"It will come back to you, my dear," said Faramir.

"Well," said Aragorn. "I think we can agree that our first priority is to get Berkin out of that house."

"Can you not just order Berodin to let the boy out?" asked Legolas. "Summon Berkin to attend Court. Summon *all* boys of noble birth and of that age to attend Court..."

"The poison!" said Eowyn. "*That* is what I was wondering before—why would Berodin be using poison?" She looked around the table. "It is not just because the boy is so resourceful, and needs to be kept subdued. It is also because the supposed sickness gives him an excuse to keep the boy a prisoner. You cannot visit him because he is sick. You cannot summon him to Court because he is sick."

"What a terrible man this is," said Florestan, softly.

Eowyn suddenly turned to Lëonórwyn. "Does Berkin know you are still alive?"

"Yes, my lady. At least, I assume he does. I have never spoken to Olemi—the servant—but Eowulf did, so I assume that he talked about me... I do not know."

"Should Lëonórwyn stay disguised, or reveal her identity? Which would be safer?" asked Florestan.

Aragorn considered the brother's question. "I think that, for now, it is probably safer for her to stay in disguise," he said. "Safer for her, and safer for Berkin. Gimli—tonight, find out everything you can from this servant."

The lady vanishes

"Tomorrow, we will all breakfast here again, and see if we can come any nearer a solution."

Extra scene: [The messenger](#)

Extra scene: [The wedding](#)

Chapter 6: Apologies and insults

"My lord," said the messenger, bowing to Legolas, "a dispatch from Eryn Lasgalen."

Legolas thanked the elf. "There will be a reply," he said, "but it will take me a while to work through all this. I will arrange accommodation for you."

It took him almost an hour to find the messenger a place to stay in the crowded city and by the time he returned to the apartment, most of the guests had gone, and the servants were clearing away the remains of breakfast. He placed the dispatch bag on the desk and glanced over at Eowyn. Someone—he noticed with a pang of jealousy—had carried her from the table to the bed and now Gimli was sitting beside her, talking and no doubt explaining away his adventure with Esmarë.

"My lord? Can I have a word?"

Legolas turned towards the quiet voice.

"I do not believe you have ever called me that before, March Warden," said Legolas, softly. "Do you want to go out onto the balcony?"

Haldir glanced towards Eowyn. "Yes, that would be more comfortable," he said.

The two elves walked silently past the bed, unnoticed by either the woman or the dwarf, and out through the elegant stained-glass doors.

"Well?" said Legolas.

Haldir took a deep breath. "I want to apologise, my lord."

"There is that word again," said Legolas.

"I should not have behaved as I did, threatening you. If you want me to resign my position, or to leave Eryn Carantaur..."

Legolas leaned over the low wall of the balcony and gazed into the Queen's garden. "That will not be necessary, Haldir. Though I admit that part of me was disappointed that you would think me capable of betraying Eowyn—and ruining the life of a young boy—in truth I knew *exactly* how you were going to react. I needed to deceive the brothel keeper and your anger made my actions all the more convincing."

He turned to face the other elf. "I know what it is like to love her when she belongs to another. And I am sorry that you suffer. But my concern is for *her*. Never let your feelings cause her pain, Haldir." The March Warden began to protest but Legolas held up his hand. "I assume that if anything were to happen to me, Eowyn would have a protector?"

"Of course, my—"

"I am *not* your lord, Haldir," Legolas interrupted. "I like to think that we are friends. So please do not ever call me that again. It really does not sound well on your lips."

...

After seeing Haldir and Gimli to the door, Legolas returned to find Eowyn perching on the edge of the bed, tentatively stretching a foot towards the floor...

"No, melmenya!" he cried, running to her. "Whatever you want, I will fetch for you."

"I want to *walk*! I feel that am trapped here, in this room, whilst everyone else in Middle-earth

is out having adventures."

Legolas laughed. "I have just received a pile of documents from my father," he said, "all of which must be read, and some revised, and others commented upon—so I will also be trapped in here, with you, for some time."

"But it is Yuletide..."

"Which is precisely why my father has sent them." Legolas grinned. "He does not want me to forget my responsibilities as a 'Crown Prince' so, at Yuletide, he sends me some light reading."

"Can I help?" she asked.

"Do you really want to?"

"Yes, of course I do."

Legolas smiled. "Let me sort through them first, Eowyn *nín*," he said, gesturing towards the dispatch bag on the desk. "Some of them only require a signature. I will take you to visit Arwen for a few hours, and when you come back I will have a pile of documents for you to enjoy."

"Legolas," said Eowyn, softly, "I am not sure I am comfortable visiting Arwen alone."

"Why not, melmenya?" He sat on the bed beside her.

"She was your mistress."

"Oh, *meleth nín!*" He hugged her. "That was over hun—" He stopped himself. "It was over *years* ago. I hardly remember it. I doubt that Arwen remembers it."

Eowyn looked at him, suspiciously. "I thought that elves had exceptional memories. Besides..."

Legolas kissed the top of her head. "Besides what, Eowyn *nín*?"

"If you do not remember it, how do you know that *I* am the better lover?"

Legolas laughed. Then he pushed her over on the bed, and kissed her tenderly. "I have *chosen* to be with you, melmenya," he whispered, "and you have chosen to be with me. Forever. The past makes us who we are, but it is the past. So—will you let me take you to see Arwen?"

Eowyn nodded. "Yes," she said. "But I will need my boots, and my cloak, for we may want to walk in the garden."

"Oh no, melmenya, you are not walking. And Arwen is certainly not carrying you!"

"One of the twins could carry me."

Legolas sighed. "Do you really want to go outside so much? Very well, I will fetch your boots and cloak. Wait there."

He walked over to her clothes chest and opened the lid, and he did not see Eowyn quickly pull something out from under her pillow and hide it down her bodice.

...

After leaving Legolas and Eowyn, Gimli returned to his apartment to prepare for his mission.

He took a long, relaxing bath, combed, perfumed and re-braided his hair and beard, then

searched through his clothes chest and carefully selected a tunic of deep blue velvet—well made but not showy—matching breeches, and a dark red cloak.

He studied himself in the mirror. *Perfect*, he thought, *a dwarf of some means—generous but not ostentatious; a talkative fellow, who enjoys company.*

...

"Can we go down into the city?" Eowyn asked, as soon as Legolas had left.

Arwen smiled. "Why?"

"I want to buy Legolas a Yuletide gift. When we arrived I saw a shop on the fifth level that sells cloth from all over Middle-earth. I want to have something made for him." She took a strip of fabric from inside her bodice. "Something beautiful, like this. You know how much pride he takes in his appearance."

"Yes," said Arwen. "But are you sure you want to encourage his vanity?"

"He is not vain."

Arwen thought it best not to contradict. "How would you get down there?"

"I was hoping that your brothers might take me."

Arwen smiled conspiratorially. "I will send for them," she said.

...

Legolas picked up the leather dispatch bag, broke the seal, unfastened the buckles, and had just started to pull out the papers when someone in a hurry knocked loudly at the door.

"Come in," he called.

The door flew open.

"Eomer," said Legolas. "Come in. Sit down. How can I help—"

"I have had to wait *two days* to get you alone," cried Eomer. "What possessed you to take her on an orc hunt? She could have been killed—ripped from throat to belly, like Theodred. She could have been raped—left permanently crippled, or mad, or pregnant—"

"I know."

"She could have been taken off to their den and used as a—"

"I *know!*" cried Legolas. "Do you think I *wanted* to take her?" He took a deep breath and calmed himself. "Please, Eomer, sit down. I had planned to leave her at Eryn Carantaur—I was terrified that something would happen to her—but she persuaded me—"

"The way she was persuading you last night, outside the Banqueting Hall, no doubt."

Legolas gave him a dark look. "I hope you did not stay to watch," he said softly.

"I did not need to watch," said Eomer. "Her commentary was perfectly explicit and could be heard all the way to my apartment."

"Eomer!" cried Legolas.

"You are a bad influence on her—"

"*Will you sit down!*" Legolas pushed the irate king into a chair. "Good. Now—" he said, "listen to me! I took her on the raid because her determination—her *refusal* to give in—broke me. I could not leave her behind. She threatened to follow us by herself."

"You should have locked her up."

"She would have escaped, Eomer," he said. "You know how resourceful she is." He suddenly smiled, fondly. "There is no one like her! She is unique."

He poured two glasses of spiced wine. "Here," he said, handing one to the king. "I know that you have always felt responsible for her—though, in truth, she is stronger than any of us—but you cannot keep her wrapped in swansdown. Eowyn has the spirit of a warrior and—however much you might want to protect her—if you keep her caged you will destroy her. So, no—though it terrifies me—I am not going to try to stop her training, I am not going to try to stop her fighting, and I am not going to try to stop her going on orc raids. I am going to let her be herself—"

He was interrupted by another knock. He set down his wine, and went to open the door.

"Ah, Mistress Hereswið," he said, "come in."

The woman entered carrying a large, flat parcel, but when she saw Eomer, she stopped. "I am sorry, my lord," she said, "I am interrupting you. Shall I come back later?"

"Certainly not, mistress," said Legolas, "I am anxious to see your work."

The woman smiled and laid her parcel on the bed. Legolas opened it, unfolded its contents and examined them carefully. Then he held them up for his brother-in-law to see.

"What do you think, Eomer?"

Eomer searched for the correct response. "It is blue," he said. Legolas' face told him that he had failed. "*Fine*," he corrected. "It is a very fine gown indeed. Blue."

Legolas shook his head. "It is perfect, Mistress Hereswið," he said. "The cut of the bodice and the beading around the neckline..." He ran his fingers over the embroidered icicles. "And the sleeves..." He examined the beaded white lace. "The sleeves remind me of frost on a pane of glass!"

"And am so pleased that you like it, my lord—and the head-dress was made by the Queen's own jeweller." The woman held up an intricate silver coronet decorated with trailing strings of blue and ice-coloured beads.

"She will look wonderful, mistress," said Legolas. He carefully laid the gown on the bed and fetched his money pouch from the desk. "Five hundred gold pieces, I believe?"

Eomer choked on his wine.

Legolas counted out the money and handed it to the dressmaker. "Thank you Mistress Hereswið. I shall be sure to recommend you to my friends."

The woman bowed, and left.

Eomer shook his head. "I do not understand you," he said.

"Why?" asked Legolas, carefully folding the gown.

The lady vanishes

"One moment you act like a Uruk Hai beserker, the next you act like a girl."

Legolas turned and stared. "A *girl*?"

"All this." Eomer waved his hand at the gown. "Lace and ribbons."

"This is for Eowyn," said Legolas.

"Choosing her clothes, dressing her up like a doll. It is not manly."

"I am not a man," said Legolas.

...

Gimli left the Citadel and sauntered down into the city. *I will take my time, and get myself into the right frame of mind*, he thought.

He meandered along the raths, window-shopping and greeting passers-by with a cheery wave or a sweeping bow. He sampled hot chestnuts from a street seller in Rath Bein, and rosy red apples from a buxom country girl with a stall beside the fifth gate, and he bought a shining silk scarf for Esmarë from a small shop on Rath Amrûn.

Then, as he approached Berodin's house, he noticed a youngish man emerging from the alleyway beside it. *Hello*, he thought, *could that be the servant, Olemi, on his way to the Golden Goose?*

"Good afternoon," he said, loudly.

The man turned towards him in surprise.

"And what a wonderful afternoon it is," Gimli continued. "Clear and dry with an invigorating chill in the air."

"Er—yes."

Gimli fell into step beside the man. "I am Norin, son of Oin, visiting Minas Tirith for the Yuletide holiday," he said. "Ah, I see we are going the same way, Master—er?"

"I am in a hurry, I am afraid," said the man.

"So am I, my friend," said Gimli, walking faster. "There is a young lady in the *Golden Goose* I am anxious to see again." He winked. "Do you know the establishment?"

The man's shoulders sagged visibly. "I am going there now," he said.

"Good!" cried Gimli. "Then let me buy you a drink."

...

Legolas sighed. *I am an elf*, he thought, *and we are different from men*.

But if Eowyn's brother thought him effeminate, then no doubt other men would, too. Eowyn's ancestors...

And what of Eowyn herself?

No. She loves me.

He opened the dispatch bag and pulled out the pile of papers. Lying on top was a letter from

his father. He broke the seal and read its contents. Then he walked out onto the balcony, climbed up onto the balcony wall, and sat gazing down into the Queen's garden.

...

"There is the shop, March Warden," said Eowyn, with some relief.

Elladan and Elrohir had been in conference with Aragorn and had sent a substitute, and neither Haldir nor Eowyn had dared admit—either to Arwen or to the other—that the situation made them both acutely uncomfortable. So Haldir had carried Eowyn out to the stables, and lifted her onto her horse, and they had made their way down to Rath Bein.

The shop was on the main thoroughfare, a double-fronted building with an elegant arched doorway flanked by stone porticoes filled with tables piled with bales of cloth. Haldir dismounted, tied both horses to the tethering post, then lifted Eowyn down from her saddle and carried her into the shop.

"My lady," said the owner, bowing deeply, "welcome! Please sit here." He gestured to one of his assistants who came forward with a chair and set it down beside the elaborate wooden counter.

Haldir carefully lowered Eowyn onto the seat, then said, "I will wait outside, with the horses, my lady."

Eowyn nodded.

"How can I help you, my lady?" asked the owner.

Eowyn showed him the sash she had stolen from Legolas' clothes chest. "I am afraid I have left it quite late, Master Osric, but can you make me one of these and have it delivered to the King's House by this evening?"

Osric took the sash from her hands and examined it carefully. "Exquisite work, my lady. Elven?"

"Yes."

"Exquisite," he said, turning it over in his hands. "Yes, I am sure we can help you. And," he added, "I think that the gentleman will be pleasantly surprised by the level of our craftsmanship. What fabric did you have in mind, my lady?"

"Something... beautiful," said Eowyn. "Very beautiful."

Osric smiled. "This would, I take it, be a gift for Prince Legolas?"

"Yes."

"Then might I make some suggestions? The Prince's colouring..."

...

"Two tankards of your best ale, Master Silrim," said Gimli, cheerfully.

"Coming right up, Master—er—Norin," said the brothel keeper. "And I see you have already met Admant," he added, "one of our best customers." He winked.

Admant, thought Gimli. *Well, well!*

He turned to the man. "A regular, my friend? I cannot say I blame you. Come—let us sit by the

fire whilst you drink your ale." He pushed his companion towards a wooden settle. "Sit down. There, that is better. What do you do, Admant?"

The servant looked at him nervously. "I—er—I work in one of the big houses on Rath Amrûn."

"Really?" said Gimli. "A secretary?"

"A footman."

"You must see all of life's rich pageant working for one of the city's important families—powerful men, beautiful young women. Have you ever met the King? Or," he raised his eyebrows, "the *Queen*?"

"No, sir," said Admant. Then he added, by way of apology, "My master does not entertain much. His nephew—" He stopped short.

Gimli waited.

"Lord Berodin does not entertain much," Admant repeated.

"His wife must find that very dull," said Gimli.

"Lord Berodin is a widower."

"Ah," said Gimli. "That is sad. But he has a nephew living with him, you say?"

"Yes, sir." Admant fiddled with the handle of his tankard.

"Well, that is a blessing. At least he has company. And the lad is fortunate to have such a caring uncle."

The man bit his lip and pushed his empty tankard towards the centre of the table.

Gimli considered probing further, but decided against it. *Better to win his trust first*, he thought.

"I live in Rohan," he said. "But I have friends here in Minas Tirith and in Ithilien. Now, would you like another drink, Admant, or is the young lady waiting?"

...

Eowyn was in high spirits as she and Haldir left the shop.

"In the end I could not decide between the two," she said, "so I am having both made up and—Oh Haldir," she whispered, "Haldir! Stop! Stop here!"

"My lady?"

"*Shhhh!* He must not see us."

Haldir ducked behind one of the pillars of the portico.

"By the gods," said Eowyn. "The man in the embroidered surcoat—do you see him? Over by the water pump—"

"In the riding coat? Yes, my lady. It looks like..." Suddenly, he understood what she had seen. "It looks like the coat your brother often wears—though less fine."

The man turned into an alleyway running off the main Rath.

"We must follow him."

"We will have to go on foot, my lady," said Haldir, walking swiftly to where the man had disappeared. "The alley is busy but horses would be too obvious."

"Whereas an elf carrying a woman will not," said Eowyn as they threaded their way through the crowds, ducking under washing lines and skirting chickens foraging for scraps in the dirty snow. People were staring at them.

"I should have left you at the shop, my lady, and come alone—"

"No," said Eowyn, firmly. Then she added, "At least you are not wearing your armour."

"What is wrong with my armour?"

"It is very—er—bright," she replied. "You should wear something that blends in with your surroundings."

"Like a green suede jerkin?"

"Something like that, yes. Look! There he is."

"I see him."

As they watched, the man glanced furtively behind him before disappearing through a shabby door.

"Shall I follow him, my lady?" asked Haldir.

"No," said Eowyn. "If I had the use of my feet it would be a different matter but, as it is, we must get back to Legolas."

...

After exactly an hour, Admant returned downstairs.

Gimli was entertaining the *Golden Goose's* elderly customers with a tales of Rohan. "Admant," he cried, breaking off from a detailed account of Eomer's heroic charge at the Battle of Helm's Deep, "come and join us, and drink another tankard."

Admant hesitated, looking behind him; Esmarë was coming downstairs. He blushed. "I—er—I need to get back to work..."

Gimli shook his head. "Surely one tankard would not hurt, lad—"

"Norin!" cried Esmarë, running downstairs, past Admant, and throwing her arms around the dwarf's neck. She sat on his lap. "I knew you would come back!" she said.

"Of course, my dear," said Gimli, smiling. "I have a Yuletide gift for you." He handed her a small package wrapped in plain blue cloth. Esmarë pulled it open, and a long, shimmering length of silver silk spilled into her hands.

"Oh Norin," she cried, jumping to her feet and pirouetting with it like a dancer. "It is beautiful. Thank you." She bent and kissed his forehead.

"You are in good spirits tonight, lass," said Gimli. "Will you join Admant and me for a drink?"

"Admant does not usually like to stay, *afterwards*," said Esmarë.

"Surely one tankard would not hurt."

The man still hesitated, torn between fear of offending the dwarf and acute embarrassment at having to socialise with the woman he had just spent an hour with.

How do I put him at his ease, Gimli wondered. I need to talk to him. And to Esmarë too...

"Perhaps Admant is right," said Gimli to Esmarë. "It is almost time to eat, so I must be getting back. But I will come and see you again tomorrow, lass, without fail." He squeezed her hand.

"Let me walk back with you, Admant."

...

"Legolas!" cried Eowyn as the March Warden carried her through the door. "Legolas, where are you?" She glanced at the desk—at the pile of papers lying there, apparently untouched—then looked out through the balcony doors. "Oh!" she gasped.

At first she thought it was the sea longing, for he was sitting motionless on the balcony wall, staring into space, and Haldir must have thought so, too, because he carried her straight out onto the balcony.

"My love?" she called, anxiously, "Legolas?"

To her relief—in a single graceful movement that was uniquely elven—Legolas turned, swung his legs over the balcony wall, dropped to the floor, and swept her out of Haldir's arms.

"Melmenya," he whispered, hugging her close.

Eowyn felt—rather than saw—Haldir retreat from the balcony and quietly leave the apartment.

"What is wrong, my darling?" she asked.

"I have had a letter from my father—when will we know, melmenya?"

"Know?"

"About the baby."

"Soon," said Eowyn, "two days, perhaps three. Why?"

"Is it always on time?"

"No," she admitted, "during the Ring war it stopped for almost six months. The healer said that lots of women were finding the same—that it was due to the uncertainty of the times."

"So if it does not start, we will still not know for sure."

"No..."

"Our child would be illegitimate," said Legolas.

"I do not understand."

He carried her back through the stained glass doors, laid her carefully on the bed, and sat down beside her. "My father has consulted Lords Galdor and Nevlondeion—both experts on elven law and custom," he explained. "And they agree."

"Agree what?" asked Eowyn.

The lady vanishes

"That we are not married, melmenya. That the Harvest Ceremony was merely symbolic and that the private vows we took before Eärendil cannot unite an elf with a woman—I am sorry, melmenya."

Eowyn thought for a moment. "Do we care?" she asked. "If Aragorn had not dissolved my marriage, I would have stayed with you anyway."

"But, the child—"

"May not exist. But if he—or she—does, he will be adored—loved and cherished by his parents, by his Uncle Gimli, by Haldir and Dínendal, by Lords Fingolfin and Caranthir, and by all the citizens of Eryn Carantaur. No child could be more fortunate."

Legolas smiled, sadly. "We will love him, melmenya, and so will our friends. But, for most elves, an illegitimate child will always be shameful, something to be hidden. Elves do not have children by accident. We do not have them outside marriage. And when you and I die, melmenya, our child's life will be unbearable.

"Perhaps for eternity..."

"Oh, Legolas, no!" Eowyn hugged him tightly. "Can we not..." A thought occurred to her. "How does your father know about the baby?"

"He does not."

"So it is *me* that he is objecting to."

"No, melmenya, he is not objecting. He is just concerned—"

"Legolas!" she chided, "Do not lie to me! His letter has turned you back into an elfling! What does he say? Read it to me!"

Legolas hesitated, clearly trying to think of an excuse.

"Is it really that bad?"

"Yes."

"Then read it to me," she said.

Extra scene: [Will he miss it](#)

Extra scene: [The yuletide gift](#)

Chapter 7: Little Leafy

"How long have you been visiting Esmarë?" asked Gimli, as he and Admant were walking back towards Rath Amrûn.

"Not long," said the man. "Why?"

It is certainly not easy to make conversation with him, the dwarf thought. "I was just wondering how long she had been working at the *Golden Goose*," he said.

He decided to try another approach. "Do you like your job?"

"No."

Gimli sighed inwardly. "Is Lord Berodin difficult to work for?" he coaxed.

The man stopped walking. "Why are you asking me so many questions?"

Gimli was almost certain that he had the right man—should he take the risk?

He chose his words carefully. "I am a friend of Prince Legolas and of Eomer King," he said. "A certain young lady is now under their protection, and she is worried about her husband. Do you know of whom I speak?"

Admant pulled Gimli into the shadows. "She is safe? We thought she was dead, though Ber—her husband refused to give up hope."

"She is safe. But what of her husband? Is *he* safe?"

Admant suddenly drew back from the dwarf. "How do I know I can trust you?" he asked.

Gimli shook his head. "I do not know. What would convince you?"

The man thought for a moment. "Take me to her," he said. "And to Prince Legolas."

"Very well," said Gimli. "But will you not be missed?"

"No. I do not need to return until ten."

"Is there any way we can reach the next level without passing Berodin's house?"

"No, my lord," said Admant.

"My name is Gimli," said the dwarf, taking off his cloak. "Put this on and raise the hood. Hmmm. It is short, but it is the best we can do. Come, follow me."

...

Legolas unfolded his father's letter. "Are you *sure* you want to hear this, melmenya?" he asked.

"Yes," said Eowyn, firmly.

He reached for her, and she leant against him, settling her head on his shoulder.

"My father is—he has had to be—strong, singled-minded. For centuries he kept Mirkwood safe by his own efforts—he had no ring to help him, so he had to be decisive, uncompromising. And if his words seem callous, well, that is because he always believes that he knows what is best."

"For you."

The lady vanishes

"Yes." He sighed. "At the top of the letter," he said, "it says 'Be sure to read this in private'."

"That is an encouraging start," said Eowyn.

"Up the margin, he has added, 'They are not made of the same 'metal' as we are.'"

Eowyn nodded. "I see."

Legolas took a deep breath. "*My son,*" he read.

"My messenger has returned from Eryn Carantaur and told me how things are with you, and I must say that I am disappointed by your behaviour. You admitted to me that you had performed a travesty of the harvest rite with this mortal, but Aerandir tells me that you are now calling her your wife. Do not be a fool—"

"I am so sorry," Eowyn whispered. "I have caused trouble between you."

"Oh melmenya!" He hugged her closer. "No. This is nothing unusual."

"Read the rest to me."

Legolas found his place.

"Do not be a fool, Lassui! Both Lord Galdor and Lord Nevlondeion have, quite separately, assured me that this cannot be the case. Whatever words you may have exchanged with her are not sufficient to bind an elf to a mortal. There is therefore nothing to stop you leaving her if you have since come to your senses."

Legolas swallowed hard.

"Oh, Lassui, if you could not keep your leggings laced, why did it have to be a mortal? Could you not at least have chosen one of your own kind?"

"Aerandir, of course, extols her charms and says that all of your Counsellors adore her. I have heard about women and their unique ability to pleasure an elf..."

"I cannot read it, melmenya."

"Please. I need to know, my darling," said Eowyn.

"...are you absolutely sure that she is not demonstrating her talents to them?"

Eowyn gasped. "Go on," she whispered.

"Your choice of lovers has never been fortunate, Lassui."

"What does he mean by that?"

Legolas did not reply.

Eowyn twisted herself around on the bed. "This is a test," she said. "He knew that you would read it to me. He wanted to see if it would frighten me away. He has done this sort of thing before."

Legolas nodded.

"So it is not that I am a woman. No one is good enough for you." She thought for a moment. "Dear gods," she whispered, "how far did he go?"

"He is handsome. And a king," said Legolas, simply.

"He seduced them?" she whispered.

She came up on her knees and wrapped her arms around him.

"To prove that they did not love me," he said, hugging her fiercely and pulling her down on top of him. She could feel him hardening beneath her and she pressed herself against him.

"If he means to separate us," she said, "he will fail." She pushed herself back up onto her knees, straddling him. "I love you," she said, opening his tunic and unlacing his leggings. "Let me show you how much, Legolas..."

The contrast between the flawless pallor of his muscular torso and the darker flesh of his erection struck her as unbearably beautiful. She stretched out her hand and stroked him, gently touching the places that gave him most pleasure—the places that he had shown her.

He smiled up at her and she smiled back.

"I will *die* if you do not take me," she whispered. His size, unexpected on so slender a frame, made her body ache, as always, to be filled by him.

He took hold of her waist and turned her onto her back. She opened her legs. "No, melmenya," he whispered. He lay astride her and, using his hand to guide himself, he pushed his hips forward and entered her. "Cross your ankles," he said, softly. Then he rose up above her, arching his back.

"Oh gods," Eowyn whimpered as he began to thrust, deep and hard but in an erratic rhythm that left her waiting uncertainly for his next body-searing plunge. "*Legolas!*" she screamed. "Oh, oh gods!"

...

"Is the poor lad safe?" asked Gimli, once they were safely past Lord Berodin's house.

Admant shook his head. "I do not know," he said. "I do not understand how he has survived this long."

"Will you see him tonight?" asked Gimli.

"No," said Admant, "I have to wait until my turn."

"Are you his only contact with the outside world?"

"No, there is another servant who helps him, but I do not know who it is. He said it would be safer for both of us if we each knew nothing of the other."

"What is your name? Your real name?" asked Gimli.

"Admant."

Gimli nodded. *So the other is Olemi*, he thought. "The lady addressed her letters to you," he said.

"Yes. That is when I first started visiting the *Golden Goose*."

"And met Esmarë."

"Yes."

"She is a lovely lass," said Gimli. "It is a shame to see her working in a whorehouse."

"Why?" asked Admant. "It is not such a bad life."

Gimli glanced at him, but did not answer.

...

"Lassui?"

"It is my father's nickname for me. *Tithen Lassui*."

"*Little Leafy*?"

"You have had too many Elvish lessons from Lord Fingolfin."

"*He* would not say so." She pushed herself up on her elbows and smiled down at him. "Why can we not just re-marry in the correct way, Legolas?"

"My father says that we need his permission—and that he will never give it."

"Then we will have to go to Mirkwood and persuade him. After all, we have our own experts in elven law." She was referring to Lord Fingolfin, and the Librarian, Maglor. "When Yule is over, we will return to Eryn Carantaur, seek their advice, then pay your father a visit. We will make it an official visit. We will take Lord Fingolfin, Haldir and his brothers, and others—many others—and Gimli and Berryn, if they will come." *Let Thranduil see how much 'Lassui' is respected by his own people*, she thought. "It is time that I met your father."

"My indomitable Shieldmaiden!" said Legolas, smiling at last.

"In the meantime," said Eowyn, "I am reduced to being your *mistress*."

"Yes. I am so sorry melmenya."

"It will be hard to bear," she said, "not least because lovers use their mistresses in ways they dare not use their wives. Or so I have heard."

Legolas stared at her for a moment, taken aback. Then he grabbed her around her waist and rolled her over, laughing happily.

There was a knock at the door.

"Oh no," cried Eowyn. "I forgot! I intended to send you away somewhere before he arrived. You will need to give him some money from my purse."

"What is happening, melmenya?" asked Legolas, pulling on his dressing robe.

"Never mind," she said. "Just do not look at what he gives you. And that reminds me—I have some important news about Eowulf."

Legolas opened the door. But it was not a servant.

"Humph," said Gimli. "Do you *ever* get out of bed these days? I have found Berkin's messenger. We are all meeting in half an hour at Eomer's apartments. You might want to do something about your hair."

...

It took almost an hour for everyone to gather.

There was Aragorn and Faramir, Eomer and Lothiriel—who had insisted on attending—Gimli, Florestan and Senta, Lëonórwyn, Haldir and Dínendal, Legolas and Eowyn—who were not, in fact, the last to arrive—and Admant.

"Sit down," said Eomer, "make yourselves at home. Lothiriel, perhaps you could..." He gestured towards a side table, laden with spiced biscuits and pitchers of fruit wine. Lothiriel shot him a disdainful look and rang for a servant.

"Very well," he said. "As you all know, Lëonórwyn arrived in Minas Tirith almost two months ago with an escort of four men and two women. We have found the bodies of three of the men and one of the women, all killed with arrows, which were then removed to hide the identity of the killers—"

"Eowyn has some news about the fourth man, Eowulf," said Legolas. "Tell them, melmenya."

"I saw his coat," said Eowyn. "Worn by a man of Gondor, on Rath Bein. Haldir and I followed him down one of the alleys behind the main rath, to a house that looked like..." She shrugged her shoulders. "I thought it looked like some sort of hideout. He gave a special knock before he was admitted."

"What makes you so sure that it was *Eowulf's* coat?" asked Aragorn.

"I know his family," said Eowyn. "The Eodan family crest was embossed on the back."

"Could you find the house again?"

Eowyn looked over to Haldir, who had been watching her and Legolas intently. "Yes," he said to Aragorn, "I know exactly where it is."

"Good. Then I suggest we send a detachment of the Gondorian Guard to raid the house at first light. We will pick up and question this man and any accomplices. And let us hope they can lead us to Eowulf. Haldir, will you go with them?"

