

A Yuletide Dragonhunt



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Title: **A Yuletide Dragonhunt**

Story Number: -

Rating: G

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: On their way to Caras Arnen for the Yuletide celebrations, Legolas and Eowyn meet a young man with an important destiny.

Author's notes: Inspired by Paolo Uccello's *St George and the Dragon* (see page 39).

The main characters in this story were created by JRR Tolkien and brought to the screen by Peter Jackson; *Merlin* belongs to the BBC. 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

“And then,” said Eowyn, dipping her head to avoid a frost-covered branch, “I shall take him down to the stables, and show him his present.”

Legolas looked at the coal-black mare his wife was leading on a long rein. “Are you *sure* you can bear to part with her, *melmenya*?” he asked, gently. The mare had been the first offspring of Eowyn’s beloved horse, Brightstar, and Eowyn had not only helped birth her but had also had a hand in her training.

“It *will* be hard,” she admitted, ducking under another branch, “but Faramir deserves a swift horse, and he will take good care of her, *Lassui*.”

Legolas smiled.

...

It was two days before Yuletide, and the couple were riding to Caras Arnen, the City on the Hills, to spend the festive season with the Prince of Ithilien.

It had been a long and taxing year—they had helped put down a rebellion in the North of Rohan; had investigated a series of particularly bloody murders in the Academy of Minas Tirith; had sailed the Bay of Carhivilven in search of Hentmirë’s long-lost cousin; and now they were more than ready to spend twelve blissful days doing nothing more than eating, drinking and having fun with their closest friends.

...

Approaching the foothills of Emyrn Arnen, the trail—flanked either side by steep, snowy banks—suddenly narrowed, and Legolas gestured to Eowyn that she should go first.

She urged Brightstar forward, leading the mare behind her and, just as she entered the passage, she heard a strange sound—like the hollow *crack* that sometimes accompanies lightning—followed by a rush of foul-smelling air that shot past her, spooking both horses and almost unseating her, and then the ground began to shake beneath her and, amidst the mounting chaos, she thought she heard Legolas cry out in horror.

“*Lassui*?” she yelled, trying to turn Brightstar’s head into the wind, “*LASSUI!*”

But the narrow pass and the panicking mare defeated her.

Over her shoulder she could see fog—or *smoke*—and a strange flicker of light, which seemed to be getting closer, and—deciding to abandon the horses, and run back to Legolas—she was beginning to dismount when she heard him shout, “*Get clear, melmenya! Ride! Ride!*”

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Part 2

Earlier, elsewhere

Ten trusty knights led by Arthur Pendragon, crouching behind a wall of iron shields, advanced upon the beast that had suddenly appeared—amidst lowering storm clouds—to terrorise the people of Camelot with its lethal claws and its breath of fire.

Merlin, scrambling from smouldering tree to blasted stump, stayed as close to the men as he dared, his eyes fixed upon the dragon's smoking mouth.

Arthur shouted a curt command and, with Sir Bors on his left and Sir Ector on his right, he darted forward at the apex of a three-pronged attack, alternately thrusting his lance upwards and ducking beneath his shield, manoeuvring himself closer and closer to the beast's vulnerable breast.

The dragon dodged its tormentors—*As a man avoids a wasp*, thought Merlin—rearing up on its hind legs and flapping its great, clawed wings.

The boy darted forward.

One of the knights—Sir Bors—caught by a beat of the leathery wings, was thrown on his back and, part-winded, had scarcely time to lift his shield before it was scorched by a blast of fire.

But Arthur was getting closer. *Thrust, duck. Thrust...*

His lance hit home—only to shatter on the dragon's enchanted scales.

Merlin flexed his fingers and, raising his hand, pronounced the ancient words of power, his voice soft, but clear. He felt the magic well up inside him; felt it gather behind his eyes and leave him in a flash; saw it materialise as a blade of flame that pierced the sky with a sudden *crack*, carving a vast circle above the dragon.

Someone, meanwhile, had thrown Arthur a torch and, scooping it up, he rolled beneath the creature's belly and crouched over Bors, using the flame to hold back the beast's raking claws.

Merlin pushed his hand forward, uttering a spell that sucked the air from around the dragon's body and sent it rushing—like a whirlwind—through the magical gateway.

The dragon vanished just as the blade of fire, completing its second circuit, sealed the rent, and flickered out.

But the knights had seen something that Merlin, in his relief, had missed.

"My Lord!" cried one.

"*Sire!*" cried another.

"Arthur?" muttered Merlin, looking about him. "Oh, no. Where is Arthur?"

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Part 3

Eowyn hesitated.

In battle she would obey Legolas' orders without question, but *this* was something different—some natural or unnatural calamity—and, just as Legolas was trying to protect *her* by telling her to flee, so *her* instinct was to go back and protect *him*.

She had never heard him cry out in fear before.

And she never wanted to hear it again.

She made another attempt to dismount—though the mare was panicking behind her, and even Brightstar seemed jittery—but, as she swung her leg over, she heard Legolas shout, "Bado, Brightstar, *BADO*," and the horse obeyed him, taking off at a gallop with Eowyn sprawled across the saddle.

For a few terrifying moments she thought she would fall, and be trampled by the mare, but—somehow—she managed to get her foot over the cantle, and back into the stirrup, and then she was *riding* again, using her hands and her legs to bring Brightstar under control—

Until the sky went black.

Clinging to the saddle as she sped onwards, Eowyn looked up, above her head—and could not make sense of what she was seeing.

The pass had become a tunnel.

But, as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she quickly realised that the 'roof' was not only *moving* but also covered in glittering scales.

Can it be?

She had never expected to see another fell beast—had believed them all slain—but the horses' terror convinced her that one of them, at least, must still be alive.

Well, she thought, grimly, *not for long*.

Tearing her eyes from the creature's belly, she looked ahead, her mind searching for an opening, her hand briefly touching her sword.

To left and right the banks were growing less steep. The pass was opening out; she knew she must strike *now*.

She drew her weapon, and prepared to attack, but the beast sprang forward, landing in front of her as she thundered out onto the plain, rising onto its hind legs, flapping its wings, and *roaring*, sending a spurt of flame high up into the sky.

That, she thought, *will take some killing*.

Then Brightstar reared up beneath her and, sword still in hand, she fell from his back.

...

Bado ... Go!

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Part 4

Legolas waited until Eowyn and the two horses had disappeared down the pass, then he urged Arod forward.

A deep sense of foreboding had come over him, raising the hairs on the back of his neck, and he was about to call out and ask Eowyn if anything was wrong, when a deafening *crack* sounded overhead and, with a blast of foul air, the sky went dark.

Legolas reined in Arod and, trying to keep the horse calm, looked upwards—and found himself staring into a vast, malevolent eye.

He knew it was a dragon—having seen the great worm Smaug when it was laying waste to the lands north of Mirkwood—but he was taken by surprise when the creature suddenly lowered its head, opened its mouth, and poured a river of flame into the gully.

"*Aggh*," he screamed, shrinking back as tongues of fire licked his entire right side, singeing his hair and scorching his skin—and, instantly, he thought of Eowyn: "Get clear *melmenya!*" he shouted. "Ride! *Ride!*" And he grabbed a handful of cloak and slapped at the flames, reaching out with his Elven senses to search for his wife's spirit.

He sensed a moment of hesitation from her, then felt her resolve to come back and save him, and he knew that he must stop her: "Bado," he shouted to Brightstar, confident that the horse would obey him, "*BADO*, Brightstar!"

