

The Dead Forest



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Title: **The Dead Forest**

Story Number: -

Rating: G

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: Why are the trees in Eryn Hollen dying? Legolas and Eowyn investigate.

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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Part 1

"Careful," said Eowyn.

The young man riding ahead of her checked his horse and guided it back to the safe path.

Arador—son of the Reeve of Newhome, a Mannish settlement on the outskirts of Eryn Carantaur—shook his head as though to clear it. He had just spent four wonder-filled years at the Elven city's Academy, studying lore with Lord Fingolfin, and natural philosophy with Master Eldacar, learning dragon husbandry with Sir Bors, and the healing arts with Master Dínendal, and he had been 'miles away', pondering how he might persuade his father to let him return to the Colony, and settle there *permanently*...

The trail widened out, and Eowyn came up beside him. "Are you looking forward to going home?" she asked, as though reading his mind.

Arador had never been completely comfortable alone in Eowyn's presence. She was good, and clever, and brave, and it was said that the Valar had granted her immortality—*Which must be the reason, he thought, that loveliness seems to shine out of her, and turn me into a blushing, gibbering idiot.*

"Ah," said Eowyn, "Legolas is back!"

Arador breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

...

When Arador's father had invited Legolas and Eowyn to spend Yuletide with the people of Newhome, it had been decided that, since Arador was also returning to his parents' home for the festivities, the three would travel together.

The day before they planned to set out, however, Legolas received a letter from Arador's father, which—in addition to the usual pleasantries and good wishes for a safe journey—contained some very alarming news. *Recently, the Reeve wrote, travellers from Doro Lanthron, have been reporting seeing large numbers of dead or dying trees to the north of the road. One claims—somewhat poetically—that the entire forest seems diseased, its soil tainted...*

Eowyn brought out her map of South Ithilien, and she and Legolas carefully traced the route from Doro Lanthron to Newhome.

"The only forest it passes through is Eryn Hollen," said Legolas, pointing to the long, narrow scabbard of trees that surrounded a blade of rock, thrusting out from the Mountains of Mordor.

"Hmm," said Eowyn, thoughtfully.

The road from Eryn Carantaur to Newhome did not go anywhere near Eryn Hollen. "But if we were to leave immediately," she mused aloud, "we could be at Doro Lanthron by nightfall. And then, Lassui, tomorrow we could ride through the Doro Lanthron Hills,"—she ran her finger along the road—"see the forest for ourselves, and still get Arador home on time."

...

Master Eldacar appeared in *Westron Wynde*
Sir Bors appeared in *A Yuletide Dragonhunt*

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Part 2

They had left Doro Lanthron at sunrise and taken the Newhome road, picking their way slowly along the muddy, deeply-rutted track, walking the horses through the narrow, stony passes, and crossing the rotting, wooden bridges carefully, one at a time.

"This is 'no man's land'," said Arador, following Legolas through the treacherous maze of rock and mire. "My father maintains the road as far as the Tavor River, which is where his authority ends, but he is always getting complaints from travellers whose horses have fallen, and,"—he gestured towards the blackened skeleton of a handcart, which someone had dragged aside and burned—"from carriers who have had to abandon their merchandise on this stretch."

"I shall talk to Aragorn," said Legolas. "Improving the entire road is beyond the Colony's resources, but something must be done. Perhaps jointly..." And after several more miles of frustratingly slow going, impatient to know the worst, he decided to ride ahead.

...

Legolas returned with good news.

"In less than a quarter of a mile," he said, wheeling Arod around, and falling in beside Eowyn, "the road leaves the hills and crosses the plain on a raised causeway—the surface is still metalled, so we should be able to make up some time. And I saw Eryn Hollen, to the north—it is about five miles as the *corch* flies..."

...

As they left the shelter of the Hills it began to drizzle, and by the time they were half way across the plain, the sky had opened, and the rain was pounding down upon them.

"Under here," cried Legolas, dismounting and leading Arod down the side of the causeway. Eowyn and Arador followed.

There was a low bridge, where the road crossed a shallow depression on wooden piles and, setting the horses loose, they crawled underneath it, and huddled together, making themselves as comfortable as they could.

"Time for something to eat," said Eowyn, lowering the hood of her Elven cloak and opening her backpack. "We have some bread and cheese, somewhere..." She grinned, clearly enjoying the adventure, and Arador thought that he had never seen her look lovelier.

He wrestled his own pack onto his lap and, rummaging inside, pulled out a leather satchel. It was crammed with small glass bottles, some empty, others filled with powder or with coloured liquid, and Arador checked each one carefully.

"What are those?" asked Legolas, leaning closer.

"Master Eldacar gave them to me," replied Arador. "so that I can take samples from the trees and the soil, and assay them for impurities."

...

corch ... crow

Part 3

By the time they had eaten their bread and cheese the rain had eased off a little, and they decided to press on, since Arador would need to take his samples in the daylight; they entered the forest an hour or so later, just as the shadows were starting to lengthen.

Here, the road reverted to a muddy trail, flanked either side by scrub and, beyond that, by trees—larches, cedars, and tall pines—close packed, and dark. The air was still, and deeply quiet—there was no birdsong, and no animal sounds—and, now that the rain had stopped, the forest seemed like a world apart, completely detached from the reality outside.

"It is so *eerie*," said Arador, in an awed whisper.

"Yes..." replied Eowyn.

"It feels as though danger were lurking behind every *tree*."

"That is your imagination working, Arador," said Legolas, smiling. "I do not sense any *danger*, although..." He broke off, suddenly, and became very still, as if he were listening hard—*Or*, thought Arador, *reaching out with some other Elven sense*. Even his horse, feeling his sudden disquiet, had stopped walking. "Over there," he said, at last, pointing to the east. "That is where the trees are ailing."

Arador immediately dismounted and, shrugging off his pack, retrieved his leather satchel.

"Can I help?" asked Eowyn, dropping to the ground beside him.

He pulled out one of the glass vials. "Take out the stopper, my Lady, and use *this*,"—he showed her the tiny glass spoon attached to it—"to scoop up a little bit of soil without touching it—because the soil could be poisonous," he added.

"Ingenious," said Eowyn.

"Master Eldacar thinks of everything," he said. "If *you* do the soil, my Lady—and take a sample of anything that looks strange—I will do the rest."

Eowyn nodded. "What will you do when you have the samples?"

"Test for salts," said Arador, handing her several vials. "If there is too much of the wrong salt —"

"I understand. We will have to work out where it has come from, and stop it."

Feeling like a teacher with an exceptionally gifted pupil, Arador couldn't help beaming at her.

...

Legolas, having pushed his way through the bracken at the trail's edge, had entered the trees, and was striding away purposefully—presumably towards the affected part of the forest.

Eowyn hastily stowed Arador's vials in her jerkin, and followed him.

Lacking an Elf's powerful grace, and having to trot to keep up with her husband, she soon found herself bedevilled by clumps of bramble, and snared by tough, low-growing ivy, and tripped by wandering tree roots, so that she had to fix her eyes upon the ground and when, suddenly, she realised that Legolas had stopped walking and she looked up, she was taken by surprise.

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There could be no doubt about it. All around her, the trees were dying—standing, it seemed, like a crowd of grey-robed ghosts, their drooping branches trailing sheets of pale, brittle needles.

Legolas placed his hands upon one of the tree trunks and, standing close, rested his forehead against its peeling bark.

Remembering her own task, Eowyn blinked back a tear, and crouched down to take a sample of the soil.

