

Westron wynde



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Title: **Westron wynde**

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Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: Gondor's most celebrated scholar settles in Eryn Carantaur. Legolas and Eowyn are caught up in his latest experiment.

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

The main characters in this story were created by JRR Tolkien and brought to the screen by Peter Jackson. No offence is intended and no profit is being made by borrowing them for use in this story, which is intended as a transformative commentary on the original.

Written for the 2008 Eryn Carantaur Yuletide Calendar.

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Part 1

*Westron wynde when wylle thow blow
the smalle rayne downe can Rayne
Cryst yf my love were in my Armys
And I yn my bed A gayne*

A strong breeze, bearing warm, moist air from the Bay of Belfalas, was responsible for the unseasonably mild weather. Knowing exactly where to look for Legolas when a westerly wind was blowing, Eowyn climbed the stairs to the 'sea flet'—a tiny platform, high above the trees, with a view of the distant ocean—and found her beloved standing upon the edge of the flet wall, gazing into the distance.

Legolas' occasional bouts of mild sea longing no longer filled Eowyn with dread, for she believed him when he told her that he would never—*could* never—leave her, but she knew how dreamy he became when thoughts of sailing filled his mind, and she was careful to warn him of her presence before she spoke. "I have a message from Master Eldacar, my love," she said, showing him the scroll of parchment in her hand. "He says that Valaina's advice has proved invaluable: he has reinforced the seams as she described, and the bladder is now airtight. The experiments with miruvor, moreover, are proving 'most encouraging'." She suddenly grinned.

Legolas held out his hands and—despite her lingering fear of heights—Eowyn grasped them and, steadied by his strong arms, climbed up beside him.

"All *that* means," said the elf, slipping an arm around her waist, "is that Arador has not yet set himself alight."

"Master Eldacar invites us to go and see his progress for ourselves."

They turned towards the south and—Eowyn shielding her eyes from the low winter sun—they looked for a moment at the large, curved object nestling, like a new-laid egg, amongst the russet carantaur trees.

"Why not this afternoon?" said Legolas.

"Yes," replied Eowyn. "Why not?"

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Part 2: Some months earlier

When King Elessar tactfully suggested that Minas Tirith's most celebrated scholar should find somewhere more *spacious* in which to carry out his latest experiment, Master Eldacar approached Legolas and Eowyn.

The couple perused the man's notebook with interest. Crammed into its tiny pages, detailed drawings, of plants, and birds, and tempests, vied for space with descriptions of natural phenomena, with calculations of weight and force, and with diagrams of fantastical inventions.

"With *this*," said Eldacar, pointing to one of his strange machines, "an army of men might approach a coastal town unseen, walking across the seabed."

Legolas frowned.

"This part is made of cork, my Lord," the man assured him, "and so floats *above* the surface of the water,"—he illustrated the explanation with his hands—"allowing nothing but pure air to enter the bore; at the same time, the upward force draws this pipe taut, and keeps it open. A man using my apparatus may breathe under water as easily as he would breathe on land."

Legolas and Eowyn exchanged intrigued looks.

"But what are you hoping to do *here*, Master Eldacar?" asked Eowyn. "What is it that needs so much space?"

"Well—if I may, my Lady..." With a diffident smile, the scholar took up his notebook, turned a few leaves, and handed it back to her.

"*This*, my Lady," he said, proudly.

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Part 3

The wind was blowing hard enough to stir the topmost branches of the carantaurs by the time Legolas and Eowyn reached the clearing that served as Master Eldacar's workshop.

The couple brought their horses to a halt, and gazed in admiration at the sight before them.

A sailing ship, more than one hundred feet long—built to the scholar's design by shipwrights brought specially from Dol Amroth, and named *The Shieldmaiden* in honour of his lady patron—sat proudly upon wooden blocks, her elegant bow and sweeping sides supported by massive beams. Above her, caught in a vast net, the 'bladder', which Eowyn's seamstress had helped Eldacar's assistants construct from elven silk, rode upon the wind, straining the ropes that held it fast.

"She is beautiful," said Legolas.

He and Eowyn dismounted and, hand-in-hand, walked across the grass to the foot of the ladder propped against the ship's gunwale.

"I think I will stay down here, Lassui," said Eowyn, holding back her streaming hair. "It is a little too windy for me."

Legolas gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I shall not be long, melmenya."

He climbed up the ladder and dropped lightly onto the ship's deck.

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"My Lord! Welcome! *Welcome!*" Master Eldacar rushed forward to greet him. "Your arrival is most opportune. We are about to perform a vital test."

"Are you not concerned about the weather, sir?" shouted Legolas, above the noise of the fluttering silk.

"Indeed; indeed—and the moment we have our results, we will extinguish the burner and stow the bladder." He guided Legolas across the deck, to where the main mast would normally have stood. "As you can see, my Lord, we have made some further modifications—the metal sheeting protects the wood from the heat of the burner without adding too much weight..."

Crouching in a copper-lined well at the centre of the ship, young Arador, son of the Reeve of Newhome, was pouring drops of silvery fluid into a delicate funnel protruding from a tall metal cage.

"The mithril mesh of the sheathing," explained Master Eldacar, "isolates the burner inside from the flammable materials outside—including the silk, should it ever collapse upon the deck—so there is no risk of anything coming into direct contact with the flames."

Arador straightened up, corking the flask. "Good afternoon, my Lord," he said, giving Legolas a brief bow of the head. "It is ready, Master."

"Lord Legolas," said Eldacar, "perhaps you would like to turn the tap?"

"The tap?"

"Down here, my Lord," said Arador, showing Legolas a tube leading from the funnel into the burner cage. "Opening it will release the miruvor, and mix it with the spirits already in the tank."

"From my calculations," explained Eldacar, "I anticipate a thousand-fold increase in the

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burner's efficiency—with just a few spoonfuls of the brandy-miruvor mixture, we will generate enough hot air to raise *The Shieldmaiden* off the ground."

"Would that be wise, sir, in this wind?" Legolas looked around. The trees at the edges of the clearing were shaking their branches; the silk above him was flapping; the ropes were creaking; Arador had gathered up his cloak and was holding it close to his body.

"No, no," said Eldacar, seemingly oblivious to the gale, "we do not propose to fly today. *The Shieldmaiden* is tethered to the ground; we have checked and double-checked her ropes. When we add the miruvor, the bladder will rise, but the moorings will hold the ship in place."

"Well..." Legolas grinned. "In that case, I would be honoured, sir."

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Part 4

Eowyn had been pacing up and down for what seemed like hours, watching Master Eldacar's assistants tinker with the ship's mooring ropes, when suddenly, and without warning, a blast of wind swirled through the clearing, lifting her off her feet and throwing her onto her back.

She landed with a thud, her body breathless, her mind crystal clear and filled with only one thought. "Legolas!" she croaked.

Above her, *The Shieldmaiden* was rising from her timber supports, pulling her ropes as taut as bowstrings.

Eowyn willed her arms and legs to move.

"Adkin, Bandan," cried Master Eldacar, swinging himself over the gunwale and onto the ladder with an agility that surprised her, "double the ropes; Marloth, put that—" Another huge gust ripped him from the steps, and dumped him somewhere on the ground.

But Eowyn's attention was fixed upon the ship.

One by one, *The Shieldmaiden's* ropes were snapping, piercing the wind's roar with a series of deafening cracks as, like a living thing, she struggled to break her bonds.

And then she was free, smashing her way up through the carantaurs, leaving nothing but a trail of broken boughs and a blizzard of red leaves behind her.

"Legolas," wailed Eowyn. "Oh gods, Legolas! *LEGOLAS, COME BACK!*"

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Part 5

"She *flies!*"

Eowyn stared at Master Eldacar, momentarily speechless.

Then, grasping him roughly by the arm, and pulling him towards the horses, she bombarded him with questions. "Can Arador control her? How much fuel do they have? What happens if the silk tears? Or catches light? Or—or—can you *ride?*"

"Yes, my Lady. But not well."

