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Title: **Winter Magic**

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Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Legolas/Eowyn

Summary: Three days before their wedding, Legolas and Eowyn find an abandoned elfling.

Author's Note: The prologue to this story is also the epilogue to *Shadowland*; Chapter 1 appeared as days 1 - 23 of the Yuletide 2007 calendar; chapter 2 is an extended version of day 24 of the Yuletide 2007 calendar.

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, which is intended as a transformative commentary on the original.

Elvish

Man le? ... 'Who are you?'

Mas i noss lín? ... 'Where is your family?'

Aviston ... 'I don't know.'

Avo 'osto ... 'Don't be afraid.'

El mae? ... 'Do you feel well?'

Mas etholich? ... 'Where are you from?'

Dôr chaeron ... 'Far place.'

Niben i eneth ín ... 'His name is Niben.' ('Small').

Telo, ertho ven ... 'Come, join us.'

Hîr e Hiril ... 'Lord and Lady.'

Hervess e hervenn ... 'Wife and husband.'

Mîl sui lotheg i edlothia an-uir ... 'Love is like a flower that blooms forever.'

Im hervenn chîn; no hervess nín ... 'I am your husband; be my wife.'

Iell nín ... 'My daughter.'

Le annon veleth nín ... 'I love you'

Im hervess chîn; no hervenn nín ... 'I am your wife; be my husband.'

Hervess nín ... 'My wife!'

Mae govannen, hîr e hiril. Le hannon a tholel. Baren bar lîn ... 'Well met, sir and madam. Thank you for coming. My home is your home.'

Prologue

"Perhaps, if you were to eat less, melmenya..." said Legolas, stepping past Eowyn and walking on ahead, his booted feet leaving no impression at the edge of the road.

Eowyn, tramping calf-deep through rutted slush, stuck out her tongue. Then, thinking better of it, she scooped up a handful of snow, formed it roughly into a ball, and threw it, hitting him just below his quiver.

"Agh!" Legolas turned, eyes narrowed menacingly—though the effect was somewhat ruined by the flailing of his hands as he tried to wipe the wet snow from his seat. "I will make you pay for that, woman!" he hissed.

Eowyn laughed—and, as always, her laughter made her elf smile. "Come," he said, drying his hands on his jerkin, and holding them out to her, "I will help you."

Smiling back at him, she placed her hands in his, and, "Wait," she said, "what was that?"

Legolas, assuming that she was trying to catch him out, grinned.

"No, Lassui, I really heard something. Listen."

Legolas listened.

"There," she whispered.

The elf nodded. "*Behind here,*" he mouthed, pointing to the hawthorn hedge, north of the road.

Hand in hand, the couple crept up to the bushes, and peered over.

"Oh, dear gods," murmured Eowyn.

*

He was sitting in the snow, his little knees drawn up under his chin, and he was crying—or, rather, he was rocking back and forth trying bravely *not* to cry, and the sounds that they had heard had been his attempts to snuffle back his tears.

"Oh, Lassui, go to him!"

The elf sprang over the hedgerow and, approaching the elfling slowly, crouched down beside him. "Hello..." he said.

Eowyn, meanwhile, had drawn her sword and, with its help, was forcing her way through the hawthorn, scratching her face and hands, and ripping her leggings in her hurry.

The child stared up at Legolas with huge, round eyes, but his little face was blank, and he said nothing and so, assuming that he could not understand Westron, Legolas asked, "Man le?"

The elfling gulped. "Melannen," he said.

Legolas glanced back at Eowyn. "He says that his name is Melannen—take care, melmenya."

"Ask him where his parents are." She wrenched herself free of the thorns.

"Mas i noss lín?" asked Legolas.

"Aviston."

"He does not know."

Eowyn re-sheathed her sword, and crouched down beside the elf. "Avo 'osto, Melannen," she said, softly. "We will not hurt you."

The child looked up at her and, suddenly, he smiled. And, raising a tiny hand, he gently touched one of the scratches on her face. "El mae?"

"He is asking if it hurts, melmenya."

"Yes." Eowyn nodded, smiling back—but the smile immediately turned into a wince. "Yes, it does, Melannen." She took his hand in her own. "Oh, he is so cold, Lassui. And wet." Her other hand went to the fastening of her cloak.

"No," said Legolas, "he can have mine." He slipped off his cloak and wrapped it around the boy's shoulders. "There is no sign of any footprints except his and ours, so he must have wandered here by himself. Mas etholich, Melannen?"

"Dôr chaeron."

"He says that he is from 'far away'."

"To a child," said Eowyn, carefully re-arranging the elfling's cloak, "even the next house would seem far away."

There was a little basket at the boy's side, covered with a checked cloth. "Perhaps there is something in here that will tell us more," said Legolas, pulling aside the cover and searching through its contents. "Some lembas; a waterskin; a half-eaten apple; a toy rabbit—"

"Niben i eneth ín," said Melannen.

Legolas smiled. "—whose name is Niben, melmenya; and a piece of parchment." He unfolded the note and read its message.

"It says," he said, "'Please take care of this child.'"

Chapter 1: A Yuletide adventure

Part 1

Eowyn frowned. "How could anyone abandon such a sweet little—" She stopped herself, aware that the elfling's eyes were upon her. "He is so wet, Lassui," she said. "We had better get him home straightaway."

"Oh, melmenya!" Legolas shook his head, smiling fondly. "We cannot just take him home."

"Why not? That is what the note says."

"He is not a Yuletide gift, my darling."

"But we cannot leave him *here!*"

"No." Absently, Legolas picked up the child's waterskin and pulled out the cork. "But we must make some effort to find his parents." He handed the skin to the boy.

Melannen took a drink, then offered it to Eowyn. "Would you like some?"

"Thank you,"—she raised the skin to her lips—"Melannen! You speak Westron!"

The child nodded.

"You *clever* boy!" She gave him a little hug; then she took a sip, and handed the skin to Legolas.

Melannen smiled up at her, proudly.

Legolas, meanwhile, having drunk from the waterskin, re-corked it, and put it back in the child's basket. "Come, melmenya," he said. "We will follow Melannen's footprints back to wherever he came from and, with luck..." He saw the disappointment on Eowyn's face, and laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder.

"It is getting so late, Lassui," she pleaded, "and—*oh...*" She yawned.

"There is still enough light, my darling. And we must make absolutely sure."

Eowyn covered her mouth and, yawning again, nodded reluctantly.

"Goodness," said Legolas. "You are making me feel tired!"

Part 2

They scrambled to their feet, and Legolas picked up the basket and with Melannen walking between them, holding their hands, they traced the trail of little footprints through the snow-covered Forest, tramping beneath the tall, dark pines until they reached a frozen stream, which they followed eastwards, gradually climbing up flights of snowy steps—pausing now and then to admire the delicate icicles fringing the sides of the gorge—every step taking them farther and farther from the Doro Lanthron road.

At last they came to a stone bridge.

"Across *there?*" asked Eowyn, doubtfully.

The child nodded.

"That is where his footprints lead, melmenya," said Legolas.

On the northern bank the trail left the stream, and wandered back into the woods, and they continued to follow it, through the frosty undergrowth, until, as the light began to fail, they came to an abrupt halt at the foot of a sheer wall of rock.

There, the elfling's footprints turned east and skirted the cliff, then suddenly turned again, and disappeared into a crevice in the rock.

"Did you really come through there, Melannen?" asked Eowyn.

The boy nodded, vehemently. "Yes, Lady Melmenya."

Legolas and Eowyn looked at one another, startled. Then they both laughed.

"It is Lady *Eowyn*," said Legolas, "but I am sure," he added, bending down to the child, and pretending to whisper, "that she will let you call her Gwanur Eowyn, if you like. And I am Gwanur Legolas."

The laughter had raised their spirits and, without further consideration, Legolas led them into the passage, and they followed its twists and turns until, after a few minutes, they came to the other end, stepped out into the open, and found themselves looking down into a little valley. Snow-covered houses dotted the hillside, lining the road that wound along the valley bottom, and clustered together in a little town. Here and there, chimney smoke curled up into the dusky sky, and lights already shone invitingly.

"Where are we?" asked Eowyn.

"I do not know, melmenya. I had no idea that there were settlements this far out. Is this where you live, Melannen?"

The boy nodded, pointing—beyond the town—to the dense Forest that covered the other side of the valley. "Over there," he said.

Part 3

By the time they reached the town, darkness had fallen, and the clear night sky was filled with twinkling stars. "It is too late to go any further tonight, Lassui," said Eowyn. "Perhaps there is an inn we can stay at."

They found one in the market place—*The Two Ways*—a big, half-timbered tavern with a row of latticed windows (filled with light and laughter), and a heavy, panelled door from which, when Legolas opened it, the mingled smells of mulled ale and woodsmoke and roasted meat spilled out into the street.

"Welcome, welcome!" cried the landlord, rushing from behind the bar. "Strangers are *always* welcome! And it's a long time since we saw the fair folk in these parts! Here, my Lady,"—he pulled out a chair for Eowyn—"sit beside the fire and let me fetch you a drink—a tankard of hot mulled ale is just what you need on a cold night like this."

Eowyn sat down, and patted her lap, and Melannen climbed up onto her knee.

Legolas smiled at them. Then, "Thank you, landlord," he said, nodding politely to the regulars as he followed the man to the bar, "but the boy will have mulled apple juice—"

"Of course, sir."

"—and we would all like some food—pease pudding, perhaps?"

"With butter and mint sauce, sir," said the landlord, "and fresh-baked bread."

"Perfect. And two rooms for the night, if you have them."

"I'll get the wife to make them up. Take your seat sir,"—the landlord gestured towards the fireside—"I'll bring your ale over; and your food, too, when it's ready."

Part 4

When their supper was finished, they thanked the landlord, said goodnight to his other guests, and took Melannen up the narrow, creaking stairs to his attic bedroom.

It was small but cosy, for the landlord's wife had lit the fire, and made up the bed with a warm quilt, and had found a tiny nightshirt for the boy to wear. Eowyn asked her to fetch some hot water and—whilst Legolas sat beside the fire and amused them by making hand shadow puppets on the wall—she helped the elfling change out of his still-damp clothes (which she hung over a chair to dry), and wash his hands and face, and put on his nightshirt.

"Now," she said, "into bed!" She pulled back the coverlet.

The elfling climbed in. "Where's Niben?" he asked.

"Niben?"

"The toy rabbit, melmenya," said Legolas, making a shadow-rabbit—which peered at the elfling, took fright, and scampered off.

Melannen laughed.

"Of course." Eowyn opened up the child's basket and rummaged through its contents. "Ah, here he is..." She turned, holding the toy up in the firelight, only to find that the elfling had already fallen into reverie.

Smiling, she laid Niben on his pillow. "He must have been so tired, Lassui," she said, carefully arranging the quilt around his shoulders, and kissing his forehead. "Sleep tight," she whispered.

Then she and Legolas, hand-in-hand, tip-toed from the room, quietly closing the door behind them.

Part 5

Their own room, on the floor below, was large and draughty, but the landlord's wife had lit the fire and aired the bed, and provided them both with flannel night clothes. Legolas held a thick nightshirt against his chest. "What do you think, melmenya? Does it suit me?"

Eowyn shook her head. "No." She sat down heavily.

"You look tired."

"No... It has just been a strange day. Do you think we will find Melannen's parents?"

Legolas draped the nightshirt over a chair to warm. "I do not know, *melmenya*," he said, kneeling down to unfasten her jerkin. "I think it unlikely that they live in the Forest" He slid it off her shoulders.

"Why?"

He pulled off her boots. "Because: why would anyone with such a well-situated home abandon a child?"

"I think it strange," said Eowyn, unlacing her leggings, "that he managed to walk so far without being found. And did you hear what the landlord said—that it was a long time since he had seen any elves?"

"Yes. I pressed him on that but he was adamant: he has never heard of any elves living in the Forest. Of course," he added, "elves are *not* seen when they do not want to be."

He fetched the warmed nightshirt, and Eowyn slipped out of her tunic, and put it on. Legolas pulled back the quilt and she climbed into bed.

"Oh," she cried, "it is freezing!"

The elf laughed. "Just a moment." He undressed quickly and, naked, climbed in beside her.

"I win," said Eowyn, snuggling close.

Part 6

Legolas wrapped his arms around her, and hugged her closer. "Better?"

"Mmm."

He shifted his hips.

Eowyn giggled.

"What?"

"*You*."

He laughed and kissed her forehead.

Then he kissed her mouth.

Tenderly...

Possessively...

Eowyn responded.

And Legolas, still holding her close, moved his hips again, and Eowyn moved hers, and—"Ah,"—he pushed himself inside her.

"*Lassui*,"—it was so beautiful—"oh, my *love*..." she whispered. And she closed her eyes, smiling, and let his thrusts—deep, deep and strong—drive her closer, and closer, and closer, until, "Ah," she wailed, and her smile turned to astonishment as her body arched upwards, "AH!"

And Legolas felt her climax envelop him; and his own body, in swift response, spiralled helplessly into sweet release. "Melmenya," he groaned, "ai, ai, meleth nín!"

Part 7

"Good morning, melmenya."

Eowyn pushed herself up on her elbows.

Legolas was sitting beside the fire, stirring up its embers, which were beginning to crackle merrily. "The landlord's wife has brought you hot water," he said, "and I have asked her to prepare us some breakfast."

Eowyn yawned. "Melannen," she said.

"I have been to see him, and he is still resting."

"We must get him dressed."

Legolas smiled. "We must get *you* dressed, first."

Eowyn pushed back the quilt, climbed out of the bed, and padded over to the wash stand. "How long do you think it will take us to walk to the Forest?" She washed quickly.

"Two hours, perhaps. Here, melmenya." He picked up her tunic, which had been warming by the fire, and held it for her to slip on.

"Oh, that is better!"

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To Eowyn's disappointment, when they reached the elfling's room they found him already up and dressed, standing by the window with his toy rabbit. "Look, Gwanur Eowyn," he said, showing her the frosted panes.

"Oh, yes!" She crouched down beside him. "It is beautiful, Melannen! Look, Lassui," she said, tracing one of the crystals with her fingertip.

"Like a faery Forest," said Legolas.

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They ate a hearty breakfast of porridge, eggs, and bread and butter; and then, whilst Legolas paid the landlord, Eowyn spoke quietly to the man's wife.

"Here you are, my Lady," said the woman, moments later, handing Eowyn a bundle of coarse brown fabric. "It's old, but it's still sound, and it should do the job."

"Thank you." Eowyn reached for her purse.

"Oh no, my Lady," said the woman. "Please have it. Mine have long grown out of it."

"Thank you very much, mistress. Come Melannen, this will keep you nice and warm." She unfolded the thick brown worsted and wrapped it round the elfling's shoulders, fastening it beneath his chin with a large wooden toggle. The heavy cloak bunched in stiff folds about the boy's legs, and parts of its hem brushed the floor. He looked like a particularly stout blond dwarf.

"Melmenya," said Legolas, smiling fondly, "he is an elf. You do not need to be so protective."

But Melannen was beaming up at his new Gwanur as though she had just given him a riding cloak of fine silk velvet.

Part 8

Outside *The Two Ways* tavern, the market was already bustling.

Eowyn took Melannen by the hand and the trio spent a few moments walking up and down the rows of stalls, buying bread and cheese, some rosy apples, and—as a special treat—three slices of spiced yule cake.

The stalls were hung with garlands of spruce and holly and decorated with strings of glass baubles, and with stars of woven straw, and many were selling seasonal gifts—scented salves and beeswax candles, boxes of sweetmeats, nuts, and exotic fruits.

Whilst Legolas and Eowyn were carefully stowing a bag of peppered almonds in Melannen's basket (which Legolas had volunteered to carry), the elfling wandered over to the next stall.

"Good morning to you, young sir," said trader, hanging a toy bear from a hook in the stall's pitched roof.

Melannen studied the wooden creature—smartly dressed in a blue shirt, a flowered waistcoat, and grey leggings—and frowned. "He looks like a man," he said.