"Yes, of course, your Majesty."

"We still do not know where the woman, Mistress Amarri, is being hidden," said Eomer. "Do you know anything about her, Admant?"

Admant, unused to speaking in such exalted company, blushed deeply. "Er—no. No, my lo—your Majesty," he stammered. "Master Berkin has not told me anything about her."

"What *has* he told you, Admant?" asked Aragorn.

Admant's discomfort increased tenfold. "He—er—has never really told me anything, your Majesty," he said. "I just run errands for him—without his uncle knowing, you understand. I bring him things like sweetmeats, parchment, pen and ink. And I take messages—"

"Where?" asked Eowyn. She was making notes on her wax tablet.

"Many places, my lady."

"Can you remember any?" asked Faramir. "Any places that you have visited regularly?"

Admant thought for a moment. "There are two houses that I have visited more than once," he said. "One is behind Rath Bein..." He looked up, suddenly. "Do you think it could be the same house, your Highness?"

Faramir smiled. "I think that is possible."

"What does it look like?" asked Eowyn.

Admant closed his eyes. "It is at the far end of the alley," he said. "Tall—three or four stories. The paint is peeling off the door—dun-coloured paint, I think—and the windows are covered with wooden shutters." He opened his eyes, suddenly, smiling. "It is next door to a carpenter's shop, my lady."

"It is the same house," said Eowyn; Haldir nodded.

"What do you do there?" asked Legolas.

"I deliver pouches of money," said Admant.

"From Berkin?"

"Yes."

"Where does he get the money from?" asked Eowyn.

"I do not know, my lady."

"Are you not curious?"

"No, my lady."

"You said there was a second house," said Faramir.

"Yes, your Highness," said Admant, "that is on Rath Celerdain, near the Old Guest House. It is more of a cottage, really."

"Who lives there?"

"An old lady—a kind old lady. She once gave me some gingerbread."

Eowyn turned to Lëonórwyn. "Did Berkin ever mention an old lady in any of his letters? An old servant? A nurse, perhaps. Or one of his parents' people?"

Lëonórwyn thought carefully. "I cannot remember anyone, my lady."

"I think we should investigate that house, too," said Aragorn.

"Yes," said Legolas, "but we must do it discreetly. We must not draw attention to the lady. Admant—tonight, you will come down to Rath Celerdain with me and show me where the house is—there should be enough time before you need to be back at your master's. Then, tomorrow, Lëonórwyn—or rather Fidélin—and I will pay the old lady a visit."

"Good," said Aragorn. "Now what can we do about Berkin? What can you tell us about his circumstances, Admant?"

"Your Majesty?"

"Where is he kept?" said Gimli.

"In the tower, your Majesty, above the main entrance."

"And the door is locked," said Aragorn.

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Then how do you get in to see him?" asked Eowyn. "And how does he summon you?"

"He does not summon me, my lady. The servants take turns to take him his meals."

"So he has to wait until it is your turn? That involves a lot of planning on his part. How many servants are there?"

"Four, my lady."

"And you do what? A day each?"

"No, my lady, a meal each."

"When will you see him next?" asked Faramir.

"Tomorrow morning, your Highness."

"How do you get in? Are you are given a key?" asked Eowyn.

"The key hangs outside the door, my lady."

"Then why does Berkin not escape—some time when the house is quiet and it is your turn to open the door?" asked Gimli.

"He cannot walk, Gimli; not well. I think it is the poison."

"Can you tell us anything about the poison?" asked Dínendal.

"This is Master Dínendal, Admant," said Gimli. "He is a healer."

"I do not know that it is poison for certain, sir," said Admant. "As a child he was a fine, strong, young lad. But, shortly after his aunt died, he was taken ill. And Lord Berodin insisted on feeding the boy himself, which was not like him... Berkin did not die, but he remains very weak."

"But he is not getting any worse?" asked Dínendal.

"I do not think so, sir. The royal healer was allowed to see him recently—"

Aragorn laughed, "Even Lord Berodin cannot say no to Master Cuthbert," he said.

"Perhaps *he* could tell you more," said Admant.

"Yes. I will speak to him," said Dínendal.

"We simply cannot leave the boy in that house much longer," said Faramir, shaking his head, and there were murmurs of agreement around the room.

"I have an idea," said Gimli.

Everyone turned towards him.

"Tomorrow night is the killing of the wren. Has Berodin been invited?"

"Yes," said Aragorn. "All the leading families of Gondor are invited."

"Good," said Gimli. "Then I will call him out for the slight he gave me the other night. He is surely no fighter. All it will take is one good blow of the axe."

There were cries of surprise and horror all around the room.

"No Gimli!" said Aragorn, laughing. "The days when a lone hero opposed evil by force of arms are over. In this age, we must use the law—however frustrating that might be to us old timers," he added, when Gimli began to protest. "For now we will content ourselves with investigating the two houses, and Master Dínendal will talk to the royal healer. Thank you Admant—your help has been invaluable. There is a meal waiting for you in the kitchens, and Prince Legolas will join you shortly."

...

After Admant had left, Gimli held up his hand. "There is something else, which I did not want to mention in front of Admant," he said, "for he is not the sharpest axe in the weapons chest, though he means well."

"What is it, Gimli?" asked Aragorn, smiling.

"Admant knows that there is another servant helping Berkin, but he does not know who it is—Berkin has deliberately kept them in ignorance of each other to protect them."

"He is a clever young man," said Faramir. There was a murmur of agreement.

"However," continued Gimli, "Lady Lëonórwyn told us that the servant that contacted Eowulf was called Olemi. At first, I assumed that Admant was Olemi—and that 'Admant' was just an alias. But now I rather suspect that this Olemi is somewhat brighter than our friend Admant, and that it is he that Berkin relies upon to perform the more dangerous tasks."

"Of course," said Eowyn. "After all, someone must have access to the money. Berkin cannot have it hidden in his room, can he? We need to talk to Olemi. Or to Berkin himself, of course. Somehow..."

"I suggest," said Legolas, "that we postpone tomorrow's meeting until midday, after we have spoken to the old lady. You are all welcome to lunch in our apartment—"

"Do you know what *I* think," began Lothiriel, suddenly. She waited until Eomer had scowled everyone into silence. "*I* think that you should just kidnap this Berkin. His uncle would not know who had done it and we could smuggle him and his wife back to Rohan. Lady Lëonórwyn is a rich woman and if Berkin is as clever as you say he is, he will soon work out a way to live there safely—and to have her estates running properly. Well—*that* is what I think."

"You have been reading too many romances, my dear," said Eomer, smiling.

But Eowyn was looking at Lothiriel with new respect.

...

"Do you think he loves her?" asked Eowyn.

"Berkin?"

"No, Eomer."

Legolas laughed. "She is beautiful and has given him an heir," he said. "She does not need to be clever."

"Or likeable? But Eomer is—well, he is not clever, exactly—*shrewd*," said Eowyn. "And it must be hard to live with someone who has no interest in your life's work. But then her idea about kidnapping Berkin—that was better than any solution I have come up with. Come here, my love."

"I do not have the time just now, melmenya. Perhaps later."

"You conceited elf! I was only going to straighten your cloak."

Laughing, Legolas bent towards her and she arranged the hood around his shoulders. "Be careful, tonight," she said, kissing his cheek.

"There is no danger, Eowyn *nín*. I will be back for supper."

...

"Come in!"

Nervously, Master Dínendal opened the door and stepped inside. He had no idea what he was going to say to the royal healer—whether he would need to beg, persuade, or trick the information out of him—but he knew that if he did not speak to Master Cuthbert immediately, he would never have the courage to do so.

"Good evening, Master Cuthbert," he said, glancing around the impressive study.

"Dínendal," said Cuthbert, "it is good to see you again. Can I offer you some refreshment? I have just acquired a bottle of a very fine spirit from the Grey Mountains, which the locals call 'the water of life'. I think that—when you try it—you will agree with them."

"Thank you," said Dínendal.

"Sit by the fire, my young friend," said Cuthbert, "and tell me what brings you here with such a troubled look on your fair face."

Dínendal decided to tell the truth.

"I was recently asked to examine a young lady who had been rescued from," he hesitated, "well—from a house of ill repute." Cuthbert handed him a glass goblet filled with a deep amber liquid. "Thank you," said Dínendal, holding it up to the light, "it is a beautiful colour.. The girl had been forced to hide there—disguised as a boy—after fleeing from her marital home. Her husband's guardian, it seems, had treated her most cruelly, and her husband was afraid for her life." Dínendal paused and looked at his glass.

"Go on," said Cuthbert.

"The girl had had to leave her husband behind and she is, naturally, very worried about him. Especially as she is afraid that he has been poisoned."

"A bad business, indeed," said Cuthbert, "but why are you telling me this?"

"The young man in question is Lord Berodin's nephew."

"I see."

"And I understand that you have examined him recently." Dínendal took a mouthful of spirit. "Oh!" he gasped, as the fiery liquid caught the back of his throat. "Oh! I would not call it—water of life," he coughed, "but it certainly—seems to have—the power of life or death..."

Cuthbert patted him on the back. "I am sorry, my young friend," he said. "I had heard that elves were great drinkers. Would you like a glass of water?"

"Yes—please," said Dínendal, wiping his eyes with a fine lawn handkerchief.

Cuthbert walked over to the side table, "You are right, Dínendal," he said, as he filled a crystal

tumbler with water, "I *did* examine poor Berkin recently. But you must understand that I cannot tell you anything about his condition."

"Yes, of course. I do." Dínendal accepted the water gratefully and took a sip. "Thank you. But do you think it might be possible," he said, "for us to discuss a hypothetical case?"

Cuthbert sat down in the chair opposite. "I do not see why not," he said.

Dínendal thought for a moment. "Could a man," he asked, "use poison to turn a strong young boy into an invalid, leaving him weak and bed-ridden, but otherwise reasonably healthy and mentally very acute?"

"I believe he could. But the wasting disease would present with similar symptoms and follow a similar course."

"Would there be any further deterioration?"

"In the case of the disease, no, not once the patient has recovered from the initial illness. In the case of the poison, probably not, unless the dosage was increased."

"Could that be fatal?"

"If sufficient poison were given, yes."

"Is there any way to tell the difference between the wasting disease and poisoning in any particular case?"

"With a thorough examination."

"Can the effects of the poison be reversed?"

"Not by human healing."

"But a boy thus afflicted might nevertheless live a long, if inactive, life?"

"I believe so."

Something about the answers troubled Dínendal—Cuthbert was more or less admitting that the boy had been poisoned, or so it seemed to him, so why had he not reported it to the Gondorian Guard?

"Did Berkin himself swear you to secrecy?" he asked.

Cuthbert looked up from the fire, his eyes wide with surprise, his mouth open.

"He did," said Dínendal. "You told him that his condition was stable, and he asked you to keep it secret. Why?"

"I gave him my word," said Cuthbert.

Dínendal nodded. "I understand your position," he said. "But Prince Legolas, King Elessar, and Eomer King have all taken Lady Léonórwyn under their protection and have sworn to her that they will do everything in their power to rescue her husband. If you have any information that might help them—or if you know of any reason why they should not do what they are planning to do—I beg of you, come forward and talk to them."

...

Swive me! thought Admant. *It is true what they say about elves!*

The lady vanishes

The man watched as Legolas, all but invisible in the shadow of the buildings, slipped silently along the lane, jumped nimbly onto a low wall and, balancing on its curved stones, looked across the small courtyard and through the window of the old lady's cottage.

The elf smiled. Then he dropped from his observation point and returned to Admant.

"What did you see, my lord?" asked Admant.

"Two elderly ladies, sitting by the fire, taking a glass of wine," said Legolas. The cosy little parlour had been decorated with festive evergreens and filled with the warm light of candles, and the two women had clearly been enjoying each other's company.

"Come Admant," he said, "let us get you back home before you are missed."

...

As Legolas entered the King's House, Haldir was taking leave of a captain of the Gondorian Guard.

"We were just making arrangements for tomorrow's raid on the thieves' hideout," he explained. He frowned. "Are you well?"

"Well?"

"When I brought Lady Eowyn back to your apartments earlier, you seemed—not yourself."

"A letter from my father," said Legolas.

"Not bad news, I hope."

"Yes," said Legolas, "yes it was. I think we will be visiting Mirkwood—Eryn Lasgalen—quite soon. And I hope you will—"

"My lord!" A messenger came hurrying towards them. "I am sorry to disturb you. It is lady Eowyn, my lord. She asked me to find you."

"Did she say what she wanted?" asked Legolas, walking towards the Great Staircase.

"She said to tell you that she is indisposed, my lord."

"Indis—" Legolas stopped walking and stared at the messenger for a moment. Then he ran—as only an elf *can* run—up the staircase and towards his chambers.

Extra scene: [The letters](#)

Extra scene: [Some unfortunate business in Eryn Aras](#)

Chapter 8: Disappointment

"Melmenya!"

She was sitting in her night dress, on the edge of the bed, her body hunched forward, her face wet with tears. Legolas fell to his knees and wrapped her in his arms. "I am so sorry, my love," he whispered, "I am so, so sorry."

"We did not want a child," said Eowyn softly, "but now that it is certain that we are not going to have one, somehow..."

"I know, melmenya. We had grown to love him."

"Our poor, illegitimate child."

He touched her stomach gently. "Does it hurt?"

"No more than usual."

"Let me make you comfortable." He lifted her into the bed and covered her with the quilt. "Do you want me to stay, or would you rather be left alone?" he asked.

"I would like you to stay. If you do not mind staying," said Eowyn.

Legolas' smile was heart-breaking mixture of sadness and happiness. "You are my wife, melmenya, whatever they say. And the only thing that could possibly keep me from your side would be knowing that you did not want me here."

He lay down beside her and took her in his arms, resting her head against his shoulder, and—without thinking—he began to sing, softly:

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

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

"Thank you," whispered Eowyn.

...

They were running through the forest.

Eowyn was a worthy quarry—fleet as a deer—but he was gaining on her. He ran up the slope to her right, leaping from rock to rock, then dropped on her from above.

Eowyn fell to the ground, laughing—and he wrapped himself around her and rolled them, over and over, down the wooded slope and out into the open meadow below.

"I win!" he cried, scrambling to his feet and holding out his hands to her.

She rose, still laughing, with leaves and acorns tangled in her hair, and, behind her, the sea sparkled in the sunlight.

And—although Legolas was sure he had never seen it before—he instantly recognised the

shoreline of Tol Erresëa and the Bay of Eldamar beyond.

...

Legolas sat bolt upright.

He remembered them; he remembered all of them—every dream he had had since Mother Night.

Dreams of Eowyn, unchanging, immortal.

And of their child, a son.

But the child does not exist, he thought, so the dreams...

He looked down at Eowyn, sleeping beside him. He could not tell *her*. But he needed to tell someone. He needed to know what the dreams meant.

...

"Good morning," said Captain Berctuald of the Gondorian Guard, "we are just about to leave."

He studied Haldir with interest. "You look exhausted, my friend—I did not think that elves needed rest."

"We need less rest than men," said Haldir, mounting his horse.

"Was she pretty?" asked Berctuald, grinning.

Haldir gave him a withering look.

Berctuald decided to change the subject. "This house," he said, "does it have a rear entrance?" He signalled to his men and the entire company of guards set off at a steady walk.

Haldir thought carefully, trying to recall the building and its surroundings. "There is a passage running down the right-hand side of the house," he said, "next to the carpenter's shop. But I have no idea where it goes... Though it would be a poor hideout that had no means of escape."

Berctuald agreed. "Well then," he said, as they passed through the fifth gate, "our first task is to scout the passage." He cleared his throat. "I have heard much of the stealth of elves, my friend. Would you be willing?"

"Of course," said Haldir.

"Good," said Berctuald. "We will wait for you on Rath Bein."

...

Haldir had chosen to wear a jerkin and leggings of whitish-grey that blended perfectly with stone of the buildings. He slipped into the alley and made his way to the thieves' house unseen. The passage was exactly as he had remembered it, narrow and partially filled with rubbish. He climbed disdainfully over the remains of a chair, and a chest that had been broken open, and—*Orc's breath!*—a sleeping man huddled in an old carpet.

At the end of the house, the passage forked. Haldir turned left.

Here the filth was even worse—kitchen waste; several years' worth of it. He clamped his hand over his mouth, carefully skirted a rotting pig's carcass, and studied the back door.

The lady vanishes

Where do they expect to go from here? he wondered. *One man either side of the door would stop them. There must be another way out.*

He examined the face of the Hill of Guard, rising steep and sheer behind the passage. *I doubt that even an elf could climb that,* he thought. *Could there be a tunnel? No—too much effort. The roof then.*

...

"Legolas? Where are you going?"

"To the bathing room."

"Why?"

"Melmenya!"

"Come here." She stretched out her arms. "Please. I know what you want."

"I will take care of it—"

But when she struggled to her knees and reached out for him, Legolas could not resist her. He took her in his arms and she buried her face in his shoulder. "I love you," she whispered, tugging his nightshirt up above his waist. "I need you." She wrapped her little hand around him and fondled him, lovingly. "Please Legolas."

"I do not want to hurt you—"

"You will not hurt me. I need you. And you need me, too. Please Legolas."

"Oh my love..." He lifted her off the bed and carried her into the bathing room.

...

"Two guards can hold the rear door," said Haldir, quietly, "but I doubt that anyone will try to use it. There is some sort of rope bridge from the roof to the carpenter's shop. I am sure that is the main way out."

"How easy will it be to climb up there?" asked Berctuald.

"We will have to go up the front—where there are windows—and over the roof ridge."

"We?"

"We do not know how many are inside, so I cannot be sure that I can take them alone."

"Fair enough," said Berctuald, "but I am no climber, my friend." He turned to his men.

"Hengist, Offa, follow the March Warden up onto the roof. How long will you need?"

Haldir looked at the two men. They both seemed reasonably able. "Ten minutes."

"Very well, we will wake the house in quarter of an hour."

...

"Did I hurt you?" Legolas asked, softly.

"No, my love."

"I feel as though I did—lying here, covered in your blood..."

Eowyn rolled over to face him. "I am sorry, my darling," she said, stroking his cheek, "I wanted you to make love to me. I did not stop to think how unpleasant it would be for you."

Legolas pulled her into his arms. "It was not unpleasant, Eowyn nín," he said. "It was..." He shook his head, unable to bring himself to say it. "It is not healthy to feel like this."

"Like what?"

"Excited by your blood—at having your blood on my—on me..." His voice trailed away.

She smiled. "You were so gentle—so *elven*," she said, kissing him. "And you must not worry—I was excited by it too."

"We are two of a kind, melmenya."

"Good."

"Eowyn, do you want to try again? We could try every time, if you wanted to."

"Oh Legolas!" She hugged him tightly. "Not yet, my love," she whispered. "I am not ready yet. But soon."

...

The men proved surprisingly agile.

Haldir stationed both of them on the rope bridge itself, close to the door. "Our task," he said, "is to drive them back inside so that Captain Berctuald can arrest them. King Elessar needs them alive. I will be down on the roof, in case anyone gets past you."

Offa grinned. "Rather you than me, sir," he said. "Those tiles are about ready to slip off."

Haldir nodded grimly. He swung himself down from the bridge just as Berctuald began knocking at the front door of the house. "Ready?"

"Yes, sir," cried both of the men. Hengist, furthest from the doorway, drew his sword.

They did not have to wait long. Offa threw himself forward as the door flew open, using his body weight to push the first man back down the stairs, and there was a cry of anger as the thief behind also stumbled and fell backwards.

For a moment nothing more happened. Then two more men, trampling over their fallen comrades, appeared in the opening. Offa sent one of them reeling; Hengist forced the other back with his sword. There was another lull.

Then fifth man, small and swift, appeared at the top of the stairs, lowered his head and barrelled into Offa, sending him sprawling into Hengist, put one hand on the rope rail, and swung himself down onto the roof...

Right onto the tip of Haldir's sword.

"Good morning," said Haldir. "That is a very nice coat you are wearing."

...

"Do you want me to stay with you this morning?" asked Legolas. "I can postpone the visit to the old lady's house—"

Eowyn bit her lip.

In truth, their recent experience had left her more terrified than ever of losing him, but she would never admit it. "No, my love," she said, "I cannot have Aragorn and Eomer thinking that you are tied to my apron strings."

Legolas smiled. "It is too late to worry about that, *melmenya*. Eomer has already told me that I behave like a girl—it seems I am not manly enough for his sister."

His words had exactly the effect he had intended—Eowyn's fear evaporated. "When did he say that?" she cried. "The arrogant fool! I will soon deal with him! Of course you must go. I just wish that I could come with you."

"I will ask Dínendal to look at your feet this morning, *melmenya*. Who knows, he may say that you are ready to start walking again. And *I* will be back before you know it."

...

As Legolas was leaving Dínendal's chamber, Haldir was returning from the morning's raid.

"We have got the man Lady Eowyn noticed yesterday," said the March Warden, "and seven of his fellows. King Elessar intends to question him this morning. I—er—I thought Lady Eowyn might want to be present. That is, if she has recovered from her—er..."

Legolas felt a sudden pang of sympathy for his March Warden. *In his position I would be frantic*, he thought.

"She is well, Haldir—you need not worry—she has indeed recovered. But Dínendal is going to her now, to examine her feet, for she is anxious to start walking again. I am just going to collect Lëonórwyn, so I will ask Eomer to fetch her later."

"Eomer—yes, of course."

...

The route to Eomer's apartments took Legolas past Aragorn's study. When he recognised the door, the elf slowed his steps, hesitated for a moment, then knocked lightly.

Aragorn opened the door almost immediately. "Good morning, *mellon nín*," he said. "That tap had to be you, or one of my brothers. Come in." He closed the door. "Sit down, and tell me what is troubling you."

"Is it so obvious?"

"To one who has lived most of his life amongst elves, yes."

"Do you know anything about dreams?"

"Has Eowyn been having nightmares?"

Legolas shook his head. "No, *I* am the one who has been dreaming—about her."

Aragorn looked surprised. "Have you ever dreamed before?"

Legolas lowered his eyes, "Yes."

"About her?"

"Yes. But this is different."

"How?"

"Last time was immediately before the harvest rite, and—er..." His alabaster skin flushed a delicate rose.

"Ah," said Aragorn.

Legolas cleared his throat. "That was a difficult time, Aragorn," he said. "But now—now I am dreaming about the future. Or perhaps a possible future." He shook his head. "I do not know." He described the dreams—the being of light, Eowyn's unchanging face, the Grey Havens and Tol Erresëa. "What do you think they mean?"

Aragorn sighed. "I know what you must hope they mean, Legolas. And I *have* heard it said that our dreams during the twelve days of Yuletide can foretell our future."

The elf's expression almost broke Aragorn's heart.

"But, in truth, *mellon nín*," the man continued, gently, "I think it more likely that your own mind, unfettered by sleep, is using your dreams to paint a picture of the future as you want it to be."

...

"Now please be careful, my lady," said Dínendal. "Do not try to walk too far to start with. And remember: use the staff to support part of your weight."

Eowyn nodded, solemnly.

Dínendal did not seem entirely convinced, but he bowed, and left her.

Eowyn smiled. Using the staff, she took a few tentative steps. There was no pain, to speak of, though her legs were a little shaky from lack of use. She shuffled towards the balcony. The air outside was fresh and inviting. She stepped through the doors and surveyed the small space.

Five times round, she thought.

After two, she was bored. *Perhaps I could go down to the garden*, she thought, absently swinging her staff from side to side. *One, two, three, four...*

Her smile broadened; as a young Shieldmaiden she had spent many hours practising with the quarterstaff.

"Engage!" she cried, holding her staff diagonally across her body. "Change!" She stepped forward, turning to the left, and brought the lower end of staff up sharply, changing hands. "Attack!" She took another step and, with the staff almost horizontal, struck her imaginary foe on the side of the head. "Engage—Guard!" Moving her left hand upwards and to the right, she brought the staff vertical, ready to absorb her opponent's blow.

Again, she thought. "Engage!"

...

"Will Mistress Amarri recognise you dressed like that?" Legolas asked Lëonórwyn, as he helped her mount the horse that had been brought up from the stables for her. "Careful, my lady, hold the reins tighter."

"I am not good with horses," said Lëonórwyn. "I do not have the knack."

"And yet they are the reason your grandfather arranged your marriage to Berkin," said

Legolas.

"That is a cruel twist of fate, my lord," agreed Lëonórwyn.

Legolas swung himself onto Arod's back. "Will you be all right? It is a long ride down."

"If we take it slowly, my lord."

"You did not answer my question," said Legolas, as they rode through the tunnel from the Citadel. "Is Mistress Amarri likely to recognise you, or might we have trouble persuading the ladies to open the door?"

"I do not know, my lord..." She turned to him sharply. "You think we will find her at the cottage?"

"Last night I saw *two* women sitting by the fire," said Legolas. "What does Amarri look like?"

"She is about sixty—she was my mother's nurse before she was mine."

Legolas had no idea what a woman of 'about sixty' would look like. "Describe her," he said.

"She is not very tall, but plump, with a round, cheerful face, and white curly hair, which she wears quite short. She likes to talk."

"Yes," said Legolas. "I think we may well find her at the cottage."

...

"Just a moment," called Eowyn. She dragged herself off the bed and hobbled towards the door. *It is not just my feet any more, she thought. The rest of my body has withered away, too. Gods, if old age feels like this, let me die young.*

She opened the door. "Eomer," she said. "What do you want?"

"That is a charming way to greet your brother," said Eomer. "I have come to take you to Aragorn's study. We are about to question the wretch who stole Eowulf's coat."

Eowyn nodded. "Let me fetch my wax tablet." She walked slowly over to the desk and, leaning heavily on one hand, carefully moved Legolas' official papers aside until she found what she was looking for.

"Here," said Eomer, "let me help you. It is torture to watch you walking like this."

"I am fine, Eomer; I ache from practising with my staff, that is all. And besides," she added, "I am too angry with you."

"What have I done now?" he asked, still watching her impatiently.

"What did you say to Legolas?" she demanded, pushing the tablet into her pocket. "Something about his being a girl?" She picked up her staff and began to move, slowly and laboriously, towards the door.

"Oh, for the gods' sake!" cried Eomer, stepping forward and sweeping her up in his arms. "You can walk back," he added, when she protested, "and I said nothing of the sort."

He carried her out into the corridor and closed the door behind them.

"So the words 'girl' and 'not manly' never passed your lips?"

Eomer tried to equivocate. "I did not mean," he began, but she broke him with a scowl. "All right! It was all that business with your gown: *'The cut of the bodice is exquisite, Mistress; what do you think of it Eomer?'* And five hundred gold! You can buy two Haradrim studs for that—"

"What gown? He has not... Oh, *Eomer!* Did it never occur to you that he intended the gown as a surprise? Which you have just ruined?"

"Then why did he not say so? All this foolishness is not what we are used to."

"No, we are not used to it. And that makes it all the more delightful. Surely you gave Lothriel a surprise gift?"

"No."

"Eomer! No wonder she is always so"—she searched for the right word—"glum. If 'manly' means 'an insensitive dolt', then no, Legolas is not manly. And I am the luckier for it."

"And I suppose you were lucky outside the Banqueting Hall the other night?"

"What does that mean?" asked Eowyn, her eyes narrowing.

Eomer blushed deeply. "Nothing."

"Good."

"But could he not have waited until you were back in your chambers? I do not appreciate seeing my sister tugged in front of the whole of Gondor."

"Eomer!" She looked away. "That was *my* fault," she said, quietly, "I seduced him." She smiled at the memory of her beloved elf losing all control.

Eomer was triumphant. "See what I mean?" he said. "He is a bad influence on you. Women do not go orc hunting. Women do not seduce men!"

Eowyn turned to him in surprise. "You have a lot to learn about women, Eomer!"

...

As they turned into Rath Celerdain, Legolas grew uneasy.

"Stop here, my lady," he said, suddenly. "That is the house"—he pointed to a small cottage at the end of the lane—"but we will leave the horses here and proceed on foot." He dropped lightly to the ground and patted Arod's neck. "*Avo visto, Arod.*" He helped Lëonórwyn dismount. "Come, my lady, we must hurry."

"Are you not going to tether the horses?" asked Lëonórwyn.

"No, they know what to do. But we must not linger—it is not safe."

"What do you mean?"

"I sense eyes upon us. And it is too late to turn back." He hurried her through the cottage gate and knocked urgently at the door. It was opened, almost immediately, by a slender, elderly woman, with bright, dark eyes. "May we enter, madam?" he asked, "I have news for your guest."

The woman glanced at Lëonórwyn, looked deep into Legolas' eyes, then stepped aside.

"Close the door," said Legolas. "Can you bar it?"

"No, my lord," said the woman. "I..." She looked around. "We could use the dresser." She leaned against the piece of furniture and tried to push it towards him. "Is it Lord Berodin's men?"

"Yes, I fear so," said Legolas, grasping the other end. "I am afraid that your beautiful plates..."

"It does not matter."

Legolas dragged the dresser down the passage, and wedged it behind the door. "Is there another way out?"

"Yes, through the kitchen, but the alley only leads to Rath Celerdain."

Legolas nodded. "This is Lady Lëonórwyn," he said. "I am sure you have heard all about her. Where is Mistress Amarri?"

"Here," said a woman's voice. "Do we have to leave—goodness, child, I did not recognise you!" She hugged Lëonórwyn.

"Yes, we must go immediately," said Legolas, relieved that both the women appeared to have wits and courage. "I will go first, in case we are attacked," he said, drawing his white knives. "Lëonórwyn, when we reach the rath, get the ladies onto the horses and take them up to the Citadel. Do not wait for me—if I am left behind, tell Eowyn what has happened.

"You will need to be brave with the horses, Lëonórwyn," he added, softly, "but you rode very well coming down here. Arod will take care of you. And remember that your nurse and your husband are both relying on you."

...

"Quickly, ladies," said Legolas, leading them down the alley. "I doubt that they will attack here—it is too confined—but once we are out in the open we will have to move even faster. Wait here a moment."

He replaced his knives, slipped out into the rath, and looked around. *A Bowman on the roof, a swordsman by the water pump, and at least three more with knives outside the tavern. They are good—for men, he thought. Alert, but not obvious. No casual observer would suspect them. Still, they have no horses.*

"Stay well back," he whispered to the women.

He summoned the horses with a low whistle. Then, moving with elven speed, he pulled his bow from its strap, nocked an arrow, and took out the Bowman.

"Now!" he cried to the women. All three ran forward—Mistress Amarri with unexpected grace—as the horses came to a halt at the end of the alley.

Legolas strode towards the remaining men, his bow raised.

"Do not try to stop us, if you value your lives," he said.