Eowyn mounted Brightstar. "Get up behind me."

It took him several attempts, for Eowyn, looking upwards in the hope of seeing the flying ship, was too impatient to hold the horse still. "Put your arms around my waist," she said, when at last he was seated, "and hold tight." She dug her heels into Brightstar's sides, and they left the clearing at a gallop, following the narrow track that joined the main road back to the city.

"My Lady," gasped Eldacar, breathlessly, "you are going in entirely the wrong direction. The wind is westerly. The ship will be sailing *east...*"

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She left Brightstar with one of the grooms, and dragged the scholar, protesting gently, up the spiralling staircase.

Half way to the top, she lost patience. "I will go ahead," she said. "Wait for me on the walkway." But after a few steps, she stopped, and turned. "How many men would you need to fly that thing? Properly?"

"Well..."

"Do not stop climbing!"

"*Five,*" said Master Eldacar, desperately. "Yes, at least five. Arador is skilled with the burner; I have some understanding of the rudder; we need two more to throw out the anchors, and a lookout at the front."

"Then we need another body," said Eowyn. "I will send for Haldir."

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Part 6: Earlier

"*Miruvor*, my Lord," cried Arador. He leaped from the burner well, ran up the sloping deck, and leaned out, precariously, over the rearing prow.

Legolas hesitated.

The ship lurched; her bows rose higher. "The ropes cannot hold us much longer," the boy shouted. "Turn the tap, my Lord! We must get clear, or the trees will rip us apart!"

"But..."

"*My Lord!*"

The boy's vehemence convinced him.

Legolas turned the tap, releasing one, two, three drops of fluid into the burner. Instantly, the ship responded, lifting vertically and snapping her remaining lines, and Legolas had a sudden vision of Eowyn, eyes round with horror, as the hull righted itself, and soared upwards.

The wind hit her full astern, and she shot forwards.

Arador—now lashed, Legolas noticed, to a rail running the full length of the deck—fought his way aft. "I am going to take the helm, my Lord," he yelled, as he laboured past. "Put that harness on, and hook yourself up. We will have to ride the current, but I will see if I can coax her out into the open. Then, as soon as the wind drops, we will try to land her." He grasped the wheel. "Tend the burner, my Lord. Keep the flames steady. When the time comes, I will tell you how to work the vents."

Though it was not strictly necessary, Legolas secured himself to the rail—noting, in passing, that the ingenious hook must be another of Master Eldacar's inventions. "Would it not be better," he shouted, crouching down to check the flames, "*safer*, that is, to lower ourselves into the Forest canopy? The branches would give, and cushion our fall—"

"*Fire*, my Lord," said the boy, swinging the wheel to starboard. "The Master has taken every precaution, but if the branches should tear the silk, the bladder will collapse, and the silk will fall upon the burner housing. And I am not convinced that the mesh will be enough to prevent its catching light. That stuff goes up like tinder, and we would be trapped inside."

The boy was no fool.

Legolas released another drop of miruvor and, through their precious mental bond, he tried to reach Eowyn, and send her comfort.

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Part 7

By the time Master Eldacar had reached the top of the stairs, clutching the hand rail and gasping for breath, Eowyn was emerging from her and Legolas' chambers carrying a small carpet bag.

"I do not climb up here very often," the scholar explained.

"Come," said Eowyn, dragging him up another flight of stairs. "I have asked Haldir to join us."

"Join us where, my Lady?" He valiantly tried to keep up with her. "This is very pleasant—with all the plants..."

She led him straight across the garden flet, and up another, much steeper, staircase—up and up, right through the Forest canopy—to the tiny sea flet.

Moments later, Haldir joined them. "Thank goodness," said Eowyn, holding out a hand.

The big elf clasped it. "Your servant told me what has happened. What can I do?"

"For the time being, just keep Master Eldacar safe. Once we are on board, I am sure there will be plenty to do, for all of us."

He squeezed her hand, reassuringly. Then, "Sir," he said, turning to the scholar, "take my arm."

Eldacar did so, though his reluctance was obvious. "You say, my Lady, 'once we are on board,'" he said. "But how, exactly, do you plan—"

"Please," said Eowyn, opening the carpet bag, "trust me. And, please, *please*, I beg you, do not to tell anyone what you are about to see." She brought out an exquisite oil lamp, enamelled with carantaur leaves and studded with little acorns of carved amber, and, holding it close to her chest, she rubbed its side. "The fewer who know about this, the better."

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Master Eldacar frowned.

Smoke was flowing from the spout of the lamp and—*Heavier than air*, he thought—was pooling upon the wooden platform, forming a thick, white blanket around his feet.

Then, against every law of nature, it rose upwards, and gathered together—*Congeaing*, he thought. *Yes, that is the word*—into shapes that, to a scholarly eye, might seem to resemble the parts of a body—a breast muscle here; a shoulder blade there; the lobe of an ear; a curving lip...

The scholar watched, transfixed, as the parts multiplied, were fleshed out, and began to join.

By the gods!

"I am the Djinn of the Lamp," said the strange new being in a great, booming voice. "Your wish is my command, pretty little mistress." It bowed to Eowyn, and—Eldacar could have sworn it—kissed the air beside her cheek.

"I *wish* you," said Eowyn, "to carry us three safely to Legolas."

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Part 8

"We are heading straight for the mountains," shouted Legolas.

"I know, my lord!" Arador swung the wheel.

The elf looked fore and aft, judging the distances. It was hard to believe how fast they were moving. "We are already more than half way."

"It is the wind, my Lord! I have no control!"

Legolas unhooked himself from the safety rail and joined the boy at the helm. "If we can just turn her a little more to the north," he said, grasping the wheel, "we will pass over Newhome." Arador's former home was a farming community, set on the broad, flat plain at the foot of the mountains. "There is enough space there to land in." But elven strength made no difference to the steering.

"She will not respond to the rudder!" cried the boy.

"Because the air does not offer enough resistance," said Legolas. "And the bladder cannot be trimmed like sails. We will have to rise higher, Arador—we will have to fly *over* the mountains. How much miruvor do we have?"

The boy pulled the flask from his pocket. "Enough," he said. "It is almost full. But, my Lord, it is Master Eldacar's belief that the air will grow thinner and thinner the higher we rise—and that, at some point, there will no longer be enough to keep us alive."

Legolas took the flask. "How high can we safely go?" he asked.

"I have no idea. Though *you* will probably survive much longer than I."

"Well," said the elf, "keep trying to turn her north. I will tend the flames. We do not need to decide just yet."

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The funnel was almost dry. Legolas uncorked the flask and poured in ten drops of miruvor. Then, on second thoughts, he added another five. *If we do have to climb*, he thought, *we will want the fuel ready*. He had no idea how, when the time came, he would decide what to do.

He re-corked the flask, checked the flames—they were still steady—straightened up, and looked towards the mountains.

They were alarmingly close.

But something else was touching the edge of his consciousness, something familiar, something...

Something he loved.

Eowyn?

He swung round.

"My Lord," cried Arador, "there is something following us!"

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Part 9

"Set us down on the deck," shouted Eowyn.

The Djinn—holding her in one hand, and Haldir and Master Eldacar in the other—circled the flying ship. But he did not move in any closer, and it seemed to Eowyn that he was hesitating, that he might even be *afraid* of the scholar's contraption.

"Set us on the deck," she tried to bribe him, "and you can go straight back into your lamp."

Still the Djinn hesitated.

"Eowyn," shouted Haldir, "they are flying into the Mountains of Mordor!"

Eowyn looked down and saw Legolas, working desperately at the ship's centre, and Arador, frantically spinning the wheel. On her left, Master Eldacar was shouting instructions into the wind. "*Please,*" she begged.

That did it; the Djinn swooped down.

