Aearlinn - a Song of the Sea

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by erobery

Summary

By bonding with him and sharing the light of his soul, Elrond saves Legolas from certain death by poisoned wounds. The proud ruler of Imladris is not happy to find himself drawing ever closer to falling in true love with his reluctant consort. Legolas, despite his doubts and fears, loses his heart to the Noldorin Lord and conceives a child by him. The twins arrive to separate the two, despising the bonding they were forced to witness and find they are somehow mixed up in the bond, too. As a kind reviewer pointed out, this AU has everything: politics, religious & cultural differences, secrets, reunions, racism, classism, battlefield bonds and pregnancy.
A Song of the Sea

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"Ai Valar, it is HOT today."

Elrond smiled in whimsical bemusement as he strolled through the portico onto the veranda, seeking the source of the plaintive voice. He discovered Legolas seated on the lip of the fountain, leaning over the edge as one long arm, plunged right into the clear water up to his elbow, bore the weight of his body while the other reached out into the falling cascade. The heavy ribbons of silver fluid bounced and spilled from his upturned palm and Legolas laughed as he flickered his fingers in the water's dance. Suddenly, he dipped his head right into the stream. The fluid poured over his golden hair and turned it to bronze, flowed down his neck and shoulders, sent droplets chasing along the contours of his biceps and racing down the long sinuous curve of his back. Elrond's grin turned more wolfish as he watched, thinking he should educate the woodland warrior and tell him fountains were not meant for bathing or for playing, but Legolas wasn't wearing anything and so he truly did not mind the breach of manners.

In two strides he was on top of the silvan, one hand wrapped around the narrow waist to hold him captive as the other parted robes and unfastened leggings and undergarments with the kind of speed elven folk only display when slaying foes or claiming mates. He claimed Legolas. The initial penetration held force enough to raise an involuntary cry of alarm that in the next motion was transmuted to a sound more decadent and utterly enthralling than anything Elrond had ever heard. He could not help himself, restrain himself, or master himself. He took his pleasure with one powerful thrust after another and spent quickly with both regret and delight, for this was bliss. Legolas, he noted as he kissed the flesh of the shoulder he covered, had copied the fountain and emptied his milky stream into the basin.

Elrond shifted, pulling Legolas from the water as he settled on the ground and leaned against the marble bounds of the pool. He gathered the Wood Elf into the crook of his arms and smiled as the graceful form exhaled a contented sigh and sprawled out across his lap, the soaked head resting upon his shoulder. "Happy?" he asked, though he didn't need to, and for answer received only a glance, filled with warmth and love, from vibrant eyes veiled beneath golden lashes. Elrond bent and kissed the brow, damp with both the fountain's essence and the salty sweat wrought from their jubilant coupling, and saw that Legolas was indeed flushed all over, pink and gold and red.

He stroked silken skin where a strong heart still beat in a wild tempo, thrilling to the sensation of a tight, hard nipple pressing into his palm as it passed, breath catching when the dark red tip was revealed anew. Legolas made that sound, a soft and trilling cry that Elrond had yet to decipher, uncertain if it was speech or something much more primitive, not caring over much as it contained within it such intimate revelation of everything the Wood Elf was. All of that, he marvelled, was his and he was as the center of some wondrous world no one else could see.

Aye, this was bliss. His robes were a mess, stained with perspiration and smelling strongly of musky secretions that normally perfumed only the bedclothes, but Elrond didn't care. He was certain he had some important meeting or appointment or duty he was supposed to be attending, yet the details escaped him. It didn't matter; he would see to it later, or tomorrow, or perhaps never. Now, he would permit this primal magic to entrance him, befuddle him, bewitch and possess him. Like Thingol he would stay, forgetting his kin, his people, his lands, his very mind if need be, so long as this fey creature remained in his embrace.
Legolas was like a craving and a hunger that never ceased, a desire that reached beneath the surface of reason, a response purely of the subconscious, instinctive and vital and irresistible. Yet he was aware if it, oh indeed he was aware! The need, the addiction had a name and a face and a form; a sound and a scent and a feel. It was nearly a sickness, his desire was so strong, like sea-longing. His every sense was consumed by Legolas and being near him was not enough, never enough. He must possess him and in so doing was himself captured, heart, soul and body bound up. Aye, Legolas was the ocean and Elrond was adrift. He smiled ruefully over this comparison, for he could not deny its truth, and kissed the wet tresses, tasting how the water was different now, having touched the Wood Elf.

"Aearen," he whispered reverently, passionately and kissed the lips that parted so readily for him.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ The Next Day, Late in the Afternoon ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"You are cold?" Elrond asked, mildly alarmed though little about life with Legolas was anything other than surprising.