"Watch," said the trader and, unseen by the elfling, he pulled a cord, and the bear suddenly leaped up and down, waving its arms and legs.

"Oh! Gwanur Eowyn," cried Melannen, in amazement, "Gwanur Legolas! Look! *Look!*"

Legolas and Eowyn hurried to his side.

"It jumps!" said the boy, pointing excitedly.

Laughing, Eowyn gave him a little hug. "Would you like one of your own, Melannen?" she asked. "Then your Gwanur Legolas can show you how it works." The boy smiled up at her. "Which would you like?"

Besides the bear, there were several men, an oliphant, and a big striped cat to choose from.

"The bear," said Melannen. "The bear with clothes on."

Part 9

They left the market square, turning east at the crossroads, and followed the narrow lane through a huddle of grey stone cottages—past a blacksmith's forge, and a cabinet-maker's workshop, where they paused to look at the frosty spider's web stretched across the window—then out onto the common, where cattle and horses, their breath steaming, were waiting patiently for the thaw.

A little further on, where the road crossed a bridge, they came upon a handful of boys sliding excitedly across a frozen stream.

Melannen turned to watch them.

Eowyn squeezed his hand. "We must press on," she said.

"We can spare a few moments, *melmenya*," said Legolas, "if he would like to try it."

Eowyn looked up at the elf in alarm, and mouthed, *No*.

But the biggest of the boys had already seen them, and came running along the snowy bank. "Does the little 'un wan' a go, sir?"

"Do you, *Melannen*?" asked Legolas. The elfling nodded. "Yes, please," he replied to the boy. "Just one."

"Come on then," said the boy, taking the smaller child by the hand. "*Melanner's* 'avin' the nex' go," he shouted to his friends.

Legolas wrapped his arm around Eowyn and they watched as the elfling attempted to slide, fell—Legolas held Eowyn back—was briefly coached by the other children (who mimed various techniques), and then, on his second attempt, slid gracefully across the full width of the stream.

Melannen threw up his little hands in triumph.

Some of the others cheered, and some laughed, good-naturedly.

"Come on, *Melanner*," said the big boy, "yer Dad said jus' *one* go."

"You were right, *Lassui*," Eowyn admitted, softly, as the children tramped back to the bridge. "It is just—he is so small..."

"I know, *melmenya*," said Legolas, gently, "but a child must always be permitted the chance to learn. Thank you,"—he handed the boy the bag of spiced almonds he had bought in the market—"to share with your friends."

"Thank yer, sir." The boy bowed, clumsily. Then, eyeing the elf shrewdly, he added, "*Melanner* says yer takin' 'im t' the Forest."

"Yes."

"Yer don't want t' go i' there, sir."

"Why not?"

The boy shrugged. "'s haunted," he said. And he ran back to his friends.

Part 10

It was midday by the time they reached the Forest. There, the road dwindled to a narrow trail, and patches of pale light, filtering down through the frosty branches, fell like jewels upon a covering of smooth, unblemished snow.

No human has set foot in here for years, thought Legolas, and he remembered the child's warning. He stopped, and listened intently.

All around him, the trees were creaking under their snowy burden, squirrels were scampering across the Forest floor, deer were browsing on the sparse undergrowth, but he could sense no sign of Silvan elves—no songs nor laughter, nothing to suggest their presence.

Perhaps, he thought, they have chosen to fade.

Perhaps that is why the humans believe this Forest is haunted...

"Well," said Eowyn, "who else is hungry?"

Melannen, who had been listening with Legolas, looked up at her, a frown of surprise on his little face.

Legolas laughed, hugging his beloved. "We elves do not hunger like humans, *melmenya*," he said, "but, since *you* are hungry, now would be a very good time to eat. Come, Melannen, help me..." Handing Eowyn the basket, he led the boy to a fallen tree, sheltered from the worst of the weather, and, together, they cleared the dusting of snow from its broad trunk.

Then Legolas turned back to Eowyn and, with a deep, sweeping bow—"My Lady?"—offered her a seat.

Melannen clapped his hands, bouncing up and down and giggling happily.

"Thank you," said Eowyn and, after curtseying to both of her elves, she sat down, setting the basket beside her.

"How far is your parents' house, Melannen?" asked Legolas.

Eowyn removed the basket's cloth and spread it out on her makeshift table, then lifted out a loaf of bread and broke it into three, handing the smallest piece to the elfling and the largest to Legolas.

"Thank you," said the elf.

"Do you not know, Melannen?" asked Eowyn, carefully unwrapping a piece of cheese.

The elfling shook his head.

Legolas crouched down beside him. "Who put the note in your basket?" he asked. The child said nothing. "Was it your Ada?" Melannen shook his head again. "Your Nana, then?"

"No..."

Legolas glanced at Eowyn.

She shrugged, helplessly. "Would you like some cheese, Melannen?"

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They finished their meal—particularly enjoying the yule cake—and continued on their way, following the lonely trail deeper and deeper into the Forest. Every few minutes, Legolas would stop, and he and Melannen would listen, carefully, then turn to Eowyn, and shake their heads.

After an hour or so of fruitless searching, Legolas grasped Eowyn's arm and the couple fell back a little, still carefully watching the elfling, who was stamping along, trying to leave *deep* footprints like his Gwanur Eowyn.

"If we do not find his parents soon, *melmenya*," said Legolas, softly, "we will have to turn back. Melannen and I could spend the night out here with no discomfort, but you... No, I want to get you back to *The Two Ways* before dark."

"Lassui!" Eowyn shook her head. "Do not treat me like a—"

Her protest was cut off by a sudden wail—a cry of desperate anguish—that echoed around them—and whether it had been made by a man, or an elf, or a beast, or even by a tree, none of them could have said.

But its effect upon Melannen was terrible. “Nana!” he cried. “Nana! *NANA!*”

And he ran off into the woods.

Part 11

“*Melannen!*” cried Eowyn. “Melannen, come back! Oh, Lassui,”—she turned to the elf—“Lassui! Fetch him back! *Please*. Go after him!”

“No, *melmenya*,” said Legolas, taking her by the hand, “we will both go after him.”

They left the track, following the elfling through the trees, until the faint trail disappeared completely, and it became harder and harder to be sure which way he had gone.

“Oh, where is he, Lassui?” asked Eowyn, anxiously. “MELANNEN!”

Snow fell down from the branches above.

Legolas pulled her into his arms. “Hush, Eowyn *nín*.” He closed his eyes, listening intently. Then, “This way.”

On they hurried, across deep-drifted snow, Legolas walking easily, Eowyn labouring, her feet sinking deep.

“Go on, Lassui,” she panted. “I am holding you back.”

But Legolas put his hand to her waist and, supporting her, led her on. “It is not far now, *melmenya*—I can hear him, just up ahead. Yes, look!”

*

They found the elfling, standing in a tiny clearing, staring up into the trees.

Eowyn struggled to his side. “Melannen,” she cried, grasping his shoulders, “you must never, ever, run away like that!” The child threw himself against her, sobbing. “Sweetheart? What is wrong?”

Legolas, catching her eye, nodded upwards.

Eowyn scanned the trees until, perching in the largest, she spotted the remains of an elven house, its broken walls and exposed beams barely visible amongst the branches—and then she realised that the snow-covered bushes all around her were the remnants of a garden.

“We must go up there, Lassui,” she said, softly, “just to make sure...”

*

The stairs were still in place, spiralling up the tree trunk. Legolas went first, carefully searching each room until he was certain that the elfling’s parents were not lying in the ruins, then he beckoned to Eowyn, who brought up Melannen, clinging tightly to her hand.

“Are you sure that this is your house, *nadithen*?” asked the elf, crouching down beside the boy.

Melannen nodded.

Still uncertain, Legolas looked up at Eowyn.

"Show me your room," she said, gently squeezing the child's shoulder.

Melannen led her through the broken doorway—splintered, it seemed, by several blows from an axe—across the roofless sitting room—its floor and walls blackened by fire—up a short flight of steps, and into a tiny bedchamber, where the carved window frames were still draped with fragments of frozen curtain.

"This must have been a lovely room," murmured Eowyn; and, stooping down beside a little couch, she picked up a battered picture book, opened it, and spelled out the name written inside its cover. "Mel—ann—en."

The boy sniffed. "I can help you practise your reading if you like, Gwanur Eowyn," he said.

Eowyn hugged him tight.

"Come melmenya—Melannen," said Legolas, gently. "We will go back to the town."

Part 12

It was a long, weary tramp back to the town.

As soon as they left the Forest, Eowyn asked Legolas to carry Melannen and, within moments, the child had fallen into fitful reverie, his little head resting upon the elf's shoulder.

"What do you think happened in that house, Lassui?" asked Eowyn, softly.

"An Orc attack," replied Legolas.

Melannen sighed, and shifted into a more comfortable position.

Eowyn waited until the elfling had settled again before continuing. "That makes sense—if his parents knew that it was coming, they would have tried to send him to safety. But there have been no Orcs reported in this region, Lassui. Not recently."

"The damage was old, melmenya."

"That is what I thought, too. But Melannen cannot have been wandering the countryside for—how long? Months?"

"Years," said Legolas. "The beams were well-weathered."

"How can that be?"

Legolas shook his head.

"Well, there was nothing to suggest that the parents did not survive," said Eowyn, thinking aloud, "so I think... I think that we must take Melannen home with us, now, and send someone back to investigate more thoroughly—Orodreth, perhaps, and Camthalion. Yes, if Melannen's parents are still alive they will be looking for him, and Orodreth and Camthalion will find them."

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By the time they reached the town darkness had fallen and the market square was filled with

excited merry makers. Some of the stall holders had lit braziers, and were selling mulled wine and yuletide pies, or were roasting chestnuts.

Legolas and Eowyn, making straight for the tavern, worked their way through the milling crowd.

Suddenly, there was a *woooooosh*, and a sharp *crack*, and a burst of coloured stars filled the sky before twinkling down to earth.

Melannen raised his head. "Fireworks," he said.

"Would you like to watch them?" asked Eowyn.

The child nodded, but his eyes were bright with tears.

"Oh, do not be afraid, Melannen," said Eowyn, gently rubbing his back, "your Gwanur Legolas and I—we are going to take care of you."

Part 13

They watched the fireworks, and the dressing of the Yule Tree, and they ate hot pies, and Melannen tried a few sips of mulled wine, and Legolas and Eowyn did their utmost to reassure the elfling, and to make him feel safe; but later, back in the tavern's warm parlour, the child sat quietly on Eowyn's knee, his little lip trembling.

"Do not get him a separate room tonight, Lassui," said Eowyn, hugging the boy. "Let him stay with us..."

Legolas leaned down, and kissed her forehead.

*

The landlord's wife put them in the same room as before but, this time, she had a small bed brought in, and made it up for Melannen and, whilst Legolas stoked the fire, Eowyn helped the elfling undress, and wash, and get into bed, and tucked him in with his toy rabbit.

"Can we have a story, melmenya?" asked Legolas, laying down the poker.

"A story?" Eowyn frowned. "What sort of story?"

"Oh, I do not know... What sort of story would *you* like to hear, Melannen?"

"One about Gwanur Eowyn," said Melannen, with a sniff, "when she was an elfling."

"Good idea," said Legolas. "Tell us about when you were an elfling, melmenya."

"Well..." Eowyn pulled a chair up to Melannen's bed and sat down. "There was the time that Eomer and I climbed onto the roof of the Golden Hall." She smiled down at the boy. "Eomer is my brother—my big brother—and, when we were young, he and I were always getting into trouble together."

Melannen managed a little smile.

"We lived," Eowyn continued, "in a great Mead Hall, known as the Golden Hall—"

"Because its roof gleams in the sun, like gold, Melannen," said Legolas, sitting on the end of the child's bed, "and all its wall hangings are woven with golden threads, and all the carvings

on its doors and its pillars are gilded. Your Gwanur Eowyn comes from a strange country called Rohan, the land of the horse lords."

"Who is telling this story?"

"You are melmenya—I am sorry. Why did you climb up onto the roof?"

"To see the oliphaunts," said Eowyn, as though the answer were obvious. "Theodred—that was my cousin—Theodred had told me that a herd of oliphaunts had come to live on the downs. I was sure that if we climbed up onto the roof we would see them."

Melannen sniffed. "And did you?"

"No," said Eowyn, stroking the boy's hair.

"Why not?"

"Because Theodred was just teasing. There were no oliphaunts. And Eomer knew it, but he climbed up with me anyway. And then I got my skirts caught; and, however hard I tried, I could not get them loose, and Eomer wanted to cut me free with his hunting knife—but I would not let him ruin my gown."

"How did you get down?" asked Legolas.

"I..." She hesitated.

"You are blushing, Eowyn nín!"

"I took my gown off. It was Eomer's idea. I had to climb down, and run back to my bedchamber, wearing nothing but my shift and boots."

She looked down at the elfling—and smiled, for his eyes were already closed in healing sleep.

*

Later

Lying awake, staring up at the firelight dancing on the ceiling, Legolas heard the creak of bedsprings, and the patter of little feet, and he lifted the covers and let a small person climb up over him, and snuggle down between himself and Eowyn.

Part 14

Next morning they rose early; and, whilst they breakfasted on porridge, toast and strawberry jam, the landlord of *The Two Ways* secured them a ride on the cart that delivered milk to the houses on the western slopes of the valley.

"Now, Melannen," said Legolas, lifting the elfling onto the back of the cart, "*this* is going to be an adventure."

Eowyn climbed up beside the boy. "Yes," she said, arranging his heavy cloak around his shoulders, "it will be lots of fun." She gave him a little hug and, when he clung to her, she looked up at Legolas, and the elf sat down with them, and pulled them both into his arms.

The carter shook his head, smiling at his passengers' antics.

Then, with a click of his tongue and a smart jerk of the reins, he signalled to his ponies, and

they pulled away.

*

Slowly, the little cart meandered up the hillside, stopping at each dwelling so that the lady of the house could come out with a cloth-covered jug and hand it to the carter to be filled with creamy fresh milk from one of the churns.

And, without exception—after passing the time of day with Legolas and Eowyn—the women would ask the carter to wait, and would run indoors, and return with a gift for Melannen—with sweetmeats, or cake, or with a pair of woollen mittens—and the boy would thank them, shyly.

And, for the rest of their days, the women of the valley would delight in telling their families and friends of the unexpected visit they had received from the beautiful elven couple and their adorable little son.

*

The carter left them near the foot of the cliff and, after waving him off, the trio quickly retraced their earlier path up to the rock wall, and found the passage.

In moments, they had crossed to the other side.

"*Niben!*" cried Melannen, suddenly. "I have lost *Niben!*" He hung his little head.

"Oh, sweetheart," said Eowyn, crouching down beside him, "do not worry. Your Gwanur Legolas will find him."

"Did you have him when you got off the cart?" asked the elf.

"Yes."

"He must have dropped him in the rocks, Lassui."

"Wait here," said Legolas. "I will go and look for him."

*

The elf ran quickly through the narrow pass and, to his immense relief, immediately found the stuffed rabbit, lying spreadeagled on the ground, just a few yards from the foot of the cliff.

As he stooped to pick up the toy, his gaze swept across the valley...

He frowned.

The narrow road still ran the length of the valley bottom; the Forest still spilled down the slope at the far side; small holdings still peppered the landscape; but the town, in which he and Eowyn and Melannen had spent the last two nights, was now nowhere to be seen.

Part 15

Legolas ran back to the others.

Eowyn was waiting for him at the mouth of the pass. "Lassui! Oh, *Lassui!*" she cried, wringing her hands—and little Melannen, standing behind her, holding on to the skirts of her jerkin, looked just as worried.

"Sweet Eru, what is it?" asked Legolas

"Our wedding!" She grabbed his outstretched arms. "We have forgotten our own *wedding!*"

*

Legolas swung Melannen up onto his shoulders and they hurried back—across the stone bridge, along the frozen stream, through the Pine Forest—to where they had first found the elfling.

"There is still time, *melmenya*," said Legolas, trying to sound reassuring. "It has only been two nights, which makes today the twentieth. Aragorn and Eomer are not arriving until late this afternoon, and the ceremony is not until tomorrow evening..." He whistled for the horses.