Go!

He heard a reassuring whinny, but cursed himself when the dragon took interest, dropping a man from one of its forelimbs, and a second man—arms and legs flailing—from the other, before moving off in Eowyn's direction.

Legolas dug his heels into Arod's flanks, urging him to follow.

But the dragon's tail swung so quickly, even an Elf could not avoid it.

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Part 5

Eowyn hit the ground and rolled, dragging herself onto her hands and knees and looking frantically for her dropped sword. The dragon was looming over her, but at least Brightstar and the mare had escaped to the comparative safety of the plain.

She spotted a glint of metal, and crawled towards it, painfully aware that the creature was watching her every move.

Inch by inch, she crept closer..

The dragon—head tilted—kept one beady eye fixed upon her.

Inch by inch...

At last, her hand closed around the sword's hilt and, steeling herself to ignore the protests of her aching body, she leaped to her feet, and lunged at the creature.

Her sword's point slid harmlessly over its enchanted scales.

And a change came over the dragon's face—its eyes gleamed and its mouth seemed to curve.

It looked *amused*.

Eowyn took an angry step backwards.

The dragon stretched out its foreleg and, using the tip of one long, curved claw, it prodded her.

Eowyn fell down.

The beast made a strange grunting sound, low in its throat, and then, delicately sliding its claw under her body, it tried to lift her up.

"What do you want?" she gasped, as—after several attempts—it hauled her upright.

The dragon croaked an unintelligible reply and, curling its talons around her, it lifted her into the air.

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Part 6

Arthur disentangled himself from the brambles and took a few steps.

It had been a long drop but, fortunately, the bush had broken his fall. And though he seemed to have lost his lance in the—*whatever had happened*—he still had his sword at his side, and—he reached up and touched his head—he had his helmet and gauntlets.

The dragon had disappeared, moving northwards (judging from the position of the sun), which meant that it was heading *away* from Camelot, and that gave him time to regroup his men, and—

Arthur frowned.

Where are my knights? Where is...

"Merlin?"

No answer.

"Merlin, you useless clod, where are you?"

He heard a groan, and turned to investigate.

"Bors?"

The least of his knights was lying in his very own patch of bramble, open-eyed but clearly winded, and barely able to move.

Looking at him, Arthur suddenly remembered another man...

Yes, I fell towards a man on horseback!

He looked around.

The terrain seemed strangely unfamiliar—blackened trees had somehow transformed themselves into a frosty glade, with a ridge of steep hills to the North—but he could see the man, lying beside his mount.

Magnificent beast, he thought. *And it looks for all the world as though it is standing guard over him.*

Removing his helmet and gauntlets, Arthur approached, talking softly to the horse, which pawed the ground nervously as he came closer. "I'm not going to hurt him," he said, gently. "I'm just going to see if I can help."

To his surprise, the creature seemed to understand, and moved a few steps backwards.

Arthur knelt down and examined its master.

It is time to get some answers.

He was a strange-looking fellow—tall and willowy, with long, silky hair as pretty as any girl's. Arthur pulled aside his grey-green cloak, noticing that it had been blackened in places by dragon fire, and laying his hand upon his chest, he felt for a heartbeat.

"Good," he murmured.

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Then he slid a hand under the man's head and lifted it.

His face was disturbingly beautiful, his features perfectly even, his eyelashes long and dark against his fair skin, his—Arthur *gasp*—his ears were *pointed*!

Instantly, Arthur remembered the stories he had been told as a child—of babies stolen, of runaways returning to find that centuries had passed in a matter of months, of strong men made frail by elfshot, of lovely women turned imbecile by water elf sickness.

Whatever this thing is, he thought, dropping its head (and absently wiping his hand upon his surcoat), *it reeks of sorcery*. He reached for his sword—

"*Sire!*" yelled Bors, and the terror in the man's voice made Arthur's heart lurch.

He turned.

A surging ball of flame, a whirlwind of fire, was rolling towards him, eating everything in its path.

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Part 7

The dragon—whose name was Nidhogg—peered closely at the little creature wriggling in his claws.

These creatures came, he had noticed, in two kinds. There were the bigger ones that acted like the cock o' the walk, generally wrapping themselves in metal shells and poking about with little steel claws; and there were the smaller ones, which seemed to do all the work, and which were usually softer and prettier, but often made a lot of high-pitched noise.

This one seemed to be a nice combination of the two—quite soft, and very pretty, but without the painful noise-making and, though it did brandish a steel claw, the way it had tried to prod him with it had been rather...

Sweet.

Of course, all the struggling it was doing now was making it hard for him to *THINK*, so he lifted it up to his mouth, and blew on it, gently.

The little thing stiffened, its face contorting in a look of surprise that made him smile, and then it slumped over his claws.

Fast asleep.

That was better.

Thinking was something quite new for Nidhogg, and it required a lot of concentration. He needed to find somewhere quiet to practise, somewhere the little creature would be safe.

He stretched out his wings and flapped them—once, twice—beating harder each time—and *thrice*—starting to run on his powerful hind legs—and again, and again, and—*up*—yes, up he climbed, rising on the current, enjoying the sensation of riding the wind as his wings worked steadily.

In less than sixty heartbeats he had reached the hills.

He circled the summit of the highest, looking for a suitable perch...

Yes.

Down he glided, landing effortlessly, and deposited his little creature on the shelf of rock.

It was still sleeping quietly.

Nidhogg folded his wings and settled down beside it, and waited for a thought to enter his head.

It took a few moments, but when one did materialise it was as clear as a bell: *The little thing is all covered up. It would look so much nicer if it wasn't.*

The dragon stretched out a claw and, working with its very tip, carefully ripped off some of the creature's gaudy covering.

...

Nidhogg ... From the Old Norse *Níðhögr*, meaning, 'dreaded striker'.

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Part 8

About twenty paces to the south, Arthur spotted a small section of stone wall, badly decayed but still, in some places, standing to the height of a man.

"Come on, Bors," he shouted, as he ran for cover, "this way! *Hurry!*"

From behind the flimsy shelter, he watched the fire advancing—and could not help noticing that the elf was lying directly in its path...

Bors crouched down beside him. "What is it, sire?"

"I have no idea. Some effect of the dragon's breath, perhaps."

"It is not flame, my Lord," said the knight.

"Are you sure?"

The other man nodded. "It has no heat—though it does *consume* like fire..."

Arthur's gaze went back to the elf. The creature was a remnant of the old ways, a reminder of a time when sorcery had been permitted to run amok; it was an abomination, and *he* was doing the world a favour by leaving it to die.

He felt perfectly justified...

"Oh, hang it!" he cried, and—throwing down his helmet and gauntlets—he darted back to the elf, grasped it beneath the arms, and began dragging it back to safety—until Bors grabbed its feet and, together, they were able to carry it.

"Secure its hands," said Arthur. "Use your belt."

Leaving Bors to his task, he looked over the wall.

The whirlwind was swirling closer and closer and, at first, he assumed that it was travelling in a straight line. But he quickly discovered that, at the slightest movement from *him*, it changed direction.

"Bors," he said, "go over there." He pointed to another short stretch of wall, about ten paces to the east.

"But Sire, the—er—the thing..."

"*Run,*" said Arthur.

The knight ran, leaping over loose stones and scurrying past patches of bramble; the whirlwind ignored him, continuing instead to batter itself against the mossy stones that divided it from Arthur.