Closer and closer they flew, and his outstretched hand began to shrink around her. Eowyn clung tightly to his knuckle, understanding that he was getting ready to slip her into the narrow space between the deck and the bladder.

It was a dangerous undertaking. No wonder he was nervous!

She saw Legolas break off from what he was doing, and prepare himself to catch her. *Poor Haldir and Master Eldacar,* she thought. *They will have to fend for themselves.*

Nearer they came—*Just a few yards more*—and she could see that Legolas was wearing some sort of harness, and was tethered to the ship. And, forgetting the mountain, she sighed with relief, thinking that he, at least, was safe.

Then the Djinn shoved her into the gap and, despite all her determination, Eowyn closed her eyes.

But she felt Legolas' arms close around her and—though the deck tilted beneath her and she began to fall—he held her fast!

She opened her eyes, and saw that Haldir and Master Eldacar were safe, too, and realised that it was their weight, at the starboard gunwale, that was momentarily unbalancing the ship.

And then she noticed her carpet bag, sliding down the deck, and saw the Djinn disappear into it (for his lamp was inside), and watched, helplessly, as the bag found one of the scuppers, and slipped through the hole...

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Part 10

All her mistakes became clear at once, and Eowyn cried out in anguish.

Legolas held her tight, and Haldir was with them in an instant. "I saw it fall, Eowyn—"

"Reduce the flames!" Master Eldacar's voice rang out over the wind, surprisingly loud and filled with authority.

"I can find it," said Haldir. He laid a comforting hand on Eowyn's back. "I can find the spot again; I know exactly where it is—"

"*Lower the flames!*" shouted Eldacar. He had taken the helm.

Arador rushed forwards, moving along the rail. "My Lord..." He pushed past Legolas, and dropped into the burner well.

"I will take a company of border guards—"

"YOU WILL BE *DEAD* IF YOU DO NOT DO EXACTLY AS I SAY!" bellowed the scholar. Legolas and Haldir exchanged startled looks. "I need you on the anchors!"

Legolas ripped off his harness and gave it to Eowyn. "Put this on; hook yourself to here."

Haldir was already beside the starboard anchor; Legolas rushed to the port.

"*Ready?*"

"Yes, sir!" cried the two elves, in unison.

"Wait for my word—Arador, hold those flames *steady*..." Eldacar seemed to be staring into something, beside the wheel. "On the count of three: one; two; *three!*"

The elves dropped the anchors.

For a moment nothing happened—the ship continued on its perilous way, but lower in the sky now, and in imminent danger of collision.

Then it lurched, its bows falling sharply, came to a sudden stop—throwing forward anything that was not strapped down—levelled off, and sat, bobbing violently on the wind.

The anchors had snagged on something below!

Legolas, having hardly lost his balance, ran back to Eowyn, who was lying flat upon the deck. "Thank the Valar you attached yourself in time!"

Arador was picking himself up off the burner housing. "Are you *burnt?*" cried the elf, as he helped Eowyn to her feet.

"No, my Lord. Gloves!" The boy held up his hands.

Haldir was safe, still standing beside the anchor emplacement.

Legolas took Eowyn's arm and led her aft. "What now, sir?" he asked Master Eldacar.

"We tend the burner," the man replied, "and wait until the wind drops. Then we will tack north, over Emyrn Arnen, to the Dead Marshes, where we will have no trouble setting her down."

"*Tack?*" said Legolas.

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"A nautical term, my Lord," the scholar explained.

"I know—but I did not realise that you had sailing experience, sir."

"I have made an extensive study of the literature," said Eldacar, guilelessly.

Legolas pulled Eowyn closer.

"Why should the anchors hold us," asked Eowyn, suddenly, "when the mooring lines did not?"

"The anchors hang on elven rope, my Lady," replied Eldacar. "The mooring lines were simple hemp."

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Part 11

Having assumed command of his ship, Master Eldacar had—diffidently—sent everyone except Haldir below decks, insisting that Eowyn should take the captain's cabin.

"I did everything so *wrong*," she said, sinking down onto the bunk. She buried her face in her hands.

Legolas knelt down beside her. "Let me take off your boots," he said, gently, "and then you can rest."

She raised her head. "Stay with me?"

Legolas smiled. "Of course," he said.

"All I could think of was persuading the Djinn to bring me to you, Lassui—but I should simply have told him to bring the ship back to its mooring. Then *you* would have been safe, *he* would have been safe, and *I* would not have risked Haldir and Master Eldacar's necks in that stupid, risky... *Oh!*" She thumped the bed with her clenched fists.

"*Shhh...*" Legolas caught hold of her hands, and brought them to his lips. "I am hardly going to scold you, *melmenya*, for rushing to my rescue," he murmured. Then he added, more seriously, "You were calm, and brave, and your 'men' followed you without question. And you would not be the first commander to decide on the wrong course of action." He kissed her hands. "That is, if it really *was* the wrong course of action—how do you know that the Djinn would have been able to carry the ship? Against the wind?"

"But, because of my mistake, Lassui, he *fell*."

"And Haldir says he can find him."

"Do you believe it?"

"Absolutely."

That seemed to comfort her. "Can we go with Haldir," she asked. "To rescue the Djinn?"

"Of course we can." He pulled off her boot. "There. Now get into bed."

...

Gazing through the cabin windows at the night sky, Legolas felt Eowyn's hand move, and smiled.

Words were not necessary between them; her touch—gentle but demanding—guided him to where he most wanted to be.

He made love to her slowly, thrusting deeply, shivering with the joy of possessing, and being possessed. "I love you, Shieldmaiden," he whispered. "I love you, my *strong*—my *brave*—my *beautiful...*"

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Part 12: Next morning

Legolas opened the cabin door and stepped out into the fresh, early morning air.

The wind had dropped during the night, and *The Shieldmaiden*, her burner tended by Haldir, was calmly waiting to set sail upon the breeze.

"Good morning, my Lord," said Master Eldacar, who—standing at a small desk built into the deck—was taking readings from various strange instruments, and recording the results in a tiny notebook. He appeared to have spent the night on deck, but looked none the worse for it. "With your permission, and your kind assistance, my Lord, I should like to lift anchor as soon as possible. By my calculations, if these conditions hold, it will take us just under twelve hours to reach the Dead Marshes."

"Have you ever *visited* the Dead Marshes, sir?" asked Legolas, tactfully.

"No, my Lord." Eldacar made another note.

"Those waters shelter the remains of warriors, Master Eldacar, lost in the great Battle of Dagorlad."

"I understand that, my Lord," said Eldacar and, for the briefest of moments, Legolas was allowed to glimpse the razor-sharp wits behind the scholar's customary vagueness, "but marshland offers us our best hope of a safe landing. And I do not believe the noble dead will begrudge us that."

"No... No, that is well said, sir," said Legolas. "But the marshes hold other hazards." He glanced towards the cabin where Eowyn was still sleeping. "There are poisonous snakes, sir, and clouds of biting insects, and I myself have seen strange flames which, they say, signal the presence of death."

"Marsh gases," said Eldacar, quietly. Then, "*The Shieldmaiden* is equipped for all climes and conditions, my Lord. I assure you, there are measures we can take to ensure that Lady Eowyn is safe and comfortable."

"Good," said Legolas, though not entirely convinced. "Thank you, sir." He decided to raise a question that had been troubling him since the ship had broken away from her moorings. "May I ask, sir, how you originally planned to land *The Shieldmaiden*?"

The scholar smiled a huge, elfling's smile. "A *tower*, my Lord! Yes, we would have built a great wooden tower, standing high above the trees—naturally, we would have had to site it some way away from the carantaur forest. But then *The Shieldmaiden* could have drawn up to it, and moored, and its passengers would have disembarked and made their own way down to the ground, whilst the ship was being attached to hoists. And then the bladder would have been deflated, and the hull lowered gently to the ground."

