

The White Ladies of Eryn Carantaur



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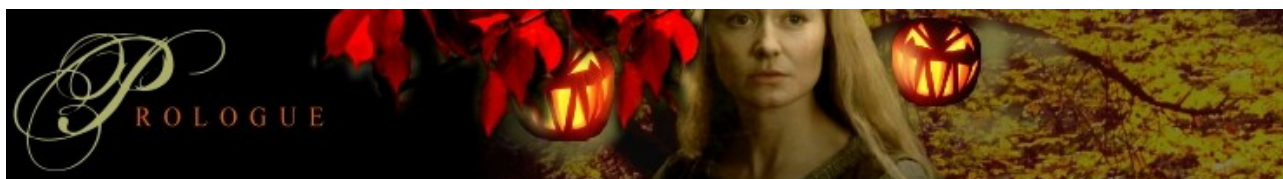
Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: On the first night of *Rhîw*, Eowyn is visited by the spirits of two young women, who beg her to find their remains, and give them a proper burial, so that they might enter the Hall of their Ancestors. Guided by the ghost of her much-loved cousin, Eowyn travels to Rohan with Legolas, to fulfil her promise. Written for the LiveJournal *lotrgficbigbang*. The story begins with a Prologue that sets the scene for new readers.

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 originals.

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"And I," said Legolas, "shall walk in the woods of this fair land, which is rest enough. In days to come, if my Elven-lord allows, some of our folk shall remove hither; and when we come it shall be blessed..." *The Return of the King*, Book VI, Chapter 4: The Field of Cormallen

Legolas ... brought south Elves out of Greenwood, and they dwelt in Ithilien, and it became once again the fairest country in all the westlands. *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, III: Durin's Folk

Q. Legolas. Did he go back to the King? Will he stay there?

A. Yes, he did. He came south with Gimli, and he brought many of his people from Greenwood the Great (so they call it now). They say it was a wonderful sight to see companies of Dwarves and Elves journeying together. The Elves have made the City, and the land where Prince Faramir lives, more beautiful than ever. Yes, Legolas will stay there, at any rate as long as Gimli does; but I think he will go to the Sea one day. Mr. Meriadoc told me all this, for he has visited the Lady Éowyn in her white house. Sam talking to Frodo-lad, quoted in *The History of Middle-Earth: Sauron Defeated*, edited by Christopher Tolkien.

It was small at first, no more than a few houses, and Legolas did much of the work himself, selecting the timber from fallen trees, learning to shape it with an axe and to fashion it into stairs, and flets, and the dwellings upon them.

But word spread, and soon Elves, who for whatever reason, had decided to stay in Middle-earth came to join their fellows, Fingolfin bringing scholars from Imladris, Caranthir bringing craftsmen from the Havens, and Haldir bringing warriors from Lothlórien.

Dwarves and Men came, too, and made it their home.

By year 5, the city of Eryn Carantaur was thriving. It sat like a dusting of blossoms upon the mighty red-leaved carantaur branches—a central 'palace', with a Council Chamber, guards' quarters, a Library, and a school for elflings, dwarflings and children; a busy market flet; several public gardens; many villages, nestling amongst the boughs—and, on the ground, workshops, stables... Even a graveyard.

And in Iavas of that year, as was the custom amongst the Wood Elves, Legolas held the colony's first Harvest Rite in praise of Yavanna, Lady of the Harvest.

...

To the Harvest celebrations came Eowyn, the wife of Faramir, Prince of Ithilien, whose marriage had sadly miscarried, though she and her husband remained the dearest of friends. Legolas had loved her from the moment he had seen her, Eowyn had come to love him gradually, and Faramir wished only that his wife might find happiness.

On the first night of the celebrations, Yavanna smiled, and Eowyn became Legolas' Lady of the Harvest Rite.

The couple travelled to Caras Arnen, the City on the Hills, and—with Faramir's help—wrote to Aragorn, petitioning him to dissolve Faramir and Eowyn's marriage. Their wish was granted and, the following Echuir, they journeyed to Eryn Lasgalen, seeking King Tranduil's permission to marry.

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To test the couple's resolve, Legolas' wily father set Eowyn three tasks. The first was to catalogue his disordered correspondence, and she accomplished it overnight with the help of her friend and tutor, Lord Fingolfin. The second was to persuade the Green Elves of Sad Glawar to pay their taxes, and she achieved that using her own reasoning and eloquence. The third and final task was to beg a jar of salve from the Healer of Eryn Aras, and she succeeded but, fatally poisoned, died, and was revived immortal.

Her transformation, however, finally convinced King Thranduil that the Valar approved his son's choice of wife and, in Rhîw of the following year, during the Yuletide celebrations, he presided over their joining ceremony.

...

The first night of Rhîw, year 6 of the Fourth Age

"E-o-wyn..."

Climbing up the main staircase, at the end of an afternoon spent sparring with Rumil and Orophin, Eowyn stopped, one hand on the rail, and listened hard. The voice had been soft, no more than a sigh upon the wind, and at first she thought she had imagined it, but—

"E-o-wyn..."

—no, it was real, and its owner was just behind her.

Eowyn spun round, automatically reaching for her sword, but there was no one else on the stairs.

Puzzled, she climbed to the top, and stepped onto the walkway.

To the right, her and Legolas' chambers stood out from the rest of the buildings, decked with pumpkin lanterns made by the colony's schoolchildren to celebrate of the first night of Rhîw.

"Eowyn..."

Gods! The voice had grown louder, and now seemed—somehow—to be coming from up ahead!

Eowyn hurried towards it, her hand upon her sword. She could see no one—*No one at all, she thought. No servants. No guards. And where is Legolas? Why, tonight of all nights, has he not come out to meet me?*

Beyond the brightly grinning lanterns, the shadows seemed unnaturally dark, and Eowyn realised that she was trembling, but the voice drew her on, past her chambers, and up the stairs to her garden.

There, between the pools of light, she thought she saw a figure, and asked, "Who are you?"

She was not expecting a reply, but the voice responded, "*Do you not recognise me, Eowyn?*"

Its owner stepped closer, his already insubstantial form fading in the lanterns' glow, but Eowyn could still see his silhouette, and she gasped, "Are you lost? Are you here because you are not at peace?"

"*I am with my ancestors.*"

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"Oh..." Her hands came up to her breast, and she smiled. "Is your father there with you?"

"Yes."

"Oh..." She wiped away a tear. "I was there myself, once, for just a moment."

"I know."

There was a smile in his voice, and Eowyn moved closer. "If you are at peace, why have you come?"

"Because, tonight, we are permitted to visit our loved ones, if they light the way."

"Light the way... You mean the lanterns?" She looked up at the grinning faces, which Legolas himself had taught the children to carve (because, he said, the first night of Rhîw meant something to all the races of Eryn Carantaur, and the colony should celebrate it). "Do you have a message for me?" she asked. "Or—or is it a warning?"

"I just wanted to see you,"—his voice had changed, become softer, more intimate—*"to see what my Shieldmaiden had become."* And, strangely, his tenderness made her blush.

"Do you like what you see?"

"You are so much wiser, Eowyn, and stronger, and even more beautiful. You were a girl then, and now you are a woman."

Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. "I am happy," she told him, because she knew that he had loved her, and because they had once believed that their futures lay together.

"I know."

"He—"

"He is the luckiest of beings. But,"—his voice began to fade—*"he loves you, Shieldmaiden, and will always love you, and will never, ever, take you for granted."*

"Wait!" she cried, rushing towards him because he was leaving her, growing every moment less and less distinct. "I want to tell you—wait—I loved you—I did—I did not know it then, but I did—please!—and I would have made you a good wife—I would..."

But he was gone.

...

Later, Legolas found her sitting in the garden.

"Melmenya? I went down to the practice field, looking for you. What are you doing up here?" He crouched down beside her. "Have you been crying?"

"On this night," said Eowyn, softly, "the dead may visit their loved ones."

"And who were you hoping to see, my darling?" He pulled her into his arms, and tried to rub some warmth into her. "Your uncle?—oh, Melmenya, you are so cold!"

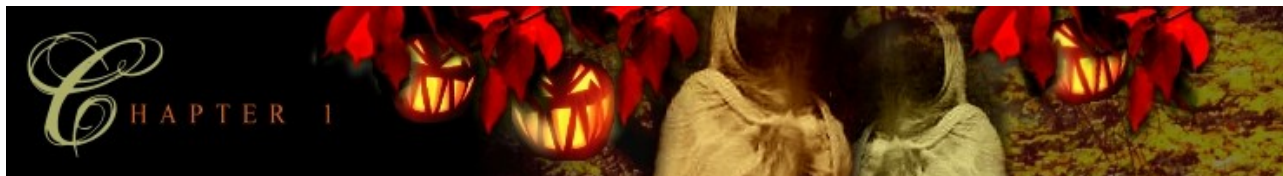
"It was Theodred who came, Lassui," she said, smiling. "Theodred has given us his blessing."

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Rhîw ... Winter (which makes the first night roughly Halloween).

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Exactly one year later

Legolas stepped out into the damp evening air and, patting the cloak draped over his arm, surveyed the line of pumpkin lanterns, carved by Eowyn and little Melannen, that ran past the door and up the curving staircase leading to their private garden flet.

Night was drawing in, and a light mist was rising from the ground. The grinning faces—some cheerful, some rather less than welcoming—glowed brightly in the gloom and, despite his misgivings, the Elf smiled.

She has arranged the lanterns, he thought, like a trail of bread crumbs, luring her quarry to her lair.

He ran lightly up the stairs, and crossed the flet to where his wife was already waiting, perched uncomfortably upon a wooden chair for she was cold, but would never have admitted it. "Put this on, Melmenya," he said, draping the cloak about her shoulders, "to please me."

"Thank you..." She gathered up the fabric, and held it close to her body. "I know you do not want me to do this, Lassui—"

"It is only that I do not want you to be disappointed, Melmenya."

"I know, my love. I know. But he is lonely, Lassui, and tonight is his only chance."

Legolas sat down beside her and, tilting his head to catch her eye, he smiled. "I *do* hope he comes, Melmenya," he assured her, gently.

She nodded, and then—with a little start—she turned towards the stairs, but it was only their servant, Galathil, bringing two goblets of smoking mulled ale.

"Good," said Legolas, handing one to Eowyn, then touching the other to hers in a refined version of the tankard-banging he had seen in the Mead Halls of Rohan. "It is a cold night," he explained. "Let us at least stay warm."

...

They waited, side-by-side, occasionally exchanging a few quiet words but, mostly, sitting in silence and, as the hours passed, the mist grew thicker—damper and colder. Legolas, who did not feel the cold himself, but had—since the first terrible time he had nursed her through a chill—developed an irrational fear for Eowyn's health, was considering picking her up and carrying her indoors, when she suddenly grasped his arm, and gestured towards the stairs.

Legolas turned, his gaze following her pointing hand...

And there was no longer any room for doubt.

Two slender columns of denser, whiter mist were floating up the stairs and advancing along the line of lanterns, and—even had they not *looked* like disembodied spirits—he would have sensed their nature immediately.

Eowyn, less awed than her Elven husband at that moment, sprang to her feet. "Who are you,"

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she demanded, "and what do you want?"—because, as the figures drew closer and their forms grew more distinct, it became obvious that both were female.

"*Your cousin says that you will help us,*" said one of the women, in a strange, echoing voice.

"Theodred," said Eowyn, glancing at Legolas with a mixture of triumph and relief. "Where is he? Is he with you?"

"*He cannot come to you tonight...*"

"Oh..."

Her disappointment was tangible. Legolas wrapped a comforting arm around her, and brought her close. "Who are you, my Ladies?" he asked.

"*Two lost spirits...*" replied the first woman.

"*...denied a proper burial...*" her companion continued.

"*...and turned away from the Halls of our Ancestors.*"

Legolas' hold on his wife tightened. "And what do you think Eowyn can do to help you?" he asked.

"*Find our remains...*"

"*...and bury them.*"

"Where?" asked Eowyn, and Legolas could hear genuine concern in her voice. "Where are your remains?"

"*We do not know.*"

"Who are you?" Legolas asked again.

The spirits shifted, twisting towards each other as though conferring, then replied, in unison, "*We have forgotten...*"

"Forgotten?"

"*He—the one who killed us—has stolen our names.*"

"Then how can you expect us to find you?" asked Legolas.

"*Your cousin says that you will help us,*" the first woman repeated, appealing directly to Eowyn.

"Lassui..."

"We will do what we can for you," said the Elf, holding his wife back. "Where did you dwell, in life?"

"*Eastfold...*"

"*Eastfold!*" said Eowyn, excitedly. She tried to break free; Legolas held her fast.

"What else do you remember?" he asked. "Are you sisters? Or cousins, perhaps? What was your father's name? Do you remember that?"

"*Eofor...*"

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"When were you mur—I mean—when did you die?" asked Eowyn.

But at that—whether because of the nature of her question, or because their allotted time had reached its end—the spirits began to shrink away: to rise, and curl, and dissolve into the surrounding mist.

"Wait," cried Eowyn following them, and Legolas found himself following, too, "you have not told us enough! We cannot—"

"*Help us,*" sobbed the women, "*please, please, help us, help us, help...*"

And the sound of their anguished weeping lingered on the air, many moments after their spectres had vanished.

...

"Fare you well, daughters of Eofor," murmured Eowyn, sinking down into a chair.

"Melmenya?" Legolas hovered anxiously over his shivering wife; she smiled up at him, sadly. "Come inside, my darling," he said. "We need to get you warm."

...

Some time later, curled up in bed together, the couple were still trying to piece together everything they had learned during their strange encounter.

"Eofor is a common name," said Eowyn, "so, without knowing his father's name, it could be hard to find the right man." She sighed. "And yet... Those women were not peasants, or servants, Lassui. They were well-spoken—women of rank—the daughters of an eorl or a thane, perhaps, or of a wealthy farmer."

"Eofor of Eastfold."

"My father was from Eastfold—the land east of the Folde—the site of Eorl's ancient capital. Important families still live there." She sighed again. "Two young women, at the mercy of their male relations..."

"You think they were killed for their fortunes?" Legolas kissed the top of her head. "I suppose that could explain what they meant when they said that their names had been 'taken' from them—that the killer had stolen their birthright."

"No..." Eowyn settled herself more comfortably against his chest. "I am not sure what they meant by that, Lassui—it is a saying I have never heard before, and the way they said it—it was as though they had been forbidden to enter the Halls of their Ancestors *because* they were nameless. I think it is something more sinister than having had your inheritance stolen—something worse, even, than having been murdered."

"What could be worse than having been killed?" asked Legolas, uncertainly.

"Having had your spirit deprived of rest."

"Melmenya," he began, and Eowyn knew exactly what was coming next.

"You promised them, Lassui," she said, vehemently. "You said, 'We will do what we can for you.' You cannot now ask me to think of my own safety, and abandon them."

"I know."

"We cannot leave their spirits in torment."

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"No. No, you are right Melmenya. We must put things right."

"Good," she said, stifling a yawn. "Then how are we going to do it?"

"Well," said Legolas. "First of all, you are going to get some sleep. And then, tomorrow, in the cold light of day, we are going to seek advice."

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The following morning, Eowyn awoke to find that Legolas had already risen.

She rang the bell for her lady's maid and, wrapping herself in her leafy mantle, walked over to one of the windows, pushing open its carved wooden shutter, and leaning out into the chilly air.

It was already mid morning—Legolas had obviously decided to let her rest—and the aerial city was a-buzz. Human colonists were hurrying down the walkways, overtaking their more leisurely Elven friends; traders from all over the Reunified Kingdom were displaying their wares; housewives were polishing woodwork; servants were sweeping floors; from somewhere to her right, craftsman-builders were hauling up lengths of timber to a melodious chant—

Master Bawden! she thought. *Of course!*

She dropped her mantle on the bed and rushed into the bathing room and, by the time her lady's maid arrived, she had washed, and dressed herself in jerkin, leggings and boots, and had tied her hair back in a rough braid.

"I have changed my mind, Míriel," she said. "I shall not need your help until supper time. But when Lord Legolas returns, please tell him that I have gone to see Master Bawden."

...

Legolas closed his daily meeting with the colony's Inner Council by thanking them for their continuing support and hard work and, as the elves were filing from the chamber, he drew one of the Councillors aside. "Might I have a word, my Lord?"

"Of course, your Highness," said Fingolfin, placing his hand upon his heart and bowing his head in a formal gesture of acquiescence.

Legolas told the scholar, briefly, of his and Eowyn's encounter with the two women.

"You saw their *fëar*..." said Fingolfin, with an emotion that, in a lesser and a mortal, might have been envy, for he was fascinated by humans, had spent many centuries studying their lore.

Legolas nodded.

"Well, your Highness," said the older Elf, "according to the beliefs of your wife's people, when the *hröa* of a Man dies, his *fëa* joins the *fëar* of his ancestors in a great Mead Hall, and makes merry for all eternity." He nodded to himself. "It is a worthy fate—"

"But something is preventing the *fëar* of these women from entering the Hall, my Lord," said Legolas. "And Eowyn believes that they are cursed."

"I see."

Legolas gestured towards the doors, and the two Elves left the chamber. "What I need to know," he said, "*urgently*, is how to break a curse."

In wordless agreement, the pair walked eastwards, towards the Library.

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"There are many different kinds of curse, my Lord," said Fingolfin, thoughtfully. "Some may be broken by anyone who performs the appropriate ritual; some can only be broken by the person responsible for the cursing; and some must be countered by a wise man or a wise woman, interceding on the victim's behalf. But in every case," he concluded, "as the *fëar* of the women themselves seem to have been saying, the first step is to find the physical remains."

"I was afraid you would say that," said Legolas. Then he added, "How?"

"Let us see what the authorities suggest, your Highness," replied Fingolfin, opening the Library doors.

...

Eowyn followed the city's main walkway westwards, past the new private Banqueting Chamber and the stairs up to the visitors' gardens, until she reached the building site, where she ducked behind the screen that concealed the building works from passers by.