"But how could we have forgotten?"

Arod and Brightstar emerged from the trees, looking none the worse for their two days of freedom.

"That is not the only strange thing, *melmenya*." As Legolas lifted Melannen onto Arod's back, he told Eowyn about the town.

"But how could it disappear?"

"I have no i—"

"*Oh gods!*" Eowyn's hands flew up to her mouth. "My gown!"

Legolas laughed. "That is the least of your worries, *melmenya*," he said, giving her a little hug. "If there is one person in Middle-earth you can rely on, it is Valaina. She will have everything in hand." He helped her mount Brightstar.

"Yes... Yes, of course, you are right." She gathered up the reins. Then, "Your father!"

"Now he *will* take some soothing," Legolas admitted. "But leave him to me, *melmenya*."

*

They galloped down the Doro Lanthron road, reaching the city by mid afternoon and, leaving the horses in the care of the stable-elves, they quickly climbed the main staircase.

Melannen's eyes were as big as saucers. "Do you *really* live here, Gwanur Legolas?" he asked, as the elf set him down on the walkway. He ran to the wall and, standing on tip-toe, peered out across the city, pointing excitedly at the guard house, the market flet, and the new public gardens. "Elves!" he cried. "Gwanur Eowyn! Look! Lots and lots of *elves!*"

Part 16

Lord Fingolfin was waiting in their private chambers.

"*Suilad, hîr nîn*," he said, rising and greeting Legolas and Eowyn formally, hand on heart, "*e suilad, hiril nîn*." Then, noticing Melannen, hiding behind Eowyn, he bent down to the child's level, and added, "*E suilad, hîr dithen*."

At Eowyn's gentle urging, Melannen stepped forward and, head bowed and blushing, returned Fingolfin's greeting.

Legolas ruffled the boy's golden hair. "Well done, nadithen." He smiled at Fingolfin. "Good afternoon, my Lord. Please accept my profound apologies for missing our meeting the other day."

"Our meeting, Lord Legolas?"

"To discuss your kind offer to stand as my Guardian at the wedding. I am afraid I was detained. But I hope that you are still willing."

"I think you will find," said Fingolfin, tactfully, "that that particular meeting is arranged for today, my Lord. For now, in fact."

Frowning, Legolas turned to Eowyn.

"What day is it, my Lord?" she asked.

"The eighteenth day of Girithron, my Lady," replied Fingolfin.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes..."

"But we were gone for two days."

"I... I do not understand, my Lady."

"No matter, my Lord," said Legolas, taking control. "You and I have much to discuss, and we will be far more comfortable in the study. Galathil,"—he called to a servant—"we will have mulled cider and caraway cake in the study, and I am sure that Lady Eowyn and Master Melannen will have the same in the sitting room—no, make that apple juice for the boy. We will talk later, melmenya," he added, quietly.

*

Eowyn led Melannen into the sitting room. "Well," she said, setting his basket on the sideboard and handing him his toy rabbit, "first, we will need to find you some clean clothes—"

Clutching Niben to his chest, the elfling turned full-circle, admiring the garlands of evergreens that draped the elegant beams, the spangled curtains at the windows, and the hundreds of tiny white candles that glittered on the mantelpiece and in the hearth.

"—then," Eowyn continued, "we will have to bathe you, and find you a chamber of your own,"—there was a knock at the door—"come in!"

Miriel, Eowyn's elven lady's maid, stepped inside, holding the door open for the seamstress, Valaina, who entered carrying a large bundle, carefully wrapped in white cloth. "Good afternoon, my Lady," said the elleth with a deep curtsy. "Are you ready for your fitting?"

"Oh," said Eowyn, "yes—I had almost forgotten!—yes, of course."

*

"You can look now, Melannen."

The elfling (who had turned his back *and* covered his eyes, for good measure) turned, and slowly lowered his hands.

His Gwanur Eowyn raised her arms. "What do you think?"

Instead of the suede jerkin and the leather boots that she had worn on their adventure, she was dressed in an elegant gown of rough-woven silk the colour of pale, sparkling wine. Its scooped neck and deep hem were embroidered with bands of creamy buttercups and tiny red pimpernels scattered over a lacework of blue briars, and its wide, translucent sleeves were edged with delicate pale blue leaves.

"Oh, Gwanur Eowyn," said Melannen, "you look like a *princess!*"

Part 17

"Ah," said Legolas, turning towards the door, "that will be the March Warden—come in!"

Haldir entered, greeting Legolas and Fingolfin formally. "I have selected the Guard of Honour for your wedding," he said, handing over the list.

"Thank you." Legolas scanned the names. "Fine," he said, "but that is not why I sent for you, Haldir. There is something else I need you to do."

Pouring the March Warden a goblet of cider, Legolas described how he and Eowyn had found Melannen, sitting in the snow beside the Doro Lanthron road, how they had retraced his steps, along the stream and through the rocks, and had found the little town—

"I had no idea that there was a settlement up there," said Haldir.

"Nor had I," replied Legolas; and he went on to explain how, the next day, they had searched the Forest and found the ruined house, but no sign of the child's parents.

"So you want me to make a thorough search," said Haldir.

"Exactly," said Legolas. "But do not go yourself. I suggest you send Camthalion and Orodreth."

"May I make a further suggestion?" asked Fingolfin, who had been deep in thought since first hearing Legolas' story.

"I would be grateful for it, my Lord."

"Speak to Berryn, March Warden," he said, referring to the colony's cartographer. "He has mapped that region and will know the town. And, if he is willing to go, he will be a useful addition to the search party."

"Of course," said Legolas.

"Do you want me to send them out now," asked Haldir, "or to wait until after the wedding?"

Legolas leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers together with a sigh. "Just between us three," he said, "I am worried for Eowyn. I am afraid that she is losing her heart to the boy. It is easily done."

"He seems an excellent little fellow," agreed Fingolfin.

"If she must part from him," continued Legolas, "the sooner it happens, the better. So send them straightaway, Haldir, with permission to return here for the ceremony. They can continue the search afterwards, if need be."

Part 18

Legolas reached for the sitting room door.

"No, my Lord!" cried Galathil.

Legolas turned in surprise.

"Lady Eowyn is trying on her wedding dress, my Lord."

"Ah—yes—thank you." He knocked. "Is it safe for me to come in, melmenya?"

"Just a moment!"

Legolas' sharp elven hearing caught the soft sounds of rustling fabric, and running feet, then silence; then the door opened, and Melannen smiled up at him. "Gwanur Eowyn and the sewing lady are hiding in the bedchamber," he said.

*

By the time Eowyn re-emerged—dressed, once more, in her jerkin and boots—Legolas had taken out the gaming board and he and Melannen were setting up the pieces.

Eowyn smiled at the charming scene. "I am going to invite your Father to tea, Lassui," she said.

*

Thranduil arrived with his 'bodyguard' in tow.

Eowyn nodded to Thorkell bogsveigir—standing beside the door, all dark and brooding, with his arms folded across his leather-clad chest—and handed him a glass of nettle tea and a plate of dainty savouries.

"Thank you."

"Ridiculous!" cried Thranduil.

"Ada!" Legolas inclined his head, indicating with his eyes the child sitting beside him, who had heard and understood every word the Elvenking had spoken.

"Perhaps Melannen would like to see the new gardens," said Eowyn. "I could ask Hentmirë to take him..."

But the elfling had immediately jumped up, and scooped up Niben and, to everyone's surprise, was holding out his little hand to Thorkell bogsveigir.

Thranduil sighed. "Yes," he said, "take the child to the gardens for half an hour."

The Beorning set down his glass and plate, dusted the crumbs from his fingers and, with only the slightest hesitation, took Melannen's hand and let the child lead him from the room.

"That man," said Thranduil, "shrinks from *nothing*."

*

"I am not making him the heir to the Woodland Realm, Ada," said Legolas—and, knowing that Eowyn would not want to hear the truth, he found her hand, and squeezed it gently—"this is just a temporary arrangement, until his parents are found."

"And who are these parents, I should like to know," said Thranduil, "that they send their son into the wilderness with nothing but a cloth toy and a piece of parchment to protect him? I am not suggesting that he should not be taken care of—of course he should—but I am cautioning you against showing him so much personal favour. What is to stop these scoundrels pursuing their advantage and demanding compensation from the Lord and Lady who, they will say, having no children of their own, have kidnapped their boy?"

"They are *elves*, Ada," said Eowyn, coldly. Their eyes met, and the look that passed between them conveyed an intimate understanding of skulduggery on his part, and a refusal to be intimidated by majesty on hers. "They are not Haradrim, and nor are they Elvenkings!"

"Melmenya!" Legolas clamped a hand to his mouth but was unable to stop his body shaking with laughter. "Ada," he said, once he had regained his composure, "it is already settled. *We* rescued Melannen and *we* will take care of him until his parents are found. He is a fine little boy, a credit to the elves who raised him. I *know* that they did not abandon him lightly; and I know that they will be too overjoyed at finding him safe to ask for anything more.

"But if anyone should ever question our motives," he concluded, "we will simply publish the letter."

Part 19

When Thorkell bogsveigir did not return with Melannen after half an hour, as ordered, Legolas and Eowyn went to look for them.

They found the Beorning in the public gardens, leaning against the flet wall (arms folded across his chest, as usual), watching the child build a snow-castle with two elflings and a tiny dwarf. "It seemed a shame," he said, "to drag the boy away."

Eowyn came up on tip-toe, and kissed his cold cheek. "Thank you, Uncle Thorkell."

"Can I go back into the warmth now?"

*

Whilst the trio sat before a cheery fire, eating a supper of cheese tart and roasted vegetables, the servants cleared out the cloakroom—which Eowyn had decided would make the perfect bedchamber for Melannen, because it was snug and warm, with its own lavatory and washbasin, and a little bay window with a view of the city—then brought in a bed, two chairs, and a chest of drawers.

Miriël, meanwhile, found the boy a nightshirt, slippers, and a little dressing robe and, for the morning, a clean tunic and some leggings.

Then Eowyn bathed the boy, and put him to bed, and she and his Gwanur Legolas sat with him, telling him stories, until he fell into reverie.

*

Legolas sat in bed, watching Eowyn, at the dressing table, brushing her hair. "Melmenya..."

"Mmmm?"

"That is a beautiful smile."

"You are going to warn me of the dangers of growing too fond of him."

"If you think that I need to."

Eowyn laid down her hairbrush and turned to the elf. "I do not love him as I love Meldon, Lassui," she said, smiling at the memory of her double's child, "truly, I do not. But I am very, very fond of him; and it is wonderful to be able to—to have the chance to spend this time with him."

"Come here, melmenya." Legolas held out his arms. "I will love you," he whispered, kissing her tenderly, "until the End of Days and, however it may happen,"—his hand moved lightly, stroking, through the sheer silk of her nightgown, her gently curving belly—"we will have a child one day, I promise. The *Valar* have promised."

*

He was so beautiful in the pale moonlight, so slender, yet so well-muscled, and he smelled so fertile, like a Forest in the rain, that Eowyn wanted more than their usual lovemaking—she desperately wanted his child.

"Now, Lassui," she whispered. "Please let it be now."

And she felt his weight settle upon her, and his hard thigh gently nudge her legs apart, and his warm, thick penis press into her aching body, and—though the healer had told her that it was hopeless—she could not stop herself hoping, and—

"Oh!" she cried.

Oh, dear gods, please!

Part 20

Next morning

"Do you *love* Gwanur Eowyn?" asked Melannen.

Silently, Legolas closed the sitting room door and tip-toed across the room. The elfling—still in his nightshirt and slippers—was kneeling on the fireside rug, talking to his cloth rabbit.

"So do I—and Gwanur Legolas and Gwanur Thorkell."

Legolas smiled.

"So do not be scared," continued the boy, "because they will take care of us until they find Nana and Ada."

Legolas retraced his steps, waited a few moments, then noisily opened the door. "Melannen? Are you there?"

A little face popped up from behind the couch.

"Shall we go and wake your Gwanur Eowyn, nadithen?"

*

"Now," hissed Legolas.

The two elves ran across the bedchamber. Legolas grabbed the elfling round the waist, lifted him onto the bed, and bounced him up and down.

"Yaaaa!" cried Melannen. "Yaaaa, yaaaa!"

"Oh!" Eowyn awoke with a start. "Oh, you two!"

*

It took a surprisingly long time to wash and dress and when, at last, everyone was ready, it was time to join Hentmirë for breakfast.

The trio crossed the walkway to the woman's house.

"Look, Melannen," said Legolas, "a robin." The elf held out a hand, and the bird fluttered down, and sat upon it, tilting its head to regard the elfling with a beady eye.

The boy laughed, and clapped his hands together, and the robin, untroubled by the noise or by the sudden movement, hopped onto his arm, then onto his shoulder, and up onto his head.

"Ow," said Melannen, giggling, and wriggling under the bird's tiny claws, "ow!"

"Now, now, little friend," said Legolas and he reached out, and gently held a finger against the bird's legs, and the robin hopped back onto his hand; and the elf lifted it into the air, and let the bird fly back to its branch.

Melannen rubbed his head.

"No harm done," said Legolas, tousling the elfling's hair.

And Eowyn, her heart glowing, took both elves by the hand, and led them indoors, before they could get into any more mischief.

*

Legolas and Eowyn spent the rest of the day preparing for the arrival of their distinguished wedding guests, leaving Melannen with Hentmirë, who took the boy to the pleasure gardens (where they played with snowballs), and then to the market (where they each had a bowl of thick lentil soup and a baked apple from one of the kiosks), and then—in her carriage—to the stone quarries (where Gimli fed the boy again, on honey cakes, and showed him how to use a mallet and chisel).

The following morning, at breakfast, Hentmirë presented Eowyn with a gift. "We saw it yesterday, in the market," she said, "and the colour suited him so well, I just had to buy it."

Eowyn opened the cloth wrapping. "Oh, Hentmirë," she cried, "it is perfect! Thank you! What do you say, Melannen?"

"Thank you," said the elfling, dubiously.

Part 21

"Now," said Eowyn, "raise your arms."

Melannen, reconciled to his fate, lifted his little hands high above his head.

Smiling, Eowyn leaned in, and kissed his forehead, before wrapping the embroidered sash around his middle and folding its ends over. "Lower them,"—she adjusted the knot—"there! Perfect!"

"I," said Legolas, looking up from his desk, "wore short tunics until my coming of age."

"But you," said Eowyn, "have a father who is a stickler for ancient tradition. Melannen has two Gwanurs—*Gwanurs*—is that right?"

"No."

"Two Aunts who want him to look,"—she hesitated, carefully rejecting 'like a prince' and choosing—"nice."

"And I am sure that he *will* look nice, melmenya," said Legolas, laying down his pen and regarding the boy. "Turn around, Melannen; let me see the front."

Raising his hands again, which made his floor-length robe ride up on his chest, the elfling slowly turned full-circle. Hentmirë's gift was of the palest silver-blue brocade, and fitted him perfectly.

Legolas smiled. "Yes, he looks very nice,"—the boy turned again, and Legolas noticed his hair—"but, melmenya, he cannot wear warrior's braids."

"Oh."

"A single braid, down the back."

"Of course. Come Melannen," said Eowyn, "back to the dressing table." She held out her hand.

Legolas shot the elfling a sympathetic smile.

*

Later

"Ah! Good," said Faramir, unconsciously reaching for Legolas' shoulders and guiding him towards the Council Chamber, "I was getting worried."

"This is only the rehearsal," said Legolas. "I do not need to run away until tomorrow."

"Legolas!"

The elf grinned.

"Very funny. Now come—your bride is waiting."

"A moment, Faramir." Legolas held out his hand, human fashion. "Before we go in, I want to thank you."

"It has been my pleasure," said Faramir, embracing the elf, "though, by the time you have placated your father, Legolas, I think you may regret having asked me to 'meddle' in your wedding arrangements."

"I do not mean that," said Legolas, "though I am, of course, grateful for all you have done these past few weeks. No, I mean for sending Eowyn to me."