Legolas smiled, sharing, in his mind's eye, the scholar's vision. "You may build your tower yet, sir."

"I hope so, my Lord," said Eldacar. "Now, might I trouble you to wake the boy?"

...

The elves raised the anchors and, with Arador adjusting the burner according to strange, coded instructions from Master Eldacar, they tacked their way north north east, sailing high above the Forest, and running parallel with the great River Anduin, just visible to the east.

"I should like to see Eryn Carantaur from up here," said Eowyn. "It is so pleasant when the

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weather is good!"

"You are not nervous, being up so high?" asked Legolas.

"No. I feel quite safe." She smiled at him. "But I am not needed here on deck, Lassui. I shall go down to the galley, and prepare some food."

"That is a kind thought, melmenya." Legolas saw Haldir's shoulders sag. "I will help you."

...

By mid afternoon they were crossing the western foothills of Eryn Arnen.

"Look," said Eowyn, pointing at the ground, "that is *us*! Our shadow!"

She and Legolas watched the dark image of *The Shieldmaiden* ripple over the grass and the trees, and fall upon a party of horsemen on the Caras Arnen road. "Merchants," said Eowyn. "Or carriers, perhaps."

"No, melmenya, no," said Legolas. "It is not merchants..." Then he cried, excitedly, "Arador, may I borrow your gloves?"

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Part 13

Far below *The Shieldmaiden*, two tiny figures, with two even tinier dogs, were 'putting up' a flock of birds, which looked, to Eowyn, like little more than a spatter of black ink on the smooth green hillside.

One of the riders raised his arm, and Eowyn understood that he was setting his falcon upon the prey. And, leaning over the bow rail, she narrowed her eyes, and stared at him, muttering, "Is that...?"

"Yes, melmenya," said Legolas. He hopped up onto the gunwale, put his hand to his mouth, and whistled.

At his call, the falcon seemed to abandon the hunt and, turning in a wide arc, began spiraling higher.

"My gods..." On the ground, the hawking party had spotted *The Shieldmaiden* and were staring up at her—and Eowyn could easily imagine the looks of wonder on their faces—but the falconer was reaching for his bow. "Could his arrow hit us from there?"

Legolas put on Arador's glove. "It would have to be a very lucky shot, melmenya." He held out his fist. "We are at the limit of his range, and a fast-moving target."

"But we are getting closer, and *he* is a skilled archer."

Legolas whistled again—this time a long, haunting melody, rising and falling like birdsong—and, suddenly, the falcon was standing upon his hand. It closed its wings, and settled, watching the elf with huge, ancient eyes.

"It is Rochiriel," said Eowyn. "She is his pride and joy—she was a gift from Eomer. But why—"

"We will take good care of her, melmenya." Legolas stroked the falcon's breast, soothing her with Elvish endearments.

Eowyn, meanwhile, had pulled out her handkerchief and was waving it over the bows, and shouting, "Faramir! Faramir! Do not shoot! It is *us!*"

"Melmenya," said Legolas, smiling, "we need some raw meat."

...

"Here," said Eowyn. She had dashed down to the galley and cut a morsel of rabbit flesh, and she dropped it into his free hand. "You must not give her too much, Lassui, or she will get 'fed up' and refuse to hunt."

"It is a cruel sport, melmenya."

"I know."

"But she understands what we want of her," said Legolas. "Master Eldacar," he called, "might we take a leaf from your notebook?"

Both Eldacar and Arador, though unable to leave their stations, had been watching with interest. "Of course, my Lord."

Legolas led Eowyn to the scholar's desk. "Write a note, melmenya—make it as small as you can. Explain that we are heading for the Dead Marshes and ask Faramir to bring help."

"And Rochiriel will take it to him?" Eowyn picked up the pen.

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"If we ask her nicely." He stroked the bird. "We will slip it under one of her jesses. It should not trouble her."

...

Rochiriel means 'daughter of a horse lord'.

Westron wynde

Part 14

By the time Eowyn had written the note, and blotted it, trimmed it to size, and folded it, and Legolas had secured it beneath the leather strap on Rochiriel's leg, *The Shieldmaiden* had left Faramir's hawking party far behind.

Legolas released the falcon and, standing at the stern, watched her swoop down and, flying as straight as an arrow, return to her master. "Yes," he cried. "He has her!"

"Let us hope he finds our message," said Eowyn.

"He will, melmenya. He will examine her carefully. He will want to make sure that she has come to no harm on her strange adventure."

...

Two hours later

"We are changing direction,"—Legolas looked up at the sky, checking the position of the sun—"turning west. Why is that, Master Eldacar?"

The scholar took a deep breath, apparently preparing to deliver a long and complex explanation—

"Look, Lassui," cried Eowyn, "down there. It must be Caras Arnen!"

Legolas patted her arm.

"I beg your indulgence, my Lord," said Eldacar. "Some years ago, I created a map of the City on the Hills, measuring its dimensions by pacing its streets. This flight gives us a unique opportunity to verify the map's accuracy—I would be most grateful if you and Lady Eowyn would compare its lines to those of the actual city, as we fly over."

Legolas looked at Eowyn. She was grinning.

"The detour does serve another purpose, my Lord," continued Eldacar. "At present, the Arnen hills are shielding us from much of the wind's force, allowing us to cross the stream, as it were. When we emerge from their lee, we should be well within the valley of the Anduin, and can then safely follow its course, north to Cair Andros."

"We will see Minas Tirith, Lassui, and Mount Mindolluin!"

"From a distance—a *good* distance—I hope," said Legolas. "Where is this map, Master Eldacar?"

"In the drawer of my desk."

...

Arador adjusted the flames, and brought *The Shieldmaiden* as low as Master Eldacar considered prudent, but the ship was moving quickly, and the couple could expect little more than a brief glimpse of the City on the Hills.

"Do not lean too far, melmenya. You must not rely too heavily on the harness."

"There is the Palace," said Eowyn, pointing to an elegant, turreted castle overlooking the rest of the city from the south, "and the stables—and, oh, look, there is my garden!"

"Berengar is tending it well. The trees are thriving."

Westron wynde

"There is the Guildhall," she continued, as they sped north, "and the market square,"—Legolas checked them off on the map—"no market today, and—oh, Lassui—there is the playhouse!" Eowyn pointed to a circular building, standing just outside the city walls (in Caras Arnen's least respectable district).

Legolas peered down its central well at the boisterous play-goers—all laughing, and jostling, and heckling, and generally having a good time—and at the players, acting out some sort of fight on the stage. "Is that supposed to be Aragorn?" he asked. "And Gimli? And—oh, Valar, who is *that*—do not tell me that bow-legged scarecrow in the yellow wig is *me!*"

"I shall take you to see that play one of these days," laughed Eowyn. "You will love it."

Westron wynde

Part 15

When they reached Osgiliath the sun had begun to set, painting the ruins in a thousand shades of pink and deep purple.

Legolas approached Master Eldacar. "They boy is tired," he said, for Arador had been carefully adjusting the burner for nearly ten hours, even taking his meals at his station. "He needs to rest—and so, sir, do you—you have been on deck, to my certain knowledge, for four and twenty hours, and goodness knows how long you went without sleep before that. Please—you drilled us well this morning—trust *me* to take the helm, and let Haldir tend the flames."

Eldacar raised a hand to his mouth and stifled a yawn. "I have another suggestion, my Lord," he said. "Let us moor for the night. It will give all of us a chance to rest, and give Prince Faramir and his men the opportunity to catch up with us."

Legolas patted his arm. "An excellent plan, sir," he said.

...

They dropped the anchors, following Eldacar's instructions, and moored *The Shieldmaiden* above the Forest of North Ithilien.

Legolas joined Eowyn in the galley and, together, they prepared a simple meal of bread and cheese, vegetable pasties, and stewed fruit, and brought it up on deck with some excellent wine.