With her long, golden hair and her leggings and boots, she was a familiar sight to the craftsmen-builders and, the moment the men spotted her, they stopped working and waited in respectful silence. Master Bawden, their foreman, who had been inspecting the carving on one of the great pillars, immediately came forward.

"Lady Eowyn," he said, with a slight bow, "what may I do for you?"

Eowyn glanced around the site. "Is there somewhere we might talk, sir?"

"Of course, my Lady," he said. "Perhaps I can offer you some refreshment?"

Eowyn remembered that she had had no breakfast. "That would be nice. Thank you."

She accepted his arm, and let him lead her off the flet, and down a narrow side-path, which snaked between the tree trunks until it brought them to a long, open-sided pavilion. There, tables, chairs, and a simple kitchen had been arranged to provide a place where the craftsmen-builders might rest and take their meals. Eowyn asked for a slice of apple pie and a glass of cordial, her companion for some tea, and they chose a table beside the flet wall, with an impressive view of the city.

"Have you ever heard of an Eofor of Eastfold?" asked Eowyn, without preamble.

"Eofor..." Master Bawden rubbed his chin. "The name does sound familiar, my Lady. Let me see... Eofor..." He frowned; then his expression turned from puzzlement to enlightenment. "Of course," he said. "The Daughters of Eofor!"

Eowyn's heart leapt. "Do you know their story, Master Bawden?"

"Well," he said, stirring sugar into his tea, "I think it goes something like this: There was once an eorl, a man of great courage and high regard, who—though he had no son—had two young daughters, called Deorhild and Guthwyn."

Eowyn took her wax tablet from her pocket, drew out the stylus, and made a note of Eofor's rank, and of the women's names.

"The girls," said Bawden, "were as fair as sunlight on May blossom,"—he smiled at the graceful young women he was seeing in his mind's eye—"and Eofor loved them more than life itself. Men came from far and wide to ask for their hands in marriage, but Eofor's younger brother, a surly fellow named Baldor,"—Eowyn made another note—"argued that the girls should marry his sons, so that the family wealth might not be divided amongst strangers."

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Eowyn cut a forkful of apple pie. "Do you know the names of the brother's sons?" she asked.

"No, my Lady. I don't believe they have names."

"What did Eofor say to his brother?"

"Eofor refused, for he wanted his daughters to marry, as he had, for love."

"He was a good man... Go on, Master Bawden."

"Well, one morning, a maidservant went to wake the girls and found their beds empty. And when she could not find them elsewhere in the Hall, or in the storehouses, stables, or the orchard beyond, she raised the alarm. Eofor mustered his *fyrdsmen*, and searched farther afield, scouring the vale to the north and the slopes of the White Mountains to the south. But he never saw his girls again, not alive nor dead."

Eowyn blinked back a tear. "A vale to the north," she said, in her most businesslike manner, "and slopes to the south. Does the story say exactly where Eofor's manor was situated?"

Bawden shook his head. "Not that I have heard..." He studied her face with a mixture of embarrassment and concern, then added, gently, "It is only a story, my Lady. A tale told at the fireside..."

"Does it say what happened to Eofor?"

Bawden nodded. "Yes... Not long after the girls disappeared, Eofor's wife—their mother—died of a broken heart, and Eofor, though he never stopped searching, became reckless, riding out wherever the enemy might be found—"

"That must have been during the War," said Eowyn, thoughtfully, "or, perhaps, shortly before —"

"I do not think the story is set in any particular time..."

"—and Eofor must have died."

"Why do you say that, my Lady?"

"Because, if he were still alive, Master Bawden, his daughters would have gone to *him* for help." She reached for her goblet. "Do you know what became of the brother?"

"Well... The story does not say. But if Eofor died, then I should think that his brother inherited everything."

"Yes... So should I. His name is Baldor, you say?"

"Yes," said Bawden, with the unhappy expression of a man who has dropped his hammer over the flet wall and is watching it fall towards a crowd.

Eowyn rose from the table. "Thank you, Master Bawden. You have done two most unhappy women a great service—oh, no,"—she placed her hand upon his arm as he began to get to his feet—"please," she insisted, "finish your tea."

...

"Legolas?"

Closing the Library doors behind her, and ignoring the pointed looks she was drawing from the scholars sitting at the tables, Eowyn worked her way through the winding chamber, pausing

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every now and then to peer into the book-filled alcoves, until she spotted her husband sitting at a table with Lord Fingolfin, open volumes and unrolled maps strewn between them.

She hurried over to join him. "I thought I would find you in here."

"We are trying to identify the curse, Melmenya," said Legolas.

"Good," she replied. "And *I* have discovered the women's names, I think."

One of the scholars made a loud *shushing* sound.

"Let us move into the schoolroom," said Fingolfin, softly. He took up the pile of books, and Legolas scooped up the maps, and the trio retreated into a side-chamber, separated from the rest of the Library by a stout pair of doors. The Elves laid out their reference materials on the little tables; Eowyn sat down on a tiny chair and took her wax tablet from the pocket of her jerkin.

"I have been speaking to Master Bawden," she said, "and tapping his knowledge of lore." And, consulting her notes, she quickly told the Elves the story of the two daughters. "When he told me," she added, proudly, "how Eofor's battle-fury had become legendary, I suddenly remembered the Thane of Morden."

She reached for one of the maps and, smoothing it flat, outlined with the tip of her finger a narrow strip of land, bounded by the White Mountains to the south and by the River Entwash to the north. "This," she said, "is Eastfold. This region, here,"—she circled a smaller area to the east—"is the Vale of Morden, on the Great West Road, just beyond Firien Wood. This,"—she pointed to a pair of symbols drawn either side of the road—"is the Mering Bridge, the most strategically important point on the Rohan-Anórien border. It was this bridge,"—she tapped the map—"that the Thane of Morden defended against the forces of Saruman, risking his own life, and the lives of his men. Like Eofor's, his courage became legendary, and..."

"I remember,"—her smile grew broader—"Theodred once saying that the thane was so reckless because he had nothing left to lose; that he had already lost everything he held dear." She shrugged. "It seemed so sad, the thought stayed in my mind."

"And now you are thinking that Eofor and this thane are the same man?" said Legolas, doubtfully.

Eowyn nodded. "Theodred knew the Thane of Morden, so he may also have known his daughters in life."

"Which would explain their connection in death..." Legolas looked more closely at the map. "Then this vale," he said, "would be the vale that Eofor scoured in the story."

"And this area," said Eowyn, "to the south, where the foothills of the White Mountains rise very gently, forming a sort of basin, is known as the Slopes of Morden." She leaned back in her little chair, her case proved to her own satisfaction.

"It is a wild shot, Melmenya," said Legolas.

"Might I make a suggestion, your Highnesses?" said Fingolfin, who had been following Eowyn's argument with interest.

"We would be most grateful, my Lord."

"Tonight, light the lanterns again. If the women appear to you, remind them of their names and ask them about their father's brother, and see if they confirm Princess Eowyn's conjectures."

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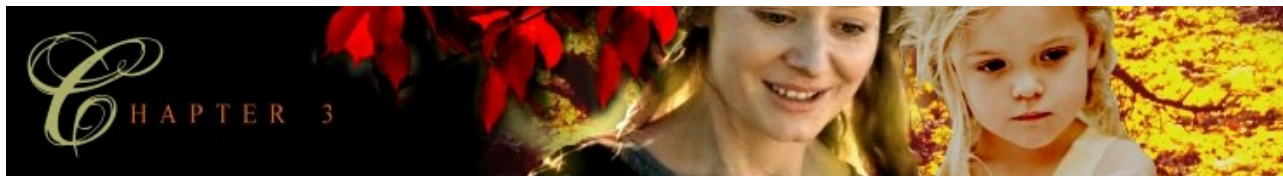
...

Fëa (plural *fëar*)... spirit

Hröa (plural *hröar*) ... body

fyrdsmen ... armed men

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“Gwanur Eowyyyyyyyyyn!”

Melannen flew along the walkway like the shot from a trebuchet, forcing startled passers by to dodge him as he homed in on his target, Eowyn, who caught him and, wrapping her arms around him, lifted him off his feet, and hugged him tightly.

“Now what have I told you,” she said, “about running up here? You could *fall*.” She turned to his mother, who had just caught up with him, and added, “Thank you for bringing him.”

“Thank you for letting him spend the afternoon with you, my Lady,” said Roseth, placing her hand upon her heart and bowing her head. “I shall return for him at dusk.”

Eowyn deposited the elfling on the wooden pathway, and returned the elleth’s formal gesture. Then she held out her hand. “Come, Melannen. We must check all our lanterns and replace any candles that have burned too low.”

...

By the time the pumpkin lanterns were ready, the sky had already begun to darken and the air had turned chilly. Eowyn lit a taper, and she and Melannen began lighting the candles, starting with those at the back of the garden, working their way towards the the staircase—where the spirits of the two women had first appeared the night before—and then continuing down the steps.

“Why are you doing this again, Gwanur Eowyn?” asked Melannen, turning one of the lanterns until its grinning face was aligned to his satisfaction. “I thought the First of *Rhîw* was finished now.”

“Yes, but they look so nice,” said Eowyn, not wanting to frighten the boy with talk of ghosts. She reached into the next lantern. “Oh, this one needs a new candle. Can you go back up to the garden, and fetch one—no, do not *run*!”

But the elfling had already disappeared up the curving staircase.

Eowyn continued lighting candles, and it was not until several minutes had passed that she realised he had been gone longer than expected. “Melannen?”

He did not reply.

“*Melannen!*” A bolt of cold fear shot through Eowyn’s chest leaving her covered in goose flesh. She blew out the taper and hurried up the steps, gasping with relief when she heard the boy’s voice.

She rushed onto the flet, and stopped short.

Ahead, the tiny elfling was bravely standing his ground, gazing up at the pale spectre of a warrior of Rohan in full armour.

Theodred!

Eowyn watched her foster-brother’s spirit reach out as though to ruffle Melannen’s hair, and

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her heart glowed with pride when the elfling politely suppressed a shiver at the large, cold hand passing over him.

"*He is a fine boy, Shieldmaiden,*" said Theodred.

"Yes..." She came up behind Melannen and laid her own hands, reassuringly, upon his shoulders. "Have you come to help me find your friends—"

"*I have come to see you.*"

"—because I think I know who killed them, Theodred," she said. "I think it was their father's younger brother, Baldor, but I need to be sure." She moved a little closer, and spoke more urgently, "Do you know, Theodred? Can you tell me? If I am to help them, I need to find their bodies."

"*They lie amongst the trees.*"

"The trees? What do you mean? There are no trees in Morden. Unless... The story mentions an orchard..."

"*Amongst the trees,*" said Theodred, "*in the lair of the dragon.*"

"A *dragon*?" squeaked Melannen.

"There are no dragons in Rohan, sweetheart," said Eowyn, gently squeezing the boy's shoulders. "It must be the local name for a place... Is that right, Theodred? Are they buried somewhere in the Vale of Morden?"

"*I must go...*"

"No! Please! Theodred! Shall the women come tonight? Can I speak with them again?"

"*Follow your heart, Eowyn,*" said Theodred, as his form began to fade, "*it is brave and true. And may the gods bless you, Shieldmaiden, Shieldmaiden, Shieldmaid...*"

...

When Roseth came for Melannen, he did not want to leave, explaining that he was hoping to see the ghost of the warrior again, or perhaps the ghosts of the two ladies, or *even* the ghost of the dragon but, after some tears—which, Eowyn thought, were really nothing compared to the tempests a human child would have unleashed—he agreed to go home, provided his Gwanur Eowyn would visit him the next day, and tell him whether *she* had seen a dragon.

...

Legolas and Fingolfin arrived not long after the boy and his mother had gone, and the three settled down to wait.

Night fell, and the Palace Guard began their regular patrols. All over the city, lanterns were lighted and the noises of the working day were replaced by those of merry-making until, gradually, those too faded...

But the women did not come.

And, as they kept watch, Legolas and Eowyn, with the help of their friend, devised a plan, which they decided to put into practice as soon as possible.

...

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Next morning

"Did you see the dragon?" asked Melannen, excitedly.

"No," said Eowyn, smiling as she lifted him into her arms for a hug, "neither the dragon nor the ladies, so you did not miss anything." She set him down again and kissed the top of his head. "But I have come to tell you that your Gwanur Legolas and I are going away for a little while, and I want you to promise that you will be very good for your Nana and your Gwanur Hentmirë whilst we are away, and that you will work hard at school."

She held out her hand and he took it, and they walked towards the market flet.

"Are you going to find the dragon?" asked Melannen.

"Yes. We are going to find the trees, and the dragon, and the two ladies, and put them to rest." She led him towards one of the food stalls.

"Does that mean that their ghosts will not come to see us any more?" He was obviously disappointed.

"It does," said Eowyn. "But that will be a good thing, Melannen, because it will mean that they are happy."

She bought two bowls of thick potage, and two cups of warm apple juice, and they carried them to a table.

"Well," said the elfling, climbing up onto his chair, "just make sure that you keep to the narrow path, Shieldmaiden."

Eowyn froze half-way to her seat. "What did you say?"

"Make sure you keep to the narrow path." He picked up his spoon.

Eowyn sat down heavily. "Where did you hear that?" she asked, though the question was rhetorical, because she already knew the answer. "Did Theodred say anything else to you?"

"He said that I was brave," said Melannen, puffing out his little chest proudly.

Eowyn reached over and grasped his hand. "You are the bravest elfling in the whole of Middle-earth."

But, *Se ánpæþ*, she mused, as she ate her potage, *se ánpæþ, the narrow path*. It was a common enough name, applied to tracks, and passageways, and alleys all over Rohan. *Though Theodred must surely have a particular narrow path in mind...*

...

Elsewhere on the market flet, Legolas was deep in negotiations with one of the traders, a man of Anórien named Adrahil son of Herluin.

"A gold fifty-piece," said Adrahil, admiring the leaf-shaped coin glistening in his palm, "for writing a letter to my brother?"

Legolas nodded. "A letter of introduction and recommendation."

"Very well, your Highness,"—Adrahil dropped the coin into the pouch at his waist—"you have yourself a deal."

Legolas held out his hand, human style, and the Man—to the Elf's well-hidden horror—spat in

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his own hand, and shook. "Osmund," he called to his neighbour, "will you keep an eye on the stall whilst I finish some business with Prince Legolas?"

...

Later

"Hentmirë assures me," said Eowyn, mixing four tablespoons of ground-up leaves into a paste with a some water, "that *all* the women of Far Harad use this to hide their grey hairs." She set the bowl on the wash stand and, taking up a small alabaster jar, turned back to Legolas, who was waiting nervously, perched upon a stool, his long, pale hair hanging damp about his shoulders.

"Now, first," she continued, removing the stopper, "I must put some of this salve on your forehead, to stop your skin turning brown."

"Oh, Melmenya..."

"If this does not work," she added, smoothing the greasy ointment along his hairline, "we will just have to apply the paste all over your face, and pretend that you have been sun-burned in Far Harad."

...

Early next morning, a group of people gathered in the clearing beneath the city.

"This, your Highness," said Lord Fingolfin, handing Legolas a small book, "is Pelilas on curses. I hope you will find it useful."

"Thank you, my Lord," said Legolas, with a formal bow. "I am sure we shall."

"And this, my Lady," said Berryn, the colony's cartographer, "is a map of Eastfold." He partially unrolled the scroll of parchment. "I have revised some parts of it," he explained, showing her the details, "according to my own observations in Year Five. Some of it is quite sketchy, but it should still be better than nothing."

"Thank you," said Eowyn. She carefully re-rolled the map, and stowed it in her travelling pack. Then she smiled at the young man hovering anxiously between Berryn and Fingolfin. "Master Arador?"

"Oh! Um..." Arador blushed deeply. "I—I thought that this might come in handy, my Lady." He gave her a black velvet bag—long and narrow, and containing something unexpectedly heavy—then backed away from her with a shy bow.

Eowyn loosened the drawstring, and gasped as a bright, blueish light spilled from the opening. "Your famous Dark Elf crystal," she said—for it was well known that the boy had squandered much of his considerable inheritance acquiring Drow artefacts. "Are you sure?"

"It will allow you to see in the dark, my Lady—I mean—if you should need to..."

"That will be very useful, Master Arador. Thank you. I shall take great care of it."

"*Legolaaaaas!*"

Everyone turned to see Hentmirë, Legolas' adopted aunt, rushing down the staircase from the city above, followed—somewhat more gracefully—by March Warden Haldir, carrying Melannen on his broad shoulders.

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The little woman reached the ground, and blundered across the clearing. "Oh, your poor hair!"

Legolas hugged her tightly. "Does brown hair not suit me, gwendithen?"

"Well... I do like it better yellow... But never mind that—just be very careful, my dear. Remember always to boil the water before you drink it."

Haldir approached Eowyn. "Someone else wants to say good bye," he said, smiling.

"Good bye again, Melannen," said Eowyn.

The little boy held out a threadbare and much-loved object, which Eowyn immediately recognised as his toy rabbit. "Niben is coming, to look after you," he said, solemnly.

"It is very kind of Niben to offer," she replied, "but I do not think he realises that we may be gone for several weeks."

"Niben does not mind," said Melannen. "He likes adventures."

Eowyn glanced at Haldir, who—almost imperceptibly—nodded his head.

"Well, if Niben does not mind, then I shall be very grateful for his company." She took the toy, and gave it a little kiss before slipping it safely inside her velvet bodice.

"Farewell, Eowyn—Legolas," said Haldir. "*No i Melain na len.*"

The couple mounted their horses and, with a final wave, rode out of the clearing.

...

Gwanur ... kinsman or kinswoman ('aunt' or 'uncle')

Niben ... 'Small'

Gwendithen ... 'Little maiden' (Legolas' nickname for Hentmirë)

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

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Six days later

Eowyn, on her hands and knees, cinched her bedroll with a leather strap, fastening the buckle and tying off the loose end. Behind her, Legolas was carefully dousing the fire with the remains of their hot water.