"Ah," said Faramir, "now that requires no thanks. In fact, it is *I* who should be thanking *you* for taking care of her for me. No one could be happier for you both than I am." He gave the elf's hand a final squeeze; then, gesturing towards the double-doors, he asked, "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

*

When the rehearsal was over, Legolas and Eowyn took Melannen down to the clearing beneath the city. And in the Banqueting Hall, which had been hung with velvet and garlanded with winter roses for the occasion, they received their guests of honour—Aragorn, Eomer, and King Shamash of Kuri—who, after taking refreshments with the happy couple, were shown to their accommodation by Lords Fingolfin and Caranthir, whilst their retinues were quartered by Captain Golradir and his palace guards.

*

After supper, the ladies and Melannen retired to Legolas and Eowyn's chambers to enjoy Eowyn's last night of 'freedom', whilst Legolas and his friends made themselves comfortable in the Banqueting Hall—lounging around the ring-shaped table, laughing, joking and telling tall tales; toasting nuts and sweetmeats; and drinking wine and dwarven ale.

"By the way, Legolas," said Aragorn, pouring the elf a glass of fragrant red, "there is something I want to discuss with you—and Faramir—once the wedding festivities are over."

"Thank you." Legolas raised the glass to his friend before taking a drink. "Something regarding the colony?"

A cheer went up at the far side of the Hall—Gimli and Eomer, it seemed, had persuaded King Shamash to join in a drinking game. Aragorn smiled; Legolas shook his head.

"Not directly," said the King. He took a handful of walnuts from the silver dish in front of him. "But it may draw settlers into the Daw Valley—"

"Is that the region just north of the Doro Lanthron road?"

"Yes."

"I have a particular interest in that area," said Legolas. "It is where we found Melannen."

"I see. Well, this is nothing, really. The people of the valley have petitioned me for the right to hold a daily market," said Aragorn. "They claim—quite rightly, I think—that both Eryn Carantaur and Caras Arnen are too far to travel. My concern is that a permanent settlement will soon grow up around the market place."

"But, Aragorn," said Legolas, frowning, "there is already a thriving town in that valley. At least, there was when Eowyn and I stayed there two days ago!"

Part 22

Later, Legolas joined Eowyn in their chambers and, after checking on Melannen with her—watching her press a final goodnight kiss to his little brow, and whisper, "You were a very good boy today, sweetheart,"—he escorted her across the walkway to Hentmirë's house.

"Aragorn is convinced," he said, "that there is no town in that valley."

"Which is exactly what you said when you came back with Niben."

"Yes," Legolas admitted, "but I must have been mistaken, melmenya. We spent two nights there."

"Two nights that, apparently, did not exist either... Well, we will know more when Orodreth

returns.”

“I shall miss you tonight,” said Legolas, knocking on Hentmirë’s door.

“It will soon pass, Lassui,”—Eowyn smiled—“and we have done it before.”

“With one or two small lapses,” said Legolas, “if I remember rightly.”

Eowyn’s smile turned into a wicked grin. “Goodnight, my darling.” She came up on tip-toe to kiss his cheek. “And, if you should get lonely during the night,”—Hentmirë’s companion opened the door and she lowered her voice to a whisper—“just imagine what you will be doing this time tomorrow!”

*

Knowing that he would not be able to sleep, Legolas climbed the stairs to their private garden.

The flet was covered with snow, and the plants, clustered together in their pretty pots, sparkled in the moonlight with a dusting of fine frost; but the bed, protected from the weather by its canopy, looked warm and inviting.

He sat down and, gazing up at the stars, sang softly,

*“A Elbereth Gilthoniel,
silivren penna míriel
o menel aglar elenath!
Na-chaered palan-díriel—”*

He broke off at the sound of running feet.

“We dreamed it!” Eowyn bounded onto the flet.

“Melmenya, your feet are bare!”

She had draped a fur rug over her thin nightgown, but her breath was steaming and her body was pinched with cold. Legolas swept her up and held her tight. “Oh, Eowyn nín! You should not have come out like this.”

“We dreamed it, Lassui,” Eowyn persisted, clasping her arms about his neck. “The drink—do you remember how we drank from Melannen’s water skin, and immediately felt tired?” Legolas carried her down the stairs. “I think we fell asleep, and dreamed the whole thing. That is why no time had passed when we got back.”

Legolas smiled, fondly. “And when did we wake up?”

“When I remembered our wedding—or perhaps a little later.”

“But why would we wake in a different place, melmenya?”

“Well, perhaps we had already walked a while before we fell asleep.”

“And we forgot that, too?”

“It is possible...” Eowyn frowned. “Do you think that, if Master Dínendal were to examine the drink, he could tell what it was?”

Legolas pushed open Hentmirë’s door. “I do not know, melmenya,” he said, manoeuvring her through the doorway.

"You are not convinced."

"No." He carried her into Hentmirë's guest chamber.

"Why?"

"Well, for one thing, we both had the same 'dream'." He set her down on the bed.

"Yes. Because of our bond." She drew up her legs.

Legolas wrapped her in the coverlet. "And Melannen?"

"We do not know for sure what he thinks happened."

Legolas kissed her forehead. "Then I will ask him in the morning. Just for you."

"I will be coming over," said Eowyn, "to help him wash and dress."

"And there is no point in my trying to dissuade you, is there?"

"No."

Legolas smiled. "Good night, melmenya."

*

Next day

Eowyn arrived early. "Good morning, Lassui!" She beamed up at him. "Can I come in?"

"This feels strange," said Legolas.

"I know. I do wish we had arranged the ceremony for this morning. It is going to be torture waiting all day."

The elf gave her a quick brotherly hug. "There is still much to do," he said. "What is that?"

She was carrying a small bundle. "Clothes for Melannen."

"More clothes?"

"Lord Lenwë's wife sent them. Everyone wants to make him welcome, Lassui." She crossed the lobby and knocked on Melannen's door. "Sweetheart?"

There was a thud, and then the sound of running feet—"Are we quite *sure* that he is an elf?" asked Legolas—and Melannen opened the door.

Eowyn gasped.

Hanging from the boy's little hand was the jumping bear they had bought him, from the Yuletide Market beside *The Two Ways* tavern, in the town that did not exist.

Part 23

Later that morning

Galathil showed King Thranduil—and his bodyguard—into the sitting room.

"Ada!" Legolas greeted his father joyfully. "I am so pleased to see you."

"Yes, it has been all of ten hours," said the Elvenking.

Legolas smiled. "This is such a strange time for me, Ada." He gestured towards one of the chairs and Thranduil sat down. Thorkell bogsveigir took up his usual position, by the door.

"Eowyn and I have believed ourselves married for more than a year," Legolas continued, taking the seat opposite his father's. "So this ceremony,"—he shrugged—"it calls into question matters that we have already decided, and it asks us to make commitments that we have already made. It—as I said—it is strange."

"In the longer term, Lassui," said Thranduil, carefully arranging his elegant sash, "you will not regret having had these months to reflect, and make absolutely sure that Eowyn—"

The door opened and the lady herself entered. Thorkell bogsveigir stepped aside to let her pass.

"What are *you* doing here?" asked the Elvenking, bluntly.

"I will not be staying, Ada—but Melannen has lost Niben."

"That boy!" Thranduil sighed. "And could you not have sent a maid?"

Eowyn looked under one of the chairs. "Míriel would not have known where—ah, here he is." She held up the cloth rabbit; then, grasping its tiny paw, she made it wave to her future father-in-law.

"Melmenya!" Laughing, Legolas rose and, wrapping an arm around her waist, escorted her to the door.

"Is there any news from Orodreth, Lassui?" she whispered, anxiously.

"No, not yet."

"You *will* send for me, when he arrives?"

"Of course."

"All this business with the child has deranged Eowyn," said Thranduil, as the door closed behind her.

"She is good with the boy," muttered Thorkell bogsveigir.

*

Berryn and Camthalion arrived at midday and were immediately brought before Legolas and his father.

Legolas sent for Eowyn.

"Is there any news?" she asked, rushing into the sitting room.

"My Lady." Camthalion bowed. "Yes, we have found out who the boy's parents are."

"And?"

"Melmenya—here." Legolas guided her to a chair. "Please go on, Camthalion." He stood beside his love, resting one supportive hand on her shoulder.

"The boy disappeared on the afternoon of the eighteenth," said the elf. "His parents immediately raised the alarm—"

"But have you brought them here?" asked Eowyn, desperately.

"We missed them, my Lady," said Berryn, gently. He took a step towards her, stretching out his hand; then—realising that his sympathetic gesture was inappropriate—he let the hand fall, but Eowyn rewarded him with a lovely smile. "They are out with one of the search parties, ma'am, and no one knows exactly where."

"Orodreth has ridden to Doro Lanthron," said Camthalion.

"It is their most likely route," Berryn explained. "Across the valley, through the rocks—either where you found the pass, my Lord, or further east—and then along the River Emlin—"

"Just a moment," said Thranduil, imperiously. "Are you saying that there is a sizable elven settlement in that Forest?"

"Yes, your Majesty," said Berryn, bowing; then he glanced at Legolas for permission, before continuing, "I did not have time to see all of it, sire, but I would put the settlement at about fifty to sixty dwellings, which—at three to four persons per dwelling—would suggest a population of one hundred and fifty to two hundred elves. There was a central meeting hall, but no sign of a palace or of any other public building. We spoke with the edair—"

"Green elves," said Thranduil.

"But we saw no sign of them, Ada," said Legolas. "Three days ago, that Forest was empty, apart from the remains of Melannen's house, and whatever made that terrible sound,"—he frowned—"and the Orc spoor—the house had certainly been attacked by Orcs at some time in the past—"

"But what about the note?" said Eowyn, suddenly. "'Please look after this child,' it said. Who put it in Melannen's basket, Lassui—who wrote it—if not his parents?"

When Legolas could not answer, she looked to the others, one by one.

"The shining elf, perhaps," said Thorkell bogsveigir.

All eyes were suddenly on the Beorning.

"It is just something the boy told me," he explained, sheepishly. "A tall, shining elf said that he was to wait for two nice people who would take care of him, and his mother and father, and all of his friends." Thorkell cleared his throat. "At least, that is what he said when we were in the park—er—making snowballs together."

Chapter 2: A Yuletide wedding

Melannen knew no more than he had already told Thorkell bogsveigir.

Legolas drew Eowyn aside. "We must go back there, melmenya. Ourselves."

Eowyn agreed. "Immediately after the ceremony."

"Well," said Legolas, with one of his most dazzling smiles, "perhaps not *immediately* after the ceremony. I think the Valar will grant us a wedding night."

*

Two hours later

Legolas paused at the threshold of the Council Chamber.

Before him, through the open doors, amidst the delicate silken hangings and the garlands of fragrant flowers, the rest of his life awaited him—his beloved father; his dearest friends, Aragorn, Gimli, Haldir and Eomer, and his wonderful Hentmirë with little Melannen; his worthy counsellors, Lord Fingolfin and Lord Caranthir; a hundred representatives of his people, including elves, humans, and dwarves; and, at the centre of all—making *sense* of all—Eowyn.

Eowyn!

As if feeling his presence, his beloved glanced over her shoulder, and they both smiled—the shared smile of two lovers, serenely happy, and destined to be together until the End of Days.

"Ready?" asked Faramir, softly.

"Yes," said Legolas.

So his friend ushered him into the Chamber, and closed the doors behind them.

Then Lord Fingolfin, acting as his Guardian, welcomed him, hand on heart, with the traditional words, "Telo, ertho ven,"—repeating them in Westron for the human guests, "Come, join us,"—and led him before his Sovereign Lord and father.

Legolas smiled at Thranduil—and, on his face, saw mingled pride, and joy, and just a little sadness.

"Hîr e Hiril, Lord and Lady," said the Elvenking, "we are gathered here today to solemnise your marriage by witnessing your exchange of vows. You must both understand that when you leave this place it will be as hervess e hervenn, wife and husband, indissolubly bound. Do you, Legolas Greenleaf, acknowledge this?"

"I do."

"Do you, Eowyn, daughter of Eomund, acknowledge this?"

Eowyn smiled up at Legolas. "I do."

Thranduil turned back to his son. "Then make your vow."

Carefully sliding his ring onto Eowyn's finger, Legolas repeated the words he had spoken, more than a year before, behind the waterfall on the way home from Caras Arnen, "Mîl sui lotheg i edlothia an-uir—love is like a flower that blooms forever," he said. "Im hervenn chîn; no hervess nîn—I am your husband; be my wife."

"Eowyn, iell nín," said Thranduil, "make your vow."

"I love you, Legolas—leannon veleth nín," said Eowyn, slipping her ring onto Legolas' finger. "I am your wife; be my husband—Im hervess chîn; no hervenn nín."

There was a soft sigh from the assembled witnesses, followed by a gentle rustling as they rose to their feet, and then a moment of profound peace whilst, hands on hearts and heads bowed, they prayed to their gods for the couple's health and happiness.

Then, at last, Legolas broke the silence, sweeping Eowyn up into his arms—a cue for the court musicians to play a joyful fanfare—and crying, "My wife and I invite you all to join us in the Banqueting Hall!"

*

Much later

When supper had been eaten, and the toasts had been drunk, and gifts had been received, and speeches given—and Master Halmir, Gondor's foremost artist, had captured it all in his tiny sketchbook—husband and wife bade their guests goodnight. "But please," said Legolas, happily, "do not stop celebrating on our account..."

"Where are we going?" asked Eowyn, as the elf led her off the main walkway, to a little door—so well-concealed behind a carantaur trunk that she had never noticed it before—opened it, and bade her climb the stairs.

"It is a surprise."

"Melannen—"

"Knows that his Gwanur Eowyn and Gwanur Legolas will be away for the night," said Legolas, "and is quite happy to have his Gwanur Hentmirë put him to bed for once—she will be sleeping in our chambers, melmenya—"

Eowyn gasped—she had reached the top of the stairs.

"Do you like it?"

Hand-in-hand, they stepped out onto the flet. The wooden platform was small, scarcely half the size of their garden, and on it stood the most exquisite building Eowyn had ever seen—a tiny palace of carved and gilded wood, neither elven nor human but a delightful union of both—with a wide, canopied porch, a bedchamber beyond, and a bathing room tucked behind that.

"This will be our secret place," said Legolas, "where we can come when we need privacy."

"But—how...?" She examined one of the prancing horses carved on the pillars.

"I designed it," said the elf, proudly, "and Master Bawden and his men built it."

"I meant," said Eowyn, "how did you keep it secret from me?"

"By banishing it from my mind, once it was under way."

"And does that mean," she said, teasing him, "that I can no longer trust you?"

"Could you ever trust me?" asked Legolas, with a wicked grin. Then he added, more seriously, "You have not said whether you like it."

"I *adore* it Lassui."

*

He carried her over the threshold, and into the bedchamber; and, after he had closed the door behind them, and shut out the rest of the world, he knelt down before her and, raising her hand to his lips, he repeated once more the vow he had made earlier—but, this time, just for her. And she drew him up onto the bed, and kissed him; and, lying together in their little hideaway, they made love as though for the very first time.

"Legolas Greenleaf."

Smiling, Legolas knelt down before the being of light. "My Lord."

"I have a task for you, child," said the being. "For you, and your wife."

"Does it concern Melannen's people, my Lord?"

"It does, Legolas; indeed it does."

"Lassui?"

Finding herself alone, on her wedding night, Eowyn stretched out a hand and felt the bed beside her.

Cold...

She threw back the coverlet, swung her feet down to the floor, and—putting on her thick, velvet cloak and her fur-lined slippers—padded out onto the frosty veranda.

Legolas was sitting on the flet-wall, naked but for his silken leggings.

"Lassui?"

He turned, smiling. "I am sorry, melmenya. Did I wake you?"

"No..."

He raised an arm, and she ducked beneath and let him pull her close.

"But I can see that something is wrong, my darling," she said, gazing up at him. "What is it?"

"I had a dream."