Master Eldacar had cleared his desk to make a table, and moved two lockers to form benches, and—with Haldir keeping a sharp eye on the burner—they sat down to supper.

It was a pleasant way, Legolas found, to get to know the people with whom circumstances had thrown Eowyn and him together, in such an unlikely adventure. And by the time Eldacar, Arador and Eowyn—under protest—had retired, and Haldir had taken his place beside the burner, and *he* had climbed up onto the bowsprit to keep watch, Legolas had begun to feel that the worst of the danger was behind them.

"A *Elbereth Gilthoniel, silivren penna míriel...*" Legolas sang softly, looking up at the stars. "*O menel aglar elenath...*"

He frowned—his elven instincts suddenly sensing danger—and looked down through the trees.

He could see nothing out of place. But when he glanced across at Haldir, he noticed that the other elf was alert, too, and listening hard. "Humans," he mouthed.

Haldir nodded.

Legolas dropped to the deck, ran silently to the starboard anchor housing, and looked over the side.

By Elbereth! Someone was climbing the anchor rope!

He crossed to the port side, and found another climber.

And then, as he watched, a third man emerged from the foliage, and followed his comrade up the rope.

Westron wynde

Part 16

The cabin door opened and Eowyn, barefoot, and wearing nothing but her tunic and sword belt, appeared in the doorway.

Legolas raised a finger to his mouth: *Shhh!*

She padded quietly to his side. "You woke me up," she mouthed, alluding to their close mental bond, "what is wrong?"

Legolas looked over the ship's side. The first man had already reached the half-way point. "We are under attack, *melmenya*," he whispered. "They look like farmers, but they are well armed. They must think that we are pirates, from a world above the clouds..."

"What shall we do, Lassui?" She loosened her sword in its scabbard.

Legolas was not sure. "Wait..." He looked over the gunwale again. The first man was still climbing steadily, the second was gaining upon him, and a third had joined them. *Many more*, he thought, *and they will drag us out of the air!* "Do you remember how to work the anchor rope, *melmenya*?"

Eowyn looked down at the mechanism, another of Master Eldacar's inventions. "Yes..."

"Good. Then get ready to use it—but not until I give the signal."

He crossed to Haldir. "I will need you to take us up," he said, "one foot at a time."

"I can raise the ship," said the big elf, "but how am I to judge the distance?"

Legolas frowned. "Pick some landmark," he said, scanning the Ephel Dúath, "and rise towards it."

"I shall do my best..."

Legolas took his place at the starboard anchor housing. The men on that side were climbing more slowly than their comrades on the port, but he knew it would not be long before the first of them reached the hull. He seized the winch handle, and waved to Eowyn: "*NOW*, *melmenya*," he shouted, "lift the ratchet, and let the rope out as fast as you can!"

She did as ordered, winding—it almost broke his heart to see it—with every ounce of her strength, and Legolas matched her, turn for turn, whilst Haldir raised the ship: one foot, two, a yard, two yards, three—

Eowyn's hand slipped, and her handle locked. *The Shieldmaiden* floundered, and a wail of terror rose up from below, ending in a sickening crash, and the creak of broken branches.

One of the men had fallen!

"Keep *winding*, *melmenya*," shouted Legolas, "keep winding!" For he knew the effect the man's death would have on the rest of his comrades.

Higher the ship rose, higher and higher, with Haldir struggling to keep the hull level and the ropes taut, until—at last—the anchors were fully lowered.

"Gods..." Eowyn collapsed, hands on knees, panting for breath; Legolas rushed over to her, and rubbed her back, proudly.

He peered over the gunwale. The men on the port side already seemed to have lost heart—the first had stopped climbing and was looking up at the extra distance; the second had begun to

Westron wynde

descend.

"We mean you no harm," the elf shouted, in Westron. "Climb down, and we will sail away and leave you in peace! But climb up, and you will force us to defend ourselves!"

...

It took a well-placed arrow to persuade the last of the farmers to retreat, but the men had one final surprise in reserve, and they used it then, hacking at the anchor ropes until the starboard line gave way. *The Shieldmaiden* veered violently to port, turning her broadside to the wind, and strained against her remaining rope, her planking creaking ominously.

But Master Eldacar had come on deck and, at his command, Legolas took Eowyn's sword, and cut the ship free.

The Shieldmaiden surged forward in the current—rising, falling, righting herself, and throwing Eowyn, who was not tethered, down upon the deck—but Eldacar seized the helm and, within moments, he and Haldir had regained control.

Legolas helped Eowyn to her feet. "But how will we land, Lassui, with no anchors?" she asked.

"I do not know, my darling," said Legolas, wrapping her in his arms. "But I am sure that Master Eldacar will think of something."

Westron wynde

Part 17: Next morning, at dawn

"Can you see him?" asked Eowyn.

She and Legolas were standing in the stern, facing south; the elf was looking for any sign that Faramir might be following.

"Mm," he said. "I was not sure before but—now that the sun has risen, *melmenya*—there is a definitely a cloud of dust, moving swiftly along the eastern bank."

"Riders," said Eowyn.

"I hope so." He was still afraid that, even if they *did* succeed in landing in the Dead Marshes, the foetid air and the insects would poison Eowyn and the other humans.

"How far behind?"

"At the moment, five or six hours, perhaps. But we are already pulling away from them."

Eowyn nodded, gravely. "The horses will tire," she said. "And the route—this part, to Henneth Annûn, is familiar to them, but once they pass Cair Andros, the going will be much harder."

...

Arador dumped a pile of metal objects—barrel hoops, door hinges, locker hasps and mooring spikes—onto the deck.

The boy had volunteered to solve the anchor problem.

"We must bend them into shape, and bind them together," he said to his two assistants, Legolas and Eowyn. "And then we will need to decide—we have thirty yards of elven rope left: do we cut it in two, and make two very strong but short anchor ropes; or do we keep it whole, and make a second rope by twisting two lengths of hemp together..."

...

Eowyn snipped off the end of the cord, and leaned back to admire her handiwork—a reasonably neat piece of splicing.

"Very good, *melmenya*," said Legolas. He smiled. "Take a rest now, my darling, whilst Arador and I finish the anchors."

"Well—if you do not mind, I *would* like to stretch my legs." She rose and, sucking her bloodied fingers, walked over to the port gunwale. Down below, the trees were thinning out and, in places, she could see the ground.

She stared for a moment at the patches of burnt earth, the scatter of bones and the smears of excrement, and at the tracks of trampled undergrowth.

And then her heart lurched.

It was as though she were looking at a vast copy of her own Orc map! The spoor were the very symbols she inscribed upon it. All that was missing was her annotations! "Legolas!" she cried. "Legolas! There are Orcs below! A *huge* band of Orcs! Look! Look at the filthy camp site, and the blood stains, and—and look at the half-eaten pig. Those are the typical signs, *Lassui*. And I think they are heading north, towards the marshes."

Legolas jumped up onto the bowsprit, and scanned the terrain ahead.

Westron wynde

"Can you see them?"

"No... But I *can* see some travellers." Legolas watched the little group of humans trekking across the rugged moorland—two men, a woman, and a horse-drawn cart carrying some housewares, a few sticks of furniture and—"Oh *Valar*," he muttered—three small children.

"If you are right about the Orcs, *melmenya*, *they* are sitting ducks."

Westron wynde

Part 18

"Can she move any faster?"

Master Eldacar, at the helm, shook his head. "I do not know of any way, my Lord..."

"Well, do your best, sir."

...

Legolas joined Eowyn and Haldir in the bows. "Any sign of the Orcs?"

"There is movement, over there," said the elf, "but I cannot be sure it is Orcs."

Legolas turned to Eowyn. She had armed herself with a bow from the ship's weapon chest, and was waiting, shoulders tense, for the fight to start. "Remember our lessons, *melmenya*," he said, rubbing her back. "Keep your muscles relaxed until you are ready to draw."

She gave him an anxious smile.