His senses told him that both elderly women were mounted, but that Lëonórwyn was having difficulty. *Elbereth help her*, he prayed, and felt Lëonórwyn leap upward and land astride Arod.

As the two horses sped away up the Hill of Guard, he could not suppress a smile of triumph, but his victory was short lived.

The lady vanishes

One of the knifemen, holding some sort of weighted cord, swung it several times above his head, and threw it. It seemed so strange that Legolas was momentarily transfixed—until the cord wrapped itself around him and one of the weights crashed into his forehead.

"Ah!" he cried, and staggered, letting his bow drop.

Then all was black.

Chapter 9: The killing of the wren

"What is your name?" asked Aragorn.

The man stared at him insolently.

"We can prove that the coat you were wearing when you were captured belongs to a man of Rohan—a man who has not been seen alive for almost a week. If you do not co-operate with us, you will be charged as an accessory to his murder. By Gondorian law, you can then be kept imprisoned indefinitely and, if his body should be found, you will be put on trial. The penalty for murder is death by hanging—there is no lighter sentence. So I ask you again—what is your name?"

"You think you can scare me?" asked the man. "Hanging is a walk in the Gardens of Far Harad compared to what *he* would do to me."

Aragorn glanced at Eomer. Eomer nodded. "If by 'he' you mean Lord Berodin," said Aragorn, "we are willing to offer you our protection. I know some part of Berodin's unlawful dealings but, as yet, I have no proof. If you give me evidence that leads to his conviction, either Eomer King or I—the choice is yours—will provide you with a new identity and a parcel of land. You will have the opportunity to make a new life for yourself—an honest life, if you have any honour left in you."

The man sneered. "I will take the land," he said. "As to the other—who can say? What do you want to know? And what is *she* doing here?" He waved his hand towards Eowyn.

"I am here," said Eowyn, "because you are *my* prisoner—it was I who found you and your hideout. And I want to know what part you played in what has happened to some of my countrymen."

The man looked at her for a moment, then smiled. "I have heard of your sort," he said. "A Shieldmaiden." He bowed, and his deference was only partly mocking. "Ask your questions, my lady."

"What is your name?" asked Eowyn.

"Alchfrid, son of Aelbert," said the man.

"How did you come by the coat?"

"It was my good fortune to be asked to dispose of a certain individual. His coat was a perk of the job, as you might say."

"Asked by whom?" asked Aragorn.

"You know by whom, your Majesty."

"Say it aloud."

Even with the promise of protection, Alchfrid still hesitated before answering, "Lord Berodin."

"How did you kill him?" asked Eowyn.

"I slit his throat."

Eowyn bit her lip. "But how did you know where to find him?"

"I was told that he was probably hiding out at the *Golden Goose*. I was given a description of the coat. I waited until he left one night, followed him, grabbed him from behind—his coat

came off in the struggle—and I slit his throat."

"Where is his body?" asked Eomer.

"I dumped it behind the abattoir down Ostrad Gwaloth—there is so much filth down there that a little extra is never noticed."

"You animal!" hissed Eomer. Eowyn touched his arm.

"How did Berodin give you your orders?" Aragorn asked.

"He sent a servant."

"Were the instructions written or spoken?" asked Eowyn.

"Spoken—I cannot read, my lady," said the man.

"That is a pity—we could have made good use of written evidence," said Aragorn. "How did he pay you?"

"I would deliver proof that the job had been done—leave something recognisable, like a finger with a ring on it or an ear with an earring, in a box at the back of the house—then he would send a servant with a pouch of gold, your Majesty."

"How many did you kill for him?" asked Aragorn, softly.

"I lost count, your Majesty. Twenty"—he shrugged his shoulders—"twenty-five. In most cases I made it look like a robbery..."

"Was it always the same servant?" asked Eowyn.

"Yes, my lady."

"Did anyone else ever pay you to do a similar job?" asked Eowyn. "Using a different servant?"

"No, my lady," said Alchfrid. "Lord Berodin kept me well supplied. I did not need another patron."

Eowyn sighed. "So what was Admant doing at the house?" she wondered aloud.

"A couple of times," said Alchfrid, "old Berodin's nephew bribed me to let a victim go free."

"And did you?" asked Aragorn.

"Certainly, your Majesty. It is easier to do nothing than to kill—and getting paid double is a bonus."

"Whom did you spare?" asked Aragorn.

The man sighed. "How should I know? Old, young, man, woman, rich, poor; they are all the same to me—they pay for my next drink, or my next whore. Pardon my frankness, my lady."

"You really have no honour, do you?" said Eomer.

The man smiled. "Honour is for those that do not have to work for a living," he said.

"I have heard enough," said Aragorn. He looked at Eomer and Eowyn. "Is there anything more you want to ask him?"

The lady vanishes

Eomer shook his head. "Get rid of him."

"I have one last question," said Eowyn, looking directly at Alchfrid. "Why were you so foolish as to wear the coat? It is so distinctive, it was bound to be recognised."

"Perhaps I was hoping to attract the attention of a beautiful lady, like yourself," said Alchfrid, leaning forward and leering at her.

Aragorn banged his fist on the table. "The Gondorian Guard will take a formal statement from you," he said, "then you will be kept in custody until Lord Berodin's trial. Once he has been convicted, you will receive your new identity, and your land—either here in Gondor, or in Rohan. And may the gods deal mercifully with you."

"Take him away!"

...

As the guards opened the doors, one of them caught a young lad trying to enter the study.

"I must speak to Lady Eowyn," the boy cried.

"It is Lëonórwyn!" said Eowyn.

"Let her in," called Aragorn.

The guard looked at the 'lad' in surprise then released her, and Lëonórwyn ran into the room. "My lady," she cried, "they have taken him."

Eowyn leaped to her feet. "Legolas? What happened?"

"He was holding them back so that we could escape, my lady, but I saw him fall."

...

They galloped down to Rath Celerdain—Aragorn, Eomer, Eowyn and Haldir—but they were too late.

Outside the empty cottage a small boy, sitting in the gutter, was playing with Legolas' beloved Galadhrim bow. Eowyn crouched down before him. "That is a beautiful bow," she said, her voice wavering, "may I hold it for a while?"

The boy held it out to her. She took it from him, and clasped it to her breast. Tears ran down her cheeks and she began to sob.

And Haldir, ignoring the presence of Aragorn and Eomer, knelt down beside her, took her in his arms, and held her tightly.

...

"You must go down there," said Gimli to Aragorn. "Take a detachment of guards, if you want to make it official, but order him to open the door, and search the house."

"Gimli is right," said Eowyn. Her face was still red and swollen from crying, but she had regained most of her self-control. "We cannot hesitate. From what Lëonórwyn and the child have told us, Legolas is probably injured. And we know that Berodin is ruthless. He has no reason..." Her voice faltered. "He really has no reason to keep Legolas alive."

"Eowyn..."

"Please, Aragorn," she said. "*Please*. He would do the same for you."

"This is not an elven realm, Eowyn," said Aragorn. "This is a kingdom of men, with long-established laws of property and personal freedom. I cannot enter Berodin's home by force. I cannot search his house until after he has been arrested. And I cannot arrest him without more evidence."

"What more evidence do you need?" asked Gimli.

"A second witness," said Faramir. "Alchfrid's testimony, explicit as it is, must be corroborated."

"And where do you plan to get that?" asked Gimli.

"They are right, Aragorn," agreed Eomer, softly, "Legolas may not have that much time."

"I understand that," said Aragorn. He sighed. "I can do nothing as a king. As his *friend*....." He shook his head. "I must be seen at the celebrations tonight. But tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow may be too late!" cried Eowyn; Haldir touched her hand.

"It is the best I can do, Eowyn," said Aragorn.

Then I will have to do better, she thought.

...

After leaving the meeting in Aragorn's study, Gimli returned to his chambers, changed into his dark blue suit, and walked briskly down through the levels to Cocks Alley and the *Golden Goose*.

"Good morning, Master Norin," said the landlord. "You are early. What can I get you?"

"No ale, today, my friend," said Gimli. "But I would like some time with Esmarë."

"You are an eager one," said Silrim. "She is still abed—no problem there, though. Just go straight up. And take your time—ten silver an hour."

Gimli nodded his thanks, climbed the stairs, and knocked at Esmarë's door.

"Who is it?"

"Norin."

"Just a moment!" There was a noise of running feet and rustling fabric. "Come in!"

Gimli opened the door. Esmarë was lying seductively on top of the bed—Gimli ignored the pile of dirty washing only partially hidden beneath it. "Good morning, Norin," she said, "are you going to join me?"

"No, lass," said Gimli, gently. "But I want to talk to you."

He closed the door behind him and walked towards her. The bed was too high for him to sit on comfortably and he was suddenly aware of how ridiculous he would look with his legs dangling. He glanced around—there was a low stool standing by the window. He brought it to the bedside and sat down.

"Have you ever heard of a servant called Olemi?" he asked.

"No, Norin," said Esmarë. But her eyes were wide and frightened, and Gimli felt sure that she

was lying.

"Do not worry, lass," he said. "You can tell me—I will not let anyone hurt you. I just need to know what he looks like."

Esmarë bit her lip. "I do not know him *well*," she said.

"But you *have* seen him," Gimli persisted "What does he look like? Is he old, young, short, tall?"

"He is taller than you," said Esmarë.

"All men are taller than I," said Gimli. "Come, describe him to me."

"He looks—well, he looks like Prince Faramir," said Esmarë. "Not too tall, not too old, not too anything, really—just sandy coloured."

"Like Prince Faramir?"

"Yes."

"When have you seen Prince Faramir?" asked Gimli.

"Last time he came to Minas Tirith, I was buying some peaches near the Great Gates. I saw him clearly."

Gimli nodded. "Like Faramir," he said. "Very well. Now, pack a few things."

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to come up to the King's House with me," said Gimli.

Esmarë laughed. "And what will we do there? Steal the crown jewels?"

Gimli shook his head. "No lass. We will be staying there, with my friends." He took the girl's hand. "The fact is, Esmarë, I have not been telling you the whole truth. My name is not Norin; it is Gimli—Gimli, son of Gloin. And I want to take you back to the King's House, where you will be safe."

Esmarë laughed again. "You are funny, Norin," she said, "and good and kind, but you are not one of the Nine!"

Gimli decided to try a different approach. "A friend of mine—the best friend a dwarf could ever have—has been taken prisoner by Lord Berodin's men. I pray to Aulë that he is still alive. But I do not know—"

"Oh, Norin!"

"And, thanks to me, you are also involved in this," he said. "Berodin has spies everywhere. There is no telling which of your customers might be his puppet. There is no knowing whether you are safe here. So come with me, lass, and I will protect you."

"Silrim will not let me leave."

"Will you come if I make it right with Silrim?"

"Of course."

"Then pack your things. Do you have a cloak?"

"Yes."

"Put it on, cover up your face. We will leave as soon as you are ready."

...

Eowyn hid in the corridor until Lothiriel and Elfwine had left the apartment. Eomer, she knew, would be with Aragorn until much later in the afternoon. She walked quickly up to the door and knocked loudly.

"Lady Eowyn," said Florestan, "you have just missed Queen Lothiriel."

"Yes, I know," said Eowyn, "but it is you and your sister that I want to talk to. I want to ask you both a favour."

...

"What do you intend to do?" asked Dínendal.

Haldir shook his head. "I do not know," he said. "I should not be doing anything—King Elessar has said that we must wait until tomorrow—and Legolas himself charged me to protect Lady Eowyn. But I cannot leave him there. And, from what the boy told us about the weapon they used on him, he may need your attention, too."

"But how can we get to him?" Dínendal thought for a moment. "Perhaps Lord Gimli would help us?"

Haldir shook his head. "I am sure that he would. But Gimli is one of the King's closest friends. And we cannot ask him to act against Aragorn's wishes." Haldir walked to the window and looked out over the courtyard.

"I am no fighter," said Dínendal.

Haldir turned, his train of thought disturbed. "What did you say?"

"I said I am no fighter. I am afraid I will let you down."

"I do not need you to fight," said Haldir. A plan began to form in his mind, its details resolving themselves as he spoke: "What I need is for you to knock loudly at the front door, draw whoever opens it out into the rath, and keep him there—just for a moment or two." He shook his head. "No," he corrected, "the longer you can keep him outside, the better. Then I need you to stay nearby, with the horses, and with your healing bag at the ready, in case Legolas needs urgent treatment."

"What are *you* going to do?"

"We know that the boy is being held in the tower," said Haldir. "If I can get inside the house, and up the stairs without being seen, I can talk to him—Legolas may be with him. Even if he is not, the boy may know where he is. And he can call on the support of at least two of the servants, if I can get him on our side."

"Perhaps you should take him a token from his wife," said Dínendal.

Haldir smiled. "You are far too romantic," he said. "But, in this case, you are right. I will try to speak to the girl this afternoon."

Dínendal looked up at him, seriously. "Haldir," he said, "what if you are caught?"

"If I have not returned to you by daybreak," said the March Warden, "come back up here and

tell Lady Eowyn what has happened. *She* will know what to do."

...

"Norin! We cannot go in there! I was not serious about stealing the crown jewels."

Gimli smiled. "And I was not romancing when I told you that I was staying in the King's House, lass," he said. "Now keep beside me, and do not mind the guards."

...

"My lady!"

Haldir had seen Lëonórwyn crossing the courtyard from Dínendal's window, and had hurried down to meet her.

"March Warden Haldir," said the young woman, bowing slightly, and blushing deeply.

Haldir opened his mouth—then realised that he had no idea how to ask her for a token without giving his plan away. "Can I rely upon your discretion, my lady?" he asked.

"That would depend on what you want me to be discreet about, sir," said Lëonórwyn.

"You have my word that it is nothing dishonourable," he said. "My only concern is to protect Lady Eowyn."

"Lady Eowyn?" The woman's colour darkened and she manoeuvred the bundle she was carrying a little further behind her back.

"I want to—to do something to *surprise* her," Haldir lied, hopefully.

Lëonórwyn looked suspicious.

The March Warden sighed. "Very well," he admitted, "I plan to go to Berodin's house. And if I do get inside I will need something of yours to show to your husband, to make him trust me—something that he will recognise. But I also need you to say nothing of this to Lady Eowyn. If she were to try to follow me..."

"*Follow* you?"

"She is a lady of rare courage and great spirit. If she knew what I was planning to do, she would want to go with me to rescue her husband."

"I see," said Lëonórwyn. She laid her bundle carefully on the ground, pulling its cloth wrapping closed, and removed one of her gloves. "Berkin sent these to me for my eighteenth birthday," she said. "When you show it to him, tell him that I said they were a far better choice than an oliphaunt—then he will know that *I* gave it to you."

Then she picked up her bundle and walked quickly into the King's House.

...

Eomer was not looking forward to the night's festivities.

It was trued that he had had his differences with Legolas—he disapproved of the way the elf had stolen Eowyn from her lawful husband; he disliked the way he let her run all over Middle-earth, pretending to be a warrior; he had been shocked by the violence of their lovemaking... But, then, Faramir did not seem to mind at all. And there was no denying that Legolas loved Eowyn, and that she *adored* him.

And he is a good friend, Eomer thought. Someone who is always there when you need him.

He glanced through the door into his wife's chamber. She was standing in the middle of the room, her arms raised to waist height, whilst her lady's maid laced up her gown. Eomer waited until her back was completely turned. Then he quickly removed a small pair of hunting knives from his clothes chest and wrapped them in a thick black cloak.

He would hide the cloak behind one of the statues outside the Banqueting Hall, wait until the feast was underway, and make some excuse to leave early.

Lothiriel would make his life a misery in the morning.

But that was tomorrow.

...

Gimli had left Esmarë in the care of one of Arwen's lady's maids—who had insisted that both the girl and her clothing must be scrubbed before she could spend a single night in the palace—and had wandered down to the courtyard of the King's House, where an excited crowd was already taking its seats in the makeshift 'theatre'.

A large wooden stage had been built out into the courtyard, with a painted backdrop depicting—quite convincingly, Gimli thought—a wintry landscape. The audience sat impatiently—chattering, eating dried fruits, and cracking nuts—on rows of wooden benches surrounding the stage, their backs warmed by flaming braziers.

Gimli took a seat and scanned the crowd for Lord Berodin. *Yes, there you are, he thought. Sitting behind Aragorn. Believe me, when the time comes, I will make you rue the day you laid a hand on that elf.*

A sudden drum roll filled the courtyard, and the audience fell silent. Out onto the stage came the 'wrenboys'—twenty young apprentices with painted faces, dressed in outlandish costumes of straw and rags. They formed themselves into three groups and, banging their sticks and stamping their feet on the wooden stage, began their strange, hypnotic chant.

*"Oh where are you going, said Milder to Moulder.
Oh we may not tell you said Festel to Fose.
We are off to the wood, said John the Red Nose."*

Onto the stage hopped the Wren, the little king of the waning year—a young man dressed in feathers and a bird mask. Oblivious to his fate, he settled on the 'holly bush'.

*"And what will you do then, said Milder to Moulder.
Oh we may not tell you said Festel to Fose.
We'll kill the cutty wren, said John the Red Nose."*

Robin Redbreast, king of the new year, flew onto the stage and beat the Wren to death with a birch rod.

*"And how will you fetch him said Milder to Moulder.
Oh we may not tell you said Festel to Fose
On four strong men's shoulders said John the Red Nose.
Ah that will not do said Milder to Moulder
Oh what will we use then said Festel to Fose
Great carts and great wagons said John the Red Nose."*

Four of the wrenboys lifted the poor victim onto a 'cart' and pushed him across the stage,

displaying his body to the audience.

*"Oh how will you cut him said Milder to Moulder
Oh we may not tell you said Festel to Fose
With knives and with forks said John the Red Nose.
Ah that will not do said Milder to Moulder
Oh what will we use then said Festel to Fose
Great hatchets and cleavers said John the Red Nose."*

Using big wooden 'cleavers', the wrenboys butchered the body and dropped the joints into a huge brass cauldron.

*"Oh how will you boil him said Milder to Moulder
Oh we may not tell you said Festel to Fose
In pots and in kettles said John the Red Nose
O that will not do said Milder to Moulder
Oh what we will use then said Festel to Fose
Great pans and large cauldrons said John the Red Nose."*

*"Oh who'll get the spare ribs said Milder to Moulder
Oh who'll get the spare ribs said Festel to Fose
We'll give 'em to the poor said John the Red Nose.
Oh who'll get the spare ribs said Milder to Moulder
Oh who'll get the spare ribs said Festel to Fose
We'll give 'em to the poor said John the Red Nose."*

Each wrenboy in turn reached into the cauldron, brought out a handful of grain, and cast it over the audience. And the crowd, cheering, and clapping, and stamping, rewarded the wrenboys' spirited performance by throwing coins onto the stage.

Gimli sighed and rose from his seat. The other guests had already begun filing into the King's House for yet another Yuletide feast. *I cannot eat when my best friend is suffering Aulë knows what torture—or worse*, he thought. *Perhaps I will walk down to Rath Amrûn and take another look at the house.*

He turned to leave, bumping the young man standing beside him. "I am sorry, my friend," he said. "I was not watching my step—"

"Gimli," whispered the lad, who seemed strangely familiar, "come with me. We are going to rescue Legolas!"

Extra scene: [The Prince of Ithilien](#)

Chapter 10: Dernhelm

They waited until Berodin was safely inside the Banqueting Hall, then they rode down to Rath Amrûn on Eowyn's horse, leading Arod behind them.

"Legolas will have my beard for this," grumbled Gimli. "You will be responsible for the world's first bald-faced dwarf... And where is *your* hair, might I ask?"

"Senta would not let me cut it off," said Eowyn. "She pasted it down with lanolin and covered it with my cap. It smells terrible."

"Thank Aulë," said Gimli, "I was afraid I might have to revive the elf after he caught sight of your cropped head."

Eowyn laughed, her worries forgotten for the moment—but they soon returned. "We *will* find him, Gimli."

"Of course we will, lass."

"Are you sure you know the plan?"

"Yes."

"Tell me once more."

Gimli sighed. "You have grown far too much like *him*," he said. "Very well—you will go to the back door and demand to see Olemi, claiming that he owes you money. Whilst you are making a commotion, *I* will strike the lock off the cellar door and enter the house—you are sure that there *is* a cellar door?"

"Yes, Lëonórwyn was forced to go down there to fetch her own coals. She says there is a trapdoor and she is almost certain that it leads to the passageway at the side of the house. She tried to open it, but it was locked from the outside."

"From the *outside*—that is strange," said Gimli.

"As if the lock were intended to keep people in, rather than out?"

"We shall see," said Gimli. "What about the inner door?"

"It is wooden and nothing an axe cannot demolish. It opens into the passage leading from the kitchen to the entrance hall."

"It will need to be a long commotion—and loud."

"I will do the best I can."

"Remember: if things turn nasty, run. Hit them where it hurts and get out. Do not worry about anyone else, just get back to the Citadel."

Eowyn said nothing.

"Promise me, or the deal is off," said Gimli.

"What deal?"

"The deal in which I risk my life for your husband and in return he throws me to the orcs for not keeping you safe in the King's House," said Gimli. "That deal."

"Thank you, Gimli," said Eowyn, softly, "I promise. But, if all goes well, I will try to make myself known to Olemi and Admant and persuade them to take me up the tower. With luck, you will already be there. With Legolas."

"Do not hope for *too* much luck, lass," said Gimli, gently. "Berodin may have imprisoned him elsewhere."

"I know," said Eowyn. "But I cannot *help* hoping."

...

"Come," said Haldir.

Dínendal was scanning the Banqueting Hall, searching for a familiar face. "I thought we were going to wait until the guests had started eating," he said.

"I have changed my mind," said Haldir.

"I cannot see Lady Eowyn."

"What do you mean?"

"She was not at the killing of the wren," said Dínendal, "and she is not in the Banqueting Hall. I am worried. She may be... distressed."

"I am sure she is."

"I mean *unwell*," said Dínendal. "Humans are prone to an illness called melancholia. It is like the sea longing in many respects, but there is no equivalent of Valinor. The afflicted can become so despondent that—in some cases—they will take their own lives."

Haldir shook his head. "It is true that Lady Eowyn was upset earlier, but she is not the sort to succumb to despair. She is the sort to..." His voice trailed away, and the two elves stared at each other. "I *thought* Léonórwyn was behaving suspiciously," said Haldir, "and she was fetching something from the stables."

"Lord Gimli is not here, either," said Dínendal. "We had better hurry."

...

The woman and the dwarf dismounted a few hundred yards from Berodin's house. Eowyn began tethering the horses, but changed her mind and, instead, patted Brightstar's neck. "*Avo visto*, Brightstar," she said, repeating the words she had often heard Legolas use, "*avo visto*, Arod."

"Will that work?" asked Gimli.

"I hope so," said Eowyn, "we may need them to come to us in a hurry."

"How well can you whistle?"

Eowyn smiled. "I will manage," she said.

They walked to the corner of Berodin's house, slipped into the passageway beside it, and—to Gimli's surprise—soon found the cellar door, sealed with a large padlock.

"Stay here," whispered Eowyn to the dwarf. "I will make as much noise as I can."

She carried on down the passage and turned the corner. Then, screwing up her courage, she

hammered loudly on the back door and, making her voice sound as deep as she could, she shouted, "Olemi! Olemi, come out here and face me or I will bring the guards! Olemi! Come out!"

The door flew open and Eowyn found herself face to face with a large woman—*The cook*, she thought—blocking the entrance with her legs astride and her hands on her hips. Eowyn swaggered manfully. "Where's Olemi?" she cried. "He owes me money! I want to see him—*now!*"

To her surprise, the woman laughed.

"Well aren't we the little fireball?" she said. "How old are you? Fifteen? Sixteen? What trouble's Olemi been getting you into, lad?"

It was hardly the response Eowyn had expected and she decided that an insult was called for. "Who are you—his *mother?*" she yelled.

The woman laughed again, delightedly.

Gods, thought Eowyn, *this is not how it happens in stories. By now, the whole house should be in an uproar.*

"Let me in!" she shouted.

The woman stepped aside.

Orc's breath. Nothing works!

Eowyn looked around the kitchen. It was empty. Silent. The whole house was silent. "Where is everybody?" she asked.

"The cat's away, so the mice are out playing for a couple of hours," said the woman.

"All of them?"

"All except me. Your friend Olemi's being 'bitten' by one of the golden geese as we speak." She winked and took a step towards Eowyn. "Is that where you met him? You're a handsome little fellow, aren't you?"

"Madam!" cried Eowyn, "*please...*" She backed against the wall.

"You're all polite now!" laughed the woman, coming closer. Eowyn could smell the ale on her breath. "I'll bet that, for all your bluster, you've never done it, have you, lad? Want to learn from an expert?"

"No!" cried Eowyn, as the woman's hand slipped between her thighs.

"What the..." The woman stared down at her. "*You're no lad—ah!*"

"Sorry mistress," said Eowyn, as the woman dropped to the floor, knocked out by Eowyn's staff.

...

"Gimli! Gimli!" shouted Eowyn.

The dwarf came running down the passage, his axe drawn. "What is it, lass?"

"The house is empty," she said, leading him through the door, "but I do not think we have

much time."

Gimli stepped over the cook. "What happened?" he asked.

"She tried to seduce me," said Eowyn, absently.

She was opening doors, looking for a way through to the front of the house. "This is it," she said, and they hurried down a narrow corridor that took them, almost miraculously, from the drabness of the servants' quarters into the gilded opulence of the entrance hall.

"Berodin is not short of a gold piece or two," said Gimli.

"Lëonórwyn thinks that the stairs to the tower are at the back of the lobby," said Eowyn, examining the wall beside the main stairs.

"Here," said Gimli, opening a small door, "a spiral staircase." He pressed his ear to the wall and listened carefully. "It is hard to believe," he said, "that they have really left the lad here unguarded, but I cannot hear anyone moving up there—all the same, better let me go first, just in case."

Eowyn sighed. "Very well," she said, "though it is really not necessary. I—*oh!*" She grasped his arm, startled by a loud pounding at the main entrance.

"Who is that?" said Gimli.

"How should *I* know?"

"Ignore it."

The pounding continued.

"We cannot ignore it," said Eowyn. "A house this size would never be left completely empty." She glanced around the entrance hall. "Hide in the staircase," she said. "I will answer the door and send whoever it is away." She pushed the protesting dwarf out of sight, straightened her cap, and limped purposefully to the entrance.

The pounding was growing more insistent.

She pulled back the heavy bolts, lifted the latch, and opened the solid wooden door. "Yes?"

"Where is he?" cried the visitor, pushing her roughly out of the way. He rushed through the hall and threw open the door to the front parlour.

Eowyn went after him. "Who is it you seek, sir?" she asked.

"Whom do I seek? Your orc of a master," He shook a piece of crumpled parchment in Eowyn's face. "A ransom! Did he think I would not know who was responsible? I followed his miserable henchmen *here!* Three hundred gold pieces! I am a poor man, but I will give him gold pieces! I will give him as many as he can eat!"

"Sir," cried Eowyn, "what are you saying?" She pursued the angry man into the parlour and followed him around the room, watching him pull aside hangings, and look under chairs and tables, as though he might find Berodin hiding behind the furniture.

"What am I saying, you animal?" he cried. "I am saying that you have taken my son. My son!" He lunged at Eowyn.

She dodged his hands. "Sir," she cried, "I am not Berodin's servant! I am here for the same reason as you—I hope to rescue someone I love!" But, ignoring her words, the man grabbed at

her again, this time getting his hands around her throat—

"Awwww!" roared Gimli, rushing forward with his axe raised.

At the sound of the battle cry, the man dropped Eowyn and turned, bewildered, to face the dwarf. "What—who are you?"

"I am the dwarf who will blunt his axe on your head if you do not step away from her," cried Gimli.

"Do as he says—get away from her," said a quieter voice, from the direction of the door, his words accompanied by the unmistakable sound of a great Galadhrim bow being drawn.

"Wait," croaked Eowyn, scrambling to her feet, and holding up her hands to stay both Gimli and Haldir, "we need him. Aragorn needs his testimony." She turned to the man. "Sir," she said, with surprising calm, "we are also here to rescue one of Berodin's victims. And we must be quick. You can come with us—and perhaps find your son—or you can continue to obstruct us, in which case Gimli will tie you up. The choice is yours."

The man stared at her, dumbfounded.

"We do not have much time," she urged.

"You are a *woman*..."

"Leave him," she cried, "his fire is burned out; he is harmless now. We must find Legolas." She limped out of the parlour, through the lobby and started climbing the spiral stairs. Haldir followed her, beckoning to Dínendal, who was hovering by the front door.

Gimli poked the man with his axe. "Go on," he said, "after them."

...

The key to the tower room was—just as Admant had said—hanging by the door. Nervously, Eowyn took it down from the hook and tried to fit it into the lock.

"Let me help you, my lady," said Haldir, gently guiding her shaking hand.

The key turned with a loud click and, together, Eowyn and Haldir pushed open the door.

...

"You are not leaving already, Master Edric?" cried Silrim.

"Aye, landlord," said Edric. "'Tis no reflection on your tavern. *I* have had my hour. Olemi did not need anywhere *near* an hour with Marglyn,"—three of his comrades raised their tankards and cheered—"Admant is sulking because the dwarf has carried off Esmarë. Osuald, Ricbert and Penda are already the worse for ale..."

"And we must all be getting back, for we have left Lord Berodin's house unguarded for far too long."

...

Eomer was used to open plains, not city streets and, as he wound his way down the narrow raths, he felt as though every window and every doorway he passed was filled with prying eyes.

What I am about to do, he thought, *breaking into the private house of a citizen of another*

realm, is madness. If I am caught there will be a scandal. And Lothiriel will never speak to me again.

But, then, Lothiriel might never speak to me again if I use the wrong knife at dinner...

He tethered his horse near the fifth gate, adjusted his hunting knives, pulled the hood of his black cloak down over his face and proceeded along Rath Amrûn on foot.

...

Eowyn stepped through the door and looked around the tower room. It was dark but, as her eyes adjusted, she could make out the outline of an occupied bed, a wash stand beside it, a small table with two chairs, and—she cried out in relief—an elf. Legolas was lying awkwardly on the floor, in the bay of the massive window, clearly injured. She ran to him and took him in her arms.

"Legolas," she said softly, "Legolas, can you hear me?" Slowly, the elf opened his eyes, recognised her, and tried to smile—but only managed a grimace.

"Oh, my love," she whispered.

In the dim light of the candle that Haldir had found and lit, she could see the angry bruises on Legolas' face and neck, and a makeshift bandage around his head.

"Dernhelm," sighed Legolas.

"Yes, my darling," said Eowyn, pressing her lips to the top of his head, "Dernhelm."