After nearly three Ages of existence during which he had seen and experienced all manner of catastrophes, fought too many battles, killed too few enemies, suffered grief and loss enough to break lesser Elves, raised a family, fostered his brother's progeny for countless generations of Men, and accumulated a vast store of wisdom and knowledge, Elrond was finally a revered Elven Lord. The Keeper of the most powerful of the three Elven Rings of Power, the noble, unflappable, charismatic leader of the White Council, Elrond was a magnet for people of all races seeking advice and aid for every type of problem, from territorial disputes to medicinal cures. One would think such an individual was no longer capable of producing an emotional response such as astonishment. Elrond certainly had come to that conclusion over an Age ago, convinced there was truly nothing new under the heavens.

Clearly, he had neglected to consider the effect one sylvan Elf could have upon him, indeed, upon the population of Imladris at large. Elrond now proceeded through each successive day in a perpetual state of perplexity. This modification to his staid, even austere, persona had begun upon finding Legolas, just over ten years ago, and not only had the befuddlement not abated, it had in fact worsened. He found it impossible to accurately predict what Legolas might do, say, think, or feel while participating in even the most mundane scenarios of life, such as eating dinner or dressing for the day.

Thus, Elrond could only stare, a minute kernel of trepidation germinating in his gut, as the slender Elf rummaged through his clothes press and brought forth a heavy fur cloak. He watched Legolas wrap this around his lithe frame, which was already encased in an excessive number of garments: woollen, silken, and leather, the Elven Lord's atop his own. The Lore Master took a cautious step forward.

"Cold? You feel cold?" he repeated, enunciating the term forcefully just to be sure Legolas had not said something else entirely in that obscure Nandorin dialect he reverted to whenever he was a bit distracted.

"Thenin," Legolas replied quietly, his brow slightly creased and a hint of a shadow gathered around his comely features.

Vivid eyes flickered up to Elrond's just for an instant and then away as he turned to pull open the bureau drawers, drawing forth a third pair of hose? No, wait; Elrond's brows arched high, kidskin gloves! He had never seen the archer cover his fingertips, yet that was precisely what was happening. Legolas pulled them on, easing those elegant and lethal digits into the smooth, tanned
hide, and still it was not enough. He hastened to the hearth and knelt, sweeping up ash into the bin, laying in straw and kindling and logs, striking flint and steel for a fire; all this done with hands that trembled and teeth clenched to stay them from chattering.

"Man le presta, Aearen?" Elrond murmured, hurrying over with opened arms into which the Wood Elf fairly dived. The revered Lord pressed him to his heart, disturbed by the shivering detectable even through all those layers of clothing. His fright increased immediately, sensing the desperation with which Legolas burrowed close to absorb warmth, hid his face, and uttered a nearly imperceptible sigh of discomfort tinged with fear. Elrond knew now; this was not some peculiar trait common to all Elves of sylvan descent.

"Alnad, alnad, Nín'ódhel," Legolas answered belatedly, the attempt at nonchalance spoiled by his uncertainty. He raised liquid eyes to unfathomable grey, imploring aid he could not voice. Elrond sat him down before the grate but did not let go. Half kneeling, half sitting, listening to the roar and snap as the flames leaped high into the chimney, he added more wood with one hand as the other pulled up the cloak's deep hood to cover the golden hair. Most of the body's heat was lost from the crown of the head, the healer knew, and he was gratified to feel the tremors lessen a little almost instantly. He breathed a sigh and rubbed the rigid back vigourously, hoping to promote circulation through lanky limbs awkwardly drawn up against the Wood Elf's folded frame. "Advae?" he asked, sitting back some to tilt up the lowered face so to judge the answer. When it came, in the form of a half-hearted and one-sided shoulder shrug, Elrond's concern grew.

Yesterday Legolas complained of the heat and went naked all the day, yet this afternoon he could not bear the temperate climate of Imladris' early spring? This was not right. The healer's analytical mind ran through the catalogue of symptoms caused by various toxins but nothing fit. Foremost in the diagnosis was the lack of any injury, from poisoned weapons or otherwise. As every meal served to Legolas was created for Elrond's table, the condition could not have arisen from ingesting something tainted. Of course, Wood Elves did not have the same refined palate as Noldorin folk and Legolas never ate much of what was prepared in the Last Homely House. Thus the possibility loomed that he had eaten something Elrond wouldn't consider food.

