

The time of the orcs has come

Downloaded from <http://www.eryn-carantaur.com>



Author: Ningloreth

Title: **The time of the orcs has come**

Story Number: 3

Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: Legolas and Eowyn return home to find that several large bands of orcs have settled on the outskirts of Eryn Carantaur. Why are they behaving so strangely? Our favourite couple battles a supernatural enemy.

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

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

The main characters in this story were created by JRR Tolkien and brought to the screen by Peter Jackson. No offence is intended and no profit is being made by borrowing them for use in this story.

Eryn Carantaur

The name means 'Great Red Forest'. *Eryn* means 'wood'. *Carantaur* is made from two words: *caran*, which means 'red' and *taur* which means 'great wood, forest' and also 'mighty, vast, overwhelming'.

The time of the orcs has come

Chapter 1: The threat

"As you can see, my Lord, my Lady, March Warden," said Lord Caranthir, Chief Counsellor of the elven colony of Eryn Carantaur, "a great deal has happened whilst you have been away.

"The orcs that you were tracking back and forth along the Anduin, Lady Eowyn, finally settled *here*, at Eithel Hûn," he pointed to the area on the large map that he had spread out on the Council table, "about five days after you left for Dol Amroth. Two days later, we received reports from a group of terrified wine traders—travelling here from Minas Tirith—of another band, lurking at the confluence of the Anduin and the Erui. A week after that, we heard of a third band, moving into Eryn Brethil. That is when I decided to send Rumil and Orophin on a scouting expedition."

Caranthir had been acting ruler of the colony for the month that Legolas had been away in Dol Amroth—and supervising the border patrols and maintaining Eowyn's orc map had been part of his duties.

"What did you find?" asked Legolas, turning to the brothers.

"That things were even worse than we had feared," replied Orophin. He rose from his seat and leant over the map. "We located the first group—Lady Eowyn's original marauders—" he acknowledged the woman respectfully, "quite easily. They were about fifty strong but, whilst we were watching, a further five Uruk Hai joined them—and there may be even more of them by now. The second group was much harder to scout. They have established themselves on the island of Toll Thâr and we could not get close enough to count them, but we estimated that there were about thirty of them, with about ten wargs. The third group—here," he pointed to a densely wooded area on the map, "is small—there are no more than a dozen of them—but they are well hidden. And," he said, pausing dramatically whilst he found the appropriate place on the map, "we found a fourth group, camped on the west bank of the Anduin, here, at Habad Penn, about—what would you say, Rumil, twenty of them?"

His brother shook his head. "Nearer thirty, I would say," he answered. "So far," he added, "they do not seem inclined to join forces, though whether they are not aware of each other or whether it is their natural tendency to distrust others, we could not tell. We did consider sending a small detachment of border guards out there to watch them and report any further movements, but we decided it was too dangerous."

"You were right," said Legolas. "Far too dangerous." He looked around the Council table. "First," he said, "I think we should thank Lady Eowyn for all the painstaking work she has put into gathering information about the orcs and plotting it on her map for the past two years—without her we would still be unaware of this threat to our colony." The assembled elves—and one dwarf—clapped their hands on the table; Eowyn bowed her head in embarrassment.

"Secondly," Legolas continued, "I would like each of your comments and suggestions—March Warden?"

Haldir looked at the map. "I say we take a force of fifty warriors out to the Anduin and deal with each band, one at a time, starting with the largest, at Eithel Hûn. We need to strike now, before they group together. We cannot afford to wait."

His brothers murmured in agreement.

Legolas nodded, considering the advice. "Lord Caranthir?"

"I agree with the March Warden," he said, "we must act whilst their numbers are still relatively small and whilst the bands are isolated, though..."

The time of the orcs has come

His voice trailed away.

"My lord?" prompted Legolas.

"What concerns me, Lord Legolas," said the older elf, "is their motives. Why are they gathering here? What is attracting them?"

"That is exactly what I have been wondering, Lord Caranthir," said a quiet, feminine voice. The company turned to Eowyn. "This is unlike anything I have seen in the two years I have been tracking the orcs," she said. "Orcs do not plan, they seldom co-operate, and I have never seen them stay in the same place for any length of time. They act on instinct, only very occasionally deviating from their normal behaviour—and then only to go on short-lived forays. Here, they are behaving as if—well, as if they are waiting for something to happen—or for someone to arrive."

"It is as if they have been summoned," said Lord Caranthir. "That is what I have been thinking."

"Yes, I agree—though we may be mistaken, my lord, for our minds actively seek patterns and explanations, and sometimes we see them where they do not exist," Eowyn admitted. "What is this, here?" She pointed at the map, to a small symbol beside the river, roughly at the centre of the area occupied by the orc bands, "Minas Athrad?"

"It is a ruin, my lady," said Orophin. "Rumil and I searched it thoroughly. The castle once controlled access to the river and, presumably, navigation along it. But it has long been abandoned. And we could find no sign of any recent occupation."

"Strange," said Eowyn. "Athrad. Does that not mean 'ford'?"

"Yes, it does, melmenya," said Legolas. "Is the Anduin still fordable there?"

"With difficulty, my lord," said Orophin. "The level of the river must have risen in recent times—perhaps that is why the castle was abandoned—and the current is now swift across the rocks. Rumil and I crossed using a rope, but it would be difficult to lead a line of packhorses across, and impossible to take a cart. Even a group of riders might risk losing one or more of their number if the river was in spate—though for a band of orcs none of this would be of any consideration," he added.

"So the band now at Habad Penn could easily cross the river and join with the others," said Legolas. "Gimli?"

"I agree with the March Warden," said the dwarf. "Strike now and strike hard. Problem solved."

"Problem solved for now, Gimli," said Eowyn tactfully, "but if something really is drawing them to Minas Athrad it will not be long before more orcs arrive to take their place. We need to find out why they are coming here and deal with that, too. I have little experience of orcs other than on the battlefield—is it possible to question them?"

"Melmenya?"

"Could we take one of them prisoner and ask him what he is doing?"

The elves and the dwarf looked from one to another, shaking their heads in surprise. "That is a suggestion I have never heard before, my lady," said Haldir.

"No," said Legolas, "nor have I. Normally, we just slaughter them like animals. But they do have intelligence of sorts—it does make sense..." He smiled at Eowyn. "Does anyone have anything else to add? Lord Fingolfin? You have been very quiet."

The time of the orcs has come

"I am afraid I have no practical experience with orcs, my lord, and can add little to your discussion," said the Counsellor. "But my concern is that you are planning to travel to Gondor in ten days' time and I think that it is important—as much for the morale of the colonists as for their safety—that you deal with the problem before then."

"Yes, my lord," said Legolas. He thought for a moment. "I agree. We will leave for Minas Athrad in two days. Haldir—I want a troop of at least fifty warriors, plus a support crew—a swordsmith, a bowyer with a stringer and a fletcher, a healer and a cook. We will make our base inside the castle ruins and—once we have confirmed the orcs' positions—we will make four separate raids on them. We will take a few prisoners from each band, melmenya, question them and send the information back to you. In the meantime, I will write to the King of Gondor and explain that we may not be able to attend his Yuletide celebrations, since we have no idea what we may find at Minas Athrad nor how long it might take us to deal with whatever is there. Gimli, I assume that you will be happy to come hunt some orc with us?"

"Indeed I will, lad, indeed I will!"

"Legolas—" said Eowyn, "what do you mean, you will send the information *back* to me? Where will I be?"

"Here, melmenya."

There was a noticeable gasp from Rumil and Orophin, but the rest of the company managed to remain silent.

"Why?" asked Eowyn.

"An orc hunt is no place for a woman, Eowyn."

"My lords, March Warden, gentlemen," said Eowyn calmly, "would you leave us please?"

"Lord Legolas is right, my lady—" began Haldir.

But Eowyn, though she was very fond of the March Warden, did not permit him to continue any further. "I wish to speak to Legolas—alone—Haldir," she said.

"*He is bound for the Halls of Mandos!*" whispered Orophin to his brothers as the trio left the Council Chamber.

...

Eowyn waited until she and Legolas were alone in the Council Chamber, then turned on him, angrily. "I do not believe what you have just done," she said. "We agreed—we agreed that this was to be a union of equals. And now you have destroyed everything." She could feel her eyes filling with tears, and her throat burning with the need to shed them, and she was determined not to let Legolas see her cry—not under these circumstances—so she rose and walked to the window, turning her back on him.

"Eowyn—Eowyn! An orc hunt is no place for you!"

"I have fought orcs before!"

"On the open plain! On the battlefield!"

"And in the caves at Helm's Deep!"

"But not in the forest! Not one-to-one in the dark! Not where they could capture you, and carry you away, and strip you naked, and rape and torture you and—and leave you crippled in

The time of the orcs has come

body and spirit, Eowyn. I cannot endure the thought of it—"

"You cannot endure it! Who do you think you are?" stormed Eowyn, turning to face him. "This is *my* life! I decide how to use it—and I want to be there. I have been tracking those orcs for two years. I know more about their behaviour than anyone here—you said yourself that you would not know of the danger were it not for me! Now, suddenly, I am not fit to take part in the raids. Not fit to see my own work come to fruition—"

"Do not be childish—"

"Childish! You had better be careful Legolas Greenleaf, because you are acting like a man—a stupid, bigoted, oppressive man. You humiliated me in front of Haldir, Gimli and your Counsellors! And I am beginning to think that I was wrong to stay here with you—I do not know you at all!" And she pushed past him and walked angrily towards the chamber door.

"No!" cried Legolas. "NO! COME BACK!" And he ran after her and gripped her around the waist and dragged her back towards the Council table, knocking over two chairs with a crash.

...

Haldir, hovering outside the Council Chamber door, reached for the latch.

"Leave them be, lad," said a gruff voice behind them. "They will sort it out."

"But—the noise. Something may have happened to—"

"Surely you have heard a lover's tiff before? I would wager you have had a fair few yourself! They are being quiet enough now, though—no doubt making up."

Haldir's face froze in a strange grimace as he tried to master his emotions, and his struggle tore at Gimli's gentle heart.

"Come with me, lad," said the dwarf, "I have a few jars of something called 'cider' in my chambers—the hobbits brought it from The Shire. It is made from apples—a very pleasant taste and far stronger than your elven wine." *And just the thing for drowning sorrows in*, he thought.

...

He crushed her against his chest and held her there with all his elven strength. "Shhhhh, shhhhh, melmenya," he whispered, rocking her back and forth. "You do not mean it; you know you do not mean it..."

"Legolas—"

"Shhhhh, shhhhh. You are just angry, meleth nín. And you are right to be angry because I did embarrass you. But that does not mean that we are not meant to be together, Eowyn nín; it does not change our love for each other..." and he held her even more tightly.

"I am going to Minas Athrad with you," said Eowyn, firmly.

"Why will you not listen to sense, Eowyn nín?" asked Legolas.

"Because it is not sense," she replied. She moved her foot. "And if you do not want to find your balls hanging from your ears, melethron nín, I suggest you let go of me."

But, far from releasing her, Legolas pushed her over the table, so that she was trapped beneath him, and held her down with the weight of his body. "Shhhhh, melmenya," he

The time of the orcs has come

whispered and kissed her forehead. And—to her surprise—she could feel him hardening against her.

"Legolas!" she cried, outraged, and she struggled to free herself, but her movements only made his penis rub harder against her belly and then, as she struggled more, against the flesh between her legs. *Oh gods!* she thought. *How could I possibly think I could escape him?*

"A less honourable woman than I would *break* you with sex, Legolas," she said, her teeth clenched. "She would withhold it until you were forced to give her what she wanted simply to satisfy your own needs. You are fortunate that *I* am an honourable woman—but I will not give up on this; I am coming to Minas Athrad with you."

Legolas reached down between their bodies and began tugging at Eowyn's skirt, taking care to rub and stroke her each time he hoisted the fabric an inch or two more.

I must keep my head, thought Eowyn. "I will not be distracted like this, Legolas," she said, still struggling. But she moaned when he entered her and, without thinking, she wrapped her legs around him. "Do you remember the first day we spent together?" she gasped. "We were—oh gods!—we were investigating the Mistress of the Ceremony's murder and—and when we went to her chambers—gods, Legolas!—to her chambers, the door was open and—and—and you told me to wait outside and went in alone and—and I had no choice but to wait—oh!—to wait, for I was not armed—oh!—and I would have been a liability to you. But I swore—I swore—oh!—I swore that I would never let you go into danger—into danger alone again. And I have proved myself since then—ah—at—Dol Amroth—ah—ah—oh gods—yes!—and on the *Sea Maiden*—yes—yes!—and I will again, Legolas—I will again—I will—I will—I—oh! oh! OH GODS! OH GODS! LEGOLAS!" And she screamed as they both climaxed together.

...

"You need not think you have won, Legolas," said Eowyn, as they lay side by side on the floor, recovering.

"Melmenya—"

"No! Do not 'melmenya' me! If you leave me behind I will simply follow you. If I am forced to travel alone I will do so—and who knows what might happen to me then! And if you lock me up, I will just persuade someone else to set me free—and you know there is no one amongst your people who can resist me. I will be with you on those raids, Legolas. Nothing will stop me. I—"

"For Mandos' sake, woman, be QUIET!" cried Legolas. And he rolled on top of her and covered her mouth with his own.

...

"You stay with me. Right beside me. You never move more than five paces from my side. You do not go haring off to help Haldir or Gimli or one of the others. You do not chase off after an orc by yourself. You do not wander off to investigate something interesting—do not pretend you do not know what I mean, Eowyn, I *know* you!"

Legolas was lying on his back with his eyes closed, so he could not see Eowyn mimicking him as he laid down his rules.

"At night, you stay in the camp, beside the fire, beside me. You sleep in my bedroll; you stand watch with me. You stay beside me at all times! Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," she said, deciding that since she had won the war she could afford to lose

The time of the orcs has come

the skirmish. "But it will be difficult to relieve myself squatting beside you."

"Well you will just have to learn."

...

"Her hair is spun from the purest gold, her skin is as clear and as smooth as the finest alabaster, her eyes have fire and depth like flawless sapphires. There is none so fair as she," said Gimli.

"I was her March Warden for almost five thousand years," said Haldir, taking another draught of cider. "There is nothing you can tell me about The Lady. And I admit that she is fair... very fair... but she lacks the fire, the warmth of spirit that truly captures the heart."

He shook his head at the dwarf—both of him—sitting in the chair opposite.

"Lady Eow—er—a certain mortal lady of my acquaintance, though she is, perhaps, less obviously fair than Lady Galadriel, has more *life* in her, more *love* to give, more—"

"Lad, lad," said Gimli, gently. "Like The Lady, she belongs to another."

...

"Good morning, melmenya," whispered Legolas, raising himself on his elbow beside her and kissing her forehead.

Eowyn smiled, sleepily, and wrapped an arm around his waist. "You are very lively for someone who has spent most of the night in strenuous exercise," she said, reaching up to kiss his mouth.

"I am an elf, meleth nín," he replied, proudly. "We do not tire like men—the harder we work, the more energy we have!" And he nibbled her neck.

Eowyn laughed, wriggling on the bed beneath him. "Even so," she said, "you cannot afford to waste any more energy on me—not if you are going to prepare an expeditionary force of fifty elves in less than two days."

...

Haldir was late for his meeting with Legolas—during the night some orc had sawn off the top of his head and was stirring his brains with a spoon. *I knew there was a reason why we did not trust dwarves*, he said to himself.

"I am so glad that you are getting to know Gimli, mellon nín" said Legolas. "There is no truer elf-friend nor more dependable comrade-at-arms in all of Middle Earth. He has a heart of oak."

Why are you so cheerful? wondered Haldir, miserably.

"Now, down to business," said Legolas. "I want fifty warriors—all must be skilled archers, and as many as possible should have experience of hand-to-hand combat with orcs. Who do we have?"

Haldir rode out a wave of nausea. "I have already sent word to the settlements at Doro Lanthron and Talad Loth," he said. "By tomorrow morning we should have sixty-five warriors available—including ourselves and Lord Gimli—more than half of whom were at Helm's Deep. Six of them are former Mirkwood border guards."

"Good," said Legolas. "There are some very able orc hunters amongst the Mirkwood elves."

The time of the orcs has come

Who would that leave to defend the city, if necessary?"

"I have called up some of the older elves and the war-trained ellith," said Haldir. "Lord Caranthir would lead them. I will also be leaving ten of my border guards on patrol."

Legolas nodded. "It is the best we can do; and, please Valar, they will never be needed. Who will we have in the support crew?"

"I have had several volunteers," said Haldir. "A swordsmith from Imladris, Nolofinwë—I have heard good reports of him—your father's bowyer, Master Taurnil, who will bring his own stringer and fletcher. And, of course, the healer, Master Dínendal."

"He volunteered? Do you think he is up to it?" asked Legolas.

"He is a very able healer—"

"That is not what I meant," interrupted Legolas.

Haldir gripped his chair as another wave of nausea broke over him. "No, I realise that. I think we should keep Dínendal at the encampment, tending the wounded, and select another healer, tougher and with more battle experience, to work in the field."

Legolas nodded. "Good," he said. "We will also need a field cook. We will take enough lembas to feed sixty-five warriors for ten days, but the cook can make his own arrangements for additional supplies—the palace storerooms are open to him. We will need sufficient pack horses to carry the support crew's equipment—perhaps some of the farmers will supply additional animals." Haldir nodded, weakly, and Legolas added, with a smirk, "I see that Gimli has had you playing his drinking game."

"Yes," said Haldir, "but never again!" Then, thinking back to his state of mind the previous evening, he added, "Will Lady Eowyn be accompanying us?"

Legolas sighed. "Yes, she will," he said, "though I have given her strict orders to remain by my side at all times." Haldir nodded, wondering how well the 'strict orders' had been received. "But," continued Legolas, "her being who she is, mellon nín, I would be grateful if you will also keep a watch on her. Do not be obvious, though, or she will deliberately try to evade us."

Haldir was flattered that Legolas had asked him to watch over Eowyn. But he fervently wished that she were staying safely behind.

...

Eowyn had spent the whole day making her own preparations for the expedition.

She had carefully copied the relevant portion of her orc map, at a larger scale, onto a new sheet of parchment, adding additional information about the terrain, and about the size and behaviour of other orc bands that she knew were lurking just outside the area. Then she carefully rolled the new map, slipped it into a wooden tube she had begged from one of the palace carpenters, and stowed it in her travelling pack, together with a pen, some ink, a wax tablet and a stylus.

Once the map had been taken care of, she took out her sword and scabbard, her mail hauberk, her boiled leather cuirass and her leather boots, and carefully cleaned and prepared them. Then she assembled her repair kit—shears, awl, thimble, needles and thread, spare buckles—her sharpening stone, pumice for cleaning her mail, dubbin and rags for her leather, and tucked them all in her pack.

Next she checked her bow, quiver, and sheath of arrows. She unstrung the bow ready for

The time of the orcs has come

travel and slipped the bowstring, a spare, and a piece of archer's wax in her pack. Then she laid out two linen shifts—one to wear and one to wash—a woollen jerkin, leggings, leather bracers and gloves. She would not need a helm.

Finally, she opened the drawer of the dressing table she shared with Legolas and took out a small earthenware jar. She knew that she was being silly—she knew that every woman or elleth who had ever stayed in the colony had one exactly like it, a small gift from the Lord of Eryn Carantaur. But it was the first thing that Legolas had ever given her—a soothing lotion delicately scented with rose and watermint oils—and she wanted it with her. She wrapped it carefully in her spare shift and tucked it in her pack.

She was ready!

...

Early the following day, elves from all over the colony gathered on the archery practice field. The Mirkwood elves were standing together.

"Almost like old times," said Amras to Orodreth and Maeglin, "hunting orcs with Prince Legolas."

"But on a rather different scale from our Mirkwood raids," said Orodreth. "We never took a swordsmith or a bowyer! It was strictly repair your own weapons. And we never had a proper cook—though we could have used one! I remember eating some very strange concoctions, courtesy of Maeglin's enthusiasm for high class cooking."

"What was that stuff he kept putting in the rabbit stew? Tasted like orcs' filth?" asked Finrod.

"Seregon. Mithrandir had told him it helped keep the bowels regular," said Camthalion, joining in the banter.

"We spent a whole week diving behind trees before we worked out what was causing it," laughed Amras.

Maeglin laughed too. "At the time you were all grateful that I was willing to do most of the cooking," he said. "And Prince Legolas was always ready to learn from me."

"Prince Legolas was eager to learn from anyone, Maeglin," said Valandil, self-styled leader of the group, "always being held back by his father."

"Shame," said Finrod. The other elves nodded in agreement.

"He has turned out pretty well, considering," said Valandil. "Travelling to Imladris and joining the Fellowship of the Ring was the making of him. And that woman—"

"Shhhhh. It looks like something is about to happen," said Camthalion.

...

"Citizens of Eryn Carantaur," said Legolas, "warriors. Our colony was founded—at the end of the Ring war—to bring joy to a land long tainted by the dark forces of Mordor. For three years we elves have nurtured the forest, bringing life where there was once only death, and growth where there was once only decay.

"But now a new threat has arisen—a threat to the very meaning and existence of our colony.

"Over past weeks, bands of orcs have been settling along the banks of the Anduin, in the region of Minas Athrad."

The time of the orcs has come

Some of the elves murmured in surprise.

"We do not know why they have come, but we do know that they cannot be allowed to stay—for there can be no peaceful co-existence with yrch!"

Some of the warriors cheered, elven fashion, with a hard, disciplined bark, stamping one foot on the ground.

"I ride forth today with March Warden Haldir and his guards to deal with these orcs, and I ask you all to ride with me. We will track down these vermin and we will destroy them. We will not allow them to harm the forest again!"

And the elven warriors drew their swords and raised their bows and cheered in unison, again and again.

...

Just a few hours ago, I was threatening to leave him, thought Eowyn. I was seriously considering going back to Faramir to live as his 'sister'! She shook her head. He can be the most infuriating person in the world—far more annoying than Faramir ever was! He is so much older and yet so much younger than I; so much wiser and yet so much more naïve. He is immortal where I am mortal—cold where I am hot, hot where I am cold—he is elf where I am human. Yet he is my love and I would not change him—not for all riches in Middle Earth...

And she drew her sword and held it aloft and cheered with the elves around her.

The time of the orcs has come

Extra scene: I have fought orcs before!

The declaration

"We will place the reserves along the wall," said Aragorn, looking up at the battlements. "They can support the archers from above the gate."

Legolas followed his friend through the milling crowd. "Aragorn," he pleaded, "you *must* rest. You are no use to us half-alive—"

"My lord..." A woman's voice emerged from the general hubbub. "*Aragorn!*"

To the elf's surprise, Aragorn immediately turned back to speak to her. And, though Legolas tried to busy himself helping Gimli direct the stream of villagers to the safety of the caves, he could not prevent his elven ears overhearing their conversation.

"I am to be sent with the *women* into the caves," said Eowyn.

"That is an honourable charge."

"To mind the children," she said, desperately, "to find food and bedding when the men return. What renown is there in that?"

"My lady," said Aragorn, gently, "a time may come for valour without renown. Who then will your people look to in the last defence?"

"Let me stand at your side."

"It is not in my power to command it."

"You do not command the others to stay!" she cried, passionately, "They fight beside you because they would not be parted from you. Because they *love* you."

There, thought Legolas. *She has said it*. And he waited, his heart frozen in his chest, for Aragorn's reply.

But it never came.

"I am sorry," said the woman. And she pushed past Aragorn and stumbled into the crowd. And Legolas caught her—one hand on her lower back, the other on her arm—and steadied her, and, for a split second, their eyes—hers full of tears—met.

Ai, hiril velui, he thought; and he squeezed her arm, gently. But anger flared in her eyes, and she straightened her arm and held it rigid, silently ordering him to let her go. And, the moment he released her, she ran away, with the women and children, into the caves.

...

The challenge

"*Aragorn...*"

"I have no time to rest, Legolas."

"That is not what I was going to say. You must *decide*."

"Decide?" Aragorn was on the move again, checking the fortifications. Legolas ran after him.

"She deserves better than this. They *both* deserve better than this."

Aragorn stopped walking. "What do you mean?"

"You cannot have both, mellon nín. You must *choose*."

The time of the orcs has come

"I have never encouraged Eowyn."

"She is lonely—vulnerable—Aragorn. The smallest gesture from you raises her hopes."

"Must I be cruel to her?"

"You must be *honest* with her. Even if Arwen *has* left Middle Earth, your heart will never be free to love Eowyn. Not as she deserves. She needs—"

Aragorn's eyes widened. "*You...*" he said. "You are in love with her." Legolas looked away. "She is *mortal*, Legolas."

"Do you think I do not know that? But so are you. And you are betrothed to an eldar."

"Arwen has a choice—although I do not wish it for her—she *can* choose to be mortal. You cannot."

Legolas glanced towards the caves. "No. But I *do* have a choice," he said. "A different one."

...

Natha daged dhaer

"Farmers, farriers, stable boys," said Aragorn, quietly. "These are no soldiers."

"Most have seen too many winters," agreed Gimli.

"Or too few," said Legolas. "Look at them. They are frightened: I can see it in their eyes." In his anguish he slipped naturally into his own language. "Boe a hyn: neled herain... dan caer menig!"