"Sleeping under the stars is very romantic," she said, rising stiffly to her feet, "when the bards are singing about it."

Legolas laughed.

...

They had taken the Eryn Arnen Road to Gobel Doron, turned west, and ridden an old sheepherders' trail to the bank of the River Anduin. Then, turning northwards again, they had followed the riverbank to Osgiliath, where they had spent their third night as guests of the garrison commander, hiring messengers to deliver letters of apology to Aragorn in Minas Tirith, and to Faramir in Caras Arnen. Early the next morning they had crossed the river and cut sharply west, riding in the shadow of the Rammas Echor until they met the Great West Road. From then on, though the going had been easier, they had needed to be more careful, riding quietly through the sparse settlements, and pulling off the road to avoid too much contact with their fellow travellers.

At midday on the sixth day, they were approaching the small town of Caras Calenhad, in the shadow of the sixth beacon of Gondor.

...

Finding Derufin, son of Herluin did not prove difficult.

A gaggle of buxom women, washing linens in the town's open-air laundry, were only too happy to direct them to the house of the unfortunate trader in return for a jug of urine, to be used as bleach, though they laughed when Legolas disappeared behind a wall to provide it.

Derufin lay upon his bed, his broken leg bound between two wooden splints. He read his brother's letter slowly, his lips barely moving, then looked thoughtfully at Legolas, frowned, and read the letter again.

"So you want to buy my wagon," he said at last, laying down the letter, and folding his hands upon his stomach.

"Your wagon *and* your stock," replied Legolas.

"Why?"

The Elf glanced at Eowyn. In the course of their journey, they had decided that they would, as far as possible, tell the truth and, though Legolas had dyed his hair to prevent his being recognised as one of the Nine, and had asked Derufin's brother not to mention his name in the letter, he had made no attempt to hide his Elven nature.

"We are searching for two ladies, sir," he said, "friends of my wife's foster-brother. Your

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merchandise will open doors that would otherwise be closed to us. And, since you cannot travel at present..."

"Hmm." Derufin stroked his beard. "Well," he said, at last, "my brother says that you are trustworthy, sir, and that is good enough for me. So all that remains for us to decide is a price."

"Name it, sir," said Legolas.

"Two thousand gold pieces," said Derufin. "That is what it will take to replace everything, once I am back on my feet."

His brother had anticipated that exact amount, and had advised Legolas to haggle, but Legolas could not bring himself to quibble over money. "Done," he said, unbuckling his belt and removing a leather pouch containing forty fifty-piece coins. "Though I shall need you to show my wife and me your—I mean—*our* wares."

Derufin tipped a few of the leaf-shaped coins into his lap, picked one up, and bent it in his teeth. "Pure Elven gold," he said, approvingly. "The lad must train you up, sir, for I shall not be going outdoors for many a day."

"Of course," said Legolas, holding out his hand because sealing deals with a handshake had begun to feel quite natural. "Thank you, Master Derufin."

...

The wagon was a sturdy, four-wheeled vehicle with high sides and a curved wooden roof, gaily painted in red and blue and decorated with curlicues of cream and yellow. Eowyn grasped Legolas' arm, and their eyes met, and each knew what the other was thinking—that it was going to be hard to destroy something so pretty...

'The lad', Derufin's apprentice, climbed up the steps and unlocked the door. "Never leave this open," he said, "or they'll rob you blind."

Inside, there was a tiny shop fitted, at the far end, with a small counter, and lined from floor to ceiling with drawers and cupboards—each secured against the perils of a bumpy road with a sturdy turn-buckle. Beyond that, a narrow door led to an even tinier cabin for eating and sleeping in, and the lad demonstrated how to convert its table and benches into a bed before he brought them back into the shop, and showed them the stock.

"Right," he said. "Here, you've got your haberdashery." He ran his hand over a column of drawers, then tapped each one in turn, starting at the top: "Needles; threads; horn buttons; glass buttons; laces; ribbons; lace trimmings; collars; cuffs." His hand moved to the next column. "Here's your trinkets—pipes; charms; bells; glass doodahs. This is your exotics—perfumes; salves; pipeweed boxes; lanterns—all from Far Harad."

He moved to the other side of the wagon. "These are your beauty preparations, but I dare say the lady already knows more about that than I do. These are your medicines—"

"*Medicines*," said Eowyn. "Do they work?"

The lad shrugged. "We've never had any complaints. Master Derufin has them made up by a wise woman this side of Firien Wood. There's flaxseed pastilles to make you shit; dandelion root powders to make you shit; prune and nettle tea to make you shit and piss—"

"We understand," said Legolas.

"Well, you can't go wrong if your bowels is regular, my mum always says. Anyway, everything's

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described in the Ledger, and you'll need to keep a careful record of anything you sell—who to, how much, and so on—it's all in there."

"Very well."

"Finally," said the lad, "this cupboard, here,"—he tapped a largish door, painted dark red—"is your poisons."

"Poisons?"

"For rats, bugs, weeds, that sort of thing. The cupboard has two different locks, see,"—he held up the keyring and showed them two small keys—"so you can't go wrong."

"Good," said Legolas. He glanced at Eowyn and, again, they both seemed to be thinking exactly the same thing—that poisons would be very hard to deal with safely.

"Show us how we should go about selling these things," said Eowyn.

...

The horses they had brought with them were not their regular mounts, but sturdy beasts, well used to pulling a cart. Eowyn hitched them to the wagon whilst Legolas stowed her saddle and the travelling packs in the bedroom, and checked—at the insistence of the lad—that all the drawers were securely closed, and the Ledger safely housed, and the poison cupboard securely locked.

Then they climbed up onto the seat and, with Eowyn at the reins, pulled out of Master Derufin's yard and rejoined the Great West Road, travelling eastwards towards Firien Wood and the border with Rohan.

It was a pleasant afternoon, and Eowyn found that sitting beside Legolas—pointing out things that *she* could barely see whilst plying her with pieces of dried fruit—was a very enjoyable way to travel; besides, she was looking forward to converting the table into a bed, and snuggling up—

"We should reach Linglow at dusk, Melmenya," said Legolas, smiling, "just as the villagers are gathering in the tavern,"—which, according to the lad, was the best time for selling trifles—"so we had better start rehearsing our parts."

...

Though it lay within Anórien, the little town of Linglow—the hill of heather—bore a Rohirric name, and its wooden buildings, arranged haphazardly around a marketplace of trampled earth, made Eowyn feel the warm familiarity of a native returning home.

She stopped the wagon outside the tavern and, whilst she saw to the horses, Legolas brought out a row of tiny bells and, using leather-covered mallets, began playing the catchy tune the lad had taught him as a way of attracting customers. Soon, the door of the tavern opened, and a few curious people came shuffling outside. By then, the Elf had warmed to his task and, inspired by the presence of an audience, he deftly turned the simple notes into a haunting Lay, singing, in his clear, sweet voice,

*"The summer slowly in the sad forest
Waned and faded. In the west arose
Winds that wandered over warring seas.
Leaves were loosened from labouring boughs:
fallow-gold they fell, and the feet buried
of trees standing tall and naked,*

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*rustling restlessly down roofless aisles,
shifting and drifting..."*

Eowyn finished watering the horses and, having taken a moment to prepare herself, stepped out into the light, drawing gasps of surprise from the townspeople, who muttered, 'Faery folk... Faery folk!'

"Good evening," she said, smiling at each potential customer in turn as the lad had taught her, "let me show you our wares." She climbed up the wooden steps—conscious that several pairs of eyes were fixed upon her seat—turned and, framed in the doorway, launched into her performance: "For the men we bring pattern-welded blades from Gondor, strong pipeweeds from the Shire, and Cocodrille-skin pouches from the sunlands of Far Harad; for the ladies, shawls of the sheerest Elven silk, kerchiefs edged with the finest Blackwork, perfumes made to ancient receipts..."

She looked at their faces, lit by a mixture of awe and superstitious fear, and wondered whether it was wise to let them think that she and Legolas might be otherworldly beings. *We are here*, she thought, *to find the daughters of Eofor, not to perform conjuring tricks...*

...

There were two men amongst the crowd who had seen the Elven archers at Helm's Deep, and were fascinated by Elven weapons. One of them unsheathed his dagger, and persuaded Legolas to give him a lesson in Elven knife work, which drew a large, appreciative crowd, and led to the sale of several Gondorian blades, each selected with Legolas' tactful guidance.

The women, somewhat bolder than the men, climbed into the wagon to view the merchandise. One bought a lace collar, another a jar of healing salve, and a third took Eowyn aside, and asked her whether the Elves might know a charm that would let her 'lie with 'imself and not get with child.'

And, as Eowyn let her customers try on the delicate shawls, and sniff the perfumes, and tell her their symptoms (so that she could look them up in her book of medicines), she found them all too eager talk. They asked her about the great Ladies she had seen on her travels—what had they bought from her?—and *she* asked them about the local families—which were the most extravagant and which the most miserly, and which of them were sadly lacking in women?

...

By the time the last of their customers had gone, and they had moved the wagon to the outskirts of the town and set the horses free to graze, and had locked up the store cupboards and made up the bed, Eowyn was far too exhausted to talk about what she had learned.

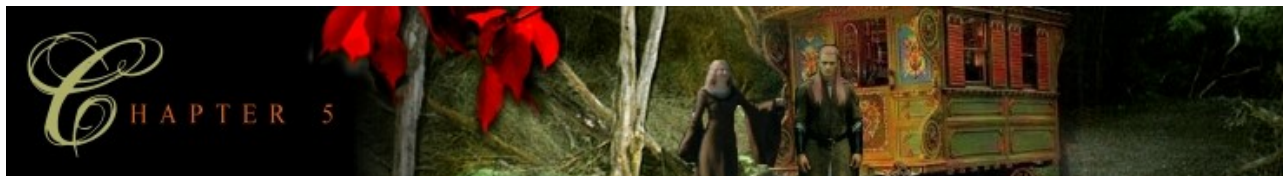
"Who would have thought," she said, settling in Legolas' arms, "that a trader's life would be so tiring?"

"You were not trading, Melmenya," replied the Elf, stroking her hair, "you were playing the spy, and that demands spirit, and nerve, and concentration. Tonight was good practice for the task ahead."

...

The song Legolas sings is from *The History of Middle Earth: The Lays of Beleriand*.

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"Well, the women were very happy to gossip about the local big knives," said Eowyn, stifling a yawn for they were setting out long before dawn, hoping to reach the next town just after dusk.

"And did you learn anything?" asked Legolas, pulling gently on the reins, guiding the horses through a narrow gap between the houses, and back onto the Great West Road.

"Lots!" said Eowyn, smiling. "Bergin son of Hallas, for instance, recently married a serving girl young enough to be his daughter, and is very liberal with his gold."

Legolas smiled, too.

"Aubin son of Osbert, on the other hand, starves his children, and dresses them in rags, so we are advised to stay well clear of him."

"Hmm."

"But I did hear *one* thing that sounded useful."

"Go on," said the Elf.

"One of the women has a sister married to an eye-healer, who often travels over the border into Rohan; I think I may even have met him. Anyway, she says that she has heard him talk of a manor he visits, now and then, beyond Firien Wood, where the eorl pays well but—for some reason— makes her sister's husband feel uneasy. I pressed her, but she could not remember any names."

"Hmm," said Legolas, again.

"You do not think it is he?"

"Our murderer? I think it unlikely, Melmenya. In fact, I think we will need the trees to part, and Oromë himself to ride out and point his horn at the culprit before we will recognise him. And I cannot see how we are ever going to find the remains of poor little—what were their names—Deorhild and Guthwyn?"

Eowyn leaned over, and kissed his cheek.

"What was that for?"

"That was for agreeing to join me on a wild-goose chase." She stifled another yawn. "I did not dare mention the girls' names last night, Lassui. I *did* ask about the lair of the dragon, but no one had heard of a narrow path, or a cleft in the rocks, or anywhere else that might once have been home to a *wyrm*."

...

The sky was beginning to brighten as they drove into Firien Wood but, within a few hundred yards, the ancient trees—sturdy oaks and slender birches—had woven themselves together in a roof of branches that blotted out the sun, and cast the road in permanent gloom.

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Eowyn felt the laughter die upon her lips.

At midday, or as near as Legolas could judge, he brought the wagon to a halt and they climbed inside and, taking refuge in their little cabin, ate their bread and cheese and drank their wine, talking softly. "Never before have I felt so troubled in a Forest," said the Elf, sadly. "There is something evil here, Melmenya. And the trees are uneasy."

They pressed on.

And, although there were many wonders to be seen—the line of standing stones, spattered with yellow lichen and furred with dark moss, leading, Eowyn knew, to the empty tomb of King Elendil; the deep, tree-lined gorge of the Firien-dale and the swift-flowing Mering at its foot; the road, which plunged onto a narrow spur of rock before edging its way warily across the Mering Bridge; the sudden sunlight, penetrating the Mering valley like a golden blade, burnishing the autumn leaves to a rich red-bronze—all of this, she and Legolas shared in dumb show, pointing and nodding but saying nothing, neither of them willing to disturb the silence.

...

They emerged from the woods at dusk, and reached the tiny town of Meringburn soon after. There, they repeated their performance of the previous night, with similar results.

"If we really *were* traders," said Eowyn, noting their few sales in the Ledger, "we would soon be starving." She put the pen and ink away and, with a sigh, went through to the cabin.

"I think that real traders are more ruthless than we, Melmenya," said Legolas, barring the wagon door before joining her. "I heard you telling the baker, for instance, that we had run out of rat poison, when I know we have a full jar."

"Well," she replied, struggling to unfasten her suede corslet, "how could I be sure that he was not planning to tip it into his wife's porridge? Or to bake it into her lover's bread?"

"Here," said Legolas, smiling, "let me." He took her gently by the shoulders, and turned her round and, loosening her lacings, helped her take the corslet off over her head. "Did you learn anything more about the fearsome eorl?"

"No..." She pulled at her shift, which was clinging to her body. "A few hints of dark deeds in the forest, but..." She shrugged. "Nothing helpful."

"Come, Melmenya," he said, sitting down upon the bed, and stretching out his arms, "you need some rest."

...

The evil that Legolas had sensed Firien Wood had disturbed him more than he could admit to his wife and, as he lay in the darkness, listening to the regular sound of her breathing, he tried to calm himself by imagining himself back home, walking hand-in-hand with her amongst the mighty carantaurs—

His spirit suddenly *jumped*, sensing another presence in the wagon.

Slowly, he turned his head and, through the narrow doorway to the shop, spied two pale columns of mist, hovering just beneath the ceiling.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

One of the columns shifted and, acquiring more substance, became man-shaped—more than six feet tall, broad shouldered, clad in full armour—almost a twin to Eomer King.

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The other column remained indistinct, but Theodred—for Legolas was in no doubt that it was he—gestured, and the Elf watched it struggle, trying but failing to form itself into a recognisable shape. At length, however, it spoke, its voice as wispy as its body: *"I am nothing but a poor, lost soul..."*

Legolas, cradling Eowyn against his chest, cupped his hand over her ear. "Do you have a name?" he asked, softly.

Again, the spirit struggled to answer: *"I was Holdred, son of Walda."*

It was precious information, and Legolas knew that he must try to learn more: "Where do you lie?" he asked.

This time, the spirit's answer was quick and clear, but thoroughly disappointing: *"In the lair of the dragon..."*

"Where is that?"

"Close by."

Then why has no one heard of it? "Are the ladies with you? Deorhild and Guthwyn?"

"There are others here..."

Others? "How many?"

"Five."

That answer raised a hundred more questions, and twice as many fears—*Who are the others? How do they come to be with you? How did they die and by whose hand?* But, as Legolas struggled to marshal his thoughts, the spirits began to fade...

"No! Theodred," he said desperately, his voice sounding louder than he had intended, "will you at least help me keep Eowyn safe?"

The ghost did not linger but, even as the mist was dispersing, Legolas thought he saw it nod its head.

...

"Why did you not *wake* me?"

The disappointment in Eowyn's voice pierced Legolas' heart. "I was afraid that too much movement—too much change—would scare them away," he said. "Holdred, at least. He seems... timid. Very young, perhaps."

"But I could have seen Theodred," she insisted, more to herself than to her husband.

"I know, Melmenya." Legolas gathered her close. "I am sorry." He kissed the top of her head. "But I know that he will appear to us again, for he is guiding us, as best he can."

He felt her body relax, which—with relief—he took for a sign of forgiveness.

For a long while they lay together in silence, listening to the whistling of the wind, which was blowing in through the open skylight. Then Eowyn said, "We need to consider everything we have learned so far, Lassui."

...

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Half an hour later, washed and dressed, and with the bed converted back to a table, Legolas spread out Berryn's map of Eastfold, and Eowyn set the shop Ledger down beside it.

"We know of six victims," she said, opening the Ledger at a blank page, and noting down the names in her firm handwriting:

Victims

Deorhild daughter of Eofor

Guthwyn daughter of Eofor

Holdred son of Walda

?

?

?

"And we know," she continued, "that their bodies have been buried—"

"Or, at least, hidden," said Legolas.

"Disposed of," said Eowyn, crossing out the word 'buried', "in a place known as 'the lair of the dragon', which—according to Theodred—is 'amongst the trees'—"

"Firien Wood!" said Legolas.

"Of course!"

They turned to the map, carefully tracing the contours of the land, Eowyn marking, with red ink, the slopes of Firien-dale and the other clefts and hollows that pitted the forest.

"Theodred mentioned a narrow path," said Eowyn, pointing to the line of standing stones. "Could the lair be somewhere along here?"

"'Keep to the narrow path' could simply be a figure of speech, Melmenya," said Legolas, doubtfully, "meaning, 'Do not stray; do not get distracted; do not wander off into danger...'" He sighed. "We could spend weeks searching these woods. The slopes are too steep for horses; we would have to climb them on foot."

"You said you sensed evil there," said Eowyn. "Could you, perhaps, trace it to its source?"