The ground here was bare of undergrowth but covered, instead, with a thick crust of greyish filth. Recalling Arador's warnings about poison, Eowyn pulled out one of the vials, drew the stopper, and carefully spooned up a small quantity.

And, as she did so—from the corner of her eye—she saw someone *move*.

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Part 4

"Hello?" said Eowyn.

The man—she was *sure* that she had seen a man—had disappeared, but he could not, she was equally sure, have gone very far...

She rose to her feet, pushed the stopper into the vial, and slipped the vial inside her jerkin. "There is no need to be afraid," she said, though her hand had automatically moved to the hilt of her sword, "we mean you no harm..." She craned her neck, trying to see beyond the trunks of the dead trees. "Do you live nearby?"

Cautiously, she began to move forward. "Do you know what has caused this?"

She sensed rather than saw her quarry move, and she responded quickly, darting through the next stand of trees.

The man froze again. He was almost invisible, dressed head to foot in a grey cloak, with the hood pulled low, so that his face was totally hidden.

"Wait," said Eowyn, for he had started to back away. "I just want to talk to you—no! *Wait!*"

She took another step towards him, and the man suddenly stooped, snatched up a rock, and hurled it at her, and—as she ducked—Eowyn caught a glimpse of his face, pale and sickly-looking, and hideously mottled with patches of blue. And, to her eternal shame, she screamed.

...

"Melmenya!" Legolas, who had seemed oblivious to anything but the state of the trees, was at her side in an instant.

"I am fine, Lassui," she said. "*Fine*. But..." She grabbed his wrist and, dragging him behind her, set off in pursuit of the stranger, following his footprints through the thick, sticky mud but, after a few yards, the ground suddenly became rockier, and the tracks disappeared.

"Where has he gone?" said Eowyn, looking this way and that. There was no obvious place for him to hide.

"And why is he so timid?" said Legolas.

"Perhaps because he is ill... Disfigured. And he may know nothing about the forest..." Eowyn sighed. "It will be dark soon, Lassui. We should be getting back to the horses."

"Have you taken your sample?"

"Yes. But I think I should also take one from the normal ground, so that Arador can compare them."

Legolas smiled. "Come..." He offered her his arm, and Eowyn took it. "Where *is* Arador?"

"He went to take a sample of water."

But, when they reached the stream, there was no sign of the young man.

"Arador?" cried Eowyn.

"*Arador!*" shouted Legolas.

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Part 5

"Over here!" said Legolas.

He had found Arador's leather satchel, and one of the glass vials, lying in the mud. The vial had been uncapped and a small drop of water was still sitting in the shallow spoon attached to its stopper.

"He would never have wandered off and left *this*," said Eowyn. She crouched down and, with a steady hand, carefully secured the sample in the vial, and stowed the vial in the satchel. Then, after wiping off most of the dirt with her hand, she slung the satchel over her shoulder.

"Someone took him," said Legolas, "dragged him, Melmenya—this way." He was heading back towards the trees.

"How many?" As she rose to her feet, Eowyn's hand was already on her sword.

"Hard to tell... Two, perhaps. Arador is no fighter, but he is young and strong; I think it would take two to hold him."

"Why would they take him? He was doing no harm."

Legolas paused to examine the tracks. In the sticky mud, their general direction was clear, though the details were confused. "He is a confident young man, Melmenya, wearing an Elven cloak; he is very obviously a person of some standing."

"You think they intend to ask for a *ransom*?" She came up beside him.

"We know that travellers are regularly robbed on the Newhome road. And Eryn Hollen would make an excellent base for outlaws."

Eowyn looked about her—to *her*, the forest provided no landmarks. "Then the man I saw was probably one of them. We should head towards—*What is it, Lassui?*" She added her final question in a whisper, for Legolas had suddenly raised a hand.

"There are Men up ahead," he answered, quietly.

"With Arador?"

Legolas did not reply, and Eowyn knew that her question had been foolish, for even Elven senses could not tell him that. He reached for his bow.

She grasped his arm. "Let *me* go ahead," she whispered. "*You* circle round—come at them from the south, and take them by surprise." It was a sensible plan, for a handful of unprepared men would stand no chance against an Elven archer, but Eowyn knew that Legolas would be reluctant to leave her side. "They will not harm me," she assured him. "I am worth at least as much to them as Arador is." She caught his gaze, and held it until she was sure that she had won the argument.

"Very well," said Legolas, at last. "But try to look harmless, Melmenya. Keep your sword sheathed—though be ready to use it."

Eowyn smiled. "I shall."

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It was exhausting, tramping forward through the mud, for the grey deposit was thicker here, and it sucked at Eowyn's feet, sticking to her boots and weighing her down. And with Legolas gone, and light fading, the ghostly forest felt threatening, and a unshakable feeling that the trees might suddenly reach out and grab her with their gnarled fingers sent shivers down her spine...

But she caught a glimpse of movement up ahead—a flash of dark hair that might have been Arador's—and she remembered her mission, and stepped forward, resolutely—

And the ground fell away beneath her feet.

Part 6

"Melmenya!" Sensing that something had happened to his wife, Legolas immediately broke off the attack, and rushed to her rescue. He found her, lying face down, at the bottom of a deep, man-made hole.

"I think I have fallen into a trap, Lassui," she said, feebly.

"Are you hurt?" He pulled a coil of Elven rope from his belt.

"No," she replied, "just winded... I was very lucky."

"It is probably a boar trap, Melmenya," said Legolas, tying a loop in the end of the rope. "Thank the Valar it is not filled with spikes."

"No, just lots of mud." Eowyn pushed herself up on her hands and knees. "I think the forest must have been flooded recently—maybe it was something in the flood water that killed the trees."

"Then we had better get that mud off you," said Legolas, "as quickly as we can." He lowered the rope into the trap. "Can you put your feet through the loop?"

"Yes..." She rolled over, and sat up, and he was horrified to see that there was even mud on her face.

"Work the rope up to your waist," he said, "and pull it tight. Good. Now..." He looped the other end around the trunk of the nearest tree, and grasped it in both hands. "Are you ready, Melmenya?"

"Yes."

He hauled her up slowly, hand over hand, and when she reached the top, she somehow managed to get one of her legs over the lip, and Legolas grasped her belt, and together they wrestled her to safety.

But she was *covered* in mud.

Legolas quickly coiled the rope and tucked it in Eowyn's belt. "Come," he said, pulling her to her feet, and he half walked, half carried her to the stream, leading her along the bank until they were back amongst the living trees and the reeds at the edge of the water were green and healthy-looking.

There, he helped her strip off her clothes, throwing the muddied ones aside, and—although she was shivering with cold—he washed her thoroughly, rinsing the mud from her hands and her face and out of her hair. And only when he was absolutely sure that it was all gone did he dry her with her shift, and wrap her in his own cloak, and give her his boots.

"We must get you to shelter, Melmenya. We will make for Newhome."

"But... *Arador*," she protested, shivering.

Legolas shook his head. "We need to get you warmed up, Melmenya. Once you are somewhere safe and dry, I will send word to Arador's father, and ask him to raise the Watch. We will return here with them at dawn, and search the entire forest."

"If Arador's father does not kill us," muttered Eowyn, "for losing his son and heir."

Part 7

Legolas strapped Arador's satchel, which had miraculously survived the fall into the boar trap, and Eowyn's wet boots to her saddle.

He had persuaded her to ride with him so that he might keep her warm with his body, and they set off at a brisk canter, leading Eowyn's horse behind them and leaving Arador's in the forest—with strict instructions not to stray—in case the boy should somehow escape his captors and have need of it.