"Si beriathar hýn ammaeg nâ ned Edoras," replied Aragorn.

Legolas shook his head, beset by images of what the orcs would do to the women—to the Shieldmaiden—if the warriors fell. "Aragorn, nedin dagor hen ú-'erir ortheri," he said, "Natha daged dhaer."

But Aragorn misunderstood the cause of his fear. "Then *I* shall die as one of them!" he said, angrily, and walked away.

Legolas, unused to conflict with humans, went to follow. But Gimli, who was more experienced in such matters, caught his arm. "Let him go, lad," he said. "Let him be. It will soon blow over."

...

Allies

Sensing her presence in the armoury, Legolas raised his eyes. "Lady Eowyn," he asked, "what are you doing here?"

"Is Lord Aragorn...?" She looked around the chamber.

"He has just popped out for a moment, lass," said Gimli.

"Good," said Eowyn. "I *mean...*" She cleared her throat. "I need swords—as many as I can get." She opened a chest bearing the royal crest, took out a small broadsword, evidently made for her, and strapped it around her waist. Then she looked up at Legolas. "There are at least ten women in the caves who have been trained to fight. If the orcs break through the door..."

"I understand, my lady," said Legolas.

"You will help me?"

"Of course."

The time of the orcs has come

"They must be small and light. And... I will need help carrying them," she admitted.

Legolas turned to the dwarf. "Gimli?"

"Aye," said the dwarf, investing the word with a whole gamut of meaning. Legolas smiled at him gratefully.

"We will *both* help, Lady Eowyn," said Legolas.

...

The reality

Gimli set the weapons chest on the cave floor and straightened up, rubbing his back. He patted Eowyn's arm. "Good luck lass—we had better be getting back. Aragorn will have calmed down by now, lad. He will be looking for us."

"I will join you in a moment, Gimli," said Legolas.

The dwarf gave him a searching glance. Then, with a brief bow to Eowyn, he left the cave.

"Thank you," said Eowyn. She smiled up at him. "And I am sorry."

"For what?"

"For my behaviour earlier, on the wall. I was angry with someone else and *you* bore the brunt of it."

Legolas shook his head. "It was nothing *híril nín*; I had forgotten it."

"*Thank you.*"

Their eyes met. And Legolas drew her closer—there was something he needed to say. "If they break through the door, yours will be the heaviest burden of all," he said, softly. "If they break through, *you* must..." He faltered.

"Must what, my lord?"

"You must kill your charges before you let them be taken."

There was a moment of silence—a silence so profound that Legolas could hear it, filling his ears—

"I know," she said, gravely. "*All* the women know it... It is why we need the swords."

Dear Valar. "I have underestimated you my lady," said Legolas.

"You are not alone in that, my lord," she said. "Men are *so* arrogant—keeping able women from open battle, but condemning them to far worse horrors here below. *Valour without renown!* Let *them* kill their own children!"

"Oh, my lady," cried Legolas, "I pray it will not come to that!"

Another long moment passed between them. Then, "Gimli is waiting," she said, softly. "And Aragorn will be looking for you..."

...

The men

"The fortress is taken," said Theoden, in despair. "It is over."

Aragorn dropped the bench he and Legolas were carrying and rounded on the king. "You said this fortress would never fall while your men defended it. They still defend it. They have *died*

The time of the orcs has come

defending it!" He looked from Theoden to Gamling and back. "Is there no other way for the women and children to get out of the caves?"

Behind him, Legolas, still helping build the barricade, seized a table—letting crockery and silverware slide to the floor—and rushed back to the door with it.

"There is one passage," said Gamling. "It leads into the mountains. But they will not get far. The Uruk Hai are too many."

"Send word for the women and children to make for the mountain pass," said Aragorn, decisively. "And barricade the entrance!"

Gamling acknowledged the order with a brief nod.

"So much death," muttered Theoden. "What can men do against such reckless hate?"

"Ride out with me," said Aragorn. "Ride out and meet them."

"For death and glory..."

"For *Rohan*. For your people."

"Yes," said Theoden, his spirit rising, once more, at the suggestion. "Yes! The Horn of Helm Hammerhand shall sound in the Deep one last time."

...

The Shieldmaiden

"The doors! The doors!" cried several voices.

"They are *breaking through!*"

Children were crying, women were sobbing—one distraught woman grabbed Eowyn and held her tight. The Shieldmaiden extricated herself gently, handing her to one of her friends. "There is a passage into the mountains," she said to a fellow warrior, "do you know where it starts?"

"Yes."

"Take everyone," she referred to the other Shieldmaidens, "down to the entrance, and begin sending the women and children through. Tell them to prepare themselves for the worst, but do nothing until I give the signal."

"What are *you* going to do, my lady?"

"Defend the door."

"Be careful."

Eowyn squeezed her arm. "Go!" Then she drew her sword and advanced up the passage towards the cave mouth, flitting from rock to column, keeping to the shadows. *Are they already inside?* she wondered. *Can I really sense them? Or is it merely fear that is making my heart pound?*

As she neared the cave mouth, she heard the wooden door splinter. But a grotesque shadow, splashed across the wall ahead, told her that at least one orc had already entered.

"May the gods aid me," she whispered. "And may the elf's prayer be granted..."

Sword at the ready, she placed her back to a column of stone and lay in wait. She knew that she must be swift and silent; she knew that she must find her enemy's weakness and strike without mercy—that much her training had drilled into her.

But how she would stand up when the moment came, she did not know. In the conscious part of

The time of the orcs has come

her mind she was chanting, over and over, *Orc, orc, orc*; then *Aragorn, Aragorn*; and then, because 'Aragorn' was too long for a battle cry, *Elf, elf, elf...*

She waited.

Suddenly the dull sheen of black armour—a filthy breast plate—appeared before her eyes; she spotted its weakness (at the neck); she brought up her sword; and struck, "*ELF!*"

The orc's yellow teeth snarled, his black blood spurted, she thrust again, and he fell, almost taking her with him. Shoulders screaming with the strain, she twisted her sword to free it, pulled it out, and raised it to deal with the next orc.

"*ELF!*"—she slashed his throat and watched him fall, clasp his wound, his last breath bursting through the ragged cut in spurts, like fiendish laughter.

She swallowed hard. Her belly had turned to water...

Orcs and Uruk Hai were swarming in now—five, perhaps six of them, were already in the passage—closing on her—and there were more behind.

They must not pass. But she needed help...

She waited until the first orc was almost in striking distance. Then, with her sword slightly lowered—and not needing to *feign* the fear in her eyes—she began to retreat, drawing them deeper into the cave, where she knew the passage narrowed and the *walls* would help her. The leading orc was so confident he did not even raise his sword until it was too late.

ELF! She struck when instinct told her it was time, watching her enemy's bloodlust turn to fear as she sliced through his throat, almost severing his spine.

And then her entire world contracted to a patchwork of glaring eyes, snarling teeth, chinks in armour and spurting blood. "*ELF,*" she shouted, "*ELF, Yaaargh—ELF!*"

"We are too late! They have already broken in!" A familiar voice finally pierced her battle-trance.

"Here," she cried, "over here! *Help me!*"

Moments later, the soldiers had cut their way to her and, for the first time in her life, the Shieldmaiden was fighting side-by-side with men.

...

The aftermath

The rohirrim rode into Helm's Deep, victorious.

Legolas watched Aragorn swing from his saddle, saw the Shieldmaiden—splashed with Orcs' blood—throw herself into his arms, saw Aragorn's expression as he held her.

You cannot have them both, Aragorn, he thought. *And you are not being fair to her...*

But he turned his back on them and went to find Gimli.

The time of the orcs has come

Chapter 2: Something evil

The long column of elves wound its way silently through the forest of Eryn Carantaur. Legolas had planned to travel the last few miles—where forest gave way to open flood plain—under cover of darkness. And as dusk fell, the column left the forest, cut eastwards across the flood plain and joined the Athrad Road.

The ruins of Minas Athrad stood, dark and mysterious, silhouetted against the starry sky.

Slowly and quietly, the elves threaded their way down the road, through the ruined gatehouse and into the castle ward. Legolas set guards at the gatehouse and at the breaches in the great walls. Then, with the castle secure, the elves set to work by the light of the moon.

Eowyn watched in fascination as groups of elves worked silently in perfect accord, anticipating one another's movements, and providing timely help, like bees in a hive. They stabled the horses in the shelter of the northern wall, and installed the support crew in the ruins of the keep, turning the Great Hall into a workshop and the solar into a healing room. The cook set up his field kitchen in one of the two bastions on the southern wall. And Legolas commandeered the other bastion as a war room.

...

The Mirkwood elves had escorted the support crew on the journey and were now installing the craftsmen and their equipment in the Great Hall.

Orodreth and Maeglin had helped the swordsmith, Nolo-finwë, test the chimney of the massive fireplace and erect his portable furnace. "The walls of this building are very thick," said Nolo-finwë, "and the flue is well-sealed, so I should have no trouble getting the fire up to temperature—and without filling the healing room above full of smoke..."

Finrod and Amras had helped the bowyer, a fellow Mirkwood elf called Taurnil, to improvise a workbench against the eastern wall of the Hall.

"The light will be good here, Mahtan," said Taurnil to his fletcher, "coming from all around us. And we can hang our patterns on this pier." He looked up towards the ceiling. "That is strange—the pier is not full height..."

Finrod turned to Taurnil's stringer, "We have met before..." he said.

"No, I do not believe so."

"You are not from Mirkwood—"

"No."

"So it must have been in Imladris that we met, when I attended the Council of Elrond with Prince Legolas."

"I have told you," said the stringer, "that we have never met before—"

"Fëanáro," called Taurnil, "come and help me position this vise."

"Excuse me," said the stringer to Finrod.

Fëanáro, thought Finrod. *Give me time. I will remember where I have seen you before.*

...

Finally, when the camp was complete, the elves laid out their bedrolls under the stars, and

The time of the orcs has come

settled down in the grassy castle ward to rest. Lulled by their gentle singing, Eowyn soon fell asleep.

When she awoke it was still dark.

She was lying—as Legolas had insisted when 'he had agreed to let her come'—in Legolas' bedroll, snuggled in his arms, warm and comfortable. Legolas was awake, still singing softly to the stars. *How unworldly elves can be*, she thought. *How wonderful and how different from men! How could I ever think of leaving him?*

However infuriating he can be sometimes...

And she rolled over so that she was lying on top of Legolas and kissed him, tenderly.

"Good morning, melmenya," he whispered, "are you warm enough?"

"Mmmmm," she whispered back, burying her face in his hair. She felt his hands slide down her back and wrap themselves around her hips, pulling her body against his, and she laughed softly at the proof of his love for her.

Legolas laughed too. "We cannot now, melmenya," he whispered, stroking her hair, "I need to make a start on organising the raid." He hesitated. "I am sorry, Eowyn. You were right and I was wrong. We did agree that ours would be a relationship of equals and I had no right to try to stop you coming here." And he kissed the top of her head. "Besides," he added, mischievously, "I like having you in my bedroll."

Eowyn raised her head, so that she could look him in the eye when she gave him her stinging reply, but a movement—like the movement of a creature—over by the castle keep caught her attention. And some instinct told her that whatever it was would disappear if she startled it. *I must keep very still*, she thought, just raising her eyes to get a better look. *Gods, what is that?* And for a moment she was completely overcome by fear.

"What is wrong, melmenya?" asked Legolas, anxiously.

"Shhhhh!" She pressed her hands down on his shoulders to keep him still.

But the creature, striding across the castle ward, had become aware of her. It paused for the briefest of moments, turning to look her directly in the eye, then it continued on its journey, disappearing through a gap in the castle wall, its graceful, sinuous motion at odds with its hideous appearance.

For a moment, Eowyn continued to watch the empty space. Then she buried her face in Legolas' shoulder and cried.

"Oh gods," she sobbed, "Oh gods, no!"

...

"Are you sure it was not an orc, my lady?" asked Haldir.

"Of course I am sure—it did not look like an orc—"

"Orcs come in many shapes and sizes," Haldir persisted.

"IT WAS NOT AN ORC!"

"Melmenya!" cried Legolas, surprised by her uncharacteristic outburst, and he put his arms around her and tried to calm her.

The time of the orcs has come

"Describe it to us again, my lady," said Gimli.

"It looked like a man—or an elf—tall and lean and it walked upright. But it was naked and covered in thick grey hair—everywhere except top of its head, which was bald. It had long fingernails, like claws. And its face... Its face was angry and it was baring its teeth." Then she added, in a very small voice, "And I was afraid of it..."

Legolas hugged her, exchanging glances with Haldir and Gimli, who both nodded in agreement. This was not like Eowyn. The Shieldmaiden who had protected the women and children at Helm's Deep by standing at the entrance to the caves and slaying every orc that tried to enter and who had ridden into battle at Pelennor Field, with a hobbit before her, bringing down two Mûmakil and slaying the Witch King of Angmar—this woman did not frighten easily.

"We will search the keep again, melmenya," said Legolas, "looking for any trace of this thing; and tonight we will post guards within the castle wall as well as without."

"You think it will come back?" asked Haldir.

"I think," said Legolas, "from what Eowyn has told us about it, that we are sleeping in its lair."

...

Shortly after dawn, Rumil and Orophin returned from scouting the main orc band at Eithel Hûn. "They are still there," said Orophin, "clustered around the spring itself. About sixty of them now."

"They are strangely subdued," added Rumil. "Normally groups of orcs are noisy. They bluster and bicker and fight. But these are just sitting. Waiting..."

"It is eery," agreed Orophin.

The scouts sent to observe the other orc bands—on the island of Toll Thâr, to the south west in Eryn Brethil, and across the river at Habad Penn—reported similar behaviour.

"They sit and wait," said one of the Mirkwood elves. "Some of them have their knees drawn up to their chests and rock back and forth, moaning. It is as if they are in pain. My lord..." he hesitated.

"Yes, Valandil?" prompted Legolas.

"It—it seems wrong to attack them when they are so defenceless."

Legolas nodded. "It does. But we have no choice Valandil. This—this condition of theirs may only be temporary. And I would not be surprised if our attack roused them from their stupor."

"At least," said Haldir, when the Mirkwood elves had left them, "it appears we can attack each band in turn without worrying too much about the others coming to their aid."

"Yes, it does," said Legolas. "Eowyn, what are your thoughts on all this?"

Eowyn, who had been sitting quietly, staring at her own feet, raised her head and looked at Legolas. Her face was pale and drawn and her eyes seemed unnaturally large. "I think it is the creature," she said.

"Melmenya?"

"I think they have seen it."

Legolas motioned Gimli, Haldir and the rest of the elves to withdraw. Haldir herded them

The time of the orcs has come

outside, but he himself remained hovering just beyond the door.

Legolas knelt before Eowyn and took her hands. They were deathly cold. "My love," he said, "you are not well and I am going to ask Master Dínendal to look at you."

She stared at him, surprised. "There is nothing wrong with me, Legolas," she said. "The creature—the creature frightened me, that is all. And I think it has frightened the orcs. There is something strange about it. But I am not ill..."

But her voice sounded small and brittle.

"Shhhhh, my love," Legolas whispered, kissing her forehead gently, "let me take you to Master Dínendal—do it just to humour your stupid, bigoted, oppressive elf-husband. There is plenty of time—we will not be leaving on the first raid until just before dusk."

And he lifted her into his arms and carried her across the ward, into the keep, to the solar, which Master Dínendal had prepared as a healing room.

...

"What did she mean, the orcs have seen the creature?" asked Gimli.

"She is not well," said Orophin. "She does not know what she is say—" Rumil gave him a sharp dig in the ribs as Legolas and Haldir approached.

"How is she?" asked Gimli.

"I do not know, elvellon, and I am worried," said Legolas. "We have searched the castle keep twice but have found no trace of this creature. I did not see it—nor did I sense anything when it passed. None of the elves on watch saw it. The only person who has seen it is Eowyn—"

"Are you sure that this creature exists?" asked Orophin.

"Of course it exists," said Haldir, quickly stepping between Orophin and Legolas. "Eowyn is no foolish maid, but an experienced warrior who has seen many strange and terrible things on the battlefield. And if she says she saw it, then there was something to see, even if its exact nature was hidden by some spell."

"Yes," said Legolas, "and we will keep looking until we find it." Gimli cleared his throat in agreement. "But let us plan our attack on the orcs," Legolas continued. He turned to Haldir. "I want forty warriors, and the healer Findecáno, ready to advance by mid afternoon; we will leave at four."

The March Warden nodded.

"Thirty of us will take to the trees," he continued, "encircle the orcs, and shoot five volleys down into the encampment. Once the shooting is over, the rest will move in on the ground and deal with the orcs that are still alive—though Gimli and Haldir will each take a live prisoner and bring him back here. I am sorry, Gimli," he added when the dwarf began to protest, "but this task is important and requires your strength and your determination, elvellon."

"Now, does anyone have any comments?" he glanced at each face in turn—Gimli, Haldir, Rumil, Orophin—all shook their heads. "Good. I leave the preparations in your hands, March Warden. I will be in the healing room if you need me."

...

Eowyn was sitting in master Dínendal's makeshift dispensary, carefully preparing a thick herbal

The time of the orcs has come

paste.

"Melmenya?"

"Master Dínendal asked me to help him," she said. "This stuff stops infection and helps skin knit together, apparently. But it takes a lot of grinding." She grinned, rubbing her face, and accidentally smeared some dark green paste across her cheek.

"Are you feeling better?" asked Legolas, gently wiping away the smear with his thumb.

"I was never ill, Legolas," she replied. "When do we leave?"

Legolas hesitated. But he did not want to have another fight with her. "At four," he said. "In five hours."

"I will be ready by then."

"Let me speak to Master Dínendal for a moment, melmenya, then I will come and help you with your paste."

Legolas beckoned the healer over and drew him outside the solar. "How is she?" he asked quietly.

"I am not sure, my lord," replied the healer. "She insists that she is not ill and I confess I can find nothing physically wrong with her, but—but I agree with you that she is not herself. She is—vague."

Legolas nodded. "What have you given her?"

"Nothing my lord—her recovery, such as it is, is due to her own constitution. Are all human women so strong?"

Legolas shrugged. "She is the only woman I know, Master Dínendal."

"Hmmm. I suspect that she is still protected, to some extent, from magical harm by King Elessar's healing powers—this creature is a being of magic, is it not?"

"I do not know, Master Dínendal. I do not know anything about it; Eowyn is the only person who has seen it."

The healer nodded, gravely. "There is a tonic I could have given her—something that we give to elves who are succumbing to grief—the early symptoms are quite similar. But in the end I was too unsure of the effects it would have on a human to risk it. And, besides, I did not want simply to mask her symptoms—we know nothing of this condition and we need to observe it carefully. So, instead, I put her to work. Taking her mind off the creature seems to have helped."

"Is it safe for her to go on the raid?"

"I believe that her physical symptoms are simply a reflection of her mental state my lord—and you will know better than I whether her mind is fit for battle."

In the event, Legolas spent a few pleasant hours working at Eowyn's side, preparing the healing paste. They talked and laughed and teased each other and by the end of it Eowyn seemed restored to her normal self.

And Legolas decided that they should both prepare for battle.

...

The time of the orcs has come

"Take care of her for me Gimli," whispered Legolas, briefly clasping the dwarf's shoulder before effortlessly swinging himself up into a tree. The majority of his warriors were already aloft, awaiting his command. Legolas gave them the signal to advance and the elves began to move silently through the trees, making not the slightest rustle to give themselves away.

We must be within a hundred yards of the orc encampment, thought Legolas, *but the forest is silent. Eery.*

Within seconds they had reached the edge of the clearing. Legolas looked down at the orcs. They were exactly as the scouts had described them—grouped around the spring, waiting silently. And they were frightened. He could feel it.

Legolas experienced a moment of remorse for what he was about to do. But he reminded himself of the countless times he had dealt with the aftermath of an orc attack—burying the dead, comforting the violated—as best he could—and despatching cleanly those whose body and spirit were too torn and broken to survive.

Valar, it had to be stopped!

He gave the signal.

Thirty elves, encircling the encampment, simultaneously nocked an arrow, drew, and loosed—a good third of the orcs were gone. Of the rest, some began to panic, leaping to their feet and trying to run—they were brought down by the next volley. Some orcs stood their ground, drew their weapons, and scanned the trees, searching for the enemy—they fell in the third volley. But a large number had simply remained sitting on the ground, as if they accepted their fate—and most of those were picked off by the final volleys. Then the shooting stopped and the ground force ran forward, Eowyn amongst them, to finish off any survivors.

Legolas dropped to the ground and drew his white knives.

...

Gimli had no idea how to take a prisoner—he suspected it involved pointing an arrow at an orc and making some sort of threat. *The March Warden will be in his element,* he thought. *But I will have to improvise.*

He selected a slow-moving Uruk Hai as his target, drew his axe and ran towards it. It was sluggish—the whole band was sluggish—but big. Using a slight incline topped with a large flat stone as a ramp, Gimli leapt into the air, throwing himself onto the Uruk's back and battering it about the head with the flat of his axe. Caught completely by surprise, the Uruk Hai had no defence. It sank to the ground, unconscious, taking Gimli with it, and trapping the dwarf's legs beneath the dead weight of its great torso.

Gimli pushed his hands against the Uruk's shoulders, struggling to free himself—*Just who is supposed to be the prisoner here?* he wondered.

Then a commotion amongst the elves to his right caught his attention. A warg was rampaging through the encampment, trampling all in its path, and heading straight towards him—"Awwww!" Gimli roared, pushing, and wriggling, and swearing, but he could not free himself.

So this is it, he thought and he turned his head to face his doom.

But a small warrior with long golden hair had placed herself between him and the galloping beast. She raised her sword and awaited her chance.

...

The time of the orcs has come

"Gimli!"

Legolas had heard his friend's battle cry and was running towards him, knives drawn, already aware that he might be too late, when, with a mixture of horror and pride, he saw his wife place herself in the path of the furious warg.

Eowyn waited, sword raised, until the animal was almost on top of her. Then, like a bullfighter, she stepped aside at the critical moment, and calmly brought her blade down in a two-handed slice.

The beast fell to its knees within inches of the dwarf's chest, its head almost severed from its neck.

...

"Retrieve all the arrows," shouted Legolas. "We cannot risk burning the bodies—it might alert the other bands—and we do not have enough elves to bury them. We will build a pyre and stack the bodies on it. But we will not set it alight until after the other orcs have been dealt with."

...

They dragged Gimli's dazed Uruk Hai and Haldir's orc back to Minas Athrad and down to the remains of the castle dungeon. Gimli inspected the cells and pronounced one of them sufficiently secure to hold the prisoners, but Legolas also posted four guards at the door.

"We will question them first thing in the morning," he said. "What they tell us may affect how we plan the next raid."

...

The elves were celebrating their victory in typical elven fashion, sitting under the stars, singing softly. But tonight Legolas was too agitated to join in. "Eowyn," he whispered, "come with me." And he lifted her to her feet and led her across the castle ward and into the bastion that was serving as his war room. There, he closed the broken door and wedged a saddlebag beneath to keep it closed. Then he took her in his arms.

"Have you any idea how it felt," he said, "watching my wife risk her life to save my best friend? All I could think was that I might lose you—that I might lose both of you, in one instant."

"Of course I know what it is like, my love. I have watched you fight! I have watched others I loved fight—and die!" said Eowyn. "But Gimli is my friend too. And, more than that, he is my comrade and I would have done the same if any of the others had been in the path of the warg. And so would you—"

"I do not think I can bear it, melmenya," said Legolas.

"Do you think I can bear seeing you in danger?" asked Eowyn. "But I do not have a choice. And neither do you, Legolas," she added, firmly. But she reached up and stroked his face.

He pressed his cheek into her hand. "I need you, melmenya," he said.

"I know, my love. And I need you, too." She smiled, "But we will have to be quiet!"

He seated himself on a piece of masonry, with Eowyn standing before him, and slowly unlaced and removed her leggings, gently rubbing her stomach and her inner thighs as he exposed them. Then he pulled her down onto his lap and opened his own leggings, so that his erect penis stood between her thighs.

The time of the orcs has come

"Oh Legolas," she whispered, stroking him gently.

But when she lifted herself and tried to sink down on him he stilled her. "No, not yet, my love." And he wrapped his hands around her hips, tilting her backwards and pulling her closer, and he began rocking her up and down so that the hard ridge of his shaft rubbed gently against her most sensitive flesh.

"Oh my love," she whispered, shivering, "Oh Legolas; Legolas, please."

"Shhhhh." He knew she liked to be penetrated quickly and he usually enjoyed her impatience, but tonight he needed to feel like a real elf—and that meant taking things slowly.

He took her little hand and placed it on his penis, gently pushing it closed around his shaft, then began to guide it up and down. The sensation was exquisite. But Eowyn began to squirm against their joined hands, begging him to enter her, and the effect of her need on his body was devastating. *Gods*, he thought, *I will not last: she makes me as impatient as she is.* And he lifted her quickly and brought her down upon him, coming as soon as he felt her warmth surround him.

And Eowyn, now used to his elven stamina, waited the few moments it took him to recover then began to ride him, hard and fast.

...

"My lord..."