"Oh..." Eowyn buried her face in his chest. "Was it about us?" she asked, nervously. "About our future?"

"Oh, no, melmenya." He kissed the crown of her head. "At least, no more of our future than the next few days." He told her about his encounter with the being of light.

"And you do not know what this task might be?"

"No."

"Well," she said, snuggling closer, "perhaps everything will be clear when we return to the Daw Valley."

*

Dawn was approaching, and Eryn Carantaur began to stir—doors opened, and people came out onto the walkways carrying candles and lighted tapers.

Having already made their own preparations, Legolas and Eowyn watched their friends join others from all over the city—Hentmirë and Gimli, with little Melannen (wrapped up in a warm woollen mantle, a muffler, and a matching cap); Aragorn and Arwen with Eomer and Lothiriel; King Thranduil and King Shamash with Thorkell bogsveigir; Haldir and, to the couple's surprise, Cyllien—all waiting.

Suddenly, first light touched the tops of the trees, and the elves and the dwarves and the humans all lit their candles and, singing softly, lifted their flames into the air to welcome the sun back from its perilous journey through longest night of the year.

"Oh, *look*," said Eowyn, pointing her candle at Melannen, who was standing on tip toe, holding his flame as high as his little arm could reach. "Just *look* at him, Lassui."

Legolas smiled. "All will be well, melmenya," he said, suddenly. "I am sure of it now."

*

The bathing room of their hideaway was small but, like the rest of the building, beautiful—the bath carved from a rosy, polished stone, decorated with swirling curves that formed elegant ledges, planted with bright green ferns dripping down into the tub.

Whilst Eowyn admired the plants, and the complexities of the plumbing—no doubt Gimli's work—Legolas filled the bath with a cascade of warm water and a scattering of herbs.

"I thought," said Eowyn, already feeling the effects of the sensual aroma, "that we were going to plan our—our—oh—*Lassui!*"

His mouth had claimed hers; his hands, sweeping down her back, had grasped her hips and driven all thoughts of their forthcoming journey from her mind.

"This morning," he murmured, "is *special*, melmenya."

She felt his erection, hard against her belly, and her body responded with a pang of physical need. She slid her hands up his chest and around his neck; he guided her closer to the bath; she let him lift and lower her—still wearing her beautiful wedding nightgown—into the scented water.

And then he was astride her—and her nightgown was floating around them like lily petals—and his weight was pushing down upon her, and he was pressing himself between her thighs. She moved her hips and let him slide into her and she wrapped her legs around him.

"Lassui..." There were things—secrets, hidden within her heart—that she wanted to tell him.

But, "*Shhhh*," he whispered, "I *know*, Eowyn nín." He raised his head and his eyes sought hers. "I know everything about you, my darling. *Everything*." And—still looking deep inside her—he began to thrust.

And it seemed to Eowyn—as it had the night before—that marriage had somehow changed them, that their bodies had been remade, and were now, at once, both more intimate and yet less familiar with each other.

And she leaned back in the delicious water, and let him make love to her, his phallus teasing her, then pleasuring her, then—starting very small, somewhere in her core—making a great

wave of sensation gather, and crest, and break, and rush out in all directions, filling her head, her hands, her breasts, and leaving her trembling in her husband's arms.

*

Some time later

"But... We cannot leave him *behind*, Lassui."

"Melmenya..."

Wrapped in dressing robes, they were sitting before the fire, eating breakfast. Legolas pulled a slice of fruited bread off his toasting fork and dropped it onto Eowyn's plate. "We cannot take him with us."

Eowyn spread the toast with butter. "Why?"

"Because,"—he threaded more bread onto the fork, and held it to the flames—"one, it may be dangerous—"

"He will be with *us*—"

"Two, it may come to a fight."

Eowyn frowned—she had not considered that.

"And, *three*," said Legolas, "his parents are coming *here*. Do you want another piece of toast?"

"No."

He laid the slice on his own plate. "We are bringing them here, *melmenya*," he said, gently, "we cannot take *him* away." He reached out, and touched her hand. "I know how much you love him, my darling, and I know that you are afraid he will think you have abandoned him—"

"Most people think that keeping a child physically safe is all that matters, Lassui. It will *break his heart*—"

"Hervess nín!" He grasped her fingers. "We will talk to him—we will tell him what we are doing, and explain why he must stay behind. He will understand. He will miss you, of course, but his Gwanur Hentmirë will take good care of him, and he loves her, and Gimli—and *Thorkell bogsveigir*, too, it seems."

"Gimli will be coming with us."

"Well, that is another thing we must decide." He dropped a second slice of toast onto his plate. "Is there any honey?"

Eowyn pushed a small, beehive-shaped pot across the table.

"Thank you... Do we mount a full expedition, or do we go alone?"

"Why would we go alone?"

"Because," he said, drizzling the golden liquid back and forth, "the Vala—the *being*, that is—in my dream, said that the task was for *us*: for me and my wife. I am wondering whether he meant that literally."

*

King Thranduil's apartment

Sweeping majestically into his sitting room, the Elvenking caught sight of his bodyguard, gazing up out of the window, and—stopping short—sighed loudly. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing, sire,” said Thorkell bogsveigir, with an almost perceptible bow.

Thranduil let the unexpected courtesy pass. “Good,” he said, “because I have a job for you, and you will need to be,”—he looked dubiously at the tall, dark man—“*sharp*.”

“You want me to go to the Daw Valley with them.”

“If Lassui insists on returning there,” said Thranduil, “yes.”

“Why?”

“You will be my eyes and ears...” He looked at the man, thoughtfully. “And *she* is my daughter-in-law: do not forget it.”

“*What?*”

“I can read you like a book, Thorkell bogsveigir.”

*

“So,” said Eowyn, “whilst I was waiting, I looked at my Orc map.” She was referring to the large map of North and South Ithilien on which—with the help of two elven assistants—she charted all the signs of Orc activity reported by border guards, messengers and travellers.

“Just moments before marrying me,” said Legolas, with a wink. “And what did you see?”

“It was exactly as I remembered. There are no Orc bands in that region—none anywhere near the Daw Valley.” She took a bite of toast. “Though, to the east, in Mordor—”

“The house Melannen showed us, melmenya, must have been attacked long before the Ring War.”

“I know it looked like that, Lassui, but—”

“Do you remember the scream?”

“Of course,” said Eowyn, softly.

“In my dream, I heard it again: I saw us, standing in the Forest near Melannen’s house, and I heard the scream.”

“Could you see who—*what*—was screaming?”

He shook his head. “No.”

They sat in silence for a few moments. Then Legolas said, “But I am sure that is where we must start, melmenya. We must find the creature that made that sound.”

*

They dressed and, descending the secret staircase, slipped out through the hidden door, and returned to the bustling, everyday life of Eryn Carantaur. Legolas held his daily meetings with Haldir and with Captain Golradir of the Palace Guard; Eowyn talked with Lord Caranthir and Master Bawden about the ongoing building works, and discussed the proposed expansion of

the school. Then, at midday, the couple welcomed their friends into their private chambers for a festive meal.

"Estel is planning to accompany you," said Arwen, as she passed Legolas a dish of braised fennel.

"Your story has piqued my curiosity, *mellon nín*," Aragorn admitted. "I want to see this town for myself."

"And *I* have heard," said Eomer, from across the table, "that the hunting in that region is more than worth the trip."

"Thorkell bogsveigir tells me," whispered Eowyn, "that your father has ordered him to go with us—well, he underestimates you almost as much as he distrusts the Green Elves, so he was bound to send his right-hand man to keep an eye on us."

Legolas turned Gimli. "And no doubt you are planning to come, too, Elvallon?"

*

Despite Legolas' private misgivings, it was decided that they should mount a full expedition, consisting—in addition to Legolas and Eowyn—of Aragorn, Eomer, Gimli, Thorkell bogsveigir, the colony's cartographer, Master Berryn, and a host of human, elven and dwarven warriors.

Arwen and Lothiriel would stay in Eryn Carantaur to lead the remainder of the Yuletide celebrations.

And, since it seemed certain that she and Legolas would be leaving before Melannen's parents arrived, Eowyn gave Lord Caranthir, Lord Fingolfin and Captain Golradir strict instructions—and *begged* Arwen and Hentmirë, too, to do everything in their power—to keep the elfling and his parents safely in the city until they returned.

*

Early morning, in Hentmirë's house

Melannen, standing on a chair, was peering anxiously out of the window.

"They will not leave without saying goodbye," said Hentmirë. "They *promised*. Besides,"—she came up behind him and gently laid her hand upon his back—"they *love* you, and could not bear to be parted from you without a proper farewell. So,"—she tried to sound firm—"come and sit with me, and we will look at your picture book whilst we wait."

Reluctantly, the child allowed himself to be lifted down to the floor. Then, "Gwanur Hentmirë," he said, "can we have a story? Gwanur Eowyn always tells me stories."

"Well..."

"About Niben."

"About *Niben*?" Hentmirë tried to remember a story from her own childhood that might serve. "Um... Well, yes. Yes, I think we can. Sit down..." She waited until the boy was settled beside her, with the toy on his lap, then began: "Once upon a time, in the city of Carhivilven, there was a tiny rabbit—"

"Called Niben," said Melannen, with a sniff.

"Called Niben. And he was as poor as a temple mouse—in fact, that is where he lived: in a

burrow, at the foot of the temple wall.”

“Gwanur Legolas says that there are no plants in Carhilivren, except in gardens.”

“There are hardy plants, like palms, which spring up wherever they can find water,” said Hentmirë, “and desert plants, which bloom suddenly when there is rain. But Carhilivren is not fertile like Eryn Carantaur.”

“So what did Niben eat?”

“Oh... Um... Offerings,” said Hentmirë. “Yes. When people brought flowers and fruit as gifts for the spirits of their ancestors, they would leave a little by Niben’s burrow.”

“Niben likes carrots.”

“Well... Sometimes, they would bring carrots... Or lettuce. Anyway, Niben was very poor. And, one day—”

“*Gwanur Eowyn*,” cried Melannen, turning towards the door.

It opened.

The elfling leaped from his chair, and flew across the room—“*Gwanur Eowyn!*”—and threw himself into Eowyn’s arms.

“Are you being a good boy for your Aunt Hentmirë?” she asked, hugging him tightly.

“Yes.”

“*Good...*”

“Melannen,” said Legolas, crouching down beside him, “I want you to remember everything your *Gwanur Eowyn* told you last night—we are going away for a little while, to make sure that the Forest is safe for you and your Nana and Ada. But we will be back soon.”

“And whilst we are away,” said Eowyn, crouching as well, so that her face was level with the elfling’s, “you must be brave, and look after your *Gwanur Hentmirë*, and do what she tells you. And, when your mummy and daddy come, tell them we want them to wait here until we come back. Can you remember that?”

Melannen nodded.

“Then give me a big hug, sweetheart, and give your *Gwanur Legolas* a big hug, too, before we go...”

*

The expeditionary force set out and, once clear of the city, made good time, galloping along the *Doro Lanthron* road until Legolas brought them to a halt at the spot where he and Eowyn had found Melannen.

From there, the warriors were forced to proceed in single file, retracing the elfling’s still-visible foot steps through the snow-laden pines, then eastwards, along the frozen stream and over the stone bridge.

*

“So Niben waited until the thieves had been gone for fully half an hour,” said Hentmirë, “and then he went up to the mouth of the cave,”—she made the toy rabbit walk along the arm of

her chair— “and he said—”

“OPEN *SESAME*,” boomed Melannen.

“Except that Niben has a *little* voice.”

“Open *Sesame*,” he squeaked.

“Yes. And the big rock just—”

The elfling suddenly grasped her arm and pointed at the window, his eyes as round as saucers.

“Is that your mummy and daddy?”

He nodded.

Hentmirë listened, nervously.

She heard the knock at the door—*They are impatient*, she thought—heard Old Donatiya cross the lobby to answer it, and heard the muttering that followed. Then the sitting room door opened, and Donatiya peered inside. “Master Túon and Mistress Roseth say that they have come for Master Melannen, my Lady. Shall I show them in?”

“Just a moment.” Hentmirë turned to the elfling. “Let me see your hands.” The boy held them up for inspection. “And your face.” He leaned forward. She smiled. “And your boots.” He stood up, and lifted each foot so that his Gwanur could check the shine on the leather. “Perfect,” said Hentmirë. “Yes, please, Donatiya. Ask them to come in here.”

She rose, and greeted the two elves formally, hand on heart, as she had been taught by Lord Fingolfin. “Mae govannen, hîr e hiril. Le hannon a tholel. Baren bar lin.”

Túon was a dark-haired elf, older-looking and more dignified than the little woman had expected; his wife seemed younger, and more passionate, with quick eyes and flaming red hair, but she walked a little behind her husband.

Neither of them said anything in reply to Hentmirë’s greeting, and she could only hope that she had got the words right. “Please,” she added, in Westron, “do take a seat. Donatiya—perhaps we could have some refreshments?”

The old woman shuffled away, grumbling under her breath.

Hentmirë smiled uneasily. Melannen, she realised, had not run to the door to meet his parents, and was still waiting patiently for them to notice him. “As you can see,” she said, patting the boy’s shoulder, “Lord Legolas and Lady Eowyn have taken very good care of your son, and I am sure you will want to thank them. They should be back in a week or so—”

“We intend to return home immediately,” said Túon.

“Well,” said Hentmirë, beginning the long explanation that Legolas and Eowyn had given her, and that she had already practised several times—

“This place,” said Roseth, cutting her short, “is not suitable for an impressionable young elfling.”

“This *place*?” The little woman could not tell whether they meant Eryn Carantaur in general, or her own home in particular. “I assure you,” she said, “that Melannen has been completely safe here, and well-cared-for. But, please, let me explain why you must stay—”

“That is not possible.”

"I have it on the *best* authority," Hentmirë persisted, "that the Daw Valley is far too dangerous at present. A troop of warriors, led by King Elessar himself, has ridden out, and will make it safe. In the meantime, Lord Legolas and Lady Eowyn want you to wait here. If you need official confirmation, I can send for Lord Caranthir or Lord Fingolfin, and they will repeat what I have just told you. Or, you can meet with Queen Arwen, who has a personal message for you from Lady Eowyn."

"This is most vexing," said Túon, glancing at his wife; she shook her head in agreement. "Very well—I want to see this Lord Caranthir. At once."

"Please understand," said the little woman, ringing the bell to summon her servant, Rimush, "that our only concern is for your well-being—yours and your son's—"

"And yet," said Túon, rising, "you are refusing to let us take him home, where he—"

"ADAAAAA!" shouted Melannen. "Gwanur Eowyn said we have to wait for her and Gwanur Legolas, *HERE!*"

*

"This is it," said Legolas, dismounting. "The way into the valley."

He led Arod to the foot of the cliff, and showed Aragorn and Eomer a deep crevice, which appeared—at first glance—to lead nowhere.

"It is narrow," said Aragorn, running a gloved hand over the rock wall, "and the sides are sharp. Can a rider get through it?"

"The path opens out," said the elf, "just past the first bend, though the ground remains uneven. It will be safest to lead the horses—though the going will be slower."

Aragorn gave the signal to dismount.

"Give me your standard," said Legolas. "Eowyn, Gimli and I will go first, and ride down into the town as your heralds. That way, the locals will be prepared for the sight of a small army emerging from the rocks."

*

Roseth shook her head in dismay.

"This is *precisely* what I feared," said Túon, coldly. "A few days in the company of this Sinda and his mistress, and the boy has forgotten how he was raised—he is behaving like an Orc."

Hentmirë put her arm around the elfling's shoulders. "Melannen," she said—doing a passable impression of King Thranduil at his most imperious—"is a *credit* to you; everyone who has met him says so. Now, please, sit down and have some fruit tea, and—whilst we wait for Lord Caranthir—your son and I will explain why he is so anxious for you to stay here."

*

Slowly, they worked their way along the narrow cleft—Legolas, in front, carrying Aragorn's standard; Gimli, close behind, leading Arod; Eowyn, behind *him*, gently coaxing Brightstar—and, more than once, the dwarf remarked upon the strangeness of the rock, and the unnatural pattern of its fractures and fissures.