"Please, allow me, my lady," said Dínendal, gently, taking Legolas from her arms and laying him down on the floor. "Can you bring that light a little closer, March Warden?" He removed the bandage and looked carefully at Legolas' wound—a deep gash near the hairline that someone had tried to clean and dress. Then he carefully palpated the bruises on his forehead and throat. "Open your eyes, my lord," he said, "and look at me. How many fingers can you see?"

"One," said Legolas, hoarsely.

"Good. Now keep your eyes on my finger..." Dínendal watched Legolas' gaze follow the movement of his hand. "Very good, my lord," he said. "March Warden, I suggest that you take Lord Legolas and Lady Eowyn back to the Citadel."

He pulled Haldir aside. "He does not seem to have suffered any lasting harm, but I suggest that you have Lady Eowyn sit behind him, to support him, and ride very slowly, just in case."

...

The front of the house is far too exposed, thought Eomer. Overlooked by at least three sets of windows, and anyone could be lurking under that archway...

He slipped into the passage running along the north wall and looked for a possible means of entry. There was a line of smallish windows on the second floor, but the wall beneath them was far too smooth to climb. Halfway down the passage there was a cellar door, but that was secured with a solid-looking padlock...

Perhaps the back of the house would be more inviting. Eomer turned the corner, and shook his head in disbelief.

The back door was open.

He slipped silently to the side of the lighted entrance, flattened himself against the wall and drew both hunting knives. Then he swung himself through the door, his body poised, his knives raised.

The kitchen was deserted, apart from the woman lying on the floor.

Eomer crouched beside her. She had a large bruise on the side of her head—which looked suspiciously like a blow from a quarterstaff. *But she smells so strongly of ale, he thought, that she might have knocked herself out falling against the edge of the table. At any rate, she is still alive...*

Then something else caught his attention.

Voices. Coming down the passage. By the gods, at least five men. Drunk and spoiling for a fight!

...

Abandoning the distraught father to Dínendal's care, Gimli approached the dark figure lying in the bed. "Master Berkin," he said, "we have come to take you up to the Citadel."

Berkin pushed himself up on his arms. "You are the dwarf," he said, "the King's friend. Admant told me about you."

Gimli bowed. "That is right, lad. Let me help you up."

Berkin shook his head, sadly. "I cannot leave, my lord. Not yet. Please go. Go quickly."

"Why would you want to stay, lad?" asked Gimli, confused.

"I am very close."

"To what?"

"To proving that Berodin killed my parents—"

"*Where is my son? He is not here!*" cried the father, suddenly.

"Who is that?" asked Berkin.

"Another victim of your uncle's greed," said Gimli. "His son has been kidnapped."

"Ask him to come over here," said Berkin.

"Lad," said Gimli, shaking his head, "we cannot stay. There is no time. Come with us and we will help you avenge your parents."

Berkin sighed. "I cannot," he said. "There are documents—and other things—still hidden in the house."

"Tell the King about them. With your evidence, he can send the guards to search for them."

Berkin looked into Gimli's eyes. "I can see that you are a man—a dwarf—of honour," he said. "But if I leave with you, my uncle will destroy everything."

"Then we will get it now lad," said Gimli. He turned to Dínendal. "Take the man down the stairs and out through the front door, my friend," he said. "Master Berkin and I will follow as soon as we can."

The lady vanishes

...

Eomer sprang to his feet and looked for a place to hide.

Beyond the unconscious woman there was another door, which appeared to lead to the rest of the house and, from that direction, he thought he could hear quiet footsteps.

Someone small, he thought. Perhaps another woman.

As he stepped warily into the corridor, a slender silhouette appeared at the far end. *No, not a woman—a young lad. And if I can take him hostage, I will have something to bargain with.*

...

Carrying Legolas, Haldir followed Eowyn down the spiral staircase and into the entrance hall.

"Take him through here," said Eowyn, softly, opening the front door. "Arod should be waiting nearby. I told him not to stray."

She stepped aside to let Haldir pass, and suddenly became aware of a black shape moving silently down the corridor towards her.

Her first thought—her *only* thought—was to protect Legolas.

"Go!" she cried, pushing Haldir through the door. Then, raising her staff to guard, she turned to face the danger. It was a man, tall and broad, armed with a hunting knife. She waited, motionless, until he emerged into the hallway, then she brought her staff down on his outstretched arm with all her strength.

The man yelped and dropped his knife.

Head! thought Eowyn, swinging the staff back to the other side of her body, *one good blow will finish him off.*

But, as she began to strike, something about him suddenly seemed familiar—"Eomer!" she cried, diverting her blow away from his head—and missing him by mere inches.

"What in Middle-earth are *you* doing here?" hissed her brother, angrily.

"I am rescuing Legolas," said Eowyn. Then she smiled, "And so are you!"

"How many times must I tell you—"

The lecture was interrupted by loud noises from the kitchen. Brother and sister stared down the corridor. The men had found the unconscious cook. "The servants have returned," said Eomer. "We must get out of here, now! Come on!"

"No. Gimli and Dínendal are still upstairs." She pointed to the staircase.

"I will stay to help them," said Eomer. "You go!"

To his surprise, Eowyn did not argue. "I will take Legolas back to the King's House," she said. She caught his arm. "Take my staff. And be careful, Eomer."

He patted her shoulder. "I will. Now go!"

...

Haldir had summoned Arod and was lifting Legolas onto the horse's back. "My lady," he said,

his relief at seeing her safe obvious, "come, you must ride behind him."

Eowyn ran down the steps and mounted Arod, taking Legolas in her arms. She looked down at Haldir. "Eomer is in there," she said. "The servants have returned and Eomer has gone upstairs to help Gimli and Dínendal." She hesitated, biting her lip.

Haldir nodded, in understanding: "You go, my lady—go slowly," he said. "I will stay."

He slapped Arod's flank.

...

It was a long, slow journey back up to the Citadel.

Eowyn cradled Legolas in her arms, talking softly, asking him simple questions, trying to keep his mind active and focussed. As they reached the fifth level, she began to notice groups of people making their way down to the lower levels.

Aragorn's guests, she thought, returning home from the feast.

And Berodin will be amongst them.

Eowyn wondered what to do. *He is unlikely to try to stop us in public, she thought, but he will know that something has happened at the house, and that will put Eomer and the others in even more danger. We could hide in an alley until everyone has passed by, but that might take hours, and I need to get Legolas to safety...*

She decided to keep going.

Slowly, they made their way along Rath Bein, through the great stone spur, and through the sixth gate, then they turned sharply down Rath Fain, rode up through the long, lamp-lit tunnel to the seventh gate and into the Place of the Fountain.

And there she saw him—her enemy—riding a magnificent white stallion from the Downs of Rohan. As they passed, his face was a mask of cold fury, and his dark, hawk-like eyes seemed to bore through her flesh and pierce her very spirit.

Instinctively, Eowyn tightened her hold on Legolas and, suppressing a shudder, bowed her head politely as she rode by.

...

Aragorn was standing with Arwen on the steps of the King's House, bidding farewell to the last of their guests, when he noticed a strange couple riding into the courtyard. *A young lad and an injured elf—Eowyn and Legolas!*

He ran down the steps, with Arwen following. "Is he..."

"He will be all right," said Eowyn, "Master Dínendal says that he will make a complete recovery. But we must be careful with him. I need to put him to bed and get his wound cleaned and re-dressed."

"Let me take him."

Aragorn lifted Legolas down from the horse and, with Arwen's help, carried him into the house. Eowyn dismounted and, leaving Arod in the care of the servants, ran up the steps after them.

"Halmant," Aragorn called to his secretary, "send Master Cuthbert to Prince Legolas' apartment."

"At once, your Majesty."

"*Aragorn*," cried Eowyn, chasing after him, "wait! Eomer and the others are still in the house, and Berodin is returning."

Aragorn swore. "Halmant!" he shouted. "Before you speak to the healer, send Captain Berctuald down to Lord Berodin's house on Rath Amrûn. Tell him to do *whatever he thinks necessary* to get my friends out of there with the minimum of fuss."

...

"How is he?" asked Aragorn, anxiously.

Master Cuthbert dipped a clean piece of linen into the bowl of herb-infused water, carefully squeezed it out, and gently began to clean away the dried blood from Legolas' wound.

"Remarkable," he said, softly. "You need not worry, your Majesty," he said to Aragorn, "he shows no signs of having sustained permanent damage to his brain, and his wound is already healing. All he needs is rest. It is quite remarkable."

"Good," said Aragorn. He looked at Eowyn, who was sitting on the other side of the bed, holding Legolas' hand. "In that case we will leave him with you—but I shall have something to say to *you*, my lady, and to the others, if they survive Lord Berodin's wrath—tomorrow."

He swept out of the apartment.

Arwen gave Eowyn an apologetic smile, then followed her husband.

...

"Eowyn?"

Eowyn, holding Legolas in her arms, pulled him closer. "I am here, my love."

"I was afraid."

"Of what, my darling?" she asked.

"Of *dying*."

With an effort, he turned himself and buried his face in her shoulder, and he spoke so quietly that she had to strain to hear him.

"All through the Ring war," he said, "I was never afraid of death. For the first time, I saw others die—Gandalf, Boromir. Your uncle. It was terrible. Senseless. But I did not fear it, for I did not know what it meant. Not until now..."

"What *does* it mean, Legolas?" she asked softly.

"It means *leaving*," he said. "In the world of the elves, life was eternal. But in this world—this world of men—life is brief, and fragile, and losing it means leaving—and I do not want to leave *you*."

Extra scene: [You must be Prince Legolas](#)

Chapter 11: Revelations

Haldir ran back into the house.

Dínendal was crossing the entrance hall, supporting the distraught father who had earlier attacked Eowyn—and, to the left of the main staircase, four men were racing down the corridor towards him.

Haldir raised his bow. "Get him out—take the horses," he hissed urgently. "Get him up to the Citadel, as quickly as you can."

"I will," said Dínendal, dragging the man through the door.

The servants were almost in the hallway. Haldir loosed two warning shots. Three of the men threw themselves to the ground, but the fourth kept running. Haldir nocked another arrow and shot him in the shoulder. The man stumbled and fell.

"Your master will not reward you for losing your lives," said Haldir in his most imperious voice. "Take your wounded comrade, go back down the corridor and stay there. If you are sensible, there is no reason why you cannot survive this."

He nocked another arrow, drew, and awaited their reaction.

After a few moments, one of the men crawled cautiously forward and began to drag his injured friend towards the kitchen. Slowly, all four men retreated.

Haldir lowered his bow, but kept the arrow nocked.

It is quiet upstairs, he thought, so I can probably ignore the main staircase. But if I were in the kitchen, I would send someone around the outside of the house to attack from the front. And I cannot hold both the corridor and the door—

"Haldir! What is happening?" called Eomer, emerging from the spiral stair, followed by Berkin and Gimli.

"Your Majesty," said Haldir, "quickly, defend the door! I have driven the servants back towards the kitchens, but there is nothing to stop them coming round the front—we must leave immediately."

"No! No," cried Berkin, "we cannot leave yet, my lords. I still need to find my father's papers and the evidence against Berodin."

He limped over to the corridor. "Can you hear me?" he called to the servants. "It is Master Berkin. I want you to know that I am with these people of my own free will. I beg you not to risk your lives on my account." He turned to the others. "That should persuade at least two of them to do nothing," he said, softly.

"Do you know where these papers are, lad?" asked Gimli.

"In my uncle's study, through there," said Berkin.

"Come on then."

The boy and the dwarf disappeared into the study. Haldir and Eomer exchanged worried looks. "I think we may be here for some time, your Majesty," said Haldir.

...

"How is he?" asked Edric.

"In tugging *pain*," gasped Penda.

Olemi tore open the injured man's tunic and gently examined the wound.

"*Shit!*" cried Penda.

"He is fortunate," said Olemi, "it is only a flesh wound—I imagine the elf knew what he was doing. And the arrowhead does not appear to be barbed—so, if you let me pull it out for you straightaway, and clean and dress the wound, you should be fine."

Penda looked doubtful, but agreed.

"I will need some help," said Olemi to the others. "Edric—I will need you to hold him down. Admant—boil some water and find some clean cloths and soap. And some spirits—try the pantry."

"We cannot just stay here playing at healers whilst there are strangers in Lord Berodin's house," said Osuald.

"Why not?" asked Admant, filling a kettle. "You heard Master Berkin. He is in no danger. And anyway..." He hesitated for a moment, gathering his courage, then added, firmly, "And anyway, Berodin has no right to keep the lad locked up, so maybe it is for the best."

Edric murmured in agreement.

"That's as may be," said Osuald, "but Berodin will have our hides if we let those bastards escape. Come on Ricbert, we'll see if we can get help elsewhere. The rest of you can do as you please—but you'll come with us if you have any sense."

...

Gimli looked around the study. "Where do we start?" he asked.

"The desk," said Berkin, pointing to a strange piece of furniture in the far corner of the room. "It has a hidden strongbox. My father showed it to me as a child, but I do not remember where it was."

Gimli looked at the desk.

It was a curiosity—as tall as a man—in the shape of an elegant four-storied town house, its steep pitched 'roof' painted to look like tiles, its 'walls' painted to look like stone. The top storey consisted of an upwards-opening door, suspended on chains and decorated with four roundels depicting *Childhood*, *Adolescence*, *Manhood*, and *Old Age*. Beneath that were two shallow cupboards and a central drawer, carved to look like supporting beams. The next storey was much deeper and contained one large cupboard on the left—its folding door decorated with images of *Love* and *Learning*—and two alcoves on the right—arched like the gates of Minas Tirith and filled with shelves of books. Below that, and equally deep, was a single locked door—decorated with painted 'statues' of the legendary Kings of Gondor—that folded down to form a writing desk. And finally, beneath the desk, there was an arched recess, containing two large, plain boxes, one labelled *Letters* and the other *Accounts*.

"My mother had it made for my father," said Berkin, proudly. "The image of *Love* is her portrait."

"She was very beautiful," said Gimli.

"Do you suppose that the images are clues to the whereabouts of the strongbox?" said Berkin.

"They may well be," said Gimli, "but a sensible dwarf has more *practical* ways of solving puzzles." He drew out a small, bone-handled hunting knife and began tapping the sides of the desk. Berkin watched, with fascination.

"This is wood, not stone, but it should still be possible to—did you hear that?" Gimli asked.

"No..." said Berkin.

"It was a duller sound." He examined the bookshelves carefully. "By Aulë," he said, "the books are not real!"

Berkin tried to pull one out. "You are right! But they are so convincing," he said, "with their leather bindings. The strongbox must be behind them, but how does it open?"

Gimli examined the front and side of the desk, looking for any signs of a catch or a hinge, but with no success. "It must open from inside the cupboard," he said.

"Behind my mother's portrait," said Berkin, smiling.

They opened the door, pulled out the few items inside, and tried to find the mechanism to unlock the compartment. Gimli shook his head, "I think that—time being pressing—and with your permission—I should use my axe," he said.

"Yes," said Berkin.

Gimli drew his axe and swung it at the false books. The wood and leather splintered, but the blow stopped short with a dull clang. "It is metal-lined," said Gimli. "I may have to do more damage than I had hoped."

Berkin nodded.

Gimli stepped to the side of the desk, repositioned his hands on the axe, shifted his weight on his hips, and swung again. The front face of the bookcase peeled away from the desk; the concealed compartment was open.

Berkin reached inside, pulled out a pouch filled with papers, and thrust it down the front of his ragged shirt. "Let us go!" he said.

"A moment," said Gimli. He drew his small throwing axe and delicately removed the cupboard door. "We cannot leave her behind in this place," he said, handing Berkin his mother's portrait.

"Thank you, Gimli," said Berkin, smiling.

...

After careful consideration, Eomer had decided to leave the front door open.

He had checked the windows on the ground floor and all were barred, which meant that the door was their only means of escape. He reasoned that it would be far safer to clear attackers from an open door than to throw open a closed door not knowing what was outside...

"It is too quiet," he said, checking the rath from behind the mantlet he had improvised from an upturned table. Though he was not particularly proficient, he dearly wished he had a bow; something with a good range. "How much longer are they going to be?"

There was a loud crash from the direction of the study.

Then another.

The lady vanishes

Eomer glanced at Haldir—the elf had not moved. In fact, Eomer could swear that the elf had not so much as *breathed* in the past fifteen minutes.

"They are coming," said Haldir, suddenly.

"Who?" asked Eomer, gripping his staff.

"Gimli and the boy."

The study door opened and the boy rushed out, followed by the dwarf. "We have the papers!" said Berkin.

"Good," said Eomer. "Now, how are we going to get out?"

"Where is your horse?" asked Haldir.

"Down by the fifth gate," said Eomer. "Too far away."

"Eowyn left her horse untethered," said Gimli, "like Legolas does, so she could summon him with a whistle."

Haldir smiled. "Yes. I had forgotten. We will make an elf of her yet. Watch the corridor, Gimli." He turned to the boy. "When I call the horse you must be ready to mount it—can you do that?"

"I will do my best," said Berkin.

"Brightstar is a good horse; he will help you. Are we all ready?"

"Yes," said Eomer.

"Give me your mother, lad; I will take good care of her," said Gimli. He pushed the piece of cupboard down his belt and turned to Haldir. "Aye," he said, "we are ready."

Eomer and Haldir stood either side of the door. Haldir whistled, and the horse seemed to appear from nowhere. "Now!" cried Haldir. "Follow us, Berkin!"

The man and the elf ran down the steps and stood either side of the horse. Berkin staggered behind them and threw himself at the horse's back. Gimli grabbed his waist and pushed him upwards...

Two men leaped out of the passageway. One ran towards Eomer brandishing a long knife, but Eomer dispatched him with two blows of the staff. The second kept his distance, watching Haldir intently.

Berkin struggled to mount Brightstar.

Three archers stepped from a doorway further down the rath and took aim; four more men, armed with swords, ran to back them up; and at least ten more archers appeared on the rooftops around the gate.

The way to the Citadel was blocked but, at last, Berkin was astride the horse.

"Gimli," said Haldir, calmly, "take the boy and head for the *Golden Goose*; your Majesty, you follow them."

His bow still drawn, the elf stood at the corner of Ostrad Tinnu, covering their departure.

The archers, knowing that the first man to try shooting an elf would die, watched and waited, but the second man from the passageway had begun to move, slowly raising his hand to swing

something around his head.

Haldir knew that the moment he gave the man his full attention the archers would shoot. From the corner of his eye he watched the man's hand, trying to understand what was happening. *What is he holding? he wondered. Why is he swinging... Orc's breath, the weighted cord! And the archers are raising their bows...*

Moving with elven speed Haldir loosed his arrow and threw himself towards Ostrad Tinnu.

The bolus-thrower howled in pain.

A hail of arrows fell on the paved rath.

But the elf had already gone.

...

"Lord Berodin," said Captain Berctuald, catching up with the man as he passed through the fifth gate, "we have had reports of a disturbance at your house. Allow us to escort you home."

Berodin bowed stiffly. "That will *not* be necessary, Captain," he said, coldly. "I am sure that whatever you have heard has been wildly exaggerated. My servants are good men, but some of them can be a little high-spirited when they have been drinking, and then the neighbours complain. I will deal with this. Please do not trouble yourself."

"The King has ordered me to investigate, my lord," said Berctuald, firmly.

The rath was quiet as they approached the house, but Berctuald noticed several men lurking in doorways and a telltale splash of fresh blood on the pavement.

"Your door is wide open, my lord," he said. "Please wait here—"

"Captain, I have told you—"

"I have been *ordered* to ensure your safety, my lord," Berctuald lied, "please wait here. Offa, Hengist, follow me."

The men dismounted, drew their swords, and cautiously entered the house. Berctuald scanned the hallway. There were several doors to the left, one of them open, a passageway to the servants' quarters, a broad central staircase, and a small open door, almost concealed beneath the main stairs, leading to a spiral stair.

"Offa, fetch Glimal, Marol and Nishryn. Send two of them up the main stairs to look for any sign of intruders. You take the other man up that spiral staircase—I want to know what is hidden up there. Hengist, come with me."

Berctuald moved cautiously from door to door, inspecting the rooms. The open door led to a study—uncluttered, precisely ordered. *The retreat of a man who likes to be in control*, he thought, *but that folly of a writing desk is out of place. And someone has taken an axe to it. What were they looking for? Money? No, money would be somewhere more obviously secure. Papers...*

Berctuald turned to Hengist. "Let us check the kitchen," he whispered.

They crept down the corridor and entered the kitchen with swords raised.

"What is going on here?" Berctuald asked, sternly.

A drunken woman was lolling in a chair by the fire, three servants were removing an arrow

from a man's hand, and a fifth man was sitting at the kitchen table, his left arm in a sling, his right hand raising a large measure of spirits to his lips.

One of the servants tending the wounded man—a commanding, intelligent-looking fellow who reminded Berctuald of Prince Faramir—looked up from his task and said, "It is nothing, Captain. Just a foolish, drunken dispute."

"And the robbery?"

"What robbery, Captain?"

"Someone has broken into the desk in your master's study."

"I know nothing about that, Captain."

"Can you deal with these injuries by yourself?"

"Yes, Captain."

Berctuald and Hengist returned to the entrance hall, where Offa was already waiting for them. "There is no one in the main part of the building—and nothing up the spiral stairs *now*, Captain," he said, "but it is obvious that someone has been kept prisoner there. Very recently."

Berctuald nodded. "Say nothing of what you have seen in front of Lord Berodin," he said. *It appears that the King's friends have already escaped*, he thought, *and have taken someone—and something—with them.*

He walked out into the rath.

"My lord," he said, "your house is safe, but your servants are in disarray and you appear to have been robbed. I have no way of knowing what might have been taken."

Berctuald saw panic flicker across Berodin's face. "It is unlikely to have been anything of consequence, Captain," he said. "I thank you for your assistance. Good evening."

Berctuald had been dismissed. He bowed his head briefly, then mounted his horse and led his company back to the Citadel.

...

By the time Haldir caught up with the others they had reached the *Golden Goose*, and were lifting Berkin down from the horse. "Quickly," said the elf, "inside."

Berkin smirked at Gimli. "I have always wondered what it looked like," he said. "The sign is a nice touch!"

"Behave yourself," said Gimli, opening the door. "You are a married man."

"Of course," replied Berkin. "Of course."

Haldir followed the others into the tavern and looked around anxiously, but the parlour was empty except for an elderly man asleep by the fire.

"Master Fingolfin, Master Norin," cried Silrim, "welcome, welcome! And you have brought more friends with you." He looked curiously at Eomer, but said nothing. "A pity the *fair* gentleman is not with you"—he winked—"tell him I have another fine young man he might enjoy introducing to the pleasures of the bedroom—"

"We need a room for the night," said Haldir, curtly. "And we need your silence."

The lady vanishes

The landlord considered the elf's request. "Do you want a woman?" he asked.

"No."

"A boy?"

"No."

Silrim looked at Berkin. "It will cost you extra if you plan to use your own," he said.

Berkin laughed delightedly. "Master Silrim," he said, "you are every bit as dishonourable as your reputation suggests!"

"Do I know you, young master?" asked Silrim, haughtily.

"Berkin, son of Alrin, at your service," said Berkin, with an unsteady bow. "I believe my account is in credit."

"Master Berkin! Yes sir! Of course, sir! Come this way."

"We will want some food," said Berkin, limping up the stairs after the landlord. "And something to drink. And it is very important that you do not tell my uncle's men that we are here—there will be a bonus for you if we spend the night undisturbed."

"I understand, sir," said Silrim. "*Incognito*, as they say. In here, sir." He ushered them into his 'front room' with its bath and mirrored bed and manacles. "I will send one of the girls up with some food. You can keep her, too, if you like—on the house."

"That will not be necessary, Master Silrim," said Berkin. "Thank you, but I am a married man."

...

"Oh, *Legolas*..."

Still half-asleep, Eowyn opened her legs and sighed contentedly as his hardness entered her. "Oh," she whispered, "oh yes..."

She sank back into the bed and smiled luxuriously—his deep thrusts and long, slow withdrawals were unbearably beautiful.

She wanted them to last forever.

But...

Her eyes flew open. "Legolas!" she cried, "we should not be doing this! You are injured."

She looked up at him. His bruises had already faded and his wound had healed over. But his fear—raw and visceral—was still there, plain in the frown on his beautiful face.

"Oh, my love," she whispered.

And, not knowing how else to comfort him, she wrapped her arms and legs around him and willingly gave him her body.

...

Gimli had laid the food out on a strange wooden contraption that he had dragged out from beside the bath, and had gathered together various objects that could be used as stools.

Haldir was keeping a discreet watch at the window.

Berkin sat down at the 'table'. "It is hard not to think about what this—um—equipment might have been used for in the past," he said. Eomer grunted in agreement. "But it is preferable to sitting on the bed. And this will be the first real food I have eaten in—oh, ages. I will probably make myself ill."

He took a large bite of fresh bread and a mouthful of roasted ham. "Delicious," he said.

Gimli grinned. "You enjoy it, lad!"

"How do you plan to get out of here?" Berkin asked.

"We will wait until morning," said Haldir, "then we will find a safe route to the Citadel."

"I have heard," said the lad, between mouthfuls, "that there is a network of caves running up through the Hill of Guard—an alternative set of raths, if you like, used by thieves and smugglers."

"Caves do not usually form in this type of rock," said Gimli, doubtfully.

"They are manmade," said Berkin. "They were originally separate cellars but, over time, they have been joined together. Perhaps Master Silrim will know something about them. If he does, I am sure that we can persuade him to help us get into them. We could probably hire a guide..."

"Where are you getting your money from, lad?" asked Gimli.

"Ah," said Berkin. "My father left me well provided for." He paused. "My father had a suspicion that Berodin would try to kill him, so he made sure that I would have someone to protect me, and enough money to live on."

"Olemi," said Gimli.

"Yes," said Berkin. "We will need to make sure that he and Admant get out of this unharmed."

"Of course," said Eomer. "What other retainers do you have?"

Berkin laughed. "I like to think of most of them as friends," he said. "There is Mistress Aedilhild—she was my mother's nurse; Sigbert, one of the Gondorian Guard; the Mayor, Lord Olivan—his wife and my mother were close friends; Master Cuthbert, the Royal Healer; and, of course, Silrim, though he knows nothing of my plans."

"The assassin, Alchfrid, told us that you bribed him to save some of your uncle's victims," said Eomer.

"When I could," said Berkin.

"How did you keep track of what was happening outside the house?"

"I got information through Olemi and Admant. The hard part was having to remember it all—I could not write it down. But, then, I had little else to think about." said Berkin. "Except Lëonórwyn, of course."

"What evidence do you have against your uncle?" asked Eomer.

Berkin removed the leather pouch from inside his shirt. "The Gondorian Guard investigated my parents' deaths and Lord Olivan has obtained a copy of their report. Someone had cut the fingers from their left hands.

The lady vanishes

"And in here"—he reached into the pouch, and drew out two gold rings, which he laid on the 'table'—"are my parent's wedding rings, engraved with their names. Berodin's *trophies*," he added, bitterly.

...

The being of light had returned.

"My lord?" whispered Legolas, shielding his eyes.

"Why are you so afraid, Legolas?" asked the being. "You wanted to share your life with a mortal, and the Valar granted your wish. You wanted her for all eternity, and I have shown you what the future may hold. Why do you still fear?"

Legolas' eyes filled with tears. "I am weak," he said.

"No, Tithen Lassui," said the being, gently, "you are not weak. You have more than enough strength for the task ahead, and you have a brave young wife to aid you. You fear because you do not trust. Follow the true path, my child, trust the Valar, and fear no more."

The being placed its hand on the elf's head in blessing, then faded away.

...

Eomer waited until both Berkin and Gimli had started snoring. "What was that business about Legolas and boys?" he asked Haldir. "Is he a tunic lifter?"

"No!" said Haldir, trying to forget his own earlier suspicions. "No, of course not! Legolas immediately realised that the boy was Lëonórwyn in disguise and pretended to hire 'him' so that they could speak in private."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am."

"Then why is he so..." Eomer sighed. "Arwen's brothers are—well, they are characters. But at least it is clear what sex they are. And you—you are obviously a man—"

"A *man*?"

"A *male*. But Legolas is so—so pretty. And it is not just his looks," said Eomer. "It is the way he plays with her—washes her, dresses her, carries her everywhere. The gods help us if she ever gets pregnant! He will probably have morning sickness with her. He will want us all to feel her belly. He will hold her hand while she gives birth."

"Did you not do that for your wife?"

"Certainly not!"

"If I were married to Eow—to someone like Eowyn, I would do all that with her and more," said Haldir. "I would want to share *everything* with her, just as Legolas does."

"It is not masculine," said Eomer.

"Why?" asked Haldir.

"Because men were made stronger and less emotional than women and women were made softer and more caring than men. It is a man's task go out into the world and make it safe for his woman and children, and it is a woman's task to stay at home and take care of her

husband's sons. That is how it should be. At the end of the day they may come together, but they do not spend their entire lives holding each other's hands."

"For an elf, masculine and feminine are not opposites," said Haldir. "Your sister is a remarkable woman—brave and strong but gentle and loving. No elf would try to restrain her. She..." Haldir's voice fell to a whisper. "I owe her my life."

"Does Legolas know?" asked Eomer.

"Know what?"

"How you feel about Eowyn?"

"Yes," said Haldir.

Eomer sighed. "See—a man would not countenance that. A man would send you away."

"Why?"

"To protect his wife!"

"Do you not trust your sister?"

"Of course I do."

"Then you think that *I* might take her by force?"

Eomer stared at him. "No," he admitted. "But a man would be jealous."

Haldir nodded. "A man would send his wife's unfortunate admirer away and make an enemy of him, instead of keeping him nearby as a friend, ready to protect his wife if ever he himself were unable."

"Is that the arrangement?"

Haldir said nothing.

"Does Eowyn know she has been bequeathed to you?"

Haldir looked uncomfortable.

Eomer laughed mirthlessly. "She would certainly have something to say about it if she did! And are you sure you are up to the task of 'protecting' my sister?"

"Yes," said Haldir. "I am sure."

"Elves," said Eomer, shaking his head.

...

"Good morning, Eowyn *nín*," said Legolas. He was sitting, fully dressed, on top of one of the decorative stone pillars that flanked the balcony doors, looking down at her as if he had been watching her sleep. Eowyn sat up and studied him carefully. "What has happened?" she asked.

"Happened?"

"Last night you were upset. Now you are not—you are behaving strangely, but you are not upset."

Legolas jumped gracefully down to the floor, sat on the edge of the bed, and took her hand. "I had a dream last night, Eowyn *nín*, after we made love," he said. "Do you think that dreams can foretell the future?"