Legolas was sleeping more deeply than usual and it took a moment before he was fully awake.

"I am sorry to disturb you, my lord..."

"What is it, Valandil?" he asked, gently shaking Eowyn, who was still sleeping in his arms.

"It is Maeglin, my lord. He was on watch last night, at the breach in the western wall..." Valandil shook his head, bewildered.

"And?"

"He is *dead*, my lord. When I went to relieve him this morning, I found him dead."

...

"His neck has been broken," said Dínendal. "Snapped by someone with great strength."

"Could it have been the Uruk Hai?" asked Legolas. "Could he have escaped from the dungeon?"

"That is the first thing I thought," said Gimli, "so I went down there and checked. But he is still in the cell—they both are. Curled up in opposite corners, sobbing like babies."

"What is going on?" asked Legolas, in exasperation.

The dead elf was sprawled face down across a pile of rubble, like a rag doll that some child had thrown down in a tantrum. Eowyn crouched beside him and looked up at his face. "Dear gods," she said softly.

"What is it melmenya?"

"His expression," she said, "he looks—he looks terrified."

"Master Dínendal," said Legolas. "Take him to the healing room and examine him thoroughly."

The time of the orcs has come

You know the sort of thing we are looking for—"

"Yes, my lord."

"Let me know what you find as soon as possible. Haldir, speak to the warriors, calm them down. I am sure this was done by an outsider, but discreetly check that everyone is accounted for. Eowyn, Gimli, let us inspect the ground carefully, and see if we can find any trace of the killer. This is beginning to feel familiar, *meleth nín*."

...

"Legolas," said Eowyn, as they examined the ground around the breach in the wall, "this is where the creature disappeared yesterday."

"I know," said Legolas. "Something strange is happening here, Eowyn—the orcs, the creature, the way you behaved after you had seen it... There is something *evil* here."

The time of the orcs has come

Extra scene: Smudges of green

Legolas paused in the doorway of the solar.

Eowyn—sitting with her back to him, hunched over the workbench—was grinding herbs for all she was worth. *So small, but so determined.* The elf's heart filled with tenderness. Gently, he took the pestle and mortar from her hands, wrapped his arms around her, and hugged her tightly.

"What in Middle Earth did Master Dínendal say to you?" she mumbled against his chest.

"He said that you are very strong, melmenya," said Legolas.

"Well—that is a relief. Why are you holding me as though I will not last the day?"

"I am just happy, melmenya." He released her, giving her a quick peck on the top of her head, then drew up a stool and sat down beside her. His seat was lower than hers, and he had to tilt his head to look up at her—they both grinned at the reversal of their customary positions.

"Dínendal also said," continued Legolas, "that you are well enough to go on the raid."

"I told you that." Eowyn selected several sprigs of iârlóth and dropped them into the mortar, added a few drops of olive oil—"Legolas! Put those down,"—and continued grinding.

Legolas sniffed at the handful of herbs.

"I said *put them down!* They have all been weighed," said Eowyn, "and I must add them in the correct order." She sighed and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, leaving a smudge of green to complement several marks already on her cheeks. "I thought you were going to help me."

Legolas, hiding a smile, replaced the iârlóth. "Yes—you are working far too hard, melmenya," he said, "let me show you how to do it." He took the pestle from her. "Like *this.*" He worked it slowly, pressing it down and twisting it into the green paste.

"Very impressive," said Eowyn.

Legolas grinned. "Of course," he said, "I am not wearing the magical symbols."

"What magical symbols?"

Legolas dipped his finger in the salve—"No!" cried Eowyn—and drew it across his forehead, leaving a green line above his dark brows. Eowyn stared at him as if he had lost his mind. Still grinning, Legolas touched his finger to the tip of her nose. "Oh!" Her hand flew to her face.

"Do not rub it, melmenya, or you will spoil the effect. Let me just..."

"No!" She dodged his hand.

"But you need one on your chin."

"Need...? What are you...? *Ohhh...*" She picked up a broad-bladed knife and looked at her reflection in its polished surface. "Oh *no!*"

"Is that not part of the spell?"

"You idiot!" She laid down the knife. "How am I to get it off?" Searching amongst the materials on the workbench, she found a jug of water and a pile of bandages, dampened one of the cloths, and handed it to Legolas.

Smiling wickedly, Legolas lightly wiped her face, then peered at the result. "No, melmenya. It does not come off. You are green."

"No..."

The time of the orcs has come

"I am sorry."

"No, you are not!" She grabbed the cloth and began scrubbing her cheeks.

"Be careful, melmenya!" He caught her hands. "You will make your face sore!"

"But I cannot go outside looking like this!"

"Why not?"

"Oh, *Legolas!*" Her eyes filled with tears. "Your warriors already think me a fool..."

"No, Melmenya! *No...*" He took her in his arms, suddenly serious. "There is *not one elf* out there that does not admire you for your courage and your swordsmanship; not one that does not recognise the true value of your Orc map. And there is *not one elf* that does not envy *me*."

"But the *creature*—they do not believe me—"

"*Shhhh.*" He rocked her, soothingly. "A few may not be sure. But when we find it, melmenya, they will know that they *should* have believed you. And they will believe you in future." He hugged her tightly. "Shall I tell you a secret?"

She nodded against his shoulder.

"Let me see your face."

She lifted her head.

He kissed her forehead. "The salve is made from oil, melmenya. And oil and water do not mix." He poured a small amount of olive oil into a shallow dish, dipped another bandage into it, then gently cleaned her face.

"Is it gone?"

"Yes—most of it." He gave her one final wipe, then handed her the cloth. "Will you do my forehead?"

Eowyn found a clean patch of bandage, and carefully removed the smudge.

"Handsome again?"

"Yes, you conceited elf!" Eowyn grinned. "Speaking of which..."

She sat down at the bench, picked up the pestle and mortar and held them out to him. "I think you were showing me how it should be done?"

The time of the orcs has come

Chapter 3: The King's man

Legolas and Eowyn leaned against the rubble beneath the breach in the castle wall. Together with Gimli, they had crawled over every inch of ground, inside and outside the castle, searching for hair, fragments of cloth, signs of a struggle—anything that might give them a clue to the killer's identity. But they had found nothing.

"Perhaps Master Dínendal will find something on the body," said Eowyn.

Gimli was perching on a large piece of fallen masonry, just outside the wall, preparing his pipe. "Who could come and go—and kill—without leaving any trace?" he said.

"An elf," said Legolas.

"But why would an elf kill one of his own comrades?" asked Eowyn.

"A personal grudge," said Legolas. "Maeglin was a Mirkwood elf—and our Silvan ways do not endear us to everybody..."

"Nonsense!" said Eowyn. "Eryn Carantaur is the most harmonious of places. Elves join this colony because they believe in its ideals. And there is not a single warrior here who does not love and respect you—"

"She is right lad," said Gimli, reaching in his pocket for his tinderbox. "Awww," he cried, as the small box slipped from his hand, rolled down the stone block, and fell to the ground. Gimli jumped down after it.

"Gimli?" said Legolas after a moment. The dwarf was hidden from view. "Gimli? Are you alright?"

"Come here lad," cried Gimli. "Come and look!"

Legolas and Eowyn knelt beside the dwarf and peered at the ground. Gimli's tinderbox lay in a patch of soft mud behind the stone. And to either side of it was a partial footprint. The feet that had made them had been bare—long and narrow with sharp nails that had left scratches in the earth. "They are like a dog's claws," said Eowyn. "And look at the way his heel is missing —"

"He was running, melmenya," said Legolas.

"But when I saw him," said Eowyn, "he was walking. Even after he realised that I had seen him, he did not run away." She shuddered, remembering the creature's expression, "He snarled at me, and then he *strode* away..."

"So this was probably a different occasion," said Gimli. "Perhaps he was running from the scene of his crime."

"Let us see where he went," said Legolas.

But another half-hour of careful searching across the flood plain and along the riverbank did not yield any more footprints.

"We can do no more here," said Legolas.

...

Master Dínendal had examined the body carefully but, aside from the broken neck and the terrified expression, had found nothing.

The time of the orcs has come

"Poor Maeglin," said Legolas looking at the dead elf. "We used to patrol the borders of Mirkwood together. He taught me a lot about living off the land—showed me how to skin and cook a rabbit." He shook his head, sadly. Eowyn squeezed his hand.

"There are no other wounds on his body, my lord," said Dínendal, "and no sign that he struggled or tried to defend himself." He showed them the elf's unblemished hands. "And yet he must have been aware of the attack," he added, stroking the pale hair back from the distorted face. "It is as though he were paralysed with fear—and his attacker simply twisted his neck and snapped his spine like a twig."

...

"Did you know Maeglin, Taurnil?" asked Nolofinwë, the swordsmith. He had several swords to repair, after the previous day's raid, and was making an early start.

"Not really," replied the bowyer. "I did most of my work for the royal family—Prince Legolas, his father—"

"King Thranduil?"

"Yes. And the palace guards. But I know that Maeglin was well regarded—he attended the Council of Elrond with Prince Legolas. And he was liked by the other border guards. He will be missed."

"Who could have killed him?" asked Mahtan. "They are saying that someone has a grudge against Mirkwood elves—we had better be careful, you and I, Taurnil!"

Taurnil laughed. "I have heard that it was this creature that Lady Eowyn is supposed to have seen," he said. "Pass me that awl, Fëanáro."

...

"Something has been troubling me, Haldir, and that is, why was Maeglin alone?"

Haldir had joined Legolas, Eowyn and Gimli in the war room.

"That troubled me, too," said Haldir. "He should have been on watch with Amras but, when Valandil found him, he was alone. I had the castle searched for Amras—we found him lying inside the keep, in the Great Hall, under the bowyer's workbench. He was in a profoundly deep sleep, with his eyes closed. It took us fifteen minutes to waken him. He says he does not know how he came to be there." Haldir hesitated. "And I believe him."

Legolas nodded. "I know Amras. He is another Mirkwood border guard—a brave warrior and an honourable elf," he said. "I believe him too."

...

The Uruk Hai and the orc were curled up, just as Gimli had described, in separate corners of the cell, moaning. Legolas drew his white knives and entered. Eowyn, Gimli and Haldir remained outside, their weapons ready. Legolas bent over the Uruk Hai. *What do you say to a fiend in distress?* he wondered. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "Why did you come to Eithel Hûn?"

There was no response.

He reached under the Uruk's body and, grasping its chin, lifted its head by brute force and stared into its yellow eyes. "I said," he said fiercely, "why did you come to Eithel Hûn?"

The time of the orcs has come

The Uruk bared its teeth at him. "Little elf," it growled, "you have no chance."

"Of what?" asked Legolas, coldly.

"Of anything—of living. He is here. He will destroy us all! We have come here to die!"

The orc in the opposite corner howled.

"Who is here?" asked Legolas.

"He is!"

The Uruk lifted one massive arm and brought it down in a crushing blow, but the elf leapt nimbly to the side, raised his knives—and stopped. Two arrows had already pierced the beast, in the eye and throat, almost simultaneously. Legolas turned towards the cell door. Haldir and Eowyn both stood with their bows still raised.

"Beaten to it by a slip of a girl," grumbled Gimli.

...

"Who do you suppose it meant?" asked Gimli. "Could some lackey of Sauron's still be alive?"

"I do not know, elvellon."

"It is the *creature*," said Eowyn, softly.

The elves and the dwarf exchanged glances. Legolas took Eowyn's hand. "Yes, it could be—"

"Do not humour me, Legolas," said Eowyn coldly. "I mean it! They are afraid. They are crippled by unreasoning fear. That is what the creature made me feel."

"But they have been nowhere near the creature, my lady," said Haldir.

"How do we know that?" asked Eowyn. "We do not know where it has gone. Besides, I have been thinking..." she hesitated.

"What *meleth nín*?"

"I have been wondering," she said, "why you did not sense it when I saw it. And how it could get close enough to Maeglin to take him by surprise and kill him. I think that humans may be more susceptible to its—its influence than elves. And perhaps orcs are even more susceptible than humans..."

"We need to know more about this creature," said Legolas. "So far, all we have is your description, *meleth nín*, and two footprints. And some ominous words from a dead Uruk Hai."

...

"Tonight we will deal with Eryn Brethil," said Legolas to Haldir, pointing to the area on Eowyn's orc map. "The scouts we sent yesterday reported seeing fifteen orcs, well hidden throughout the forest. We will take a force of twenty archers, up in the trees, and pick them off one by one. We will not use any ground forces, so Gimli, Eowyn, you will stay here."

Eowyn bit her lip, but nodded her head in agreement. "Gimli and I will search the castle again—we will see if we can find any trace of the creature," she said. Gimli grunted in agreement.

Legolas wanted to tell her to stay with the others in the castle ward, and on no account go looking for the creature. *But if I try to keep her wrapped in lambswool I will lose her*, he

The time of the orcs has come

thought. "Be careful, melmenya," he allowed himself to say, "especially in the uninhabited parts of the castle—make sure that you and Gimli both stay together at all times."

...

A young man climbed down the rocky slope towards the edge of the forest. He had spent two days and three nights safely hidden in a cave, *And, given the choice, I would be hidden there still*, he thought. But he had been entrusted with a job to do. *And if you are to have any hope of future advancement, Berryn, you will have to go back inside that castle.*

Ducking low, he slipped out of the forest and into the thick brushwood that marked the start of the flood plain. The sun was high and the sky was bright, and after two days and three nights of turning it over in his mind, he was almost sure that the castle would be safe now. In the daylight.

Still, it would be sensible to keep out of sight for as long as possible. So he followed the scrub along the edge of the forest, as it snaked its way westwards, to the narrowest part of the flood plain.

...

"We have a visitor," said Haldir.

"A visitor?"

"A man. The lookout on the southern wall spotted him half an our ago, working his way along the edge of the forest, trying to stay out of sight." Haldir smiled. Though he had become quite fond of humans—some humans—in recent times, he still found their clumsiness amusing.

He and Legolas went to the breach in the western wall and, staying well out of sight, watched the young man thread his way through the brushwood.

"Here he comes," said Haldir, as the young man broke cover and began running towards the castle, "running as if all the goblins of Moria were chasing him."

"Take him prisoner," said Legolas. "Bring him to me in the bastion."

...

Please gods, thought Berryn, sprinting across the uneven ground, *let my things still be there. If not... well I will have to go back and admit to King Elessar that I have made a complete pox of it.*

He was beginning to rise from the crouch, ready to clamber over the rubble at the base of the breach, when three tall, otherworldly figures stepped out from behind the castle wall, their bows drawn. The young man stopped in mid stride, straightened up, and slowly raised his hands in the universal gesture of surrender.

Gods, he thought, *looking through the gap in the wall, where did all the elves come from? Hundreds of them!*

...

His captor, a big, handsome elf in full armour, was quite courteous, leading Berryn through the castle and into one of the corner bastions, where a beautiful, young-looking elf seemed to be waiting for him.

"Thank you, Haldir," said the young elf. He turned to Berryn, "Who are you and what are you

The time of the orcs has come

doing at Minas Athrad?" he asked.

Berryn opened his mouth to reply but, at the same moment, caught sight of a map laid out on a piece of fallen masonry, and all other thoughts left his head. He walked over to it. "This is good work, gentlemen," he said, "There are a few inaccuracies in the region of Toll Thâr, and here, where the Anduin meets this small tributary, but otherwise it is surprisingly accurate. These lines here... What do they represent? 'Band A 20/10... 23/10'... Band. Band of what? '50 orcs...' Orcs! You are mapping orcs! I have never seen a map used in this way before. Who drew this?"

He looked up to find the elves staring at him in disbelief and the big one looking quite murderous. He raised his hands in a placating gesture. "I am sorry, gentlemen," he said, "around maps I tend to forget myself. I am Berryn, son of Hador, cartographer by appointment to His Majesty, King Elessar." He bowed low. "At your service. Who made the map?"

"My wife," said the young elf, cautiously.

"I should very much like to speak with her," said Berryn.

"Why?" asked the elf, sharply.

"She is clearly a kindred spirit."

The big elf gripped his sword but the young one raised a hand to stay him. "You have not answered my question," he said. "Why are you here?"

Berryn began to reach inside his jerkin, but froze as the point of the big elf's sword touched his throat. "Gentlemen!" he gasped, "I merely wanted to—"

"Haldir, what in Middle Earth are you doing?" said a new voice, from the direction of the door, but Berryn could not see its owner.

"We caught him entering the castle where the body was found, my lady," said the big elf. "And we are still waiting for him to explain himself."

"Body? What body?" asked Berryn, trying to keep as still as possible.

"Put your sword down, Haldir," said the smaller elf. "I do not think he was reaching for a weapon—were you Master—Berryn was it?" Berryn nodded, with great care, as the sword point was slowly pulled away from his skin. "What were you going to show us?"

"My Royal Warrant, sir, from King Elessar. May I?"

The elf nodded. Berryn reached into his pocket, withdrew a piece of parchment and handed it to him. The elf unfolded it. Berryn took the opportunity to turn and look at the lady. She was walking towards the smaller elf, clearly curious to see the warrant. Berryn stared in surprise. *What is a human woman doing with all these elves?* he wondered.

"Master Berryn was just admiring your map, meleth nín," said the elf, looking at the parchment.

She is his wife? thought Berryn. *She seems familiar. Where have I seen her before?* He studied the woman carefully, as she stood beside the young elf, one small hand resting on his arm, whilst they both read the warrant. *At court! Princess Eowyn!* Yes, now he remembered, he had heard a rumour that Eowyn had run away to live with an elf. *So that is Prince Legolas. What in Middle Earth are they doing here?*

"Well," said Legolas, "this is certainly Aragorn's signature—and the warrant does seem to be in

The time of the orcs has come

order." He looked up at Berryn. "But you were hiding from us in the forest. And you were trying to enter the castle unseen. Why?"

Berryn was taken aback. They were camped in its den—did they not know about it? "The *monster*, my lord, I was hiding from the monster." His three captors looked at each other in surprise. Then Eowyn smiled at him. A radiant smile. *Gods, she is beautiful*, thought Berryn.

"You must tell us *everything* you know about the monster, Master Berryn," she said.

...

"Did it attack you?" asked Haldir.

"No sir," said Berryn, "I did not give it the chance. But it scared the sh—it gave me a scare."

"How did you come to be in the castle, Master Berryn," asked Legolas. Then he added, suddenly, "When did you last eat?"

Berryn was surprised. "Er—before my boat capsized, my lord—er—three days ago."

Legolas nodded, gravely. "Sit down," he said, indicating a stone block covered with a blanket. Eowyn, meanwhile, had opened the door and was sending one of the guards for food.

"Carry on, Master Berryn," said Legolas, "you say your boat capsized?"

"Yes, my lord. It was my own fault—I had been travelling down the river, taking sightings of the northern bank, and I had left it too late to find a mooring—it was already quite dark when I spotted the castle ruins, with a wharf, of sorts, and it seemed ideal. But I must have hit something in the water as I rowed across—a rock or a log—and I lost my parcel of parchments overboard. Three months' work! So I was stupid enough to lean over the side to try and reach it."

He shrugged his shoulders. "My boat turned over. But I did manage to rescue my parchments," he grinned, "and some of my equipment, and swim ashore."

The food had arrived. Eowyn handed him a plate of lembas bread, cheese and dried fruit and Berryn began to eat, ravenously.

"I was soaking wet," he said, with his mouth full, "so I dragged my equipment into the keep and went back out into the ward to gather some firewood. When I got back inside, my stuff had gone and—gods, this is hard to explain—I am not normally a nervous person, my lord. My work takes me into all sorts of lonely and dangerous places—but I suddenly felt *fear*. Not because my things had gone—though that was disturbing enough. No, the feeling was not natural. It was—it was as if the hall was filled with it—I could feel it on my skin, in my mouth and throat, like a mist... *Fear*. I was bathing in it. I was terrified."

"That is exactly how I felt," whispered Eowyn. Legolas put his arm around her.

Berryn continued. "And then I saw the monster. It was standing in the shadows, but I could see its face in the moonlight. And its expression..." He shook his head; then he put down his piece of lembas bread and ran his hand through his hair. It was clear how much this plucky young man had been scared by his experience. "I ran. I do not know how I got out into the forest, nor how I found the cave. But I lit a fire and I stayed there for three nights—until this morning."

"Why did you come back?" asked Legolas.

"My parchments, my lord. I did not want to come back, believe me. But three months' work! I

The time of the orcs has come

needed to find my parchments and my equipment. And the more I thought about it, the more I felt that the castle would be safe in the daylight."

"Why?" asked Eowyn.

"I do not know, my lady—I suppose because the monster was lurking in the shadows. Yes, that was it, I felt that it was hiding in the dark."

"Did the creature follow you when you ran?" asked Haldir.

"I have no idea, sir. I did not look back... But, now you mention it, no, I do not think it did. No, I think that if it had I would have felt it behind me."

Haldir looked at Legolas. "This seems to be its den—where it feels safe. But where does it hide?"

Legolas shook his head. "We have searched the castle three times since we arrived and found no trace, and now we have a dead warrior. We need to move out of the castle, March Warden, and into the forest. How big is your cave, Master Berryn?"

"Not large enough for all your men—your elves—my lord, but there may be others about."

"Will you join forces with us, Master Berryn? Your detailed knowledge of this area would be very useful to us. I am afraid we have found no trace of your parchments," he added, "but when we have dealt with the orcs, and with this creature, I will provide you with any assistance you need to repeat your work. And you need not trouble yourself about Aragorn—King Elessar—I will explain to him what happened to you. *And*," he added, "I am sure my wife will be only too willing to talk to you about her map."

Berryn bowed deeply. "I would be honoured, my lord."

"Take Master Berryn to Gimli, Haldir. Ask him to look for more caves. We need a defensible campsite with space for the horses and somewhere suitable for workshops, a healing room and a place to keep prisoners. We will move camp before nightfall. We will postpone the orc raid until tomorrow."

...

"I do not want you to search the castle when I am away tomorrow, *melmenya*," said Legolas when Haldir and Berryn had left them. "The creature is dangerous—Master Berryn has confirmed everything you told us about it. And what he says about its being active in the dark agrees with our own experience. When we have the opportunity we will take a search party over to the castle, together. In the *daylight*. Please do this one thing for me, *melmenya*..."

Eowyn smiled. "Am I really so unreasonable, Legolas?" she asked.

"No..." said Legolas. "But sometimes you need careful handling. And then I am reduced to begging."

Eowyn laughed, reached up on tiptoe, and kissed his mouth.

...

Gimli and Berryn returned in less than an hour with the news that they had found a very acceptable campsite. "There are four caves, a nearby clearing for the horses, and," Gimli paused for effect, "a spring for fresh water! I know how much you elves like to wash..."

...

The time of the orcs has come

The move was completed, with typical elven efficiency, just after dark. Gimli had examined all the caves carefully and had allocated them according to the amenities they offered. The craftsmen were installed in the largest cave—which had a broad mouth and several openings in the roof to admit light—and their furnace was erected just outside. The smallest cave, with a narrow, easily guarded mouth, was turned into a cell to house the remaining orc prisoner, who was chained to one of several natural rock pillars. The middling cave, which was dry and airy, was given to the healers, who turned its various rock shelves into beds.

That left the fourth, smallish, cave for Legolas' war room. "It is well lit and shallow—not too oppressive for an elf," said Gimli. "But see this alcove?" he showed Legolas the back of the cave, "it is a natural hearth and chimney—you can light a fire in here, lad, lay out your bedroll in front of it and keep your lady nice and warm..."

Legolas squeezed his shoulder. "Thank you, elvallon. Thank you. I sometimes forget how much she must feel the cold—for she never complains."

Gimli nodded sagely, "I know, lad. You were very lucky to find her."

...

After the evening meal, when most of the elves had settled down to rest, Legolas turned to Eowyn. "You look tired, melmenya," he whispered. "Would you like some help undressing? And washing?" He grinned. "And getting into bed..."

Eowyn smiled. "You are a very wicked elf," she said.

Legolas took her by the hand and led her up the steep, narrow path to their small cave, then lifted her into his arms and carried her inside. He had lit the fire, but she still shivered a little when he opened her tunic and—to keep her warm and cosy—he undressed her quickly and put her straight into the bedroll. Then he undressed himself, climbed in beside her, and took her in his arms.

"I thought you were going to wash me," she said.

Legolas smiled wickedly. "I have to dirty you first," he said.

Eowyn giggled, watching him intently as he knelt between her legs, lifted her lower body onto his thighs and, with a little help from her, entered her.

"Oh, Legolas," she sighed, "I love it when you do that..."

"I know, melmenya. I know my Shieldmaiden likes a swift attack... Keep still, melethril nín."

And he wrapped his hands under her buttocks raised himself up on his knees, and began to thrust—deep and hard.

"Oh gods, Legolas!" she cried. Her head and shoulders were still on the ground, cushioned on the bedroll and, with her body at that angle, Legolas seemed to be touching parts of her that had never been touched before. Her muscles tightened around him of their own accord. "Oh gods!"

"Shhhhh, melmenya," he moaned, "shhhhh, or they will hear you!"

"I do not care," cried Eowyn, her head thrashing from side to side. "I do not care!" And she continued to moan, and sob, and cry out, until she suddenly burst into peals of laughter as Legolas' thrusts finally pushed her over the edge.