"And Bors is right," Arthur murmured. "It *is* cold—COME BACK," he shouted.

...

A few minutes later

"You are awake, Master Elf."

Legolas tried to sit up, but his hands were tied behind him.

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"Tell, me," continued the voice, "what, exactly, is this Ear Win you were talking about in your swoon?"

Eowyn!

Legolas forced himself to stay calm, for he could sense no immediate danger to his wife; he rolled himself onto his side so that he could look up at his captor—a young man, clad in armour. *One of the men who fell from the dragon, he realised, and a stranger to these parts, which is why he does not recognise me...*

"My travelling companion and I," he said, cautiously, "were separated when the dragon appeared. I believe it may be pursuing her." Behind his back, his long fingers worked at the leather strap binding his wrists. "Release me, sir, and let me go to her."

"A Lady in distress, my Lord," said the young man's companion.

"A she-elf," said the youth.

"The Lady is human," said Legolas. "She is a warrior of great renown, beloved of her people, and the sister of a King."

"A *King*," said the youth. "And what King would that be?"

"The King of Rohan," said Legolas.

"Oh, of *Rohan*." The young man sighed. Then, "You *lie*, Master Elf," he cried, drawing his broadsword. "For there is no such kingdom as Rohan!"

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Part 9

Eowyn opened her eyes, and realised that her teeth were chattering. She sat up, and tried to rub some life back into her bare arms.

Bare arms?

She looked down at herself, and yelped—someone had taken a knife to her riding gown and leggings! Some *man*—she presumed—had cut away the lovely jewelled sleeves and most of the bodice, and had left just a tiny strip of velvet covering her breasts; he had hacked away her skirts, leaving her modesty barely covered; and he had ripped off her leggings, and exposed her legs—

At least, she thought, rubbing her thighs, he has left me my riding boots...

She raised her head, looking for the culprit, and saw instead that she was no longer down on the plain, but somewhere high up in the hills of Eryn Arnem.

With the dragon, she thought, watching the beast, cautiously, and—her hand brushed her hip—with no sword.

But before she had time to decide on a course of action, the dragon thrust its muzzle at her, and made a strange noise: "*Wha' za ma'ar?*"

It peered, cross-eyed, into the space between them, as if trying to see what had gone wrong with its words, then it tried again: "*Whatz za maddar?*"

It sighed, turned its head, and coughed up a big glob of sooty phlegm. "What's the matter?" it asked, triumphantly, at the third attempt.

"Well, for a start, I'm *cold!*" yelled Eowyn, not bothering to hide her anger, since the dragon—on closer acquaintance—did not seem particularly fierce, and added, as the truth dawned on her, "Because *someone* has seen fit to undress me."

"*Hmm...*" said the dragon.

It was silent for a few more—*freezing*—moments, then it said, "*Wai' eer.*"

"*Heer...*"

"*Erm...*"

It sucked in a huge breath and, fearing more mucus, Eowyn held up her hands, and shouted, "I understand!"

The dragon hopped off the rocky ledge, and disappeared.

Eowyn waited.

Then, from far below, she heard a sudden *woosh* of flame, accompanied by a bright glow, and the dragon returned with a rock in its mouth, which it set down, very carefully, beside her.

"*Beddar?*"

Eowyn moved a little closer. The rock was radiating a delicious warmth, which quickly thawed her limbs. "*Better,*" she said. "Yes."

The dragon grunted with something like satisfaction and, curling around her (and the rock), it

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settled down to sleep.

Well, this is strange, thought Eowyn. She closed her eyes and thought of Legolas, trying to reach him through their mental bond, but—though she tried and tried—her husband's spirit seemed strangely absent.

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Part 10

Keeping his eyes on the young man's sword, Legolas worked on his bonds. "Those whirling flames," he said, to divert the youth's attention. "What are they?"

"Some sorcery of *your* doing, elf."

Legolas shook his head. "No. I—"

"Sire, look," said the man's companion. "I think it might be dying down..."

For a split-second, the young man took his eyes off Legolas.

The elf, his hands free at last, immediately rolled out from under the man's sword, sprang to his feet, snatched up his white knives and *ran*, whistling to Arod as he skirted the whirlwind and headed towards the pass where he had last seen Eowyn.

Behind him, he heard the young man curse. Then, "After him, Bors!" he cried.

"Sire?"

Legolas smiled. Bors was clearly not the *sharpest* knife in the weapons chest.

"I will follow you when I can," said his Lord

And, as Legolas plunged into the narrow gully, he sensed the hapless Bors following him.

...

By the time the man had caught up with him, Legolas had reached the plain, and found the horses waiting, impatiently. "You could not follow your mistress," he said, stroking Brightstar's muzzle, "but you would not leave the place where you last saw her."

"There are tracks over here," called Bors. He was leaning forward, his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. "A woman. She was... *Fighting?*"

"Yes, she is a fine swordswoman," said Legolas. He approached the skittish mare, coaxing her with Elvish endearments.

"And there are scorch marks," said Bors. "It looks like the dragon took her."

"I know." Legolas grasped the mare's bridle. He could sense Eowyn, somewhere to the north, but the impression was faint, and the emotions he was feeling from her were confused—there was anger, as he had expected, but there was also amusement, and gratitude, which he had not...

Then, suddenly, there was a wonderful moment of clarity, when he felt her reach out to him, and their spirits touched. "She is not afraid," he gasped.

"How do you know?" The man had come up beside him.

"Do you share your Lord's mistrust of elves, Master Bors?"

"*Sir* Bors. A knight of Camelot." The man raked his hand through his hair. "No... Not really."

"So I can trust you?"

"I suppose so."

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"My name is Legolas." He placed his hand upon his heart and bowed his head in a formal greeting. "Will you help me rescue my wife, Sir Bors?"

"Your *wife*..." The man frowned. "I am bound by my oath," he said, "to rescue a damsel in distress."

"That is a noble sentiment," said Legolas.

"*And* I have orders never to let you out of my sight."

"Then it is agreed. You will ride Brightstar—he is my wife's horse—and I shall ride the mare, and we will leave Arod for your Lord. I have no doubt that he will follow us as soon as he is able."

"He intends to kill you."

"He may try," said Legolas, mounting the mare. "But I do not think he will."

Bors mounted Brightstar. "Where are we going?"

"North," said Legolas. "That is as much as I know, at present."

"Well, if I were the dragon," said Bors, turning the horse's head, "I would be up there." He pointed to the hills of Eryn Arnen. "It gives him a good view of the plain, and of the river to the West—for he will need to hunt regularly, and that is the perfect vantage point—and the winds at that height will help him land safely with his prey. Yes, I would wager my inheritance that he has made his nest up there."

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Part 11

Eowyn clasped her hands together, and smiled.

For a moment, she had felt Legolas' presence!

He had told her that he loved her, and had assured her that he was coming to find her. And, although he had been gone a split-second later, that contact had been enough to reassure her that her husband was safe.

It had given her hope.

She settled down beside her heated rock and, ignoring the dragon's snores, she tried to work out a plan.

She did not believe that the beast meant her any harm—it seemed to think of her as a pet—but that might easily change if she tried to sneak away, which—in turn—meant that, in order to escape, she might have to kill it, and she no longer thought she could bring herself to do that.

Besides, she thought, I already knew that my sword—which was lying somewhere out of reach—is no match for the dragon's scales.

And then there was the small matter of the mountain.