"I have heard people say so," said Eowyn, "but I am not sure that I believe it."

"Nor am I," said Legolas. "But my dream..." He thought for a moment. "My dream was about our future and it comforted me."

"What happened in it?"

"I am not sure how much I should tell you, *melmenya*. I saw many things, which may or may not come to pass. Would it be better for you to know—and be burdened by expectations—or for you to go forward unaware?"

Eowyn thought for a moment. "Were we happy, Legolas, in the future?"

He kissed the top of her head. "We were very happy, *meleth nín*."

"Then I suppose that is all I need to know," she said, hugging him. "I trust your judgement, Legolas. Though I should warn you," she added, "that it is only my head talking now. My heart is still very curious and will no doubt pester you for days to come."

Legolas laughed.

"Why were you sitting half way up the wall?"

"I needed to see the trees in Arwen's garden."

"Why did you not go out onto the balcony?"

"I needed to see you, too." His expression suddenly became serious and he slowly leaned in, and kissed her with an intense tenderness—on her mouth, then on her neck and then on her breasts, gently sucking her nipples.

Eowyn slid her hand down his body and fondled him, purring with delight as she felt him growing. "*Mmmmm...*"

"*Melmenya...*" he whispered, pushing her gently onto the bed.

She sat up, suddenly. "Legolas!" she cried.

"What is it?"

"Eomer and Gimli! I left them in Berodin's house! And—oh!" she put her hands to her mouth.

"What, *melmenya*?"

"Aragorn is angry with me. Very angry. Gimli and I—we went against his orders and broke into Berodin's house. We broke the law."

Legolas kissed her forehead. "It is still early, *melmenya*," he said, brushing her hair out of her face. "But we will talk to Aragorn later—I will plead your case and *you* will apologise and throw yourself on his mercy. And do not worry about Gimli and Eomer. I am sure they were back hours ago."

Extra scene: [My body may be weak now uncle](#)

Chapter 12: Twelfth Night

Legolas groaned with pleasure.

Eowyn's body was soft and warm, and gloriously wet, and—after a few thrusts—he was already on the brink. He grasped the bed sheet in both hands. "Gods, melmenya," he moaned, willing his orgasm away, "I must rest for a moment..."

Eowyn giggled happily. "But you have only just begun," she teased.

"You love," he panted, "undoing me like this."

She shook her head innocently, then suddenly tightened her muscles, squeezing him mercilessly.

"*Elbereth GILTHONIEL!*" cried Legolas and his body convulsed violently as he exploded inside her. "Gods," he gasped, trembling in her arms, "I am going to make you pay for that. I am going to make sure that you never do that to me again!"

"You can try," said Eowyn, "but you will never stop me—I can do whatever I want with you."

Legolas pushed himself up on shaky arms and looked down at her. "You think you can undo me again?"

"I *know* I can," she replied.

...

Shortly after dawn, Berkin summoned Silrim.

The landlord arrived carrying a heavy metal box, which he laid on the bed. "Here it is sir," he said, "just as Master Olemi left it."

"Thank you, Silrim," said Berkin. "You have been very helpful and I will settle my account with you when we leave. But my friends and I have one last service to ask of you. We need to enter the Citadel unseen. And I have heard that there is a system of tunnels running up the Hill of Guard..."

Silrim looked uncomfortable.

"I would pay very well for an introduction to someone who could show us the way."

"How well?" asked Silrim.

"I do not know what the going rate would be, Master Silrim."

"Five hundred gold pieces," said Silrim.

Eomer gasped.

"Very well," said Berkin, calmly. "Arrange it for us."

The landlord bowed. "It will take me about an hour, sir," he said.

"Perfect," said Berkin. "In the meantime, can you arrange some breakfast for us?"

"Of course, sir." The landlord bowed again and left.

...

His thrusts were just how she liked them—rough but perfectly aimed—and she was soon feeling the first faint suggestions of release. Eowyn wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled herself up off the bed, changing the angle of his penetration to give herself more time.

In response, Legolas grasped her waist, came up on his knees, and lifted her onto his lap, using his hands to make her ride him.

Oh! Deliciously impaled and delirious with pleasure, Eowyn arched her back and pushed herself down harder on his shaft. She moaned in ecstasy, her hips gyrating, as her whole body tingled with anticipation—*gods, she was close—*

Too close! she thought, *Too close! I am about to lose.*

She concentrated on Legolas, clasping his head against her breasts and gently caressing his ears and scalp with the very tips of her fingernails, until she had him sobbing on her bosom like an elfling. *Oh yes!* she thought, *Oh yes, my darling! Come for me!* And the moment she felt his orgasm begin she slid off him and, grasping him gently, she watched the streams of seed erupt from him. "Oh, my love," she whispered, "you are so beautiful!" And she leaned forward and placed a tender kiss on his moist, dark flesh.

...

Berkin slipped his hand down his ragged breeches and, grinning at Gimli, removed a small key. "Not the most comfortable place in the world to keep something hidden." He unlocked the metal box and opened it.

"By Aulë!" cried Gimli.

The box was completely filled with small leather pouches.

"Coins and jewellery," said Berkin. "Part of my father's fortune."

"Where is the rest?" asked Eomer.

"With Lord Olivan," said Berkin. "It is safer with him, but difficult to access, so I have always kept a small amount here, where Olemi could get at it whenever we needed it." He smiled. "My uncle spent the last twelve years trying to make me tell him where the money was. But I knew that my life depended on his not knowing. He wanted this, and he wanted me to marry Léonórwyn. After that, I could die... Now, there are eighteen hundred gold pieces in here, and various items of jewellery, so we should be fine."

"I will repay you when we reach the Citadel," said Eomer, uncomfortably.

"Certainly not, your Majesty," said Berkin. "I would not be here if it were not for you—and Gimli and Haldir—so allow *me* to do what I can to repay *you*." He smiled. "Money is nothing compared to freedom!"

...

Eowyn sighed—she had won the contest but now she was desperately aroused and the elf in her arms was exhausted. She slipped her hand between her thighs and, burying her face in Legolas' hair, she tried to pleasure herself.

"Oh," she complained, softly. It was not working.

Legolas raised his head and looked down at her hand.

"I am sorry, melmenya," he whispered. "Beautiful, bewitching melmenya."

The lady vanishes

He took her hand and brought it briefly to his lips, then he replaced her fingers with his own, gently circling her sensitive flesh with light, delicate touches.

"Oh, Legolas," she whimpered, "*inside* me, please..."

"*Shhhhh*"—he kissed her tenderly—"trust me." Without removing his hand, he slowly kissed his way down her body, gently parted her legs, and began lapping at the swollen bud of her flesh with his tongue.

"Oh!" Eowyn's body arched with pleasure.

Legolas took her into his mouth and sucked gently.

"*OH!*" Eowyn stared in surprise as the whole of Middle-earth suddenly exploded in a shower of stars and someone, caught at the centre of the storm, screamed.

Then the world disappeared altogether.

...

"This is Master Olodan," said Silrim. "His fee is another five hundred."

Berkin nodded, solemnly. "Thank you, Silrim." He turned to the other man. "We need to use an entrance that is close by—we cannot risk going out into Rath Amrûn. And we want to leave the caves in or near the Citadel. I will pay half your fee now and half when we arrive."

"Very well, sir," said Olodan. He paused for a moment, looking at Eomer and Haldir, who had carefully shrouded themselves in dark cloaks, then added, "It is no business of mine what you intend up there but I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't advise you to wait until nightfall. The way into the Citadel is well concealed but, once you are out in the open, the whole place is guarded better than a young maiden's muff. You will have far more freedom in the dark."

"Thank you for your good advice, Master Olodan," said Berkin. "But I'm afraid we cannot wait that long."

...

"*Melmenya*..."

It took Eowyn a moment to understand why Legolas looked so worried. "I swooned," she said.

"I shall send for Dínendal."

"No," said Eowyn. She reached for him, smiling contentedly, "No, my love, it is not something to trouble a healer with. It is normal."

"Normal!"

"Well, perhaps not quite normal. Hold me, Legolas."

He scooped her up in his arms.

"I have heard other women talk about it," she whispered, laying her head on his shoulder. "They call it 'the little death'. It is just a very intense completion." She lifted her head and kissed him. "Thank you, my darling."

...

"There are four men in the street," said Haldir, "and I would wager there are more of them, out

of sight, perhaps watching the alley from the roofs."

Olodan curbed his natural curiosity. "The entrance we will use is behind the locksmith's, four doors down," he said. "We can get there by going through the back yards of the houses if you don't mind a bit of climbing."

Gimli looked at Berkin. "I will manage," said the boy. "Let us go!"

...

Legolas closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on maintaining his rhythm, but the knocking was growing more insistent.

"Go away," he shouted.

"I have a message, Prince Legolas, from his Majesty, King Elessar."

Legolas swore. "Wait there then!" he shouted. "And please do not disturb me again!"

He raised himself up on his hands and thrust harder. "Come for me, *melmenya*," he whispered. "I know you are close. Come for me now. I cannot hold on much longer, my love..."

Eowyn writhed beneath him, desperately chasing her release. "I cannot..."

"Yes, you can, *meleth nín*, you can—*oh*"—he was forced to pause for a moment, hovering over her—"you can," he gasped, "you can..."

Clenching his teeth, he lifted her up from the bed, slid his hands down her body, grasped her buttocks and, squeezing them firmly, pulled her down hard against his pelvis.

Eowyn wailed.

"Yes, *melmenya*! That is it!" He cried out in relief. "Yes, I can feel you! Oh Valar, Eowyn *nín*, I can feel you!"

...

The entrance to the caves was concealed inside a small wooden shed built against the hill.

As they waited for Olodan to clear the camouflage from the door, Haldir took Gimli aside.

"Berkin is brave and determined, but he is already exhausted. I can carry him," he said, "if you can persuade him to let me—he seems to look up to you."

Gimli nodded. "Lad," he said, quietly, to Berkin. "You are doing very well, but we need to move quicker."

"I know," said Berkin. "I will try harder."

"Let me carry you," said Gimli.

"I am far too tall!"

"Then let Haldir carry you," said Gimli. "He is a great big fellow and, though they may look fragile, elves are almost as strong as dwarves."

Berkin hesitated. "Do you think he would?"

"He has already offered," said Gimli.

Berkin grinned at Gimli. Then he turned to Haldir. "Thank you," he said. "It is not how I had dreamed of escaping but I would be grateful for some help."

"Come, gentlemen," said Olodan, opening the door at last. "Follow me."

He led them into a squarish stone chamber, lit with torches, then closed the door behind them. "Stay close to me and do not leave the path I use," he said, taking one of the torches from the wall. "You would not get lost forever, because there are many ways in and out, but you could easily stray into a place that is—shall we say—dangerous territory..."

"What are we going to tell Aragorn about all this?" Eomer asked Gimli, softly.

"I have been wondering that myself," said Gimli.

Haldir lifted Berkin over his shoulder and they all began the long, slow climb up to the Citadel.

...

"Good morning," said Aragorn, "I am sorry to have disturbed you so early, Legolas."

"Eomer did not return?" asked Eowyn, anxiously.

"No," said Aragorn. "Here, sit down, you both look exhausted. Let me get you a drink." He poured three glasses of spiced wine. "Last night, Captain Berctuald searched Berodin's house. He found clear evidence that Eomer, Gimli and Haldir had escaped, taking Berkin with them. Master Dínendal arrived here shortly after you did. But the others are still missing."

"Do you think..." began Eowyn, softly.

"I am sure they are still alive, Eowyn," said Aragorn. "But, for some reason, they were unable to return to the Citadel. The question is, where could they be hiding?"

Legolas thought for a moment. "The *Golden Goose*," he said.

"Of course," said Eowyn. "It is near to Berodin's house—and it is the only place they know."

"And Gimli has become quite friendly with the landlord," added Legolas. "I will go down there and look for them—"

"*No you will not!*"

"Melmenya—"

"You have only just recovered from a severe beating," said Eowyn

"Eowyn is right," said Aragorn "I will send Berctuald. He is a good man—he will find them. In the meantime, Legolas, I suggest you get some rest."

...

They had been climbing, for what seemed like hours, through a series of strange, square rooms, joined by transverse passages and steep, narrow staircases. Gimli had remarked several times that to call these featureless dungeons 'caves' was a travesty.

"How much further?" asked Eomer.

"Just another two staircases," said Olodan. "We are nearly there."

"It is hard work."

Olodan nodded. "The stairs are not easy. The passages are narrow and the torches use up the air. It makes the heart beat faster. The lad would have taken days to climb them by himself."

"Yes."

"But *I* am used to them."

"What do you do?" asked Eomer, curiously. "What do you use the stairs for?"

"Ah," said Olodan. "I suppose you could call me a courier."

"I imagine you avoid paying excise by moving things around the city this way?" said Eomer.

"I avoid all manner of things," replied Olodan.

They reached the top of the stairs and stepped out into a level passageway, penetrating further into the hill, with heavy doors either side, some of them locked. "We are on the sixth level," said Olodan. "Through there"—he pointed to one of the doors—"is the *Live and Let Live*. The tavern is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and sells many things besides ale and whores. The customers pay well for their—er—pleasures."

"It really is another world," said Berkin, awe-struck. "An under-world. Though it is quite hard to appreciate it fully when you are hanging upside down."

"Have you ever considered turning to crime?" asked Haldir.

"Why do you ask that?"

"You attempt things that other people would assume were impossible, and you have an uncanny ability to anticipate the actions of others even though you have relatively little experience of life. It strikes me that you would do very well at it."

"Thank you," said Berkin, "I think. But there is already more than enough crime in my family."

...

"I cannot just sit here waiting, melmenya. Not whilst Gimli is in danger."

"I know," said Eowyn, snuggling close, "but I do not want you to go." Legolas hugged her. "We could both go..."

"No, melmenya."

"Yes! Yes—that is the answer. We will both go together. Go out onto the balcony. Go on!"

"Why?"

"So that I can change."

"Since when have you been shy about undressing in front of me, melmenya?"

"Since it took Aragorn's messenger an hour to drag us out of bed this morning," said Eowyn. "We cannot control ourselves. Go outside."

...

They started up the final staircase, a long, curving passage running so close to the surface that, here and there, they could see pinpoints of light where fissures in the rock opened to the outside.

"We are inside the Great Prow," said Olodan. "Not long now. From here, you need to be silent."

Moments later, the stairs ended in a gently sloping passage. Olodan stopped before a small wooden door bound with iron reinforcements. "Put out the torches," he whispered. He waited until it was dark then slid back a tiny panel and peered outside. Once convinced it was clear, he carefully opened the door, moving it slowly to avoid making any noise, and they stepped out into a small potting shed.

"By the gods," said Gimli softly, "for the last few hundred yards we were inside the thickness of the palace wall, and now we are in the corner of the Queen's garden. Those are Legolas' beloved *fanglas* cuttings."

"I will not go any further," said Olodan. "You must be careful. Once you leave this shed you are on your own—when I close the door you cannot come back into the caves. The courtyard is overlooked on all four sides. There is a single way out, in the centre of the wall opposite. It gives on to the main east-west corridor of the palace. Now, I believe you owe me a further two hundred and fifty, young master."

"Of course," said Berkin, handing him a money pouch. "And thank you, Master Olodan."

The man bowed, stepped back into the cave, and closed the door. Once he was safely locked in, Gimli opened the potting shed door and stepped out into the garden.

"Gimli!" cried a familiar voice from the balcony opposite. "Gimli! What are you doing *there, elvellon?*"

...

The evidence that Berkin provided, supported by the testimonies of the assassin and of the father of the kidnapped boy, was enough to condemn Lord Berodin. That same afternoon, Aragorn sent the Gondorian Guard down to Rath Amrûn to arrest the entire household. Olemi and Admant were immediately set free.

There was no sign of the kidnapped boy but, with Berkin's help, two of the servants—Osuald and Ricbert, Berodin's accomplices in crime—were persuaded to betray their master.

Over the following day, they revealed an extensive network of thieves, smugglers and murderers, all working for Berodin. By nightfall, the Gondorian Guard had arrested a further fifteen men and six women, and had found the boy unharmed.

...

After careful consideration, Gimli and Eomer had decided to keep most of what they had learned about the Minas Tirith underworld to themselves. The day after their escape, however, Gimli quietly made his way to the Queen's garden, and began making a few important modifications to the end wall of the potting shed.

"Gimli," said a soft voice, behind him.

Gimli put down his hammer and turned. "Yes lad?"

"Do you have much experience of women?" asked Berkin.

"A little," said Gimli, thinking of Esmarë. "Why do you ask?"

Berkin stepped inside the shed, closed the door behind him, and lowered his voice still further. "Lëonórwyn and I are married," he said, "but we have not—er—you know..."

"There still is plenty of time for that, lad."

"Yes. But the thing is... The thing is, Gimli, that I do not know what to do. I mean—I have read the books. But they are not—not very explicit. And I do not know whether Léonórwyn would have married me if she had had a choice. I do not know if she likes me."

"She likes you lad. She makes that very clear."

Gimli thought for a moment. He had never expected to have to talk to a young human about... the birds and the bees.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat, "sit down." He pointed to a wooden box. Berkin sat.

"Now... As you know, the male organ of pleasure—assuming that men are broadly the same as dwarves—is on the outside, for all to see." Berkin nodded. "But the female—um—equivalent is secret, hidden away, like a precious gem."

"Where is it?" asked Berkin.

"Well—pretty much where yours is, lad, but very small and delicate."

Gimli thought for a moment, "Start off by exploring the landscape—gently, with your fingertips and, even better, with your tongue—get to know its *landmarks*. Then, when you are ready—*both* ready—to"—he inclined his head—"delve for the treasure, remember what you have already learnt about the layout of the mine—"

...

A large bonfire had been built in the courtyard of the King's House and the guests were taking turns to cast their Yule Wreaths into the flames.

"What are you going to wish, melmenya?" asked Legolas.

"Legolas! You know it is supposed to be secret."

"Well, I will wish..." He leaned towards her, and whispered in her ear.

Eowyn eyes widened and she laughed. "You wicked elf! I can promise you that *that* will never happen!" Then she raised herself on tiptoe to whisper back, "How would I stroke your ears if my wrists were chained to the bedposts?"

She grinned at the look on Legolas' face, but then her own expression became serious. "Do you think we will ever have any time alone, Legolas? Do you remember, when we were first together, how we travelled to Caras Arnen to talk to Faramir—we rode by day and slept in the trees by night, just the two of us? And then we spent the night under the waterfall?"

"Yes," said Legolas.

"Since then, we seem always to have been with others, snatching moments together and feeling guilty about it."

"You were upset when we were interrupted the other day."

"Embarrassed," said Eowyn. "It is different at home. Elves are more tactful."

"We will soon be home, melmenya. Is that what you are going to wish?"

"It will be one of many wishes," said Eowyn.

The lady vanishes

Legolas squeezed her hand. "Come," he said, "it is our turn." They walked towards the bonfire, holding their Yule Wreath between them.

"Make your wish!" said Legolas.

For a moment, they both bowed their heads and closed their eyes.

"Ready?" asked Legolas.

Eowyn nodded and, together, they threw the wreath into the fire. The dry leaves curled in the heat, then flared brightly, and their light and smoke bore the couple's hopes and resolutions upwards towards the stars.

The final feast of Yuletide was bittersweet, since the friends of the Ring knew that it was the last time they would be together for many months.

Eowyn watched her friends with interest.

Aragorn and Arwen were talking happily—clearly still very much in love; Faramir and his secretary were sharing a quiet moment; Gimli was talking earnestly with Esmarë; Eomer and Lothiriel appeared to be arguing; the March Warden was sitting by himself and seemed quite despondent...

Senta and Florestan were dancing.

And Berkin and Lëonórwyn had grown more comfortable in each other's company.

Eowyn smiled. Berkin was not at all what she had expected. He was tall—as tall as Legolas—and thin—*Half-starved*, she thought, *but Lëonórwyn will soon put that right*—and, though unsteady on his feet, he was surprisingly graceful, with a handsome, intelligent face, enhanced by a faint beard and moustache, and a thick mane of black curls. *I can see why Lëonórwyn was willing to marry him.*

She turned to look at Legolas. *I can only hope that they will be as happy as we are*, she thought. And, smiling, she held out her goblet of wassail to her beloved elf.

"*Westu Legolas há!*" she said.

...

"Oh Norin—Gimli!—I have such good news!"

Gimli smiled up at Esmarë. "Sit down, lass, and tell me all about it."

"The Queen has said that I can stay here! I will be one of her ladies, tending the flowers in her garden!"

"That *is* good news," said Gimli. He took her hand and stroked it, gently. Then he said, hesitantly, "But do you think you will be able to cope with being a servant, lass?"

"What was I before Norin?" she answered, smiling. "A slave to any man who chose to pay! Oh, it will not be easy—I know that—but it will be a good, respectable life. And it is what I want."

"Then I am very happy for you, lass."

"I owe it all to you, Norin. Thank you." She leaned forward, and kissed the dwarf's forehead.

...

"That is a very fine-looking gown, Eowyn," said Eomer, "a very nice blue. And the bodice is...." He waved his hands.

"Thank you, Eomer, it was a surprise gift from Legolas."

Eomer nodded and sat down beside the elf. "I have been summoned to Eryn Lasgalen," he said, quietly, "by your father. Since Celeborn sailed West, he has been concerned about the isolation of East Lorien. He wants some sort of alliance—to keep the Beornings in their place. It seems that we must negotiate it face-to-face." He shook his head. "I have heard that your father drives a hard bargain."

Legolas nodded. "His reputation is well deserved. When are you going?"

"I have suggested waiting until the middle of Gwaeron, after the branding season."

"Eowyn and I had planned to visit my father soon. If you have no objections, I would like our stay to coincide with yours. My business with him is—well, let us just say that I think you will find that you have an interest in it too."

...

"My lady, would you care to dance?"

Eowyn glanced at Legolas; he was still deep in conversation with Eomer.

"I am not a good dancer, March Warden," she said.

"Nor am I," said Haldir. He held out his hand. Eowyn hesitated for a moment, but then she rose, and let him lead her out onto the dance floor.

"I have not thanked you," she said, as they wove, hand-in-hand, the length of the hall, "for going to Lord Berodin's house to rescue Legolas."

Haldir bowed his head. "It was nothing, my lady."

They turned, changing hands, and began working their way back between the other couples.

"It was very loyal of you to risk your life for him."

She curtseyed and he bowed.

"I did it for you," he said. "I thought only of you."

Something in his voice made Eowyn stop dancing and stare at him.

"You were so distressed..."

People were beginning to stare at them; Haldir pulled her gently to the side of the dance floor. "I would do *anything* for you, my lady. I—"

"Please do not say it."

"Eowyn—"

"You have had too much to drink March Warden. But think carefully—if you say it, nothing can ever be the same again. If you say it, you and I can *never* be friends again."

The lady vanishes

A look of intense pain flickered across Haldir's face. Then he squared his shoulders and became, once more, the haughty March Warden of Eryn Carantaur. "If that is the case, I will not say it, my lady, for your friendship means more to me than anything else I possess."

He led her back to her seat and, with a brief bow, walked away.

...

"Are you all right, melmenya?"

Eowyn looked into his eyes. "I love you," she said. "I could never love anyone else."

Legolas wrapped an arm around her. "I feared this would happen," he said. "Do you want me to speak to him?"

"No."

"Can you live with it?"

"I will have to." She looked up at him. "You do trust me?"

"Of course, melmenya."

"I am very fond of him."

"That is why it hurts."

"You are a very special elf."

Legolas smiled. "I have always thought so. And handsome with it."

Taken by surprise, Eowyn laughed. "And conceited, too," she said. She stroked his face. "But very handsome. And very, very special."

Across the hall, Elrohir and Elladan were singing a bawdy song.

*"I have a gentle cock,
Descended from the great,
His comb's red coral,
His tail is of jet.
His eyes are of crystal,
Set all in amber.
And every night he perches him
In my lady's chamber."*

Legolas and Eowyn grinned at each other. "Are you ready for bed, melmenya?" Legolas asked. "We have a long journey ahead of us tomorrow."

THE END

Extra scene: [The arrangement](#)

Extra scene: [Eowyn gets herself into big trouble](#)

Some Yuletide games!

Legolas, Eowyn and their friends enjoy an evening of story-telling.

The dead boy

Legolas solves a well-known lateral thinking puzzle.

"One day," said Gimli, "my father was tramping along the High Pass through the Misty Mountains, when he happened upon the body of a young man, hanging in one of the thorn bushes that grow all along that trail.

"The day was hot, and the body had already begun to turn, but my father took pity on the poor lad, lowered him to the ground, and raised a cairn of stones over him."

"That was kind," said Legolas.

"Mmm." Gimli took a swig of ale. "But—what do you think the lad had died of?"

Legolas shrugged. "His injuries must have been severe—perhaps he had fallen from higher up the mountain. Or maybe he met with a band of Uruk Hai, who beat him to death, then threw his body aside."

Gimli shook his head. "There were many cuts and bruises on the body, but it was my father's belief that the lad had frozen to death."

"On such a hot day?"

"Aye."

"But how could he..." Legolas grinned. "I know what happened to him!"

Solution. "The boy wanted to travel," said Legolas. "So he climbed up to the Eagles' Eyrie and, when one of the birds took flight, he jumped onto its back. But the Eagle soared too high for a mortal man to bear—to where the air is thin and cold—and the boy froze to death, fell from the Eagle's back, and landed in the thorn bush."

This puzzle usually concerns an East European stowing away in the undercarriage of a plane bound for the USA, who freezes to death on the journey and falls into the desert when the plane lowers its wheels, prior to landing.

The mistake

Legolas tells a story. (Based on another well-known lateral thinking puzzle).

"Guilin was a hunter of great renown," said Legolas, taking a sip of wine. "Orcs, wargs, trolls—there was nothing he could not stalk—his hand was as swift as summer lightning, his aim as true as a dwarven blade."

"Why do I get the feeling that this dwarven blade is about to let him down?" asked Gimli.

"Something to do with the past tense," replied Eomer, cutting a chunk of meat and raising to his mouth on his knife.

"One fine winter's day," said Legolas, "tracking goblins across the misty mountains, he spotted a wounded she-wolf. She was dragging herself across the snow, her shattered hind-quarters leaving a terrible red stain—"

"Lassui! We are *eating!*" Eowyn refilled his glass.

"Guilin could not bear to leave her suffering. So he raised his bow, took careful aim, and shot her between the eyes. She died instantly. But seconds later, he realised his mistake. And minutes later, he was dead." Legolas took another sip of wine.

"How?" asked Eomer.

Solution. "While he was looking at the wolf, the goblins crept up behind him and tore him limb from limb," said Gimli.

"No!"

"Pity..."

Eomer glanced at Eowyn. "I have heard it before," she said.

"Guilin had forgotten the she-wolf's mate," said Legolas. "The wolf, finding her dead, threw back his head and let out a terrible howl." He looked from Eomer to Gimli and back again, but both faces were still blank.

"The sound loosened the ice," he explained, "high up on the mountain. Within moments a great wave of snow had engulfed both the elf and the wolves. Their bodies were found the following spring, and Guilin's arrow was still embedded in the she-wolf's skull..."

Eomer's riddle

Pronounced as one letter
And written with three
Two letters there are,
And two only in me.
I'm double, I'm single,
I'm black, blue and grey,
I'm read from both ends,
And the same either way.
What am I?

Solution. Eye.

Eomer's turn

Another well-known lateral thinking puzzle.

"A man of Dol Amroth," said Eomer, "wanting to visit his kinsman in Lond Daer, hired a fisherman to take him and his wife by boat." He poured himself another goblet of wine.

"They set sail in late spring," he continued, "when the weather was warm and the wind fair. But, two days out of port, they ran into a terrible storm, were driven off course, and shipwrecked upon a tiny island, somewhere west of Andrast. The wife, sadly, perished in the wreck—"

"This is not," said Gimli, "one of those stories where the men bed each other, is it?"

"No," said Eomer.

"Good."

"Weeks later, they were rescued by a passing ship, and the man was taken safely to Lond Daer where his family held a great feast to welcome him."

"Now that is more like it!" Gimli drained his tankard of ale.

"Amongst the many delicacies laid out upon the table was a roasted albatross—"

"Albatross?"

"A sea bird—it is a local speciality, apparently. The man took one mouthful of the meat, and immediately asked to be excused. Some time later, his kinsman found him in the guest quarters, dead. He had taken his own life."

"How?" asked Eowyn.

"He had fallen upon his sword," said Eomer, "but that is not important. What is important is—"

"Why?" said Legolas.

Solution. "Give us a clue," said Eowyn.

"Ask me a question," said Eomer.

Eowyn thought for a moment. "Did the man know that it was albatross before he ate it?"

"Yes."

"So it was not that he had sworn never to eat albatross and had mistakenly broken his oath..." Eowyn looked at Legolas. The elf shrugged.

"Does it taste very bad?" asked Gimli.

"I have never tried it," replied Eomer.

"But the man thought he *had* eaten it before!" said Eowyn. "And, when he tasted it, he knew he had not."

"Go on," said Eomer, with an encouraging smile.

"On the island, the fisherman had fed him meat," said Eowyn, "telling him that it was albatross. But when he tasted *real* albatross, he realised what he had actually eaten."

"Which was?" cried Gimli, impatiently.

The lady vanishes

"Part of his dead wife!"

"Awww!"

"Do you not want that chicken breast, Gimli?" asked Eomer, innocently.

Gimli's riddle

I can run but not walk.
Wherever I go, thought
follows close behind.
What am I?

Remember, this is Gimli's riddle.

Solution. A nose!

Eowyn's riddle

In a marble hall as white as milk
Lined with skin as soft as silk
Within a fountain crystal clear
A golden apple doth appear.
No doors there are to this stronghold
Yet thieves break in to steal the gold.
What is it?

Solution. An egg!

Eowyn's story

This is based on a TV drama I saw as a child. (For some reason, it really stuck in my mind!) I believe it was adapted from a story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle called The Brown Hand.

"My uncle's healer, Master Swithun," said Eowyn, "was fascinated by all creatures. He collected the skins and bones and skulls of orcs, and goblins, and—well—of condemned men, too, when he could get them—to compare their bodies—hoping to understand how the races differed. My uncle's visitors would bring him specimens from all over Middle-earth—"

Eomer chuckled.

"This is not," said Eowyn, coldly, "about you and Theodred locking me in the privy with a skinned monkey."

"Eomer!" Legolas gave Eowyn a sympathetic hug.

"It was *pickled*," the King protested, "and sealed in a *jar*."

"A *glass* jar. It was hideous. Anyway, this is a different story." Eowyn took a sip of wine. "One morning—this was before he had fallen under Saruman's spell—my uncle, feeling a little off colour—"

"After a night's heavy drinking, no doubt," said Eomer.