...

The time of the orcs has come

They had been curled up together for almost an hour, Eowyn sleepy but not yet asleep, when Legolas heard someone, standing at the mouth of the cave, clear his throat nervously.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Valandil, my lord."

"What is it?"

"I am sorry to disturb you my lord, my lady—" he began.

"But?" asked Legolas.

"It is Finrod, my lord. We cannot find Finrod."

The time of the orcs has come

Extra scene: The paper child

She was sitting at her desk, carefully reading a reconnaissance report from the Captain of the Rangers, checking its details against a large map of Rohan and Gondor spread out on the table before her.

Her beloved Orc map, thought Faramir, glancing at the dashed and dotted lines and the esoteric notations on its surface. Her paper child.

"Anything useful?" he asked.

"Possibly..." Eowyn turned the page. "He says that several of the farmers in the region of Parth Ford are reporting missing livestock..."

"It could be wolves. Or bears, up there..."

"Or it could be orcs," said Eowyn. "Especially as there has been a large band lurking *here*, just to the north, for several weeks. It would mean that they were moving south for the winter—and I have seen them do that before." She picked up her pen. "Will you be gone long?"

"Four, perhaps five, days..."

"Remember to ask Aragorn for a copy of his new map of the Forest of Druadan. I have heard that his cartographer is very skilled." She hesitated. "Is Berengar going with you?"

Faramir bit his lip. "Yes..."

She said nothing; but her pain seemed to spread out across the room, filling Faramir's lungs and squeezing his heart. "Eowyn—"

She laid down her pen. "I must speak to Mistress Sieglinde."

"Wait..." He caught her arm.

"*Faramir*, I must speak to Mistress Sieglinde."

He held her fast. "You *know* that I would never betray you?"

"Physically," said Eowyn. "But what would that matter, now? And why should we *both* be miserable—all *three* of us?"

"I do not know what to do..."

She threw up her hands, breaking his grip. "There is nothing you can do! Nothing any of us can do!" She turned back to her map.

"Suppose..." began Faramir, quietly.

"Suppose what?" she asked, without looking up from her work.

"Suppose we were to have a child?"

She dropped her pen—and a large blot of ink formed on the map, unnoticed. "*How?* Do you expect me to sleep with one of the servants?"

"*Eowyn!*"

"Or perhaps seduce Aragorn next time I see him? Or Leg..." Her voice trailed away, and tears formed in her eyes. Then she added, loudly, "Or *Gimli?*"

"We could have a child."

"No, thank you."

The time of the orcs has come

"I am sorry."

"I must finish with this report. Captain Alfgar needs it back."

"Yes..."

"There *is* something you can do for me, Faramir," she said, carefully erasing the ink blot with a pellet of fresh bread.

"What is that?"

"You can take my work seriously." She dipped her pen in the inkwell, and, very deliberately, turned her back on him.

Post script

She had ridden out to meet Faramir in the foothills of Eryn Arnem.

"You have visitors," he said. "They are venturing into the wilds of North Ithilien to help me hunt your Orc band."

Eowyn smiled.

It was Aragorn, dressed in his Ranger's leathers, sword over his shoulder—the very picture of a man escaping his tedious responsibilities for a few days. And Gimli, sturdy as a bear, mischievously winking at her as he suddenly moved the butt of his axe. And Legolas—tall, strong, beautiful Legolas, missing, for once, his practice shot, because Gimli had tapped the arm of his bow and spoiled his aim.

"Oh, *dear*," said the dwarf.

The elf glared at him.

But all Eowyn could see, as if for the very first time, was the elven height, the swell of hard muscle under jerkin and leggings, the pale golden hair lifting in the breeze...

She swallowed hard.

"Come and greet your guests," said Faramir.

She swung down from the saddle.

"Good morning, Eowyn," said Aragorn. "I hope you will not mind us taking Faramir away for a few more days."

"Hello, lass; how are you faring?" asked Gimli.

"Good morning, my lady," said Legolas, placing his hand on his heart and bowing his head. "Will you be so good as to show us your Orc map?"

The time of the orcs has come

Chapter 4: The castle keep

"When did you last see Finrod?" asked Legolas.

He had summoned all the Mirkwood elves and Haldir, and had asked Gimli to join them, and was questioning Valandil just outside the cave—he wanted to give Eowyn some privacy.

"I am not sure, my lord," said Valandil. "He was helping the bowyer move his tools. Master Taurnil had forgotten his draw bench and Finrod went back to the castle for it. I do not know if he ever returned—though the draw bench is there in Master Taurnil's workshop."

"You have searched the entire camp—the clearing, the spring?"

"Yes, my lord,"

"Have you tried the castle?"

"Yes, my lord, Amras and I went back and searched the Great Hall, but we found nothing."

Legolas sighed. "If something has happened to him, we need to find him as quickly as possible. And though I am not happy to send warriors back into the castle in the dark, I do not think we can wait." He thought for a moment. "Torches. We will each have a torch—maybe the creature is afraid of flame. We will leave in fifteen minutes. Haldir, see if Master Berryn is willing to join us."

...

"What are you doing, melmenya?"

"Getting dressed."

"Eowyn—"

"Please do not start, Legolas. I am coming with you. I will have my own torch, and my sword, and I will stay by your side at all times, my love. Besides, I seem able to sense the creature better than you, so I may be useful."

Legolas shook his head. "You will be the death of me, meleth nín," he said, strapping on his quiver and white knives. Then he held out his hand to her. "Come, Shieldmaiden," he said, "let us join the others."

...

They crossed the floodplain quietly, not lighting their torches until they had passed through the castle gatehouse.

"Valandil, Amras—search along the walls, inside and out," said Legolas. "Pay particular attention to the breaches. Camthalion, Orodreth—check the bastions and the dungeon. When you have finished, all four of you search the ward.

"Gimli, Berryn—take the ground floor of the keep.

"Eowyn, Haldir—we will search the upper floors."

...

Eowyn had never been in the castle keep in the dark before and she was forced to admit—though only to herself—that the place was frightening; but whether she was simply experiencing normal fear or whether she was somehow sensing the creature, she could not

The time of the orcs has come

say.

"Stay close to me," hissed Legolas.

Do not worry, thought Eowyn, *I have absolutely no intention of getting left behind*. But she decided it was best to keep those thoughts to herself.

Their torches cast strange shadows as they passed through the Great Hall and climbed up the spiral stairs to the floor above. The solar, which Master Dínendal's presence had made a place of warmth and comfort, was now cold and forbidding. They searched the main living chamber thoroughly, and the bedrooms opening off it, then they worked their way along the narrow gallery that ran full circle through the thickness of the walls, examining various small rooms, until they returned to the staircase.

"Let us try the next floor," said Legolas.

The next floor was even colder and more cramped. Slowly, they made their way around the gallery, checking each small room in turn. Eowyn, following behind the two elves, lifted her torch above her head and looked around. The gallery walls were featureless apart from a row of arrow loops. *Strange*, she thought, *there is no room here for an archer to draw...* She stepped up to the nearest opening and, raising herself on tiptoe, looked outside.

The clouds had cleared since they had crossed the floodplain and now the sky was bright. She was peering northwards towards the Anduin. She could see the river, sparkling in the moonlight, and the steep cliffs of the northern bank glowing white, and she could see... *Gods, she could see a figure wading in the water.*

"Legolas!" she hissed, in a hoarse, urgent, whisper—*As if the creature could hear me at that distance!* she thought. "Legolas!"

He was beside her in a split second, his white knives drawn, ready to defend her.

"No," she said, pointing through the arrow loop, "look."

Legolas peered through the narrow opening. "Sweet Eru," he whispered, "it is real!"

...

"Haldir, go after it! We will follow as quickly as we can—"

As the March Warden disappeared down the gallery, Legolas grasped Eowyn's hand—"Come melmenya!"—and dragged her past the remaining rooms, down two flights of stairs, across the Great Hall—"Come on, Gimli!"—and out into the castle ward. Together they climbed through the breach in the western wall, with the dwarf and the man following behind them, scrambled over the rubble, and ran down to the Anduin.

Haldir was standing at the river's edge looking out across the water.

"Did you see it?" asked Legolas.

"No," said the March Warden, "not really. Just a silhouette and a few ripples. But I have found these." And he pointed to several clawed footprints in the mud at the edge of the river. "What are we going to do?"

"I do not know—" began Legolas.

"My lord, my lord! We have found him! We have found Finrod!"

The time of the orcs has come

Legolas turned to face Valandil, running towards them. "Is he—"

"He is alive, my lord, but barely."

...

They had found Finrod lying beside the western wall, hidden in a narrow gap between the wall and the pile of rubble. Amras had crawled in beside him and, by the light of his comrades' torches, had checked his injuries, but Legolas sent for Master Dínendal to examine him properly and to supervise moving him.

"Why would Finrod return to the castle alone?" Legolas asked Eowyn as they followed the stretcher party back to the campsite.

"I do not know. Perhaps he forgot something. Or perhaps..."

"What, melmenya?"

"Perhaps the creature came into the forest and took him. If he was on the outskirts of the campsite..."

"Gods," said Legolas. "You are right—I have been thinking that the forest is safe—but you are right. We will have to be more careful in future."

...

"My lord, a word..." Dínendal drew Legolas and Eowyn to one side. "Are you sure that this was done by the creature?"

"Why do you say that?" asked Legolas.

"The injury. It is similar, my lord, but it is not the same. And whoever did it—I do not think they were as strong—or as skilled—as the person who killed Maeglin. Could it have been an orc, my lord? "

Legolas took his arm and drew him further away from the rest of the elves. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Master Dínendal," he said. "It is most worrying. But can I ask you to keep it to yourself for now?"

...

"What are you going to do?" asked Eowyn, softly.

They were back in the privacy of their cave. Eowyn was undressing before the fire and Legolas was sitting on the floor, watching her. He sighed; he had been enjoying the way the light of the fire made her skin glow and turned her hair into ribbons of gold. "I have no idea, melmenya," he said. "I am out of my depth."

"We need to break it down," said Eowyn. "Consider one problem at a time." She climbed into their bedroll. "Come to bed, my love, and we will think it through."

Legolas slipped out of his tunic, leggings and boots, climbed in beside her and took her in his arms. It felt good to lie with her, to feel the warmth of her body, to feel so close to her. *It is not always necessary to make love, he thought, sometimes this is enough.*

"We have three problems," said Eowyn, "or so it seems to me. First there are the orcs—though they are not giving us the trouble we expected. Secondly, there is the creature—we have no idea what it is or why it is here—we do not even know how dangerous it is. Did it really kill

The time of the orcs has come

Maeglin? Did it really attack Finrod?" She paused. "And that brings us to the third problem—"

"If it was not the creature, who, or what, attacked Finrod?"

"Exactly."

"Was it an orc? Or was it... Gods, what a mess," said Legolas. "And why are the orcs behaving so strangely?"

"Legolas... what were you going to say? Was it—what?"

"Was it an elf, melmenya?"

"Oh." Eowyn thought for a moment. "Is that really likely? I had always thought..." She hesitated.

"Thought what, melmenya?"

"That elves were above murder. That Angaráto was an exception."

Legolas sighed. "Many humans assume that immortality automatically brings wisdom, Eowyn, but elves are like humans in that respect—age is no guarantee of honour. Some elves are better than other elves—for a Lord Elrond there is also an Angaráto."

"So what do we do?"

Legolas smiled. He loved the way she was always ready to share the burden of rule with him. And somehow her support now seemed to put everything into perspective. "We need to know more about the creature, melmenya—what it is, what it wants, why it had such an effect on you and Berryn and, possibly, on the orcs." Legolas knew exactly where they needed to look for this information, but he also knew that he was going to have a hard job persuading Eowyn to go along with his plan, so he decided not to broach the subject until later. "For the time being," he said, "we must keep the creature contained—observe it, keep it away from the campsite."

"Do you think that is possible?"

"I do not know, melmenya. I have four elves watching that breach in the western wall—if the creature returns to the castle, they will see it. And after that... we will keep a watch on it until we know more about it.

"In the meantime, we will proceed with the orc raids, as planned. We will take some more prisoners and see what they will tell us."

Eowyn nodded. Then she asked, delicately, "What if Finrod was attacked by an elf?"

Legolas sighed. "I do not want to start a panic amongst the warriors, melmenya. I will keep Finrod under guard, and see what happens."

Eowyn snuggled closer; he kissed the top of her head.

"Where are you going to find out more about the creature?"

"The library at Eryn Carantaur. We have collected books from all over elvendom—I am sure we will find something amongst Lord Elrond's—"

"No!"

"Eowyn—"

The time of the orcs has come

"No! I will not go!"

"Melmenya..."

"Send someone else. I will not go!"

"It must be someone who has seen the creature—"

"Send Berryn!"

"I cannot send Berryn—"

"I do not read elvish!"

"The librarian will help you—"

"No! Legolas, please! Do not make me leave you. We have never been apart, except when I was kidnapped. I could not bear it—anything but that! Please! *Please* do not make me leave you..." Her voice faltered. "I could not bear it."

Legolas lifted her chin. Her eyes were filled with tears and she was swallowing hard, trying to stop them falling. "Oh, melmenya..." She was right. How could he ever have considered it? He kissed her forehead and folded her in his arms. "Shhhhhh, melmenya, sh, sh, sh. I will ask Berryn if he is willing to go..."

She gave him a radiant, though slightly tearful, smile. Then she snuggled back against his chest. But after a moment she said, "Legolas, what did you mean, when you saw the creature and said, 'It is real'? Did you not believe me?"

Legolas sighed. What had he meant? He had had doubts, but not about her—not really.

"I believed *you*, melmenya," he said. "I had no doubt that you had seen what you described. But I did find it hard to believe there was something living in the forest that I, in all my years, had never seen, nor heard of—" he shook his head.

"Perhaps it does not live in the forest," said Eowyn. "Perhaps it is a creature of the river or of the sea. Perhaps it is trapped here and that is why it is so angry..." She hesitated. "I am so glad that you saw it," she added. "For I know you were not the only one who doubted its existence."

Legolas smiled. "I did *not* doubt you, melmenya. And nor did my warriors—and the fact that they listened to you is proof of how much they love and respect you. As Haldir said to his brothers, you are yourself an experienced warrior, and if you say you saw something, then you saw it."

"Haldir said that? He believed me? Perhaps I should be in *his* bedroll—"

"Go to sleep, melmenya."

"I am not really sleepy."

"Well—*what are you doing?*"

"I am trying to find your *hand*, you conceited elf!"

Legolas laughed. "Here."

And she lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it.

The time of the orcs has come

...

Shortly after dawn, Legolas sought out Berryn. To his surprise he found the man breakfasting with Haldir, Rumil and Orophin, eagerly asking them questions about the geography of Lorien.

"Master Berryn," said Legolas, "may I have a word?"

Berryn flashed his new friends an apprehensive smile, then rose and followed Legolas a short distance into the forest.

"I brought you here, Master Berryn, because I want you to feel free to refuse my request if you find it unreasonable."

"My lord?"

"I need someone—someone who has seen the creature—the *monster*—to travel to our capital city and consult some of the books in our library. I do not want to send my wife—and you are the only other person who has seen the creature clearly. I would pay you well..."

"No payment would be necessary, my lord," replied Berryn, "To have the opportunity to visit your city, to see your architecture—" He shook his head. "I have heard so much about it, my lord—"

"I am afraid you will not have time to see much on *this* occasion, Master Berryn. But I promise you that, once this campaign is over, you will return to the city as my personal guest."

"How will I get there, my lord?"

"I will provide you with a horse, and Rumil and Orophin will escort you—at the gallop, you should reach Eryn Carantaur in four or five hours.

"I will give you a letter of introduction to the librarian, explaining to him what we are looking for. Briefly, I need to know everything you can find about this creature. I need to know what it is and how it lives. I need to know whether it is dangerous, or whether this feeling of terror it seems to excite is just its way of protecting itself. I need to know if it really *is* responsible for the strange behaviour of the orcs. And, just in case, I need to know how to trap it and how to kill it. And I need all that by tomorrow—or the day after at the latest."

Berryn's smile reminded Legolas of a warrior—of Gimli—about to go into battle. "Leave it to me, my lord!" he said.

...

After arranging Berryn's departure, Legolas returned to the cave to find Eowyn and Gimli in serious discussion. Eowyn was eating breakfast. "Legolas!" she called, "Gimli has an idea about the creature."

Legolas sat down beside her and she handed him a plate of lembas bread and eggs. He looked at her quizzically.

"There was not much left by the time I woke up, but it really tastes quite pleasant," she said.

Legolas took a tentative mouthful, then raised his eyebrows, and nodded. "What is your idea, elvellon?"

"We search the castle in daylight, whilst the creature is still in the river," said Gimli.

"Why?"

The time of the orcs has come

"Because we found no trace of it last night, lad."

Eowyn laughed at Legolas' expression. "Gimli thinks that the castle may have hidden passages—many stone-built fortifications do. Helm's Deep is riddled with them—Eomer and I were once lost in one for two days."

"Two *days*—" said Gimli.

"We did not have a dwarf's instincts."

"The point is, lad—if the creature is sleeping in the castle, maybe it has a nest. We saw nothing last night, but we may well be able to find something in the daylight, whilst the thing is out fishing."

"If we know where it sleeps," said Eowyn, "we can approach it at its most vulnerable. When you arrived Gimli and I were discussing what we know about the creature's movements—or possible movements. *I* saw it leaving the keep, Master Berryn saw it *inside* the keep, so we think that that is probably where it lives." Legolas nodded. She continued, "Berryn told me it was standing beside one of the piers on the eastern wall and—and this is more speculative—Amras was found lying under the bowyer's workbench, which was against the eastern wall. Well, it is a place to start."

Legolas finished his eggs. "Very well," he said, "let us go."

...

In the daylight, it took Gimli less than ten minutes to find the entrance to the creature's den.

He started in the south east corner of the Great Hall, tapping the stones with the butt of his axe and listening carefully. "Hear that?" he said, "That is solid stone... That is rubble fill... Solid stone... stone... stone... Ah," he said, tapping a pier, "empty space!"

He examined the carved mouldings running up the corners of the pier, feeling the stone with expert fingers. "Yes..." He grasped a section of moulding and pulled. The piece of stone, attached to a long metal rod, slid out in his hand, and the face of the pier swung open like a door.

"Quite a simple mechanism, really," said Gimli. "See—once you are inside, you pull it back, and the door closes. We will need those torches, lad."

Inside the pier, a spiral staircase wound its way, not upwards, as Eowyn had expected, but downwards, into the bowels of the earth. The three friends climbed slowly down the stairs.

"It is damp down here," said Eowyn. "Dripping."

"We are below the level of the river," said Gimli, "the water filters through the stone."

"It seems you were right, melmenya—it is a creature of water."

"And it must be intelligent," said Eowyn, "to have found the door mechanism—"

"Look!" said Gimli. A low door opened off the staircase. Gimli stepped through and raised his torch. "Well," he said, "it does indeed have a nest."

Ducking through the door, Legolas and Eowyn followed Gimli into a small room. In the corner was a circular 'bed' made from woven rushes and lined with bits of cloth—and with strips of torn parchment.

The time of the orcs has come

"Poor Master Berryn," said Legolas, "I am afraid his maps will need redrawing."

Gimli used the toe of his boot to examine a pile of debris that had been pushed into the corner. "Fish bones, tangled cord, a broken rule... ah, a notebook. A little mouldy, but at least we can salvage that," he said.

"No Gimli," said Legolas. "Leave it where it is and let us go before we disturb too much—now that we know where the creature sleeps, we do not want to frighten it into moving somewhere else. We can get the notebook after we have—dealt—with it."

"Aye, you are right, lad."

They stepped out onto the staircase. "Where do you suppose that goes?" asked Eowyn, pointing down into the darkness.

"Further into the rock," said Gimli. "Perhaps there are more rooms. Or perhaps it connects with something else..."

"Let us get back to the camp," said Legolas, clearly less comfortable underground than his companions, "the light will be fading and Haldir should have the raiding party ready..."

...

Berryn, Rumil and Orophin had reached Eryn Carantaur after four hours' hard riding. They left their horses in the main stables and began climbing the massive stairway to the aerial city. Berryn's eyes were as round as saucers. The place was beyond his wildest imaginings—as far as he could see, slender walkways spilled between the branches of the mighty trees, connecting the elegant wooden buildings nestled in their branches.

He paused for a moment to get a better look at the buildings—their intricately carved woodwork, lustrous stained glass, pale green paintwork and white canvas sunshades. He shook his head. It is so beautiful, he thought, that words cannot describe it... And his mind was instantly filled with hundreds of questions that poured out of his mouth at random, "Did Lorien look like this? Why did Legolas choose this site? How big is the city—how many people live here? Are they all elves? What are the trees called? Why are they so tall? How did you lift the building materials up here?..." And Rumil and Orophin, their spirits already broken by his constant questioning, took him by the arms and hauled him up the rest of the stairs.

The library—though open to all the citizens of Eryn Carantaur, and to visiting scholars—was part of the palace complex. Rumil and Orophin dragged Berryn through its elegant doors, dumped him—with a few words of elvish—before the chief librarian, promised Berryn they would return later to take him to supper, then left to find some peace and quiet.

Berryn looked at the librarian. He was one of those elves that looked old and distinguished rather than young and beautiful, so Berryn drew himself up to his full height, straightened his clothes, and bowed respectfully. "I am Berryn, son of Hador," he said, "cartographer to his Majesty, King Elessar, here on a mission for your lord, Prince Legolas." And he made a quick attempt to smooth the creases out of Legolas' letter before handing it to the librarian.

The librarian smiled and bowed his head, took the letter, broke the seal, and read its contents carefully. "Lord Legolas says you have seen this creature," he said.

"Yes sir," said Berryn.

"My name is Maglor, Berryn," said the librarian. "Please take a seat and tell me everything you can remember about it."

...

The time of the orcs has come

Legolas had been gone for almost six hours.

Eowyn was pacing.

She had checked her map, for the fifth time, measured the distance between Minas Athrad and Eryn Brethil, calculated the miles, estimated the average speed of an elf climbing through trees, added on the time it would take him to kill one orc, two orcs, three orcs... And she was sure that Legolas should have been back two hours ago.

I should have gone with him, she thought. I should not have let him go alone.

It helped to keep moving. She paced past the cave she shared with Legolas, past the rocks where the field cook had set up his kitchen, past the ring of trees where the elves had laid out their bedrolls, past the cave where the Mirkwood elves were guarding Finrod, who was lying in healing sleep...

And where, to her left, an elf was hiding behind one of the trees, watching.

Is he really watching Finrod? Eowyn walked a little further, turned, and paced back towards her cave. *Yes, he is.* A few moments later, she turned and paced back towards the healing room. *Who is it? One of the craftsmen, the stringer.*

What should she do?

On reflection, Eowyn decided that, since she could not be sure that the stringer was actually doing anything suspicious, she would not tackle him now. She would wait for Legolas—*Please, gods, let him return safely*—and tell him what she had seen.

And in the meantime, she thought, it helps to keep moving.

The time of the orcs has come

Extra scene: Pillow talk

She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it.

"What was that for?" asked Legolas.

Eowyn was silent for a moment. "Well, it cannot be for believing in me when others do not, because *Haldir* has more faith in me than you; and it cannot be for treating me as an equal, because you were about to send me home; and it cannot be for—"

"I am sorry I asked."

She pushed herself up on her arms and grinned down at him. "It must be because I love you."

He slid his hands down to her waist and, making good use of his elven strength, rolled her on top of him.

"*Legolas!*"

"What?"

"You *know* what." She grinned.

"*That?*"

"Yes." She giggled.

He raised his eyebrows.

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

She giggled again. "Maybe I do not want to."

"*Maybe?*"

"Maybe I would prefer to sleep." She laid her head on his chest. "But you would *obviously* prefer to do something else..."

"Little vixen!" He rolled her over onto her back, pushed aside the bed roll, rose to his knees and loomed over her.

"That," said Eowyn, staring up at him, "is just not fair."

"Why?"

"Because it shows you in a *most* advantageous light."

"That was the intention."

"Come here."

"I may prefer to sleep."

"Ha!" She reached up and stroked his long, thick shaft. Then she curled her hand around him—"Come here,"—pulled him down to her mouth, and sucked him, very lightly.

"Valar!" Despite his awkward position, Legolas squirmed with pleasure.

Drawing him deeper, she sucked harder.

"*Oh...*" He took his weight upon his hands and stretched his legs out wide, muscles taut, thrusting

The time of the orcs has come

gently downwards, gritting his teeth to maintain some self control.

Eowyn grasped his thighs and sucked.

His hands curled into fists—a delicious pain had begun rippling through his testicles. He gazed down between his arms. Eowyn was moving rhythmically, concentrating on her task, her eyes tightly closed, and—

"MELMENYA!"

Some still-conscious part of his mind told him to withdraw and he came over the rock above her head, moaning her name with each spasm, until he was empty.

Then he collapsed onto his side and reached for her, pulling her into his arms. "A moment, melmenya," he whispered, "just give me a moment..." He kissed her, tenderly. "And then I will find some way to reward you for that—my beautiful, wanton *woman*."