By the time they emerged from Eryn Hollen the sun had set, and a low, dull moon shone fitfully in the cloudy sky. Legolas scanned the landscape; the River Tavor, running east to west, was less than a mile away and, beyond that, the Plain of Hollen was dotted with human homesteads. He quickly spotted the nearest farmhouse.

"Not long now, Melmenya," he reassured her.

...

The elderly farmer was not surprised to find an Elf at his door; the Elves of the Colony were regular visitors to Newhome. Whilst he and Legolas were discussing the mechanics of getting a message to the Reeve, the farmer's wife took charge of Eowyn, sitting her before the fire, feeding her with hot soup, and finding her a shift, a pair of breeches, and some boots to change into.

"This is very kind of you, Mistress," said Eowyn, who—because she was feeling a great deal better—was quite embarrassed by the fuss that was being made over a little mud and water. "Are you sure that you can spare them?"

"Spare them? Oh yes," said the old woman, hanging Legolas' cloak over the wooden clothes horse to dry. "I haven't fitted into that shift since I was a young girl—younger even than you—and the boots and trews,"—a wistful, faraway smile suddenly transformed her face, and Eowyn caught a fleeting glimpse of the beauty she must once have been—"well, *they* belonged to my Jemmy, before he went away to the White City."

Eowyn assumed that Jemmy was the couple's son, and she wondered whether, perhaps, he had been killed in the Ring War...

"Goodness," said the farmer's wife, picking up Eowyn's wet shift, "*this* wants a good washing! Whatever have you been doing with it?"

"I fell into an old boar trap."

"What, up in Hollen Woods?" The old woman dropped the shift into a wooden tub.

"Yes."

"No wonder that husband of yours was so worried! You want to stay well away from Hollen Woods. All sorts of things go on up there." She handed Eowyn a blanket.

"What sort of things?" asked Eowyn, spreading the blanket over her knees.

"Comings and goings, strange lights and noises... They think they're keeping it quiet, but everyone this side of the town knows about it."

"Who *are* they?"

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"Nobody knows." The old woman fussed with Eowyn's blanket. "Baranor and Turgon went up there to find out, and never came back."

"They *disappeared*?"

The old woman nodded.

Eowyn thought of Arador. "Does the Reeve know about it?"

"Hollen Woods is south of the Tavor."

"And beyond his jurisdiction," said Eowyn. Then she added, softly, to herself, "Which makes it *our* responsibility..."

The farmer's wife, meanwhile, had picked up Eowyn's damp boots. "We don't want to leave these too near the fire, do we, or they'll crack. What a fine pair of boots!"

She turned them over, and examined the soles.

"Well, just look at that," she exclaimed, pulling a tiny stone out of the leather, and dropping it into Eowyn's hand.

Part 8

The farmer had no son or servant to send as a messenger and, besides, once Eowyn was out of danger, and he was sure that she was in good hands, it occurred to Legolas that both feeling and courtesy demanded he should ride to the Reeve's house and deliver the bad news himself.

So, with a quick farewell to Eowyn, he mounted Brightstar and, leaving Arod in the farmer's capable hands, set off for the town.

Above him, as he thundered down the road, a lowering sky was threatening more rain, and he knew that *that* did not bode well for the following day's search...

...

The Reeve's house was a miniature citadel, protected by a high wooden wall; Legolas rode up to the gatehouse, dismounted, and hammered on the gate.

"Legolas Thranduilion, of the Elven Colony," he told the guard, "with urgent news for the Reeve of Newhome." He was escorted to the Reeve's private quarters, where a Steward asked him to wait in the study, whilst the man fetched his master.

To Legolas' surprise, the Reeve came running—as if, having been told that the Elf was alone, he had made his own deduction: "My son?" he cried.

"I believe he has been abducted, sir," said Legolas, "for ransom."

The Reeve staggered; his face was as white as his linen. Legolas, calling to the Steward for help, guided the man to the nearest chair, and sat him down.

"Tell me everything..." the Reeve gasped.

"Arador disappeared in Eryn Hollen, sir," replied Legolas. "Taken by at least two men. My wife and I pursued them, but my wife was injured, and—"

The Reeve's head jerked up.

"She is well, sir," Legolas assured him. "And there is every reason to believe that the outlaws will take good care of Arador, for they will want a good price for him. However—" The Steward had fetched a glass of wine for his master, and he handed it to the Elf. "Thank you. I do not intend to wait for them to contact us, sir," he continued, "so I have come to ask you to raise the Watch. I will go with them to Eryn Hollen, and we will begin searching at first light. Here, sir, drink a little of this..."

The Reeve seized the glass, and downed its contents in one gulp. "I shall come with you, Lord Legolas," he said, decisively. "Bedric,"—to the Steward—"say nothing of this to Lady Morwen. If she asks, just tell her that I have gone out to meet our guests. Now fetch Captain Hallas; there is much to organise."

...

As Legolas listened to the Reeve giving orders to the Captain of the Watch, he could not shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong. For when he had suggested that the outlaws' motive might be *ransom*, a look had flashed across the Reeve's face that had chilled the Elf to the bone.

Part 9

Legolas returned to the farmhouse anxious to discuss his suspicions with Eowyn.

The elderly couple had retired for the night, the old woman having made up a bed for her guests on the settle. Eowyn, however, was still sitting at the kitchen table and, with her chin resting on her folded arms, was gazing intently at something on the table top.

"Melmenya...?"

"Come, Lassui," she cried. "Look at *this!*"

Legolas slid onto the bench beside her.

She was showing him a tiny lump of pure *blue*—bluer than the sky over Rohan on a summer's day; bluer than the ocean off the Bay of Carhivilren; bluer than the blue-enamelled doors of Golden Hall of Eshmunazar—it was the *bluest* blue that Legolas ever seen, except, perhaps, on a butterfly's wing and, like a butterfly's wing or a bird's breast, it seemed to glow with an inner light.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I have no idea," replied Eowyn. "Mistress Ioreth found it stuck to the sole of my boot. But, watch..." She picked it up and rubbed it across the back of her hand, leaving a long, blue smear on her milky skin. "*This* is what I saw on the outlaw's face, Lassui. I am sure of it."

"Could it be artist's chalk?"

"That was *my* first thought. But what would artist's chalk be doing at the bottom of a boar trap?"

Legolas could not answer that, and they sat in silence for a while. Then Eowyn asked, "Did you speak to the Reeve?"

"Yes."

"Was he very angry with us?"

"No. Not at all. In fact, his reaction was strange."

Legolas frowned, trying to recall exactly what he had seen, and why it had made him feel so uncomfortable. "I do not think he was surprised at all, Melmenya. He was *shocked*, yes, and afraid for his son but, once he had mastered the fear, it was as though he had been warned that Arador might be taken, and had already planned what to do if he were."

He turned to Eowyn, and took her hand. "He insists on coming with us tomorrow, Melmenya. And we must be very careful, because I think he may do something rash."

Part 10

When the Reeve arrived at the farmhouse, with ten heavily-armed men of the Watch, Legolas and Eowyn were already waiting. They had said their farewells to the farmer and his wife, giving them a pouch of golden coins for their trouble, and Eowyn was still wearing the clothes the old woman had given her, with her own boots and Legolas' cloak.

"Who is your best tracker?" Legolas asked the Reeve. The weather was mild, but the scent of rain hung upon the air, and he was anxious to start the search before the trail was washed away.

"Belecthor was born in the forest," replied the Reeve, beckoning one of the Watchmen forward. "He is young, but he is a cunning woodsman."

"We will have need of your skills, mellon nín," said Legolas to the young man.

...