"—summoned Master Swithun. The healer arrived late, looking pale and haggard.

"Whatever is the matter," asked my uncle, 'you are worse than I am.'

"My sincere apologies, your Majesty," said Swithun, bowing, 'I confess I can no longer sleep at night.'

"Sit down," said my uncle, kindly. 'Sister-daughter, fetch Master Swithun a glass of wine.'

"That was the first time he had ever asked me to pour wine," said Eowyn, smiling. "I climbed up on a chair—I had to use both hands to lift the jug..."

Legolas patted her hand affectionately.

"Tell me," said my uncle, 'what troubles you enough to deprive you of your rest?'

"The healer took the goblet from me with a nod of thanks. 'To tell the truth, your Majesty,' he said, 'I do not expect you to believe this—I hardly believe it myself.'

"My uncle beckoned me to him, and lifted me up on his knee. 'Go on...'

"Four—no, five nights ago now, I awoke with a deep feeling of unease and, sensing that the trouble—whatever it was—lay in my study, I crept to the door and opened it. The light was dim but, sure enough, I saw a man, bending over my specimen collection and, as I watched, he lifted one of the jars. I shouted out in surprise—I do not know what I said—but at that, the man turned, and he threw the jar at me.

"It missed me—fortunately, for it was a large jar and the spirits I use to preserve my specimens are harmful to living flesh.'

"But what of the intruder," asked my uncle, 'why was he not brought before *me*?'

"That is the perplexing thing, your Majesty," said Swithun. 'He disappeared. I raised my arm, to shield my eyes from the fluid, and when I lowered it, he was gone.'

"Where?'

"I do not know. He did not pass me at the door and there is no other way out of my study.'

"Have you seen him since?"

"Every night, your Majesty. Or, rather, I have seen his shadow, moving back and forth beneath the door, and heard him lifting and replacing the specimen jars."

"Has he broken anything else?"

"No, your Majesty."

"My uncle stroked his beard. 'What do you think of this, Eowyn?' he asked."

Eowyn smiled. "I think he is a ghost," I said.

"My uncle nodded, thoughtfully. 'You may well be right,'—"

"Where was *I* when all this was going on?" asked Eomer, doubtfully.

Eowyn shrugged. "Probably learning to be a man—living wild, hunting orcs—"

Legolas laughed and, pulling her close, kissed her cheek.

Eowyn grinned. "May I continue with my story?" she asked Eomer.

"By all means."

"Well, to cut a long story short—"

"Always best," said Gimli.

"My uncle commanded two of his most trusted men—Hama and Gamling—to spend the night in Master Swithun's chambers. He ordered them to wait outside the study until they were sure that the man—or whatever it was—had entered, and then, without giving him any warning, to throw open the door and capture him."

"And what happened, melmenya?"

"He disappeared. One moment he was there, they said, and the next he had disappeared."

Eomer shook his head.

"It is true!" said Eowyn. "I heard their report. They had not caught him, but they had seen him clearly."

"So who was he?" asked Eomer, sceptically.

"A complete stranger," said Eowyn.

"Put Eomer out of his misery, melmenya," said Legolas, laughing.

"He was a complete stranger," said Eowyn, "but, from Gamling's description, it was clear that he was a man of Far Harad and that one of his arms was missing. And *that* detail reminded Master Swithun of a specimen he had bought from a pedlar, many years before—"

"A severed arm? Awwww," said Gimli.

"So this thing—this ghost—was looking for its severed arm?" said Eomer.

"That is what we deduced. The arm must have been amputated whilst he was still living and now that he had died, he needed it back."

"Of course," said Legolas. He turned to Eomer. "The people of Far Harad believe that their bodies must be whole or they will not be permitted to enter the next world. That is why the Hatja of Carhivilven was so concerned to find his son's remains and bury them properly."

The lady vanishes

"The problem," said Eowyn, "was that the arm had been destroyed in a fire, many years before. So it looked as if the poor creature would be condemned to spend eternity looking for it—"

"And tormenting the poor healer," said Gimli, taking a swig of ale.

"Yes. My uncle moved Master Swithun to new chambers and ordered that his study be kept locked. But, every night for several weeks, the guards reported seeing the man's shadow, beneath the door, passing back and forth.

"Then, one day, Master Swithun was called to attend a young Rider who had been gored by a warg. His arm was so badly torn that the healer had no choice but to amputate. And, as he performed the operation, he realised—"

"That he could pickle the arm and leave it for the ghost to find," said Gimli.

"Yes!"

"And did he?" asked Legolas.

"Yes!"

"And so the 'ghost' was never seen again," said Eomer, dryly.

"He was seen *once* more," Eowyn corrected. "He appeared in the Golden Hall, before my uncle, Master Swithun, and me. He raised both hands before his face to show us that, at last, his body was whole, and he bowed deeply, and then he disappeared."

Tragedy at sea

A final lateral thinking puzzle.

There was a light tap at the door.

"That will be Haldir," said Legolas. "Come in!"

The March Warden entered. "I was told you wanted to see me immediately..." He stared at the festive scene.

"Yes," said Legolas. "Come and join us!"

"Get some mulled ale inside you, laddie," said Gimli. "You look famished."

The mellow atmosphere was so infectious that Haldir, for once, did not point out to the dwarf that elves were not troubled by the cold as other races were.

"Come sit by me," said Eowyn. "We are telling stories."

Haldir took the seat she was offering and, when she began to pile food upon his plate, thanked her with a smile. "Stories?" he asked.

"Of doom and gloom," said Gimli. "Stories with a macabre twist."

"Like the story of Guilin," said Legolas.

"Ah."

"Do *you* know one?" asked Eowyn. She poured him a goblet of wine.

Haldir picked up his knife. "I did hear a strange story once. But it is not, perhaps, appropriate to tell it here."

"Why ever not?" she asked.

Haldir glanced at Legolas. "It concerns the Straight Road."

Legolas smiled. "Tell it, March Warden. It is Yuletide."

"Very well."

Haldir thought for a moment. "A grey ship set sail from Mithlond. Its crew—all of them young Silvan elves who had never before seen the sea—were filled with joy at the sight of the wide green ocean—the white-capped waves, the shadows of great sea-fish beneath its surface, and the clouds of wheeling gulls above..." From the corner of his eye the March Warden saw Eowyn reach for Legolas' hand and he smiled, gratefully.

"Three days later, having been delayed by a violent storm, another grey ship set sail—this one carrying a party of older, wiser elves, venerable scholars from Imladris."

Haldir took a sip of wine. "Less than a day into their journey, the second ship came upon the first, hove to, and surrounded by the bodies of its young crew, floating in the sea. Every one of them had drowned."

"Oh..." said Eomer. "How? *Why?*"

"The elves in the second ship lowered a small boat and sent two of their number to investigate. They threw a line up to the deck, climbed aboard, and found the vessel perfectly seaworthy. They could think of no reason why the youngsters should have abandoned ship and perished..."

"So why did they?" asked the dwarf.

The lady vanishes

"Because the sea had seduced them, Gimli," said Eowyn, darkly.

Solution. "You mean the sea *persuaded them to drown themselves?*" asked Gimli.

"As good as," said Eowyn. "Why do you think the other elves needed to throw a line up to the deck?"

Haldir smiled. "The lady is right—*and*, may I say, much quicker than the venerable elves on this occasion. It seems that the young elves, longing to swim, had jumped over the side, forgetting to arrange some means of climbing back aboard. When the storm came, they were trapped in the water, and the sea took their lives."

"What a sad story," said Gimli.

Legolas patted his back. "Let us drink to their spirits, *elvellon*, waiting in the Halls of Mandos."

"May their time be short," said Gimli, raising his tankard. "And let us thank the gods for our own well being, and that of our loved ones, this Yuletide."

LATER

Poor Legolas...

"Open it!"

Eowyn looked at the large, flat parcel, lovingly wrapped in green and gold fabric and secured with golden ribbon. It was clearly a book.

"Is it the story of Beren and Luthien?" she asked, for he had promised her an illuminated copy.

Legolas shook his head.

"*The Lays of Beleriand?*"

"No."

Carefully—because she knew that Legolas took great pride in his gift-wrapping skills—Eowyn pulled apart the bow and opened the fabric. The book was old, its faded leather binding blocked with a series of strange golden characters. "It is from Far Harad," she said, running her fingers over the title. "This is their language."

"Look inside."

Eowyn opened the book at a beautifully painted miniature depicting a man and a woman. She turned the volume sideways—then upside down—then righted it again—but it still took her several moments to decipher the picture—and several more to believe what she was seeing.

"*Legolas!*"

The elf grinned. "Do you like it? I thought we might—"

"It is certainly educational." Eowyn turned several pages. "They are a very adventurous couple. And the man is extremely well-endowed."

"I imagine the artist has exaggerated that, *melmenya*. To excite the reader."

Eowyn looked at one of the pictures more closely. "He has a golden ring, *Lassui*; right through his—"

"*Oh!*" The elf turned away, closing his eyes in a grimace of sympathetic pain.

Eowyn turned another page. "Now *this* position is interesting—perhaps we could ask Haldir, or maybe Lord Fingolfin, to join us—"

Legolas seized the volume. "It is just an old book, *melmenya*." He shut it and set it on the nightstand. "Forget it."

Eowyn grinned. "Come here, *edhel nín*." She twined her arms around his neck. "No mere bearded man from Far Harad could possibly compete with *my elf* for skill and *stamina*," she whispered.

And she sucked the tip of his ear...

THE END!

Extra scene: Two nights

A tense night in Edeb

Eowyn climbed into the narrow bed. The room was small and chilly, the facilities primitive, but everything—thank the gods—was spotlessly clean. She tucked the coverlet under her chin, shivering between the cold sheets. "Are you coming to bed, Legolas?"

"I—er—I need to check the horses."

Eowyn threw back the covers

"What are you doing?"

"Coming with you."

"It is cold, melmenya. And you need sleep." Gently, he pushed her back into bed and covered her up.

"I need—*want*—you, here beside me," she said.

"I will be back soon."

But she knew that he would not.

Twelve days later, on the journey home

Eowyn climbed into the narrow bed—and felt two strong hands grasp her waist.

"Legolas!"

Holding her face down, he teased the back of her neck, easing himself between her legs, pressing himself—

"No," she gasped, "I want to see your face."

He nipped her ear; then she felt his weight lift, and she rolled onto her back.

Gods, he was beautiful! Love and desire welling up within her, she traced her finger over his smooth forehead, between his dark brows, to the tip of his slightly broad nose, over his perfect, bow-shaped lips...

His mouth grazed her palm.

...

"Ah—ah—ah—"

Grasping the bed sheets, Eowyn arched her body, and let her wild wood elf batter her senseless.

"Agggghhh—*GODS!*"

...

The lady vanishes

"*Gerich veleth nín, melmenya,*" he murmured.

Smiling, Eowyn opened her eyes and, lazy with pleasure, gazed into her lover's eyes.

"I love you too."

Their mouths met.

Extra scene: The most handsome man she had ever seen

"Why did you bring *her*?" asked Theodred.

"I did not bring her," said Eomer. "She just came."

Theodred, for all his bluster, knew better than to try where Eomer had already failed. "Well," he said, "she had better be *quiet*."

He drew back the heavy curtain, carefully lifted the massive latch—grimacing at the noise it made—slowly pushed open the door, and peered into the Council Chamber.

"It is empty. Come on." They slipped inside and closed the door behind them.

"Where can we hide?" asked Eomer. The chamber was smaller than he had expected, and sparsely furnished—just an oak table surrounded by nine heavy chairs, the seat at its head a small throne. Three of the walls were bare; the fourth was draped with a tapestry.

Theodred grinned. "In the privy," he said.

"What privy?"

With a flourish, the King's son lifted the wall hanging to reveal a doorway. "*This* privy."

"But what if someone wants to *go*?" asked Eomer.

"They cannot. It is my father's *private* privy."

"But what if *he* wants to..."

Theodred ended the debate by grabbing Eomer's arm and dragging him into the small room. Eowyn tried to follow. "*You* cannot come in here," said her cousin, pompously. "This privy is only for *men*."

He dropped the curtain, leaving the girl standing alone in the Council Chamber.

...

Eowyn turned around and around, looking for somewhere else to hide.

The table? You can see right under it...

But there was nowhere better. She dropped to her hands and knees and crawled beneath, just as the door opened behind her and someone wearing a new—and ill-fitting—suit of armour, metal grating on metal as he moved, came into the chamber.

There was a moment's silence. Then he said, "*I can* see you, you know."

Eowyn closed her eyes. *Perhaps*, she hoped, *he means Eomer*.

"I can see you."

No, he means me.

"Come out, my lady," he said. Then he added, with a desperation that Eowyn was too nervous to notice, "*Please* do not make me bend."

Eowyn stayed exactly where she was.

"Theoden King and his Counsellors will be here at any moment," he pleaded. "If they find you, you will be in trouble, and *I* shall very likely be dismissed on my first day—please, my lady, come out."

Sighing (silently) to herself, Eowyn began to crawl backwards.

"No! Wait!" he hissed. His hand pushed her bottom.

The door latch was lifting.

There was a grating of armour. Eowyn rolled over and drew up her knees, wrapping her arms around her legs to make herself as small as possible. The young guard had turned and was standing between her and the door, shielding her with his mail-clad legs.

"Father!" he said.

"I told you not to call me that here. Is the Chamber secure, soldier?"

"Yes, *Captain*."

"Then do not linger—you know your duties. Come on, Banduil—what are you waiting for?"

"I—er—a *rat*, sir—I think I saw a rat," said Banduil. "And I was just—"

Captain Falemi swore. "The Council Meeting is about to start," he said. "Find the wretched thing and use your sword."

"Yes, sir."

"And do not leave it lying in here." The door closed.

Eowyn shot out from under the table.

The young guard grinned. "You do have a face, then," he said. "Come on—stay behind me." He led her to the door, cautiously opened it, and peered outside. "The King is coming, we must hide you quickly. Do you know where the door opposite leads?"

"My uncle's bed chamber," whispered Eowyn.

Banduil used the same oath as his father. "The one beside it?"

"Theodred's bed chamber," said Eowyn. "I could go in there."

"Are you sure?" She nodded. "Good. Then keep your head down and do not look about you." He gave her another grin as he seized her hand. "Ready?"

"Yes."

They slipped from the Council Chamber, crossed the corridor in a blur—Eowyn could already hear the measured tread of her uncle's Body Guards to the left—pushed open the bed chamber door, and fell inside.

"There," said Banduil, as he helped her to her feet, "you are safe and sound."

He smiled.

Then, as if remembering his place, he drew himself up to his full height, clicked his mailed heels together, with a slight wince when his armour pinched, and bowed his

head respectfully. "At your service, my lady. Good night."

He backed out of the chamber.

...

Eowyn waited several hours until her cousin and her brother returned at last, each blaming the other for the dare that had forced them to endure, in silence, the endless tedium of a Privy Council meeting.

"*You* will have to do that every day when you are King, cousin," said Eomer, throwing himself down on the bed.

"And so will you, when I make you First Marshall of the Riddermark, cousin," replied Theodred, carefully pouring out two glasses—and a half glass—of his father's finest spirits.

...

Years later, Eowyn realised that Banduil had been no more than a boy that day—just fifteen.

But to an eight year old he had seemed a *man*; and, for many years—with his youthful grace, his dark, mischievous eyes, and the faintest trace of beard above his lip and on his chin—he had remained the finest, the bravest, the most handsome man she had ever seen.

Extra scene: Come live with me...

**"Tall grow the trees from forod to harad,
In the dark depths of Mirkwood!
Tall—"**

Her eyelids flickered.

"*Híril nín?*" Legolas bent closer, searching her marble-smooth face for any sign of awareness.
"Eowyn?"

He had lost count of the nights he had spent at her bedside, watching, whilst his mortal friends—her brother and the Steward of Gondor—slept; sitting at her side without fear of being seen.

"Choose to live, Eowyn *nín*," he whispered, gently stroking her battered shield arm. "And I will show you a darkness that can heal.

"*Come live with me and be my love...*"

**The Passionate Shepherd to His Love
Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)**

*Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods or steepy mountain yields.*

*And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.*

*And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;*

*A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of th'purest gold;*

*A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me and be my love.*

*The shepherds' swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love,*

Published posthumously in 1599.

Extra scene: The charming Lady Emliet

"Your Highness..."

Legolas smiled at the handsome neighbour offering him a tray of sweetmeats, and selected a small bunch of candied cherries tied with a green ribbon. "Thank you."

"The Queen," said the lady, carefully replacing the dish on the table, "has told me that you and I have an interest in common."

Legolas shot her a dazzling smile. "Do we, my lady? And what would that be? Archery? Or knife-work, perhaps?"

The woman laughed—and her genuine warmth charmed the elf (who was all too used to finding himself the target of *amorous* women). "No, your Highness—we both love our gardens."

"Gardening! Of course!"

"The Queen told me that you, your Highness, are responsible for her beautiful flower beds."

Legolas inclined his head, as if to say, *You have found me out.*

"May I ask," said the lady, leaning a little closer and—*unconsciously*, Legolas was almost sure—placing her hand upon his arm, "where you obtained such fine specimens of *rîloth*? I have some in my own garden, but it does struggle in this thin soil."

"They, and the soil they are rooted in, come from my father's own garden, in Eryn Lasgalen, my lady," said Legolas. "*Rîloth* is his particular favourite. And," he added, "since it is clearly one of *your* favourites, too, I shall write to his gardener and ask him to send you a box of seedlings."

"Oh! Your Highness!" The woman bowed her head in thanks. "You are *most* gracious."

"It is my pleasure—and *please*, call me Legolas."

He smiled again, and she—though a woman of mature years—blushed to the tips of her rounded ears. "That would hardly be proper, your Highness," —she returned his smile—"especially if my husband were to hear it."

Legolas grinned. "And which of these gentlemen must I be wary of, my lady?" He glanced around the table. "Would it be the fine-looking man in red velvet?"

The lady laughed merrily. "Your Highness! Lord Minastan is young enough to be my son."

"Surely not!"

The woman shook her head at his flattery.

"The older gentleman, then, sitting beside him?"

"No!" She pretended to be insulted. "Lord Wistan could be my *father!*"

"Ah—then it must be the distinguished-looking gentleman, in blue, seated next to *him.*"

The lady glanced at the man in question, then said, quietly, "Fortunately *not.*"

She was no longer laughing, and Legolas—knowing *exactly* who the ‘distinguished-looking’ man was, and sensing that he might be about to obtain some valuable information—pressed a little harder. “He is perhaps too melancholic for a sanguine lady such as yourself...”

“He—” The woman shook her head; all mirth had left her.

“Has he done you *wrong*, my lady?” asked Legolas, gently.

She sighed. “One of his servants, your Highness,”—she leaned close and spoke very quietly—“*seduced* my lady’s maid and left her in the family way.”

“I see.”

“I should imagine that an elf has strong views on such things.”

“Are you saying that he abandoned her?”

“I am. He refused to acknowledge the child—claimed that he had no way of knowing that it was his—that Faeleth might have been with anybody. But my Faeleth is a good girl, your Highness, and—although she did not say so—I am convinced that he forced himself upon her. His master, of course, ignored my complaint.”

“Surely his master’s lady was sympathetic?” said Legolas.

“Lord Berodin’s wife died some years ago, your Highness, and, since then, his servants have been allowed to run wild—the men spend most of their time in the *Golden Goose*.”

“A tavern?”

“A bawdy house, your Highness; a place that *sells* women’s favours, if you will pardon my speaking so plainly.” She looked away—this time blushing with real embarrassment. “It is a terrible place; they are *all* terrible places, and should be closed. I have petitioned the King, on numerous occasions, but—”

“Is it not preferable, my lady,” said Legolas, gently, “that men like that servant should have a place to satisfy their lusts—?”

“Your Highness!” The woman was shocked. “You cannot be defending the husbands who betray their wives in these places?”

“Certainly *not*,” said Legolas, “never! But *unmarried* men, who—”

“Or youths, who squander their innocence on bought women!”

Legolas, remembering his own first time, with a courtesan at his father’s Court, said quietly, “It need not be a shameful thing, my lady,”—though he remembered that Eowyn’s reaction had been something similar to Lady Emliet’s—“such women can be very kind and forgiv—”

“Do you think *they* are happy, your Highness? Some of them are little more than children. Do you think it a *good* life for a woman?”

Legolas was reduced to silence. Then he admitted, “Those words put me to shame, my lady.”

To be continued in [The arrangement](#)

Extra scene: The contest

Smiling, Eowyn settled back and watched the elves compete.

Haldir—tall, broad-shouldered, feet firmly planted on the ground, moved with all the splendour of a well-bred stallion.

Legolas—smaller, slighter, achieved by quicksilver grace what his opponent must—however beautifully—exert himself to accomplish.

Thoroughbred and Meara, she thought.

Extra scene: This will not be the first time...

Part of this piece was inspired by two wonderful short stories by Regina, [The Finest of Vintages](#) and [The Last of the Summer Wine](#).

“Wait here, Valandil,” said Legolas. “I do not expect to be long.” He climbed nimbly from the small boat and paused on the wharf to get his bearings.

The house he sought was in the north eastern corner of Esgaroth. He set off down the winding, wooden street, prudently keeping to the shadows, avoiding the aggressive drunkards who seemed to own the place at this time of night.

He had passed two taverns—noisy, brightly lit, and enveloped in a haze of liquor fumes—and a rundown peep show, before he found the bawdy house with its tell-tale red lanterns—his mission already stirring memories of visits to a similar house, elsewhere, and kindling the strangest sensation in his loins.

It is the recollection of desire, he thought, but not desire itself.

He knocked at the door.

...

Before the Ring war he had visited Esgaroth at least twice a year, coming personally to select fine wines for his father’s cellar—and for his own—from a woman merchant in the docklands. She was a widow—plump, silver-haired, and full of life—and she regarded him with unashamed admiration!

He had always looked forward to their meetings: the mild flirtation; the sharing of food and wine and stories; the fascination of seeing her grow older—and, he thought, more beautiful—as the years passed by.

...

The door opened. A young maidservant bade him enter, showing him into the parlour where her mistress—Madam Mab—greeted him with enthusiasm. “Come *in*, sir, and welcome! Do sit down and take a glass of wine with me—Almiel,” she shouted over her shoulder, “fetch the young gentleman a goblet of sack—we’re *always* pleased to see the fair folk here, sir.”

Yes, thought Legolas, because, compared to men, we are insatiable—and we pay accordingly.

“What are you looking for, sir?”

Legolas glanced around the room. It was divided across the centre by two heavy velvet curtains—scarlet, edged with a deep golden fringe—drawn back to provide a tasteful frame to the scene beyond. But the elf was unimpressed by the five or six young women reclining, entwined like lovers, on the ornate, gilded day bed.

“I am not here to—”

He broke off, mid sentence.

It cannot be!

...

On his last visit, they had spoken of life and death.

The wineseller had envied his eternal youth; he had envied her mortality.

We call it the gift of the Valar, he had said. It is both a gift and a blessing, for this world is a vale of tears and, one day, you will be at rest.

He had waved to her as his raft pulled away.

...

The illusion lasted for no more than a moment.

The girl, Almiel, had emerged from behind the curtain carrying a goblet of wine and—just for a moment, with her golden hair rippling down to her slender waist, her graceful figure, and her lightly muscled arms, left bare by her chemise and corset—she had looked like *her*.

Just for a moment.

But that moment had been enough to awaken his desire—with a vengeance. Legolas closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

"I came here bearing a message for a friend," he said, his voice sounding surprisingly calm. "But now I find..." He swallowed hard. He could not bed the golden-haired girl, Almiel. It would have to be one of the others. "Dark hair," he said, softly. "I am looking for dark hair, dark skin, brown eyes."

"Of course, sir—Aedith, take the gentleman upstairs. Are you sure that one will suffice, sir?"

"Yes, madam. Thank you." He rose to follow the girl. "If my friend should finish whilst I..."

"I will bid him wait for you, sir."

"Thank you."

...

The wineseller had died a few days later.

Her nephew had sent word to Thranduil's Halls, but Legolas had already left for Imladris and did not receive the letter until long after the Ring War.

She will miss your friendship in the next world, the nephew had written. Your words were a great comfort to her at the end.

He had been a callous fool, Legolas realised now, never thinking of the pain his unchanging face must be inflicting on a mortal woman—his friend—*When she was clinging to her short life with such determination*, he thought.

How could I put her through such torment?

...

The room was small and unexpectedly plain, but clean. Legolas unlaced his leggings with a sigh of relief, and sat down on the bed.

"What would you like me to do, sir?" asked the girl.

Legolas tried not to look at her. "I..." He held out his hands. "Come here."

She knelt before him, pulling aside his tunic. "Oh, *sir*, you are a *horse!*" She wrapped her mouth around him.

It had been a long time. *Not since Lorien*, thought Legolas, leaning back on his hands, his back arching. *Not since the two ellith at the bathing pool*. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the sensation. It was pleasant—her tongue rough on his sensitive flesh, its caress reaching deep into his body...

But she was never going to make him come. *Where is the love?*

"*Stop*," he gasped, catching the girl's head in his hands. "Stop, child."

...

I am hers, he thought, *in body as well as spirit*.

...

Singollo was waiting in the parlour. "What is it, Lassui?"

"My father requires your return, immediately," said Legolas.

"Of course."

They paid Madam Mab, left a gratuity for the girls, and hurried back to the dock, where Valandil and the others awaited them.

Legolas glanced along the wharf. "You go on," he said. "I will make my own way back."

Singollo frowned. "Surely it is not the girl, *mellon nín?*" he asked, quietly, "Not after what you told me last night..."

Legolas smiled. "No, Collo, it is not the girl. I need to talk to a wineseller, that is all, so I may as well stay here until morning. I will cross the lake by ferry and walk back through the Forest."

Singollo placed his hand upon his heart and bowed his head. "Take care, Lassui. *Le cenithon ned lû thent*," he said.

...

Legolas sat on the wooden quay, legs dangling over the water, watching his friends disappear into the mouth of the Forest River.

Would I choose mortality for her sake?

Of course I would, were it possible. Would my love be love, otherwise?

...

"Good morning, your Highness!" The wineseller's nephew bowed, formally; then he took out his keys, unlocked the warehouse door and swung it open. "It's been a few years! Are you looking for something in particular?"

Legolas hesitated. He had not thought of buying wine. "Something that will travel well," he said. "To Caras Arnen on horseback. A single bottle—it is a gift."

The nephew scratched his head. "For a lady?"

Legolas was taken aback. "Yes—since you ask."

"It is just that ladies generally prefer a sweeter, lighter wine, your Highness. Let me see..." He led the elf past rows of carefully labelled barrels, and crates of glass bottles, and between shelves of stone jars, to the back of his storeroom. "I'd suggest this one, sir—it's young but smooth—light, fruity, with just a hint of clover. Comes all the way from The Shire. Would you like to try it?"

Legolas shook his head. "I always trusted your aunt's judgement, Master Wineseller," he said, "and now I will trust yours. Will you pack it for me?"

"Of course, your Highness." The man called to his apprentice, "Fetch a bottle-box and some straw, lad."

"I wanted..." Legolas began, "that is..." He was unsure of the correct words. "I wanted to offer my..." *No.* He began again. "I will miss your aunt," he said, simply. "I am sorry you have lost her."

"Thank you, your Highness. But it was some time ago now."

"Yes—I am sorry—I was away—I did not hear of her death until a few days ago—"

The nephew smiled, shaking his head in apology. "I just meant, sir, that time has healed the wound."

"How?" asked Legolas.

"Your Highness?"

"How does it happen? The healing? Is it sudden? Or slow? Does it leave a scar? Are there some wounds that *never* heal?"

The nephew looked at him intently. "You have lost someone, sir? Was it during the war?"

"I," said Legolas, quietly, "I have made more mortal friends, Master Wineseller. Many mortal friends..."

The nephew nodded, sympathetically. "There is no telling, your Highness," he said, gently. "Sometimes the healing is swift; sometimes the pain lingers. But there is only one medicine, and that is to get on with your life as best you can, and make the very most of what is left to you. Yes, there are scars—always scars. But, if you are fortunate, sir, they will be the sort that you are proud bear—fond memories of the ones you have lost."

...

Legolas paid the ferryman and set off at a steady pace, following the northern bank of the Forest River.

She is unhappy—I know she is—but what can I offer her? For me there will be loss whatever happens—perhaps I will fade; perhaps I will sail. But, for her, there would be...

Torment.

The torment of growing old amongst immortals.

Two months later

"Prince Faramir and Master Berengar are inspecting the Ranger outpost at Parth Fordo, your Highness," said the steward. "They will not be back until late."

"And Princess Eowyn?"

"She is in her garden, your Highness."

"Thank you, Master Godart. I know the way."

Legolas walked swiftly through the empty palace, to the garden which he, with Gimli and Eowyn's help, had created—breaking through the stone paving, freeing the good Ithilien earth beneath, and transplanting trees, planting seedlings, and sowing seeds...

He found Eowyn asleep, curled up on a wooden bench, beneath one of his favourite cherry trees. He crouched beside her. "My lady?"

She stirred, opened her eyes, and—for a moment—stared at him in charming confusion. Then, "Prince Legolas,"—she always seemed to address him formally these days—"Prince Legolas," she sighed, "I fell asleep." There were tear marks on her cheeks.

"Shall I fetch a servant to carry you indoors, my lady?" asked Legolas, gently.

"No, Master Elf!" she said, suddenly the feisty Shieldmaiden he knew of old. "I am *quite* capable of walking! In fact, I shall walk around the garden with you."

"Will you permit me, then?" He offered his arm.

She looked up into his eyes, trying, he felt, to judge his intentions, before she accepted his help—she had clearly not forgotten his behaviour outside the Golden Hall. "I trust you found your father well?" she asked.

"He is an elf, my lady," replied Legolas. "And elves do not suffer illness."

"Of course not. How strange that is!"

As she said it, he noticed that she was walking with a limp. "My lady? Are *you* ill?"

"Ill? Oh, no. No, it is just a cramp." She smiled. "I am not as young as I used to be—"

"Dear gods, Legolas, what is wrong?"

"Do not leave me."

...

Within the hour he was on the road, galloping back towards Eryn Carantaur, having made some incoherent excuse to explain his change of plan.

Had he stayed with her one moment longer—gazing into those tear-filled eyes, hearing her gentle reassurance that no one amongst his mortal friends would leave him, were they given the choice—just *one moment* longer, and he would have taken her in his arms, and then...

The lady vanishes

And then, who knew where it might have led?

"*Here,*" he gasped, hunched over Eowyn, his forehead pressed against the cool marble folds of the statue's robes.