The time of the orcs has come

Chapter 5: The mer-maid

"There are many creatures that live hidden on the margins of Middle Earth, unknown to the rest of us, Berryn," said Maglor. "There is a creature, called a blemmye, that has no head—but is reported to have its face in its chest." He slid a ladder into position and began climbing up to the top shelf of the bookcase. "There is a creature called a sciapod that has a single foot, but that foot is so large that it can raise it above its head to shelter from the sun!"

"That does not seem very practical," said Berryn.

"It is a creature of the desert," said Maglor, "so shade is perhaps more important to it than locomotion... Ah, here we are—" He pulled out a large book, richly bound in red leather, and carefully climbed down the ladder with it. "*Chronicles of the Grey Havens*," he said. "This came from Lord Elrond's library." He laid the book on a table and began turning its pages, carefully. "Now, if my memory serves me—ah, yes—"

Maglor began reading, "*In the year 3410 of the second age, men fishing off the coast of Harlindon caught in their nets a wild man. He was naked and was like a man in all his members, covered with hair and with a long shaggy beard. He eagerly ate whatever they brought him but if it was raw he pressed it between his hands until all the juice was expelled. The men brought him to the elves of the Grey Havens, who tried to speak with him but he would not talk. He showed no signs of reverence or belief. He was allowed to go into the sea, strongly guarded with three lines of nets, but he dived under the nets and came up again and again. Eventually he came back of his own free will. But later on he escaped and was never seen again.*"

"I believe there is a picture of the creature," said Maglor, turning the page. "Yes, here!"

"By the gods," said Berryn, reaching towards the woodcut, "that is it! That is the creature—the hairy body, the face..."

"Good," said Maglor. "Now I know where to look."

...

The raiding party advanced silently through the trees—picking off the orcs below with ruthless efficiency—until it came to a group of four, crouching on the ground with their hands raised, as if in submission to some invisible being.

What on Middle Earth are they doing? wondered Legolas, signalling his warriors to lower their bows. "We need to take prisoners," he said, softly, to Haldir.

Haldir nodded. "Kill two, capture two?"

"Yes."

The two elves raised their bows, drew and loosed—two orcs fell. The surviving orcs, panic-stricken, leapt to their feet and began running through the forest. The elves dropped nimbly to the ground and followed, quickly gaining on them.

"Stay behind them," cried Legolas, running up the trunk of the nearest tree—crossing its branches to the next tree—crossing to the next—and the next—then dropping down in front of the orcs.

"Stop," he shouted. His bow was raised, with two arrows drawn

Haldir, behind them, had drawn his sword.

The time of the orcs has come

The orcs fell to the ground, trembling.

"What is *wrong* with you," asked Legolas, exasperated. "What were you doing in the clearing? Is it the creature? The—the *thing* that is living in the castle? Is that what you are afraid of?"

The orcs, on their knees, turned to face one another. Then, without a word, each drew his dagger and slew the other.

...

"It is called," said Maglor, moving his ladder, "a 'merman'—or, more properly, *men* call it a merman. Elves call it a 'gæarbenn'. And, of course, we do not know what it calls itself."

He began to climb the ladder. "Now what have we here? *The Higher Creatures of the Sea*," he said, translating the title into the common tongue, "yes..." He pulled the book off the shelf and handed it down to Berryn. "*Dangerous Animals of the Sea*, yes... And there should be—ah, here we are, *The Natural History of the Merman*." He handed both books to Berryn. "Do you read elvish?"

"No," said Berryn.

"Then I will have to translate the relevant parts for you. There is just one other book I think we should look at..." He slid the ladder across two book cases. "Now where—ah yes, *A Discourse on the Mind*."

"Sir?"

"Maglor," corrected the librarian.

"I am sorry s—*Maglor*. Why do we need the last book?"

"Because what you described, my young friend—the fear you experienced—was the merman influencing your mind. As we have seen, the merman cannot speak—at least, not in the world above the sea. I suspect that he communicates in thoughts and dreams, and that he implants extreme fear in his enemies' minds as a way of protecting himself—"

"Which would explain why the orcs are all so frightened," said Berryn. "And suggests that it—he—is not really as dangerous as he seems. But then who killed and attacked the warriors?"

"Let us see what else the books have to say about him, Berryn," said Maglor.

...

Eowyn stopped pacing when she heard the raiding party return.

She ran through the trees, past the field kitchen, past the bedrolls, past the healing cave, to the clearing where the horses were kept.

"Legolas!" she cried, "Legolas!"

And Legolas leapt down from his horse and wrapped her in his arms.

...

"Since there has been no further sighting of the creature," said Legolas, "we will proceed with the next orc raid. There are two bands left, one on the island of Toll Thâr; one, about thirty strong, across the river at Habad Penn. Neither is particularly easy to reach but I propose we take Habad Penn—the river is quite low at present."

The time of the orcs has come

He was holding a council of war with Eowyn, Haldir and Gimli.

"There is no tree cover on that shore," said Haldir.

"No," agreed Legolas, "so we will have to adapt our tactics. We will take thirty warriors, cross the ford, get into position just before dawn and attack at first light—five volleys of arrows, then we go in to deal with the survivors. Any comments?"

"How do we cross the ford?" asked Gimli.

"On horseback," said Legolas. "You will ride with me, elvellon."

Gimli muttered something unintelligible about dwarves and horses.

"What are you going to do about the stringer, Fëanáro?" asked Eowyn. She had already described what she had seen whilst waiting for the raiding party to return.

Legolas thought for a moment. "We will keep the Mirkwood elves guarding Finrod," he said. "But ideally—ideally we need someone to watch Fëanáro without his knowing."

Haldir nodded. "Someone we can trust who has good reason to spend a lot of time with him, like one of the other craftsmen—"

"Master Nolofinwë!" said Eowyn.

The elves and the dwarf turned towards her.

"Why melmenya?"

"I know him—well, *slightly*—Arwen introduced me to him when I first arrived in Eryn Carantaur for the Harvest Ceremony," she smiled at Legolas. "She asked him to make her a sword as a Yuletide gift for Aragorn. He was Lord Elrond's personal swordsmith. It was he who reforged the sword of Elendil..."

"He forged Anduril?"

"Yes."

"Why did he not tell us?" asked Haldir.

"He struck me as a very honourable and a very *modest* person," said Eowyn.

"Let us speak to him," said Legolas.

...

When Rumil and Orophin came to take Berryn to supper, they found him still with Maglor, pouring over a large pile of books, and making careful notes on a sheet of parchment.

"Thank you for coming for me," said Berryn, "but I will not have time for supper if I am to get this information back to Lord Legolas in time."

The brothers returned with two plates of food, promising that they would come back at midnight to take Berryn to his lodging. But at midnight, they found Maglor still engrossed in his books and Berryn already fast asleep, his head resting on the table, his food untouched.

...

"Master Nolofinwë," said Legolas, "Please sit down." He paused a moment to collect his

The time of the orcs has come

thoughts. "I am about to ask you to do something that you may feel you cannot—honourably—do. And if that is the case, I want you to say so. Your honesty will not be held against you."

"My lord?"

"First I must stress that, whether you agree to help me or not, what I tell you must not go beyond these walls," said Legolas. "Can you agree to that?"

"Of course, my lord," said Noloſinwë.

"Good. As you know, Finrod is lying in the healing room, recovering from an attempt on his life. What you will not know is that Master Dínendal does not believe that his injury was inflicted by the creature."

"Then by whom, my lord?" asked Noloſinwë.

Legolas turned to Eowyn. "Melmenya?"

"This afternoon, Master Noloſinwë, I saw Fëanáro, hiding behind the trees, watching the healing room," said Eowyn. "He was there for at least an hour. I do not think he knows I saw him..."

"It may be nothing," said Legolas. "He may have an entirely innocent reason for his concern. They may be friends—"

"No, my lord," said Noloſinwë. "I do not believe they are. I heard them talking when we first arrived..." He hesitated, trying to decide whether he should continue. At length, he said, "Finrod was convinced that they had met before but Fëanáro insisted that they had not..."

Legolas exchanged glances with the others.

"What we want you to do, Master Noloſinwë, is keep a discreet watch on Fëanáro. If he is innocent, then you will see nothing. But if he intends Finrod some harm, you may be able to raise the alarm and prevent it."

Noloſinwë thought carefully, then he said, "Yes, I will. Some instinct tells me that all is not right with Fëanáro. I will do as you ask, my lord."

...

The raiding party crossed the ford without incident. By dawn, they were in position, encircling the orc encampment.

As the sun rose, Legolas gave the signal and the elven archers—in perfect synchrony, and with ruthless precision—shot five volleys into the unprepared orcs. Then the entire raiding party moved in to finish off the survivors.

Haldir ran to the nearest orc, drawing his sword. The creature had been hit twice in the chest but was still struggling to draw its dagger. *There is more fight left in these*, thought Haldir, and he raised his sword and drove it through the orc's heart.

The blade passed straight through the orc and buried itself deep in the ground beneath. "Orc's breath!" the elf cried, twisting the sword to free it—

"HALDIR!" screamed Eowyn. And there was no mistaking the warning in her voice.

Haldir spun around—his sword still trapped in the ground—to face an injured Uruk Hai bearing down upon him with its sword raised to strike. Haldir abandoned his own sword and began to

The time of the orcs has come

reach for his knife... But Eowyn had already slipped between them. She calmly raised her blade and stabbed, driving the tip through the weakest part of the beast's armour, where the plates left a yawning gap at its neck.

The Uruk Hai grasped its throat. It knew it was dying—blood was bubbling from its mouth and spilling out through its fingers—but it still had the strength for one final, frenzied blow and, with all the power of its massive sword arm, it lashed out at Eowyn, slicing through her leather cuirass and mail hauberk.

"Ah!" Eowyn's cry was more of a sigh than a scream. She grasped her shoulder and turned towards Haldir.

"It burns," she whispered. And collapsed into his arms.

...

"EOWYN!"

Legolas shrieked so loudly and with so much anguish that the elves momentarily stopped their work, but they soon remembered their orders and continued the grim job of dispatching the surviving orcs.

Legolas ran to his wife and helped Haldir lower her to the ground.

"She saved my life," said the March Warden. "She saved my life..."

"She does not seem to be bleeding much," said Legolas, "help me get this armour off." He unlaced the leather cuirass and, together, the elves supported the woman's unconscious body and slipped the cuirass off her shoulders then pulled her mail hauberk over her head. Legolas ripped open the front of her tunic. The wound ran diagonally from her left shoulder to her breast.

"It is just a *scratch*..." he said, confused.

"Poison!" said Haldir. "*Poison!* She said it *burned*..." He lifted the Uruk Hai's sword and sniffed it, then held it up to the light. A faint trace of dried liquid was still visible on the blade.

"We must get her to Master Dínendal, *now*," said Legolas. "Tell Gimli to take charge of the mopping up, then follow me."

...

Berryn awoke at dawn, his arms cramped and his neck stiff.

He rubbed the back of his neck and looked around. He was still in the library, Maglor was still reading, and his plate of food was still sitting beside him.

His stomach growled.

"Ah," said Maglor. "You are awake. Good. I have found out some very important things about our merman."

Berryn took a quick bite from the bread on his plate and picked up his pen. "I am ready to take notes," he said.

"First," said Maglor, "—now where was it? Ah, yes. The merman has a very distinctive method of killing his prey." He began to read from *Dangerous Animals of the Sea*, "The merman feeds on large fish, turtles and seals, considering the young of the seal a particular delicacy. It kills

The time of the orcs has come

its prey by grasping it in its powerful arms and suddenly twisting its head to break its neck."

"By the gods!" said Berryn.

...

Legolas gave Arod his head, and the horse, seeming to understand the urgency of his mission, galloped across the ford and through the forest, leaving his master free to cradle his lady in his arms.

Haldir followed close behind.

When they reached the campsite Legolas rode straight to the mouth of the healing cave. "Master Dínendal," he cried, "Master Dínendal! Help her, help her, please..."

"Lay her down here, my lord," said the healer, quickly preparing a rock-shelf bed. "What has happened?"

"We believe she has been poisoned by an Uruk Hai blade," said Legolas. Haldir showed the healer the traces of dried liquid on the sword.

Dínendal carefully drew Eowyn's tunic aside. "The wound is not deep," he said, "—fortunately it is no more than a scratch, my lord. March Warden, please pass me those shears." He carefully cut away the tunic. "Hold her still, my lord," he said to Legolas.

Legolas took her in his arms and gently held her head against his chest, leaning down to hear what she was saying.

"Legolas?" she whispered.

Master Dínendal returned with water, clean cloths, and a jar of granular paste. "This salve will draw out any poison that is left in the wound," he said, "but I am afraid that a great deal of it will already have passed into her blood."

Whilst Legolas supported her, Dínendal carefully cleaned the wound, then spread on the thick pink salve and covered it with a pad, which he bound in place with the cloth.

Eowyn began to tremble violently.

"It is the effect of the salve, my lord, drawing out the poison," explained Dínendal. "We must renew it, every half hour," he added.

Eowyn curled up against Legolas' chest and began to sob, her voice full of fear and hopelessness. It was heartbreaking. Legolas pressed his lips to the top of her head then raised his eyes to look at Haldir. The March Warden's face was wet with tears.

...

"Legolas?"

The last thing she remembered clearly was Legolas calling her name. But Legolas had gone—she looked around for him, desperately—and she was completely surrounded by kneeling orcs.

"Get down," growled the beast beside her. And it reached up with its filthy hands and pulled her to her knees. "He is coming. Stay down"

"Who—"

The orc cuffed the side of her head. "Quiet! Eyes down! Or we all suffer!"

The time of the orcs has come

A wave of fear rippled through Eowyn's body.

"He is coming!" gasped the orc. "Stay down!"

Eowyn felt another surge of fear—then another—and another, each stronger than the last—stronger and stronger—until her body was trembling violently and her mind was filled with nothing but the hopeless, helpless sobs of a broken woman. Was that voice her own?

I will not give in to this, she thought, and she forced herself to raise her head and look at the creature that was filling her with such terror.

It was standing before the orcs like a king before its people and it was looking straight at her—singling her out from the crowd of its wailing subjects, just as it had that night in the castle ward. And their eyes locked once more—but this time it did not walk away. Instead, it came towards her, pushing its way through the grovelling orcs, and it raised her to her feet.

"At lassst," it said, "you are here."

...

Berryn grabbed another mouthful of bread and cheese and continued writing.

"The merman," read Maglor, "'does not have a natural mate'—"

"What does that mean?" asked Berryn.

Maglor shrugged his shoulders. "There are no mer-women," he said.

"Then how does it reproduce?" asked Berryn.

"I am coming to that—where was I? Ah, yes. *'When the merman is mature he comes ashore to find himself a mate. He may chose a female of any species—elf, human, hobbit or dwarf—though humans seem preferred. When he has selected his consort he uses his superior mental powers to persuade her to join him under the sea. His potency is considerable and few are able to resist. Once the female accepts him, an irreversible transformation occurs.'*"

"What sort of transformation?" asked Berryn, knowing that he would not like the answer.

"There is a picture," said Maglor. He turned the book around and lifted it so that Berryn could see the page—swimming along its margin was a creature that was part woman, part fish.



a mermaid

...

When Dínendal came to change her dressing, Eowyn was struggling so violently that it was taking both Legolas and Haldir to hold her down.

"Please try to keep her very still for a moment, my lords," said Dínendal, as he carefully cut open the bandage and removed the dressing.

The time of the orcs has come

"Gods!" cried Legolas, "what is happening to her?" The skin around the wound had turned green and scaly.

"It is the effect of the poison, my lord," said Dínendal. He showed Legolas the soiled dressing—the pink salve had turned a lurid green. "Here is the poison that has been drawn out of her body." He spread fresh salve on the wound and applied a clean pad.

"Is the change *permanent*?" asked Haldir.

"I do not know, my lords," said Dínendal, softly, securing the new dressing. "We will draw out as much of the poison as we can, and the lady is very strong, and—and, looking through my books, I think I may have found an antidote—but I will let you know as soon as I am sure."

But at that moment, Eowyn began screaming, "No! No! Legolas! LEGOLAS! Help me!"

...

"At lassst I have found you," hissed the merman, "my mer-maid."

"I am no mer-maid!" said Eowyn.

The merman stretched out its thin grey hand and traced its finger from her cheek to her chin. Eowyn tried to pull away, but two of its orc-subjects were holding her fast. The merman slid its hand down her throat and over her breast, stroking her scaly green skin, and laughed. "You are indeed a mer-maid," it hissed, "for, even ass we ssspeak, your flesh is changing. Ssoon you will be a creature of the ssea—and I will take you ass my mate, for I tire of sssolitude!"

Then the merman took her hand and, suddenly, they were swimming—diving and rolling and gliding through the sea, swimming through gardens of bright, waving sea-flowers and shoals of darting fish. And the merman was smiling and beckoning her into its rocky bed.

"Come, my love," it hissed, "come with me. We will live ass one throughout the long agess and you will bear me many children..."

"No," cried Eowyn. "No! No! Legolas! LEGOLAS! Help me!"

...

"Maglor," said Berryn, softly. "There is only *one* female for miles around Minas Athrad, and that is Lady Eowyn."

...

Dínendal returned carrying a book.

"Have you news of the antidote?" asked Legolas, anxiously.

"Yes, my lord, though I confess I do not understand how it can possibly work—"

"What is it?" asked Haldir.

Dínendal cleared his throat. "You must lie with her, my lord," he said.

"Lie—" Legolas looked from the healer, to Haldir, then to Eowyn. "But she is unconscious..."

"Yes, my lord. But, according to the text," he waved his book, "it is the only way to draw her mind back from the dark place in which it is now trapped. And, once she is conscious, the poison will have no hold over her." He cleared his throat, "I do recommend, though," he said, "that we also continue to treat her in the conventional way. I will change her dressing before

The time of the orcs has come

you—er.."

...

Whilst Rumil and Orophin saddled the horses, Berryn packed up his notes. Maglor escorted him down the main staircase to the clearing beneath the city, where the brothers were waiting for him with two very distinguished-looking elves.

"They are Lord Fingolfin and Lord Caranthir," whispered Maglor, "Lord Legolas' most trusted advisors."

"My lords," said Berryn bowing low.

"Please, Master Berryn," said Fingolfin, "do not stand on ceremony. Rumil and Orophin have told us of the merman. We are here to tell you how grateful we are for all that you have done and to wish you a safe and swift journey. Lady Eowyn is dear to all of us—very dear." Lord Caranthir nodded in agreement. "We pray that you will be time to save her."

"I will do everything in my power, my lords," said Berryn, gravely.

And he swung himself up onto his horse and, together with the two elves, left the city of Eryn Carantaur at the gallop.

The time of the orcs has come

Extra scene: The return

He smelled of rain—of forest rain. Eowyn buried her face in his chest, inhaling his scent, holding him with arms of steel. She would *never* let him go...

She felt him move—felt him press his lips to her head—and all the terror of the past six hours burst from her in a great sob. *What she might have lost!* Then she clung to him, weeping uncontrollably.

She felt his arms slide down her body, felt him lift her, and carry her—she kept her face hidden in the crook of his neck.

But she knew that he was not taking her home to their little cave.

...

Dínendal examined her, then drew Legolas aside. He spoke softly, but not so soft that Eowyn could not hear. "It is not a relapse, my lord," he said. "I believe it is a perfectly normal reaction to your return."

"I do not understand."

"I think she is crying with *relief*, my lord—I recommend that you spend a few hours with her, just the two of you, alone..."

...

This time he did carry her up the steep narrow path to their own cave. But he did not take her inside. Instead, he climbed up the rock face, to a small plateau high above the cave mouth—ringed by beeches and fringed with bracken—where they could not be seen from the camp, but could easily summon help, if needed.

There they sat, side by side, on a flat boulder.

"I am sorry, *melmenya*." He wrapped his arm around her and held her close.

She shook her head. "No," she said, her voice weak from crying, "I am being foolish, Legolas." She gulped. "I know that. It is just... You were so long, my darling... I could not understand why you were gone so long. I thought..."

"I know." He kissed her temple.

"I think I can see, now," she continued, haltingly, "why *men* go to war and *women* stay at home."

"*Melmenya?*" Legolas looked down at her in surprise.

"To make it easier." She took his hand and, lovingly stroking his fingers, she struggled to explain. "If I had never known how it was to fight by your side... If, like other women, I thought it was my place to stay at home and wait... Perhaps I could have borne it more..." She searched for the right word.

"Patiently?"

"Patiently... *Philosophically*."

"But you are not saying that you will put away your sword and leave the fighting to me—?"

"Never!"

Her spirit had returned in that one word. Legolas hugged her proudly. "What *will* you do, Eowyn *nín*?"

"What will we both do?" asked Eowyn—and her voice had grown stronger, more even. "We will

The time of the orcs has come

both suffer—because, sometimes, our paths will reverse and it will be *you* who is waiting for *me*...

"But," she continued, "I would endure a *thousand times* the terror I felt today for just one more moment fighting by your side."

Extra scene: My wife!

Legolas drew his white knives and ran into the chaos.

A massive Uruk Hai, two arrows lodged in its chest and another protruding from its back, was lumbering amongst the busy elves, slashing wildly with a ragged black blade. Timing his movements precisely, Legolas slipped, like a dancer, beneath its flailing arm, rose, sliced, ducked, and spun away.

The Uruk raised a hand to its throat... But the hand froze, mid air, the knees buckled, and the beast crumpled to the ground.

Legolas had already moved on—

...

"HALDIR!"

Her voice came to him above the hubbub, piercing his concentration, and making his blood run cold.

He turned—knives relaxing—immediately found her in the melee—saw Haldir, with his sword stuck in the ground—*You fool*—saw the Uruk Hai bearing down on him—saw Haldir reach for his knife—*No time, mellon nín*—began to run—saw Eowyn step forward—saw, with unbearable pride, her drive her sword through the beast's throat—felt the overwhelming relief—

...

Then the Uruk Hai lashed out.

And Legolas was screaming, "EOWYN! EOWYN!"

NO, NO, NO. Middle Earth had slowed around him—every step was lasting an Age. But, somehow, he was beside her, *NO, NO, NO.* He took her from Haldir's arms and laid her on the ground, *NO, NO, NO.*

...

Haldir was mumbling the same words, over and over..

NO, thought Legolas, *No, n—there is no blood. Why is there no blood? Has she fainted? Please, Valar, let her just have fainted...* "Help me," he cried. "Help me get this armour off."

Fingers shaking, clumsy with fear, he unlaced her leather cuirass and, with Haldir's help, pulled off her mail, ripped open her tunic—

"It is just a *scratch*..."

"*Poison.*" Haldir's words stabbed his spirit. "She said it *burned.*"

"We must get her to Master Dínendal. *NOW.*"

How he carried her to Arod, lifted her onto Arod's back—*Haldir must have helped me*—crossed the ford, found the Healing Cave, he had no idea. "Stay with me, *melmenya*, stay with me."

"Lay her down here, my lord," said Master Dínendal, quickly preparing a rock-shelf bed. "What has happened?"

Thank the Valar for Dínendal!

The time of the orcs has come

...

Sweet Eru, how he longed to make love to her! *If anyone knew what was in my heart!*

He had been excited by battle—of course—but, the moment she had fallen, his arousal had been transformed into something else—a tender desire—a *yearning*—for his injured wife.

As though his love could put things right!

...

"Have you news of the antidote?" he asked, anxiously.

"Yes, my lord, though I confess I do not understand how it can possibly work—"

"What is it?" asked Haldir.

Dínendal cleared his throat. "You must lie with her, my lord," he said.

The time of the orcs has come

Chapter 6: The duel

Legolas looked at Haldir. The March Warden's horror—and pain—were written clearly on his face but, always supportive, he patted Legolas' shoulder encouragingly. Legolas lifted Eowyn into his arms and carried her out of the healing room, through the forest, and into the their cave.

"Forgive me, my love..." he whispered, laying her down on their bedroll. Carefully, he removed her boots and leggings, then undressed himself and knelt down beside her.

How could he do this without hurting her?

Gently, he stroked her stomach, sweeping his fingers in wide circles, warming and stimulating the skin. Eowyn moaned. Very slowly, so as not to frighten her, he slid his hand down between her thighs, pressing his fingers against her most sensitive flesh, caressing and probing, and preparing her for lovemaking.

"No," whispered Eowyn, barely loud enough for even an elf to hear, "no, no, no."

Tears ran down Legolas' face. "Trust me, melmenya," he whispered.

Then he lay between her legs, and slipped slowly into her body, a fraction of an inch at a time, until he was completely inside her. And he began making love to her, in a gentle, rocking rhythm.

...

"Come lie with me," hissed the merman, laying her down on its rocky bed. And it stretched out its long thin fingers, caressing the scaly green skin of her belly and running its hand downwards to probe the strange opening where her body joined her tail.

Eowyn felt the first stirrings of desire... "No," she whispered, "no, no, no."

"Leave her, if you want to live!"

Eowyn pushed hard at the merman's chest and turned her head—and her heart leapt with joy to see Legolas, standing tall and magnificent in the water, his angry face surrounded by billowing blonde hair.

"She is my wife!" he cried, "and you shall not have her!" And he drew his bow and loosed a warning shot that grazed the merman's shoulder.