Dawn had broken by the time they reached Eryn Hollen and, although the thin light barely penetrated the forest, Legolas quickly led Belecthor to the boar trap that had captured Eowyn.

"Take care," the young man warned his comrades, "there will be more of these... This way," he called, having picked up the trail. "But stay behind me." Then he raced away, scurrying through the dead trees like a fox hound, following the spoor unerringly.

Legolas ran behind him, with Eowyn at his side, aware that the Reeve and his men were falling further and further behind, but anxious to find Arador before the father launched a self-destructive attack on his son's captors. Several times he felt sure that they were being watched—*followed*—but, when he tried to reach out with his Elven senses, the sadness of the forest overwhelmed him and, when he looked about him, he saw nothing but dying trees...

Suddenly, Belecthor raised a hand and, signalling that the others should do likewise, he dropped to his belly.

Legolas and Eowyn crawled up beside him.

Directly ahead, nestling almost invisibly in the shadow of a rocky outcrop, stood a good-sized building. Its roof had long since collapsed, its door and shutters had rotted away, but its thick, slate walls still stood two storeys high.

"That is where the tracks lead," whispered the young man.

"What now?" asked Eowyn, softly.

"I shall go and see what I can see, Melmenya," said Legolas. "You stay here with Belecthor, and when the Reeve and his men arrive, hold them back."

...

Easy for you to say, Lassui, thought Eowyn, glumly.

...

Keeping low and moving lightly, Legolas circled the clearing, looking for a way to cross the open ground without being seen. When he was sure that he had found it, he sprinted across, ducked beneath one of the open windows, and peered inside...

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Part 11

Legolas beckoned the others to join him.

"There is no one inside," he said, quietly, to Belecthor. "See if you can find which way they went."

Eowyn, meanwhile, had gone into the building. "*Lassui*," she hissed. "Come and look at *this!*"

Legolas hurried inside.

The interior was a large, empty space, open to the elements—lichen was growing on the walls, and grass had pushed its way through the packed-earth floor—but a well-worn track led from the door to the remains of a hay loft, which provided a sheltered storage area for a stack of wooden crates.

Eowyn had drawn her sword, and was trying to prise the lid from one of them.

"Melmenya, be careful!"

"There are *blue* hand prints, *Lassui*," she said, "on all of the boxes."

"Let *me...*" Legolas took one of his white knives and, working the thin, Elven blade in up to the hilt, he levered the lid from the box, releasing a cloud of blue dust.

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances, then both peered inside.

The box was lined with blue-stained oil-paper. "Whatever it is, it needs to be kept dry," said Eowyn.

She lifted a flap of the oil-paper. Inside the lining, the crate was packed with blue sawdust, and she reached into it, and pulled out a little, blue-stained muslin bag, with a carved wooden peg sticking out of the top. "A bag of *blue*," she said, frowning. "And there must be *hundreds* of them here, *Lassui*—*thousands*. What in Middle-earth are they for?"

"I have no idea, Melmenya."

"My Lord..." said a diffident voice behind them; Belecthor had returned.

"What have you found?" asked Legolas.

"Cart tracks, my Lord," replied the young man. "Two sets. One cart comes regularly from the Newhome road; it arrives empty, turns, waits in the clearing, then goes back heavily laden. The other comes from somewhere to the east; that one arrives laden and returns empty, except for the last time—"

"When it carried away Arador and his captors," said Legolas.

"It looks like it, my Lord."

"Then that is the trail we must follow."

Eowyn had replaced the bag of blue, and refitted the lid and, as she was bending down to pick up a stone, intending to hammer the nails back home, she suddenly straightened up, and turned to Legolas.

"*Lassui*," she said, "where is the Reeve and all of his men?"

Part 12

It did not take a tracker to read the signs.

The Reeve and his men had not followed Belecthor to the derelict barn; instead, they had veered off to the east, taking a narrow deer trail. "In about a quarter of a mile," said the young woodsman, crouching beside the footprints, "this joins the forest road the second cart will have taken."

Legolas swore, softly. "Then the Reeve will reach the abductors before we do. We must hurry!"

The trio set off at a swift pace, with Belecthor leading the way.

"Lassui," said Eowyn, as they ran either side of the muddy path, "this means that the Reeve must already know where the people who took Arador are hiding."

They leaped over a puddle.

"Yes, Melmenya," replied Legolas. "And I do not think that the villains want a ransom—in fact, I fear they want revenge."

They ran in silence for a few moments. Then Eowyn said, "But they could not have known that they would find Arador beside the stream."

"No. *That* must have seemed like a gift from the Valar."

Belecthor suddenly turned right, and they followed him, out onto the forest road, where a muddle of fresh footprints, sharply outlined in the mud, overlay a set of cart tracks.

"Do you have any idea where they might be going?" Legolas asked the young man.

"There is a mine," replied Belecthor, "up by Amon Hill. It's not been used since the dark days, but those are the only buildings I know of in this part of the forest."

"Do you know a quicker way there?"

Belecthor cast a glance at Eowyn. "We can climb the Ambenn Rocks, my Lord, but—"

"I can manage," said Eowyn.

They cut back into the forest, and soon found themselves at the foot of a steep escarpment. Belecthor ran up the rocks on all fours, as sure as a mountain goat; Legolas sent Eowyn up behind him. "Watch where he puts his hands and feet, Melmenya and do exactly the same."

Eowyn scrambled up the rock face; Legolas followed close behind her.

"I have been thinking, Lassui," panted Eowyn, as she climbed. "A mine—might that not be—where the blue comes from?"

"What is mined in this place?" Legolas called to Belecthor.

"Salt, my Lord," he said, "and other things." He had gained the summit, and he reached down and, grasping Eowyn's arm, helped her up the final few feet. "There, my Lord, my Lady," he said, "is the mine." He pointed across the valley.

Legolas came up beside his wife, and they both gasped at what they saw.

Part 13

Looking down from the Ambenn Rocks into the Hollen Valley, Legolas and Eowyn could see the mine—a great, gaping wound in the foot of Amon Hill—and, clustered around it, a jumble of tumbled-down stone buildings and newer wooden sheds. To the east, a stream had been dammed and its waters diverted into a series of massive, square-cut ponds. To the west, fires burned beneath gigantic vats, and smoke poured from noxious substances, filling the air with an acrid, choking stench.

But that was not the worst of it.

The worst—the most unnatural—thing about the Hollen Valley was that everything was *blue*.

The stone walls were *blue*, the slate roofs were *blue*, the wooden sheds were *blue*, the bare, worn earth was *blue*, the cart that must have brought Arador there was *blue*—even the hapless men and women, slaving at the water tanks and over the fires, were *blue*.

“What *is* it?” whispered Eowyn. Then, pulling herself together, she added, “Can you see any sign of Arador, Lassui?”

“No,” said Legolas, “but I can see his father and the Watch.” He pointed to the south, where a line through the trees showed the path of the forest road, but Eowyn’s human eyes could see no sign of the men. “We must get down there, Mel—”

Young Belecthor caught his arm. “These people are not *friendly*, my Lord,” he said, and he looked sideways at Eowyn.

Legolas smiled. “Neither is my wife, mellon nín.”

...

Legolas had a plan, of sorts, though he would have been happier had Gimli or Haldir been on hand to back him up.

“You and Belecthor will go down first,” he told Eowyn, “and I will cover you. You must make as much noise and draw as much attention to yourselves as possible, and demand to be taken to their leader so that you can warn him that the Reeve is on his way with an army of men.”

“But that will only be a diversion,” said Eowyn.