"You mean like a living lodestone?"

Eowyn squeezed his arm with an apologetic smile; Legolas smiled back.

"Well," she said. "Do we know anything else?"

"We know the story Master Bawden told you."

Eowyn nodded. She took up her pen and, after a moment's thought, wrote:

People in the story

Eofor

Wife of Eofor

Baldor

Wife of Baldor

Son 1

Son 2

Servants?

They stared at the list. "We do know that the spirits cannot rest," said Legolas.

"Yes, because their names have been 'taken'."

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"No—not the boy's."

"You are right!" Eowyn made a note. Then, leaning back against the wooden wall, she stared up at the curved ceiling. "You do not think...?" she began.

"What do I not think, Melmenya?"

"The girls were of a marriageable age, and the story mentions marriage. Do you think that Holdred could have been a suitor?"

"A suitor... He could be! And the extra dead could be his rivals—"

"Or his men, if he were the son of an eorl."

"Would not a man of substance have been missed?"

Eowyn shrugged. "It must have happened around the time of the War, when it would have been easy to pretend that he had been taken by orcs."

Legolas nodded, thoughtfully. "I think we are in need of some more local gossip, Melmenya. I think we should break our fast in the tavern."

...

The *White Horse* was homely, and spotlessly clean, the beams of its low ceiling hung with fragrant herbs, its stone floor strewn with a carpet of fresh rushes, its polished wooden tables decorated with jars of jolly purple-red flowers.

Eowyn recognised a woman's touch. She took a seat at one of the tables whilst Legolas called for the landlord.

"You're them traders," said the man, surprised to find himself with customers so early in the morning, "that people says is faery folk!"

He offered them mutton stew and freshly-baked bread.

They accepted the bread, but asked for butter and honey, and two mugs of ale.

"You must get a lot of travellers here, being so close to the Great West Road," said Eowyn, as he arranged the bread board, the plates, and various knives on their table. "And being the last tavern before, and the first after, Firien Wood!"

"Oh, aye," the man replied, smiling. "We get all sorts in here—Anóriens, Gondorians, even some from Far Harad, these days, though they don't talk much..." He swung round, his tray still balanced expertly upon his fingertips, and gestured towards the wall behind the counter, where someone had pinned up various 'trophies'—a pair of Gondorian gloves, an Elven knife, a Haradin belt.

"Oh, aye," he continued, setting down a dish of butter, "we get all sorts in here. There's not many as don't stop at the *White Horse*." Then he added, conspiratorially, "It's the ale. Best in Eastfold."

"The locals must appreciate that, too," said Legolas, slicing the bread.

"Oh, aye." The landlord returned to the counter, drew two mugs of his famous ale, and brought them over.

"We have been summoned to a manor, somewhere near here," said Legolas, spreading the bread with butter, "by a man called Walda."

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"Walda..." The landlord rubbed his chin. "Nearest manor to here's Mereham," he said, pulling up a chair and sitting down, "but you don't want to go there."

"Why not?" asked Eowyn.

"The eorl's not slow to set his dogs on strangers if he takes a mind to, nor to have them beaten off by his servants, if you get my drift."

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances. *The fearsome eorl.*

"That must be hard on his wife and children," said Eowyn, as she drizzled honey on her bread. "They must get very little company."

"Elder son's as bad as his dad," said the landlord. "And the mother's a shrew. No, it's the younger lad everyone feels sorry for."

"Poor boy," said Legolas, sympathetically. "And his father is called Walda?"

"Walda? Nay," said the landlord, "his name is Baldor. Baldor son of Eoheort."

...

As the couple were leaving, Eowyn reached out and gently brushed her fingers over the jugful of spiky flowers at the centre of the table. "This is Fireweed," she told Legolas. "It grows all over the middens outside the pales of Edoras." She turned to the landlord. "But we do not see it in the south."

"Round here we calls it Dragon Flame," said the man, "for its shape, and because it likes to grow on burnt ground. The local children bring bunches down from Eorl's Ditch or Wyrms' Hollow,"—he did not notice how Eowyn's expression changed—"and the wife gives them a few buns for it—she's soft like that." He smiled with obvious affection for his spouse.

"Thank you, sir," said Legolas, giving him a leaf-shaped Elven coin, and adding, with a nod towards the rest of his collection, "for your wall."

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Crossing the road to where the wagon stood, sheltered beneath a stand of oaks, Eowyn could scarcely contain herself.

"Calm down, Melmenya," said Legolas, "or you will have an apoplexy," which was a saying he had heard Men use under similar circumstances, though he had no idea what it meant.

He unlocked the door, and Eowyn rushed into the cabin, and seized the map. "Here it is," she said, breathlessly. Legolas sat down beside her. "The second glade, just west of the path to Halifirien and the seventh beacon. See, it is not named."

"Because Berryn did not know its name..."

"That is right." She traced the line of Great West Road, westwards. "And here," she said, "are the manor and village of Mereham,"—she measured the distance with her fingers—"only ten miles away." She looked up at Legolas. "What do we do first?"

"We must go to Wyrms' Hollow first," said Legolas, decisively. "If there is any chance of finding the bodies, Melmenya, they must be our main concern."

...

They checked their provisions and, whilst Eowyn was hitching the horses, Legolas went back into the town and bought bread from the tavern (because, his wife argued, they would be fools to eat anything made by the poisoning baker), cheese from the dairymaids, and a fruit pie from one of the housewives.

Then they turned the wagon round and drove back into Firien Wood, crossing the Mering Bridge at about midday, and stopping beside the first of the standing stones, which marked the way to Halifirien, shortly after.

"The path is narrow," said Legolas, bringing a big smile to Eowyn's face. "And far too steep for the horses, Melmenya. We will have to climb it on foot."

Eowyn changed into her jerkin and leggings, and strapped on her sword; Legolas, having stowed the food and some extra clothing in his travelling pack, checked his bow, arrows, and quiver, examined his white knives, and slung everything across his back.

Then the couple freed the horses to graze and, with an "*Avo visto*," set out.

Though the sun was at its zenith, the trees were dense along Firien-dale and the path was shrouded in darkness, the gloom broken only rarely by pale splashes of light that, far from bringing relief, illuminated lurid fungi and teeming insects, which Eowyn would rather not have seen. High above her, magpies cursed and crebain cawed; all around her, unknown creatures rustled and grunted, reminding her of the great Boar of Everholt that had gored poor King Folca to death...

"Do you still sense evil?" she asked.

"Yes."

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"So do I." She looked around, warily. "I should not be surprised if Baldor had stationed a few serfs—or even a *glam* of orcs—here to deter visitors."

Legolas stopped, and turned back to face her. "Then the best strategy, Melmenya," he said, softly, "is to be very, very quiet."

Eowyn brought her forefinger and thumb up to her mouth, and pinched her lips closed.

Legolas grinned and, stooping, kissed her forehead.

But 'very quiet' was easy for an Elf to say. Eowyn soon found that climbing up a steep path paved with uneven stones, in near darkness, without breathing heavily, or gasping when she stumbled, or yelping when she turned an ankle, was very hard indeed.

...

They had been walking for almost an hour when the path suddenly turned into a raised stone causeway, and crossed a broad clearing, carpeted with reeds.

"Moss," said Eowyn, poking the boggy ground with her sword. "This must be Folca's Glade." She sheathed her weapon and unrolled her map. "Yes... Look, the path will veer east in a few hundred yards. At this rate, Lassui, we shall reach Wyrms' Hollow just before dusk."

Legolas uncorked his waterskin and passed it to her. "We must find somewhere to spend the night, Melmenya," he said, "and then begin the search at first light."

...

Wyrms' Hollow was a spoon-shaped valley, some two hundred yards at its widest and perhaps a quarter mile in length, bordered to the north, south, and east by steep rock walls.

"Now that I see it," said Eowyn, surveying the field of dense colour stretching out before her, "I find it hard to believe that anything really bad could have happened here..."

Legolas followed her gaze. The entire 'hollow' was crammed with purple-red flowers, which to Eowyn clearly spoke of innocence, but to him hinted at some violent disturbance, some tainting of the forest—a shivering pool, blood-red in the waning light, with a cloying scent that reminded him of the orc carcasses he had seen burning on the Plains of Rohan.

He scanned the cliffs for a suitable camp site. "Over there," he said at last, pointing to a ledge high up on the northern wall. "We will be safe up there. Can you climb, Melmenya, or shall I carry you?"

Eowyn laughed. "That is a very tempting offer, Lassui," she said, "but my honour insists that I climb."

"Very well."

He took her by the hand and they waded into the purple-red sea until they reached the foot of the rock wall, and scrambled up. Legolas shrugged off his pack and, whilst Eowyn arranged the bedrolls and laid out the food, he went back into valley to gather some fire wood. Then, after the sun had gone down, they sat in the firelight—Eowyn holding Melannen's toy rabbit—and they ate, and talked, and Legolas opened a box of sweetmeats he had taken from their stocks, and they shared happy memories until Eowyn grew tired.

...

Some time later, feeling warm and safe in Legolas' arms, Eowyn looked out across Wyrms'

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Hollow.

In the soft moonlight, something was moving, hovering above the lightly waving Dragon Flame. "Lassui," she whispered, "look. Is that the spirits? Or is it just mist?"

Legolas looked. But he could discern nothing human about the apparitions, and the overwhelming sense of sadness and loss that hung upon the air did not seem any greater for their presence.

...

Eowyn awoke with a start, sensing her husband's distress. "Legolas? What is wrong?"

The sun had risen and, at the western end of Wyrms' Hollow, the Dragon Flame was glistening like amethyst in the morning light. Legolas was sitting on the edge of the rocky platform, his legs dangling over the side.

"Lassui?" Eowyn wriggled out of her bedroll, and crawled to his side.

"It would take us days to search this place thoroughly, Melmenya," he said, sadly.

Eowyn nodded. "Even if we cut down the plants as we went," she agreed, thinking aloud. "I suppose we could burn them..."

"Doing evil to expose evil?"

"To expose a much greater evil."

"Is it, Melmenya? Surely poisoning an ancient forest is the greatest of evils?"

"The forest will recover from this, Lassui," said Eowyn, firmly. "With our help. You have proved that in Eryn Carantaur." She squeezed his arm. "I say we start the search over there." She pointed to where they had seen the mist rising during the night. "If we find nothing, we will continue in a line until we reach the rocks over there. Then we will move a few yards over, and search along a parallel line—"

"I do not want to spend another night here, Melmenya."

"Then we will finish before dusk and, whether we have found anything or not, we will go back to the wagon. The road is good. We can be in Meringburn for supper."

They worked diligently until midday, then climbed back up to their refuge, and ate a simple meal of bread and cheese and fruit pie before continuing with the search, criss-crossing the little valley in straight lines with the aid of a length of Elven rope. The ground was ashy, and Eowyn's feet stirred up a cloud of filthy dust as she shuffled forwards, her back bent—

"It is time to go, Melmenya," said Legolas, with obvious relief.

Eowyn glanced around. Their search was recorded as ruts in the Dragon Flame, and she was shocked to see how little of the hollow they had covered. "You fetch our things, Lassui," she said, wearily. "I want to carry on until I reach the rocks." She watched him for a moment, striding across the clearing and climbing gracefully up the cliff, then she turned, and ploughed on.

"Anything?" he asked, rejoining her a few moments later.

"No..."

"Come, then." He held out his hand, and Eowyn took a step towards him—

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And something crunched beneath her feet.

"Wait," she cried, looking down at her boots, "wait, wait... Oh! Oh, Lassui, look!"

She stepped backwards, and Legolas peered into the gap she had left behind. Then he drew out one of his white knives and, crouching down and working carefully, he cut away the stems of Dragon Flame to reveal the bones of a finger, which soon became an entire hand, which joined to a wrist, and extended into a forearm, and then ended abruptly, just below the elbow, in a pile of white ash.

He looked up at Eowyn.

"Keep going," she whispered.

Legolas continued cutting, slowly exposing—in piles of ash and the odd fragment of bone—the outline of an entire human body.

Eowyn reached down beside the head, and picked up a small object.

It was a jewel, such as a rich man might wear pinned to his velvet cap—a golden wolf, intricately detailed, its body inlaid with fragments of the deepest purple-brown stone. "This is a family crest, Lassui," she said.

...

They tramped back to the wagon.

Eowyn sat down on the rear steps, pulled off her dirty boots and dumped them on the ground. "How do Elves stay so clean?" she asked, for—even after having lived with one for two years—it was still a mystery to her. "It is not just your face and hair, Lassui; your clothes are spotless, too."

"No, they are not, Melmenya!" he replied, smiling as he drew some water from the barrel. "Come inside, and we will wash."

He set the bowl of water upon the table and, helping her out of her clothes, dampened a cloth and gently wiped her face, her arms and hands, her legs and feet...

"What are we going to do now?" asked Eowyn.

Legolas sat back on his heels. "The forest is hopeful," he said.

"Really?"

He nodded.

"Good! Then I think we should stay here tonight, and go back to Wyrms' Hollow in the morning. Because, if we could just find the others..." She picked up the golden wolf, and held it in the candle light.

"Do you recognise the crest, Melmenya?"

She shook her head. "No. But perhaps it was Holdred's."

"Or another rich suitor's."

"We should leave it out tonight," she said. "Because it might—you know—bring its owner here."

...

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But the couple were not disturbed during the night, and the following morning they cut six pieces of tarpaulin from their stocks and, rolling them up and lashing them to Legolas' travelling pack, set out for Wyrms' Hollow.

Several hours later, working in unseasonal heat, they had exposed two more bodies—one an exceptionally tall, well-built man; the other a small, slight figure, girl with a little knife-belt, of which the buckle, the point of the scabbard, and the small, fine blade of the knife, blackened by flame, remained.

But around the three figures lay a border of empty ground several yards wide; the trail had gone cold.

Legolas uncorked his waterskin and handed it to Eowyn and, after carefully rinsing the dust from her fingers, and dribbling some over her head, she took a few sips of water. "The small one *could* be a woman," she said, thoughtfully. "But I do not think we have found Deorhild or Guthwyn, Lassui. I do not know why, but I picture them lying together, clinging to one another..." She looked out across the field of waving Dragon Flame, turning crimson in the failing light. "It is time to go."

Legolas unrolled three of the tarpaulins and, murmuring, "*Hiro hyn hîdh ab'wanath*," laid them over the ashes.

Eowyn, meanwhile, had gathered some stones. "Do you think we can trust the landlord, Lassui?" she asked, handing them to Legolas, one at a time.

"Yes, I do," he replied, weighting down the tarpaulins.

She nodded. "Then I think we should take him into our confidence—not about the spirits, perhaps—but we can say we know someone who knew the women, which is true enough. And we can show him the wolf, and the scabbard point, and see if he recognises them."

"And if he does?"

"If he does," she said, "we will act on whatever he tells us. If he does not, we will come back here. With help."

...

Avo visto ... 'Do not stray'

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

In England, Fireweed flowers July-August, but I've used artistic licence!

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“Up at *Wurm’s Hollow*?” said the landlord, incredulously.

Legolas nodded. “We have found three bodies so far, but we believe there are more.”

He and Eowyn had returned to Meringburn, opened up the wagon with considerably more success than on previous occasions, then joined their customers in the tavern, lingering until, at last, they had found themselves alone with the landlord.

“Killed by orcs, maybe,” said the man, rubbing his chin, “during the war...”

“We do not think so,” said Eowyn. She brought out the golden wolf they had found beside the first body, and set it on the table. “Have you ever seen this crest before?”

He picked it up. “Aye... It’s of the House of Gáruulf.”

“What can you tell us about them?” asked Legolas.

The man hesitated.

“We will make it worth your while,” said Eowyn, encouragingly.

“Nay, it’s not that,” said the man, looking from her to Legolas, and back again. “Look, I know he’s an Elf—and you—you seem like a lady—but how am I to know you’re not planning to rob them—or to do worse, maybe, being as they say you’re faery folk and all?”

Eowyn caught Legolas’ eye and, touching the golden chain around her neck, asked a silent question. Legolas nodded. Eowyn grasped the chain and lifted it, drawing something from inside her bodice and dropping it into her cupped hand. “I cannot prove,” she admitted, “that I did not steal this, but...” She opened her hand.

In her palm, at the end of the chain, lay a golden ring bearing the crest of the Kings of Rohan.

“My Lady!” gasped the landlord—and he slid from his chair, and fell to his knees.

“Please,” said Eowyn. “All we want is some information.”

“Friend,” said Legolas, touching the man’s arm, “will you join us in another drink?”

“A drink? Oh... Aye... Aye!” The landlord scrambled to his feet and scurried behind the counter.

“We were asked,” Legolas explained, “to find out what happened to two young women, friends of the late King’s son, but what we have discovered instead is the body of a young man and what may have been two of his servants—or, perhaps, a servant and a younger kinsman, or a kinswoman...”

“The young man was wearing the crest,” said Eowyn, fingering the wolf, “so we know that he was of the House of Gáruulf. But the women we seek were the daughters of Eofor, and we believe that they were murdered by his brother, Baldor.”

“Baldor, son of Eoheort,” said the landlord, setting down the mugs of ale with shaky hands. After a moment’s confusion—during which it appeared that he was trying to decide whether it

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would be better to prostrate himself on the floor—he sat down. “Aye, well, if you want to know about him, my Lady, you’ve come to the right place.”

...

The following morning, Legolas and Eowyn spent almost two hours carefully rearranging the contents of their little cupboards and making sure that the turn-buckles securing the doors were in the right positions.

Then they hitched the horses and set out, travelling westwards along the Great West Road until, about half a mile before the road branched off to Mereworth, Legolas brought the wagon to a halt in the lee of one of the rocky outcrops that dotted the plain. “You are well-hidden here, Melmenya,” he said, raising the hood of his cloak. “But I shall not be long.” He dropped lightly to the ground.

“Take care,” said Eowyn.

The Elf smiled. “I shall.” Then, bow in hand, he set off at a run.

...