He could say no more until his crisis had passed. And then, with a deep, contented sigh, he whispered, "It would still have led here, melmenya. But so much sooner."

Extra scene: The messenger

"My lady—"

"Haldir," she murmured. "Where is Legolas?"

"He will not be coming home, my lady." He lifted her into his arms, gathering her close. "I shall take care of you now."

"Thank you." She slid her arms around his neck, sighing against his cheek, "Make love to me, Haldir."

She was small, and so soft, he was afraid his heavy body might hurt her. But he kissed her neck, her throat, and her warm, full breasts, and his hand slipped under her nightgown, crept between her thighs, and gently teased her c—

"Buy me another, love," said Marglyn.

Extra scene: The wedding

This scene is a slight spoiler in that it introduces Berkin before we have met him properly in the main story. You may prefer to read it after you have read Chapter 11.

The servant slipped into the hallway unnoticed, opened a partially-concealed door beside the main staircase, and, after carefully closing it behind him, climbed to the top of the tower. The key was hanging on the hook, as usual.

He took it down and unlocked the door.

The room was dark—its single bay window was boarded up—and bare, with no rugs on the wooden floor nor hangings on the walls, and meagrely furnished.

As he entered, its lone occupant struggled to rise from the bed.

...

"Olemi! What is it?" asked Berkin, swaying towards the servant on unsteady legs, "why have you risked coming up now? What is wrong?"

Olemi caught his young master by the arms and eased him back onto the bed. "She is here."

"She? Who?"

"Lëonórwyn."

"No!" Berkin shook his head. "She cannot be! I told her to stay away."

"She ignored you. She is here."

The boy swore. "What has he done with her?"

"He has put her and her two women in the front attic; he has sent the men away."

"We must get them back, and keep them nearby."

"Yes—fortunately, they have not gone far." Olemi jerked his head towards the boarded-up window. "They are lurking in the shadows, just beyond Ostrad Dúlinn."

"Good. But we must get them somewhere safe before Osuald and Ricbert notice them—take them to the *Golden Goose*," said Berkin, growing noticeably stronger as he made his plan, "pay for their lodgings. Silrim will know where to stable their horses. Tell them to wait there for Lëonórwyn. Make *sure* they stay. Tell them I will send her as soon as I can, but it might take a few days."

"How are you going to get her out?"

Berkin shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know yet. But some opportunity will arise." He smiled. "It always does."

Olemi patted his shoulder.

...

Two days later

Berkin looked up from his book.

Footsteps.

My uncle and someone else.

He hid the small volume—smuggled from the library by Admant—under his filthy pillow, and glanced around the room.

Is there anything else I need to hide?

Something about the second set of footsteps suddenly caught his attention.

Light. Almost—graceful.

Oh. Gods!

Berkin quickly tucked his dirty shirt into his ragged trousers, ran his fingers through his wild black hair, rubbed his shirt cuff across his teeth—

The door opened.

And, for a split-second, Berkin was disappointed.

Lëonórwyn's hair was not pale and silky, as he had always imagined, but brown, and as thick and unruly as his own; her features were not delicate, but strong and boyish; her limbs were not slender, but straight and sturdy.

But then she smiled, and he found himself grinning back, like an idiot.

"This is your betrothed," said his uncle. "You will be married as soon as Master Ingold has finished drawing up the papers." He pushed the girl forward. "Say something. I do not have all day."

"Hello," said Lëonórwyn, with an embarrassed shrug.

"Hello," replied Berkin, desperately trying to think of some way to distract his uncle and speak to her privately. "Will you sit down a moment?" He glanced at Berodin for 'permission' before leading her to the bare table with its two wooden chairs—all the while conscious of the erratic movements of his shaky limbs.

He pulled out a seat.

"Thank you."

Berkin remained beside her. "I am afraid I cannot offer you anything to eat or drink..." He heard his uncle sigh. "And I cannot introduce you to Sniffer," he added, loudly, "because he seems to be hiding."

"Who is Sniffer?"

Berkin laid a hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle, warning squeeze. "My pet rat," he said. "He and his friends are quite tame. I feed them scraps—"

"*Rats!*" cried Berodin. "*You feed rats! You stupid—*" He threw open the door and leaned out into the landing. "Admant," he roared, "Admant, come up here!"

Keeping his hand on Lëonórwyn's shoulder, Berkin leaned closer. "*I have arranged for your men to stay nearby—*"

Berodin turned back into the room. "Have you *no* sense?"

Admant came running up the stairs. "Go down to Rath Celerdain" said Berodin, "and fetch the rat catcher—"

"*You must be ready to leave at a moment's notice,*" whispered Berkin.

"—tell him to come immediately. Tell him to bring his *strongest* poison—"

"*I will send someone to help you escape as soon as I can.*" The boy turned to face his uncle.

But Lëonórwyn caught his arm. "*What about you?*" she whispered.

"*Do not worry about me.*"

"*I came here to help you—*"

"The cost of this," cried Berodin, turning on his nephew, "will come out of your *personal* coffers! Come, girl!"

"May I kiss her before she goes?" asked Berkin, boldly.

"Of course you may," said Lëonórwyn, rising from her chair.

The boy leaned in and pressed his lips to her cheek. "*I must stay here a while longer,*" he murmured, "*but promise me that you will return to Edoras. I will write to you there.*"

"*I promise—I will if I can.*"

...

Three days later

Olemi set down the breakfast tray. Beside the bowl of thin porridge and the horn spoon sat an earthenware jar filled with twigs of winter-flowering *égvor*. "Where did these come from?" asked Berkin, bending over the pink blossoms and inhaling their delicate scent.

"The old lady asked me to bring them up."

"Lëonórwyn's nurse?"

"Yes." Olemi laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. "It is *today*, Berkin. The Notary has been closeted with your uncle since dawn and they called Lady Lëonórwyn in about an hour ago."

"Oh gods!" Berkin ran his hand through his hair. "Take that slop away, Olemi," he said, rising to his feet, "please—but leave the flowers—and fetch me some soap and water. And... And..."

"Sit down a moment," said Olemi, gently guiding the boy to the bed. "You need all your wits about you. I will find you something clean to wear—"

"Hurry!"

"I shall." He paused at the door. "Do not worry, Berkin."

...

Hoisting his borrowed breeches back to his waist, Berkin prayed to the gods they would

not fall down until after the 'ceremony' was over.

A whole army of people was climbing the stairs. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the sounds, separating the individual footfalls—*Yes, there she is!*

He took a deep breath and turned to face the door.

His uncle entered first, then the Notary—*Poor old Ingold, party to so many crimes!*—then Lëonórwyn—Berkin shot her a welcoming grin—and, finally, his uncle's two prize fighting cocks, Osuald and Ricbert, each jostling the other to get through the door first. *Gods!*

Berodin, noticing the jar of *égvor*, cast a suspicious glance around the room, but seemed to see nothing else out of the ordinary. "Sit down boy," he said impatiently, "you make me giddy, swaying about like that."

Berkin stumbled to the table and pulled out a chair for Lëonórwyn, who rewarded him with an affectionate smile, then took a seat beside her.

"There is only one paper for *you* to sign," said Berodin. He gave Ingold a curt nod.

The Notary laid a parchment on the table. "This is the Marriage Contract, Master Berkin," he explained. "You must sign it *here*." He made a cross at the bottom of the sheet.

Berkin glanced at Lëonórwyn. "I shall do my best," he said quietly, "to be a good husband." Then he took up the pen and signed his name, *Berkin son of Alrin*. He handed the pen to his future wife.

"Sign it below him, my lady," said the Notary.

Lëonórwyn added her signature, turning to Berkin with a faint smile.

"Now the witnesses," said Ingold.

Slowly, Ricbert wrote his name in a large, childish hand, then Osuald made his mark.

"It is done, my lord," said the Notary. "It just remains for the marriage to be consummated."

"It that *really* necessary?"

"I am afraid that a marriage is not legal without it."

Berodin turned to his nephew. "You have an hour," he said. "Let us hope there is one thing you can do without falling over."

Berkin watched, open mouthed, as the 'wedding guests' departed, and Osuald raised his forearm in a lascivious gesture before closing the door.

...

The couple sat for some moments in uneasy silence. Then Berkin said, "Do you have a brooch?"

"My lord?"

"My name is *Berkin*, like in our letters."

"Yes, I know. I am just—"

"Nervous. It feels strange."

"Yes."

"You deserved better than this; I am sorry."

"It is not your fault."

"Do you have a brooch, Lëonórwyn?"

"Your uncle has locked my jewellery away. For safekeeping—"

"The *swine*! Do you have *anything* sharp?"

"Sharp? I have scissors..." She reached into the cloth purse at her waist and drew out a tiny pair of sewing shears in a little leather sheath.

"Perfect!" said Berkin, smiling. "May I borrow them?"

"Why?"

The boy cleared his throat. "How much do you know about marriage?"

"You mean, about men and women?"

"Yes."

"I think I know the facts, Berkin," said Lëonórwyn. "And I do not believe we will need scissors..."

"We want to do it in our own time," said Berkin, gently taking the shears. "But they will look at the bed sheet."

"I do not understand—*what are you doing?!*"

"Shhhh." Berkin clamped his hand around the finger he had just stabbed and rose unsteadily to his feet. "If you have a handkerchief, too, that will be useful. I should have asked you before, but I am not thinking clearly today." He stumbled over to the bed. "Of course," he said to himself, "the books do not say how much... Probably no more than a few drops." He squeezed his bleeding finger over the dirty sheet, letting it drip, then carefully smeared the blood into an uneven patch. "There—your virginity."

"That *is* cunning," said Lëonórwyn, coming up beside him. "I would never have thought of that. Here..." She took his hand and carefully bound his finger with her handkerchief. "Does it hurt?"

Berkin smiled. "It smarts a little."

"But will your uncle not realise? When he sees *this*?" She tied off the ends in a bow.

"It is only a small cut," said Berkin, "it will stop bleeding soon. Besides, I doubt Berodin will come back in person. He will send Osuald or Ricbert—and I would need to cut off my whole hand before either of them would notice." He looked at her curiously. "What are you smiling at?"

Lëonórwyn came up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "My very clever husband," she said.

Extra scene: Will he miss it?

Legolas turned from the mirror and smiled.

The *men* Eowyn knew cared nothing for their appearance, dressing as befitted kings but happier when life allowed them to wear leather and mail.

Her elf had a weakness for fine clothes that touched Eowyn's heart.

...

She rolled onto her belly and, feet held aloft, slid down to her knees—*I must look ridiculous!*—crawled to Legolas' clothes chest and opened it.

Perfect order!

She found his leaf-green sash, struggled back to the bed, and hid it under her pillow.

Will he miss it?

She grinned: *No—not if I avoid wearing leaf green.*

Extra scene: The Yuletide gift

Eowyn gazed into her glass of cordial. It was time to clear the air. "Legolas has told me," she said, quietly.

Arwen was far too old, and far too wise, to mistake what she was referring to. "Good," she said.

Eowyn looked up in surprise. Arwen was smiling. "Had he kept it from you, Eowyn, it would have become a wedge, slowly driving you farther and farther apart," she said. "And it would always have stood between *us*—and I should very much like *us* to be friends."

Eowyn considered Arwen's offer—for that was what it was.

She had never had a female friend before. Female servants, yes, with some of whom she had been close—as with Míriel, now—but her *friends* had always been male—her brother, Eomer; Theodred; and, especially, Legolas. And, of course, Gimli and Faramir, and—she supposed—Lord Fingolfin...

"Yes," she said, with a slightly nervous smile. "I should like us to be friends, too."

"But it still troubles you?" asked Arwen, gently.

Eowyn chose her words carefully. "I knew that Legolas must be experienced—what man—*male*—is not? It is just... He is *so* much older than I, Arwen and, when I try to think about it, I cannot comprehend it."

"Do you wonder about the future?"

"You mean, do I wonder what will happen when I am old?"

Arwen's nod was almost imperceptible.

"All the time," Eowyn admitted. "But Legolas..." She gazed down at her glass again.

"He will never forsake you," said Arwen, gently. "Just as I will never forsake Estel." She placed her hand upon her rounded stomach as she said her husband's name.

"I know," said Eowyn. "I *do* know that. But..."

Arwen waited patiently.

"He says he will follow me. In death. He will follow me wherever I go, and he will beg to be permitted to join me." She looked up at her new friend, all her anxieties suddenly finding release. "I do not *want* him to die, Arwen. *I do not!* But a part of me—a *part of me...*"

"Wants never to be separated from him," finished Arwen. "There is no shame in that—"

"It is not *shame* I feel. At least, not just shame."

"What else?"

"Guilt."

"You must not feel guilty," said Arwen.

Eowyn stared at her, suddenly remembering what Legolas had told her of the advice Lord Elrond had once given him, and of the the peace it had brought. "You *are* your father's daughter," she said, softly, and Arwen's answering smile was radiant. "You do not condemn us?"

"Condemn you! Of course not, Eowyn—remember—the Valar themselves have blessed your union. They mean you to be together." She leaned forward in her chair. "You must trust them. If his following you is not the way, then they will make another way clear to you—in time."

"Will we recognise it?"

"If you are open to their guidance."

"Thank you," said Eowyn. "Thank you."

She caught Arwen's gaze and held it, and they shared their first smile as friends—but it was immediately interrupted by a light tap at the door. "That must be one of your brothers."

"No, I do not think so," said Arwen, "it does not sound like one of them—I think they must have sent a messenger."

"Come in!"

...

"Haldir!" Arwen held out both hands to her childhood friend. "Come and sit with us—join us in a cordial."

Haldir greeted her formally. "Thank you, your Majesty, but I believe you have an errand for me? Your brothers will be in conference with King Elessar for some time, and have sent me in their stead." He raised his head and smiled.

Arwen hesitated for the briefest of moments.

She is far too wise, thought Eowyn, to have missed the tension between us... And a part of her wondered, dispassionately, what Arwen would decide to do.

"Lady Eowyn," said Arwen, "needs an escort down to Rath Bein."

So Arwen trusts us. But it will be so uncomfortable...

"Of course, your Majesty," said Haldir, with another bow. He turned to Eowyn. "My lady?"

What could she do? Eowyn nodded her assent—and automatically closed her eyes as Haldir bent over her and scooped her from her seat. She had no memory of the last time he had held her—in the strange, distorted world that the Merman had created in her mind, Haldir had been an orc—but she knew that she had been naked, and she had no doubt that Haldir's memories of the incident were vivid.

"I have sent word to the stables," said Arwen. "Your horses will be ready." She smiled at Eowyn. "I do hope you find what you are looking for," she said.

And Eowyn knew that she was referring to something far more precious than the Yuletide gift.

"Lady Eowyn," said Arwen, "needs an escort down to Rath Bein."

Ai ceryn Manwë, thought Haldir. But, "Of course, your Majesty," he said, with another bow. He turned to Eowyn. "My lady?"

Haldir had spent almost five thousand years as March Warden of Lothlórien, but he had never heard The Lady's voice as clearly as he was hearing Eowyn's anxiety now.

He tried to reassure her: *I love you, my lady*, he thought, *and want nothing from you that you would not freely give*. Then he scooped her into his arms, and she was so light—*Lighter than a mallorn leaf*—that his heart nearly broke.

"I have sent word to the stables," said Arwen. "Your horses will be ready. I do hope you find what you are looking for, Eowyn." She turned to him. "*No i Melain na le*, Haldir. Do not be a stranger, *mellon nín*."

"*Nanarad agevedim, híril nín*," he replied, with a bow of the head.

...

"What is it that you are looking for, my lady?" he asked, as they rode out of the stables.

The sky had darkened early, threatening more snow, and several Palace functionaries were rushing about The Citadel, lighting lamps. Eowyn paused within a pyramid of golden light, waiting for the passage to the Place of the Fountain to clear.

"A gift," she said, "for Legolas." And, at the mention of *him*, she suddenly relaxed. "Something beautiful, Haldir. If I had thought of it earlier, I would have had a robe made for him but, since I have only a day, I thought of a sash, in some exotic fabric from Far Harad..."

They passed the White Tree and entered the tunnel in single file.

Haldir made no attempt to banish the jealousy squeezing his heart. *This is how things are*. "He is a lucky elf," he murmured.

"I am sorry," said Eowyn, as they emerged, side-by-side once more, on Rath Fain. And, at first, he thought that she had heard his complaint. "All this talk of clothes is of no interest to you," she continued, "but I do..." She dropped her gaze, suddenly, to the pommel of her saddle. "I *do* want to thank you, Haldir."

"For what, my lady?"

"For going to the *Golden Goose* with him—for taking care of him. I was so worried." She glanced up at him, and frowned—misinterpreting his guilty expression. "I *trust* him, Haldir! Of course I do! But he is not worldly—not like you and I and Gimli. He has skills the rest of us can never hope to match, with the bow and the knives, and I have seen him leap effortlessly onto a moving horse, and climb the leg of a *mûmak*. But he does not know the ways of men—"

"I think he is far shrewder than you realise, my lady," said Haldir, as they rode through the Sixth Gate and into Rath Bein.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that it was *Legolas* who immediately recognised Lady Léonórwyn last night; it was Legolas who, just as quickly, thought of a way to speak to her privately and confirm her

identity; and it was Legolas who bought her from the landlord—

“Bought her?”

Haldir realised that he had gone too far. And now he had no choice but to explain further. “She was disguised as a boy my lady—as a male *whore*—the *property* of the landlord. Legolas could not risk exposing her true identity, so he pretended that he was...”

“He was what, Haldir?” asked Eowyn.

Haldir selected the least of several evils. “He said that he was buying the boy as gift for *you*, my lady.”

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Eowyn laughed merrily. “For me! Perhaps you are right about his worldliness, March Warden! I shall have speak to him about this —”

“Please do not, my lady. If he has not told you himself—”

“He and I have no secrets, March Warden,” said Eowyn, firmly.

“Of course not, my lady. But—”

“No buts. If he has not already mentioned it, it is because he has not yet had the opportunity.”

“Of course,” he said, thinking, *Tell yourself that if you must.*

The scowl he provoked should have felled an elf at sixty paces—Haldir was not sure how he survived it. “I am sorry, my lady; I realise I have little experience of such matters...” He said it instinctively, with no intention of deceiving or manipulating her, hoping merely that she would seize it as an offer of submission and let the subject drop.

Eowyn clearly thought otherwise. “What are you not telling me, Haldir?” she demanded.

There was nowhere to hide. And why *should* he hide? The elf brought his horse to a stop. “Legolas pretended that he wanted to bed the boy,” he admitted.

“And?”

“And I...”

“And you believed it!” Eowyn stared at him incredulously. “How could you?”

YOU KNOW HOW. YOU KNOW WHY! he thought, but he said nothing.

“Did you *threaten* him?”

“I have since apologised.”

“Well—that is something.”

“And he was most gracious. But that is why I am convinced he will not tell you about it, my lady,” said Haldir.

“Yes, he *will* tell me,” replied Eowyn. “But he will wait until the time is right.” She looked south along the Rath. “There is the shop, March Warden,” she said. And she smiled with relief.

Postscript: Three days later

The package—narrow, flat, wrapped in golden fabric and tied with golden cord—was sitting on his bed. Waiting for him.

He pulled the parchment from beneath the bow, and read its message.

Thank you for your time today. I hope you will accept this peace offering. Eowyn.

Her handwriting was strong—the characters clearly formed, without flourishes—the effect businesslike but not especially neat. Haldir smiled. *Her* handwriting. He opened the parcel.

It was a sash—of deepest red and shimmering gold—a pattern of spiky leaves with sharply etched veins. It reminded him of...

My armour, he thought.

Extra scene: The letters

Height: somewhat less than an elleth.

Build: slender but rounded.

Hair: golden, waving.

Eyes: grey-blue.

Face: charming.

Charming, sighed Thranduil. He re-read the description. *Nothing remarkable there. She is short, grinning, and tends to fat, as edenith do.*

He continued reading.

'Prince Legolas introduced her as his wife.'

"NO!" Thranduil's cry of horror echoed throughout his cavern-study. "NO, LASSUI! NO!" He crushed the report in his fist and threw it to the floor. "You foolish elfling! You foolish, *foolish* elf—

"Oh..." On second thoughts, he retrieved the parchment, hastily smoothed it out, and continued reading.

'Lords Caranthis and Fingolfin address her as 'My Lady' and refer to her as the colony's co-ruler.' Of what concern is that to me? He scanned further down the page.

'The lady herself is charming'—That word again!—'Intelligent and considerate, a very agreeable companion at dinner and—'

"You," said Thranduil to his absent messenger, "are bound for the Halls of Mandos. No—better still—for a nice, long visit to Bergthórr beytill."

He rose from his desk, crossed to the sideboard and poured himself a large measure of strong red wine. Then, somewhat fortified, he continued reading: *'His Highness is a very attentive husband—'* Thranduil shuddered at the word, *'—and seems, if I may be so bold, your Majesty—'* "No you may not," *'—happier than I have ever seen him.'*

Thranduil laid down the parchment, and—his mind numbed by excess emotion—stumbled into his garden cavern. The small space was filled with lush greenery and the Elvenking took a deep, calming breath, inhaling the comforting scent of fresh, living things—

The green smell! How Lassui loves it!

He sat down heavily.

'Happier than I have ever seen him...! What is the fool talking about? Lassui has always been happy. He was a happy little elfling. Always smiling. Always...'

Always ready to be taken in by some scheming female.

Thranduil returned to his desk, selected a piece of parchment and took up a pen.

'My son,' he wrote.

He tapped his fingers on the wooden table. *My son... My son...* "You should have told me, Lassui," he said aloud. "You should have brought her here and let me..."

Put her to the test.

Thranduil sighed. "Of course, after that unfortunate business in Eryn Aras..."

Ahem.

But perhaps there is another way to test her.

He retrieved his pen and continued writing, choosing his words carefully.

'Aerandir tells me that you are now calling her your wife. Do not be a fool, Lassui! Both Lord Galdor and Lord Nevlondeion have, quite separately, assured me that this cannot be the case—'

Well, they would—if I told them to, he thought.

'In any case, Lassui, you know full well that a Crown Prince cannot marry without his King and father's permission, and I will never give it in this case '

"That should give *her* something to think about. Now for him."

'Aerandir, of course, extols her charms and says that all of your Counsellors adore her. I have heard about human women and their unique ability to pleasure an elf. Are you absolutely sure that she is not demonstrating her talents to them? Your choice of lovers has never been fortunate, Lassui.'

He signed his name with a flourish.

Then another thought struck him. *It can only work if he reads it out to her. Hmm...*

Smiling, Thranduil added, *'Be sure to read this in private,'* in large letters, across the top of the sheet.

"If she loves you, Lassui," he said, scattering sand over the wet ink, "this will only bring you closer." He shook the parchment, folded it carefully, and sealed it with wax. "But if she is a fortune hunter, it is better for you to know it now."

And if a letter does not do the trick, he thought, *as he rang for Aerandir, I can always pay a visit to Eryn Carantaur, and remedy the situation in the usual way.*

The reply

You do not know Eowyn; you have never met her and yet, it seems you know her better than I!

I have travelled through Moria, Rohan and Gondor. I have fought Sauron's forces at his own Black Gates. I have played a vital part in the affairs of men, elves and dwarves.

But I am incapable of choosing my own wife!

When will you accept that I am no longer your elfling but a grown elf?

Your letter has had exactly the opposite effect to that which you intended. I was almost in despair, knowing that you planned to test Eowyn as you tested the others, and afraid that your insults would hurt her so much that she would return to her brother. But Eowyn is made of sterner stuff, a Princess who has left a Palace to live in the Forest with me. She loves me, Ada. 'If he means to separate us,' she said, 'he will fail.'

As for our marriage. We have legal minds of our own to call upon. You can expect an official visit from us in late Spring.

And you will accept her as my wife, Ada. I swear it.

Legolas.

Extra scene: Some unfortunate business in Eryn Aras

Through the utter darkness of a moonless Mirkwood night, a lone elf rode silently down the winding trail to the silvan outpost of Eryn Aras.

The stranger stopped, just short of the settlement's perimeter fence, dismounted, pulled the hood of his dark cloak over his face, and, leaving his horse to graze, approached the palisade.

With a slight smile—enjoying the rare opportunity to behave like an elfling once more—he placed one hand on the wooden wall, one foot against a good, stout plank, and sprang gracefully atop the fence. He scanned the clearing below—*No guards*—and dropped lightly to the ground.

No one came forward to stop him.

I must talk to Lassui about this laxity.

Moving like a ghost, the elf crossed the deserted clearing, climbed one of the staircases that spiralled upwards to the aerial town, and walked purposefully along its darkened walkways to the small dwelling that Singollo Greycloak—under extreme duress—had described.

He tapped on the door.

The occupant came running—her eagerness audible in every footfall—and threw the door wide open. "Lassui—!"

He stepped inside, catching her in his arms and pulling her against his chest—with no desire other than to quieten her.

She pressed her body to his.

There was a moment of profound stillness.

Then she pulled away. "Who *are* you?"

He lowered his hood.

"Oh!"

"You and I need to talk," said Thranduil.

...

"Lasfain—*Legolas*—will be here at any moment," said the elleth, coldly.

Thranduil shook his head. "I have sent him to inspect the Forest Path. He will not be back for a week."

"You are lying. He would *never* leave without telling me—not without sending word."

"'Word' is locked in my study," said Thranduil. "And will be until I release him, tomorrow morning."

The elleth sighed, temporarily defeated; "*What do you want?*" she asked.

"A glass of wine would be nice."

She stared at him, incredulously. Then she said, "Legolas does not exaggerate when he talks of you."

"That is good to hear. May I sit down?"

"Suit yourself."

Thranduil glanced around the tiny room, considering his options—two wooden chairs either side of a small table beneath the window, a rug before the fireplace, and a surprisingly large bed against the far wall. The bed had no doubt witnessed events that Thranduil would prefer to believe had never happened...

Still—it was the most comfortable option.

He sat down gracefully.

The elleth, meanwhile, had picked up a goblet from one of the two place settings on the table, and sloshed some wine into it. She handed it to her unwelcome guest. Thranduil sniffed dubiously at the dark red liquid, took a mouthful, rinsed it around his teeth, and shuddered. "You should have asked Lassui to fetch you something decent from my cellars." He placed the glass on the nightstand.

"What do you want?" the elleth repeated.

"To talk," said Thranduil. "I have a proposition for you."

...

She sat down on one of the chairs. "You have five minutes."

"This is what happens when a prince beds a commoner," muttered Thranduil. "Royalty no longer inspires respect..." He folded his hands on his lap. "End your association with my son and I will give you the equivalent of ten thousand gold, in gowns and jewellery, and an escort to the city of your choice—I would recommend Lothlórien—it is further from Elrond."

"You think I am a fortune hunter!"

"Oh, no," said Thranduil. "Lassui is an uncommonly fair elf, and has a loving disposition. I dare say you are besotted with him. And I am sure you would be happy as his wife."

"Then why are you trying to send me away?"

"Because *he* would not be happy as your husband—you are not good enough for him."

"He says I am the companion of his spirit—"

"I am sure he does. But you are not."

"How do you know?"

Thranduil sighed. "Marry *me*. Be my queen."

The elleth stared at him, opened mouthed. Then she said, "This is some sort of test."

"It is," said Thranduil. "And you have just failed it."

"What do you mean?"

"You gave the wrong answer—for you were imagining yourself a queen. I could see it in your eyes."

The elleth looked away.

"An elleth who really was the companion of my son's spirit would never—not for one fraction of a second—have thought of marrying me. She would have cried out 'No!' immediately."

...

"My offer still stands," Thranduil continued. "Ten thousand gold, in gowns and jewellery, and an escort to Lothlórien. *On one condition.*"

"What?"

"You make the break as painless for Lassui as you can."

"How?"

"Use your feminine skills." He rose. "I will leave you now. The moment I am convinced that you have released my son, I will make the arrangements." He turned to leave.

"You have done this before," said the elleth.

"Several times."

"And the elleth has always failed the test."

"Indeed."

"Have you ever considered," she asked, "that that might have more to do with *you* than with *our* feelings for Legolas?"

Thranduil frowned. "What do you mean?" He turned.

Without his realising it, she had closed the gap between them. "You are an attractive elf," she said. "And a king."

Thranduil took a step backwards. "This," he said, "has been a business meeting. Nothing more."

"Really?" She came closer, raising her hand to touch his face. "Are you not curious?"

Thranduil took another step back. "About what?"

The elleth pursued him. "About this elleth who has taken your precious son—your elfling—from you? Do you not wonder what it might be like to bed her yourself? Do you not suspect that she might find *you* the better lov—"

"This is a test," said Thranduil, swallowing hard.

"It is; and you have just failed it," said the elleth, triumphantly. "Tell me, your Majesty, who should be the more guilty—the elleth who, for the briefest moment, imagined herself a queen, or the father who imagined himself stealing his son's lover?"

...

"I have underestimated you," said Thranduil, softly.

The lady vanishes

"You have underestimated *Lasfain*" said the elleth, "by not trusting his judgement." She pushed past Thranduil and opened the door. "You can keep your *jewels*, your Majesty; I shall not be leaving Eryn Aras." She raised her hand to cut off his protest. "You need not worry. You have also underestimated your son's sense of duty. I believe that he has already decided to leave me—I am sure that tonight was to have been our last time together." She raised her chin, defiantly. "I would have made him a *loving* wife."

"Yes," said Thranduil. "But you are not the one."

"If he asks," said the elleth, "I shall tell him what happened here."

Thranduil shrugged his shoulders. "Lassui has forgiven me far worse than this."

And he raised his hood, and walked out into the night.

Extra scene: The Prince of Ithilien

Peaches!

Esmarë picked up a velvety fruit, inhaled its scent, and smiled.

Home...

Whispers, rippling through the crowd around her—“*The Prince of Ithilien!*”—brought her back to Minas Tirith, and Esmarë turned to watch his cavalcade pass, curious to see the man these people seemed to hold in such high regard.

He was nothing special.

Shame, she thought. Then their eyes met, and he smiled—a gentle smile that lit his sensitive face with true beauty...

But *not* the smile of a red-blooded man looking at a lovely young woman.

Oh! Esmarë hurried home to tell the girls.

Extra scene: You must be Prince Legolas

This scene is a slight spoiler in that it introduces Berkin before we have met him properly in the main story. You may prefer to read it after you have read Chapter 11.

Lëonórwyn is safe!

Berkin lay on his back, staring at his usual patch of ceiling, considering everything that Admant had just told him.

More than safe—she is back with her brother and under the protection of two Kings and two Princes! He smiled at the irony of it. *And, if Admant has understood their discussion correctly, the King and his friends are concerned about me, too.*

Berkin tried to decide how this might affect his plans—his life's work. He was so close...