He would never forget the moonlit night when he had spied Legolas grazing among the garden shrubberies, singing softly to himself. Smiling at this quaint, endearingly primitive behaviour, Elrond had sauntered across the lawn to observe, magnanimously asking to share in the humble repast, willing to taste a leaf or a flower. Legolas had smiled shyly, daintily plucking two hugely fat slugs from the greenery. The largest he had hesitantly held out to the Noldorin Lord and the other slimy, wriggling gastropod he had popped in his mouth as one would a ripe, succulent blackberry. Then he had chewed it, swallowed it, and eaten the second one, Elrond having refused the delicacy.

It had not been possible to kiss Legolas for quite a while after that, which had wounded Legolas' feelings almost beyond repair, resulting in his retreat to the woods covering the northern corner of Imladris, and thus termination of sexual intercourse between them. He had returned eventually for he couldn't stay away, but it had taken a long time to repair the wound. Bringing up the subject of food was still a difficult undertaking, but poison was the most likely answer for the bizarre sensitivity to temperature, and Elrond was too frightened of loosing Legolas permanently to hesitate. He drew a breath and sat back enough to meet the Wood Elf's eyes.

"What have you eaten recently?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? There must be something. Tell me everything your have eaten, Legolas." A quick shake of the hooded head was the only reply and Elrond frowned. "Can you not think of anything out of
the ordinary? An insect? Some kind of fungus, perhaps? Think, Legolas!" Elrond shook him a bit for emphasis and then felt his heart freeze at the look of sorrow and pain that flashed across Legolas' face. "Nay, nay! Don't, Legolas; I didn't mean it unkindly. I know you understand what is safe to eat in your world, but this is a different climate with different flora and fauna."

Elrond knew it was the wrong thing to say for Legolas wasn't looking at him anymore and only shook his head listlessly. The shivering increased but he tried to break free. Elrond went on, tightening his hold. "Nay, don't go! We must discuss this frankly. As a healer, I must seek the cause and since you have not been injured" his voice faltered and stopped and Elrond actually gasped as the sylvan's eyes once more met his.

The anger in them was just the sort of wrath that caused a father to check himself before chastising a child, a paternalistic disappointment combined with real rage, more than sufficient in magnitude to bring about destruction and devastation. So strange, for this young thing, so very much younger than even his youngest child, to tender him such a stare, a look that said no dissembling would help, all lies were known, and only abject apology and contrition could salvage the day. Elrond swallowed, for the truth Legolas knew was less than flattering.

Noble and dignified, dauntless and brave, wise and learned, Elrond Peredhel was all these things. His lineage was superlative, combining the best qualities of the Noldorin, Sindarin, and Vanyarin Eldar with the exalted powers of the Maiar and the sturdy tenacity of Humans. Throughout every realm on Arda, he was revered for his tolerance and respect for the diverse beliefs and customs of those who found their way to his protected realm. Elrond was proud of his unique heritage and esteemed reputation.

Yet beneath this façade of responsible and compassionate authority, he was not so very different from anyone else and like everyone else had his personal prejudices. It was no secret that the Lord of Imladris summarily excluded the sylvan Elves from his agenda, dismissing them as a lesser people, incapable of contributing to the struggle against the encroaching Shadow. Imladris had closer ties to the Rangers inhabiting Eriador than to the wild Elves of Rhovanion. Why, Dwarves had visited the hidden valley more frequently than the folk of the Woodland Realm. Shocking? Perhaps, but even the Valar chose favourites among Iluvatar's Children.

Oh yes, it was easy to point to Wood Elves with a sneer and a snicker. They'd been hiding in their Greenwood so long they didn't even speak the same language, if it even was language, as their Sindarin and Noldorin kin. Not even the Galadhrim could understand them anymore. There was no proof positive that any of them could reproduce their archaic tongue in written form. It was rumoured they couldn't read and write Sindarin either and didn't see any reason to learn such skills. Until the arrival of Oropher's refugees early in the Second Age, sylvan culture had relied upon stone for arrowheads, knives, and tools. The Second Age! Most of the great deeds of elf-kind were ancient history before the Wood Elves even learned of them. They hadn't fought in any of the great battles of the First Age and the one war in which they had participated, the Last Alliance, hadn't shown them to be very effective, for they had been slaughtered nearly to extinction. Indeed, being sylvan was equated with being stupid, ignorant, incompetent, and stubborn.

That was the general consensus among the citizens of the other Elven realms, including Imladris, and Legolas knew it. The Lord of Imladris had been known to laugh at such jibes and jests himself, and Legolas knew that, too. Truthfully, this low opinion of the wild Elves hadn't bothered Elrond before. Now, though, oh, it bothered him now, for now there was Legolas. Legolas, who was everything, absolutely everything! The breath he inhaled was no less vital to his existence than this enchanting, intoxicating, exasperating, intriguing Wood Elf, and Elrond could not pretend anymore.