The village of Mereworth lay a few miles to the south of the Great West Road, where one of the many streams that trickled down from the mountains pooled to form the lake from which it took its name. The manor itself stood upon a natural rise to the west, its fine Hall, stables, and orchard enclosed by a stout wooden fence, its farm lands, divided into narrow strips, stretching out in all directions and, to the north, fringing the Road itself.

Moving swiftly past the men working in the fields, and almost invisible beneath his Elven cloak, Legolas scanned the road until he found exactly what he needed and, after making a careful note of its location, he ran back to Eowyn.

“All set,” he said.

They waited until the fading light told them that the men would soon be returning home.

“Are you ready?” asked Legolas.

“I *would* be, if Theodred had come last night and had given us his blessing.”

The Elf put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her gently.

“But, yes,” she said.

“With luck, Melmenya,” he said, addressing the unspoken cause of her sadness, “we will have it repaired. And if it cannot be repaired, we will have another built just like it, and we will take it to Pelargir, and spend a week there, watching the boats in the harbour...” He took up the reins.

“With Melannen?”

“With Melannen. Now hold on tightly.”

He guided the horses back onto the road, commanding them, with a few quiet words of Elvish, to run swiftly. Off they went, faster and faster, dragging the wagon behind them, and the vehicle began to sway, growing more and more unstable as it picked up speed, until it was lurching terrifyingly from side to side, and Eowyn was clinging on for dear life.

Then Legolas steered towards the uneven ground he had found earlier and, as the wheels hit the ruts, he pulled on the Elven ropes holding the horses, and the animals shot from the

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shafts, leaving the wagon behind.

For a split-second it seemed to freeze, held upright by some mysterious stroke of luck...

Then it overturned with a sickening crash.

But Legolas had already wrapped his arms around Eowyn and thrown them both clear.

...

Cries of horror went up from the fields, followed by the sounds of running feet.

Legolas held on to Eowyn, and waited.

"Are y'all right, Master Elf?" said a voice.

Legolas looked up into a strong, honest face. "My wife," he replied, "is badly shaken."

The man looked about him, obviously wondering what to do. Behind him, his fellow serfs were jostling and crowding, trying to get a better look at the injured woman.

"The horses have gone," said someone, helpfully.

"Shall we carry the lady up to the manor?" suggested another, but this was followed by a low murmuring, from which Legolas' Elven hearing extracted several variants of 'Baldor won't like that...'

"You'd best keep an eye on all that stuff, Ealdfrith," said a third man.

"Aye..." replied the first, and Legolas saw his gaze shift, unhappily, to the wagon.

It was lying on its side, with its door—which they had purposely left unlatched—wide open. Inside, patterned shawls and colourful ribbons streamed down from its open cupboards like banners at a banquet, whilst bales of cloth, and bundles of hose, and pouches of the finest Shire pipeweed lay piled beneath. Everything looked ruined, but—thanks to Legolas and Eowyn's work that morning—it was mostly show, for only carefully chosen items had been permitted to fall.

And those things, thought Legolas, must be calling to poor men such as these like the sea to a Sindar.

Ealdfrith, meanwhile, had made up his mind. "Algar," he said, to the young giant standing beside him, "get yourself by that wagon and don't let anyone near." He turned back to Legolas. "We'll sort out your gear later, Master Elf. Let's get the lady comfortable first."

"Thank you, my friend," said Legolas, with genuine gratitude. "I am most—"

"What's going on *here*?"

Legolas turned towards the new voice. The crowd had parted—with much bowing and tugging of forelocks—to reveal a handsome young man sitting astride a magnificent white horse. The rider flexed his legs, urging his mount a few steps forward, and demanded, impatiently, "Well? Ealdfrith?"

"There's been an accident, Master Guthmer," said the man, bowing low. "They're traders—the lady's been shaken up. I'm about to take them up to the village."

Guthmer studied Legolas, assessing his bow, his white knives and, lastly, his ears, then he turned to Eowyn, his expert eye lingering upon her body... "Bring them up to the manor," he

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said, turning his mount around, "with their things. You can put them in the barn."

Then he rode away without another word.

...

One of the men had had the foresight to bring a small hand cart down from the fields and, after making sure that Eowyn was comfortable, Legolas—with help from Ealdfrith and Algar—transferred half the contents of the wagon to it, selecting those things he thought would prove most useful—the Gondorian knives, the pouches of pipeweed, some of the more exotic trinkets, a few bottles of perfume and jars of salve, and several of the most attractive items of women's clothing. Then, leaving the poisons secure in their special cupboard, he closed and locked the door.

As they climbed the gentle rise to the manor, Legolas carrying Eowyn whilst Ealdfrith pushed the cart as though it weighed nothing, the Elf asked him whether the village had a cartwright, and was assured that, yes, from what Ealdfrith had seen, Lionel Cartwright would have no trouble repairing the wagon, though Legolas would need to obtain permission from Eorl Baldor before he could ask Lionel to work on it.

Perfect, thought Legolas. An excuse to talk to Baldor and a reason to linger here in Mereworth—doubtless for several days.

...

The barn was a long, narrow building, set at right-angles to Mereworth Hall across the well-kept yard. Inside, at one end, a series of pens offered accommodation to animals during winter; at the other end, a line of raised stone platforms kept sacks of grain, barrels of salted meats, and jars of preserved fruits safe from vermin.

Whatever else he may have done, thought Legolas, Baldor runs an efficient household.

He set Eowyn down on one of the lower rungs of the ladder up to the hayloft and, smiling, kissed her forehead, for she was playing the part of the fragile woman to perfection. "How do you feel?" he asked, quietly.

"Not bad. A bit bruised..."

As he set about arranging their stocks, together with the contents of their travelling packs, to form a cosy bedroom in the alcove beneath the stairs, a servant entered the barn and invited them to sup with the family.

Legolas placed his hand upon his heart and, making the very low bow favoured by the serfs of Mereworth, asked the haughty messenger to convey his acceptance, together with his sincere thanks, to his master and mistress.

The man grunted.

When he had gone, Legolas hopped over the fence into one of the animal pens, found a wooden pail, and fetched some water from the well in the yard. "Come, Melmenya," he said, smiling, "we must get you into costume."

"Costume?"

"You surely saw," he explained, "how Baldor's son was looking at you. I think a little faery magic might help you loosen his tongue."

"He had better not *try* anything with his tongue," said Eowyn, darkly.

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Half an hour later, washed and with her hair brushed out, she was twirling for Legolas' critical appraisal. He had dressed her in a gown of embroidered muslin, cut just short enough to reveal her feet in their little brown boots, and a golden corslet, which—laced tightly beneath her breasts—lifted her bosom, hiding few of her charms.

"Hmm," said Legolas. He fiddled with her neckline. "Perfect! Let us go."

...

The Great Hall, though as well-maintained as the rest of the manor, felt curiously cold and unwelcoming.

As she approached the high table, with Legolas at her side, Eowyn surveyed the members of the House of Baldor.

At its centre sat the eorl himself, a man of about forty-five years, with dark, hawk-like features emphasised by a sharply-trimmed beard. On his left sat the lady of the house, a strong-looking woman, perhaps twenty years her husband's senior, her steel-grey hair covered with a veil of the finest gold mesh.

Beside her, an empty seat awaited the more senior of their guests, and beside that sat the younger of the couple's two sons, a pale, weak-looking boy whose eyes never left the wooden spoon he was turning in his hands.

On Baldor's right sat the elder son, Guthmer, already regarding Eowyn as his personal property because, on his right, a second empty seat awaited *her*. And, hovering behind Baldor, stood the servant who had delivered his master's invitation to supper, and had received Legolas' answer so surlily.

"Who are you, friend?" asked Baldor, addressing Legolas.

"I am Lassui, a humble Elf of Mirkwood," Legolas lied, "and this is my wife, Melmenya. Since the War, we have been travelling the southern lands, trading in knick-knacks and fancies."

"What brings you north?" asked Guthmer.

A flicker of annoyance soured the father's face. "Welcome," he said, overriding his son's question. "Take your places,"—he gestured towards the empty seat beside his wife—"and let us eat."

...

"So," said Baldor, splashing more his wine into his goblet, "when Theoden's call came, I ignored it."

Legolas glanced at Eowyn. He could see—although he doubted that anyone else would notice—that she was seething with anger, but whether because Baldor had betrayed her uncle, or whether because Guthmer's hand was hovering above her thigh, he could not be sure, though he knew that he would be teaching the young man a sharp lesson, once their mission was complete.

"You have hardly eaten anything at all, Master Lassui," protested Baldor's wife, Lady Gléowyn. "I do hope that our simple fare does not disappoint you." She smiled coquettishly.

"No indeed, my Lady," he replied, honestly, because the roasted meats, the *briv* of peas, beans and roots, the fresh baked bread, though plain, were all of the finest quality and perfectly cooked. "We elves are not large eaters," he explained, "especially of meat."

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"And yet you are so strong..." She laid a hand upon his arm, and he felt her fingers explore his muscles.

Her younger son guffawed.

Legolas gently removed her hand, but he smiled, and let his eyes linger on her face, so as not to discourage her flirtation completely.

"Tomorrow, Master Elf," said Baldor, throwing back his head and tossing the last of his wine down his throat, "I shall be hunting, up in Firien Wood." Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances. "I hope you will join me. There are times when the hunter must admit defeat and fall back on a bowman, and I have heard many tales of your race's prowess with the bow." He glanced at Eowyn. "I am sure your wife can find something to amuse her here."

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“Animals,” growled Eowyn. Then, “Except,” she added, rummaging in her travelling pack for her night gown, “that *that* is an insult to beasts!”

Legolas came up behind her and, smiling, wrapped his arms around her. “Did you learn anything useful?”

“No.”

“Nor—”

“But *he* obviously considers Firien Wood a part of his manor.”

“It is where the boar are found, Melmenya—and, for a man like Baldor, there is the extra satisfaction of hunting on land that is prized by the kings of two kingdoms. But we cannot yet assume that it means anything more to him than that.”

He turned her round to face him, and she slid her arms around his neck.

“Are you sure that you will be safe, hunting with him tomorrow?” she asked.

“I am more concerned about leaving you behind.”

“Well, it *will* be hard to survive an entire day of sewing and tittle-tattle.” She sighed. “I had better get some sleep, Lassui. I shall just fetch some fresh water...”

...

Outside, a new moon in a clear sky filled the silent yard with silvery light. Eowyn crossed to the well and, setting her pail upon the ground, seized the handle, intending to lower the bucket.

“Melmenya...”

The name took her by surprise, not so much because she had thought she was alone, but because no one but Legolas—and, once, little Melannen—had ever called her by it before, and she did not like hearing it in another’s mouth. She turned. “Master Guthmer.”

Deference came hard to her—unlike Legolas, to whom it seemed to come easily—but she managed a small curtsy.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked, and his smile was conspiratorial.

“Fetching water,” said Eowyn, wishing she had her sword at her hip.

“Naughty girl.” He came towards her like a cat stalking a little bird. “And, of course, you had no idea that *I* would be coming out to lock the gates, did you?”

To her annoyance, Eowyn was forced to take a step backwards and found herself pinned against the wall of the well. “No, indeed,” she said, trying to judge whether she could turn the situation to her advantage, or whether she should simply duck past him and run.

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"I have had many girls, Melmenya. Many, many girls. But none so feisty as you."

He bent in closer, and she could feel his breath upon her cheek. "I am a married woman," she said, firmly.

"And I am a lord."

"Not yet," she countered, drawing herself to her full height, but still leaning back from him.

"Soon."

"Not if your father has any say in it."

Guthmer laughed, loud and hearty. "There are other routes to advancement."

"You mean by serving the king?" She could not keep the surprise from her voice.

"Would you be impressed," he said, "if Eomer King were to favour me?"

"I would be astonished."

"You," said Guthmer, "are no merchant's wife." He brought up his hand, and his fingers hovered beside her cheek. "What are you? Mm? An eorl's daughter who ran away with a pretty Elf?" He stretched out his forefinger, and lifted a strand of her hair, and Eowyn—deciding that it was time to stand up for herself—shoved his hand away. "By Béma," he laughed, "you are spirited."

He leaned in again.

Eowyn prepared to raise her knee—

"What...?" he cried, suddenly recoiling, shrinking in horror from something behind Eowyn's back. "No! No!"

Startled, Eowyn looked over her shoulder.

A pale column of mist was rising from the earth; it moved through the crystal-clear air, rippling as it came, thickening into the tall figure of a warrior.

"Theodred," whispered Eowyn.

"Get back!" shrieked Guthmer, bringing up his hand to shield his eyes. "Back! Back!"

But Theodred drew his ghostly sword and advanced, and the lordling turned and ran.

...

"Theodred?"

The spirit had stopped, a few strides beyond the well, and was staring at the door through which Guthmer had disappeared, his body glowing in the moonlight, his hair streaming in a ghostly breeze.

Eowyn came up beside him, and he turned to her, and smiled.

"We have found Holdred son of Walda, Theodred," she said, urgently, "and two others, but we have not found the women. Are we looking in the right place? Are they in Wyrms' Hollow? And was it Baldor who—" A terrible thought suddenly struck her—she remembered the boast of 'many, many girls'. "Was it Guthmer?"

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Theodred sheathed his sword and, reaching out, stroked her hair with his gloved hand, and she shivered as an icy draught seemed to pass right through her.

"Follow your heart, Shieldmaiden," he said, gently. *"And remember to keep to the narrow path..."*

...

"Lassui," cried Eowyn as she ran into the barn, "*Lassui!*"

Legolas dropped his bow, his painstaking maintenance forgotten and, leaping to his feet, took her in his arms. "Melmenya! What is it?"

"Theodred," she gasped. "And Guthmer!"

"Come... Sit down." He guided her into the little alcove beneath the stairs and lowered her onto her bedroll. "Tell me..."

Breathlessly, Eowyn described what had happened in the yard—how Guthmer had tried to kiss her, how Theodred had intervened, and how he had repeated his warning about the narrow path.

"I am so sorry, Melmenya," said Legolas, holding her tightly. "I was not there for you."

"No..." She laid her head on his shoulder. "I would have called for you had I really felt threatened, and you would have been at my side in an instant."

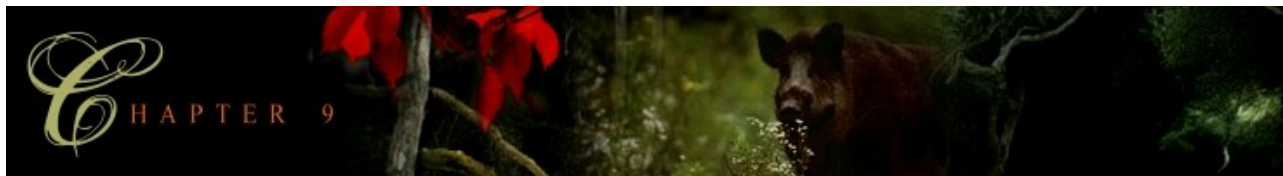
Legolas raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Yes, I would..." Then he added, softly, "Theodred promised me that he would help take care of you, Melmenya. Thank the Valar he is a man of his word."

...

Later, when Legolas had gone back to cleaning his bow, and Eowyn, lying in her bedroll, was looking thoughtfully at Melannen's toy rabbit, she suddenly asked, "What can Guthmer possibly be planning to do, thinking that it will earn him Eomer's favour?"

Legolas looked up from his work. "That is a very good question, Melmenya."

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Though he had needed no sleep himself and had spent the night awake, watching over Eowyn, Legolas waited until the hunting party had assembled before he joined them in the stable yard, threading his way through a half-dozen men on horseback, concerned to find that neither Guthmer nor his younger brother was amongst the riders.

"Good morning, Master Elf," said Baldor, twisting in the saddle as his mount turned about. "I have picked out a horse for you, since your own is still missing. His name is Firebrand, and—I promise you—he is a challenge."

Legolas placed a hand upon his heart and bowed his head in thanks.

"Will you require a saddle, sir?" asked a harassed groom, struggling to lead a magnificent milk-white stallion through the swarm of mounted men.

Legolas reached out, and gently took the animal's head in his hands, wondering how Baldor had come to own a horse that had obviously been sired by one of the Mearas. "*Gerich faer vara*," he murmured and, touching his forehead to the horse's muzzle, he added, "*estelio nin*, Firebrand." Then, "*Le hannon, mellon nin*," he answered the groom, "but no. I shall ride him as he is."

And he sprang lightly onto the horse's back, ignoring the looks that passed between the riders, though he had little doubt that wagers had been laid, and that money would be changing hands at the end of the day.

"Well then," said Baldor, "let us depart."

...

Eowyn set her foot upon a step, and hitched up her skirts.

Legolas had insisted that, from now on, she should carry a hunting knife, and he had selected one from their stocks—a long, slender, Gondorian blade, lightweight but strong, that slipped easily from its smooth leather scabbard.

She wrapped the strap around her thigh and threaded it through the buckle, smiling as an image of Guthmer's startled face appeared in her mind's eye.

"My Lady?"

"Yes..." She lowered her skirts and turned to find a serving girl hovering just inside the barn door. "What is it?"

Blushing, the girl dropped a hasty curtsy. "Lady Gléowyn asks you to join her in the solar, my Lady."

"Thank you, er...?"

"Eldit, my Lady."

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"Thank you, Eldit. I shall come at once."

The solar—the lord and lady's private chamber—sat above the western end of the Great Hall, supported by a row of carved wooden pillars. *If the lady discovered that she was entertaining the sister of the King of Rohan!* thought Eowyn, smiling as she climbed the stairs.

She knocked lightly at the door, and opened it without waiting for a reply. To her surprise, the solar was bright and cheerful—a lady's chamber. She closed the door behind her and, approaching Lady Gléowyn, who was sitting upon the great bed working a piece of elaborate embroidery, she curtsied.

Gléowyn waited a few moments more than strictly necessary before slowly raising her head and looking Eowyn in the eye. "Sit down," she said.

Eowyn glanced behind her, spotted a couple of stools, drew one a little closer, and sat.