Legolas nodded. “Once I am sure that they do not intend to harm you, Melmenya, I will search for Arador. By the time the Reeve arrives, I should have his son safe, and we should be able to avert a massacre.”

“You think that that is the Reeve’s intention?”

“I am sure of it, Melmenya; I saw it written on his face. There is a blood feud between these two, and I fear that Arador may be the next casualty.”

...

It was not difficult for Eowyn to make a commotion scrambling down the rocks.

By the time she and Belecthor reached the valley floor, most of the workforce had turned to stare at them, and several men—armed guards, she realised—were coming towards them.

Eowyn approached the first, a heavy, thickset man with a surprisingly homely face and, drawing herself up to her full height and mimicking her brother, Eomer, at his most kingly, she

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said, "I am Eowyn of Rohan, co-ruler of Eryn Carantaur." She pulled out the signet ring she wore about her neck and, keeping her other hand on her sword, she showed it to him. "I demand to speak with your leader."

"What's she saying?" asked a voice, and the first man turned to reveal a second, who was obviously his twin brother.

"She says she wants to talk to Ma," he replied.

Part 14

As the two men led her and Belecthor across the *blue* yard towards the *blue*-stained buildings, Eowyn reached out to Legolas and, through their mental bond, tried let him know that things were going according to his plan.

The twins stopped at one of the wooden sheds, and the first opened the door and courteously stepped aside to let Eowyn enter, then—obviously feeling the need to re-assert himself—he shoved Belecthor in after her.

To Eowyn's surprise, the shed appeared to be some sort of counting house. Shelves of ledgers lined its walls, several stout wooden chests, of the kind used for storing coin, stood in a corner, and an ancient desk, carved and leather-topped (though the leather showed distinct traces of *blue*) filled the remainder of its small space.

And behind the desk sat 'Ma', scrutinising her accounts.

When Eowyn entered, she leaned back from her work, and looked her up and down. "Well, you're a pretty one and no mistake," she said, "even if you *are* a bit skinny. What can I do for *you*, sweetheart?"

She was a large woman, and well-upholstered, her blue eyes merry in her round face and, although her clothes were simple, her thick, blue-white hair had been teased and tortured into an elaborate style. Eowyn could see that she had once been a striking beauty.

Ma discreetly signalled to her sons that they should leave.

They remained oblivious.

She jerked her head towards the door.

They did not notice.

"Go," she cried, waving them away. "They're good boys," she said to Eowyn, as the door closed behind them, "but a bit,"—she mouthed the final word—"slow."

Eowyn found herself completely wrong-footed. "Um," she said, "I believe you have Arador, son of the Reeve of Newhome."

"Yes," said the woman, brightly. "Nice boy."

"Well," said Eowyn, trying to get things back on track, "his father is coming for him, and bringing the Watch. He will be here in a matter of minutes."

The woman leaned right back in her chair, folded her arms across her massive bosom, and looked up at Eowyn, shrewdly.

"He means to use *force*," Eowyn explained.

"I'm sure he does." Ma smiled. "Him and me have some old scores to settle. But my boys *love* a good scrap."

"But the Reeve's soldiers," Eowyn insisted, "are experienced fighting men—they will take no prisoners."

Ma did not respond.

"I can prevent the attack," said Eowyn, feeling like a little girl pestering her mother.

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"And how would you do that, sweetheart?"

"By taking Arador to his father." Eowyn leaned forward, hands on the desk. "The Reeve does not control this part of the forest, Mistress—I do. *He* cannot make you stop doing... Whatever it is that you are doing, but he *can* storm this place and kill you and your sons."

Part 15

Confident that Eowyn was safe—for the time being, at least—Legolas slung his bow across his back, climbed down the Ambenn Rocks, and ran lightly across the valley floor, passing the humans without drawing any attention to himself.

He had no idea where Arador might be, but the building that the cart had been left beside seemed a good place to start looking—especially since, on closer inspection, he noticed that its windows were sealed with stout, wooden shutters and its door closed with a heavy bolt, as though someone might be confined inside.

Crouching in the shadow of the nearest shed, Legolas looked for a way in.

The building's drystone walls were sturdy, but its slate roof was in poor repair, and had a hole in it that looked large enough for an Elf to slip through.

Legolas ran across the open space and leaped, clambered easily up the wall and onto the roof, and swung himself through the gap—

"Oh!" cried a startled voice and, as Legolas landed on one of the tie beams, a tall, dark figure fell from it, and hit the earthen floor with a dull thud.

Legolas dropped to the ground beside him.

"Lord Legolas," gasped Arador, winded, but grinning broadly. "You got my message, then!"

...

Legolas took the Elven rope from his belt, and threw one end up over the beam.

"I have lost count of the number of times I have tried to escape," said Arador, tying the other end around his waist. "But the gap between the beam and the hole is just too wide for me to jump. That is why I bribed Loveric to take the message to you."

"I never got it," said Legolas.

Arador sighed. "I should have known I could not trust him. That is my grandmother's ring gone for nothing."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, my Lord, as ready as I will ever be."

Legolas hauled on the rope, and helped the young man climb—up the stone footing, up the thick wooden post, until he had got one leg over the beam, and could sit astride it.

"Stow the rope," said Legolas; he shinned up the post. "I will go through the hole first, then help you across."

Arador nodded. "You know" he said, coiling the rope around his forearm, "my father has never liked Ma Everill. They say she was an absolute stunner when she was young—well, you can sort of see that, can you not?—so I've always wondered if he—"

"Who is Ma Everill?" asked Legolas, jumping from the beam, catching hold of one of the purlins, hanging, then pulling himself up through the the hole.

"She is the boss," said Arador, "the one running this place, and making the *blue*. She wanted me to help her, but—well—the *blue* itself does no real harm, of course, but *making* it..."

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Legolas' upper half reappeared in the hole. "Take my hands," he said.

Arador tucked the rope in his belt, and reached across the void.

Part 16

"So he's the Reeve of Newhome now, is he?" said Ma Everill, disparagingly. "I knew Baranor son of Barathor when he was nowt but a snotty-nosed toddler in torn britches. He didn't have the balls for a scrap then and he doesn't now."

"But his men do," said Eowyn, glancing at Belecthor. "Let us at least take Arador out to the Forest Road, so that the Reeve can see that his son is unharmed."

"Why're you so worried about me and my boys, sweetheart?"

Eowyn hesitated. "I am worried about Arador," she admitted. "My husband and I were responsible for his safety.."

"Ahhh."

"But, now that I have met you," Eowyn continued, "I do not believe you intend to harm him, so —"

"First impressions can be deceptive," said Ma, with a hint of steel in her voice that took Eowyn by surprise—and left her wrong-footed a second time.

"I do not understand you," she confessed. "And I have no idea what you are doing. Out there, I mean..." She waved a hand to indicate the mine and all the work taking place in the valley.

"No, well, I can't say I'm surprised at that," said Ma. "It's obvious that *you've* never washed your own smalls."

"Never washed... My *shift*?" Eowyn was more baffled than ever. "What is it that you are making out there? Why is it killing the forest? And why did you take Arador? If it was for ransom, why did you send no demand to his father?"

"*Ransom*?" said Ma, laughing.

"Then you only took him to keep your secret safe?" Eowyn probed.

"Look, sweetheart—"

The door flew open. "Ma," cried one of her sons, "soldiers are coming!"

...

Ma crossed the yard like a ship in full sail, her head held high. Eowyn and Belecthor followed anxiously.

"Where is Arador?" asked Eowyn.

"The boy's safe," said Ma.