"Aearen, forgive my arrogance. I should not presume to greater knowledge of what in the natural
world is safe to consume, not greater than yours, at least. Be patient with me; I am old and slow to learn new things. I'm worried and want an answer, a solution. I can't bear for you to suffer discomfort of any sort." Elrond meant every word of it, for he loved the Wood Elf dearly, and that is the truth he would have Legolas know.

Absolution was instantaneous. Legolas murmured something in sarcastic Nandorin but Elrond only caught the words 'ancient' and 'dirt'. The icy fire cooled in the pools of blue and Legolas relaxed, moving back into Elrond's arms with a sigh. "I haven't been hungry enough to forage or hunt," he said in faintly accented Sindarin.

"For how long?" Elrond wrapped his arms around the shivering body with a silent prayer of thanks to the Valar and squeezed Legolas for all he was worth. Yet his expression became grim when the only response was another shrug and a small shake of the head. "When did you last eat, Legolas?" In truth, Elrond was upset that he could not remember this himself, but he had become accustomed to the sylvan's refusals at table and had decided it was best not to inquire too closely about when, or what, Legolas ate.

"You fed me honey spiced with cinnamon just yesterday," Legolas said and smiled as a soft blush stole over his cheeks and ears. A shudder worked through him that had naught to do with being cold. "Ah, yes." A slow smile curled Elrond's lips into a distinctly lecherous curve as the event replayed. His body tingled in recollection; gladly would he repeat the experiment, designed to broaden his love's appreciation for new 'tastes', considering the pleasure experienced as Legolas had licked and sucked the sticky substance from some exceedingly sensitive areas. Enlightenment blossomed. The previous day's claim of being too warm had been but a game, an excuse for Legolas to wander naked through the garden, offering a tempting invitation too beguiling to ignore. He had kept Legolas in a state of arousal the whole day, or perhaps it was the other way round, but in any case they had enjoyed one another for hours. Mayhap Legolas merely wished to play.

Elrond's eyes dropped down to admire a mouth made to allure, parted just enough to be teasingly provocative, the scent of the breath leaving them still evocative of cinnamon and honey, but even as he contemplated sampling the supple lips, Legolas' control slipped. His incisors rattled briefly before he clamped his jaws together and ducked his head in embarrassment, the luscious smile vanished.

The Noldorin Lord sighed, judging the Wood Elf truly was suffering, and lifted the lowered face he loved so. The expression returned imparted the deep and abiding trust Legolas harboured, so much that Elrond's soul wrenched to see it, for it had not always been like this. The thought ran through his mind that he was living a wondrous dream from which he never wished to wake. He touched the high, fair cheek, his fingertips brushing against a softness that was real and warm and present and his alone.

Warm. Legolas' skin was warm to the touch. Despite the normal temperature Elrond detected, Legolas shivered again and huddled even closer, burying his nose into ebony locks, tucking gloved hands into the folds of thick velvet robes. "Ringe," he muttered and shuddered in misery.

"I am truly concerned," Elrond stated. "It may be that the cinnamon acts as a sort toxin for sylvan folk. You did say you hadn't tasted it before."

"Aye, that's so; though I didn't eat very much," the blush deepened as Legolas' heart leaped, "of the spice."

Elrond laughed lightly, pleased to have the sickness defined. "True enough, and its virulence must be mild for it has been several hours since you consumed any. I will give you a purging tea and that should cause it to dissipate more quickly. As long as you do not partake of cinnamon again, I doubt
there will be any lasting effects."

Legolas’ features contorted in appalled disgust upon hearing this. He watched in dread as Elrond rose and collected the necessary herbs and filled the kettle with water. "Ai! I am only cold; no need for medicine," he protested. "What I need is for you to come and warm me."

"Nay," Elrond shook his head seriously and resumed his seat. "We have no means to determine if the symptoms will worsen. It is best to rid your body of this bane before it has time to do you real injury." He encircled the shivering Elf with his arms and smiled faintly to hear the woebegone sigh that escaped the archer’s lips. He gently swayed, humming and stroking the shaking back until the water boiled.

The lovers shared a couple of peaceful hours by the fire, wound around each other in a snug embrace, silent in the comfort of their mutual dependence, before the tonic worked and Legolas had to make a hasty dash to the privy. The Elven Lord waited patiently yet it was nearly an hour before Legolas returned. His hair was wet as if he had just washed it, which he had, but he had re-wrapped himself in all the previous garments and added a thick woollen blanket as well.