"I am told," said Gléowyn, pinning her needle to her embroidery and setting the frame aside, "that you and your husband have a fine selection of silks and trimmings."

"Indeed we do, my Lady," replied Eowyn, slipping into the role of merchant's wife. "This,"—she indicated her slightly outlandish gown with a graceful sweep of the hand—"is made from Elven silk, and trimmed with Haradin lace."

Lady Gléowyn did not seem impressed.

"Most of our stock is still locked in the wagon," Eowyn continued, unabashed, "which is down at the roadside, but it is being brought up to the cartwright's workshop today and, if my Lady wishes, I will be happy to show you our wares tonight. My husband," she added, recalling the woman's open admiration of Legolas, "is always happy to demonstrate the weapons."

"Tell me about Minas Tirith," said Lady Gléowyn. "You must have been there on your travels. Tell me what the great ladies wear. Do they follow the Elvish Queen's example?"

"Yes, they do, my Lady." Eowyn began a long and detailed account of the fashions she had seen the last time she had been at Court, and it was not until she had been talking for some time that she noticed Gléowyn's younger son, lurking behind the curtains of the great bed. Fortunately, her surprise went unnoticed because, at the same moment, the surly servant entered the chamber, and whispered in his mistress's ear.

"I seems I cannot be spared," said Lady Gléowyn, wearily; "I am needed urgently elsewhere. Please wait here for my return."

Eowyn watched the woman depart, relieved to see her younger son slink out behind her, closely followed by the ill-tempered servant.

...

By the time the hunting party reached Firien Wood, all was prepared. Baldor's efficient master huntsman had stationed relays of hounds throughout the forest, ready to be released when their handlers were given the signal, and was waiting for them on the Mering Bridge. "We've found a bed, my Lord," he said, "down in the dell beside the Blue Rocks. It's still warm, so the boar can't be far."

"Take us there," said Baldor. He turned to Legolas. "Are you game Master Elf?"

Legolas assented with a polite bow of the head, though hunting animals for sport gave him no pleasure, and he questioned the wisdom of pushing the horses up and down the steep slopes.

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Baldor eyed him thoughtfully, sensing his disapproval.

Then he signalled to his fellow riders, and they followed him into the valley, their horses struggling to retain their footing. When they reached the bottom, Baldor dismounted and inspected the boar's bed.

"He's a big one, Waldef."

"Yes, my Lord."

"And, as you say, not long gone. Release the dogs."

The master huntsman waited until his lord had remounted before signalling the dog handlers to slip the leashes. The hounds scurried away, barking excitedly.

"Come on!" cried Baldor, spurring his horse. The riders set off in pursuit, jostling each other in their eagerness to stay close to their lord; Legolas hung back, concerned for his mount, which—though swift and high-hearted—was wary of men.

Suddenly, the dogs turned south, flowing up the rocky hillside like enchanted water.

"This way," Baldor shouted, and the riders wheeled east, retracing their previous path until they found a way up. Legolas followed, climbing the slope, crossing the road, and plunging into the forest beyond, following a trail he immediately recognised as the narrow path that he and Eowyn had taken up to Wyrms' Hollow.

This will be interesting...

"More dogs," cried Baldor. "The demon is close!"

The master huntsman, running beside his lord, blew his horn, and another pack came streaming from the trees to join the chase.

"If we can drive him into the Hollow," someone shouted, "we'll have him cornered!"

A second later, they burst into the clearing and sighted their quarry for the first time—a massive boar, fighting for his life as the dogs leaped for him like a single, snapping monster.

Baldor swung from the saddle and, gripping his spear, approached the rout. "Call them off, Waldef," he ordered.

The dogs were summoned by their handlers.

Baldor faced the boar alone.

Legolas, meanwhile, had taken his bow from its strap and nocked an arrow and, urging his mount forward, was working his way to the front; for Baldor, though fit, was not a large man, and in the final struggle the Elf knew that weight would count more than determination.

Baldor brought his spear up, and waited, his eyes fixed upon the boar.

The beast pricked its ears, and took several small steps.

Baldor leaned in—

The boar charged—

Baldor struck, and missed, his spear glancing harmlessly down its shoulder—

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And, in the split-second before it reached him, and ripped him asunder, Legolas drew and loosed, and buried his arrow deep between the boar's eyes.

...

Eowyn moved quickly round the chamber, picking up the various knick-knacks and examining them, unsure of what she was looking for. The large chests that lined the southern wall were all safely locked—more evidence of the lord and lady's excellent housekeeping—but lying upon one of them she found a carved box, about the size of a book, shallow, and ornately gilded.

She pulled the pin from the catch, and opened it.

It housed the portrait of a woman—an exotic beauty with dark eyes and long, black hair—and, as Eowyn studied it, she was reminded of Baldor's sharp features, and of his unusually dark hair and beard...

Quite rare in Rohan, she thought. Is this a picture of Baldor's mother?

The two murdered women, Deorhild and Guthwyn, had been—as far as she could tell—blonde, like her own family. But Baldor's sons were both dark, like their father..

Could Baldor be a bastard? she wondered. Did he have to kill off the legitimate heirs to secure his inheritance? Eofor died in a skirmish, but what of his wife? Might Baldor have killed her to prevent his brother's having more heirs? Might she already have been with child when—

"What are you doing?"

Eowyn recognised the voice. *Guthmer.*

She closed the portrait and replaced it. "I am snooping," she said, made bold by the knife strapped to her thigh. She turned to face him.

Guthmer, to her surprise, merely grunted, as though her answer were perfectly satisfactory. He crossed to the great bed and threw himself down upon it.

Eowyn returned to her stool.

"The wraith did not harm you, then?" he asked, after a few moments' awkward silence.

"On the contrary," Eowyn replied, boldly. "The 'wraith' is the spirit of one my ancestors, and he protects me whenever an impetuous boy threatens my honour." She saw Guthmer's expression change. "Oh," she said. "You have seen him before."

The young man did not reply.

"When?" she demanded.

He scowled.

Eowyn rose to her feet. "I am not lying, Guthmer," she said. "The spirit is one of my ancestors —"

"And you are no merchant's wife," he said, with a sneer. "So who are you?"

"That is not important—"

"Horse *shit!*" He rose, and came towards her and, through her silken skirts, Eowyn felt for her hunting knife. "Who are you, Melmenya—if that is even your name? And what are you doing here, with all your airs, and your ancestors, and your pretty Elf husband—" Suddenly, his hand

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shot out, and he seized the the golden chain about her neck, and yanked the ring from her bodice. "Oh, shit!" he cried. "Shit, shit, shit! You are an agent of the King—"

"Guthmer—"

"Who are you? Why are you here? What does he know? Why are you in disguise?"

"No!" Eowyn tried to limit the damage. "No, it was the spirit who led me here, Guthmer. The spirit! And I do not know what he wants. When has he appeared to you?"

The young man licked his dry lips. Behind his eyes, doubt and fear were vying with anger and recklessness.

"Tell me," said Eowyn, with the firm voice she would have used to coax a horse.

But, at that moment, the chamber door opened, and Lady Gléowyn entered with her younger son. "Ah, Guthmer," she said, "I have been looking for you. Something is disrupting work in the fields. Take your brother with you. Mistress Melmenya, will you join me in an inspection of the Buttery?"

...

"You have my thanks, Master Elf," said Baldor, with a gracious bow of the head—though, when he raised his eyes, Legolas saw shame in them. "It appears that what they say about your kind is true."

He gestured to his master huntsman, and the man moved in to 'unmake' the boar and prepare the dogs' reward.

"My younger son," continued Baldor, "has shown an aptitude for the bow. Perhaps..."

Legolas doubted that the sulky boy had any skill whatsoever, but replied, "I would be honoured, my Lord, to see him shoot and, perhaps, to offer some guid—"

"My Lord! My *Lord!*"

The Man and the Elf both turned towards the commotion.

Some of the hounds, strangely having lost interest in the boar, were dragging their confused handlers further down the clearing, where several riders were examining something on the ground, and calling, "My Lord! *My Lord!*"

Baldor waded through the yapping dogs; Legolas, knowing exactly what the men had found, followed him.

"Bodies, my Lord," said one of the riders. "Burnt beyond recognition." He stepped aside to allow Baldor better access.

"This is the 'man-mountain', my Lord," said another of the riders. He was holding up the tarpaulin with which Legolas and Eowyn had covered the largest of the victims, and was indicating its size with his free hand. "I am sure it is he."

Baldor poked the ashes with the toe of his boot.

"Are there any more?" asked Legolas, innocently.

In no time, the dogs had found two.

They were lying, as Eowyn had foreseen, huddled together, one partially covering the other, as

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though trying to protect her. Legolas crouched down beside them. The flames had done their work less thoroughly here, and larger parts of the bodies were still intact, including a small foot in a red leather boot. "Women," said Legolas, looking up into Baldor's face.

And the emotions he saw there were unmistakable.

...

The Buttery was a stone-lined storeroom beneath the Great Hall. A spiral staircase led down to its heavy wooden door, and a series of small windows, high up in its walls, let air and shaded light into its cool depths.

"Can you read and write, Mistress?" asked Lady Gléowyn, as they entered.

"Of course," replied Eowyn—adding, hastily, "my Lady."

"Good. Then you can be my scribe."

Lady Gléowyn closed the door behind them, crossed to one of the wooden shelves, took up a large slate and a piece of chalk, and handed them to Eowyn. "I will tell you what to write."

For almost an hour, the lady inspected and counted the items on her shelves, and Eowyn erased, added, and updated the amounts recorded on the slate.

"My son," said Gléowyn, as she completed her count of the jars of pickled cabbage, "is spoken for. *Twelve*."

Eowyn corrected the list. "My Lady?"

"He is betrothed. To the eldest daughter of Walda son of Galfrid." She started on the jars of strawberry preserve.

"I am married, my Lady," said Eowyn.

"To a merchant," replied the woman. "He is a pretty fellow—there is no doubt of that—but a bright, ambitious young woman with a modicum of beauty can always raise herself by a more sensible marriage."

"The elves do not permit divorce, my Lady," said Eowyn.

"There are other ways to end a foolish alliance," said Gléowyn, airily. "Two dozen. But do not think that you will ever have my son, Mistress—there, all done. Now let us return to the solar. Since you are so proud of your learning, you can read to me."

...

"*At last,*" said Eowyn, "*tidings came to Eorl of the need of Gondor, and late though it seemed, he set out with a great host of riders. Thus he came to the battle of the Field of Celebrant, for that was the name of the green land that lay between Silverlode and Limlight. There the northern army of Gondor was in peril—*"

"You read tolerably well," said Gléowyn, "though your voice lacks sweetness."

Eowyn cleared her throat. "Do you wish me to continue?"

Fortunately, the woman's reply was forestalled by the sound of clattering of hooves rising from the courtyard below. "The men have returned," she declared and, setting her needlework aside, she rose and left the chamber.

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Eowyn, though she had not been invited, followed.

Outside, amidst the chaos of the riders' dismounting and the grooms' leading away the horses, she quickly found Legolas.

"Come, Melmenya," he said, quietly. "Baldor has given us permission to check Master Lionel's progress with the wagon, and I have much to tell you."

...

Gerich faer vara ... You have a fiery spirit

Estelio nin ... Trust me

Le hannon, mellon nín ... Thank you, my friend

The passage Eowyn reads to Lady Gléowyn is from *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, II: The House of Eorl.

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Eowyn took Legolas' arm, and he led her out of the manor, towards the village.

"You look," he said, eyeing her green silk gown with its gauzy skirts, be-ribboned bodice, and fantastical trimmings, "like a woodland sprite."

"When we get home," she said, crossly, "I shall need to bathe for a week."

"And shall I be invited to join you?"

"You," she replied, "will be required to scrub the parts I cannot reach."

"Whatever has upset you so?"

Eowyn glanced over her shoulder. Then, confident that she could not be overheard, she told him of the trying time she had had with Gléowyn, of her surprise encounter with the younger son, and of her conversation with the older. "Guthmer is a spoilt child, and he has probably ruined half the maidens of Eastfold, but I do not believe he killed Deorhild and—"

"I have found their remains, Melmenya," said Legolas.

Eowyn stopped walking. "Lassui!"

"They are in Wyrms' Hollow, about ten yards from the others."

They needed somewhere to sit down together, share their discoveries, and plan their next move. Eowyn looked around the village. Up ahead she spotted a pole, garlanded with foliage, set above the door of one of the houses—the sign of an alehouse.

"What do you say to a mug of ale?" she asked.

...

The alewife was a cheerful, rosy-faced woman with an entire Éored of small, noisy children. She sat her guests down in the parlour, drew them a large jug of excellent ale, and shooed her offspring out into the kitchen, leaving the couple to talk in peace.

Legolas described what had happened in Wyrms' Hollow: how the men had identified the 'man-mountain' and his master, how he had persuaded them to look for more bodies, and how they had found Deorhild and Guthwyn. "I cut the Dragon Flame from their ashes," he said, softly, "and covered them with my cloak. Baldor plans to send his serfs to the Hollow tomorrow, to gather up the remains and bring them here. The women will be buried in the family graveyard with their ancestors, and Holdred and his servants will be sent back to his father."

"And Baldor made no attempt to destroy the evidence," asked Eowyn, incredulously; "not even to kick away the ashes?"

"No. He was as horrified by the discovery as everyone else."

Eowyn looked up from her mug of ale, surprised.

"I am sure of it, Melmenya," said Legolas. "He is a man whose feelings show clearly in his eyes"

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and, just as he could not hide from me the fact that he did not like being in my debt, nor could he conceal that he had recognised the women. But there was no guilt in him. In fact, I would say that there was sorrow."

"Sorrow... Well... So now we know that it was not Baldor who killed them," she said, putting complete trust in Legolas' instincts. She took a sip of ale. "And Guthmer," she continued, thinking aloud, "had definitely seen Theodred's ghost before, probably more than once, so—oh, of course! Theodred has been trying to persuade Guthmer to find the women's remains!"

Legolas smiled.

"Yes, that is a wild shot," she admitted. "But I am sure that, though Guthmer knows something, he had nothing to do with the deaths." She took another sip.

"So it was neither Baldor nor Guthmer," said Legolas. "Who does that leave?"

"There is the younger son," said Eowyn. "He is strange, Lassui; I do not even know his name, because no one ever uses it. And there is that big, churlish servant who is always lurking in the shadows..."

"There is also," said Legolas, raising a possibility they had both been side-stepping, "Lady Gléowyn herself."

"Yes..." Eowyn sighed. "The landlord of the *White Horse* was right, she *is* a shrew. She advised me to dispose of you and marry more prudently, but made it very clear that her son was out of bounds. Guthmer, it seems, is betrothed to the daughter of Walda, the sister of poor, dead Holdred... But many women have fierce tongues, Lassui. It does not mean they are murderers."

She poured more ale into their mugs, and they sat in silence for a few moments.

Then Legolas, whose understanding of the Mannish laws of inheritance was sketchy, said, "If one of the women had married Holdred, then Walda's manor—which, according to our friend the landlord, is the richest in Eastfold—would have gone to Eofor's descendants, would it not? But if Guthmer marries Walda's daughter—"

"Who now has no brother—"

"Then Walda's estate goes to *Gléowyn's* descendants."

"And, thus, she had a strong reason to murder the women," agreed Eowyn. "But we need proof, Lassui."

"And there is still," said Legolas, "one body we have not yet found."

...

They paid for their ale, and made their way to Lionel Cartwright's workshop, arriving in the middle of a heated argument between the man and his son.

"Oh, sir—lady," cried the carpenter, "I don't know how it's happened!"

"Please, my friend," said Legolas, gently taking the distraught man by the arms and guiding him towards a wooden stool, "sit down, calm yourself, and tell us what is wrong." He glanced at the man's son, who seemed to be trying to disappear into thin air.

"I was only gone for half an hour, sir, to get a bite to eat, and the boy was supposed to stay here, and keep an eye on things..."

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"What happened?" asked Eowyn.

"Someone came into the the workshop, climbed into your wagon, and broken into one of the cupboards, my Lady."

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances, both fearing exactly the same thing.

The steps up to the door had been removed for repair; Legolas hopped lightly onto the threshold, went inside, and checked the poisons cupboard. "Yes, Melmenya," he said, gravely.

"Have they taken anything?" asked Eowyn, soothing the cartwright with a gentle squeeze of the shoulder.

"I cannot be sure, but I think so."

"Help me up, Lassui. I shall make a list of everything that is still there and, when we get back to the barn, I shall compare it to the list in the Ledger."

...

The robbery aside, Lionel Cartwright was making good progress, and estimated that the wagon would be roadworthy in another three days. Legolas paid him for the work he had done so far, plus some extra to repair the poisons cupboard, have a strong metal lining made by the blacksmith, and fit it.

Eowyn, meanwhile, having carefully transcribed the labels of the remaining bottles, jars and phials onto her wax tablet, examined the door and floor of the workshop for any signs left by the intruder.

"Nothing," she said, as she and Legolas left the cartwright's. "There were no obvious footprints in the sawdust—perhaps he swept the floor as he left. And he did not force an entry—"

"He did not need to," said Legolas. "These people trust one another, Melmenya. The only reason Lionel Cartwright even bothered to ask his son to keep watch was because he was concerned for *our* belongings."

"But who would have known that we had poisons?"

"Anyone who saw us at Linglow or Meringburn."

"Of course! So it may have nothing to do with the manor."

"It may have been the baker of Meringburn, determined to get his rat poison," said Legolas. "Though, somehow, I doubt it."

"Well, if it were the baker," said Eowyn, "I'd wager you Brightstar's next foal that he didn't want it for rats." They both smiled, uneasily. "You know, Lassui, I think we should be careful." She stopped walking, and turned to face him, speaking earnestly. "It was not one of the villagers; it was someone from the manor. I think we should go back to the tavern, buy bread and cheese and a few jugs of ale, and—for the foreseeable future—avoid eating or drinking anything that Lady Gléowyn offers us."