The merman slid off Eowyn's body and swam towards the him, its hands outstretched. "She is no longer your wife, little creature," it hissed. "She is a woman of the sea, my mermaid. She can no longer walk on land or live in air—"

"You lie!" cried Legolas and, moving faster than Eowyn's eyes could see, he loosed two more arrows that pierced the merman's chest. But the creature hardly paused as it pulled the arrows from its flesh and dashed them away.

Legolas threw down his bow and drew out his two white knives, spinning them in the water to align their blades.

"Foolish little creature," hissed the merman. "Your weapons cannot harm me!" And with a sweep of its arm, it knocked the knives from Legolas' hands and trapped the elf in a lethal embrace.

But it had underestimated its opponent. As it moved its hand to the back of Legolas' head, the

The time of the orcs has come

elf broke its grip, swept up his knives from the seabed, and buried both blades in the merman's fragile gills. The creature howled with pain as ribbons of blood spiralled through the water.

"She is mine!" cried Legolas. "You shall not have her! I will take her back to the forest, where she belongs!"

And he dropped his white knives and knelt beside Eowyn. "Trust me, melmenya," he whispered. And there, in the water, on the merman's own bed, he gently entered her strange, scaly body, and began making love to her, in a gentle, rocking rhythm.

...

"Oh, Legolas!" gasped Eowyn, her eyes flying open, "Oh! Oh! My love!"

And she clung to him as the pleasure crested and rolled through her body, leaving her head and her arms and her legs tingling with joy.

"I am still myself..." she whispered. "It was just a *dream*."

...

When they approached Eryn Brethil, where the great carantaurs disappeared and the beech forest that lined the Anduin flood plain began, the elves suddenly reined in their horses. Berryn, who was riding between them, began to protest, but Orophin held up his hand.

"Shhhhh," he said.

He pulled his bow from its strap and nocked an arrow, then gestured to his brother. Rumil drew his sword and slowly rode forward.

"What—" began Berryn.

"Shhhhh!"

Orophin waited until Rumil was thirty yards ahead, then gestured Berryn to follow. The three riders edged forward, slowly, the elves watching and listening, and the man jumping at every movement of the trees. Five minutes passed, then ten...

And Berryn had just managed to convince himself that it was a false alarm—when three orcs leapt from the undergrowth in front of Rumil, swords raised. The brothers were ready—Orophin brought two down with perfectly aimed arrows, and Rumil finished off the third with his blade.

But another group of orcs had already surrounded Berryn and were attempting to drag him from his horse. Berryn, who, despite his courage, was no fighter, had drawn his sword and was slashing wildly at his attackers.

The brothers rode back through the melee, cutting and slicing. "Ride!" cried Orophin.

He caught the bridle of Berryn's horse and the three riders galloped out of the ambush, Rumil slashing at the single orc that tried to follow. "Out onto the flood plain," cried Orophin, "where we can see them coming! We will ride along the forest edge. It will take longer, but we have more chance of getting there alive."

"We *must* hurry," shouted Berryn. "I think the merman knows we are coming!"

...

"What is wrong?" asked Eowyn, anxiously.

The time of the orcs has come

Dínendal had carefully removed her dressing and was staring at her shoulder. "There is nothing wrong, my lady, your wound is healing nicely." The scaling had completely disappeared. "But I want you to stay here for the rest of the day, so that I can watch your progress."

He drew Legolas aside. "I am concerned," he said, "about the sudden disappearance of the skin reaction, for I do not believe that all the poison has left her body. I will continue applying the salve and will keep a watch for any return of the symptoms. And you are welcome to stay here with her, my lord."

...

Eowyn soon fell into a troubled sleep and Legolas, sitting by her side, holding her hand, was just beginning to slip into reverie...

"Orc attack! Orc attack!" Legolas leapt to his feet. Haldir was running towards him. "About thirty have invaded the encampment to the south west," he cried, "but we have them contained."

"Reinforce the entire perimeter," said Legolas. "I will join you..." A movement caught his eye: Eowyn was struggling to get out of bed.

"No melmenya!" he cried. "Not this time. You are not fully recovered; you must stay here." When she began to protest he continued, sternly, "I will not argue with you Eowyn—you will stay here if I have to tie you down. And I *will*, melmenya."

A tiny smile appeared on Eowyn's face, and she sat down on the bed, quite heavily.

"Good," said Legolas.

He turned to the two Mirkwood elves, who were still guarding their sleeping comrade. "Valandil, Orodreth, we need you defending the encampment," he said. "We must leave Finrod in the healers' care."

...

"Gods speed, Legolas," whispered Eowyn, as she watched him leave with Haldir. And she suddenly felt very tired, so she lay back on the stone bed and closed her eyes.

...

He is nervous, thought Nolo-finwë, glancing at Fëanáro. The stringer was quietly packing the tools of his trade into a small pouch. *He is very nervous. Perhaps he plans to attack Finrod whilst everyone else is distracted by the orcs. And what does he intend to do with those?* Fëanáro had slipped the pouch into his pocket.

Nolo-finwë picked up his sharpening stone and began to hone a blade. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the stringer glance round the workshop, as if to check that no one was watching him. Then he slipped out of the cave without a word.

I must follow him, thought Nolo-finwë. He put down his sharpening stone. "I will be back in a moment," he said, to Taurnil and Mahtan, and he rose and left the cave.

Fëanáro was already disappearing through the trees, heading in the direction of the healing cave. Nolo-finwë followed silently, at a safe distance.

...

"Three!" roared Gimli, pulling his axe from the back of an orc's skull then spinning around to

The time of the orcs has come

cut down another beast with a blow to the neck. "Awwww! Four!"

"Eight!" cried Legolas, nocking another arrow.

"Six!" shouted Haldir, dodging an Uruk Hai's sword and stabbing upwards, cutting its throat.

...

Eowyn moaned.

Master Dínendal—busily preparing the healing room to receive casualties—immediately stopped what he was doing and went to her bedside.

The lady was flushed and restless. Dínendal laid the back of his hand against her brow—she was feverish. Carefully, he removed her dressing and examined her wound. The discolouration and scaling were back. Dínendal fetched some water and a cloth and began to clean the wound, working from her shoulder to her breast.

"No!" cried Eowyn. "Get away from me! Get away!" and she began to struggle.

Dínendal leant over her, intending gently to restrain her and was taken completely by surprise when Eowyn suddenly lashed out, punching him in the face.

...

"Legolas?"

"He isss not here," hissed the merman, leaning over her and trailing its thin hand across her throat and down between her breasts. "He hasss abandoned you, my love."

"No!" cried Eowyn. "That is not true! He is protecting me—he is protecting all of us—from your vile orcs! Get away from me! Get away!" And she beat her fists against the merman's head and chest.

...

Fëanáro had stopped at the edge of the clearing and was staring into the healing cave. Nolofinwë crept closer. *What is he looking at?* he wondered. *By the gods!* Through the mouth of the cave the swordsmith could see Lady Eowyn pounding Master Dínendal with her little fists. And, as he watched, the healer, taken by surprise—and far too gentle to retaliate—sank to the floor, stunned, and the lady rose from her bed, pulled off her long white shift, and walked—naked—out into the forest.

What do I do now? Nolofinwë wondered. *The lady is clearly delirious—she does not know what she is doing—and must be brought back, but I have been charged to protect Finrod...*

He looked around. The healer was still lying on the ground and there was no one else in sight that he could call to for help. And Fëanáro had started to move.

Nolofinwë grasped the hilt of his sword, ready to run forward and defend Finrod, but the stringer did not enter the healing cave. Instead he walked across the clearing and back into the forest, to where the horses were kept. Keeping his distance, in the cover of the trees, Nolofinwë watched Fëanáro untie one of the horses, mount it, and set off at a gallop, heading south east, into the densest part of the forest.

With everyone either fighting the orcs to the west or watching the flood plain, no one will see him go, thought Nolofinwë. *Should I follow?*

The time of the orcs has come

No, Finrod is safe-Lady Eowyn is my priority now. And he ran back towards the healing cave. Master Díndal was already struggling to his feet. "Lady Eowyn is walking towards the castle," Nolo-finwë called. "Send help after us!"

Then he ran into the forest in pursuit of the errant woman.

...

"Why is it that we are always in the place furthest from the action?" asked Orodreth. They had been sitting in the trees, keeping a watch on the castle, since the orc attack had started.

"Perhaps Prince Legolas just wants to keep his old Mirkwood comrades safe," said Valandil, grinning.

Orodreth laughed—then he suddenly held up his hand, listening hard, "Hear that?" he asked softly.

Valandil nodded. "Something in the undergrowth."

Both elves silently nocked an arrow and peered down through the branches. An orc emerged into the clearing beneath the tree. Both elves instantly loosed their arrows and the orc fell—to be immediately replaced by another. The elves dispatched the second beast, and it was replaced by another, and then another, and another.

The two elves soon fell into a steady rhythm, shooting each orc as it emerged from the brushwood. Neither noticed the naked woman slip out of the forest, walk across the flood plain, and enter the castle. And neither noticed the elf following her.

...

Cautiously, Nolo-finwë entered the castle keep.

Lady Eowyn was in the Great Hall, sitting on the floor, waiting.

"My lady?" said Nolo-finwë, softly. "My lady, you should not be here." He took off his jerkin and tried to drape it around her shoulders, but the woman pushed it away. "Please my lady—" he began.

"No!" cried Eowyn, "No! I do not want to leave!"

"Very well, my lady," said Nolo-finwë. "We will wait." *And, please gods, he thought, let help come soon.*

...

"Sssoon, my love," hissed the merman, draping a sharkskin mantle around her shoulders, "sssoon we will leave this dry world behind."

"No!" cried Eowyn, shrugging off the mantle. "No! I do not want to leave!"

...

"Thirty-three," shouted Gimli, swinging his axe, "thirty-four.."

This does not make any sense, thought Legolas. "Gimli, Haldir, to me!" he yelled, drawing his two friends out of the battle.

"What are they doing?" he asked. "They are not making any attempt to advance—they are hardly fighting. And they have not attacked anywhere else along the perimeter. It is as if they

The time of the orcs has come

want to keep us *here*. But why? What else is happening and where?" He shook his head. "I need to go and look. Gimli—take charge here. Haldir—come with me!"

...

Master Dínendal, following the sounds of battle, met Legolas and Haldir racing through the forest.

"What has happened to you?" asked Legolas, taking the healer's arm.

Dínendal touched his damaged face. "It was—it was Lady Eowyn, my lord," he said softly. "She attacked me and left the healing room—left the campsite."

"No..." said Legolas, shaking his head, "no!"

"I believe she was hallucinating, my lord," said Dínendal. "And I frightened her—she seemed to think that she was defending herself..."

"Where did she go?" asked Haldir.

"Master Nolo-finwë said she was walking towards the castle. He was following her."

Legolas looked at Haldir. "We must go after her—fetch her back, quickly," he said. "And we will need Gimli if we are going to find her in that castle—can you make your own way back to the healing room, Master Dínendal?" The healer nodded.

"Why would Eowyn go to the castle?" asked Haldir as they ran back towards the battlefield.

"I do not know," answered Legolas, "but I would be willing to wager that the creature has had a hand in this."

...

In the strange darkness of the castle keep, Nolo-finwë's senses were straining to their limits. He could hear the water dripping from the cistern in the roof; he could hear the mice running under the floorboards beneath him; and now he could hear footsteps coming from inside the castle wall.

Beside him, Lady Eowyn, who had been sitting completely—*unnaturally*—still, suddenly raised her head and looked towards the opposite wall.

Nolo-finwë stood, drew his sword, and stepped forward silently. At the last moment, some instinct told him to step aside and he watched in amazement as the front of one of the piers swung towards him and a creature—tall, thin, and covered in thick grey hair—stepped out into the hall and beckoned to Lady Eowyn.

By the Valar! It is real, he thought. He raised his sword. "Leave her!" he cried.

The creature spun around, raising its right arm, and knocked the sword out of Nolo-finwë's hand. And the swordsmith's mind was suddenly filled with a voice—a terrible, raw, hissing voice, laden with malice. *Foolish, foolish little creature, it said. She isss my chosssen mate. And you cannot ssstop her coming with me.*

"No!" cried Nolo-finwë. "She does not belong to you. She is the wife of the Lord of Eryn Carantaur! And she is my sovereign lady!" And he threw himself between the creature and the cowering woman.

The creature snarled, wrapped its arms around him, and began to squeeze—squeezing the air

The time of the orcs has come

out of his lungs, squeezing the life out of his body—and, as his eyes began to darken, Nolofoinwë felt its hand slide up to the back of his head.

"No!" screeched Lady Eowyn. "No! No! Legolas!"

And Nolofoinwë dropped into oblivion.

...

"Come to me, come join me now, my love," hissed the merman.

Eowyn shook her head, No! No! she thought, but the merman was beckoning, beckoning, and she could not resist... She began to rise to her feet, to follow him. But an elf, tall and fair and noble, stepped between them.

"Leave her!" he cried, "she does not belong to you!"

And Eowyn watched in agony as the merman grasped him and began to squeeze the life from his body.

"No!" she screeched. "No! No! Legolas!"

...

As Legolas, Haldir and Gimli emerged onto the flood plain, three riders approached them from the west.

"It is Berryn, with Rumil and Orophin," said Haldir.

"My lord!" cried Berryn, springing down from the saddle, "Lady Eowyn—the monster wants Lady Eowyn!" He ran beside Legolas. "The merman—that is what it is called—comes ashore to find a mate."

"Lady Eowyn would never leave u—never leave Lord Legolas for that thing!" cried Haldir.

"It has taken her against her will..." said Legolas, softly.

"The merman can control the minds of—er—lower animals," explained Berryn, "such as orcs and, to some extent, humans—even elves, if they are close enough."

"And Eowyn is weakened by the poison," said Legolas.

"If she accepts the merman, my lord," said Berryn, "it will take her below the sea. And if that happens—if she begins to breathe under water—she can never return."

"How do I kill this thing?" asked Legolas.

"No one knows, my lord," Berryn admitted. "Arrows and blades do not appear to harm it in the normal way. But *The Natural History of the Merman* suggests that its gills, on the sides of its neck, may be its most vulnerable part."

Legolas nodded. "It is not much to work with, Master Berryn," he said. "Come, we must hurry."

...

They found Nolofoinwë lying on the floor of the Great Hall.

"Is he—" began Legolas.

The time of the orcs has come

"He is still breathing," said Orophin.

"Thank the Valar," said Legolas. The swordsmith's sword was lying in front of the secret door. Legolas picked it up. "He must have tried to protect Eowyn," he said. "The merman has taken her to its nest—Gimli, can you open the door?"

Gimli ran his hand down the stone moulding and pulled on the concealed handle. The front of the pier swung open.

"Rumil, Orophin, stay with Nolofoinwë," said Legolas. "If we are not back in an hour, fetch help. Master Berryn, will you join us?"

"Of course, my lord."

Haldir lit four torches and the two elves, the dwarf and the man stepped through the pier-door and descended the spiral staircase. The merman's nest, lined with Berryn's torn parchments, was empty.

"My maps!" whispered the cartographer, sadly.

"He must have taken her deeper into the rock," said Gimli. "Come, follow me."

They continued descending.

"It is dank down here," said Haldir, looking around uncomfortably. "And it feels as though the entire weight of Arda is pressing on our heads."

"Yes," agreed Legolas. "But," he added, "Eowyn is used to buildings of stone and to underground caves—so the confinement will not trouble her so much..."

At last the staircase ended, and the rescuers stepped out into a low, broad cave. Legolas raised his torch. Strange rock formations glistened in the firelight—ribbons of coloured stone spilled from the ceiling to the floor, forming natural pillars and curtains of rock and casting intricate shadows on the walls. The floor sloped gently down to a dark pool of water.

"This is a strange cave," said Gimli. "Chilling. I feel as though ten thousand ants were crawling across my flesh..."

"The merman is nearby, my lords," said Berryn, shuddering. "I can feel the fear surrounding me—perhaps that is why you are all finding this place so unnerving."

Gimli drew his axe and walked down to the rocky shore. "That," he said, pointing to the water, "will take them to the Anduin. And from there, to the sea..."

"Eowyn! Eowyn!" shouted Legolas, his voice echoing around the cave, "Eowyn! Where are you?" He began striding towards the pool—

The merman rose out of the water.

Gimli lifted his axe and Haldir drew his sword, but Berryn, mastering the fear that was threatening to paralyse him, stepped in front of them holding up both hands.

"No! My lords," he gasped, "no! Lord Legolas, as her husband, must confront the merman alone. But beware of it, my lord," he said to Legolas, "—although it cannot speak, it can place thoughts in your mind and it will use them to deceive you..."

Legolas stepped forward. "You have taken my wife against her will," he said, "Return her now!"

The merman bared its teeth, and its voice filled Legolas' mind. *She isss no longer your wife.*

The time of the orcs has come

She hasss lain with me and now she iss my mate.

"You lie!" cried Legolas.

The merman laughed. *Sssee how she livess now!* And Legolas could see Eowyn, her legs transformed into a shimmering fishtail, swimming through corals and diving for pearls, laughing with her merman husband and playing with her mer-children.

I have given her what you could not, hissed the merman. I have given her immortality. Ass my mate she will live forever.

A sharp pain pierced Legolas' heart and he sank to his knees in despair.

The time of the orcs has come

Chapter 7: The victor

Legolas buried his face in his hands. *It is true, he thought, I cannot give her immortality. And she is happy in her new life. I must let her go...*

But then a familiar voice drifted through his consciousness—Gimli—saying, "No, lad, no—do not give up!" And another voice—Berryn—saying, "My lord, my lord, whatever the merman is telling you is false!" And then—the dearest voice in all of Middle Earth—crying, "Legolas! Legolas! My love! I have not betrayed you! Do not leave me!"

Eowyn?

Yes Eowyn! Legolas leapt to his feet. "You lie!" he shouted at the merman. "Eowyn has refused you! She is still my wife! And she wants to return to the forest with me! Come here and fight for her with honour!"

And when the merman did not move, Legolas waded out into the water to confront it. "Gimli, Haldir, Berryn," he cried, "find Eowyn and get her back to the camp!"

"Be careful, my lord," called Berryn, as he followed Gimli and Haldir into the stone labyrinth, "it will wrap its arms around you and try to break your neck."

Legolas drew out his two white knives, spinning them to align their blades.

"You can swim away now," he said to the merman, "back to the sea, and live. Or you can stay here and die. The choice is yours."

Foolish little creature, hissed the merman. *Your weapons cannot harm me!* And with a sweep of its arm, it knocked the knives from Legolas' hands and enfolded the elf in a lethal embrace.

...

It was Haldir who found Eowyn, crouching behind one of the rock curtains, naked, and shivering with cold. He took off his cloak, wrapped it around her and, despite her frantic struggles, he scooped her into his arms and carried her towards his comrades.

"Gimli, Berryn, come and help me," he whispered.

"How are we going to get her out of the cave without the merman seeing?" whispered Berryn. "And what are we going to do about Lord Legolas?"

"Legolas!" cried Eowyn, "Legolas!"

"Shhhhh, my lady," whispered Haldir, rocking her against his chest, like a crying baby. "Shhhhh. You must be quiet—"

"Legolas!" she screamed. And she suddenly pushed hard against Haldir's chest and kicked her legs, so that the elf lost his grip and dropped her in a heap at his feet. Then she leapt up, threw off Haldir's cloak, and ran through the cave towards her husband.

...

"The elf offers me mercy," hissed the merman. "But I will crush the life out of its body—"

"Legolas!" cried Eowyn, "Legolas!" And she tried to reach her beloved elf but one of the merman's orc-minions was holding her fast.

"I have it in my grasp, now, my love, and it is dying!"

The time of the orcs has come

"Legolas!" she screamed, and she pushed hard against the orc's chest, freeing herself from its grip, and ran through the cave to save her husband.

...

Foolish creature! said the merman, inside Legolas' mind. *I will crush the life out of your body!*

But the merman had underestimated its opponent. Legolas suddenly broke its grip and drove both fists into its neck.

And as the creature staggered, gasping for breath, Eowyn ran down to the water's edge, swept up Legolas' knives, and buried both blades in creature's fragile gills. The merman fell forwards into the water, and a dark pool of blood spread out across its surface.

...

"Legolas," whispered Eowyn.

"Shhhhh, melmenya," said Legolas softly, slipping out of his jerkin and wrapping it around her. "You are safe now. You have saved us both."

And he hugged her tightly, as if afraid she might still leave him.

...

Gimli dragged the merman's limp body out of the water and he and Berryn examined it carefully. "It is not breathing," said Gimli. "What shall we do with it?"

Legolas looked down at the strange creature. "Put it back in the water," he said. "Let its spirit return home."

Gimli nodded. Carrying the body between them, he and Berryn waded back into the pool and dumped it. The merman did not sink, but remained on the surface, as if lying on a bed, and was slowly borne out to the centre of the pool by the gentle lapping of the waves. Then it slipped beneath the water, and disappeared.

"By the gods," cried Gimli, "did it sink? Or did it swim?"

...

The five friends climbed back up the spiral staircase to the Great Hall, where Rumil and Orophin were tending Nolofinwë, who had regained consciousness.

Together, the elves, the woman, the dwarf, and the man left the castle and returned to the safety of the forest. The orcs had vanished. Legolas sent out scouts in every direction but all reported that the immediate vicinity was safe—the orc bands had dispersed as quickly as they had gathered.

"Maintain a minimal guard on the perimeter," said Legolas to Haldir. "Tomorrow at dawn we will light the pyres and burn the bodies. If the orcs do not return we will leave this place by mid-morning. With luck, we will be back in Eryn Carantaur by nightfall. In the meantime, March Warden, tell the cook to prepare us a feast tonight. Let us reward our warriors with some much needed merry-making."

...

Eowyn's feet had been badly torn when she ran across the cave floor and Legolas had insisted on carrying her all the way back from the castle and into the healing cave.

The time of the orcs has come

"Please set her down here, my lord," said Dínendal, pointing to a stone bed. The healer examined the wounds carefully. "Some of these are quite deep, my lady," he said, "and will need to be stitched. And, since humans heal more slowly than elves, we must be very careful about infection. I will clean them and anoint them with a healing salve—the salve you made yourself, my lady—it will also help reduce the pain. But you must not walk until your feet are fully healed."

"How will I manage?" asked Eowyn.

"I will carry you wherever you want to go, melmenya," said Legolas.

"To the bathing room?"

Legolas smiled.

Eowyn watched Dínendal as he collected all the materials he needed. "What happened to his face?" she whispered.

Legolas hesitated. "You—er—you did it, melmenya. Do you not remember?"

Eowyn stared at the healer open-mouthed. "I *hit* him?" Legolas nodded. "Master Dínendal," she called softly. "Master Dínendal, I am so sorry. Please forgive me. I cannot think why I would have done such a thing—"

"Please do not be concerned, my lady," said Dínendal graciously. "You were delirious—and I have had many a more serious injury from a wounded elf..."

...

"How is Finrod?" asked Legolas.

"He awoke from healing sleep almost an hour ago, my lord," said Dínendal. "And he has already taken some food—I believe he will make a full recovery."

"That is good news—very good news," said Legolas. "And Master Nolofinwë?"

"He has been extremely fortunate, my lord. All he requires is rest."

"Are they well enough to answer some questions?" asked Legolas.

"You could have a few moments with them now, my lord," replied the healer, "but I would much prefer it if you would wait until morning."

...

"What do you remember, melmenya?" asked Legolas, as he carried her back to their cave.

"It is strange," said Eowyn. "It all seemed real and yet a part of me knew that it could not be true... My body had changed—I had a tail, like a fish. And I could breathe under the water." She buried her face in his shoulder and whispered, "The merman wanted me to lie with him—to be his wife. He touched me. *There.*"

"Melmenya—" Legolas began.

"I would not have given in to him, Legolas—I swear it. But *you* stopped him. You fought with him. And when you had beaten him, you made love to me."

Legolas set her down on their bedroll. "I *did* make love to you, melmenya—when you were still unconscious. Master Dínendal said it would save you from the poison. I am so sorry..."

The time of the orcs has come

She pressed her finger to his lips. "Shhhhh, shhhhh—it did save me, my love. It pulled me out of the nightmare."

"The merman showed me your life beneath the sea," said Legolas. "It looked so beautiful—you looked beautiful, swimming amongst the sea creatures. And you seemed so happy. Gods!" he cried, "I almost lost you to the sea!"

"No!" cried Eowyn, hugging him fiercely. "Never! I would *never* have left you! I would never have yielded to him! My only desire—my only *thought*—was to return to you!"

...

The feast was held in the clearing beside the healing cave. The cook had outdone himself. There was fresh bread—Legolas could not imagine how it had been baked—a rabbit stew for those who ate flesh, and a spicy vegetable dish for those who did not. And for dessert there was compote of fresh and dried fruits, flavoured with mead and decorated with wild herbs.

Legolas smiled. During the fighting, the diverse people of his colony had come together as one. And here, at the feast, it was happening again—Gimli was entertaining Valandil and Berryn with tales of the Ring war; Rumil and Orophin were swapping stories with Orodreth and Camthalion; and Amras was deep in discussion with Haldir. All around him Lorien elves were singing with Mirkwood elves and Mirkwood elves were dancing with elves from Imladris.