But he had not yet decided how he would use the evidence once it was in his grasp, and he had never, *ever*, allowed himself to wonder what would happen after he had revealed it—he had always assumed that his life would end at the moment of success.

But if the King's friends are showing an interest in me...

Of course, Berodin might still kill him at any moment.

But what if he were to give Admant a letter to give to the dwarf? He would have to time it *exactly* right, but just suppose—

Berkin sat bolt upright. Someone was climbing the stairs. *Not Olemi*—he would know his friend's footsteps anywhere—*No, three men, two of them carrying something, the other, my uncle. What are they bringing?*

Oh gods, he thought, *is this it?*

He looked around the room, though every detail was already branded on his memory. *No way out. Nowhere to hide. No weapon.*

Not that I could use a weapon if I had one.

He swung his legs off the bed and struggled to his feet. *If I am going to die*, he thought, *it will not be lying in bed.*

And he clasped his hands behind his back because his limbs were unsteady and he did not want his uncle—or those bastards, Osuald and Ricbert—to think that he was quaking with fear.

...

Melmenya...?

Legolas tried to make sense of the splinters of light and noise and pain that were spiralling through his body.

Eowyn nín?

...

Osuald and Ricbert were carrying a man.

"Move," snarled Ricbert. "Over there."

Berkin snarled back—prudently, at the same time, shuffling backwards—watching them dump the slender body on the floor. This was the first time one of his uncle's other victims had been brought into his room and Berkin wondered why.

What is special about this one?

In the slow, slightly foolish manner he always adopted in his uncle's presence, he asked, "Who is he, uncle?"

"None of your concern," said Berodin. He motioned his two servants to leave.

"How long will he be here?" Berkin persisted. Then, "Is he *dangerous*?"

"Dangerous?" Berodin shook his head, but not in reply to his nephew's question. "He will be here for as long as I wish him here," he said, "and he is no more dangerous than you are."

...

The moment his uncle had slammed the door, Berkin was on the floor, crawling on all fours towards his fellow prisoner. "Can you hear me?" he asked, softly.

The man was moaning.

Berkin leaned over him, tentatively touching his shoulder. "Are you all—*oh my gods!*" A glance at the delicately pointed ears confirmed it. "You are an *elf*," he said. "Are you Prince Legolas? Yes, you must be..."

...

Melmenya? Help me...

He struggled to tell her—to make her understand. "Thirsty, melmenya. Drink..."

...

An elven prince, thought Berkin, a hero of the Ring War—the King's personal friend. Is there no one Berodin dare not attack? Is there nothing he cannot get away with?

"*Faug*," muttered the elf. "*Sog...*"

What was that? The boy leaned closer, turning his ear to the elf's lips.

"*Sog...*"

Elvish! "I do not understand, your Highness—are you in pain?" Carefully, Berkin examined the prisoner's head and neck, grimacing at the bruises around his throat and the deep gash across his forehead.

"We must stop that bleeding."

Everything in the room—Berkin's clothes, his sheets, anything he might otherwise have torn into bandages—was filthy. "It will have to be your own shirt," he said softly. "I will be careful..."

"*Sog, melmenya.*"

"Yes, sogmelmenya," replied Berkin, assuming that the sound of his own language would comfort the elf, "sogmelmenya."

The silvery fabric of the elf's shirt was soft but too strong for the boy's weakened hands. He growled in frustration and, ignoring the pain in his joints, worked his thumbnail into the fibres until the silk finally gave way—and then he laughed with relief, tearing off a long strip, forming it into a pad and pressing it firmly against the elf's forehead.

"Faug," moaned the elf. "Faug..."

"Faug," repeated Berkin.

...

I think I am dying, melmenya.

Legolas' throat burned with thirst and with unshed tears. *I am...*

No! he thought. *No, melmenya! I shall not leave you without a fight! I shall not!*

...

The elf had grown restless. Berkin was trying to hold him still, but his own ravaged body was no match for elven strength. "Please, your Highness, you will hurt yourself—"

More footsteps. But this time he recognised them, and they were most welcome. He turned towards the door, struggling to keep the elf from thrashing about. "Olemi! Come and help me..."

The servant dumped the lunch tray and crouched beside his young master.

"Faug..." muttered the elf.

"He keeps saying that," said Berkin. "And 'sog' and 'melmenya'. But I do not know what he means."

Olemi examined the wound. "There is no sign of infection—in fact the cut is already beginning to heal. But he seems hot." Olemi slid his hand inside the elf's shirt. "Hot and dry... I think he needs water." He scrambled to his feet. "Can you lift him up?"

Berkin struggled manfully.

"Here." Olemi had brought a tankard of water and a spoon from the lunch tray. "Let *me* hold him."

Berkin took a spoonful of water and carefully dribbled it into the elf's mouth, smiling when his patient swallowed it greedily. "You were right," he said to Olemi, "thank the gods you came when you did."

"Sog," said the elf, gratefully.

"Sog," Berkin repeated, giving him another spoonful. Then, with sudden inspiration, "Water?"

"Water," the elf agreed.

...

Berkin looked down at his sleeping guest.

The boy had seldom seen his own reflection, but he knew that his thick black hair was wild and shaggy, his face dirty, his teeth—the gods alone knew what state *they* were in—his body thin and wasted.

But now is not the time for jealousy, he thought, struggling to his feet. He hobbled over to the table, grasped one of the wooden chairs, and dragged it—as quietly as he could—into the window bay, where he turned its back to the wall, and climbed up onto the seat.

The windows were covered with wooden planking, in which Berkin had, some months earlier, bored himself a tiny spy hole. He put his eye to the hole and watched the traffic on the rath below, smiling cynically when he recognised one particular passerby. *And where might you be going to, uncle, wearing my father's best sword? To sup with your friend, the King?*

...

The elf was still sleeping, his eyes open, but lifeless. *Strange*, thought Berkin. *Why do they not dry out?*

A sudden noise, from beyond his prison door, caught the boy's attention.

More footsteps—Osuald on his own—trouble.

"Keep quiet," he whispered. Then he shuffled away from the elf and, using the table, struggled to his feet, and stood, hands spread on the table top, legs braced, ready to face his uncle's favourite thug.

The door swung open and Osuald stood in the doorway, holding a knife. "What are you doing out of bed?" he barked.

"I needed exercise," said Berkin.

The man sneered.

"What are *you* doing up here?"

Osuald was too foolish to dissemble. "Your uncle wants *him* dealt with." He waved his knife at the elf.

Oh gods, no! Berkin watched the man stride arrogantly across the room, taking a pride in his despicable job.

No!

An idea occurred to him. "*When* did my uncle give you the order?" he asked.

"What?"

"*When did he tell you what you had to do?*"

"This morning." Osuald was reaching for the top of the elf's head.

"Because he has changed his mind," said Berkin.

The man grasped the elf's hair and, raising his head, got ready to slit his slender, white throat.

"*I said,*" yelled Berkin, taking a few wild steps, "*that my uncle has changed his mind.*"

He caught Oswald by the shoulder.

The man dropped the elf's head with a thud and turned on the boy, brandishing his knife. "What are you talking about?"

"I heard him tell the elf, this afternoon, that he had decided to keep him alive—to get a ransom for him. He is a Prince, one of the King's closest friends, and my uncle can get a fortune for him—but not if you kill him."

"*Bollocks...*" The man's eyes narrowed. "You are talking bollocks."

Berkin played his trump card. "Ask my uncle if you do not believe me—go on—go and ask him—ask him *now*. Then come back and thank *me* for saving your skin."

Oswald stared at the boy for a long moment. Then he sheathed his knife. "I cannot ask him until morning," he said. "But if he tells me that you were lying to me, I'll come back and I'll cut your prick off." He spat on the elf. "It would have put me off my beer anyway."

Berkin waited until the thug had closed the door, then sank down beside the elf. "So, your Highness," he said, carefully wiping the spittle from his face and hair, "you will at least live until tomorrow. And then..."

"Well, let us hope I can think of something else tomorrow."

Extra scene: My body may be weak now uncle

Olemi waited until his escort had closed and locked the door, then laid the tray on the table. "I have heard something," he said, helping Berkin out of bed. "Your uncle has ordered another killing."

Berkin shuffled unsteadily to the table. "Who is it this time?"

Olemi pulled out one of the chairs. "Brandir son of Borondir, a merchant from Rath Bein."

Berkin dropped heavily onto the seat. "Why?" He picked up a piece of coarse bread and dipped it into the bowl of stew.

Olemi pulled out the other chair and sat down. "According to Osuald, Brandir has been importing a substance from Near Harad—like pipe weed, but so pleasurable it leaves the smoker desperate for more. In Near Harad, apparently, men have become slaves to it —"

Someone slapped at the door, impatiently. "COME ON, OLEMI! WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THERE?"

"Is that Osuald?"

The servant nodded. "He says your uncle wanted to go into partnership with this Brandir."

Berkin gestured with his piece of bread. "But the poor fool refused."

"He is not exactly *innocent*, Berkin."

"No..." The boy took a bite. "Still," he said, swallowing the food with difficulty, "that does not give Berodin the right to kill him—does the man have children?"

Olemi shrugged. "I do not know."

"Can you come back tonight? With the supper tray? Swap with Penda? "

"Why? What do you want me to do?"

"I am not sure yet, but—"

There was another loud slap on the door.

"Osuald is getting impatient," said Olemi.

"You had better go—I may need you to be his best friend, later." Berkin grinned. "And thank you, Olemi."

The man shook his head. "You know that is not necessary."

Berkin dipped his bread into the thin stew. "Do *you* have to eat this stuff?"

"No."

"No. I thought not."

...

Berkin dragged one of his chairs into the window bay, turned its back to the wall and climbed onto the seat. The windows were boarded up, but many hours' patient work with the handle of a metal spoon had made him a small spy hole, carefully concealed amongst several knots in the wood.

Berkin put his eye to the hole.

Watching the world pass by helped him think.

...

Olemi was late. "The cook's drunk again," he said. "And I am not sure if this was intended for you or for one of the dogs."

Berkin lifted the lid of the dish. "Ah—part of an old boot." He took up his spoon—he was not permitted a knife—and tried to cut the gristly meat. "A *tough* old boot." He picked it up in his fingers. "Tomorrow is your afternoon off, is it not?"

"Yes." Olemi nodded.

"And Osuald can get away whenever he chooses... I need you to take him to the *Golden Goose*—tell him you owe him a drink."

"He will want a whore," said Olemi.

Berkin grinned. "As long as it gets him talking. I want to know *who* my uncle is hiring to kill the merchant. And *when*. And then..." He laid the piece of meat down with a sigh and pushed the dish away. "I cannot eat *this*."

"I will try to bring you some of our leftovers when I come back for the tray."

"No," said Berkin. "No, I want you to send Admant up for the tray."

"Admant?"

"We need help."

"Well, yes, I know, but *Admant*."

Berkin smiled. "I shall not ask him to do any thinking. But he is a good sort and I think he is fond of me—or, at least, feels sorry for me—in any case, I believe I can trust him." He looked up at the faithful servant. "Do you not think so?"

"I do not doubt that his heart is in the right place," said Olemi. "But I am not convinced that he can keep a secret."

"I shall not tell him about *you*—"

"I am not worried for myself."

"I know," said Berkin, smiling. "Your concern is for me. But I do not think you need to worry; I have already tested him."

Olemi looked up in surprise.

"With small things—sweetmeats, and so on. He brought them straight away, and never questioned where the money had come from. Tonight I will try him with something more important."

"How many more schemes are you running that I do not know about?"

Berkin smiled. "I keep nothing from you, Olemi; I just do not tell you everything."

The servant laughed. "I will send up the leftovers with Admant," he said.

...

Berkin heard the key turn in the lock, and a rough voice say, "Be quick." Then the door opened, and Admant stepped inside, looking furtive.

Berkin sighed inwardly. *Maybe this is not such a good idea.*

"I have come for your tray," said Admant, too loudly.

Berkin signalled to him to lower his voice.

"I have come for your tray," said Admant, in a stage whisper, opening his jerkin to reveal the leftovers, carefully wrapped in a cloth. "From Olemi," he mouthed.

Berkin almost laughed out loud. "Thank you—*wait* Admant—can you bring me something else, next time you come—tomorrow morning, is it not?"

"What is it you want, Master Berkin?" whispered Admant, nervously. "Only, last time, I had real trouble getting up to Rath Bein."

"This is something from my uncle's study—"

"Oh," The servant sounded as though he had been run through with a sword.

"Just a sheet of *parchment*," said Berkin, quickly, "some ink, and a pen. Bring them when you fetch the food, and take the pen and ink away when you come back for the tray. Can you do that for me, Admant?"

The servant looked around the room—as if checking that Berodin was not waiting in the shadows to catch him out—before replying, "I suppose so."

Berkin smiled. The man really *was* a good sort. "Thank you. Here." He took a small coin from the pocket of his ragged trousers and handed it over.

"Oh... Oh no, you do not need to do that, Master Berkin," said Admant, trying to give it back.

The boy raised his hand. "Drink to me, next time you are in the *Golden Goose*," he said.

...

Berkin hobbled over to the table, sat down, and unrolled the cloth bundle. He smiled. Olemi had done him proud—there was a small chop, some roasted potatoes, a slice of pease pudding and a piece of bread soaked in gravy: cold and slightly greasy but, compared to what Berkin normally ate, delicious. The boy took his time, savouring each mouthful.

Then he licked his fingers, carefully folded and hid the cloth—he would give it back to Olemi or Admant at the first opportunity—and hobbled back to his bed.

He would not have much time tomorrow, so he must compose his letters tonight, and commit them to memory.

...

"And this," said Admant, pulling a warm and slightly crumpled piece of parchment from inside his shirt and placing it next to the pen and ink. "I will be back in half an hour."

Berkin took a mouthful of the disgusting slop the cook had given him for breakfast, and waited until he was alone. Then he smoothed the parchment on the table, taking care not to get it greasy, pulled the stopper from the ink bottle, and dipped the pen.

At the top of the sheet, he wrote,

Your dealings have brought you to the attention of someone who has paid to have you killed. If you value your life, LEAVE MINAS TIRITH WITHOUT DELAY.

Further down the page, he added a separate note,

Your victim has already left the city, but I believe it is in everyone's interest that Berodin does not know.

If you agree, ask my man for 500 gold and the token. Go immediately to the House of Healing, bribe the guard to let you into the mortuary, and obtain whatever part Berodin has demanded from you as proof of death.

When I hear that he has dispatched your payment, I shall send you the same amount. You will thus receive double the fee for less than half the work.

...

Gazing through his spy hole, an hour or so later, Berkin watched Ricbert flirting with a pretty young serving girl from the house opposite. *What does Lëonórwyn look like?* he wondered. *Does she have long, pale hair?*

The click of the key took him by surprise, but his quick mind told him that the only person it could be was his uncle. He slid to the floor, landing in a heap because his legs gave way.

Berodin entered with another man, whom Berkin recognised as a Notary. "What are you doing over there?" asked his uncle, impatiently.

"I felt like walking," said Berkin.

"You should be more careful. Come here."

Using the chair for support, Berkin pulled himself to his feet and shuffled to the table. The Notary, clearly uncomfortable in the boy's presence, placed four sheets of parchment before him.

"You need to sign these," said Berodin.

"What are they?" Feigning stupidity, Berkin stared at the papers, secretly scanning their contents: *'Title Deed'. Not important. 'Contract of Sale'. Not important.*

"Nothing that need worry you," said Berodin. "You know that your interests are safe in my hands."

'Grant of Land'. Not worth fighting for. 'Marriage Settlement'.

"Come along, boy. Master Ingold's time is valuable."

Berkin glanced down the page. *'In the event of my death, my wife's fortune...'* Not on your life. "Can I have a pen?"

He dipped the nib in the small ink pot and signed the first paper, *Berkin son of Alrin*, writing slowly and laboriously. He handed the document to the Notary with a proud smile.

"And the others," said Berodin.

Berkin son of Alrin; Berk... "Oh."

The ink had run out. He reached for the ink pot; his arm twitched violently, knocking it over—"Oh, no!"—he dropped the pen and picked up the pot, holding it in mid air, watching in dismay as the ink spilled over the final sheet of parchment.

"You stupid boy!" cried Berodin, grabbing his arm. "You stupid, *stupid*—now Master Ingold must prepare another copy! If your mother and father could see what I have to put up with!"

"I believe it was an accident, my lord," ventured the Notary, meekly. "But, if the boy will finish signing the Grant of Land, at least we can complete the transfer."

...

In the event of my death, my wife's fortune...

Sitting on the floor, beneath the window, his knees drawn up under his chin, Berkin turned the sentence over and over in his mind.

He means to kill us both, he thought. Some tragic accident... I must warn Léonórwyn—must tell her to stay away. Perhaps I can get Admant to—

The key turned again.

Busy day. But Berkin smiled at this visitor. "I was not expecting you until tomorrow."

"I swapped with Ricbert," said Olemi, "because I managed to speak to Osuald last night." He helped the boy to his feet.

"Is it soon?"

"Tonight. You seem weaker today..."

Berkin shrugged his shoulders. "It comes and goes." With the servant's help, he sat down on the bed. "What else did Osuald tell you?"

"The assassin is one Alchfrid, son of Aelbert. Osuald is to meet with him this evening."

"You must follow," said Berkin. "And you have much to do beforehand." He counted each step on his fingers. "Go to our friend. We will need—what is the fee? Two thousand?"

"Two and a half. Osuald is most put out."

"Get three, then. Do you know what token my uncle has demanded?"

"No."

Berkin thought for a moment. "Once you have the gold, go straight to Brandir—you will have to talk your way in—wear your holiday clothes and show the gold—say that you

want to buy.”

Olemi nodded.

Berkin handed him the parchment. “You will need to cut this in half beforehand. Give the top part to the merchant and make sure he believes what it says.” Berkin rubbed his chin. “He will probably be *wearing* the token—it must be something my uncle has seen in the course of their dealings, something distinctive, like a ring-seal. Use your judgement. Get it from him.”

Olemi nodded again.

“Come back here as soon as you can, and then follow Osuald like a shadow. Do not let him leave without you.” He turned to the servant with a sudden misgiving: “You *are* willing to approach this Alchfrid?”

“Do I have any choice?”

“Of course you do!”

“You know I am.”

“Be careful. Give him the bottom part of the parchment. If he cannot read, you will have to read it to him.”

Olemi scanned the letter. “*Berkin...*”

“What?”

“This part about the mortuary.”

“A dead man will not miss a finger,” said the boy. “And the gods may even reward him for helping the living.”

...

There was not an inch of Berkin’s body that did not ache. He had no idea how long he had been standing at the spy hole. But he was determined—

Yes!

For an instant, at the very edge of his field of view, he saw Osuald leaving the alley beside the house, turning northwards along Rath Amrûn, making for the Fifth Gate. Moments later, a slighter figure, wearing a dark cloak with the hood raised, followed.

Sighing with relief, the boy slid down the window boards onto the chair seat.

Now it is just a matter of more waiting, he thought.

...

Surely he is back by now!

Berkin hobbled to and fro, from his bed to the window, from the window to the bed...

...

He collapsed on the coarse coverlet. *Gods, Olemi, find some way to come up here and tell me!*

...

OLEMI!!!

...

Is this...?

Wearily, Berkin pushed himself up on his elbows and watched the door.

Yes! At last!

He forced himself to stay silent until Olemi had closed the door behind him, and his escort had turned the key, then he whispered, "What happened?"

The servant laid the breakfast tray on the table. "I could not get up here last night—"

"With Brandir!"

"He has gone. Packed up his wife and children and rode for Caras Arnen—he has family there, apparently."

Berkin fell back against his pillow. "And Alchfrid?"

"Took the gold. Giving him the token was what really convinced him—he thought I had been sent by the gods!"

"What was the token?"

"A signet ring."

Berkin smiled, a touch of pride on his gaunt face.

"I escorted him to the House of Healing," said Olemi, "to make absolutely sure. And then left him happily looting Brandir's house."

"It worked," said Berkin, shaking his head. "It actually *worked!*"

"It worked." Olemi bent over his master—his late master's only son—and helped him back into a sitting position. "Do you want to eat your breakfast in bed?"

"What is it?"

"Porridge, I think."

Berkin laughed. "No. I think I will do without porridge this morning."

"You certainly deserve a celebration. I will see if I can smuggle something up—"

"Send it with Admant," said Berkin. "I need to speak to him."

Olemi regarded him curiously.

"Admant is going to be my messenger," said the boy, "to Lëonórwyn. When will I see you again?"

"Tomorrow evening."

"I shall miss you till then."

The lady vanishes

...

Berkin lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, waiting for Admant.

My body may be weak now, uncle, he thought, but I can still fight you with my mind! I can fight you with my mind!

Extra Scene: How could I stroke your ears?

"Well I will wish..." Legolas leaned down and whispered in her ear, "for one night of passion with a beautiful human slave."

Eowyn's eyes widened. "I can promise you *that* will never happen," she said. "How could I stroke your ears if my wrists were chained to the bedposts?"

After the banquet

Legolas unhooked the clasps of his ice-blue robe and shrugged it off his shoulders. "Melmenya?" He had been hoping that Eowyn would unbraid his hair and comb it out for him. "*Melmenya?*"

Still no answer. She seemed to have locked herself in the bathing room.

With a disappointed sigh, he sat down at the dressing table, carefully removed his coronet, unbound and unlaced his single braid, and ran his mûmak comb through his long pale-gold hair.

What is she doing in there?

He leaned forward, critically examining his face in the mirror—*Do I really look like a girl?*—until a creak behind him drew his eyes away from his own reflection and up to that of the bathing room door, and of the woman standing framed within it.

Without a word, she emerged, walked to the bed and sat down upon its edge, her eyes lowered, her back rigid, her hands clasped in her lap—*naked* apart from her thick mane of golden hair and the five lengths of scarlet ribbon she had tied around her wrists, her ankles and her throat.

Dear Valar, Eowyn nín!

...

With a conspiratorial smile, Legolas rose from his chair and, swaggering slightly, stood before her, legs apart, hands on hips. "Unlace my leggings."

"Yes, my lord."

There was hardly time to register the look of mischief on her face before she swooped down and nuzzled him, rubbing hard against the soft ridge of his growing erection.

The elf gasped.

Twisting her head, she caught his lacings in her teeth and pulled, rearing up and arching her back to undo the knot—and forcing Legolas to clench his muscles at the sight of her breasts bouncing with the movement. Then she was back, burrowing behind the flap of his leggings, pressing her lips to his hot, hard flesh and giggling when it jerked in response.

"No!" he cried, catching her by the shoulders. "No! *Stop!*"

She raised her head.

"That was *bad*," he scolded. "Very, very bad. You must *obey* me."

She smiled broadly.

"You are an *insolent* slave. You must be punished." He leaned forward, lifting her up off the bed, and kissed her mouth roughly.

Eowyn simply returned his kiss—at the same time taking the opportunity to reach inside his leggings and wrap her *cold* hand around him.

"Ow!" With something less than his usual fluid grace, Legolas shuffled forwards and dumped her back on the bed, hastily pushing her fingers away.

"*No!* You are not playing the *game*," he complained. "You are behaving like a wanton! And you looked so *sweet* and *innocent* when you came out of the bathing room..." He ran his hand through his hair in despair.

He did not see Eowyn's expression suddenly change as she watched those loose strands fall back around his face. "Do you wish to start again, my lord?"

Legolas frowned. She had lowered her eyes again now, and was looking suitably contrite, but... "How do I know I can trust you this time?"

"You are my *master*," said Eowyn.

Common sense vied with masculine pride, and lost. Legolas sat down beside her. "Undress me then," he said, sternly. "Take off my boots."

Eowyn slid to the floor and, kneeling at his feet, carefully loosened his laces. "Please lift your feet, my lord," she said, meekly, drawing off each boot in turn.

Legolas watched her graceful body bend and stretch. "Come here," he said, hungrily.

"Where, my lord?"

He caught her by her bound wrists and drew her forwards, bringing his knees together to imprison her between his thighs. "*Here.*"

"Why, my lord?" she asked, innocently.

"It is not your place to ask questions." He pulled open his leggings. "But if you please me tonight, *mûlvelui*, I shall reward you well." He took her hand and gently curled her fingers around his hard shaft.

Eowyn eyed him dubiously. "You are too big for me, my lord."

It took him a moment to recover his composure. "Many have said so," he agreed, enjoying the game now. "But they were grateful afterwards. Kiss me."

Sinking down between his legs, Eowyn pressed her lips to his smooth, ruby flesh.

Legolas stroked her hair. "Yes," he whispered, "yes, I can see that you will be well rewarded, *mûlvelui*, very, very well re—"

Eowyn opened her mouth, and slowly sucked him in.

"Oh! Oh, sweet Eru! *Stop!*" He grasped her head and held it, and waited, absolutely still, until the danger had passed. Then, with a gentle caress, he said, "Put your arms on the bed and lean forward, *mûlvelui.*"

And he slid to the floor, and knelt behind her.

...

Two elves might have held themselves on the bittersweet verge of release all night—delaying the crisis with subtle techniques—but for an elf and his slave there was no such choice, and Legolas deliberately thrust his *mûlvelui* over the edge, laughing at the torrent of curse-ridden compliments that suddenly burst from her lips.

Then, with a ecstatic cry of his own, he arched his back, and let himself join her in joyful abandon.

...

"Were you surprised?" asked Eowyn.

Legolas nodded. "After you had said it would never happen," he replied, pulling at one of her bonds, "that you would never submit to a master—"

"Do you think that *you* were in control?" She grinned.

Deliberately, Legolas draped the scarlet ribbon around his own neck and tied it in a neat bow. "Maybe not, *melmenya*," he said, smiling, "but let us see if *you* can do any better.

"*Híril nín.*"

Elvish

mûlvelui ... 'sweet slave'. You have to wonder why the elves have a word (*mûl*) for slave.

Híril nín ... 'my lady'.

Extra scene: The arrangement

A continuation of [The charming Lady Emliet](#)

"This represents a considerable sum," said Aragorn, gazing into the casket of jewels—emeralds, rubies, cool, pure diamonds, and sapphires in every colour of the sky—that sat on the desk before him. "Does your father know what you are doing?"

"No."

"Does Eowyn?"

"Of course!"

Aragorn smiled. "Of course..."

"The income is to be administered by Lady Emliet—"

"I will wager *that* is not popular with Lord Glarimar!"

"No." Legolas smiled. "I think the arrangement will be the cause of much dissention in that household. But the lady is adamant, and I have made her a promise. She will use the revenues to pay Master Silrim an annuity to replace his lost income—"

"However did you calculate that?"

"Berkin did it."

"Ah."

"—provided, that is, she is satisfied that he is keeping to the terms of our agreement."

"No more whores."

"Precisely—of either sex. She will use the remainder of the income to set up a home for Silrim's women and boys—and any others who come to her in need. None will be questioned; none turned away. All will find a safe home, either here, or in Eryn Carantaur."

"Legolas..."

Aragorn leaned back in his chair and regarded his friend curiously. "What is to stop these women turning your safe house into a brothel of their own?"

Legolas smiled. "Lady Emliet," he replied.

Extra scene: Eowyn gets herself into big trouble

They had said their sad farewells and had set out at dawn, slowly winding their way downwards through the levels, finally passing through the Great Gates as the huge mechanical clock in the Place of the Statues—the wonder of Gondor—struck nine.

Before them sat the Pelennor, white and empty save for the criss-crossings of a few deeply-rutted cart tracks. Above them, the sky curved in a vast blue dome.

"If we reach the river before two," said Legolas, "we can rest a while beneath the Osgiliath Bridge. I want to be at the inn soon after dark."

"Were it not for me," said Eowyn, "the four of you could camp on the trail. Perhaps *I* could—"

"I will not risk your freezing to death in the snow, *melmenya*," replied Legolas, firmly.

Eowyn hid her grin. There were times when it was nice to be cherished.

...

When they reached the river, the elves and the dwarf dismounted and soon found a safe way down the steep bank, using the stone footings of the bridge as a staircase.

"Come, *melmenya*," said Legolas, holding out his hand. "I will help you."

Steadied by his strong arm, Eowyn climbed down to the river's edge.

"Under here," called Master Dínendal.

Beneath the massive arch, a patch of dry ground littered with boulders served them as a dining room and, with a splendid view of the Anduin, the travellers spent a pleasant hour sharing their midday meal.

"I am just going to stretch my legs," said Eowyn, "before we set off again."

"Do you want me to come with you?" asked Legolas.

Eowyn grinned. "No. I shall not attempt any mountain climbing."

"Well—be careful. Your feet have only just healed..."

...

The climb was much easier than Eowyn had expected and, concentrating as she was upon placing her feet safely, she was soon surprised to find herself at the top of the bank.

The sun, sitting low in the winter sky, was painting the frosty landscape in subtle shades of rose and lavender and, stretching out her arms, Eowyn turned full circle, savouring the view—noticing, as she did so, that several inches of pristine snow lay, like lambswool, along the parapets at either side of the bridge...

...

Splat!

"Agh!" A string of elvish curses burst from her target as he instinctively crouched, arms raised over his head, and shook himself like a dog, trying to dislodge the wedge of snow that had caught in the high collar of his tunic. "What?" He began to turn—

Splat! Her second shot slipped neatly through his guard and caught him on the back of the head. "EOWYN!"

Now more troops were emerging from under the bridge, running to their captain's aid. She took out the first with two rapid shots, *splat, splat*, forcing him to adopt the same defensive posture as his leader.

"My lady!" cried the second, and—showing her first sign of weakness—she lowered her aim and, *splat*, let the civilian off with a warning.

"When I get up there..." roared her first victim, demonstrating exceptional courage by running up the snowy slope, until, *splat, splat, splat, splat*, she pinned him down with a barrage of perfectly-aimed hits.

But, just as victory seemed within her grasp, she realised—*splat*—that she had left her own back exposed—*splat, splat*. "Gimli!"

The crafty dwarf had crept up the slope on the far side of the bridge. "Surrender," he shouted, "and I shall persuade the elf to go easy on you."

"Never!" she cried, whirling round and hurling two missiles simultaneously—one at his chin, *splat*, the other at his neck, just below his helmet, *splat*.

The dwarf spluttered and cursed. Eowyn bent to scoop up more ammunition.

But she had forgotten her back once more! And before she could rise with her deadly weapons, some dishonourable foe came up silently behind her, grabbed her, and dumped a handful of snow down the back of her tunic.

"Agh!"

"Taste the bitterness of defeat, Eowyn Eomundiell," he whispered, nipping her ear.

Three days later

"A-choo..."

Legolas handed her a hot toddy.

"Thank you," said Eowyn with a sniff. "Whad are you laughing ad?"