...

It began with a piercing scream—the travellers had seen the Orcs.

The brutes were streaming from the Forest, charging across the rough terrain, splashing through the ribbons of water, closing in on their prey. Legolas counted eighteen in all, led by a hulking Uruk Hai—a huge, merciless monster.

The Shieldmaiden was still a long way away.

The men had set the horse free, and were turning the cart over. Pots and pans and bits of clothing spilled out, and lay strewn across the ground. *That is good*, thought Legolas. *That will distract them*. He saw the woman and her children crawl into their makeshift refuge, and could imagine the young ones trembling with fear. One of the men had brought out a stubby bow, and the other—an elderly fellow—was brandishing a heavy staff.

They did not stand a chance.

Legolas fitted an arrow to his bow. "*Melmenya*," he said, calmly, "find something you can make a lot of noise with, and use it. Haldir, aim for the stragglers. We need to turn them around, and bring them back this way."

...

By the time *The Shieldmaiden* had drawn within range, the archer on the ground had already loosed two arrows—and missed with both.

Haldir leaped up onto the gunwale and shot. His arrow hit home, and the stricken Orc fell to its knees, wailing, but its companions scarcely noticed.

The elf shot another creature, and then a third.

"They are too stupid to understand what is happening," said Legolas, drawing and taking aim. The distance was shrinking rapidly. He loosed, and dropped the big Uruk Hai. And, this time, some of the other Orcs noticed, and stopped running, staring at their fallen leader. One of them scratched its head—Legolas shot it between the eyes.

Eowyn, meanwhile, had brought out two saucepans and was banging them together and shouting, "Hey! Hey! Over here! Over *here!* "

Westron wynde

The pack fell apart in confusion—some were still running towards the humans, but less purposefully now; some (as Legolas had predicted) had lost interest in fighting, and were sorting through the bits and pieces on the ground; and one, nursing a wounded leg, was trying to see where the noise was coming from.

It saw *The Shieldmaiden*, and—face distorted with fear—pointed skywards, gibbering madly.

"*This is it,*" said Legolas, pulling another arrow from his quiver. "Get ready—we will have one chance from here, and another from the stern, and we must leave none alive, for we cannot protect the family once we have passed over them."

Haldir nodded grimly.

Eowyn put down her saucepans, and took up her bow.

Westron wynde

Part 19

"Potatoes, my Lady!" cried Arador, from the burner well.

Eowyn stared at him, wide-eyed.

"There is a sack of potatoes we did not have time to stow—over there, by the rope locker," he said. "When the Orcs are beneath us, drop them!"

...

There was a strange moment of calm, whilst the Orcs gaped at the ship, in awe and confusion.

And then they were running, and shooting, and hurling their weapons and, when they had got rid of those, they threw stones, and clods of earth, and then they stood defiantly, waving their fists and roaring.

Eowyn, taking her time, and aiming her arrows carefully (as Legolas had taught her), thought that she had hit at least two. Legolas and Haldir, each adjusting his stance as *The Shieldmaiden* flew closer and closer, were killing with elven efficiency.

Eowyn laid down her bow, seized the potato sack and, holding it up to the gunwale, tipped the vegetables over the side.

"Well done, melmenya!" shouted Legolas, seeing the Orcs cower under the deadly shower. The ship passed over them. "Stern!"

The trio rushed aft, and the two elves, leaping up onto the taffrail, finished the beasts with a storm of arrows.

"Please, my LORD," roared Eldacar, "you are making it almost *impossible*—"

"I am sorry, sir," cried Legolas, dropping to the deck and running to the gunwale. "Get away from this place," he shouted to the astonished family as the ship passed over them. "It is not safe! Head south, along the river." He moved backwards, trying to stay level with the men. "You will meet with Prince Faramir on the riverbank: tell him that Legolas has sent you! *Legolas!*"

...

Lingering aft, Eowyn watched the travellers gather up their belongings.

The woman and the elderly man had righted the cart and, whilst the mother comforted her children, the grandfather rounded up the horse and hitched it between the shafts. Meanwhile, the younger man was moving from Orc to Orc, making sure, with a quick plunge of his knife, that the brutes posed no further threat to his family.

...

Eowyn turned away.

For a moment or two, she watched Master Eldacar, who seemed to be gazing into some sort of funnel that stood beside the wheel. Then, "What is that?" she asked.

The scholar gave her one of his childlike smiles. "I call it my seeing-tube," he said, motioning for her to take a look.

Eowyn peered into the instrument. The tube was sealed with a picture of moorland, seen from directly above, and—she frowned—

Westron wynde

The picture was *moving*. She reached out, and touched it.

The surface was smooth, and cold—*A plate of fine quality glass, she thought, or perhaps some sort of crystal*—and, after a few moments, she suddenly realised what she was seeing. “*How...*” She looked up at Master Eldacar, returning his smile. “How in Middle-earth does it work?”

“A simple arrangement of lenses to gather, and mirrors to bend, the rays of light emitted by the ground beneath us,” said the scholar, proudly. “It is essential for safe manoeuvring.”

“It is wonderful! But... We do seem to be flying very low,” said Eowyn.

“*Low?*” Eldacar looked into the seeing-tube. “Mmm... *Arador,*” he called, “do not reduce the flames until I tell you.”

“I have not changed the setting, Master,” the boy replied. “The flames are steady.”

Eowyn ran to the taffrail and looked over. “I think we are sinking, sir,” she cried.

Westron wynde

Part 20

"Surely it cannot—*can* it be? The *bladder*?" Eldacar clicked his fingers. "Yes, that *must* be it! Here, my Lady, take the helm."

"Oh, sir, I do not..."

But the scholar was hurrying forward, staring up at the huge silken bag and, after two swift turns around the deck, he shouted, "My Lord, Master Haldir, help me—we must lighten the ship!" He seized a small barrel and, struggling to lift it up to the gunwale, pushed it over the side.

Perplexed, Legolas looked across at Eowyn. "We are sinking, Lassui," she shouted. "Master Eldacar thinks that the silk is damaged." She wiped her hand on the skirts of her jerkin, and grasped the wheel again.

Eldacar, meanwhile, was rolling a second barrel. "We cannot land here," he explained, "because we need *water* to attenuate the impact. We must keep her aloft for as long as we can."

"Can we not repair the silk?" asked Haldir, taking the barrel from him and throwing it over the side.

"I do have the materials..." Eldacar had started dragging the weapons chest. "But I have not yet perfected a means of finding the leak."

"*Arrows*," said Legolas, as Haldir lifted the chest. "The Orcs were shooting *arrows* at us." He looked up at the bladder. "One of them must have hit... And they ran out long before we passed over them, so it must be at the very front!" He turned to Eldacar—who had already begun moving the next chest—and grabbed him by the shoulder. "Where are these repair materials, sir?"

The scholar abandoned his task reluctantly. "Here..." he said, opening a locker and bringing out a leather satchel. He showed Legolas its contents. "These are patches of reinforced silk, and this,"—he partially drew out a bottle of yellow fluid—"is a gum of my own devising." He pressed the satchel into Legolas' hands with a few hurried instructions. Then, "Excuse me, my Lord," he said, and rushed to take over the supervision of the burner so that Arador—who was pointing out that he was the stronger of the two of them—could help Haldir clear the deck.

Legolas unbuckled his quiver, laid it beside his bow, and strapped the satchel around his waist. Then, as an afterthought, he quickly detached one of his white knives, and hung it from his belt.

"*Lassui*?"

"I am going aloft, melmenya," he shouted. "Just hold her steady."

...

Legolas jumped up onto the bowsprit, seized hold of the rigging, and climbed swiftly upwards, hand over hand. At the top of the jib he paused, scanning the curved surface of bladder directly above him.

Nothing...

He looked down.

Sweet Eru, I do not have much time!