His colony was a success. *And* he had Eowyn to share it with him.

Suddenly in high spirits, Legolas turned to her. "Would you like to dance, my lady?" he asked.

Eowyn laughed. "How can I dance when I cannot walk?" she asked.

"I will show you!" he cried. And he leapt to his feet, scooped her up in his arms, and carried her amongst the dancing elves, and—weaving in and out between them—he whirled her round and round, and they both laughed until it hurt.

...

"Legolas? You are suddenly very quiet."

"I was thinking about the celebration after Helm's Deep, *meleth nín*," he said.

"On the parapet outside the Golden Hall," said Eowyn.

"Yes..."

"Is something troubling you, my lord?"

"I needed some air, my lady."

"The smell of sweat and ale can be overpowering," she said, smiling.

What a beautiful smile, *thought Legolas*, and all because she thinks that *he* will one day return her love. Oh Eowyn!

"Why are you wearing your cloak, my lord?"

Her question, so far from his present thoughts, took him by surprise.

"Your healer," she explained—meaning, he supposed, the healer from Lorien she had tried to

The time of the orcs has come

bully into treating Haldir—"told me that elves do not feel the cold. But you are wearing your cloak—and with the hood raised..."

He thought for a moment. "You are right, my lady," he said, impressed by her insight, "I suppose it is because I still sense danger. Elven cloaks are designed to hide the wearer from sight."

"What danger do you sense?" she asked.

"The eye of the enemy is moving, my lady."

"Searching for the ring?"

"Yes."

She was standing quite close to him now, and he was sure she must be hearing his heart, crying out to her.

"Is there anything you need, my lord?" she asked, softly. "I believe my uncle's steward has found you a bedchamber. If you need clean clothes, or a bath, or company for the night—"

And like a fool—like an utter fool—his heart and body singing with joy, he threw his arms around her.

"My lord!" she laughed, pushing him gently away, "I did not mean me! There are women—"

Legolas' blood froze. "No, my lady—No, I do not require that." And he turned away, trying to hide his shame. "I am sorry, my lady," he added.

"Please do not trouble yourself, my lord," she said. Then softly, "Goodnight."

"How foolish I was," said Eowyn.

"Melmenya?"

"To refuse you. You should have thrown me to the ground and taken me, there and then!"

Legolas wrapped her in his arms. "You were in love with Aragorn then, my darling."

"One night with *you* would have cured me of that!" she whispered. Legolas laughed. "What a night it would have been!"

"I have thought that many times, myself, meleth nín," said Legolas, stroking her hair.

She snuggled against him. "Is it too soon, do you think, for the Lord of Eryn Carantaur to leave his own celebration?"

Legolas looked around the clearing. "I do not think we would be missed, melmenya."

"Then take me back to our cave, my love," she whispered.

...

Legolas lit the fire. "It will soon be warm, melmenya," he said.

Eowyn, sitting on their bedroll, smiled. "Come here," she said, softly.

The time of the orcs has come

Legolas crawled towards her on all fours. She laughed. "Sit down; there is something I want to tell you."

He sat before her, crossing his legs gracefully.

Eowyn reached up and stroked his face. "I want to tell you how much I love you, Legolas," she said, "—I love your kindness and your gentleness and your concern for others. I love your decisiveness as a ruler. And I love your fierceness in battle."

"Melmenya..."

"Shhhhh," she said, stroking her thumb across his lips. Carefully, she unbraided his hair, running her fingers through the long, silken strands. "I love your hair," she said. "I love the way it feels when it brushes against my skin..."

She smiled. "And I love your body," she said, unhooking the fastenings of his silver tunic, one by one, and sliding the tunic over his shoulders. Legolas shrugged it off and let it fall to the ground. Eowyn smoothed her small hands over the hard, taut muscles of his arms and shoulders and his powerful chest. "I love your grace and your strength," she said.

She brought her hands down to his knees, running them over the pale grey cloth stretched over his muscular thighs. She took her time unlacing his leggings, then she pushed the fabric down over his hips. Legolas pulled the leggings off.

Eowyn reached out and gently traced her fingers down his penis, from head to root, stroking the soft golden curls surrounding it, then she carefully slipped her hand beneath his testicles and supported their weight. She leant forward and kissed him, lovingly. "You are so beautiful," she said.

"Melmenya..." he whispered.

"I would *never* betray you Legolas," she said. "I would die before I would let another use me."

"Shhhhh, melmenya, do not say that... do not ever say that..." He took her in his arms and laid her gently on the bedroll. "I love you, melmenya," he said, "more than I ever thought it was possible to love..." He kissed her neck, just above her dressing.

"I will have to be so careful with you, Eowyn nín," he whispered, "whilst you are still healing..."

...

"*OH—Valar!*" Legolas moaned. He had been holding them both on the edge of completion for what seemed like hours, taking them slowly to within a hair's breadth of release, then stopping, leaving them both shuddering in exquisite pain.

"Please..." Eowyn begged.

She lay beneath him, naked, her skin and hair glowing golden in the firelight. "Please, my love," she whispered, reaching up, winding her arms around his neck, and pulling him down for a kiss.

And, as their lips touched, he finally lost all self-control. The pleasure that had been smouldering in his limbs for so long suddenly flared in his groin, and he exploded inside her.

And he felt her body lock itself around him in response.

...

The time of the orcs has come

Haldir sought out Legolas just after daybreak. He had already sent out detachments of troops to burn the dead orcs, as Legolas had ordered, but he also had some disturbing news.

"One of the horses is missing," he said, "and Fëanáro is nowhere to be found."

Legolas considered the information, gravely. "Let us see if Nolofinwë and Finrod are well enough to talk to us, mellon nín," said Legolas. "Will you join us, Eowyn?"

"Of course," said Eowyn, "though I will need some help getting there."

...

"I saw Fëanáro leave," said Nolofinwë. "He packed up his tools, took a horse and headed off to the south east. I considered following him, but—"

"But you followed Lady Eowyn instead," said Legolas. "You did the right thing, Master Nolofinwë, and I will not forget your courage—nor your trustworthiness—in trying to protect my lady from the merman."

...

"Did you see your attacker?" asked Legolas

"Yes, your Highness," said Finrod, "it was Fëanáro—I was talking to him just before he hit me."

"Do you know why he attacked you?" asked Haldir.

Finrod nodded. "I had realised who he was, sir. I recognised him on the journey here—or rather, I was sure that I had seen him before—but I could not place him until that night. I knew that I must have seen him at Imladris—when we attended the Council of Elrond, your Highness—"

"Please do not call me that, Finrod..."

"I am sorry—er—*sir*..."

"Who was he, Master Finrod?" asked Eowyn.

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

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

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

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

...

"What are we going to do about Fëanáro?" asked Haldir, as they left the healing cave.

The time of the orcs has come

"Travelling south east from here at the gallop," said Legolas, "he would have reached the Harad Road last night. By now he could be half way to the River Poros. I do not think there is anything to be gained by sending a troop of warriors after him. I think we should send two or three hand-picked trackers—to bring him back with the minimum of fuss."

Haldir nodded.

"But," continued Legolas, "I shall also send a warning to Prince Imrahil, just in case Fëanáro manages to slip by us again—and I shall talk to Aragorn and the others when I see them at Minas Tirith."

...

Whilst the elves were preparing to leave Minas Athrad, Legolas approached Berryn.

"Will you return to Eryn Carantaur with us, Master Berryn?" he asked. "I can never repay you for what you have done for me and my lady over the past few days, but I can least at keep my promises to you. My wife and I are travelling to Minas Tirith in two days time and you can rest assured that King Elessar will hear of the service that you have rendered me. If you wish to accompany us, we will be very pleased to have you on the journey. But, if you prefer, you are welcome to stay at Eryn Carantaur for as long as you wish—and if my people can provide any assistance with your work, it is yours."

"I am honoured, my lord," said Berryn, bowing, "I should very much like to spend more time in your city."

"It is settled then," said Legolas.

...

"No Legolas! They are disgusting!"

Legolas laughed. "They are *beautiful* little feet," he said, unwrapping Eowyn's dressings. "Though how anything so small can support such a fierce warrior, I do not know!"

She grinned at him, ruefully.

"It has not escaped my notice, melmenya," he said, carefully washing her wounds, "that you were poisoned doing precisely what I told you not to do—running off to save Haldir..."

"Would you rather I had left him to die? Would you rather I had let the merman break your neck?"

Legolas lifted her foot to his lips and placed a gentle kiss on its instep. "I would rather I could wrap you in some magic spell that would shield you from all harm," he said. "But even that would harm you..." He sighed as he began to spread the healing salve on her wounds. "I fell in love with a warrior, a woman of courage and strength—yet she is so small and fragile that it would be easy for an orc, or Uruk Hai, or some other foul thing to take her from me... But if I try to keep her locked away, safe, I will break her spirit," he looked up at her, "—and destroy the very thing that I love and want to protect."

"There is no answer, my darling," said Eowyn, stroking his face. "For me, perhaps it is more natural, because centuries of women have learnt to wait patiently whilst their husbands risk everything in battle. But it is no less painful, Legolas—I am no less afraid of losing you."

Legolas finished bandaging her feet. "All we can do is trust the Valar," he said. "But keeping faith is sometimes very hard..."

The time of the orcs has come

Two days after the expeditionary force returned to Eryn Carantaur, a lone elf crossed the Anduin at Pelargir and began the long journey across the river delta.

I will head for Belfalas and the city of Dol Amroth, he thought. It will not be pleasant, living amongst humans, but I have no other options left. And the superior speed and stealth of an elf will surely be valuable commodities in the world of men...

The time of the orcs has come

Extra scene: He had seen her naked before!

He had seen her naked before—knew exactly how she looked unclothed—her slender waist, small, full breasts, delicately muscled limbs. He could see her, in his mind's eye, whenever he wanted—whenever he allowed himself the guilty pleasure.

But nothing had prepared him for the shock of finding her, crouching behind a spur of rock, naked and shivering with fear.

She looked so small.

So wild.

So—

Sweet Eru!

He tore off his cloak and draped it over her, carefully hiding her body as he scooped her into his arms. "You are safe now, my lady," he whispered. "Safe."

Extra scene: The real thing

"I am happy for you," said Theoden. "He is an honourable man."

Eowyn smiled modestly, her eyes downcast. "You are *both* honourable men..."

...

The Golden Hall was hot and noisy. She approached Aragorn shyly but with a happy smile. "Would you like to take a walk in the cool night air, my lord?" she asked.

"Eowyn..." he said. And the reproach in his voice made Middle Earth stand still around her. "What is it you want from me?"

"I thought you knew," she whispered. "I thought you felt the same..."

"You do not love *me*, Eowyn." His tone was gentle, as always, but every word he uttered was like a sword piercing her heart. "It is only natural that you would long for a champion, a hero—your life has been hard. But *I* cannot give you what you seek..."

...

She stumbled along the empty wall-walk—looking for somewhere private to lick her wounds—and she did not notice the elf, gazing out across the plains of Rohan, until it was too late. Drawing on all her reserves of pride, she stiffened her back and walked towards him. "Is something troubling you, my lord?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

"I needed some air, my lady."

She stood beside him. "The smell of sweat and ale can be overpowering," she agreed. And, despite her misery, she smiled up at him.

The elf turned his intense, unnerving blue eyes on her and his expression seemed to say *I understand your pain*. Eowyn was taken aback. *I have mistaken his beauty for coldness*, she thought. *And he is troubled, too*.

"Why are you wearing your cloak, my lord?" she asked. "Your healer told me that elves do not feel the cold." She looked more closely at the strange grey-green fabric, which always seemed to blend with its surroundings. "And you have your hood raised..." she added.

"You are observant, my lady," he said. "I suppose it is because I can still sense danger. Elven cloaks are designed to hide the wearer from sight."

The time of the orcs has come

"What danger do you sense?"

"The eye of the enemy is moving, my lady."

"Searching for the ring?"

"Yes."

He turned back towards the plain and, inexplicably, Eowyn found herself reminded of her duties as a Shieldmaiden. "Is there anything you need, my lord?" she asked. "I believe my uncle's steward has found you a bedchamber. If you need clean clothes, or a bath, or company for the night—"

But she never finished her question because—to her amazement—this aloof, ethereal creature threw his arms around her, and crushed her against his body.

And, for a split second, she felt his erection pressing hard against her belly...

Just for a split second.

Before she pushed him away.

"My lord!" she said, laughing with embarrassment. "I did not mean *me*! There are experienced women whose role it is to—*comfort* warriors."

The elf's face distorted in horror. "No, my lady; no, I do not require that!" He turned away from her. "I am sorry, my lady..." he whispered.

He was hiding his face now—his face and his lower body—and, for some reason, Eowyn found it unbearable that such a beautiful creature should feel ashamed. "Please—do not trouble yourself, my lord," she said, sincerely. And, when he did not respond, she added, softly, "Good night, my lord."

...

She fled around the corner and stood, with her back pressed against the parapet's cold stone, trembling violently.

The elf's body had been warm and vital. She had felt strength in those slender arms and she had felt—*Oh gods!*—she held her hand to her mouth—she had felt potency in that hardness. Even though she had crassly offered to find him a whore it had never seriously occurred to her, before she had felt his erection, that an elf might not only have the same *desires* as a man but also possess the same *private parts*...

But, then, the man does not desire me...

How strange—that the elf should want me when Aragorn does not. And how shameful that I should suddenly want him in return...

It was utterly shameful. But that did not stop her walking slowly back to where the elf was standing.

...

He was exactly where she had left him but now his graceful form seemed twisted.

Broken.

How easy it is to read his feelings, she thought. *He is not cold at all...* She stretched out her hand and gently touched his arm. He already knew she was there, of course, but when he turned towards her she saw a whole gamut of emotions pass over his fair face. Pain, fear, hope, love...

Love.

The time of the orcs has come

And a single word fell from her lips. "Yes."

...

He bent slightly, leaning down to her level and, with his eyes and with his long, slender fingers, he explored her face, her rounded ears, and her throat—and then he slipped his hand, oh so gently, inside her bodice and caressed her breasts.

Oh gods!

Eowyn was not a virgin. But the one lover she *had* had could never have made her body tremble the way the elf's delicate touch was doing now.

What would it be like to be taken by this being?

"My lord," she whispered, suddenly afraid that someone or something might snatch him from her, "we may not have much time."

He said something in his own, melodious language and, with a smile, added, "Impatient Shieldmaiden." Then, stepping back, he seized the points of his laces and pulled.

Eowyn gasped.

With effortless strength, he lifted her onto the stone wall, pushed her skirts up to her waist and, grasping her booted ankles, drew her feet over his shoulders. Eowyn—who had always insisted that her lover snuff out the candles before they made love—instinctively tried to pull away, wanting to hide herself.

"Trust me, hiril nín," the elf whispered.

He leant forward and tenderly kissed her mouth. Then, using his hand, he stroked his penis along her sensitive flesh.

"Oh!" cried Eowyn. "Oh!"

"Do you like that, hiril nín?" he asked, gently.

"Yes."

He positioned himself carefully, gently teasing her with shallow thrusts. Then he grasped her buttocks and, driving his hips smoothly forward, he pushed past the slight resistance and slipped deep inside her, filling her completely.

Eowyn's entire body jack-knifed. "Oh!" she wailed.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, beginning to withdraw.

"No! No!" she cried, tightening her muscles, "please do not stop!"

"Oh, hiril nín," he groaned, "relax, melmenya; relax and be patient or it will end too soon. Please—trust me," and, kissing her neck, he began to thrust.

Gods, how he filled her! And his mouth on her throat... Eowyn could not *stop* her body tightening around him. Within moments she raching for something she had never felt before...

But it was already too late. The elf was shuddering violently. "Sweet Eru," he groaned, and Eowyn felt his warm seed fill her womb. "I am coming!" He buried his face in her shoulder, and his body twisted. "Oh Valar—I am coming."

"Oh," said Eowyn, "oh..." She was pleased that he had enjoyed it. And it had certainly been better for her than usual... But it was so miserable to think that she would never feel whatever it was she had been so close to feeling. She buried her face in his hair and wept silently.

The time of the orcs has come

"A moment," the elf gasped. "A moment to recover, hiril nín. I am sorry—it had been a long time. But I shall not leave you unsatisfied, melmenya. I promise..." And she immediately felt him growing hard again inside her; and then he raised himself up and, grasping her hips, began to thrust.

And that tiny feeling, low in Eowyn's body, suddenly became a beautiful, aching need and, from pure instinct, she began to meet his thrusts. "Harder," she cried, "please, please... harder.. hard—OH!" It spread through her like wildfire, burning every inch of her body, and she lay back, writhing on the cold stone—letting it consume her—until finally, incapable of any more physical sensation, she sobbed with deep emotional release as the elf, too, cried out in completion.

"Oh, my lord..." she whispered, again and again, "my sweet lord... my sweet, sweet, lord..." And, gazing up into his ageless blue eyes, she lifted his hand to her lips, and kissed it fervently. "Thank you, my lord..." she said.

"Legolas," he whispered, "Eowyn nín."

"Legolas. Thank you, Legolas..."

...

"Melmenya? Eowyn! Wake up, Eowyn nín!"

Reluctantly, Eowyn opened her eyes. She was lying, one leg thrown across the elf, pressing herself against his thigh.

"I was dreaming..." she said.

"I noticed!" Legolas grinned. "About *me*, fortunately." He pulled her closer and kissed her forehead.

"We were outside the Golden Hall," she said, "after Helm's Deep. But, this time, I did not say no—and you made love to me."

"What strange things human dreams are," he said, stroking her hair.

"They give vent to our deepest hopes and fears," said Eowyn. "And to our regrets..."

"Do you really have regrets, melmenya?" asked Legolas. "About us?"

"Only about the time we wasted," she said. "Almost five years..."

"But we cannot know what would have happened if we *had* joined ourselves that night," he said, settling her against his chest. "We might have decided that it was a terrible mistake—"

"No, never!"

"We might... But, as it is, when we were finally brought together, we were both ready for it—and we had the blessing of the Valar."

"Yes." She sighed. "But my dream was so wonderful..."

"Better than the real thing?"

Eowyn was quiet for a moment. Then, hiding her smile against his chest, she said, with feigned innocence, "I am not sure, Legolas. I think I may need reminding what the real thing feels like..."

The time of the orcs has come

Chapter 8: The ring-bearer

A brief interval of fun and games before the next adventure...

"It is so nice to be home," said Eowyn, as Legolas carried her along the walkway to their private chambers, "even if it will only be for a few hours. I do not suppose—*no...*"

"What, *melmenya*?" prompted Legolas.

"That we could send Aragorn an excuse and stay *here* for Yule? We could spend some time together, just the two of us," she grinned, "in bed..."

Legolas laughed and kissed the top of her head. "No, *melmenya*— wonderful as that would be—we cannot! It is an official visit and we accepted Aragorn's invitation months ago. We will be several days late as it is."

He carried her through the front door, across the lobby and into the sitting room—

"Legolas!" Eowyn gasped. "It is beautiful!"

The fireplace, the pillars, and the beams of their severely elegant sitting room had all been decorated with garlands of holly, ivy, mistletoe, and fir cones; the windows had been hung with deep green velvet spangled with golden stars; and the mantelpiece and hearth sparkled with hundreds of tiny white candles.

"How ever did you do it?" she asked.

"I asked *Míriel* to arrange it—before we left for Minas Athrad." He carried her over to the fireplace and set her down on one of the chairs clustered around the fire. "I am glad you like it," he added, almost shyly.

"I love it. Thank you! But now, more than ever, I want to stay at home..."

Legolas knelt before her and kissed her hands. "You will enjoy Minas Tirith, *melmenya*," he said. "I promise."

She smiled—then a thought struck her. "Legolas! We still have presents to wrap!"

...

Eowyn took a sip of mulled wine. "How is that?" she asked. She held up the parcel she had been struggling with.

"Terrible, *melmenya*!" laughed Legolas. "Give it to me." He carefully undid her handiwork. "The secret," he said, "is to match the shape of the wrapping to the shape of the present." He picked up a circle of rose-pink gauze.

"Do you think Gimli will like that colour?" asked Eowyn.

"He is a dwarf, *melmenya*. They love all beautiful things... Now, pull up the ends like this... Tie it off with thread, like this... Decorate it with a ribbon... And arrange the ends of the bow, like this. You try."

"Perhaps I should wrap Faramir's book—he will be more forgiving..." She took a bite of caraway cake. *Choose a piece of fabric the right shape—dark blue for Faramir—pull up the ends... Tie off with thread—hmmm, not too bad—decorate with a ribbon...* "Stop laughing! Or you will be sleeping alone tonight. In the *garden*."

...

The time of the orcs has come

"There is not enough time to get everything packed!"

"Míriel will do the *packing*, melmenya—all *you* have to do is tell her what you want to take. Anyway, you will not need much..." His voice trailed away.

"Why not?"

Legolas tried to look innocent. "We are only going for a few days..."

Eowyn laughed. "You are no good at lying, Legolas."

"Lying?"

"It is written all over your face!"

"Alright," he admitted, "I have the feeling that the Yuletide Elf may be bringing you a few things."

"Gowns? Let me see!"

"No, melmenya!"

"*Please...*" She grinned mischievously.

Legolas hesitated. *Just one*, he thought. "Stay here then. Do not try to see where I am going."

Eowyn waited impatiently as Legolas disappeared into their bedchamber. *How could he possibly hide anything in there?* she wondered.

He returned with a large, flat parcel, wrapped in iridescent green gauze, and decorated with a golden ribbon tied in a large, artfully arranged bow. He laid it on her lap.

"Merry Yuletide, melmenya," he said.

Eowyn ran her fingers lightly over the golden bow. "It is beautiful," she said. "I love it."

"You have not opened it yet!"

She pulled the ends of the bow, carefully untied the ribbon, and unwrapped the fabric. Inside was a gown of bright green velvet, embroidered with clusters of golden holly leaves and with deep red holly berries. "Oh, Legolas!" She held it against herself. The neckline, edged with golden beadwork, was cut very low, in the elven fashion. She looked at Legolas, suspiciously.

Legolas laughed. "You will look lovely, melmenya," he said. "Your wound will be fully healed by Yule. And look—this goes underneath. It will show a little at the neck—and preserve your modesty..." The underdress was made from translucent gold silk, decorated with tiny golden snowflakes. "Try them on," he said. He helped her change out of her tunic and leggings.

"The gown laces up the *back...*" said Eowyn.

"Mmmmm," said Legolas, carefully tying the lace, "that way, you will always need help undressing, melmenya!" He carried her into the bedchamber and held her in front of the mirror. "Do you like it?" he asked.

Eowyn examined her reflection. "It is the most beautiful gown I have ever seen," she said, kissing him tenderly. "Thank you." Then she added, excitedly, "Carry me over to the dressing table! But do not look!"

When she was quite sure that Legolas' back was turned, she opened her jewellery box, took

The time of the orcs has come

out a small silver key and unlocked the cupboard on her side of the table. She sorted through a pile of small parcels and selected one, wrapped—rather untidily—in bright orange fabric—she made a last minute attempt to straighten its corners. Then she closed the cupboard door. "You can look now," she said, holding the present towards him.

Legolas gave her a ravishing smile. "Thank you, melmenya!" He weighed it in his hand. It was light. He shook it. It made no sound.

"Open it!"

Legolas carried her to the bed and, sitting beside her, carefully unwrapped the present. It was a large comb, carved from a single piece of dark red wood, its spine decorated with a line of intricately detailed Mûmakil. Legolas examined the animals carefully. "It is beautiful, melmenya, thank you." He sniffed it. "It smells of spices!"

"I know. It is the natural smell of the wood. It comes from a tree that grows only in Far Harad."

Legolas' expression suddenly turned wicked—he handed her the comb.

"Take off your tunic," she said, smiling.

Eowyn carefully unfastened his braids and gently massaged his scalp. He sighed contentedly. Then she began combing, working out a few tiny snags, until she could run the comb through the full length of his hair. Legolas moaned and arched his back slightly. Eowyn had had relatively little experience of men, but she was almost certain that this reaction was uniquely elven—and that her gift had been the perfect choice.

"Lean forward," she whispered. She put the comb down and began to massage Legolas' neck and shoulders and to kiss the delicate points of his ears.

"Gods, melmenya," he gasped, his back arching sharply.

Eowyn laughed. "I love the way your ears are so sensitive..."

Legolas rolled over, pinned her to the bed and kissed her hungrily, tickling her neck and shoulders with his mouth and his loose hair. Eowyn wriggled and laughed beneath him, and they hugged tightly. Then Legolas suddenly stilled. "Wait, melmenya! I have something else for you!" And he jumped up and ran into the sitting room.

Moments later, he returned and placed another parcel on her lap.

Eowyn examined it carefully—it was a cylinder, about ten inches long, made from a brightly coloured material that was neither fabric nor parchment, but something similar to both, and its ends were twisted to form a sealed pocket in the middle.

"Hold your end, tightly," said Legolas, grasping the other end. "Now—pull!"

BANG!

"OH!" cried Eowyn, falling over onto the bed, laughing.

Legolas hugged her. "You have won, melmenya," he said. "See!"