Eowyn looked around, hoping to spot Legolas, but could see no sign of him. Her hand moved to her sword, and she sensed that Belecthor was trying to decide whether—when it came to a fight—he should stay at her side, or should join his comrades; she felt sorry for him. They reached the mouth of the road just as the Reeve came into view, running at the head of his men. His sword was drawn, and his men were chanting, and Eowyn had to admit that it was a stirring sight.

But Ma simply planted her plump hands on her broad hips and, as unperturbed as a rocky headland facing a stormy sea, she roared, "Baranor son of Barathor, *stop* this nonsense!"

Part 17

Legolas grasped Arador's wrists and hauled and, for a split second, the young man hung in mid-air, his feet kicking.

Then his head was through the hole and, as his hands were scrabbling to find purchase on the slates, the Elf grasped the back of his belt and pulled him out onto the roof, and he lay there, gasping for air.

Legolas hopped up onto the roof ridge.

"Has my father arrived?" asked Arador, trying to crawl up the roof, to get a better view.

"Quickly," replied Legolas, coming down again.

Without giving himself any time to think about it, Arador launched himself across the slates, grabbed the edge of the roof, and—grazing his hands and knees as he went—half climbed, half tumbled to the ground.

He got down relatively unharmed—a split-second, it seemed, after Legolas landed beside him—picked himself up and, limping slightly, ran across the yard, following the Elf.

...

"I said, *stop* this nonsense!" Ma roared.

Eowyn's hand closed around the hilt of her sword. Though she had come to Eryn Hollen with the Reeve, determined to rescue Arador by force if need be, she couldn't help feeling protective towards Ma. She knew that Belecthor was also torn, and she said to him, softly, "Go to your comrades," but the young man did not move.

The twins were behind their mother and, to Eowyn's surprise, the workers she had assumed were captives were also flocking to Ma's side, brandishing spades, and hammers, and stirring rods.

The scene was set for a short and unnecessarily bloody battle.

"Stop this *now*, Baranor son of Barathor," shouted Ma, "or I'll *tan* your hide for you!"

...

Arador raced towards his father, wondering what he could possibly say to stop him—wondering whether his father would even *recognise* him when he approached.

Arador was under no illusions. He might be his father's only son and heir, but he was also a disappointment, and he knew that his father's actions had little to do with him and his captivity. There was something going on between his father and Ma, some agreement that had been broken when the twins had caught him taking water samples from the stream.

Ma—in her cryptic way—had hinted as much.

But, despite all his best efforts—probing her whilst she had been trying to persuade him to help her—he had been unable to learn what that agreement might be.

Arador raised his hands above his head, and shouted, "Father! Do as Ma says! *STOP!*"

Part 18

The Reeve of Newhome raised a hand, and called off the attack.

There was a moment of uncertainty—some of the Watch were reluctant, having drawn their swords, to sheathe them without drawing blood, and some of Ma's followers were still goading them on—but Arador slipped past Ma and her sons and walked forward alone, and the Reeve slid his sword back into its scabbard and came to meet him, and gave him a perfunctory hug.

"Whatever that woman has been telling you," the Reeve began, addressing Legolas.

"She has told me nothing," Legolas replied. He glanced at Eowyn; Eowyn shook her head. "But I think it is time that *one* of you explained what is going on here."

"How about a nice cup of tea, dear?" said Ma, as though the past few minutes had never happened.

...

The Reeve dismissed the Watch with strict orders to round up their horses and return home.

Ma sent her people back to work, and led her guests—including a very out-of-place and thoroughly uncomfortable-looking Belecthor—to one of the stone buildings.

The dwelling inside was neat and clean, with a well-blacked cooking range, a wooden table scrubbed almost white, lace-edged cloths and embroidered seat-cushions—though, even here, *blue* had seeped in through the shutters and under the door, and had settled in a fine layer on the floor and over the furnishings.

Ma made everyone sit down, and busied herself making the tea, warming the pot with a little hot water before she spooned in the tea leaves, added the boiling water, and let it brew for a few moments.

"I'll be mother, shall I?" she said, when it was ready, pouring it into dainty little cups and handing them round. "Help yourselves to milk and sugar."

Legolas politely took a sip before setting the cup and saucer down on the table. "Perhaps now you will tell us, Mistress," he said, "what you are doing out there?"

"Making *blue*," said Ma. Then, when she noticed that Legolas was still looking blank, she added, as though speaking to a simpleton, "*Laundry blue*."

She offered him a biscuit.

"I am sorry," he said, taking one and putting it on his saucer. "What is laundry *blue*?"

"Noble folks!" said Ma. "You want everything whiter than white, but you never stop to think how it's done! Washerwomen put laundry *blue* into the final rinse, to banish any hint of yellow—so that the linens look fresh."

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged glances.

"And you are making it?" said Eowyn. "*Here*?"

"A hundred and twenty-five pounds of it a week," said Ma, proudly. "Two thousand ounces. It's a long and complicated business." She settled back in her chair. "Of course, the real stuff's made from a natural blue stone. What we make here is a *fake blue*—from clay, and caustic

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soda, pitch and, well, a few other things. We have to grind it, bake it, wash it... But the mine and the forest provide everything we need. It's a *blue* gold mine."

"And you sell the *blue*?" said Legolas

"To laundries all over Gondor—the Royal Laundry at Minas Tirith can't get enough of it—and my representative's taking samples to Edoras as we speak. I didn't bother with you Elves—well, *you* don't yellow your smalls, do you?"

Blushing delicately, Legolas turned to the Reeve. "And what is *your* part in all of this?" he asked.

Part 19

The Reeve shook his head. "I—I don't—"

"He takes a cut," said Ma, pouring herself another cup of tea.

Legolas frowned "A *cut*?"

"Ten per cent of the sale price of the *blue*." She held up the teapot, offering the others another drink; they shook their heads.

"Ten per cent for doing *what*?" asked Arador, with a strange expression on his face.

"The levy pays for the upkeep of the road," said the Reeve, "for maintenance of the bridges, and—"

"It pays *him* to keep quiet, he means," said Ma. "Pays for his stables, and for Lady Morwen's fancy drawers." She turned to Legolas and, in an exaggerated whisper, admitted: "The mine doesn't belong to me—I'm what you'd call a squatter—so *he's* got me over a barrel."

"I see," said Legolas, thoughtfully. "Who *does* it belong to, then?"

Ma shrugged. "It was left abandoned when Sauron was defeated," she said. "It was going begging..."

"I *think*," said Arador, "that it belongs to you, my Lord, as Lord of Eryn Carantaur."

Beneath the table, Eowyn took Legolas' hand.

"Are you going to close me down?" asked Ma.

Legolas looked from her to the Reeve and back again. "Between the pair of you," he said, "you have killed the forest."

"No," said the Reeve.

"No," said Ma, "that's nowt to do with me."

"But the trees were healthy in Sauron's time," said Belecthor, suddenly. "There were heaps of spoil around the mine, and nothing would grow up on the slopes, but the trees beside the stream weren't dying like they are now."

"It is probably the salt water," said Arador. "Jemmy told me they had trouble with the dam," he explained; "that it kept giving way and washing out the salt pans. The salt water would have drained down the stream and flooded the lower-lying ground, and that would explain all the crusty mud."

"*Jemmy*," said Eowyn. "I have heard that name before, somewhere..."

"Jemmy's my business partner," said Ma. She picked up the plate of biscuits and offered it round. "I was working in the Royal Laundry, after *he'd*,"—she jerked her head towards the Reeve—"run me out out Newhome—"

"I did *not*—"

"Yes you did. *I* knew *you* too well." She leaned towards Legolas and added, confidentially, "*I* was a looker, in my day."