"You are still chilled," Elrond remarked, settling the quaking Elf onto his lap. "Did you bathe in cold water? I should have followed and made sure you heated the bath first," he scolded. He knew Legolas had washed from head to toe after the purgative flushed his bowels, for the sylvan held to a very fastidious definition of the word clean. "Let me warm you. Undress; we need to lie skin to skin and share our bodies' heat.

He whisked away the fur cloak with a flourish that made Legolas’ eyes sparkle, only to find a green velvet formal robe. That he removed as well, uncovering two brocade waistcoats. There were many buttons and it took a while to dispense with those. Beneath them, Elrond revealed a leather cuirass and stripped that off, followed by vambraces, the gloves, two tunics, three silk shirts, and a linen undershirt. At last Elrond uncovered the svelte torso’s gloriously erotic veneer of apricot skin. He ran hungry eyes and eager hands over the exposed chest, pinching taut ruby nipples, devouring garnet lips. The kiss ended and he met Legolas' hopefully wanton look with a smile. "Aye, once you stop shivering. Get those things off." Elrond pointed to the boots and leggings as he set Legolas aside and started to disrobe.

Legolas groaned, desire and misery mingled, as he separated from his lover and endured the touch of the room's air. He tugged off the boots, thick wool socks, three sets of hose, two pair of leggings, and a soft silk breechclout. Knees pulled up to his chest, he folded sinewy arms around them and set to rocking while he waited. A more dejected and pathetic mass of quivering flesh could not be imagined.

In mere minutes Elrond was divested of his elaborate, lordly garb and tossed aside the last of his small clothes, adding them to the heap of fabric and leather already deposited on the floor. With exuberant gusto he pushed aside an armchair and its side table to make room, spread out the blanket, pleased Legolas had thought to bring it along, and reached for the naked archer, laying him down before the hearth. Elrond stretched out atop him, a chord of joy thrumming through his veins, grateful that the sensation of cold was an internal perception for Legolas only and not truly a lack of heat. The body beneath him was inviting and responsive, Legolas’ penis flexing and just starting to fill. Elrond settled the fur cloak over them both and then delved into the lavish mane, tangling the golden hair and planting small kisses upon the becomingly flushed cheeks. He claimed inviting lips that lifted to meet his and felt himself grow hard. He shifted to let Legolas feel him, thick and hot and rigid, pressing against his belly, enhancing the arousal, enjoying the friction.

Then Legolas abruptly retreated from the kiss to draw his legs close, seeking to curl up, and voiced a
small complaint, disappointment and frustration evident. Elrond realised their feet were still exposed and couldn't repress a light chuckle to be interrupted so. The cloak was not meant to be a blanket and while Legolas was not as tall as Elrond, even he was not fully covered by the fur. Elrond had to prop himself up to grab the heavy velvet outer robes, draping this over their ankles and toes. That done he laid back down and gathered Legolas to him.

"Advae?"

"Advae."

Legolas sighed and closed his eyes, safe and protected beside the Noldorin Lord, and soon the chill began to dissipate. The shivers became more like searing jolts of liquid fire as Elrond's hands and lips ravished him. A swift caress of a tongue across his ear preceded the hushed whisper of his name while fingers teased the tip of his penis. He squirmed under the delicious assault.

"Ai, Nín'ódhel, the things you do to me!"

"You like it, Aearen; you know you do."

Elrond rubbed his palm over Legolas' lean abdomen and down to the lovely erection, relishing the way the organ stood out at nearly right angles to the flat, hard stomach. He curled his fingers around it and smiled; the length of the slender shaft was almost exactly the width of his hand and the fit was perfect. He squeezed and Legolas gasped, twitching all over, and Elrond met his lover's pleading eyes with playful mischief. He stroked and watched, leaning low to nibble on firm little nipples and the tender rosy skin surrounding them, feeling the accelerated pulse beneath his mouth. Legolas' respiration was harsh and desperate as he pushed against Elrond's grip, but otherwise he was quiet in his passion.

Slowly Elrond worked his tongue over Legolas, determined to taste every bit of naked flesh before he reached his peak. It was a goal he had yet to achieve, for by the time his lips reached the archer's navel the Elven Lord was too close to release to restrain himself. No matter how often they coupled, Elrond never managed more than a brief period of intense foreplay before he gave in, thrusting inside the slick, tight confines of his lover's body. Ecstasy overtook him shortly after penetration and Legolas was usually spent by then, lost, adrift in crashing waves of delight. Perhaps if Legolas would not pump him quite so well he could complete his feast this time. Elrond seized the wrist and arrested the tantalising motion, pulled the other hand off his arse, and drew both up and away, high above the archer's head. Legolas giggled and wriggled under him.