Eowyn examined the cylinder. It had torn in two, and she had been left holding the larger part. Inside the pocket was a slip of parchment and a small wooden box.

"Why did it explode?" she asked.

The time of the orcs has come

"It contains a small amount of the powder that Mithrandir used to use in his fireworks," said Legolas. "Pulling makes it explode—do not ask me how, Eowyn nín, for I do not know!"

Eowyn grinned. "Where did you get it?"

"Dol Amroth. I had a terrible time keeping it dry on the way home..."

Eowyn read the parchment.

*"I know a word of letters three,
Add two, and fewer there will be."*

She looked at Legolas questioningly.

He grinned. "I am not telling you the answer, meleth nín," he said. "You will have to work it out for yourself. Open the box!"

Eowyn picked up the wooden box and carefully removed its polished lid. "Oh!"

It was a ring or, rather, two rings—one silver, one gold—flowing over and under and around each other. "It is a betrothal ring, melmenya," said Legolas. "I know it is a little late. But I wanted you to have one—I wanted to give you one." He took it from the box and slipped it on her finger.

"Thank you," she whispered.

...

"This one?" asked Legolas, "or this one?"

Eowyn was sitting in bed, drinking mulled wine, and helping Legolas choose the clothes he would take to Minas Tirith. She sighed. The wine was strong and—though it was a very enjoyable job—Legolas' hair was loose and his chest was bare, and she was growing impatient.

"I do not know..." she said.

Legolas laid both tunics over a chair and sat down beside her. "What is it, melmenya?" he asked anxiously. Illness was new—and frightening—to him. "Are you feeling unwell?"

Eowyn shook her head; then she wrapped her arms around him, and whispered in his ear, "You have not made love to me *all day*..."

"Oh, my love," he said, "we must put that right." And, kissing her tenderly on her face, her neck, and her breasts, he used one hand to unlace his leggings. Eowyn immediately took hold of him and drew him towards her.

Legolas smiled down at her, "My impatient Shieldmaiden!"

He buried his face in her neck and let her guide him; then he flexed his hips and entered her in one firm but gentle thrust. They both sighed with pleasure.

"Keep still, meleth nín," he whispered. And he lay on top of her, enfolding her in his arms. And only his hips moved, in a slow, inexorable rhythm.

...

"FEW!" cried Eowyn, her body arching.

"Yes... YES, MELMENYA!"

The time of the orcs has come

...

"All I said was—"

"I *know* what you said. But what you want to know," said Eowyn, "is whether this lover I had before Faramir was Aragorn—you are jealous. That is why you are so angry—"

"I am not *angry*—"

"Yes you are. Why? Does it matter if it *were* Aragorn?"

"Of course it matters! It matters because I loved you, even then," cried Legolas, furiously, "it matters because Aragorn was already betrothed. He had *no right to take you*. He had *no right to—*"

"He did not! *He did not, Legolas!*"

Legolas stared at her, confused.

"It was Theodred!" she said. "It was not Aragorn. *Theodred* was my first lover."

"Theodred? Oh, *melmenya*," he reached for her, "*melmenya...*" He slipped his hands around her waist and pulled her close, burying his face in her hair. Eowyn did not resist, but she remained aloof.

"How many lovers did *you* have before me?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters—*now!* How many?"

Legolas sighed. "Twelve," he admitted. "But I am much older than—"

"No you are not! I am almost middle-aged; you are young for an elf! But I suppose," she added, "as a Prince, you were encouraged to sow your wild oats. I suppose some palace official was ordered to supply you with as many *ellith*—"

"*Melmenya!*"

"You started this, Legolas, being jealous!" She sighed, and began tracing the muscles in his chest with her finger. "So who did you have before me?"

"I cannot tell you *that*—"

"Why not?" she asked. "I told you—and, besides, I *need* to know."

Legolas sighed—she was right. "There was a whore my tutor hired," he said, "after my coming of age ceremony—she was the first."

"That is a sad way to start," said Eowyn, softly.

"There was the daughter of my father's Chief Counsellor. Several other ladies at court—"

"How many?"

"Four. There was an *elleth* I—er—knew in one of the settlements to the north of Mirkwood. A serving *elleth*—"

"Legolas!"

The time of the orcs has come

"I treated her well... A dancer at Imladris, when I attended the Council of Elrond. And two bathing attendants at Lorien."

"Together?"

Legolas nodded, looking slightly embarrassed.

"And *then* you tried to get me into bed at Edoras—you were busy during the Fellowship," she said, dryly. "But that is only eleven. Who was the twelfth, Legolas?"

He hesitated for a long time. "Arwen," he said.

Eowyn was taken aback. "Arwen!"

"It was many years ago, melmenya. Long before Aragorn was born..."

"Was it serious—with Arwen?" she asked.

"No, melmenya!"

"Was it serious with any of them?"

"No."

"So it was just physical?"

"Yes."

"Were they better than me?"

"Oh, melmenya!"

"That means yes."

"No! No it does not! No one could ever be better than you!"

"Not even the whore?"

"The whore was efficient."

"What does that mean?"

"It was over in moments..."

Eowyn smirked, her face buried in his chest. "That was not *her* doing," she said. "With you it is often over in moments."

"Melmenya!"

"Was she better the second time?"

"There was no second time. She wanted more money."

In spite of herself Eowyn laughed. She raised her head. Legolas smiled at her and she touched his face. "What about the others?" she asked, softly.

"Oh, Eowyn! What if I were to ask you about Faramir and Theodred?"

"Then I would tell you that Faramir was kind and gentle but that his heart was not in it," said Eowyn, "and that Theodred... Theodred was too much like Eomer—and I could not let go."

The time of the orcs has come

Legolas kissed her tenderly and—at last—felt her relax in his arms.

"I did begin to think," she said, softly, "that there was something wrong with me..."

"No, melmenya. No! You are a wonderful lover—passionate and giving—I meant it when I said there was no one like you. Not for *me*. You give me everything I have ever wanted. You give me joy such as I never imagined existed."

"Really?" Eowyn asked, with child-like insecurity. "Truthfully?"

"Of course, my darling. We are perfectly suited, you and I. Woman and elf."

Eowyn nodded. "*You are hot where I am cold and cold where I am hot,*" she said.

"Melmenya?"

"It is something I thought a few days ago," she said, softly. "But the truth is that we are *not* perfectly suited—the truth is that some of your 'brief affairs' with ellith will have lasted for longer than my entire lifetime—"

"Melmenya—"

"I do not want to leave you, Legolas," she whispered.

Legolas shook his head. "I will not survive you, Eowyn nín. I will die when you die—"

"No!"

"Shhhhh," he kissed her hand. "We will never be parted, melmenya. We will be together forever. I have made up my mind—"

Eowyn pushed herself up on her hands in alarm. "To do *what?*" she cried.

"To follow you," he said. "Woman and elf, we were both created by Ilúvatar. And the Valar gave you to me. Whatever happens to men when they die, wherever they take you, I will follow. I will beg to be admitted. It may take time, but I will persist—"

"Legolas—"

"Shhhhh. Will you wait for me?"

"Of course I will wait for you."

"Do you think your ancestors will accept me as your husband?"

A single tear ran down Eowyn's cheek. "Oh my love... Yes."

"Then it is agreed?"

Eowyn nodded.

"Good," said Legolas, smiling. He reached up and lifted her bowed head until their eyes met and an answering smile transformed Eowyn's face—and then they grinned at each other like two children who had just agreed to be naughty.

And when he turned her onto her back, and gently pressed her into the bed, she did not resist but wrapped her legs around his waist and returned his kisses with equal passion.

THE END

The time of the orcs has come

Epilogue

"Legolas?"

"Mmmmm?"

"Am I *really* better than Arwen?"

"Oh, melmenya!"

The time of the orcs has come

Extra scene: A pleasant time in Rivendell

"And you have my bow..."

"And *MY* axe!"

...

They would not be leaving until sunrise. Legolas penned a short note to his father.

There was so much he wanted to say—so much he wished he had said before he left Mirkwood. But there was no time now to find the right words. Instead, he rehearsed the bare facts—that the One Ring had been brought to Rivendell; that it must be destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom; that the Halfling, Frodo Baggins, a cousin of Bilbo Baggins, had volunteered to take it; that Frodo would, if he were to stand any chance of succeeding, require an escort; that the remainder of the company consisted of Men, Halflings and—*Valar help them*—a Dwarf; and that his own skill with the bow, and with the knives, would therefore be essential to the success of the quest.

Forgive me, Ada, for accepting this task without consulting you. But the Dark Lord poisons Mirkwood. This may be the way to defeat him.

Legolas

He sat for several long moments, deciding whether to add a final sentence. Then he took up his pen again and wrote:

I love you, Ada.

...

Valandil will deliver this for me, he thought.

He entered the Hall of Fire, looking for his lieutenant.

The Mirkwood elf was standing close to the great fire, watching a young elleth dance in its amber light. The tune was haunting and her movements were slow, intricate, and perfectly graceful. Legolas paused, admiring the lines of her slender body, the drape of her silken gown over the slight swell of her hips...

She turned, their eyes met and lingered; she smiled.

And Legolas, suddenly feeling closely confined and in need of meditation, entrusted his note to Valandil, left the Hall of Fire, and went outside to walk beneath the trees.

...

"Good evening, your Highness." The dancer had sought him out.

Legolas was a young elf, in the prime of his child-fathering years, strong of body, fair of face, and royal of blood—and he had never wanted for a willing mate. And it occurred to him now that his feelings of frustration might just be cured by something other than meditation.

He gave her his most winning smile. "Are you *following* me?"

"No, my lord! How could you *think* it?" But her eyes told him she lied.

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing..." said the dancer, boldly. "Nothing that you have not bestowed on many an elleth before me..."

"And what would that be? A kiss?"

The time of the orcs has come

"My lord! A *smile*."

Legolas laughed.

"But a laugh," she said, "is even better."

"Are you sure there is nothing *more* I can offer?"

"You are the son of a king..." she said, softly; and her sudden loss of confidence was a clear admission of her hopes.

"And you are a very beautiful elleth..." He lifted her chin. "But what is this doing here," he said, playfully, "on your bosom?"

"What is it?" she asked, smiling. "A fallen leaf?"

"No..." Slowly, he slid the straps of her gown down her arms, lowered the offending fabric, and exposed her pretty breasts to his eager touch.

...

This was a game they had both played—with other partners—many times before. He clasped her to his chest, his arms locked around her waist. Her hands, forcing themselves between them, found his lacings and pulled.

"Wait," he gasped.

He drew her out of sight, behind a mighty beech, and stood with his back to its trunk. "Now."

She opened his leggings.

But—whether because of the wine, or his earlier mood of melancholy, he did not know—he was no longer ready for her. And he was uncomfortably aware that his penis was not impressive at rest. He reached down and stroked it. "Here," he said catching her hand and replacing his fingers with hers. "Make me hard."

She was certainly *not* impressed.

But she was a servant and she did as he asked, with her hand, and then with her mouth. She was no innocent!

Legolas closed his eyes and sank back against the tree, automatically resting his hands on his hips and tilting them upwards. Her touch was light at first—pleasurable. Then, as his body began to respond, and *she* became more committed to her task, her fingers seem to reach inside him, drawing the blood from his belly and his legs, and from up under his arms, filling him, making him rise, making him *grow*...

"Your *Highness*!"

He smiled. They were always surprised. "Come here."

She took his hand and he raised her to her feet.

There was a stone table, covered with fallen leaves, not three yards from where they stood. Devouring her mouth, her neck, her shoulders, he pushed her roughly over it; she pulled up her own gown; and he thrust inside her.

He had never had a mate who moved like she was moving—sometimes meeting his thrusts, sometimes avoiding them, and, all the while, kissing and biting and laughing—and, though they drew it out as best they could, it did not take long.

"Valar," he moaned, "I am going to *fill* you." He bit down on her neck, trying to hold himself back, but to no avail. "You are safe, little one," he whispered. "My seed will not grow in your womb..."

The time of the orcs has come

...

As they walked back to the terrace, he drew one of his white knives, cut a clasp from his tunic, and gave it to her as a keepsake.

For some reason he was sure that he would never lie with her again.

Extra scene: For me the grief is too near

"I have not the heart to tell you," said Legolas. "For me the grief is too near."

...

He had known of death—of course he had. Had not his mother died bringing him into the world? Had not his friends died guarding Gollum? But *knowing* was not *seeing*. *Feeling loss*—even the loss of his own mother—was not *losing*.

As he wandered beneath the trees of Lorien, behind him, his distant kin were singing their Lament for Mithrandir..

Mithrandir!

For the first time, he had *seen* it: seen the moment when hope had left Mithrandir's eyes; seen the moment when resignation had taken its place; seen the moment when the survival of his friends—"*Fly, you fools*"—had become all that was left to him.

At that moment the world had broken; and now it could never be put right...

What he would give never to have left Mirkwood.

I miss you, Ada, he thought. *I miss Singollo and Voronwë. And I miss the comfort of her arms...*

...

How he had reached the bathing pool he had no idea. But the water, glowing pale blue-green in the light of Ithil, was calm and soothing. *To bathe is not disrespectful*, he thought. *The water will cleanse my spirit*. He sat down on one of the wooden benches, slipped off his tunic, pulled off his boots, and unlaced his leggings.

"Can I help you, your Highness?"

The voice belonged to a bathing attendant. She was young—no more than fifty years, he judged—and fair. Very fair. And she was looking at him with unconcealed admiration. He could have replaced his leggings; could have taken up his tunic and boots, and left, thanking her for her offer of assistance.

Later he would wish that he had.

But at that moment, in the moonlight, beside the blue-green pool, with Gandalf's Lament whispering on the breeze, he fixed his eyes upon her face and pulled his leggings open.

He saw her eyes widen. "Your Highness!" Her reaction was gratifying.

She fell down before him, a hand on each knee. "Show me what you like..." He took her hand and placed it on his penis, gently curling her fingers around its bulk, then guided her hand up and down.

Smiling, she bent forward and took him in her mouth.

Legolas closed his eyes. He *needed* this—it felt as though a century had passed since that night in Rivendell. He stretched out his legs, muscles taut, arched his back, gripped the bench...

Oh Valar. "Do not stop, little one," he whispered. "*Please*. Do not stop."

The time of the orcs has come

"There is far better to be had than *that*."

Legolas' eyes flew open.

A second elleth, equally young, equally fair, was gazing down at him.

Gazing at *them*.

The first elleth raised her head and—much to Legolas' physical discomfort—*offered him* to her friend with a welcoming smile. The second elleth, licking her lips, sank to her knees and took him in her mouth.

"Ceryn Manwë," gasped Legolas.

The first elleth was watching her friend with obvious pleasure—her hand between her own thighs—and Legolas had the distinct impression that his role was now secondary. *Any hard elf would give them what they want*, he thought. And something about that—about being reduced to nothing but a convenient erection—made his pulse quicken and his loins burn brighter, and he thrust his hips forward, unconsciously preparing for release.

"No, your Highness." The first elleth closed her hand around him and squeezed. "Wait. Save your strength, for you must pleasure us both."

"Caro!" The elf fell forwards, gasping for breath.

With a wicked smile, the first elleth turned on her back and, lying between his legs, came up beneath him, sucking his testicles into her mouth. Her companion continued to coax his penis.

Within moments Legolas was again on the brink, sobbing like an elfling, his body trembling. "I am *coming!*" The second elleth's hand immediately stopped him.

"We must come first," she said, rising gracefully. And, placing a knee at either side of his thighs, she sank down upon him and began to ride him.

Legolas grabbed her waist, and tried to thrust, but the first elleth, still lapping at his testicles, stopped him with a strong hand on each thigh.

"Oh," moaned the second elleth. "Oh, yes... You are a *mallorn*, your Highness!" She closed her eyes and leaned back from him, fondling her own breasts as she rose and fell. "Ohhhh..." Her movements had become urgent—she was riding him hard.

She was *smiling*...

"OH," she cried, "OH YES... YES, YES, YES... YES!" Her hands flew up to her hair, her back arched, and Legolas felt her body contract, as though she was trying to push him out of her...

"There!" She gave Legolas a quick peck on the forehead. "Your turn," she said. But she was speaking to her friend.

Legolas waited whilst the ellith changed positions. "Are you alright, your Highness?"

He nodded, speechless—there was nothing left of him, now, but his erection, and that was infinite. "You are *so beautiful*," said the elleth, stroking his hair. "The fairest elf we have ever had." She leant forward and added, in his ear, "And the *biggest*..."

She began to move.

"Let me come," whispered Legolas, hoarsely, "*please*. Let me come..." The elleth between his legs laughed, sending vibrations through his testicles, up into his belly, and out to his limbs. He felt her hand move under his buttocks, felt her fingers trespass...

His body arched to avoid it but there was no escape.

The time of the orcs has come

They were riding him to his death.

He would not survive it.

He *could* not survive it.

"LAGO," he screamed. "SI! SI!"

And the sky exploded within him.

...

"Prince Legolas?"

He opened his eyes. The first elleth was gazing down at him, her eyes filled with concern.

"What happened?"

"You fell into a swoon, your Highness." She smiled. "We were worried. It has never happened before."

"Did *you*...?"

"Did *I*...? Oh—yes. Yes, thank you. I did."

...

He carried the guilt of that night with him, hidden in his heart, until the blessed day when, deep in the Forest of Fangorn, he again beheld Mithrandir, reborn as Gandalf the White.

Extra scene: I am happy for you

"My lords," said Aragorn. "you have heard all the evidence. How do you find Angaráto?"

"Guilty," said Finwë.

"Guilty," said Fingolfin.

"Guilty," said Caranthir.

Legolas nodded. "Guilty..."

...

Watching himself in the full-length mirror, Legolas untied his sash and draped it over the dressing table chair, then slowly unhooked the fastenings of his robe and slipped it off his shoulders. Under the heavy, ceremonial brocade he was wearing a sleeveless shirt and silver leggings. He opened his wardrobe, looking for a tunic.

Something Eowyn will like...

The bathing room door opened.

He turned, startled. "Arwen! I did not realise..." He smiled—the slight embarrassment adding a delicate colour to his cheeks. "How are you feeling, mell nín?" He caught her by the arms and—gently—made her sit down on the bed. "Eowyn has told me your good news. I am very happy for you, Arwen."

"I *can* still walk, Lasvelui."

Legolas, crouching before her, looked up in surprise. "You have not called me *that* in a long time, Arwen," he said, softly.

The time of the orcs has come

"It has not been right to call you that for a long time," said Arwen

"But it is now?" he asked, thinking, *She is so much wiser than I.*

Arwen reached down and tucked a lock of hair behind his ear. "Yes. Because *now* you have found the companion of your spirit."

"Yes, I have..." His smile was radiant. "But, surely, that would make it *less* appropriate..."

Arwen laughed, stroking his cheek. "Now that our hearts have both found their true homes, Lasvelui, they can visit each other as old friends—remembering the past and enjoying their memories." She looked deep into his eyes. "What will you tell her, Legolas?"

"About us? I was not planning to tell her anything."

"So you intend to lie to her when she asks?"

"Why should she ask?"

"You have lived a hundred times longer than she," said Arwen. "She *will* be curious about your past. And, if you hide it from her, it will become a wedge driven between you."

But Legolas could not bring himself to contemplate Eowyn's brief span. Instead, he asked, "Have you told Aragorn?"

"That is different."

"Why?"

"In the world of men, Lasvelui, a man may explore—is *expected* to explore—the meaning of love with many women before he settles on his spirit's companion; a woman—a *maiden*—is expected to wait, untouched, until she is discovered by hers. That is why Eowyn is free to ask about *your* past and why Estel will never ask about *mine*."

"That is unfair," said Legolas.

Arwen smiled. "Living in Gondor, I have observed much about human life that is unfair." She stroked his hair. "Its briefness can be *most* unfair..."

"Please, do not talk about that—"

"It is something you must face, Lasvelui."

"Yes. But not now," said Legolas. "Not yet. *Please*."

Arwen cupped his face in her hands. "Your choice was *right*, mell nín," she said. "We both know that. So, whatever the future holds for you and Eowyn, the Valar will always be with you—"

"**LEGOLAS!** Legolas—*Oh!*" Eowyn stood transfixed in the doorway, colour flooding her cheeks, her hands crushing the door frame.

"Your beloved, Eowyn, was just insisting that I sit down," said Arwen. "He understands nothing of pregnancy—he thinks that I am an invalid."

Eowyn looked from Arwen to Legolas and back again. And, apparently reassured, she smiled. "He is just concerned for you and the baby," she said. She came up beside him, and placed her hand on his shoulder. "You are like a sister to him, Arwen."

And Legolas turned his head and, closing his eyes, pressed his lips to her fingers.

The time of the orcs has come

Extra scene: The companion of my spirit

Eryn Carantaur

Eowyn stirred in his arms.

He relaxed his hold a little, let her settle, then gathered her up again. *Sleep well, meleth nín.* He kissed her temple, and her words came back to him: *"A dancer at Imladris, two bathing attendants at Lorien... And then you tried to get me into bed at Edoras..."*

You are wrong, melmenya, he thought. *I wanted so much more than to bed you!*

...

Edoras

The plains of Rohan stretched, blue-black, around him.

High above, Eärendil, sign of hope to those oppressed by evil, burned bright, his clear light silvering the distant mountains—but bringing no comfort to the elf.

I must speak to her, he thought. *I must explain.*

He went inside—and found her sleeping in the Golden Hall itself, stretched out on a couch before the fire. *Anyone can intrude upon her here,* he thought. *Why did Eomer not carry her to her chamber?*

The mortal need for regular sleep was still new to him, and fascinating, and he stood beside her, gazing at her—her precious little body curled, knees drawn up, her hips rising in a luscious curve, her slender feet bare (had he known, then, how cold a mortal's feet can grow whilst sleeping he would have covered them), one little hand clenched into a fist, the other resting gracefully by her side.

Valar how he *ached* for her.

But not with the lust he had satisfied at Rivendell, nor with the need he had indulged at Lorien. No, this was something different. *This was something he had never felt before...* Something terrifying and yet so *sweet*.

...

Eryn Carantaur

"Legolas?"

"Mmmm?"

"You are not resting."

He smiled. "I do not need to rest melmenya."

"But you are *fretting*. I can feel it." She raised her head. "Is it about what we were talking of earlier?" she asked softly.

"Yes, melmenya."

"You do not have to do it, my love. I do not *want* you to do it..."

"Do what?" For a moment he did not understand. Then, "No, melmenya! I was not thinking about *that!* I have no doubts about *that!* I was thinking about the other thing..."

"Your parade of mistresses?"

"*Eowyn!*" He pulled her closer.

The time of the orcs has come

"And it has made you *hard*?"

...

Edoras

He was so deep in thought that he was not aware that she had woken until he noticed her enormous grey eyes staring back at him.

"My lady," he whispered.

She sighed deeply, her chest rising as she drew a great draught of air into her lungs, then she stretched slightly. "You are still awake?"

He nodded.

"Is there something you need?"

"To apologise."

"You have already done so."

"Not adequately."

"You need say nothing more."

"I want to *explain*..."

...

Eryn Carantaur

"Eowyn! I am hard for *you*. You are the only one who can rouse me now." He took her hand and placed it on his erection. "This is *yours*."

He felt her giggle against his chest. Then she stroked him, lightly, her fingertips circling his head and finding—unerringly—that special place that instantly made him want to—

"*Oh, Valar, melmenya!*"

He crushed her to his chest in an effort to retain his self control.

"Will it always be like this?" she asked. Her hand, still stroking, had moved down his shaft.

"Mmmm, that is nice..." He moved his hips luxuriously, thrusting gently into her hand. "Like what, melmenya?"

"Will you always want me three times a night?"

He smiled. "Always. Let me kiss you."

She turned her face to him. He covered her mouth with his own, his lips exploring hers with gentle insistence.

She sighed. "I am not sure I can manage it."

"Then you must stop *that*, melmenya." He made his penis jerk in her fingers. "Or I shall not be responsible for my actions..."

Eowyn grinned. "I did not mean *tonight*. I meant when I am *old*—"

...

The time of the orcs has come

Edoras

She blushed. There is no need to *explain*, my lord," she said, raising her hand, "I know about men and women. I know about *warriors*."

"But I am an elf, my lady, and we are different. An elf..." But what could he tell her? *I am bound to you, now, for all the life of Arda? I shall never love another? After your death I will languish amongst the trees, fading, until my spirit fails? Or until I hear the call of the sea?* How could he tell her that?

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. "An elf does not desire indiscriminately, my lady. My desire was not for 'a woman'; my desire was for *you*. But I have mastered it now, and I shall not trouble you again."

Eryn Carantaur

He *took* her, hard and fast—leaning against the head of the bed, her knees raised either side of him, glorying in his elven potency. "Oh, Legolas..." her hands came up to cup his face. "My *beautiful* Legolas! My *strong* Legolas! My... Oh, gods, my *elf*..."

...

Edoras

"How strange you are," she said. "*All* of you. How different you are from *us*..."

It was said with wonder—she meant no hurt by it—but her words cut Legolas to the quick. "I will leave you to your rest now, my lady," he said, quietly. "Good night."

As he left the Hall he turned. She had settled again, her sweet body once more in repose.

Sleep well, meleth nín.