She could see no way to get safely down to the plain, *And no way, she thought, for an elf to get safely up. Which means that my only option is to persuade the dragon to let me go.*

She lay on her back, trying to think of a convincing argument but, as the sky turned dark and the stars began to shine, she grew more and more tired and, eventually, she drifted off to sleep...

...

"Good morning..."

Eowyn opened her eyes. The pale winter sun was shining through the windows, lighting Legolas' golden hair as he leaned over her.

She sighed. "Morning, Lassui." Then, "It must be late..."

"I let you sleep in a little, melmenya, since escaping from a dragon takes it out of a woman."

"What have you been doing?" she asked, for he was fully dressed.

"I have been in your garden." He brought his hand from behind his back with a flourish, and opened his fingers. Lying in his palm was a tiny flower of the deepest red, laced with delicate frost. "I found it lying on the ground," he said. "The hûnlass shed it just for you."

The hûnlass... Eowyn remembered the little plant that Legolas had given her, one Sweetheart's Day, years before the Valar had brought them together, and how he had told her that the men of South Ithilien believed that its flowers brought joy to all who saw them. "It may have been for someone else," she said, holding out her hand and letting Legolas drop the flower onto it. Her garden belonged to another now.

She brought the flower to her nose, and inhaled its delicate scent, looking up at her husband. "How do you know that it was intended for *me*?"

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Legolas smiled his most beautiful smile.

"You are a very conceited elf," she said, laughing, and she reached over to the nightstand, and gently tipped the flower from her hand.

Then she turned back to Legolas and slid her arms around his neck.

Legolas lowered her onto her pillows and, as he kissed her mouth, gently but thoroughly, she felt his hands move down to her hips and pull at her nightgown.

Eowyn considered undressing him, but quickly decided that that would take too long, so she brought her hands down to his waist and, reaching inside his jerkin and tunic, she unlaced his leggings.

Legolas' hand, meanwhile, had found its way between her legs.

"Oh," she moaned against his mouth. She had curled her own hand around his hard, thick warmth just as *his* fingers had begun to tease *her* flesh, and her back arched with the sheer, unbearable joy of it. "Oh. Oh—"

...

Eowyn awoke with a start.

...

The Flower, written for Valentine's Day 2007, is on page 40.

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Part 12

"You know a lot about dragons," said Legolas.

"Yes—dragons are a passion of mine," said Bors, smiling. They had been pushing the horses hard for almost an hour, and had slowed to a walk to allow the animals a few minutes' rest. "It was my older brother who was destined for knighthood," Bors continued. "I was never much good with a sword or a mace, but I can read, and reckon, and I have a good memory for facts. Had my brother not died of the pestilence, and my family not needed a representative at Uther's court—"

"Uther?"

"King Uther Pendragon, my Lord," said Bors—for he had begun to treat Legolas with the respect due to one of superior standing—"Prince Arthur's father."

"Your Lord is a *prince*?"

"Indeed, my Lord."

"That explains it," said Legolas. He smiled. "You were saying?"

"Well, being at court has its benefits," said Bors. "As I said, I can read. And I have read treatises on alchemy, astronomy, philosophy, and, of course, I have read bestiaries—many bestiaries."

"Then you will know the story of how Túrin Turambar killed the dragon Glaurung," said Legolas.

"Er... Glaurung? No, my Lord. No. In fact, I don't believe I've ever heard of a dragon called Glaurung."

"Well," said Legolas, "this story may be of use to us."

"One night, as the dragon was sleeping beside a deep gorge—called Cabed-en-Aras, the Deer's Leap, because it was so narrow—Túrin Turambar climbed down into the ravine, planning to climb up the other side, and take the beast by surprise."

"But the dragon awoke. And, as it stretched its forequarters over the gorge, and slowly hauled the rest of its bulk across, Turambar—though he was still far below—he saw his chance. He climbed like a man possessed and, the moment he was close enough, thrust his enchanted sword into the creature's belly with all his strength."

"And did the dragon die?"

"Eventually," said Legolas, since—under the circumstances—the rest of Turin's story was of little comfort.

"Do you plan to use the same tactic, my Lord?"

"I think it is certainly worth considering," replied Legolas.

"And do you actually *have* an enchanted sword, my Lord?" asked Bors.

Legolas laughed. "I suspect that Prince Arthur greatly underestimates your value, mellon nín," he said. "Come, let us ride on!"

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Part 13

Not again!

Arthur ducked behind a rocky outcrop, and waited.

The red whirlwind had suddenly vanished, minutes after Sir Bors had followed the elf but, by the time Arthur had reached the pass down which they had both vanished, the thing had returned, weaker than before, but just as threatening, and just as determined to consume him.

That attack had lasted perhaps ten minutes, then the swirling mass had disappeared, and Arthur—having no other option—had plunged into the gully.

Moments later the whirlwind had reappeared.

From behind the rocks, Arthur watched it.

What is it?

Some piece of sorcery, no doubt, but what?

And why does it want me?

He reached down, picked up a handful of frosty gravel, and threw it into the swirling wind. The tiny stones rolled round and round towards its centre, then disappeared.

Arthur leaned back against the sloping bank.

What would happen to a man, he wondered, if he were to fall into it?

There had been no flash of light, no crash of thunder—nothing to say that the stones had been *destroyed*...

To Arthur, it had looked as though they had passed *through*.

So what is on the other side?

Arthur looked about him.

He knew this part of Camelot like the back of his hand—he had hunted here with his father many, many times—but he had never seen this pass before, never seen those massive hills to the North—and those ruins he had been hiding in, the remains of some ancient fortification—where had *they* come from?

It's all part of the sorcery, he thought. I have been sent to a strange land. But to what purpose?

To kill the dragon?

To help the elf rescue his Lady?

Or just to get me away from Camelot?

He sighed and, rubbing his eyes, sensed a sudden change in the air around him.

The whirlwind has vanished again!

He leaped to his feet, and took off at a run.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

...

The pass gave out onto a broad plain that stretched all the way to the hills, which sat many miles to the North, though their exact distance was hard to judge in the dusky light. Somewhere in between, he could just make out the shapes of two horsemen—the elf and Sir Bors.

If the whirlwind comes back, and I'm out here, he thought, I'll have no chance.

The elf's beautiful horse nuzzled his shoulder.

"Why are you here boy?" he asked, stroking its muzzle. "Hm? Did your master leave you here for me? Why would he do that? Does he mean me to follow him?"

Arthur found that his opinion of the elf was changing.

If he *did* follow the others, he would be putting himself at risk, but he was a Prince of Camelot, the foremost of its knights, and—though discretion might be the better part of valour—there was a difference between discretion and outright cowardice.

For, as Bors had pointed out, there was a damsel to be rescued.

And it was just possible that someone, or *something*, had brought *him* here to do it.

"Good boy," he said, mounting the horse. "Take me to your master."

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 14

The dragon snorted and, taking a deep, noisy breath, lifted its head with a look of surprise.

It had woken up! Eowyn scrambled to her feet.

"Y' *aw'ight?*" it gurgled.

"Yes," she said.

She was very hungry, but she did not want to send it looking for food—who knew what it might bring back—a sheep?—a *child*?

And she was also thirsty; she had her waterskin—for, when the creature had *rearranged* her clothing, it had left that hanging at her hip—but she had long since drunk it dry.

"I do need some water," she said.

The dragon took another rasping breath. "*Wa'er...*"

"Yes. To drink."

"*Hmm.*"

The beast hauled itself to its feet, stretched out a foreleg, picked her up, and threw itself off the rock shelf.