At length, they filed out into the open and, shielding his eyes from the sun, Legolas gazed down into the valley.

"Has anyone noticed us?" asked Eowyn, coming up beside him.

"There are two men on the Forest road," he replied. "They seem to be watching us. And there is a man chopping wood, over there." He pointed to a tiny homestead, at the far side of the valley. "He is looking in this direction."

"Might they raise the alarm?"

"No. We three will reach the town long before they..." He looked back at the rock face, frowning. "Gimli?"

Eowyn scanned the cliff from east to west. "Where is he?"

"I have no idea..." He stepped into the mouth of the pass and shouted, "ELVELLON!" and the word echoed down its length, "Elvallon—Elvallon—Elvallon..."

"He was in front of me," said Eowyn, "and Aragorn was behind, and Eomer behind *him*, and then Thorkell bogsveigir.. Oh gods, where are they, Lassui,"—her voice wavered—"what has happened to all the others?"

Chapter 3: Back to the Forest

"Go," said Eowyn. "Go back through the passage! I will stay with the horses. You go and—"

"No." Legolas grasped his wife's hand. "We must stay together, melmenya."

"Stay...? Oh, gods! You mean..."

"Come."

Cautiously, they went back into the crevice. "It is so *quiet*," said Eowyn, softly; then, as Legolas came to a sudden halt, "What?" she hissed. "What is it, Lassui?"

"*That*, melmenya." He pointed to a small, sturdy iârloth bush, rooted in the rocky wall, several feet above their heads. "I do not recall seeing that before." He caught a leaf, spiralling down from the snow-laden branches and, crushing it in his fingers, inhaled its sharp scent. "No, I am *sure* it was not there before."

"*Look*," said Eowyn, grasping his arm. "There are no footprints. Not even mine!" She crouched down, and examined the unblemished snow. "This cannot have fallen in the last few minutes —"

"Of course!" said Legolas. "We must go back to the valley, melmenya. At once!"

"But—why? What has happened to the others? Where are they, Lassui?"

"I do not know," he admitted, hurrying her down the passage with a hand at her waist, "but I am sure they are safe. Remember what the being in my dream told me? The task is for me and my wife."

*

Eryn Carantaur

"Here we are," said Hentmirë, opening the door to the guest apartment.

After a long and heated discussion with Lord Caranthir, Melannen's parents, Túon and Roseth, had finally agreed to stay in the city until Legolas and Eowyn returned, but the little woman had no idea what had persuaded them.

"This will be perfect," she said. "You have a large bed chamber, a bathing room, a sitting room, and a study, and there is a second, smaller bed chamber, just for Melannen." She squeezed the boy's hand, and he smiled up at her.

"It seems unnecessarily luxurious," said the elfling's father, looking round the lobby disapprovingly.

"Well, we are visited by dignitaries from all over Middle-earth," said Hentmirë, "and *they* must be treated with proper respect. Now, Rimush will bring Melannen's things—"

"*What* things?"

"Oh, just a few necessities,"—she decided not to mention the full-length robe of finest silk brocade she had given his son—"clean underwear and things. Melannen, this is *your* bed chamber." She waited until the boy had opened the door, then turned to his parents. "You see, he has his own lavatory and washbasin."

The elves said nothing.

"Your bedchamber is next door.."

Still, they said nothing.

"Well, then," said Hentmirë, "I will leave you to settle in. I am sure you will be very comfortable but, should there be anything you need, I am only across the way." She gestured in the general direction of her own home. "And I will come back, just before seven, to take you down to supper." She placed her hand upon her heart and bowed her head in formal leave-taking.

The elves did not return her courtesy.

"Yes... Well, good bye, Melannen. Be good for your mummy and daddy." She gave the boy a little wave and he, at least, waved back, smiling.

*

Eowyn followed Legolas, out into the open.

The mysterious town was still nestling in the valley, and Arod and Brightstar were still grazing on the damp grass under the shelter of the cliff.

"Thank the gods," she muttered, tramping over to her horse. He nuzzled her shoulder, and she grasped his bridle, and stroked his ears, murmuring "Good boy,"—she kissed his muzzle—"good, good boy." Then, "What *do* you think happened to Gimli and the others, Lassui?"

"Nothing," said Legolas. He came up beside her. "I think that we have somehow found our way back into the shadowland."

"The shadowland?" She considered his theory. "Through the rocks?"

"Yes."

"And left them behind."

"Yes."

"By the gods," she said at last, "let us hope you are right! Yes, that makes sense, but... What do we do now?"

"We go down into the valley," said Legolas, summoning Arod. "And do whatever it is we are supposed to do."

"Wait a moment, Lassui,"—she grasped his arm—"does this mean that *Melannen* is from the shadowland?"

"I do not know, melmenya."

"I do not think he is."

"I think we need to make sure," said Legolas.

"Yes," she agreed, quietly, "yes, let us go down. But we will have to walk the horses."

"I know. And I am sorry, my darling." He could see that she was tired, and he put his arms around her, and gave her a gentle hug. "We will go straight to the inn, melmenya, and take a room, and you can rest before supper."

"It *would* be nice to lie down for a moment or two."

"It has been a hard few days."

"Yes... Well, not our wedding."

Legolas smiled.

"Just... All *this*."

*

Later, trudging down the steep path, she suddenly asked, "Do you think he is missing us, Lassui?"

"Oh, I am sure he is, *melmenya*," Legolas replied. "But Hentmirë will be taking good care of him, and—who knows—maybe his parents are with him by now."

*

Hentmirë crossed the walkway with a heavy heart. She had wanted to tell Melannen that he could come to her whenever he needed, but she knew that *that* would have been inappropriate.

Still, she could not help feeling that she was letting him down—and Legolas and Eowyn. She could not imagine how two such stern parents could have raised such a loving child.

But when she reached her own front door, and automatically looked back at the guest apartment, she was very relieved to see—in silhouette, through the window of Melannen's bed chamber—Roseth hugging her son at last.

*

"Welcome *back*, sir!" cried the landlord of *The Two Ways* inn, when the couple walked into the parlour. "Good to see you and your lady wife again so soon!"

He wiped his hands and, hurrying to Eowyn's side, guided her to one of the chairs beside the fire. "Here you are, my Lady—you look perished! Take the weight off your feet, and I'll get the wife to bring you a nice hot drink."

"We would like a room," said Legolas, nodding greetings to the regulars as he followed the man back to the counter.

"Of course, sir."

"And we will want some food later, and feed for the horses—they are already in your stables."

"Very good, sir—ah, here's the wife, now."

The landlady soon had them settled in her best room, with a cheery fire and tankards of mulled ale.

Eowyn sat down on the bed.

"Mmm," said Legolas, taking a good draught of the hot, spiced drink, "this will put you straight to sleep, *melmenya*. We had better get you ready." He set his tankard on the night stand and, kneeling at Eowyn's feet, pulled off her boots.

"They remember us, Lassui."

"I know." He laid the boots aside. "Your feet are cold..."

"Did you notice that the landlord said we had not been gone long?" She unfastened her jerkin and shrugged it off.

"I did." Legolas lifted her foot onto his lap and gently massaged it. "Better?"

She smiled. "Yes." Then, "His wife asked where Melannen was."

"What did you say?"

"Staying with his Aunt."

Legolas patted her knee. "Lie back, my darling." He waited until she was settled, then he pulled the quilt up over her shoulders.

"I have been wondering why," said Eowyn, stifling a yawn, "if you are right, and we *are* in the shadowland—and I think you must be, because there is a town here but not in our own world —"

"Which is easily explained, *melmenya*," said Legolas, sitting on the edge of the bed. "We know that small changes can lead to big differences between the two worlds so, if one of the Stewards—Faramir's grandfather, perhaps—"

"Ecthelion."

"Yes. If he granted these people the right to hold a daily market, just as Aragorn is planning to do in our world, and then—just as Aragorn anticipates—a permanent settlement grew up around it—"

"That would explain the town, yes," said Eowyn, turning onto her side. "But what I was really wondering, *Lassui*, is why the Valar would send us *here* if they want us to help Melannen's people?"

Legolas frowned.

"Because the one thing about this world that we know for certain, the one thing that we have seen for ourselves, is that, here, the Elven settlement has already been destroyed."

*

Eryn Carantaur

Hentmirë looked up from the tengwar character she was forming, and listened.

Someone was knocking at the door.

Fearing that it might be Melannen's father, she wiped her inky fingers, and went out into the lobby. Donatiya had opened the door to a young elf, whom Hentmirë recognised as one of the palace servants. He was insisting that his message could only be delivered to *her*, in person.

"Well she can't be disturbed," said the old woman, firmly.

"It is all right, Donatiya," said Hentmirë, approaching the door. "Did Melannen's father send you, my dear?"

"Yes, my Lady." The elf bowed respectfully. "Master Túon asked me to return *these*,"—he showed her a pile of folded clothes—"and to tell you that his son does not require them."

Hentmirë took the bundle. "What a pity," she said, recognising the little tunic that Lord Lenwë's wife had given the boy, and the embroidered nightshirt that Míriel had found for him, and—on the top of the pile—the beautiful silver robe that she, herself, had chosen for him.

"And, er... *This*, ma'am, I am afraid," said the elf. He held out the jumping bear that Legolas and Eowyn had bought.

Donatiya swore under her breath.

"Thank you," said Hentmirë, taking the toy. "When you see Master Melannen, my dear, please tell him that I will look after it for him."

*

Legolas waited until he was sure that Eowyn was fast asleep, then went down to the parlour.

The inn was busy, crammed with locals who, having come into town for the Yuletide market, were making merry with mulled ale and other festive fare, but the elf managed to find himself a place beside the fire. He ordered some supper and, whilst waiting for his food, tried to strike up a conversation with the man across the table, who had pushed his empty plate aside and was shuffling a pack of playing cards.

Legolas began by remarking on the coldness of the weather, but that drew no response. Then he talked about the Yuletide celebrations, and the market, and the fireworks, and when, at last, the man replied, gruffly, that, yes, people came from all over the valley to join in the tomfoolery, he seized the opportunity, and asked, "Do many *elves* come? I have heard that there is a settlement nearby."

"A *settlement*?" The man placed his cards upon the table and looked at Legolas, thoughtfully. Then he pushed the pack towards him. "Cut," he said.

Legolas was surprised but, nevertheless, lifted about a third of pack off the top, and set it down beside the rest.

His strange companion took the first five cards from the larger pile and laid them on the table, face-down. Then—without so much as glancing at the elf—he asked, "You looking for family?"

Legolas thought of Melannen. "Yes," he said, "in a manner of speaking."

The man turned over the first card. It was crudely printed, in thick black lines and overlapping patches of bright colour, but—to Legolas' surprise—its compelling design depicted a small child, wandering through a thicket of wooden staves. "Family," he said, thoughtfully. "In danger."

He turned the second card. It showed a divine being, standing in a blaze of yellow light, and the man seemed impressed. "Your task is blessed!" he said, and quickly turned the third card.

Legolas gasped, softly, for it depicted a man hanging from a tree, and the fact that the rope was tied around his ankle, and that his body, therefore, was hanging upside-down with one leg bent at the knee, only served to make the image seem more menacing. The man rubbed his chin. "*Change*," he said, and turned the fourth card.

This one showed a swordsman on horseback—tall and lightly built, with long blond hair—and, beneath him, a line of roughly-printed characters read, *The Prince*. "You," said the man.

He reached for the final card, declaring, "Your destiny," and turned it over.

"Valar," whispered Legolas.

At first sight, the picture seemed to show a young lad, bravely brandishing a sword in each hand. But, on closer inspection, it was obvious—to Legolas, at least—that the boy was, in fact, a woman in disguise.

"Strange," said the man.

"*Dernhelm*," said Legolas.

"Hmm..." The man thought for a moment. Then he took a sixth card from the pack and, glancing at it briefly, laid it face up beside the others. "Your destiny," he repeated.

The card showed a skeleton, beheading a warrior with a sweep of its scythe, and beneath the grotesque image was written a single word.

Death.

*

Eryn Carantaur

"We *green* elves are unaccustomed to... *Feasting*," said Túon to Hentmirë, as she led him and his family towards the Banqueting Hall.

"Well," replied the little woman, patiently, "there is a wide choice of food—some of it quite plain—and you can eat as much or as little as you wish."

She took them up the steps, and into the domed pavilion, and—having foregone her usual place near the head of the table—she found them seats next to Lord Fingolfin, who had volunteered to help her entertain Lord Legolas' guests, and she took the chair beside Melannen's.

Then trumpets sounded, and everyone rose to greet Queen Arwen and Queen Lothriel as they entered the Hall accompanied by King Shamash of Kuri and took their places at table. Arwen, glancing round the company, honoured Hentmirë with a brief formal greeting, hand upon heart, which the little woman returned in kind, and smiled at Melannen, who—having recently been introduced to both of the beautiful ladies—waved back enthusiastically, until his father caught hold of his hand.

Meanwhile, a small army of servants had begun carrying out the first course of pork-and-cheese tarts, spicy minced meat pies, and simple platters of bread and cheese.

Hentmirë heard Túon sigh, and she turned towards him, intending to suggest that he choose the latter. The elf was not looking at the food, however, and the little woman followed his gaze, up one of the elegant pillars and across the intricately carved ceiling, taking in the velvet hangings and the garlands of Yuletide evergreens. "Human follies," she heard him mutter.

But Lord Fingolfin had heard him, too: "Our colony," he said, a trifle sharply, "welcomes elves from all over Middle-earth; humans from Rohan, Gondor, and the hot lands to the south; dwarves from the Glittering Caves; and halflings from the Shire. We live together in peace and friendship, and we are proud to observe the customs of *all* of our citizens."

One of the serving elves set a plate of tiny minced meat pies on the table, between Hentmirë and Melannen.

"Those are my *favourites*," said the elfling, in a loud whisper.

"I know," Hentmirë whispered back and, with a wink, she slipped an extra pastry onto his plate.

*

The Two Ways

Eowyn awoke suddenly, sat up in bed, and peered into the darkness—it took a second or two before, with a gasp of relief, she recognised Legolas, sitting on a stool beside the dying embers of the fire. “Light a candle, my love...”

He went over to the dresser and, moments later, the room was filled with soft light.

“You look troubled.” She held out her hand. “Come and sit beside me and tell me what you are thinking.”

Legolas pulled up a chair. “I have just spent more than two hours in the parlour, *melmenya*,” he said, sitting down, “quizzing the locals.”

“What did you find out?”

“There are no elves living in the Forest. They are all agreed on that. Several people have explored the remains of the flets, and one even admits to having found a gold brooch, which he sold to a jeweller in Caras Arnen for ‘a tidy sum’, but no one has ever seen a living elf there.”

“Did you mention the noise?”

“I did. They believe it was wolves—”

“That was no wolf!”

“Or possibly Orcs. At any rate, it seems that the men of the Night Watch patrol the eastern slopes regularly—though they seldom venture into the Forest itself—and the farmers tell their children that the trees are haunted to keep them out of it.”

“We must go and see for ourselves,” said Eowyn. She leaned over to the night stand and poured two glasses of water.

“Are you hungry, my darling? I can ask the landlady—”

“No,”—she took a sip of water—“no, I will wait until breakfast.”

Legolas leaned closer, and lowered his voice. “*Melmenya*... Something else happened down there. Something strange.” He told her about the man and his pack of cards.

“He has really upset you.”

“He showed me *Melannen*, *melmenya*. And I have no idea how he did it.”

“Nor have I,” she said, softly. She set down her glass, and reached for his hand. “But at least he seemed to think that *I* was your destiny.”

“Death was my destiny.”

“Oh, *Lassui*, no!” She grasped his hand, firmly. “You told me,” she said, “that he turned over your card, and then mine, and then he had to take an extra card from the pack. If that means anything at all, it means that we have a joint destiny. And we are not afraid to face it *together*, are we, my love?”

*

Later, when Eowyn had gone back to sleep, Legolas gently freed himself from her embrace.