Westron wynde

Up he went, hanging beneath the silk. *It is really no different from scaling a Mûmak*, he thought—for the bladder hissed and shuddered like a living thing—though he dared not use his feet for fear that his boots might do further damage.

By the time he reached the edge of the great rope net, he had spotted the tear—quite small and, fortunately, reasonably accessible. He climbed to it quickly, wondering what had become of the arrow that made it. *Did it fall to the ground? Or did it pass right through the bladder, leaving another hole on the opposite side?* He hooked one arm through the mesh, and examined the ragged edges, seeing immediately that the escaping air was forcing the threads apart, threatening to rip the fabric along its grain. It would take at least two patches to ensure that all the weakened silk was reinforced.

I must work fast!

Hanging by the crook of his elbow, Legolas reached into Master Eldacar's satchel, found a patch, and put it between his teeth. Then he took out the bottle of gum, transferred it to his other hand, drew out the stopper (which had a small brush attached) and, with some careful juggling, managed to smear a thin layer of the noxious stuff onto the bladder, stow the bottle back in the pouch, and press the patch home.

He counted to sixty, as Eldacar had instructed.

Please, he prayed to the Valar, for Eowyn's sake, let it hold.

He lifted his hand.

Westron wynde

Part 21

Legolas examined the repair.

The patch had stayed in place, but its edges were badly puckered.

Breathing heavily, he pulled out the bottle, dipped the brush, and painted a generous quantity of gum around the edges. Then he set to work on the second patch.

...

Eowyn leaned sideways and, holding the wheel rock-steady, peered into the seeing-tube.

Despite all the weight that Haldir and Arador had jettisoned, and the extra fuel that Master Eldacar was burning, and despite whatever Legolas was doing, hidden somewhere upon the bladder, *The Shieldmaiden* was still sinking.

"Sir," she shouted, "*Master Eldacar!* I think we are about to run aground!"

...

The scholar responded instantly. "*Arador,*" he called, "come and take over the burner—keep the flames as high as you can." He hurried aft. "Let me take the helm, my Lady,"—he grasped the wheel—"you hook yourself to the rail, ma'am,"—he glanced into the seeing-tube—"ah... Yes, I suggest that you and Master Haldir crouch beside the anchor housings, my Lady, shielding your heads with your arms."

"But... But what about *Legolas?*" Eowyn ran forward, and leaned out over the bow, looking upwards. "Legolas!" she shouted. "Legolas, you must come down! Quickly, my love! *Quickly!*"

...

Legolas lifted his hand. The second patch, neater than the first, seemed secure. He unhooked his arm from the netting, and began climbing down to the hull.

"*Legolas!*"

"Melmenya?"

"You must *hurry!*"

He looked down, and swore, for his repairs seemed to have made no difference—they were still going to hit the ground. "Melmenya," he shouted, "get back from the gunwale. *Please!* Get well back! I am com—" In his anxiety for her safety, he missed his hand hold, and swung out over empty space, legs kicking.

"*Lassui!*" Eowyn screamed in terror—she had seen him slip.

He grabbed the rope and hauled himself to safety, shouting, "I am all right, Eowyn nín!" He knew, now, that there was no time to reach her before they hit the ground. "Please, my darling, do whatever Master Eldacar tells you."

But Eowyn was leaning out, trying to see him. He caught a glimpse of her golden hair, and then her sweet face, and then, very slowly, she seemed to roll over the gunwale and, arms and legs gently waving, to fall.

"*MELMENYA!*" he shrieked.

Westron wynde

Part 22

She was not frightened.

The world was rushing madly past her but *she* was floating, gazing serenely at the beautiful air-ship above her, and at Legolas, hanging gracefully from its rigging...

Then her fall came to an abrupt stop, broken by her safety harness, and the sudden jolt almost snapped her spine. She heard Legolas' anguished cry, and remembered his warning—*Do not rely on it, melmenya*—and, at that instant, she shot out her hand and seized the ship's planking, and the entire weight of her body was hanging from the fingers of her sword hand.

That was when the fear came, stabbing her through the heart and spurring her to more-than-human effort. She lunged upwards, kicking her legs, and just missed catching hold of the hull with her free hand.

"MELMENYA!"

Oh, Lassui! Lassui!

...

Nothing else mattered now—Legolas drew his white knife, slashed through the rigging, and sailed down upon the falling rope.

...

Eowyn missed again.

But, this time, a strong hand had grabbed her wrist, and she felt herself being pulled upwards, her breasts and belly scraping painfully on the ship's side.

...

Legolas thrust his feet forward and, shifting his weight, swung under the silk, dropped, and landed on the deck beside Haldir.

Together, the elves dragged Eowyn back on board.

"Sometimes, melmenya," said Legolas, crushing her to his chest and burying his face in her hair, "you are so foolish..."

...

"She is *lifting!*" shouted Master Eldacar.

Legolas raised his head and his eyes met Haldir's; the elves turned towards the scholar.

"I do not think it is sufficient to take us far," Eldacar admitted. "There must be another leak—"

"Where the arrow came out," said Legolas.

"—but if we continue to lighten her, we may gain ourselves sufficient time to choose a more suitable place to land..."

Legolas deposited Eowyn beside the anchor housing. "Stay there, melmenya."

"I can help."

Westron wynde

The deck was already clear. Haldir disappeared below.

"No," said Legolas, harshly. "*Stay there.*"

He stepped aside to allow the other elf to pass (carrying a large barrel), then plunged below decks himself.

"At least," Arador shouted after him, "we will be leaving a trail for Prince Faramir to follow!"

...

"Master Eldacar," said Eowyn, "is that *water?*" Staying back from the gunwales—and well out of Legolas' way—she was keeping a lookout. "Over there." She pointed to starboard.

"My Lord," shouted the scholar, "might I trouble *you* to take a look?"

Patting Eowyn's shoulder as he passed, Legolas jumped up onto the bowsprit and stared into the distance. "Yes! Yes, sir, it *is!*"

"Very good!" The scholar's voice was once more filled with child-like excitement. "Lord Legolas, Lady Eowyn, Master Haldir, please take your places beside the anchors—though I do not believe that we will need them for this landing. Arador, I trust you will follow my instructions to the letter..."

...

The Shieldmaiden's keel was barely clearing the heather, but the ship flew on, as though drawn to the wide expanse of dark, shimmering water, only a few hundred yards ahead.

"Arador, keep those flames steady!" shouted Eldacar.

"If it is not deep enough," murmured Eowyn, "we will be smashed to pieces—"

"It *is* deep enough, *melmenya,*" said Legolas, firmly. "You can tell that by its colour." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and they crouched down beside the anchor housing. Haldir was already in position at the other side.

"This must be the strongest part of the hull," said Eowyn.

"Yes."

"Arador, open the flaps and vent the bladder!" shouted Eldacar.

"I am so sorry," said Eowyn, "for what happened before."

Legolas kissed her forehead.

"Arador, snuff out the flames!"

Eowyn closed her eyes, and waited for the impact.

Westron wynde

Part 23

"OH!" Eowyn's eyes flew open, and a strangled cry was forced from her lips, as she and Legolas were thrown up in the air, doused in a great, cold wave, then fell back onto the soaking deck with a painful thud.

Legolas helped her to her feet.

"Is everyone safe?" shouted Master Eldacar. "*Arador?*"

"The flames are out," replied the boy. "Everything is all right here, Master."

The scholar looked down his seeing-tube. "We appear to be floating..."

"Is the hull intact?" asked Legolas.

"Our first task must be to inspect her."

...

Whilst Arador and Eowyn worked on folding and stowing the deflated bladder (each, under protest, wearing Master Eldacar's insect-armour, complete with mittens and a veiled hat, to protect them from poisonous bites), Legolas and Haldir followed Eldacar below deck, to check for damage.

"Naturally, we need only concern ourselves with the parts below the waterline," said the scholar, opening a hatch. "Though I must confess," he added, "that, because the hull was never intended to sail in water, making her fully watertight was not a priority..."