Eowyn, taken completely by surprise, screamed.

"*No,*" croaked the dragon, as its body settled into a graceful glide, "*no' tha' noise!*"

It swooped downwards, through a narrow valley, then up again, and round, and landed upon another shelf, this one much shallower than its own, and with flowing water—spilling from a crevice in the rocks above, and pooling at its centre.

The dragon put Eowyn down, and she ran to the waterfall and, cupping her hands, she drank and drank. "Thank you," she gasped, wiping her mouth. Then she re-filled her waterskin.

"*Aw'ight now?*" asked the dragon.

"Yes."

The beast scooped her up again and, this time, she managed not to scream when it launched itself into the wind, and flew her back to its lair.

...

The dragon curled itself around her and, propping its head upon its forearm, peered down at her.

Eowyn stood with her head bowed, embarrassed by the beast's attention.

Suddenly, using the very tip of one of its claws, it retrieved her sword, and pushed it towards her. "*Sho' me.*"

Eowyn picked the sword up. "You mean..."

"*Poke 'n' prod.*"

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

"Well..." She blushed. "Yes, all right. These are the basic guards."

She raised the sword above her head and held it horizontal, pointing it at an imaginary opponent's head. "This is called the *Ox*." She brought the hilt of the sword down to her hip, blade pointing upwards. "This is the *Plough*." She lowered the sword's point, inviting her enemy to strike. "The *Fool*." She raised her hands above her shoulders, ready to slice downwards. "*Over the roof*. And, finally..." She brought the blade down to her side. "The *Tail*."

Then she executed the guards a second time, moving gracefully from one to another; then a third, adding more footwork; and then a fourth time, moving more fluidly still, dancing around the space formed by the beast's body...

"*Hmm,*" said the dragon. "Nice."

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 15

"Look," cried Legolas, reining in his mount and pointing towards Emyrn Arnen. "Over there!" A dark, winged shape, just visible against the starry sky, was circling the hilltops. "You were right, mellon nín! It is hiding in the hills."

"Do you think your wife,"—Bors hesitated—"is still *safe*, my Lord?"

"Yes, she is alive," said Legolas. Since finding Eowyn again, he had had an almost constant impression of her state of mind. "She was startled a moment ago, but she does not seem frightened now." He turned to Bors. "We will give the horses another short rest—I intend to ride through the night."

"And when we reach the hills, my Lord," said Bors, "what then?"

"We will climb, like Túrin Turambar."

"In Camelot," said Bors, thoughtfully, "it is said that the men of past ages were giants compared to the men of today..."

"The same is said here, mellon nín," said Legolas. "Ah... You think that we are over-matched?"

"A trifle, my Lord."

"Well, you are the one who knows about dragons. What is their weakness?"

"Save for the belly, which is a *little* softer than the back, Sire, I'm not sure I know of any."

...

By the time they had reached the foothills of Emyrn Arnen, a thick layer of cloud had blotted out the moon and stars, making it hard to recognise the peak on which they had seen the dragon land.

Legolas scanned each hill in turn, looking for any sign of the beast.

"It would certainly break *my* spirit to scale the wrong unscalable rock face," said Bors. He dismounted and, coming up beside the elf, stared up at the hills. "What we need is some way of making it show itself. Perhaps if we were to tether you, my Lord, dressed as a maiden, over by that gully."

Despite himself, Legolas laughed.

"Or perhaps..." said the man, more seriously. "Am I right in thinking, Sire, that you can 'hear' your wife's thoughts?"

"We have a bond," said Legolas, trying to describe, without revealing too much, how he could reach out and sense Eowyn's thoughts, and how—sometimes—she could do the same with him. "Especially when the emotions are intense," he explained, "like pain or fear..."

"So it is likely that she could hear you now, were you to try?"

"There have been moments, as we rode, when I felt that she could hear me," said Legolas.

"Then would it be worth," said Bors, "trying to speak to her, and asking her to give us some sort of signal, my Lord?"

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 16

Exhausted, Eowyn sheathed her sword.

"Why you've stobbed?" gurgled the dragon.

"I am tired," said Eowyn. Then, thinking that a beast might not understand the meaning of 'tired', she added, "I am out of breath, and my arms and legs ache."

The dragon leaned towards her and, tilting its head to one side, peered at her exposed limbs. Then, after a moment or two, it said, "*Siddown*," and nodded at the ground.

Eowyn sat down beside her rock (which was no longer warm, but she was too hot from the exercise to notice).

"Do you wan' more wader?" asked the dragon.

"No," said Eowyn, holding up her waterskin, "I have some here, thank you." She drew out the stopper and took a drink, pondering her situation. She had one very pressing problem, and no idea how she was going to solve it—Legolas was coming for her.

Legolas would climb the cliff, fight the dragon, and one of them would die.

If it were Legolas—and the pain of trying to imagine Legolas' death was just too much to bear—then Eowyn knew that she would die as well.

But if it were the dragon...

Well, she could not bear to think of the dragon's dying, either.

Especially not at *Legolas'* hand.

So she had to think of way to save both of them.

"Where do you normally live?" she asked. "This rock is obviously not your home."

The dragon tried to shrug its shoulders. "*Evvrythin's change'*," it said.

"What has changed?"

"*Nevver though' b'fore. Nevver talk' b'fore.*"

"Before what?"

"*B'fore you come.*"

"Before *I...*" Eowyn frowned. The dragon had arrived upon a strange, foul-smelling wind, but from where, exactly? Could it have been...

From somewhere where dragons neither think nor talk, she thought.

Somewhere without elves—the elves taught the trees to talk, so why not dragons as well—though was it not Morgoth who created the dragons, to do his bidding?

She looked up at 'her' dragon.

He is not evil, she decided. *He is just unfortunate in his choice of food.*

She drew her knees up to her chest and, closing her eyes, reached out, searching for Legolas.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

To her surprise, she found him immediately, and a series of words—spoken in *his* voice—formed in her mind: “Show us where you are, melmenya.”

“Legolas,” she thought back with all her might, “he is not evil. Please do not kill him, my darling.”

“*You aw’ight?*” asked the dragon.

Eowyn opened her eyes and—praying to the gods that Legolas had heard her—said, “I am a little cold.”

“*G’over there,*” said the dragon. And, moments later, it warmed her rock with a great blast of fiery breath, which lit up the sky.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 17

“Whoa!” cried Arthur, bringing the elf’s horse to a standstill.

High above him, a jet of fire, blasting at the rocks, had just exposed the position of the dragon’s lair. Arthur watched it, memorising landmarks and judging distances, until the flames died out.

“Well,” he said, patting the horse’s neck, “now we know where to find the beast. Let’s hope that your master proves as easy to track down.”

...

It was the horse, however, who found the elf—resisting all of Arthur’s attempts to guide it, it picked its own way through the maze of criss-crossing paths, and brought him straight to the foot of the dragon’s hill.

The elf, who seemed to be expecting him, greeted Arthur with (what he *supposed* was) an elven gesture of respect, placing one hand upon his heart and bowing his head.

“I see that you have escaped the whirlwind, your Highness,” he said.

“I have—Sir *Elf*,” Arthur replied, and saw a hint of amusement flit across the creature’s flawless features.

But, after glancing at Sir Bors, who—though not much of a fighter—had always proved himself a shrewd judge of character, and seeing that the man appeared to have befriended the elf, he decided that it was time to make some sort of apology. “On reflection,” he began, awkwardly, “I—I feel—that is, I think may have been a little—er—*hasty* in my earlier judgement—”

“As I recall, your Highness,” said the elf, lightly, “you risked your life to drag me from the whirlwind’s path. I am in your debt.”