He was too unsettled to rest.

Had he been at home, he would have gone outside, and walked under the trees; here, he did not want to leave Eowyn alone so, instead, he drew back the curtains, and looked out.

Below him, the Yuletide market was quiet at last, its rows of stalls boarded up for the night; the square was in darkness; the lamplighters had snuffed out the street lamps.

Above him, the stars were shining like jewels scattered upon a mantle of black velvet.

There are no clouds, he thought. It will be cold tonight.

*

Elsewhere

There are no clouds, thought Gimli, looking up at the stars. It will be cold tonight.

He nodded to a young Gondorian who, standing lookout at the edge of the encampment, was stamping his feet and blowing on his freezing fingers. "Away to your bedroll, lad," he said. "I will take your watch."

The man bowed his head. "I thank you, my Lord, but King Elessar—"

"I will make it right with Aragorn. Go on."

Gimli watched the boy disappear into one of the canvas shelters they had erected against the foot of the cliffs. Then he drew his axe and, planting the butt firmly on the ground, he settled down to watch, for a dwarf could stand, still and silent, for hours, waiting like a coiled spring—

"What do you think happened to them?"

Gimli growled; Thorkell bogsveigir had the most annoying habit of sneaking up from behind. "You," he grumbled, "should be getting some sleep tonight. It may be your last chance for a while."

The Beorning ignored his advice. "One moment, there she was in front of us, all tight leggings and golden hair; the next,"—he shrugged—"there was no trace of her—and nowhere for either of them to have gone, no crevices, no chimneys, no holes in the ground... Nothing."

"We will find them."

"How?" The Beorning had insisted that, as King Thranduil's agent, charged with the protection of his son and daughter-in-law, he be allowed to join the discussions between Aragorn, Eomer and Gimli, and he had made himself unpopular—with Eomer in particular—by pointing out the flaws in every plan they had come up with. "Oh, yes. By riding across the valley and appealing to our friends, the green elves, for help. I do not think so."

"You made no better suggestion," said Gimli.

The man sniffed. "Maybe not. But the green elves are already here. Look, over there,"—he pointed to a knot of trees, directly ahead—"and there are more, there, by the ruined farmhouse and, there, where the stream cuts through the rocks. When I spotted them lurking, I got Camthalion to have a look. He has no idea what they are doing, nor why they are letting us see them do it. He says that green elves are 'strange'."

"They had nothing to do with the disappearance," said Gimli.

"So what are they doing?"

"Just keeping an eye on us. Being cautious."

"Hmm. Well, I seriously doubt that we will get any help from them."

*

The Two Ways

"Lassui..." Eowyn padded over to window and, grasping her husband's arm, coaxed him back towards the bed. "You must let it go, my darling..."

He was still fully dressed; she sat him down and, kneeling before him—just as he had earlier knelt before her—she parted the skirts of his tunic and set to work on his leggings, untying the lacings and pulling down the flap.

He showed no signs of arousal but, when her fingers brushed his flesh, she heard him gasp, "Oh! *Melmenya*,"—his voice cracking on the second syllable of her name—and she felt him jerk against her palm.

She leaned in and, supporting him in her hands, though he had begun to harden now, and quickly, she took him in her mouth.

"No, *melmenya*; no, you are too tired, you should not—I must not let you—oh, *melmenya*—oh, *no...*" he protested. But her tongue and her lips soon silenced him, and then she felt him lean back, and carefully shift his hips forward, and relax, and grow to his full size, at last, in her mouth.

"I love you, Lassui," she murmured, though the words were muffled, "I love you so much, my darling."

*

They left *The Two Ways* an hour before dawn, having asked the landlady to hold their room since they were intending to return the same evening.

"It was so good of her," said Eowyn, as they rode out of the town, "to provide us with all this food." The woman had been horrified at the thought of their leaving without a proper breakfast, and had insisted on packing a basket for them to take with them. *'There's bread and cheese and apples,' she had said, 'a couple of slices of pease pudding—made with best butter, my Lady—pasties for your dinner, and a jug of pear brandy, to keep out the cold.'*

"We must give them some extra coin when we leave, Lassui."

Legolas, riding beside her, stretched out his hand; Eowyn grasped it and they exchanged smiles. "We shall," he said. Then he added, "Who could be anything but happy, with you by his side, *melmenya*?"

Eowyn laughed, remembering how despondently he had been gazing at the stars when, recognising the signs, she had lured him back to bed. "It does not take much to cure you of your melancholy, does it?"

"I am lucky that way."

As the sun was rising, they crossed the little bridge where, on their previous visit, they had encountered the children, playing on the frozen stream. "Do you want to stop here for breakfast?" asked Legolas. "I can clear the snow from the stones, and you can sit down."

They ate their bread and cheese, and drank a little of the brandy, and Legolas looked thoughtfully at the remains of the children's slide. "I was hoping that we would follow your footprints back to Melannen's house, melmenya," he said, "but it has snowed since we were here before."

Eowyn handed him the jug, and walked out into the road. Her boots left a distinctive mark—small and pointed, with a leaf-shaped pattern worked into the sole—but she could find no prints that matched them, for everything was blurred by the fresh layer of snow.

"Still, very few tracks go beyond this bridge, Lassui," she said, looking at the ghostly marks. "And, by the time we reach the Forest, it may be that mine are the only ones left."

*

Eryn Carantaur

Hentmirë awoke with the uncomfortable feeling that the day was going to be a difficult one.

She told Donatiya that, should anyone knock, she would answer the door herself, and she was not at all surprised when, just before breakfast, she opened it to find Melannen standing on the doorstep, with Niben tucked under his arm.

"Gwanur Hentmirë," he said, with a dazzling smile, "can I stay with *you* until Gwanur Eowyn and Gwanur Legolas come back?"

*

Eowyn's conjecture had proved correct.

Her footprints—and, here and there, little Melannen's—though indistinct, could be followed, and they quickly retraced the route to the ruined flet, climbed up, and searched it thoroughly. In the kitchen they found a few broken utensils; in one of the bed chambers, some blankets; and in the elfling's chamber, a wooden chest—still intact—containing a few small, homespun tunics, a pair of boots, and a cloth mouse—"Shadow Niben," said Legolas, and Eowyn's eyes filled with tears. But they found nothing that could tell them any more about the fate of the colony than they already knew.

Eowyn went down to the lower level and, in the remains of the sitting room, brushed the snow from the window seat, and sat down. She looked at the destruction lying all around her. Then, "Lassui," she called, "how old is Melannen?"

"I do not know, melmenya. Ten, perhaps. Or a little older." He put the mouse back in its nest of tunics, and closed the chest.

"But not as old as this damage?"

"No." He came down the stairs, and joined her in the sitting room.

"So," said Eowyn, thoughtfully, "when *this* happened,"—she waved her hand—"our Melannen had not been born. Here, we have found clothes and toys and, when we came before, his picture book with his name in it."

"What are you thinking, melmenya?" He sat down beside her.

"Well... This Melannen must have been conceived many years earlier than our Melannen."

"Yes."

"But, judging by the size of his clothes, this Melannen must have been about the same age as our Melannen when the Orcs attacked the settlement."

"Yes, which—oh, Valar!" He turned to face her. "Which means that, in our world, the attack may be just about to happen!" He sprang to his feet. "We must try to get back, melmenya!"

"But Lassui—wait! If the Valar sent us here, perhaps there is something they want us to see, something that will prepare us for what we need to do. Might it be sensible to search the other flets? If we could find out more about the Orcs, even track their route through the settlement —"

"Then we would know where the attack was likely to come from! Good thinking, melmenya. But we had better hurry. It would be a lot easier without all this snow."

"I know," said Eowyn, "but—oh!" Her hands flew up, and covered her face.

It was the same terrible cry that they had heard before, the same wail of loss and pain and unbearable anguish that still haunted their dreams, and it was coming from the ground, directly beneath them.

Chapter 4: Carafin's loss

For a split-second, the couple stared at one another, startled.

Then Legolas turned and ran, across the flet and down the spiral stairs, his hands reaching for his white knives as he descended.

But Eowyn knew, somehow, what had made that terrible sound and why, and she rushed after him, crying, "No, Lassui; Lassui, *wait!*" She skidded onto the icy landing, her boots slipping on the wood, and started down the steps.

*

Hentmirë looked anxiously at the tiny elfling standing on her doorstep.

She knew that the *responsible* thing would be to take him straight back to his parents.

But how could she betray a little boy's trust?

"Well," she began, "um,"—if only Legolas and Eowyn had come back!—"um, I *think*,"—inspiration struck her—"I think that we should go for a walk, Melannen. Yes, I shall send Rimush to tell your parents that you are safe—with me—and then you and I shall go for a walk."

*

Grey-white and whippet-thin, with a shock of dirty orange hair, the figure bounded across the snow and, with Legolas in close pursuit, plunged into the trees.

It was fast.

And used, thought Legolas, to evading predators, for it darted this way and that, drawing him into the maze of frosty undergrowth, tangling him in the blackthorns and the brambles. He was convinced, now, that it was harmless, but he kept his knives unsheathed, using the flats of the blades to push aside the grasping branches, and he was just beginning to gain on it, when a sickening jolt to his spirit—*Melmenya!*—told him that something had happened to Eowyn.

Instantly forgetting his quarry, he streaked back to clearing and, sheathing his knives, flew up the staircase. "My darling!"

She was lying awkwardly in the curve of the stairs. He crouched down beside her. "Melmenya?"

She lifted her head, and managed a weak smile. "I am all right, Lassui. I just... I fell..."

The palms of her hands were bloody but, to his relief, she pushed them against the step and tried to raise herself, and he knew that nothing was broken. "We must get those cleaned," he said, "and bound up. Let me help you..."

He lifted her, gently, into a sitting position.

"Owww..."

"Melmenya?"

"Just a few bruises on my bottom," she said, shifting uncomfortably, "to go with the grazes on my hands and knees. I should have been more careful. Can get me to my feet, Lassui?"

"Of course."

He wrapped an arm around her and, with his support, she rose, and managed to descend the stairs. "We must not—let her get away," she gasped—and Legolas realised that he had almost forgotten the creature he had been chasing.

He frowned. "Her?"

"We will need—the food the landlady packed for us—and the toy we found—in Melannen's bedchamber. Would you fetch them, Lassui?"

*

"Where are we *going*?" asked Melannen, skipping along beside Hentmirë.

"To see a very wise elf," said the little woman. She led him into a courtyard, just off the main walkway.

"Why?" He spun around as they crossed the empty space, looking up at the tiers of narrow balconies, then followed his Gwanur up a short flight of steps and through a pair of tall, carved doors. There, he stopped bouncing, and looked about him. "What is *this*?"

They were standing in a very long, very high, very light chamber, and its walls, which wound between the carantaur trees to form hundreds—Melannen thought—of little alcoves, were filled from floor to ceiling with *books*.

There were red books, and green books, and blue books, and black—

"This," said Hentmirë, in a whisper, "is the Library, where people from all over Middle-earth come to study, so we must be very quiet."

She led him between the rows of tables, past a big, human boy who seemed to be copying a picture from one of the red books. As he passed, Melannen stopped and, coming up on tiptoe, peered at the boy's drawing.

The big boy raised his head, and grinned.

"Melannen," hissed Hentmirë. "Come on."

Melannen grinned back before hurrying to her side.

"This," she said, opening another set of doors, "is the schoolroom."

"Ada does not let me go to school," said Melannen.

"Why ever not?" She waved him through.

"Teachers fill young minds with nonsense," he answered, matter-of-factly. "He trains me himself."

"Oh," said Hentmirë. "Well, you go and sit at one of those desks by the window, and I will find Master Maglor."

*

"Do you really think the mouse will work?" asked Legolas, crouching down beside Eowyn, who—cleaned up but still shaken from her fall—had already concealed herself behind a clump of snow-covered bushes, downwind of the clearing.

"It worked with me."

"Yes, but *you*,"—he put his arm around her shoulders, and pulled her into a gentle hug—"you —"

"I am foolish."

"Human, *melmenya*. You are human." He pressed his lips to her cold forehead. "You could not sense that the gaur was close."

"Well, I am sure it will work on her, too," said Eowyn. "Though it is a little cruel." She looked up through the lacework of branches to the steel-grey sky beyond. "I think it is going to snow again, *Lassui*."

*

Elsewhere

Gimli looked up at the steel-grey sky. "I think it is going to snow again, *Bowswayer*."

"Keep *still*," the Beorning grumbled. He had agreed to carry the dwarf in the absence of the latter's usual riding companion, but was far from happy with the arrangement. "It does not matter," he added, brushing a few big flakes from his sleeve, "there are no tracks to get buried; she did not come this way." He urged his horse onward, following the two Kings and their retinues down into the valley.

Gimli grunted, sympathetically.

At dawn, the Beorning had reported his nocturnal observations to King Elessar, who had immediately sent messengers to parley with the green elves, but the men had found no trace of them in the places Thorkell had pointed out. "Slippery *buggers*," he growled.

"Still, *Aragorn* knows a thing or two about elves, lad," said Gimli. "We will be allied with them by nightfall."

"Not if what *Thranduil* says of them is true," the man replied. "Green elves are the most contrary creatures on gods' earth."

"But *Aragorn* will charm them out of the trees, laddie," said Gimli, confidently.

*

Melannen, standing on his chair so that he could trace the grain of the wooden desktop with his finger, pursed his lips as he thought it through: *Gwanur Hentmirë is taking a very long time. She must have got lost.*

He jumped down from his desk, slipped out of the schoolroom and, unnoticed by the scholars in the main hall, went to find her.

*

The snow had started as a gentle swirl of flakes, but now was falling heavily. Legolas took off his cloak and draped it around Eowyn's shoulders.

"Thank you," she whispered, snuggling into it (and, inadvertently, showing him that the fall had hurt her more than she was admitting). "If she does not come back soon, *Lassui*, our bait will be buried."

*

Having found the colony's teacher, Master Maglor, in one of the Library's most secluded bays,

Hentmirë had explained her predicament. "Just what am I to do?" she asked.

"You must take him back to his parents, my Lady," he said, firmly.

"But—"

"It is not uncommon," he explained, more gently, "for a child who has been disciplined at home to seek refuge with friends or relations who have spoiled him in the past, but—"

"Legolas and Eowyn did not *spoil* him," said Hentmirë, loyally, "they showed him *love*."

"Would you like *me* to speak to him?"

The little woman bit her lip. "Well... No," she said, at last. "No. *I* must break it to him."

*

Legolas glanced at Eowyn.

She was hunched over, shivering, her gloved hands clasped to her breast.

"We should get you back to the inn, *melmenya*," he whispered.

"No." She sounded determined. "Not yet, *Lassui*. *Please*. Just a few more moments—oh!"—she grabbed his arm, and pointed towards the clearing—"look!"

Legolas peered through the branches. The figure—pale and wraith-like amidst the falling snow—had emerged from the far side of the clearing and was stalking Melannen's toy mouse, which lay, spread-eagled, on the ground.

Legolas shifted his weight, readying himself to spring, but Eowyn—her hand still upon his arm—tightened her grip. "No," she whispered. "Give her a moment to settle, then let *me* approach her, slowly."

"*Slowly?*"

"Have you never caught a bird, my love?"

"No..."

"Well, you need to do it slowly."

They waited.

The creature crawled to the toy, and bent over it, nuzzling and sniffing. Then it settled back on its haunches and—suddenly looking almost elven—scooped the mouse up in one of its hands.

"Oh, *Valar*," gasped Legolas. He glanced at Eowyn; her eyes were filled with tears. "You were right, *melmenya*."

"Melannen, Melannen," croaked the broken *elleth*, pressing the toy to her cheek and muttering fiercely, "don't let your *Ada* see; don't let him; don't *let* him!"

Eowyn took the remains of the loaf from the food basket, and broke off a large piece.

"Be careful, my darling..."

"I shall." She replaced the remainder of the bread and, hitching up her two cloaks, worked her way around the bushes and edged into the clearing, holding the food out at arm's length.