Legolas swore quietly. "Haldir," he said, "go back on deck and see if Arador has any idea how to measure the depth of the marsh water."

The big elf squeezed his arm, and disappeared up the steps.

"Here we are..." Master Eldacar lowered his lantern into the hold.

Legolas peered over the scholar's shoulder. "*Water,*" he sighed.

"I am afraid so."

"Let me go down." Legolas dropped through the hole, and landed lightly on the floor, with the water lapping around his ankles. "Hand me the light, sir." Crouching in the bilge water, he slowly worked his way around the ship's sides, gently probing the wood, searching for holes or for obvious gaps in the planking, but he could find nothing. "It appears to be seeping in through the joints."

"It *is* possible," said Eldacar, "that as the water soaks into the wood, and the wood swells, the ship will seal herself naturally—I understand that is why decks are regularly *swabbed*..."

"I have heard the same," said Legolas. "But I do not think that, in this case, we dare wait and see, sir."

...

Back on deck, they found Arador and Eowyn, still in their cumbersome suits, measuring one of the anchor ropes, whilst Haldir, standing at a wooden contraption forward of the burner well, was working its handle up and down. "The shipwrights saw fit to install something called a 'bilge pump'," he explained, as the other elf passed. "Thank the Valar."

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Arador, meanwhile, had paced out the rope. "About seventy feet," he shouted through his veil, "but, beneath that, the bottom is very soft. The ship," he added, "measures less than fifty feet from her keel to the highest point of her stern."

Legolas and Eldacar exchanged glances.

"I do not want Eowyn, or the boy, or you, to go into the water, if we can avoid it," said Legolas, quietly. "It *looks* innocent enough, but something—a shadow, growing in my mind—is warning me otherwise. There is no telling what these marshes might conceal."

"I believe there *is* another option, my Lord," replied Eldacar.

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Part 24

Legolas inspected the equipment laid out on Master Eldacar's bunk. "I had no idea that you had already built it."

"Oh, yes. And, fortunately, it was stowed in the privy, so it was not jettisoned with the rest."

"Have you ever used it?"

"No," said Master Eldacar, without hesitation, "but I have no doubt that it will work."

Legolas considered Eldacar's suggestion: using the water-suit—provided it worked—Eowyn and the others would be able to reach the bank without touching the poisonous waters. But the marshes concealed other dangers—of that he was certain—and against those, the suit offered no protection...

"I will use it," he said decisively. "I will carry a rope to the bank, and pull the ship aground. Then I will return, and we will all wait here, on board *The Shieldmaiden*, until help arrives."

...

The water-suit was made from soft, supple leather. Legolas slipped his hands into the sewn-in gauntlets, and waited whilst Master Eldacar gathered up the wide shoulders and tied off the drawstring. Then he picked up the skull-like helmet, with its breathing tube and cork float, and headed for the cabin door.

...

Eowyn and Arador were busy erecting some sort of framework on the poop deck. But, when she saw Legolas, Eowyn stumbled down the steps, and lumbered to his side. "Lassui, what are you doing?"

He explained his plan.

She leaned in as close as her veiled hat would allow, and said, in a strange loud-whisper, "Is it *safe*, my love?"

"Of course, melmenya," he lied.

To his relief, she smiled. "Well, be careful Lassui," she said. "When you get back, we will have an insect-proof tent for you to rest in."

But, despite the smiles, she followed him to the gunwale, and fussed over the fastenings of his water-suit, and the little frown of concern that she tried to hide from him tugged at the elf's heart.

...

Master Eldacar lowered the helmet over Legolas' head, and laced it in place.

The elf gripped the end of the breathing tube between his teeth, and took a few experimental lungfuls of air. He sighed—breathing was not, of course, going to be anywhere near as easy as the scholar had claimed.

But he must keep calm.

He gave Eowyn a final smile through the helmet's glass visor, then climbed over the ship's side, and slowly descended the rope ladder.

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...

The water was cold and murky and, though the leather suit hardly affected his movements, the glass visor of the helmet soon clouded over, making it hard for him to see. But, once he had accepted that he must rely upon his other senses, he began to make good progress, swimming just below the surface, dragging the cork float behind him.

He was more than half way to the bank when he felt something grasp his arm and, assuming that it was an eel or, perhaps, a water snake, he shook it off, and continued swimming.

Moments later, he felt it again, and now its grip was firm—cold, steely fingers, biting into the flesh of his arm through the leather sleeve.

He turned his head, but could see nothing; he kept swimming.

But the hand was still there, and now it had weight and strength behind it and, at each stroke, it pulled at him, dragging him lower in the water. And, suddenly, a rasping voice formed words inside his head: *Why do you disturb our graves?*

The elf trembled, with fear for Eowyn, and with shame for himself.

But he had no intention of abandoning his task and, forcing himself back to the surface, he tore away the lacings that held his helmet in place, and pulled it off. Cries of surprise echoed dimly across the water, but an invisible mist enveloped him, and he could neither hear Eowyn's words, nor reply to them.

"Show yourself to me," he said to the spirit.

Slowly its pale, sad face emerged from the water. *Why do you disturb our graves?*

The elf placed a hand upon his heart and bowed his head in respect. "To save my wife," he answered, simply.

He felt the spirit's gaze shift, across the water, to the deck of *The Shieldmaiden* and, for a brief and terrible moment, he shared the wraith's unbearable loneliness.

Do you love her?

"With all my heart."

The spirit reached out, and its pale hand seemed to pierce the elf's flesh, and curl about his heart, weighing its worth.

Legolas cried out.

Do whatever you must to save her, it sighed, at last. *But do not disturb these waters again.*

And then it was gone.

...

When Faramir arrived, two days later, *The Shieldmaiden* was still afloat, tethered to the bank by the rope that Legolas had carried across the water.

Haldir lowered the gang plank that he and Arador had built, and the five adventurers disembarked. Within half an hour they were riding across the marshland, following the local farmer whom Faramir had hired to guide them across the dangerous terrain.

They reached higher ground, and paused, turning to bid a final farewell to the ship that had

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been their refuge.

The Shieldmaiden accepted their thanks, graciously. Then, as they watched, she slowly keeled over, and slid beneath the water. When the travellers left the Dead Marshes, it was as though they had never been there.

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Epilogue

The afternoon sky was filled with snow but inside their bed chamber, lit by a log fire and a few bright candles, all was warm and cosy.

"Surely," said Legolas, nuzzling Eowyn's neck, "you want to fly again, melmenya? I thought that you enjoyed it."

"Mmm..." Eowyn tilted her head, exposing more of her tender flesh. "It was fun," she murmured, "for the hour or so that we—*ah*—that we were not facing—certain death."

Legolas lifted himself up on his hands and pulled out of her, gradually; then, smiling down at her, he suddenly thrust deep. "He—*oh*," he gasped, grasping the bedsheet, "*assures me, melmenya—oh yes—that, with modifications, The White Lady—*"

"*White Lady?*" hissed Eowyn.

"That is what—what we have decided—to call the new ship."

"*Ah.*"

"*The White Lady,*"—he breathed the name against her skin, grinding his hips with each syllable—"she will use—use hot air—to work a great—a great *paddle*—"

"*Oh.*"

"Yes. Oh Valar, yes." He slid his hands beneath her and, exerting his elven strength, he shifted position, lifting her up on top of him.

"*You,*" said Eowyn, riding him slowly, "are far too hopeful, my darling. But I—*oh gods, my love,*"—she leaned back, bearing down hard upon him, and Legolas felt her body tighten around him—"I do not want—you to change, Lassui. Do not ever—*ever*—grow old—and *wise.*"

...

Later

"But I *am* old and wise," said Legolas, suddenly.

Eowyn kissed his hands, laughing.

THE END

...

Until, that is, they go to rescue the Djinn in the New Year.