“Well,” said Arthur, “be that as it may—if you still intend to rescue your Lady, I offer you my sword.”

“The Lady is Lord Legolas’ *wife*, Sire,” said Sir Bors.

“I see,” said Arthur.

“And she—er—she was able to inform us,” Bors continued, “that she is as yet unharmed.”

Arthur saw the elf—*Leg-a-las*—shoot the knight a look of gratitude, and wondered what secret Sir Bors might be keeping from him. “What’s your plan?” he asked.

“I intend,” said Legolas, tying a length of flimsy-looking rope to a ridiculously elegant arrow, “to climb up there, and ask the dragon to set my wife free.”

“Ask?” said Arthur, incredulously.

“Beg, if necessary.” Legolas fitted the arrow to his bow.

“And if that doesn’t work?”

“Then I will have to think of something else.” The elf planted his feet, and drew his bow, taking careful aim—and, though Arthur had always considered the bow a commoner’s weapon, he found himself admiring its obvious power.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

"Right," he said.

Then the elf loosed and, as the arrow flew silently up the hillside, it seemed to Arthur that it was *following* the contours of the rock, *seeking* a suitable target—until, suddenly, it buried itself deep in a crevice. He had to admit that it had been a phenomenal shot.

Then Legolas grasped the rope, and Arthur understood how he intended to use it. "That will not hold," he said.

"It is an elven arrow," said Legolas, cheerfully, "and elven rope." And he began to climb.

Arthur waited until the elf had gone a good thirty yards without falling to his death before he motioned Bors to follow. "This wife of his had better be beautiful," he muttered, under his breath.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 18

One after another, they climbed the rope until they reached the arrow, which was lodged above a shallow ledge scarcely broad enough for the three climbers to rest upon.

Bors hauled himself onto the rock, shuffled to one side, and sat with his head in his hands, breathing heavily. Arthur, sitting beside him, watched Legolas pull the arrow from its cleft—as easily as if the stone had been butter.

"All right," said Arthur, "now that *has* to be sorcery."

Legolas shook his head, smiling. "Elves have command of their weapons in ways that humans do not, your Highness, but it is not sorcery." He nocked the arrow again and, bracing his legs, raised the bow above his head, parallel to the cliff face, drew, and loosed.

The arrow streaked upwards, carrying the elven rope another two hundred yards closer to the dragon's lair.

...

They had been climbing for hours, zig-zagging from one perilous, crumbling ledge to another perilous, crumbling ledge, but the elf—Arthur noticed—was showing no signs of the fatigue—*Or, he thought, let's face it, the fear*—that was wearing down him and Bors.

He came to the end of the rope and, clinging to it with one clammy hand and two tired legs, he reached for the safety of the rock—missed it—swung forward, and banged his head on the ledge.

The cliff and the night sky suddenly changed places as his feet lost their grip and his head rolled back, and only his left hand, locked in a death grip around the flimsy rope, stopped him from falling thousands of feet to his death.

For hours (it seemed), he swung in the breeze like a pair of freshly-laundered under-hose.

Then a strong elven hand closed around his wrist, and he felt himself being lifted bodily until his knees crashed onto the rocky shelf, and Sir Bors threw his arms around him, and pulled him to safety.

"Thank you," he gasped, crawling forwards, with his rump in the air. "And thank *you*, Sir Elf. I believe,"—he let out a huge breath—"that *that* more than makes us even."

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 19

Eowyn lay upon her back, watching the sky turn from velvety black, to dirty grey, to a luminous pale lavender. She had spent the past few hours trying to think of a way to prepare the dragon for Legolas' arrival. *He will be here soon*, she thought, anxiously—and, as though the beast had overheard, it suddenly raised its head, and peered down at her.

"Wha'?"

"Er—nothing."

"*You wan' mo' wader?*"

Despite her fears, Eowyn could not help smiling. "No," she began, but broke off as a cry of surprise pierced the air, followed by the rattle of falling rocks.

Both heads—woman and dragon—swung towards the sound. "*Wazzat?*" cried the dragon.

Eowyn scrambled to her feet, praying that Legolas had not fallen. *Should I lie*, she thought, *and try to distract him, or should I simply tell him the truth?*

"It is something I *need*," she said.

"Wha'?" the dragon demanded.

More rock fell, and Eowyn knew that Legolas was still climbing. The dragon, meanwhile, was eager to investigate, and it was becoming harder and harder to keep its attention. "My husband," she said, loudly.

"*'usban'?*"

"*Mate*. My mate. Do you have a mate?"

Eowyn heard another noise but, this time, the dragon seemed oblivious to it. "*No...*" it said, sadly, and its head drooped, and Eowyn's heart lurched at the expression of loss that spread across its face.

"Oh—I am so sorry," she whispered.

But then, because she *had* to make it understand, she pressed on: "My mate is worried about me, and he is coming to make sure that I am safe. Will you let him come up safely?"

The dragon rose to its feet, and stretched out each limb, and shook its great, clawed wings. When it behaved like a simple animal, it was truly a terrifying sight.

Eowyn watched it walk to the edge of plateau. "Please," she begged, following it, "please do not hurt Legolas."

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 20

Hanging from the elven rope, just a few yards from his goal, Legolas looked up—and found himself staring into the dragon's beady eyes.

Well, I have certainly lost the element of surprise.

He heard Eowyn say, "Please do not hurt Legolas!" But he saw the beast raise its foreleg, and curl its claws, and felt the rope twitch, and he had just enough time to call out a warning to the men beneath him before the dragon lifted the rope and, with all three climbers still clinging to it, swung it round in the air...

...

"Ah!"

With slightly less than Elven grace, Legolas hit the rocky plateau standing on his feet. The curses and groans coming from Prince Arthur and Sir Bors, somewhere behind him, told him that *they* had not been quite so lucky.

Above his head, the dragon was making a series of gurgling sounds, which *almost* sounded like, "*Whichiz your 'usban'?*"

Eowyn ran to Legolas' side, and threw her arms around him. "This is."

"*Iz verry small,*" said the dragon, unimpressed.

"So am I," said Eowyn, bravely.

"*Hmm,*" said the dragon.

"*Melmenya...?*"

Eowyn squeezed his hand, meaning—he knew—*Leave this to me, Lassui*, but he could not help asking her, "Are you all right?"

"I am fine," she whispered. Then she added, loudly, "The dragon has taken very good care of me."

Legolas heard Arthur snort and prayed to the Valar that the young man would not do anything to worsen an already tense situation. He looked down at Eowyn and, for the first time, noticed that she was almost naked. "What happened to your riding gown, *melmenya*?"

"I will explain later."

"My Lady," said Arthur. Eowyn turned towards him. "Arthur Pendragon, my Lady, at your service." Legolas saw a flash of red.

"Thank you, my Lord," said Eowyn, dropping the slightest of curtsies as she draped the Prince's cloak around her shoulders.

"*No,*" wailed the dragon. "*Li'le thing look beddar unwrapp'd.*"

"But this is warm," said Eowyn. She hugged herself and, smiling up at it, mimed *warmth*. "See? I feel better wearing it."

"*Are y' going 'way?*" asked the dragon, suddenly.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Legolas' breath hitched in his throat and, mentally, he prepared himself to rip his bow from its strap and nock an arrow; his elven senses told him that, behind him, Arthur's hand had reached for his sword.