"You don't want me to touch you?"

"Aye, no more of that. There are things I want to do to you and your talented fingers are too distracting."

"Ah, but you can't continue if your hands are occupied thus."

"I wasn't planning on using my hands."

To prove it, Elrond licked slowly around the outer rim of Legolas' left ear until he reached the point, inflamed to a fiery red, and sucked it hard. That did raise a soft cry from his lover and a great deal of squirming. He released the ear and repeated the manoeuvre on the right. Legolas sighed out his name and something indecipherable in Nandorin which Elrond silenced with a blistering kiss. Needing to breathe, he sampled the tender skin on the long, elegant throat Legolas offered with a beckoning tilt of his head, practically begging to be marked. Elrond was pleased to oblige, but to his chagrin he discovered Legolas was right; he couldn't venture any lower if he continued to pinion the archer's
hands with his own. He looked down into half-lidded, smirking blue eyes and converted that smug triumph into shocked disbelief by stating:

"I can always tie you down; that would make things much easier."

Putting thought to action, he sat up and shimmied over to the pile of discarded clothes, sifting through until he found what he wanted. Elrond turned back to spy Legolas propped on his elbows watching, brow slightly furrowed but eyes dilated and bright with excitement to see what he was doing. The Elven Lord held up his find: a long narrow strip of soft white silk, his breechclout, and laughed as Legolas mouth gaped and he shook his head.

"Nay." He edged backwards but at once his shoulder brushed the brick stoop of the hearth.

"Aye." Elrond pounced.

They wrestled, cursing, grunting, laughing; a table went over and something on it shattered with the ringing note only leaded crystal makes. The blanket and cloak became hopelessly tangled but the heap of clothing proved useful in soaking up whatever had been in the decanter. The struggle ended with Elrond straddling the slim sylvan warrior's waist, victorious, swiftly binding submissive hands to the leg of the mahogany settee with fabric that had just minutes earlier secured the genitals resting on the golden Elf's middle.

The silken cloth carried the intimate, musky odour of the Noldo Lord's unique scent. Elrond took the breechclout's trailing end and used it to wipe the sweat from Legolas' forehead, scrubbed it gently over his nose and mouth, entranced as it billowed out under the wind of the archer's straining lungs. He jerked it away and kissed Legolas, a devouring kiss, a claiming kiss that left them both dizzy and elated.

Elrond didn't spare either of them a moment to regain equilibrium, feverishly licking and nipping shoulders and biceps, exposed underarms, corrugated sides where ribs heaved to try and keep up with the need for oxygen. The navel, ever his nemesis before, he deliberately ignored, rolling Legolas over to rub his cock forcefully against taut buttocks, not stopping the rutting action until he could see a red weal forming there in the enticing divide. Tracing the long groove of the spine with his tongue, he imprinted his teeth on the nape of the archer's neck. This caused the scarlet head of his engorged penis to bump against Legolas' arse; a scintillating flare of bright delight tore through him. Before proximity to culmination proved too great a temptation, Elrond backed away, gratified to hear a plaintive whimper when he lifted his weight from the sylvan and transferred attention to the Wood Elf's legs.

Legolas was trembling again but not from cold. Elrond discovered to his wicked glee that his young lover was very sensitive around the crease of the knees and tickled him there, laying down a wet streak and then blowing it dry, until Legolas begged mercy. The noble lord granted it, moving on to partake of the quivering skin covering the powerful thighs, parting the legs and pushing them wide as he moved between them, biting left to right as he worked upward. And then he was there, once more at the crux of their mutual desire, Legolas' scent staggering to senses already overwhelmed, and he pushed his tongue against the small pink pucker. He felt a tremor ripple through the body sprawled out before him and sat back to take in the full effect of Legolas, bound, subdued, and receptive. Another shudder wracked the sylvan and he spread himself open, panting in anticipation.

Elrond crowded forward and pressed his forefinger into the constricted anus, softly exhorting Legolas to be at peace, smiling when he was in deep enough to at last wring a lustful groan from his lover. Immediately he removed the digit and eased it lower toward the scrotum and slid two fingers into the slippery heat of the second opening. Gently he probed, exploring, gathering the slick secretions, intending to use the fluid to lubricate his cock before penetration, but the scent emitted
when he withdrew his coated fingers was staggering and he greedily sucked it all off instead. Elrond bowed low and dipped his tongue into the narrow invagination, savouring the taste, moaning as the aroma enveloped him, and simultaneously shoved his finger back into the rectum, stimulating Legolas’ prostate vigourously.