"Naughty boy, naughty boy," the elleth was chanting now, "but Carafin will hide it; Carafin will put it away..."

Eowyn moved closer.

Carafin's head jerked round. "Ssssssss," she hissed, dropping to her hands and knees, "ssssssss, sssssss!"

Eowyn stood her ground and, smiling, held out the bread.

(Legolas, behind the bushes, fitted an arrow to his bow, and took aim).

Moments passed.

Then the Carafin's body relaxed; she eyed the food.

Eowyn inched a little closer.

Suddenly the elleth lashed out—Legolas almost loosed his arrow but Eowyn immediately raised both hands to signal that Carafin had simply taken the bread—and she bounded back to the centre of the clearing and, sitting upon the snow, demolished the food in great bites, chewing it hard, and smacking her lips appreciatively.

Keeping her movements slow and her gestures small, Eowyn sat down beside her.

"More," said the elleth. "Mmm. More."

"Lassui," said Eowyn, not taking her eyes off the elleth for a second, "would you fetch the rest? He is bringing you some more," she explained. "No, no, there is no need to be afraid. He will not hurt you."

*

For the second time, Hentmirë opened and searched each of the schoolroom cupboards. "No, he has *vanished*..."

"Perhaps he has gone home, my Lady, to his parents," said Maglor.

"No..." Hentmirë sat down on one of the little chairs and rubbed her forehead. "No, he would not have done that. He would have waited for me, and asked me to take him back. No, he has run away, Master Maglor. He must have overheard us, somehow, and he has run away." She looked up at the elf. "I have let him down."

"Oh, my Lady, *no*." He sat down beside her. "You must not reproach yourself! You made the right decision. But now we must try to find the little fellow, and as quickly as possible. You know him better than I—where do you think he might have gone?"

Hentmirë frowned. "Well... We had a nice time at the market, the other day," she said, slowly, "and he made some friends when he played in the gardens, but,"—she shook her head—"I think he will have gone to Legolas and Eowyn's house. Yes, I think he will be waiting for his Gwanur Eowyn."

*

Breaking one of the landlady's cheese pasties in half, Eowyn handed a piece to Carafin, and took a bite from the other piece herself.

"Nice!" muttered the elleth, chewing noisily. "Nice—nice—nice! Mmm!"

"Whatever are we going to do with her, Lassui?"

Legolas sighed. "I have absolutely no idea, melmenya." He had removed Brightstar's saddle and had brought it back to the clearing for Eowyn to sit on. "She must have been living here," he said, laying it on the ground, "on her own, since the Orc attack—"

"ORCS!" wailed Carafin. "Filthy, filthy Orcs!"

"Shhhh," said Eowyn, taking an apple from the basket and giving it to her.

"Mmm," said Carafin, dribbling apple juice down her chin, "mmm—mmm—mmm!"

"We will soon run out of food, Lassui."

Legolas crouched down beside his wife and said, very softly, "We must take her back with us."

"Can we? Do you think the Valar will let us?"

"I think we have to try."

Carafin, meanwhile, had finished the apple and was looking as though she might crawl away. Eowyn quickly found her some cheese. "How shall we persuade her to come with us?"

"Not going," said the elleth, taking a huge bite. "Not, not, not!"

She understands us, Eowyn mouthed. Then, "Why not?" she asked Carafin, gently.

The elleth hurled the piece of cheese at her and scuttled away, scrambling over the remains of the garden until she came to one of the rectangular mounds and there, working frantically, she scraped away the snow to reveal a pile of stones.

"Oh gods," murmured Eowyn.

"A burial cairn," whispered Legolas.

"*Melannen*," said Carafin.

*

The Library

Arador laid down his pen, and leaned back in his chair, shrugging his stiff shoulders.

He had been working—on a problem that Lord Fingolfin had set him—since the Library had opened, he had had no breakfast, and his stomach was beginning to protest. It was time to wander over to the marketplace for hot pie and peas. He returned his book to its shelf, put his pen and papers in his pigeon hole, checked that his money pouch was still hanging from his belt, and went to the cloakroom to collect his greatcoat and scarf.

As he wound the scarf around his neck, bending forward slightly, he spotted a little foot sticking out from beneath the row of cloaks. "Hello," he said.

The foot disappeared.

Arador pulled a cloak aside.

He was *expecting* to find the cheeky little elfling who had grinned at him earlier; what he was *not* expecting was to find the child crying. He crouched down beside him. "What are you doing under here?" he asked, kindly.

The boy sniffed. "Hiding."

"*Hiding?*" Arador sat down beside him and, shoving the cloak aside, leaned back against the wall. "Why are you hiding—my name is Arador, by the way." He held out a hand, but the elfling looked at it suspiciously. "What is *your* name?"

"Melannen."

"Why are you hiding, Melannen?"

"I am waiting for Gwanur Eowyn and Gwanur Legolas to come back."

"Oh..." Arador had heard rumours that Legolas and Eowyn had rescued an Elven child from somewhere near the Mountains of Mordor. "I thought they had sent for your parents," he said.

The elfling sighed, and Arador almost laughed, for it was such a world-weary sound. "Ada is *cross* with me."

"Oh..." Arador knew what that felt like. "What about your mama—your Nana?"

The elfling frowned. "Nana is cross too, when Ada is there."

"So you are hiding here until Legolas and Eowyn come back..."

"Gwanur Eowyn *never* gets cross," said Melannen. "She plays with me, and we read books, and Gwanur Legolas is teaching me *archery*, and Gwanur Hentmirë tells me stories—"

"I see," said Arador. He was still young enough to remember what it was like to receive a disappointment and feel that the world was coming to an end—and, besides, his stomach was growling. "Would you like some pie and peas, Melannen?"

*

Hentmirë, having searched Legolas and Eowyn's chambers from top to bottom and found no trace of the missing elfling, collapsed into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

"There is nothing else for it," she muttered. "I shall have to tell his parents that I have lost him."

*

"She must have been living here," whispered Legolas, "all alone, since the Orcs attacked, and killed Melannen. And it has driven her out of her mind."

Carafin had settled herself upon the burial cairn and, arms clasping the rocks like the body of her dead child, was crooning a lullaby.

"Oh, Lassui," sobbed Eowyn.

Legolas pulled her into his arms, and let her cry against his chest.

Could *Carafin* have buried him herself? he wondered, stroking Eowyn's damp hair. *She does not seem capable.* He glanced around the clearing, looking again for any signs of other survivors.

"We cannot take her away from him, Lassui," Eowyn sobbed. "It would destroy what little is left of her."

Legolas pressed his lips to the top of her head. "We would have to take Melannen's body with

us.”

“*Could you do that?*” She shifted in his arms, leaning back to look up at him. “Dig him up? His little bones...” She shook her head. “She would not let you. She would tear your eyes out.”

“We cannot leave her here, melmenya. Not like this.”

“She needs people to care for her. Elves. We need to restore the settlement, Lassui.”

Restore the settlement.

Was that it? His important task?

Legolas drew Eowyn back to the middle of the clearing and sat her down on Brightstar’s saddle. “But this is not our world, melmenya,” he said, crouching beside her. “And we are only here so that we can stop this happening *there*. Unless...” He frowned, thinking about what she had said. “How are you feeling, melmenya? Physically? Tell me the truth.”

“Well, I am stiff and sore,”—she sniffed, wiping the tears from her face— “and cold. But I am all right, really, Lassui.”

He nodded. “Then this is what we are going to do...”

*

“Here,” said Arador, setting a plate of steaming food in front of the elfling, “tuck in.”

The market was busy, but they had managed to find a table, next to the flet wall, with a wooden canopy to keep off the snow. Arador sat down opposite Melannen and, taking up his spoon, gestured towards the boy’s plate. “Go on,” he said, “it’s good.”

Melannen poked the mountain of meat pie. “Ada says that you should never take more than you need.”

“Well,” said Arador, scooping up a spoonful of food and shovelling it into his mouth, “*you* eat as much as you need and *I* will eat the rest, and—that way—nothing will be wasted.” He took another mouthful and, chewing it, looked at the elfling, curiously. *It would be just like some haughty, aristocratic elf, he thought, to lecture the kid on self restraint, but overlook the basics.* “Did your Ada never teach you to say thank you?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Gwanur Legolas,” said Melannen, “says that we should not eat animals unless there is nothing else. But Ada says that the Valar *made* the animals for us to eat, as long as we give thanks, and do not over indulge.”

“Over *indulge*,” said Arador. “Hmm... And what do *you* think?”

“I think the pie is nice...”

“Me too.”

A young waitress swept up to their table and, deftly setting down a jug of hot apple juice, leaned over to Arador, and whispered, “I finish at six o’clock.”

Arador smiled up at her.

"Is she your hervess?" asked Melannen, watching her move to the next table.

"My wife?" Arador laughed. "No, Elfleda's just a friend." He poured out two goblets of juice and pushed one towards Melannen. "Right," he said, suddenly serious, "tell me how you came to be hiding in the library."

*

Later

Legolas laid three dead rabbits on the ground.

Eowyn, sitting beside the camp fire, stretched out a hand and stroked the nearest carcass. "Poor little things."

"I know. But I could find nothing else, melmenya, and you need some food to keep out the cold. Do you know how to clean them?"

She nodded. "My uncle taught me on my first hunting trip."

He drew one of his white knives and, spinning it, offered her the handle. "Use this." Then he sat down beside her and, drawing the other knife, began whittling a piece of wood, shaping it into a spit. "How is she?"

Carafin had stopped singing but she was still lying on the burial cairn.

"No better," said Eowyn, carefully slitting the rabbit's skin and peeling it back, "but at least she has not run away. I think she must spend most of her time like that." She made a small hole in the snow and, opening the animal's belly, removed the contents, and buried it. Then, taking another handful of snow, she scoured out the cavity. "The first one is ready, Lassui."

Legolas threaded the carcass onto the spit and suspended it over the fire. "Can you manage the rest yourself, Eowyn nín?"

"Of course."

"I will find us somewhere to sleep." He crossed the clearing, keeping well away from Carafin so as not to scare her, and—deliberately ignoring the remains of Melannen's house—searched the Forest until he found another staircase, and climbed up.

This house had been much larger than Melannen's, spreading across several trees, with a number of small bed chambers—presumably for servants—at the very highest level. Amongst these he found exactly what he was looking for: a tiny room with its walls and roof still intact, and with enough lumber to block up the door and windows, and make the place reasonably snug and safe. With his cloak as a mattress, Brightstar's saddle as a pillow, and horse blankets and his shared body warmth to keep out the cold, Eowyn should have a reasonably comfortable night. He cleared the couch and barricaded the windows. Then he descended the stairs and ran back to the clearing.

Eowyn had finished cleaning the rabbits, and had strung them on the spit. "I tried coaxing Carafin with another apple," she said, as he sat down, "but she was not interested."

"She has probably eaten her fill for the time being, melmenya. I doubt she is used to having so much, so easily."

"Do you think he *will* help her, Lassui?"

Legolas' plan was to spend the night in the Forest, question Carafin again in the morning, then

—whether they had learned anything valuable from her or not—return to the inn and, from there, send a messenger to his double—the Legolas of this shadow world—telling him about the ruined settlement and asking him to send someone to take care of the elleth. He would word it as a warning, pointing out that the region was vulnerable to attack from anyone still lurking in Mordor, and suggesting that it would be a sensible precaution to establish a small permanent guard post there.

“We can do no more for her than that,” he said turning the wooden spit, “unless we are prepared to kidnap her. And the people of the Daw Valley have no reason to shelter her, so we would either have to find someone trustworthy, and pay them to take her to Eryn Carantaur, or take her there ourselves—and that would leave the elves in our own world unprotected for several more days...”

He had found a pewter cup in the kitchen of the ruined house, and he scrubbed it out, then filled it up with clean snow, and pushed it into the embers to warm. “I just wish,” he said, “that the Valar had told me—”

Eowyn grabbed his arm and squeezed it, urgently.

He turned, and gasped.

Carafin was crouching down beside them, holding out Melannen’s cloth mouse.

“Thank you,” said Eowyn, taking it, and pressing it to her bosom.

Carafin settled down next to her. “*Orcs*,” she said, bitterly. “Orcs came. Night night,”—in a sing-song voice—“night night, sleep tight, Melannen—night night, Nana.”

Suddenly, she sprang forward on all fours, roaring, tearing up handfuls of snow and throwing them into the fire: “Orcs came,” she screamed. “ORCS CAME!”

*

Eryn Carantaur

Melannen’s father, seated at the table, stared at Hentmirë like a judge examining a prisoner. “I cannot believe what I am hearing—Roseth, control yourself.” (His wife was weeping softly).

“He really cannot have gone far,” said the little woman. In Carhivilvren she had been a person of some importance, and she was drawing upon all her past experience now, meeting the gaze that threatened to bore a hole in her skull. “I have spoken to Captain Golradir and to March Warden Haldir, and their soldiers are searching the city for him. It is just a matter of time until they find him—as I said, he cannot have gone far—”

Roseth whimpered, and Hentmirë’s concentration broke. She turned to the elleth. “I am so sorry...”

“If anything has happened to to *my* son,” said Túon, with cold fury, “I shall insist that your incompetence is punished.”

*

“Someone like that doesn’t deserve a kid,” muttered Arador.

Having arranged for Elfleda to join them at the end of her shift, he had brought Melannen home to his tiny lodgings in the Library courtyard. The elfling had promptly fallen asleep, curled up with Niben, in the middle of the bed.

"From what you've told me," said Elfleda, who was roasting chestnuts on the fire, "he's not actually a bad father, just a bit—well—strict. And his mother's all right."

"His mother's nice to him, but only when that tyrant isn't there to stop her," said Arador. "Otherwise, it's no toys, no playing with friends, no going to school—it's a wonder the poor kid isn't deranged—"

"Are you sure you're not confusing him with your own father?"

Arador ignored the question. "It's obvious why he wants to be with Eowyn."

"Well, of course, *anyone* would want to be with Eowyn," said Elfleda. "Let's just hope she doesn't bend over and give him a sun tan."

Arador stared at her, uncharacteristically speechless.

The girl shrugged. "Sometimes your Eowyn-worship gets a bit annoying." She poked at the chestnuts. "So what are you going to do with him?"

"Let him hide here."

"Oh, for the gods' sakes!"

"What?"

"You're supposed to be clever, a bloody *scholar*—"

"Just imagine what that bastard will do if he goes back. The kid will be twenty before he sees daylight again!"

"Arador! It is not for *you* to come between them! This Túon is not your father! And do you honestly think that even Eowyn will let you stay here if she finds out you've stolen a child? You'll be sent back home before you can say *I'm a donkey-prick*—and that's if they don't lock you up and throw away the key." She dropped the toasting fork and pounced on him, grasping his shoulders and shaking him hard. "*Aradooor!*"

The boy sighed. "All right," he conceded, shrugging her hands off. "I'll see if I can persuade him to go back of his own accord. But I won't force him."

*

Later

Legolas finished barricading the door and, climbing onto the couch beside Eowyn—all bundled up in horse blankets—took her in his arms and settled down to rest.

He had just begun to drift into reverie when something cold brushed against his chest.

"*Melmenya?*"

Icy fingertips grazed his flesh as they slid down to his waist.

Ignoring his body's immediate response, Legolas grasped Eowyn's hand. "Now is not the time, my darling," he said, softly.

"Why not?"

Her voice was muffled by the cloaks. The Valar only knew how she had managed to free her hand—or how she expected *him* to find his way to *her*. "It is too cold, *melmenya*."

"You will warm me up."

Her hand slipped inside his leggings, and Legolas held out for a moment longer. Then—muttering "*Wanton...*"—he rolled over onto his back and, closing his eyes, let her stroke him.

"AAAAAAAAAARGH!" Carafin's angry scream pierced the night.

The couple sprang apart, then froze, transfixed by a second noise—of short, rasping breaths.

"Orcs," whispered Eowyn.

Legolas scrambled to his feet, doing up his leggings. "Stay here, melmenya," he cried. "Bar the door behind me!"

TO BE CONTINUED...