"Yes," said Eowyn, firmly. "But... I need you to help me. I need you to fly me and my husband, and his friends, down to the ground. Will you do that for me?"

The dragon's head drooped. "*Wha' 'bout me?*" it asked.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 21

Legolas glanced at Eowyn; tears were spilling down her cheeks. "Oh, melmenya..." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and pulled her close.

"My Lord," said a voice, "if I might make a suggestion."

Legolas rubbed Eowyn's back. "By all means, Sir Bors."

"Dragons crave company, my Lord," said the man. "Without it, they become bitter, and cruel. They do not live well together, but prefer the society of men—and, of course, of beautiful Ladies." He bowed to Eowyn. "If you were to set aside, my Lord, a territory of perhaps one hundred square miles, uninhabited but well-stocked with game—"

"Ewyn Elenath," said Eowyn. "The Starry Hills, Lassui—they would be *perfect!*"

Legolas looked up at the dragon. "What is to stop it straying into Newhome, or Doro Lanthron, and terrorising the settlers?"

"He will promise not to," said Eowyn.

"Melmenya..."

"There is also the company, my Lord," said Bors. "If you were to build a 'dragon-tower', somewhere high in the hills, which was constantly manned by a handful of willing people—"

"*Li'le thing!*" cried the dragon, happily.

"I will *visit* you," said Eowyn, "I promise; but I have responsibilities elsewhere."

"Who would want to live with a dragon?" asked Legolas, softly.

"Scholars," said Eowyn. "It will be a wonderful opportunity for them, Lassui. They will come from all over Middle Earth."

"And I, myself, would be happy to spend time with it," said Sir Bors, "if Prince Arthur will give me permission."

"Well," said Arthur, who had been listening in silence, "you're not much use as a knight."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"Very well," said Legolas, turning to the dragon, with a sigh. "You will fly us down to the ground and then you will wait for us up here. We will return in fourteen days—can you count?"

"No."

"Then... Look for us when the moon is one-quarter full," said Legolas. "We will take you south, to a place where you will be free to hunt, and to spend time with—with your friends."

"We will appoint guards to make sure that everybody treats you well," said Eowyn.

"*An' Li'le thing will come an' visit?*"

"I shall."

"*An' poke 'n' prod?*"

Legolas turned to Eowyn, startled.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

"He likes to watch me practise my sword guards," she said. "Yes, I shall."

"Unwrapp'?"

"We will see."

...

Elenath ... the starry host, all the stars of heaven.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 22

They said their farewells at the foot of the cliff, Eowyn crossing her heart and hoping to die if she did not return at the appointed time or—at Legolas' insistence—soon after, and the dragon promising to eat nothing but wild beasts whilst it waited for her.

Then the couple resumed their journey, skirting Eryn Arnen until they reached the main Caras Arnen road, then following it northwards, taking Prince Arthur—riding Arod—and Sir Bors—gently coaxing the highly strung mare—with them.

...

"This is very kind of you," said Arthur to Eowyn, who was riding beside him. "I only hope that your friend will not mind the intrusion."

"Faramir will be delighted to meet men from a hitherto unknown region," Eowyn replied. "He is a scholar, and a great lover of lore." Then she added, "And, though his library is not so extensive as the Library at Eryn Carantaur, I am sure there will be *something* there about your homeland, and where to find it."

Arthur glanced at Legolas, running effortlessly at his wife's side. "You speak of Prince Faramir warmly," he said

"We are old friends," said Eowyn.

...

They broke their journey at midday, having reached the great cliffs of Amon `aer where, sheltering in the lee of the hills, they shared a simple meal of lembas bread and melted snow.

"I understand from your husband," said Arthur, watching Legolas water the horses, "that you are skilful with a sword, my Lady. Perhaps, when we reach the City, and you are sufficiently rested—and with Lord Legolas' permission, of course—you will do me the honour of sparring with me—we might teach Sir Bors here a thing or two."

"I do not need my husband's permission to spar, Prince Arthur," said Eowyn, rising to her feet and drawing her sword. "And I am ready *now*."

"Here?"

"You have challenged a Shieldmaiden, Prince Arthur," said Legolas, laughing.

Arthur looked from Eowyn to Legolas and back again. "Very well..."

He rose, and drew his own sword.

The pair assumed their guard positions, each watching the other closely.

Then Eowyn struck, and Arthur parried; Eowyn struck again, and Arthur's parry was less elegant; Eowyn struck a third time, and Arthur forgot that he was fighting a Lady, and began sparring in earnest.

Blow followed blow; the pair circled, cutting and thrusting until, suddenly, their swords locked.

Sir Bors, who had been watching the fight avidly, moved in closer. He was aware (though, perhaps, his Lord had forgotten) that the position now favoured Arthur, since Eowyn was physically smaller, and undoubtedly the weaker of the two—

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

But it was Eowyn who broke the deadlock, swinging her hands down, and to the left, throwing Arthur's blade aside, and leaving her own sword's point poised at his throat.

Arthur reeled back, startled.

Then a slow smile spread across his face, and he dropped his sword, and raised his hands in surrender. "You *are* good," he said, with genuine admiration. "I only wish—"

But the words died in his throat when the red whirlwind—absent so long that he had almost forgotten its existence—rose up from nowhere and surged towards him, eating a path through the snow.

Arthur backed away, looking frantically for a refuge.

Behind him soared the mighty wall of Amon `aer.

There was nowhere for him to hide.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 23

"No, my Lady!" shouted Sir Bors, as he raced towards his Lord, for Eowyn had already stepped between Arthur and the whirlwind.

"Melmenya!" cried Legolas, darting towards her—"My Lady!" gasped Arthur, reaching out for her.

But Eowyn stood, frozen like a statue, gazing into the whirlwind's spinning depths, her sword hanging uselessly at her side, whilst the red vapour swirled around her, lifting the edges of her cloak, and the loose strands of her hair, and drawing them into itself.

"Melmenya!" shrieked Legolas.

...

Camelot

Merlin caught the briefest glimpse of a lovely face, framed by long blonde hair, and immediately curled his outstretched hand into a fist, drawing his magic back into himself.

He looked about him, guiltily.

Arthur's knights were still frantically searching for their Lord.

"Over there," he shouted, pointing to a dense stand of trees. "I—er—I think I saw something, over there..."

He needed time—and he needed to be alone—to work out why, instead of Arthur, his spell had almost brought a beautiful woman back from the magical world.

...

Eryn Arnen

The whirlwind disappeared, swallowed by its own mouth.

Eowyn, released from its clutches, fell to her knees.

"Oh, melmenya!" Legolas threw himself down beside her and gathered her into his arms.

"Is she all right?" asked Arthur, anxiously.

"I saw someone, Lassui," Eowyn gasped. "He—he was standing in the eye of the storm. I saw him clearly."

"Was it a *man*?" asked Legolas.

"Yes," said Eowyn. Then, "No—no, it was a boy—a dark-haired boy, with deep, deep blue eyes and he—he looked almost Elven, Lassui, but he was not."

"Did you see anything more, my Lady?" asked Arthur.

"There was a tree, behind the boy, but it was black. It—no—no, it was *scorched*."

Frowning, Arthur glanced at Sir Bors.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

Part 24

Two days later

“So you found nothing in the Library, not even with Faramir’s help?” said Eowyn.