"Saes!" Dimly Elrond heard the whispered entreaty but he was not about to stop. This, this is what he had fantasised practically every other hour of the day and night for the last ten years. Always his need for Legolas outstripped him and though he was the dominant partner he always felt that Legolas was the one in control. Now, he would take him at his leisure, as he pleased, any way he wished. He shoved the right leg out further and wormed his hand between the rug and Legolas to find the archer’s penis, pleased when the sylvan lifted up to give him better access.

The distended cock was hot and seeping and Elrond knew if he squeezed even once he would feel the quick spurt of ejaculate flow over his knuckles. The inclination to do so was strong, but a sound stopped him, a garbled cry that was close to a sob. "Saes!" The second plea came out in an undignified hiccup, a panicky note of desperation within it, and Elrond did stop, lifting his head to make sure Legolas was all right, resting his cheek against a hip, fondling the balls carefully and cupping the soft backside with the other hand.

"Pan vae?" he whispered but there was no answer.

He sat back on his heels intending to untie his love and gather him close but the sight was more than he could bear: Legolas vulnerable and exposed, clinging to the leg of the sofa where his wrists were secured, elbows digging into the rug beneath him, head bowed and face hidden, shoulders shaking with the torment of the tantalising invasion. Elrond scooted to his knees and crouched over his lover's back, questing with the tip of his cock, teasing the stretched anus before brushing the second, wet opening and entering him there with a long slow thrust. He held himself thus, motionless, exultant, petting the damp and matted yellow mane, kissing the rigid shoulder, whispering endearments and licking at the ear into which he spoke them. Legolas calmed also, completed and filled, listening, just his heaving suspiration accompanying the promises and vows.

Elrond withdrew halfway and then pushed back inside, repeating the move and establishing a steady rocking pace that was exquisitely erotic. Every thrust forward and back stroked the glans of his penis and, though he had taken his pleasure thus with Legolas before, the sensation was brand new, an entirely different element of sensual excitement building within him. Legolas tossed his head and the tip of an ear was revealed; Elrond bit it and Legolas came, abruptly and with a cry almost like regret, quivering and muttering in Nandorin, curses or endearments Elrond could not tell for certain.

With a growl he pulled out, repositioned his cock and shoved inside the anus. His deep, satisfied groan was joined by Legolas' yelp of surprise. Now he did not hold back but drove into the writhing body relentlessly, working to strike the sylvan's sensitive core with every lunge. Legolas struggled beneath him, pushing back, trying to get his knees under him for support, but Elrond would not allow even that minute level of control, bearing down on him with all his weight.

On the next retreat he again withdrew entirely, gripped the archer's hips and pulled him up a bit, re-entered the extra cavity, and pumped as he reached around slender hips. Elrond found Legolas' cock stiff enough to be stroked in concert with his thrusts; a great swell of exhilaration swept over him as the flesh in his hands twitched in dry orgasm and Legolas exhaled a stuttering moan. Now Elrond was ready; now he would come. The powerful surge tightened in his loins and he didn't struggle against the onslaught, permitting the wave to crest and break upon him, dragging him away, drowning thought and reason with vibrant delight. Elrond collapsed atop Legolas, spent, sweaty, exhausted, and deliriously happy.
Aearen: my ocean
Nín’ódhel: my Deep Elf
Thenin: True. (Yes.)
Man le prest, Aearen?: What troubles you, My Ocean?
Alnad, alnad, Nín’ódhel: Nothing, nothing, My Deep Elf.
Advae?: Better? (Well again?)
Ringe: cold
Pan vac: All right

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"Well? Is he coming or not?" Glorfindel demanded, impatiently tapping out an annoying staccato on the table with his nails.

"Yes, I am sure he is, but not to this meeting," returned Erestor drily.

Glorfindel scowled, a darkening of his fair countenance that was terrifying to enemies of his Lord, and muttered a curse his father was wont to say when things did not go according to Plan. "Bugger a Balrog." The re-born warrior, like his father before him, detested alteration from the prescribed and agreed upon Plan. "This is intolerable," he announced and stood up, the chair that held him screeching backwards with a rasping scrape upon the stone floor. Glorfindel stalked to the balcony and roughly tore aside the gossamer drapes to stare in belligerent displeasure at the pleasing view. "Elrond has missed three of the last five scheduled sessions. How does he expect me to continue when he fails to listen to any account of the state of our defences? A dragon could dry up the Bruinen and he wouldn't notice."