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Arador gasped.

"Anyway," Ma continued, "one of those scholars at the Academy'd worked out how to make fake *blue*, but no one was interested 'cept me and Jemmy... And Jemmy knew the mine, you see—knew it would give us everything we needed, and knew there was people up here that wanted the work. So we came back, and set up the *blue*-making. Then *he*,"—she nodded at the Reeve—"found out, and made us pay him to keep quiet."

"I think I am wearing Jemmy's breeches," said Eowyn.

The Reeve turned to Legolas. "Her accusations are crazy, Lord Legolas," he said. "What are we going to do with her?"

Part 20

Under the table, Legolas squeezed Eowyn's hand. "Do you think the forest can be saved?" he asked Arador.

"I know very little about the tending of trees, my Lord," the young man replied. "You, and the gardeners of Eryn Carantaur, can answer far better than I. But, for what it is worth, I think the trees are beyond saving."

Legolas nodded sadly; he had come to the same conclusion.

"Though," Arador continued, thinking aloud, "if the dead trees were felled, the soil could be tilled and remedies introduced, and—when the soil was well enough—young trees could be planted. It would take time, but pines and larches grow swiftly. In one—maybe two—generations of Men, perhaps the forest *could* be restored..."

Legolas smiled. "This is why the deeds of Men will outlast the Elves," he said. Then he added, "With proper care, Arador, do you think that *blue* could be made without—"

"Surely, Lord Legolas," the Reeve interrupted, "you do not intend to allow this woman to keep making the stuff. She abducted my son!"

"She did, and she will be asked to make amends for it, sir," said Legolas, "by serving the Colony—though Arador says that she treated him humanely, and that will also be taken into account. As for the *blue*, since it seems that I own the mine, I have decided that if, with the help of the Elves, it can be made safely, then there is no reason why Mistress Everill should not continue to employ the people of Eryn Hollen."

"Oh, that's a true gentleman, that is," said Ma to Eowyn.

Beneath the table, Eowyn twined her fingers with Legolas'.

Legolas turned back to Arador. "Would you be willing—to begin with, at least—to oversee the restoration of the forest, and the improvements to the *blue*-making? I know that you want to continue your studies, but this would be an opportunity to spend some time putting your learning to the test."

"My Lord," said Arador, placing his hand upon his heart and—without any trace of irony—bowing his head like an Elf, "I would be *honoured*—"

"Now, wait a *minute*," cried the Reeve. "My son is not one of your subjects! He is a Man, and he has responsibilities. I have arranged an advantageous marriage—"

"Papa!" Arador rose to his feet, knocking over his chair; it clattered on the stone floor. "No! I do not want to marry yet—and certainly not a woman I have never seen! Please, my Lord,"—he appealed to Legolas and Eowyn for help—"my *Lady*..."

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Part 21

"Legally," said Legolas, "Arador is still a child."

"Only just, Lassui."

Legolas and Eowyn had tactfully withdrawn, dragging Ma and Belecthor with them, to give the Reeve and his son a chance to talk in private. Now they were walking aimlessly round the *blue* works, waiting.

"He is almost twenty-one," said Eowyn, "which is no doubt why his father is doing this *now*. Arador may seem like a child, because he spends so much time with three thousand-year old Elves, but amongst Men he will soon be a man."

"Then maybe marriage is what he needs, Melmenya."

"Overseeing Eryn Hollen is what he *needs*, Lassui," said Eowyn. "It was a brilliant idea. He is exactly the right person to test, and alter, and improve things here, and—though he has always been good at persuading people to do what he wants—it will make him into a proper leader. *And* he will be able to mix with women his own age without having to plunge straight into a marriage."

"She may be a very nice girl."

Eowyn sighed. "I cannot *believe* that his father would force him..." She stopped walking and, from the frown on her brow, Legolas could see that she had had an idea.

"Melmenya?"

"Do you intend to report the Reeve's behaviour to Aragorn?" she asked.

"I must," said Legolas.

"Suppose you did not?"

"You mean—*blackmail*, Melmenya?"

"A deal," said Eowyn. "A second chance. Conditional on exemplary behaviour in the future and, of course, on Arador's freedom."

"And how would you enforce such a deal, Melmenya?" asked Legolas.

"Hmm..."

...

They found Ma Everill deep in conversation with a big, rangy man who bore more than a passing resemblance to the twins. "My punishment," said Ma, "what will it be, when it's at home?"

Legolas folded his arms across his chest. "You will help me repair the road from here to Doro Lanthron, Mistress," he said.

"More levies," said Ma.

"The *same* levy," said Legolas, "but put to its proper use. And the work will be to your advantage."

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"How?"

Legolas smiled. "It will allow you to transport your *blue* to Pelargir and, from there, to Far Harad."

"Far *Harad*," said Ma, her eyes focusing on the future, and on new laundries to conquer...

...

Eowyn, meanwhile was looking at Ma's companion.

"Got something on my face, lady?" he asked, with a hard edge to his voice.

Eowyn was undeterred. "Are you Jemmy?"

"Depends who wants to know."

"I want to know."

The man sighed. "Yes, they call me Jemmy. Jemmy the Key. So what?"

"Your mother wants to see you," said Eowyn. "And it is Yuletide, so—"

"Ma and Pa forgot about *me* a long time ago," he said, dismissively.

"No," said Eowyn, "you are wrong. Your mother still keeps the robe from your Naming Ceremony, and your first pair of boots, and some of your clothes, freshly laundered, in a special chest. She *longs* to see you. Please—go and visit her, Jemmy."

...

"They call him Jemmy the Key, do they?" said Eowyn, as she and Legolas walked away. "Well, now I think we know how Ma acquired the recipe for fake *blue*."

Legolas laughed.

Part 22

Yuletide at Newhome was awkward.

Legolas had warned the Reeve that he was honour-bound to tell the King about his 'levy' on the transportation of the *blue*, and the man was alternating between excessive friendliness and cold reserve. His wife, Lady Morwen, flitted about doing her best to entertain her guests whilst trying to keep her husband happy and to persuade her son to join in the festivities.

But Legolas and Eowyn threw themselves into the celebrations, feasting with the ordinary people of Newhome and attending the Yuletide ceremonies as guests of honour.

...

Towards the end of their stay, Eowyn awoke in the middle of the night to find that Legolas had gone for a walk and, unable to get back to sleep herself, she put on her velvet mantle and wandered down to the kitchen, found a bottle of apple brandy, poured herself a large glass, and settled in front of the fire.

The warm glow—from both the fire and the alcohol—was comforting, and she had just begun to feel drowsy when the kitchen door opened.

"My Lady!"

"Arador."

After a moment's hesitation, the young man closed the door behind him. "Where is Lord Legolas?"

"He has gone to walk beneath the trees. It is his way of coping when things are difficult."

"I see..." Arador picked up the bottle and, pulling up a chair, sat down beside her. "I am thinking running away to sea," he announced. "Maybe I can join a band of corsairs."

"No," said Eowyn. She shook her head, smiling. "I have had dealings corsairs. They would sell someone as handsome as *you* for a lot of money."

"Are you, um... I mean... How much have you had to drink, my Lady?"

"Only one glass. Why?"

Arador blushed. Then, "If my owner," he said, eyeing her surreptitiously, "was—you know—only a little bit older than I, and clever, and beautiful, being her slave might not be so bad."

"What if your owner were a man?"

"Point taken..."

"Perhaps you could persuade your wife to settle in Eryn Carantaur?"