...

Supper that night was a rowdy business, for Baldor and his lady were entertaining the hunting party—half-a-dozen lusty Rohirrim with healthy appetites and even healthier thirsts.

Legolas and Eowyn, being mere traders, had been banished to the lower end of the table but,

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with their delicate beauty and their exotic costumes, they still attracted much attention, especially once the ale had begun to flow, and they both found themselves having to discourage amorous advances from the drunken riders.

Still, the near-riot made it easy for them to put Eowyn's precautions into practice and, although they pushed their food around their platters, and raised their goblets at every toast, neither ate a morsel nor drank a sip.

...

"Ohhhh," said Eowyn, "I thought it would never end!" She sank back on her bedroll.

Legolas lit one of the fancy Haradin lanterns, and hung it from the steps above the bed. "We had better check the poisons list, Melmenya."

"Hmm."

They worked together, quickly and efficiently, Legolas reading out the names from Eowyn's wax tablet, Eowyn finding the corresponding entries in the Ledger and marking them with small crosses.

Finally, she set down her pen. "Not rat poison, Lassui," she said, with a sigh. "Wolfsbane." Then she read out the full entry:

"**Wolfsbane.** Ground root of plant, mixed with oils, is used for rubbing into aching joints to relieve pain. Leaves may be used to repel werewolves.

"**Extremely poisonous if swallowed.

"Death occurs within two to six hours. The initial signs are nausea, vomiting, and looseness of the bowels. These are followed by a sensation of burning, tingling, and numbness in the mouth and face, and of burning in the abdomen. In severe poisonings, tingling and numbness may also spread to the limbs. Other symptoms may include sweating, dizziness, difficulty breathing, headache, and confusion. The main cause of death is a paralysis of the heart and lungs. Signs after death are as for suffocation."

Legolas swore.

Eowyn turned to the page on which she had previously made her notes about the murders, and updated them:

Victims found at Wyrn's Hollow

Deorhild daughter of Eofor

Guthwyn daughter of Eofor

Holdred son of Walda

? 'Man-mountain'

? Boy servant

?

People in the story at the Manor of Mereworth

Eofor – deceased

Wife of Eofor – deceased

Baldor

Wife of Baldor Gléowyn

Son 1 Guthmer

Son 2

Servants? 'Lurker'

Eldit

Poison

Wolfsbane

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"If *you* had stolen a bottle of poison, Melmenya," said Legolas, "where would you conceal it?"

"You mean, if I were Lady Gléowyn?"

"Or any of the household."

"Well, if I were Gléowyn, I think I would hide it in the solar. There are—oh—at least six good, strong chests in there, all secured with padlocks. If I were her, I would hide it in one of those." She wiped her pen on a rag. "If I were one of the sons... In the stables, perhaps? Yes. Or in the weapons room, if they have one, with the whetstones and the cleaning oils. If I were a servant—"

"In the kitchen," said Legolas. "With the cooking oils and vinegars."

"Perhaps. Or in the laundry, with the lye..."

"We *must* get it back," said Legolas, angrily. "You and I are safe, Melmenya, if we do not eat or drink anything but our own food and ale, but a poisoner does not care whom he kills, so long as one of the dead is his intended victim. Whilst it is missing, everyone is at risk."

"Yes..." said Eowyn thoughtfully, replacing the stopper in the ink bottle. Then, "Tomorrow, Lassui, you must go to Baldor, and tell him that it has been stolen."

"Baldor?"

"Only he—or Lady Gléowyn—has the authority to search the entire manor and, if need be, the village," she explained. "We do not know if we can trust Gléowyn, but Baldor is at least innocent of the murder of the women. And reporting the theft will not compromise us—in fact, it is exactly what a genuine merchant would do."

"Of course..." Legolas took her pen and ink from her and set them carefully aside. "You are right, as usual, Melmenya."

"And I," said Eowyn, settling down in her bedroll, "will talk to the serving girl, Eldit. We need to learn more about Master No-name and the Lurking servant. And she must know this household and its secrets better than anyone."

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“Did you get *any* rest?” sighed Eowyn, pushing herself up on her elbow. She had found it hard to fall asleep herself but, some time in the early hours, exhaustion had overcome her and she had dozed fitfully until daybreak.

“I am fine,” said Legolas. He had set a wooden chest (painted with scenes of the Shire) beside her, covered it with a cloth (edged with fine Gondorian lace), and was laying out two wooden platters (carved with passages from the *Life* of Helm Hammerhand). He opened up the Haradin chest in which he had secured their food, turning the key and sliding the various rods in and out in sequence to reveal its metal-lined compartment. “I should have put the poisons in here,” he said, lifting out the bread, cheese, and a jug of ale sealed with a cork. “I should have taken more care of them.”

“Oh, Lassui,” said Eowyn, gently, “it is not your fault.”

“Then whose is it?”

“His—hers—whoever took it,” she replied. “Here,”—she cut a piece of cheese and put it on his platter—“break your fast, then go and talk to Baldor.”

Legolas looked thoughtful. Suddenly, he grinned. “It can be very hard to maintain the appropriate level of guilt in your company, Melmenya.”

...

“Master Elf...” said Baldor, warily.

The ‘lurking’ servant had shown Legolas into a small chamber beneath the solar, a man’s private study, crammed—to Legolas’ surprise—with shelves of books, and with glass-fronted cabinets containing natural curiosities and scholarly instruments.

Baldor was sitting at his desk, writing a letter.

“I have bad news,” said Legolas.

Baldor’s manner softened. He gestured towards a stool and, out of politeness, Legolas sat down. “Someone has stolen a bottle of Wolfsbane from our poisons store,” the Elf explained. “It is a healing preparation which, I understand, may be used to treat the pain that comes with age, but which, if swallowed—”

“Is fatal,” said Baldor.

“Yes.”

“And you think...”

“I *fear*,” said Legolas, “that whoever took it does not intend to use it for healing. Since the thief would have to have known that we stocked it, it is reasonable to assume that he—or she—has been a customer of ours, but that would not exclude your servants, the villagers—”

“Or members of my own family.”

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"You may want to take precautions," said Legolas, awkwardly. "To protect your family, I mean. And you will no doubt want to order a search for the poison."

"Hmm." Baldor leaned back in his chair. "When you walked through that door, Master Elf, I thought you had come to fleece me."

Legolas frowned, genuinely puzzled. "*Fleece* you, my Lord?"

Baldor laughed, and clapped his hands together loudly. "You really are as naïve as you look," he said. "Or is it honour?"

"I don't..."

"You saved my life, Master Elf. That is one debt I owe you. And you found my missing nieces. That is another. But you really have no interest in gain, do you? Strange in a merchant..." He looked at Legolas speculatively. "I am about to ride up to Wyrms' Hollow, to supervise the recovery of my nieces' remains. Will you accompany me?"

Legolas was eager to help lay the two women to rest, and to have the opportunity to find the final missing body, but there was something else that needed dealing with first: "The *poison*, my Lord."

"My steward will deal with that. ULRIC!"

The door opened, and the Lurker entered, and Legolas was reminded of one of Gimli's sayings, about a fox being left in charge of a hen house.

...

Eowyn dressed carefully, selecting a gown of lavender silk and dressing her hair with a fillet of moonstones, then went in search of the serving girl, Eldit.

She found her sweeping out the Great Hall, and offered to help.

"Oh, no, my Lady," said the girl, scandalised. "You would ruin your lovely gown." She had drawn up her own skirts and tucked them in her belt, and was negotiating the ruins of the previous night's feast—food scraps, spilled ale, spittle, and worse—with care. "You might, though," she added, shyly, "help me spread the fresh rushes later, if you wouldn't mind."

"I'd be happy to."

Eowyn perched herself on one of the chairs, and watched the girl work.

It made her feel uncomfortable. In her uncle's Hall she had paid no attention to the servants who had seen to her every need, and—though during the war she had taken care of herself, and others—in Eryn Carantaur the elves performed their chores so inconspicuously, the cleaning seemed to do itself...

All in all, she was relieved when Eldit finished the dirty work, and she was able to help with the more pleasant task of scattering the sweet rushes. It gave her the chance to draw the girl into conversation, beginning with a few casual remarks about the weather, then gradually encouraging her to talk about her own family—about her widowed mother, and her four younger brothers.

"Do you have a moment to come over to the barn?" she asked, realising that it would be prudent to take Eldit somewhere more private before asking her about Lady Gléowyn and her sons. "I have some scented soap your mother might like."

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"I have no money, my Lady," said Eldit, embarrassed.

"Oh, I did not mean—I would not dream of asking you for money."

"Why?"

Eowyn gave a small shrug. "You have a good mother, and she deserves something a little special," she admitted, honestly.

"Perhaps I could do some work for you, my Lady," said Eldit.

"Yes! You could come to the cartwright's with me, and help me rescue the lace."

"At midday," said Eldit.

"I shall be in the barn."

...

Wyrms' Hollow was transformed.

A small army of men—amongst them Ealdfrith, and the young giant, Algar—had beaten a path through the Dragon Flame and, kneeling beside the remains of the bodies, were gathering up the ashes and transferring them to separate chests with a care Legolas found deeply moving.

Baldor dropped from his horse and went to inspect their work. Legolas dismounted and, murmuring, "*Avo visto*, Firebrand," followed him.

"How much longer will it take?" asked Baldor, waving away the men's attempts to show respect.

Ealdfrith looked unhappy. "It's slow work, my Lord, for we must be careful."

"Better to fetch back some earth," said his master, "than to risk leaving anything behind."

"Thank you, my Lord. That will make the job easier. We should be finished before nightfall, in that case."

"Good."

"Have you found any more bodies, Master Ealdfrith?" asked Legolas.

Baldor looked up in surprise. "You think there are more?" He seemed shaken. "Well, you are welcome to look, Master Elf."

Legolas gave him a sharp nod, as though accepting an order, then waded out into the Dragon Flame and, letting his mind clear, reached out with his Elven senses, searching.

The forest was no longer angry—a small smile of relief curved his lips—and the desperate sense of sadness and loss, which had so disoriented him when he had come here with Eowyn, was no longer clouding his inner vision. He looked, listened, felt, and—yes—sensed another presence, somewhere up ahead.

Slowly, he walked forward until he was sure he had found the place, then he drew one of his white knives and, crouching down, began to cut away the Dragon Flame.

A while later, he rose, and surveyed the remains he had uncovered.

It was the charred body of an enormous hound.

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...

"The soap," said Eowyn. She had selected a large cake, made in Far Harad from the finest olive oil, perfumed with rose water and a hint of ginger, and wrapped in an exotic leaf.

Gingerly, Eldit picked it up, and smelled it. "Oh, my Lady! It's lovely."

"Good," said Eowyn, smiling. "Now,"—she took up her carpet bag—"let us go to the cartwright's."

It was a fine, bright day, and the two women walked side-by-side, talking and laughing, and it did not take Eowyn long to steer the conversation towards life at the manor, nor to realise that the poor girl was sweet on Guthmer.

"I hope," she said, softly, "that he treats you with the respect due to a free woman and a good servant."

"Oh, yes, my Lady," said Eldit, earnestly. "Oh, I know they say Master Guthmer's wild and all, but he'd never try to force himself on a *good* girl."

Eowyn wondered what that made *her*. "And his brother," she said, anxious to learn as much as she could before they reached the cartwright's workshop, "what is *he* like?" She was surprised to see the girl hesitate, biting her lip as though she were trying to think of a tactful answer. "He seems," she prompted, "shy..."

"Master Thengel is quiet, my Lady, it's true, but I wouldn't say he was *shy*..." She looked away, trying to hide the deep blush that had spread across her face.

"Would *he* ever force himself on a girl, Eldit?" she asked, gently.

"What makes you ask that?"

"Well... I can see that he makes you uncomfortable."

"It's just something I saw him do, my Lady, years ago—"

But they had reached the cartwright's workshop, and Eldit suddenly fell silent. Eowyn could have cursed.

...

Baldor gave orders for the hound's remains to be buried where they lay, then he and Legolas started back, riding slowly down the narrow trail, then side-by-side across the Mering Bridge, each deep in his own thoughts.

Legolas was wondering how much he dared reveal to Baldor.

The man was arrogant, with a casual contempt for those he considered his inferiors. *But no more, Legolas thought, than many other noble Men, Elves, and Dwarves I have encountered. And, like them, he has a sense of honour. And I believe he is troubled by the discovery...*

"You recognised the dog," he ventured, quietly.

Baldor turned, his thoughts still far away. "The *dog*?" he said. Then he remembered himself. "Oh, the dog. Yes. It belonged to my elder son."

"And you know who is responsible for its death," said Legolas.

Baldor shook his head, though whether he was denying the knowledge, or whether he was

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simply refusing to answer, Legolas could not be sure. "Guthmer," he said, "came to me yesterday with some nonsensical tale about your wife's being an agent of the King." He gave Legolas a sharp, searching look. "And you, Master Elf... You are no merchant. Who are you?"

"No one," said Legolas. And then, because lying troubled him, he added, "That is, I have no official standing here."

"Then what are you doing here?"

Legolas made his decision: "I was asked to find the remains of your nieces."

"By whom?"

"Someone close to the King," he replied, warming to telling half-truths. "Someone who knew them."

"A suitor, no doubt," said Baldor. "Béma knows, there were enough of them. Sometimes... Sometimes they seemed to think they would get the pair.."

"You," pressed Legolas, "wanted them to marry your sons."

"Our law does not forbid it, Master Elf. And it would have kept Mereworth in the family."

But instead, thought Legolas, *their deaths did that.* "What happened?" he asked. "When they disappeared? And why is Holdred son of Walda lying with them?"

...

Eowyn climbed up into the wagon and, carefully detaching and untangling the lengths of lace and ribbon, passed them down to Eldit, who rolled them, and stowed them in the bag. Eowyn had little interest in the lace itself, but she had thought that the work, being companionable, would put the girl at ease and make it easier to coax gossip from her.

Unfortunately, Lionel Cartwright, having made a promise to Legolas, was busy at his bench and, when his wife called him for his midday meal, he refused to stop working and, instead, asked her to bring his food into the workshop.

Eowyn had just conceded defeat, and climbed down, when the workshop doors flew open and the Lurker rushed in, followed by a handful of Baldor's servants.

"Search the place!" he barked. Then, spotting Eldit, he shouted, "What d'you think you're doing here, girl? Get back to work! Go on! Back to the manor!"

Eldit ran from the workshop, sobbing.

The men began tearing the place apart, pushing lengths of timber aside and shoving things off the workbench. One of them climbed into the wagon.

"No," cried Lionel Cartwright. "Please! Be careful!" He tried to protect the panel he had been working on. "Why are you *doing* this?"

"We're looking for the poison you *lost*." The Lurker's eyes were fixed on Eowyn.

"It is not *here*!" she said, angrily. "A child could see that it would not be here! Why would a thief go to all the trouble of taking it from the cabinet and leave it here? You should be—"

"Shut your mouth!" He slapped her hard, across the face with the back of his hand.

Eowyn, taken by surprise, staggered backwards, one hand coming up—too late—to protect

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herself, the other reaching, through the fabric of her skirts, for her hunting knife... But she realised that she could not draw it without exposing her legs to the Lurker and his friends, and instead seized a chisel.

"Get out of here," she growled, drawing herself up to her full height and advancing on the Lurker, every inch the Lady of the Shield Arm.

And, to her surprise, the Lurker gestured angrily to his men, and they left.

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Eowyn hurried back to the barn, hoping that Legolas would be there and—

...

"They disappeared," said Baldor. "All of them. I can tell you no more than that. Deorhild had formed an attachment to Holdred son of Walda, and her father—my brother—encouraged it. The boy set out from his father's manor with his body guard—"

"The 'man-mountain'."

"Yes—and a page. He was coming to ask for the girl's hand, but never arrived. We searched, of course, as we later searched for my nieces, but—well, you have seen Wyrms' Hollow—why would we look *there*? And, if we had, how would we have found them?" He turned, a sudden realisation showing upon his face. "It was you," he said. "You and that bewitching little wife of yours. *You* found Holdred, and covered his remains."

"His spirit led us to his body," said Legolas.

"Spirit! Yes, my lady sees spirits. And my son, Guthmer." He sighed and, suddenly, he looked old—old like an Elf who has waited too long to sail West. "Spirits," he muttered. "Spirits..."

...

Eowyn's first impression was of a stifling combination of smell and taste and *roughness* covering her face—

Cannot breathe!

She clawed at it, and it moved, and with some frantic struggling she managed to pull it off and throw it away—

A horse blanket, she thought.

Everything was dark.

And the air was cold, and the floor beneath her hard—stone flags—and she was certainly not in the barn!

My head hurts.

She brought up her hands, and carefully examined her skull, finding no wound, but a large swelling, hot and tender.

Someone must have hit me on the head...

The Lurker!

He must have been waiting for me.

A shaft of fear pierced her chest. *Has he left me here to die?* she wondered. *Am I to vanish, like poor Deorhild and Guthwyn, whilst Legolas searches for me, frantically, like their father?*

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Instinctively, she wanted to shout for help, but, *No*, she thought. *If the Lurker hears me, he will come and silence me. No, I must stay quiet, and get out of here myself!*

She shifted her hips—realising, for the first time, that she was sitting on something uncomfortable—and she reached down and, feeling with her fingers, discovered her carpet bag.

Goodness, I must have been holding it tightly!

A slow smile spread across her face. Fumbling in the dark, she opened the bag and felt inside, burrowing past the rolls of lace Eldit had helped her rescue, until her fingers brushed a cylinder of velvet.

Yes!

She drew out the long, narrow pouch and opened it, and a pale, bluish light spilled out over her hands. *Bless you, Master Arador*, she thought. *I shall kiss you when I get home!* And, as she pulled the glowing crystal from its sheath, she chuckled to herself, imagining the young lad's embarrassment if she were to keep her promise.

At the same time, feeling with her free hand, she found the scabbard strapped to her thigh. *The idiot has left me my knife!*

Heartened, she scrambled to her feet—swallowing down the sudden nausea—and, raising the crystal high above her head, looked about her.