Arthur shook his head. “Though it was, in fact, Sir Bors who was working with Prince Faramir—books and me, we’re not really... Compatible.”

Eowyn laughed.

They were sitting beneath a Yuletide canopy of holly and ivy, guests of honour at Faramir’s table; servants were clearing away the remains of the feast, and bringing in platters of gyngerbrede and caraway cake, and bowls of dried fruits and nuts.

“But they both assure me,” continued Arthur, “that they have found no mention of Camelot, nor of any of the kingdoms that surround it.” He picked up a jug of wine and offered to refill Eowyn’s goblet.

“Thank you...” She watched him pour, then raised the goblet to him before taking a sip. “So, what will you do?” she asked.

Arthur refilled his own goblet, and set down the jug. “Your husband,” he said, “has very kindly offered me—and Sir Bors, of course—a refuge in your colony. He tells me that you have scholars there who’ll find the solution to my problem or perish trying.”

“Yes, we have an Academy,” said Eowyn, excitedly. “It is quite small at present—just twenty scholars—but we have had chambers built, in the Library courtyard, so that each has his own study, and there is a common room, where—”

A piercing scream interrupted her; she and Arthur both turned towards the commotion, and Eowyn grasped Arthur’s arm.

The swirling wind had entered the very heart of Faramir’s palace.

...

“This boy you saw, inside it,” shouted Arthur, above the cries of surprise, and the din of chairs being shoved aside, as courtiers scrambled out of the whirlwind’s path, “what was he wearing?”

He and Eowyn had left their seats, and were working their way—against the tide of fleeing guests—towards the wind, which appeared to be sweeping towards *them*. Legolas vaulted over a table and joined them, taking Eowyn’s arm.

“Wearing? A blue jerkin, I think,” Eowyn shouted back. “Yes, with a red kerchief at his throat—”

“I *knew* it.” Arthur approached the whirlwind, unconsciously raising an arm to protect his face.

“What are you going to do?” cried Legolas.

“I’m not sure how,” Arthur replied, “but I believe I’m going home.” He peered into the eye of the storm. “Is that you, Merlin?” he shouted. “How in the gods’ names did you find me?”

The couple heard no reply, but Arthur turned towards them, and waved a brief farewell.

Then he stepped forward.

The whirlwind collapsed.

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

All was still.

And then a single voice broke the unnatural silence. "My Lord...?" said Sir Bors.

...

"I've found him!" shouted Merlin. "Over here!" He waved to the knights. "Careful," he said to Arthur.

"What happened?" Arthur, lying on his back, dazed, rubbed his forehead.

"The dragon hit you on the head," said Merlin.

"But... That was *days* ago."

"No," said Merlin. "Just a few minutes."

"But I *remember*—Lady Eowyn, and Legolas—the elf—"

"*Elf?*"

"I..." Arthur sat up and looked about him. "Where's Sir Bors?"

"The dragon took him," said Merlin. "Flew North with him."

"*Took* him?"

Merlin nodded.

"Well," said Arthur. "Poor old Bors."

THE END

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

The Lady and her Dragon

Paolo Uccello: *St George and the Dragon*



This was the inspiration for *A Yuletide Dragonhunt*. Uccello clearly knew too much about anatomy to give the dragon four legs *and* wings!

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

The Flower

Written for St Valentine's Day, 2007

Eowyn laid down her pen and, looking up from her Orc map, glanced out of the study window.

Two servants, having slipped into the courtyard below—her garden—and being unaware that their mistress could see them, were groping urgently, the man quickly hoisting the girl's skirts, the girl pulling open the man's leggings—

Eowyn caught a sudden glimpse of stiff flesh and turned away.

Such behaviour was forbidden; and Eowyn thought of sending someone down to stop them for, as mistress of the household, she was personally responsible for the honour of her maids.

But how could she deny them a joy that *she* envied?

"My Lady..."

Startled, Eowyn turned towards the study door. "Legolas!"

The elf placed his hand upon his heart and bowed his head. "Good morning."

"Good morning! Come in!" Since that day when he had found her, sitting in her garden—when he had held her, and sung to her—they had grown less formal with each other. Eowyn rose from her desk and, taking the elf by the arm, guided him to a group of chairs clustered, cosily, before the fireplace. "To what do we owe this pleasure?"

Legolas waited for her to sit before taking a seat himself. "I have been summoned to Minas Tirith," he said, "and it seemed like the perfect opportunity to make a little detour and bring you *this*."

"Hardly a *little* detour." She took the wooden box from him and looked at it curiously. It was tall and narrow with a hinged door and looked like the one of the cases that wine merchants used to protect their most precious vintages—except that it had holes drilled in the top. "What is it?"

"Open it and see."

Smiling, Eowyn slid back the catch and opened the door.

"A flower."

Legolas laughed—so fondly that Eowyn found herself blushing. "Not just *any* flower, *híril nín*," he said. "A very rare flower."

Eowyn looked at the plant more closely. It was about as big as her hand, with deep red petals and thick, succulent leaves.

"It is called a *hûnlass*," said Legolas, "and the edain of South Ithilien credit it with a very special power."

Power? Eowyn frowned, suspiciously, for there was still a hint of laughter in his voice. "Is it used in healing?"

"Of a sort."

A Yuletide Dragonhunt

"What does that mean?"

"Look at the shape of its leaves."

"They are like little hearts." *Is it used to make love potions?*

"It is believed," said Legolas, "to bring joy to all who see it."

See it? She looked up at him—only to find that *he* was looking at *her*, his eyes lingering upon her face. She blushed again. "Thank you."

"It was growing in the middle of the Doro Lanthron road," said Legolas, "dispensing much joy, but causing even more chaos. So one of the colonists dug it up, and asked me to find it a safe home. Shall we take it outside and settle it in your garden?" He rose from his seat, and strode over to the window.

"Yes,"—she remembered the amorous couple—"no! No, *wait!*" But the elf was already staring down into the courtyard. "Are they still there?" she asked, faintly.

"Yes," said Legolas.

And—except in battle—it was the only time that she had ever heard him sound angry, and she was surprised by it.

...

By the time they reached the garden, the lovers had disappeared. Legolas stood, hands on hips, staring at the plants they had crushed underfoot.

"I am sorry," said Eowyn, anxiously. "I should have stopped them, I know, but I..."

"This garden is not *theirs* to make free with," said the elf, bitterly. "It is o—it is *yours*."

Eowyn blushed deeply—and Legolas must have sensed her sudden, inappropriate, thoughts for he turned to her, and *he* seemed to be blushing, too. "Is there anything we can do," she asked, "is there an elven *blessing* that will...?"

But he took her arm, and patted her hand, already himself again. "We will dig up the injured plants and take them inside," he said, referring to the little glasshouse that he had had built in another courtyard. "Perhaps, with care, they will flourish again. Then, we will plant our new friend over here, well away from the walls, where it may grow safely. And, after that, my *worried* Lady,"—he smiled down at her, expectantly, and Eowyn felt her frown melt into an answering smile—"that is better! After that, I am at your disposal."

He bade her sit down on one of the stone benches, and went to work, carefully lifting each battered plant from the trampled earth and setting it in one of his wooden trays—all the while suggesting places that they might later ride out to, sights that they might see together.

And Eowyn, one hand resting on the little hûnlass in its wooden box, listened, smiling. She did not care where they went—she would gladly stay in the garden all afternoon.

She was happy.

But the edain of South Ithilien had been wrong. It was not their *plant* that had brought her joy.