"I met her today." Arador took a swig from the brandy bottle. "They had put a ribbon in her hair," he said, "but there is no disguising an Oliphaunt."

"Oh, Arador!" Eowyn put her hand over her mouth to stifle her amusement.

"Though I doubt she has an Oliphaunt's intellect."

"Then what are you going to do? I mean..." She shrugged.

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Arador took another mouthful of brandy. "I have given it a lot of thought this past week, my Lady, and there is only one thing I *can* do."

There was an ominous note in his voice, and Eowyn turned to him in alarm. "Not..." She drew a finger across her throat.

"Oh, no, not that." He sighed. "But something *almost* as final."

Part 23

When Legolas returned, Eowyn was waiting for him, sitting in the bay window of their bedchamber, wrapped in a blanket.

The couple seldom argued, but both were aware that Legolas' putting his responsibilities to Aragorn above his friendship for Arador, and refusing to intervene on the latter's behalf, was threatening to come between them.

As Legolas entered the room their eyes met and, for a long moment, they looked at one another. Then Eowyn rose to her feet and took a step towards him, and Legolas pulled her into his arms and held her close

"I am sorry, Melmenya," he whispered.

"I wish we had never come here, Lassui," said Eowyn. "I shall be so glad to go home. I would rather have spent Yuletide with Ma Everill and her 'boys'—or, better still, fighting orcs at Minas Athrad."

"Have *you* been drinking spirits?" he asked, with a sudden smile in his voice.

"*One* glass!"

Legolas backed to the chair, and sat down, pulling Eowyn onto his lap; she settled with her head on his shoulder. "I could not sleep," she explained, and described her trip to the kitchen and her conversation with Arador.

"What do you think he meant?" asked Legolas.

"I am not sure, Lassui. But I keep remembering something Ma Everill said about the Reeve—that he had run her out of Newhome because she *knew him too well*. At the time I just assumed that they had been lovers—"

"So did I."

"But Ma has some very disreputable friends— "

"Like Jemmy the Key."

"Exactly! So, suppose she was actually accusing him of something criminal? A man who uses his position to extract money from one person is probably doing it to others, and may be involved in *other* rackets—"

Legolas laughed, fondly. "Where did you hear *that* word, Melmenya?"

"And, I was *going* to add," she said, swatting his arm, "that you were right to refuse to make a deal with him, and hide his dishonesty from Aragorn, but I will not give you that satisfaction now."

Legolas kissed the top of her head. "So," he said, more seriously, "are you thinking that Arador knows of these other 'rackets'?"

"And intends to use them to put pressure on his father—yes, perhaps. And, as far as any fatherly love for him is concerned, that could surely be described as *final*, could it not?" said Eowyn.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then Legolas said, "Was I right to allow Ma Everill to

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continue making her *blue*, Melmenya?"

"Hmm," said Eowyn, thoughtfully. "I do not doubt that Ma and Jemmy stole the recipe from its inventor, and I do not doubt that she uses Jemmy—or her boys—to, er, encourage people to do what she wants. But she is giving the people of Eryn Hollen hope, and they seem content. And it is better to have the workings *there*, where we can have some control, than to drive her away and have her destroy somewhere else."

"My thoughts, exactly," said Legolas.

...

The following morning, at breakfast, the Reeve made an interesting announcement: "My son and I have come to an agreement," he said. "I will permit him to return to the Colony, and you may employ him as you see fit."

Eowyn glanced at Legolas, and they both looked to Arador, but the young man's expression gave nothing away.

Part 24

They set out for home on the second day of Narwain.

The Reeve gave his son a brief, impersonal hug; Lady Morwen, though she was bearing her sorrow bravely, could not hide the heartbreak of watching her only child leave the nest, and Arador spent a few minutes talking to her quietly before hugging her, and kissing her goodbye.

Everything had changed, and a profound sense of loss was in every breast.

On the outskirts of Newhome, the trio paused to bid farewell to the elderly couple who had helped Eowyn when she had fallen into the muddy boar trap.

The old woman was especially pleased to see them. "My Jemmy," she told Eowyn "said that *you* said he should come and visit me. He's not a bad boy, my Lady—even his father admits that—though he does sometimes let other people lead him astray.."

...

As they crossed the River Tavor, and neared Eryn Hollen, the storm they had been riding towards broke, unleashing a torrent of driving rain, and they hurried into the shelter of the trees.

"Do you still wish me to make the *blue-works* safe, my Lord?" asked Arador, wiping the rain from his face. It was the first he had spoken since they had left his father's house, for he had been deep in his own thoughts.

"I do," replied Legolas, "if *you* are still willing."

The young man nodded. "Then I should like to collect some proper samples—from the stream, and of the soil around the dying trees—to take back to Eryn Carantaur. Belecthor says that if it rains on Lady Day, you can expect a wet winter, and—from what I have seen—it will not take much to break the dam and flood the salt pans again. We shall need act fast—Master Eldacar will know how to improve the dam, and perhaps Master Amdir can spare an Elf or two to supervise the work, and then Master Nirorn might know a way to heal the soil..." As he was speaking, he opened his leather satchel and checked its contents.

Legolas glanced at Eowyn, and the pair exchanged a small smile.

"I will help you with the samples," said Eowyn, dismounting. "We do not want it to take too long—we need to put the worst of the Doro Lanthron road behind us before nightfall."

...

Crouching beside Arador, Eowyn pulled the stopper from one of Master Eldacar's ingenious glass vials, and used the tiny spoon in the stopper to scoop up a quantity of crusty, grey-white soil. "What was it you threatened," she asked, casually, "to make your father change his mind about marrying you off?"

"I cannot say, my Lady." Arador dipped his vial in the stream, and held it there.

"But it was something other than the *blue*?"

Arador did not reply.

"You do realise that, once Legolas has sent his report to the King, Aragorn is likely to investigate *all* of your father's dealings?"

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"He will find nothing."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I know my father."

"You mean..." In her mind's eye, Eowyn saw the Reeve frantically destroying evidence, and she wondered how far a man like that might go to cover his transgressions. "Is it just embezzlement, Arador, or is it something *worse*?" She was serious now.

Arador sighed. "In some ways, my Lady, my father is a *good* Reeve—he fights tirelessly for his people's rights, and in matters of justice he is thoroughly impartial—and he is not the only official who sees the chance to levy the odd additional 'tax' as part of his due. But in the past,"—he lifted the vial from the stream, and carefully inserted the stopper—"when he was young, my father and an accomplice used to rob houses."

"*Jemmy the Key*," said Eowyn, intuitively.

"I will let *you* judge whether that is worse... But they were like brothers, apparently, until they had a falling out. I knew nothing about it until Ma let something slip when she was trying to persuade me to join her and Jemmy. And I did not *want* to use it against him. We may not be close, but he is still my father." He sighed again. "Sometimes, you have no choice but to defend yourself. And I had to be *willing* to expose him, or he would not have taken me seriously."

"It is so hard to believe," said Eowyn. Then, when Arador looked at her sharply, she added, "That your father and Jemmy made a living climbing through windows, I mean. For they are neither of them small men."

Arador chuckled. "You are a very sensible person, my Lady."

One by one, he stowed the vials in his satchel. "I have promised my mother that she can come and visit me whenever she wants."

"Of course she can."

"But it may mean having my father come, too."

"There is always a price to be paid," said Eowyn, and they both knew that she was referring to so much more than the Reeve's potential visits.

"Thank you, my Lady."

"Are you finished?" asked Legolas, joining them.

Eowyn glanced at Arador; the young man nodded.

"Good," said the Elf, holding out a hand to his wife. "Then let us go *home*."

THE END