She was standing in a stone chamber, small and narrow like a corridor, lined with workbenches on its longer sides.

She tried the door.

Locked.

She lifted her skirt and drew her knife, and set to work on the door frame, stabbing and gouging, trying dig away the wood around the lock.

She had been working hard for several minutes when she suddenly sensed someone behind her, and she turned, brandishing the knife.

A figure emerged from the darkness, his handsome face and long waving hair glowing in the dim light of the crystal.

Theodred. Relief flooded Eowyn's entire body. "Oh, Theodred!"

"*Shieldmaiden.*" He gestured towards one of the benches.

"What is it?" Eowyn had so far ignored the chamber's paraphernalia, and only now did it occur to her what a place like this might be used for. "Is it the poison, Theodred?" She came forward, holding out the crystal, scanning the array of jars and bottles that littered the work surface.

Theodred pointed to a small cabinet. "*In there.*"

Eowyn opened the door.

Within, she found a glass jar, and took it out. It had been corked and dipped in molten wax, and—she peered more closely—strange runes had been carved into its waxy seal.

She held the glowing crystal against the glass.

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Inside, lay two pieces of folded parchment; one had opened slightly and, with effort, Eowyn made out five letters, written in a firm, no-nonsense hand:

D E O R H

"Deorhild!" She looked up at Theodred. "This... This is the women's names!"

He nodded.

"Stolen... Locked away... Should I smash it open?"

Theodred shook his head.

"Very well..." She found her carpet bag and, discarding some of the lace, stowed the jar safely inside. "Is there a quicker way out of here?"

"No."

Eowyn sighed. "I had better get back to work, then."

...

Legolas left Baldor—still deep in thought—at the stables, and strode swiftly to the barn, looking for Eowyn.

The moment he entered, he knew that something was wrong. Disquiet hung in the air, like dust in a shaft of light and, on the floor, just inside the door, two parallel scratches in the earthen floor, ending in piles of straw, showed where someone's heels had been dragged...

"Melmenya!" he cried, but he knew she was not there to hear him.

He turned, and rushed outside, almost colliding with the girl, Eldit. "My wife," he said, "do you know where she is?"

"No, sir—I was coming to see if she was all right..." She described what had happened at the cartwright's workshop. "Master Ulric," she said, "the steward—he was very angry..."

"The Lurker," muttered Legolas.

And, boiling with anger, he went to find him.

...

"Oh, this is hopeless," said Eowyn, sinking down to the floor. She was desperately tired, hungry, thirsty, her head was aching, and her hand had started to blister. "I need help, Theodred."

She realised that she could no longer feel her foster-brother's presence and, when she looked round, she saw that he had gone.

With a sob, she reached for her carpet bag, took out a roll of soft, silken ribbon, cut off a length, and wrapped it protectively around her hand. Then—as she was stuffing the rest back into the bag—she noticed a small, pointed ear sticking out of the sea of lace, and pulled at it.

It was Niben, Melannen's toy rabbit.

Eowyn sat back on her haunches, thinking of the tiny elfling—of his sunny, irrepressible nature, and of the way that taking care of him brought out the very best in both herself and Legolas.

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She kissed Niben, put him safely back in her bag, and returned to her carving with renewed purpose.

...

Having searched the hayloft, the stables, the orchard, and—with mounting panic—the well, Legolas was at his wits' end. His instincts told him that Eowyn was still alive, and somewhere nearby, but his warrior's experience kept reminding him that the difference between life and death was no more than a split-second's slash of a knife...

And he could not forget the fate of Deorhild and Guthwyn.

He strode into the Great Hall, grabbed a passing servant, and demanded to speak to the steward.

"I've not seen him since he went down to the village, sir," said the man politely, obviously accustomed to being treated roughly. "I think he's still down there."

Legolas let the man go.

He knew that Eowyn had been taken from the barn. If the Lurker was in the village, he could not have done it.

Then who?

The one person he could be sure of was Baldor, for the man had been with him when it must have happened.

He approached the private end of the Hall and, without knocking, barged into Baldor's study.

It was empty.

...

Eowyn set her knife on the floor and, ignoring the pain in her already-bruised shoulder, threw herself against the door.

This time, there was a sound of wood splitting...

Then the door gave way, taking Eowyn by surprise and sending her sprawling over the threshold. She pushed herself up on her hands. A dim light, filtering through small windows set high in the walls, and a familiar smell told her where she was.

"*Ceryn Béma*," she swore, "the Buttery." *Another valar-forsaken door to get through!*

But, at least, she should be able to find something to drink.

Remembering her previous day's work, she dragged herself to the corner where the cider barrels were stored, found one with a tap and, cupping her hand beneath it, lapped the liquid from her palm, like a cat.

That's better!

She got to her feet, retrieved her knife, bag, and the crystal and, back in the Buttery, searched the shelves until she found a wheel of cheese, and cut herself a slice.

Mmm, she thought, *Lady Gléowyn will have a fit...*

There was no bread, but she found some oat cakes, took a couple, and re-assessed her

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situation.

Gléowyn must know what is behind that door, she thought. And then it hit her, like an arrow between the eyes: The writing in the jar is hers! It was she who stole the women's names!

For some reason, the realisation filled her with terror. Dropping the uneaten oatcake, she took up her knife, and approached the door—

It opened.

Eowyn scurried backwards, her knife raised defensively.

But it was not Gléowyn who came in.

"Well," said Thengel, "my brother's right, you *are* a clever she-orc. And with more fight in you than any of the others had." He drew his sword, and his voice which, until now, had sounded weak and sulky, was suddenly hard and purposeful: "Get back in my mother's leechcraft room."

"No," said Eowyn. In the confined space of the smaller chamber she knew she would stand no chance, knife against sword. But here in the Buttery, where there was room to manoeuvre, she might, perhaps, dodge his cuts for long enough to find his weaknesses, and exploit them.

Besides, she thought, I would rather die than cower before this little turd.

"As you wish," said Thengel, and lunged.

...

Legolas threw open the door of the solar. "Where is my wife?" he demanded.

Baldor and Gléowyn, deep in a quiet but fierce quarrel, broke off.

Gléowyn was the first to recover. She extricated herself from her husband's grasp and, smoothing her gown, said dismissively, "She is about somewhere."

Then, before Legolas could protest, she changed her story: "She is with my younger son, Master Elf; they will be coming up here presently. In the meantime,"—she crossed to a side table—"won't you join us in some refreshment?" She drew the stopper from an ornate bottle and poured two large measures of wine into glass goblets.

"Master Elf,"—she handed one to Legolas—"my *dear*,"—and the other to Baldor, who had sunk down onto the great bed.

Legolas watched Baldor raise the goblet to his lips—

"No!" he cried and, with Elven speed, streaked forward, and knocked it from the man's hand.

...

Thengel swung his sword.

Dodging it, Eowyn passed her knife to her left hand, swept up a broom, and used it to deflect his next strike, following—whilst he was still off-balance—with a cut to his left side.

Her blow fell short, but Thengel howled as the blade scratched his ribs. "*Bitch!*"

He swung again.

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Eowyn needed a shield. She fell back, dropping the broom, and—passing the knife back to her right hand—grabbed a lid from one of the cauldrons. It was small, but it would have to do.

Thengel laughed and, raising his sword high above his head, brought it down like a hammer.

Eowyn blocked, moving her feet to find the flat of his blade and pushing it away, but it was hard work, for though she was strong for her size, the boy—though he did not look it—was stronger.

I need to out-fight him!

She retreated again, bringing up her little 'shield' to protect her head and neck and, crouching, her knife held in the *plough* guard, she waited for him to slash again, preparing herself to attack wherever he left open and, this time, to bury her knife right to the hilt.

But Thengel hesitated.

He is nervous, she thought. He did not expect me to fight back. But I need him make the first move. I must goad him...

"Coward," she cried. "Woman-killer! *Mother's* boy!"

He was standing with his back to the Buttery door, blocking her escape, and there was murder in his eyes. Eowyn readied herself for what she knew in her heart would—one way or the other—be their final clash.

...

"What are you doing, you oaf?" demanded Gléowyn.

Legolas said to Baldor: "The poison, my Lord."

Baldor looked from the Elf, to his wife, and back again. "Surely you have not—"

"He's *lying!*" cried Gléowyn.

"Is he?" said Baldor, coldly. "Am I safe, knowing what I know? Am I to believe that some tender feeling still lingers in your heart—that you would spare me for love?" He rose from the great bed. "Ulric has been searching the village, wife—noisily, I'll wager. If I should die, Guthmer will know what to look for."

"You *fool!*" She seized the wine and raised it to her lips.

Baldor lunged for her, but Legolas was faster. "NO!" he shouted, knocking the bottle from her hand, "TELL ME WHAT YOU HAVE DONE TO EOWYN!" He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her; Baldor did nothing to stop him. "Where is she? Where? *Where?*"

"*In the leechcraft chamber!*" she screeched.

Legolas pushed her away.

"Behind the Buttery, Master Elf," said Baldor, taking charge of his wife. "Down the stairs at the western end of the Hall."

...

Eowyn watched Thengel's eyes. Desperation was slowly replacing the fear in them; timing would be everything.

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Suddenly, a pale figure drifted into the edge of her vision and, though her gaze remained steady, she knew that it was Theodred, come to help her. But, as she waited for him to act, a more substantial figure appeared beside him and, raising a heavy wooden club, struck Thengel a mighty blow, which knocked him to the floor.

For several long moments, Eowyn and her saviour stood face-to-face, eyeing each other in silence, Eowyn wondering whether she had found a true friend or merely a deadlier foe.

Then Guthmer bowed. "My Lady."

With a heavy sigh of relief, Eowyn dumped the cauldron lid and, turning her back on the young man, wiped her knife and sheathed it.

"Did you know?" she asked.

She spotted the crystal—still glowing brightly—lying where it had fallen on the floor, picked it up, and took it back into the leechcraft room to find its velvet pouch.

"I... I knew that something wasn't right, that he..." Guthmer sighed. "He was so young. I couldn't believe that he'd... So, no, I didn't. Not until the spirit spoke to me."

"What did Theodred say?"

"That if I did not act, another woman—his own cousin—would lose her life at my brother's hands."

Eowyn sheathed the crystal and put it in her bag. "You know that your mother is guilty, too? She helped him hide his crimes."

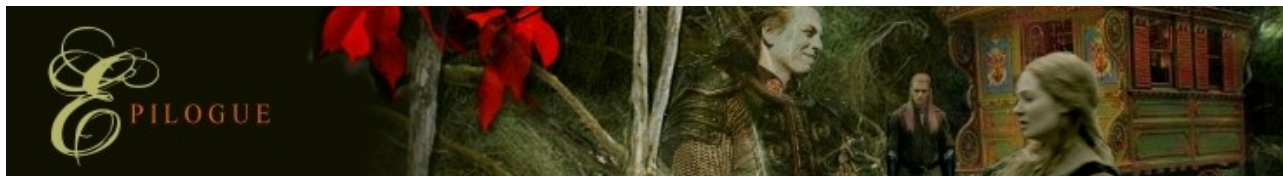
"Thengel was always her favourite," he said. "She would do anything to protect him."

"Well *I*," she said, taking another oat cake, for the fight had made her even hungrier, "have done what I promised—your cousins' remains will be properly buried, and the curse on them will be lifted. How you and your father—and Holdred's father—choose to punish your mother and brother is no concern of mine or my husband's."

She approached the door. Guthmer stepped aside to let her pass.

But, as she reached the foot of the stairs, Eowyn paused. "If you still hope to serve my brother, Eomer King, I will speak to him on your behalf."

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"Melmenya!" Colliding with Eowyn at the top of the Buttery stairs, Legolas threw his arms around her and, lifting her off her feet, whirled her round. "Valar, I was afraid I had lost you!"

Eowyn laughed. "For *this*," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck, "it is almost worth having been knocked out, imprisoned, and forced to fight for my life!" And when Legolas set her back on the floor, she hugged him tightly. "Ohhhhh... I cannot wait to go home, Lassui."

"We could call the horses and leave straight away," said Legolas, kissing the top of her head.

Eowyn was silent for a moment. Then, "No," she said. "I love our little wagon. Let us wait until it is repaired, and take it home with us."

...

Despite the damage done by Ulric's men, Lionel Cartwright still maintained that the wagon would be repaired on time.

For the next two days, Legolas and Eowyn waited uneasily, hovering on the fringes of the action, watching Baldor deal with the aftermath of his wife's betrayal and his son's crimes.

On the evening of the first day, Legolas found him alone in his study, and set before him the jar that Eowyn had found in the leechcraft room. "It contains," he said, "the names of your nieces. We believe it is a curse, designed to deny their spirits rest."

"Leave it with me," said Baldor.

The following morning, the opened jar was returned by Eldit, with a message from her master: 'It is lifted.'

"Let us hope that it *is*," said Eowyn, doubtfully.

...

The following night, when Eowyn went to draw water in the yard, Guthmer was waiting for her.

"There is to be a trial," he said, winding down the bucket for her, "in two weeks, when the Hundred Court meets. It is only a formality, of course. My brother has confessed to strangling Deorhild—it seems she resisted him—and to stabbing Guthwyn when she found him kissing her sister's dead body...

"Holdred and his men," he continued, raising the bucket, "he had ambushed in the Shepshaw Rocks—they would not have stood a chance, for Thengel is surprisingly good with a bow. Bouncer,"—Guthmer's dog—"he poisoned, to spite me. I hope he didn't suffer..."

He lifted the bucket onto the wall, and tipped some water into Eowyn's pail.

"Thengel will hang," he said. "And Father will pay Holdred's father his son's worth, to avoid a blood feud." He smiled, ruefully. "At least, now, I won't have to marry Walda's daughter."

"And your mother?" asked Eowyn.

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"Oh, mother will survive. She always does. All *she* did was dispose of the bodies. She must have had help, but,"—he shrugged—"you cannot punish a servant for obeying his mistress's orders."

"She stole the poison."

"No, Thengel stole the poison. Mother took it from him, and hid it for safe-keeping."

Eowyn shook her head. "She tried to *poison* your father, Guthmer."

"If she did, your husband destroyed the proof."

"Your father will need to find himself a food taster."

"I think she will be sent away. To live with her sister, the widow of Eorl Syward."

"Up in the mountains? Hanging her would be more merciful."

Guthmer smiled.

"And what of you?" asked Eowyn.

Guthmer perched upon the wall of the well, and folded his arms across his chest. "I shall take up your offer—to speak to your brother the King on my behalf."

Eowyn regarded him, thoughtfully. Then she said, "I shall do as I promised, if that is what you really want. But *you* were not made to follow orders, Guthmer. *I* think you should stay here, marry a good woman, have children, and learn to be a worthy heir to your father."

"Are you offering?"

"You know I am not."

Guthmer smiled. "You cannot blame a man for asking."

"You are a good man, Guthmer, beneath all the bluster." Eowyn picked up her pail. "You know what is right, and you have the courage to do it. One day, Eomer may have need of you. But, in the meantime, think on what I have said."

...

On the morning of the third day, the men of Mereworth hauled the repaired wagon up the road to the manor. Most of the household were waiting at the gates to see the Elf and his wife depart.

"What do you propose to pull it with?" asked Guthmer.

Legolas raised his hand to his mouth and whistled. Moments later, the beating of hooves announced the return of the 'runaway' horses. "They have been waiting for my signal," he explained.

"That's a neat trick, Master Elf," said a voice, and the crowd parted to allow Baldor to approach his departing guests. "Forgive me," he said, bowing deeply, "I mean, your Highness."

Legolas smiled. "I have no official standing here."

Baldor straightened up and, after a slight hesitation, held out his hand. "Fare you well, then, Legolas of the Woodland Realm. I am triply in your debt. If you should ever return to collect, you will find me ready to pay."

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That night, Legolas brought the wagon to a halt in Firien Wood, close to the narrow path that led up to Wyrms' Hollow, and he and Eowyn ate a simple supper of bread and cheese, and bowls of *briw* re-heated over a wood fire.

Then they gathered up all the lanterns they could find—stout iron ones with horn lights from Rohan; tall, elegant ones with delicately etched glass from Gondor; fantastical palaces of glittering metal and coloured glass from Far Harad—laid them out in a long line leading from the end of the path to the foot of the wagon steps, lit them and, wrapped in Elven cloaks, settled down to wait.

Sometime after midnight, Legolas gently woke his wife.

The two young women, Deorhild and Guthwyn, were standing side-by-side, their beauty now matched by a liveliness that justified Master Bawden's description, 'as fair as the sunlight on May blossom'. Beside Deorhild, holding her hand, stood Holdred son of Walda, younger than Eowyn had imagined him, but handsome, and with laughing eyes that promised his wife much happiness.

Next to him were his faithful servants, the brave 'man-mountain', seven feet tall and with hands that might crush a man's skull, but so gentle that only a threat to his master could move him to violence, and the little page boy, whose cheeky grin, reminding Eowyn of Melannen, almost broke her heart.

But beside the lad, licking his fingers, stood brave old Bouncer, looking forward to playing with his new friend until his beloved master was ready to join him.

Eowyn's eyes filled with tears.

To the right of the group, a little way off, stood Theodred, a warrior in the prime of 'life', his hair lifting in a never-ending breeze.

"Fare you well," whispered Eowyn, a sob in her voice, "all of you. Go and make merry in the Halls of your Ancestors."

One by one the spirits took their leave, until only Theodred remained, smiling at his cousin. "May *Béma* bless you, *Shieldmaiden*," he said, his voice like a whisper. And, to Legolas, he added, "Take care of our treasure, my friend..."

"*Theodred!*" Eowyn leaped down from the wagon and ran towards him, but he was already fading away.

"You will see him again, my darling," said Legolas, gathering her into his arms. "You will see him many, many times, I promise. Every year, on the first night of Rhîw, you will invite him to join us and, whenever he can, he will come to you."

THE END