"Oh really, Glorfindel, you are exaggerating. For myself, I am happy for him. This all turned out much better than it might have, given the family propensity for tragedy."

"You are either joking or have come under the spell of that Mirkwood faun, too," snarled Glorfindel, turning to point accusingly at his old friend.

"What has made you so set against the youth? He hardly had any control over the circumstances and has made Elrond smile and laugh, laugh, Glorfindel, for the first time in centuries." Erestor was neither impressed nor intimidated by his colleague's elaborate posturing and calmly reached for the copious notes inscribed with meticulous accuracy by Glorfindel's elegant and flowing hand.

"I don't trust him; I don't like the changes his presence has wrought upon Elrond. Laughter and smiling are fine, but look at the facts, Erestor. Elrond is neglecting his duties in favour of fornicating with That Wood Elf." Glorfindel came back to the table and slapped his palms down flat upon it, fixing his piercing eye upon the unflappable Chief Advisor. To his dismay, not only did this rough language and jarring noise fail to shock Erestor, the Elf actually snickered like an adolescent, a decidedly lurid expression fleeting through his dark eyes.

"What's the matter, Glorfindel, no one to warm your bed? Or perhaps you are jealous? Have you been harbouring an unrequited desire for my noble kinsman?"

"Be careful, Erestor, for our friendship will bear only so much. That Wood Elf has proved an unrelenting distraction to Elrond and even you can't deny that."

"Nor would I try. I simply believe the distraction is a most healthy one. I have not seen Elrond so relaxed and at peace in more time than I care to recall. He loves The Sylvan, you know."

"Ai Valar, you are so blinded by your foolish romanticism," groaned Glorfindel, resuming his seat. "This isn't love, Erestor. It is purely a physical attraction. I'm telling you, there's something unnatural about the way That Wood Elf has so thoroughly seduced him. Think about it; they have absolutely nothing in common. One is a noble and learned leader among our people, refined and sophisticated in his tastes, descended from the princes of the Noldor. The other is little more than a primitive
"Read the third page of that report; it details a skirmish from our last patrol to the Trollshaws. That Wood Elf killed two Trolls and cut out their hearts, carrying the bloody organs into the sun where they were changed into garnets. Then he yanked out all their teeth to keep as souvenirs, placing them in the light to turn them into gems as well."

"Aye, he made a pair of lovely anklets out of the pale pink stones and I know he wears his, though whether Elrond does is still a mystery. He took the garnets over to Aegas Mírdan but you know Aegas; keeps his lips sealed about secret gifts. Can't wait for Ened Ethuil to learn what The Sylvan has commissioned for Elrond."

"Ah yes, another holy day approaches. That such archaic, superstitious religious celebrations are now held in Imladris is embarrassment enough. Now, this lamentable custom coincides with both the frenzied escalation of their lust and the impending arrival of delegates from Dol Amroth and Gondor. How are we to conduct a successful mediation between those two realms if the Men can't respect our Lord any longer? He looks a fool, Erestor, cavorting like a stag in rut."

"On the contrary, mellon, he will gain in their esteem." Erestor smiled at his friend's description of Elrond's renewed libido. "Men find exhibition of virility important. This is the way of mortals. They have little regard for the virtues of abstinence and self-restraint, thinking them signs of age and impotence. In fact, if I can arrange it I will make certain the emissaries 'accidentally' come upon Elrond when he has The Sylvan stripped, aroused, and pleading for penetration."

"Erestor, you're incorrigible!" A new voice joined the conversation from the doorway to the advisor's office. There upon the threshold, hands on hips and an amused but slightly disapproving smile on her lips, stood Arwen Undomiel, the fair Evenstar of Imladris. She had been there long enough to hear nearly the entirety of their dialogue. "Spying on Ada's intimate activities is very bad form, Muindoradar. Making a spectacle of it would be unforgivable." She stepped into the room amid Erestor's apologies as both Elves rose and bowed to her in deference. Taking her father's accustomed place at the table, Arwen held out her hands for the multi-page report. "Now then, let us not have it said that all Glorfindel's efforts are wasted. Is there something in this account that particularly concerns you, captain?"

With that the Balrog-Slayer and the Chief Advisor ceased their gossiping and gave all attention to their Lady, but Arwen was concerned nonetheless. Imladris' citizens would never accept her father's new arrangement if his closest friends and family continued to use the situation for their merriment. Whenever he was discussed, the only talents credited to the woodland warrior pertained to his erotic allure and proficiency in casting spells of enchantment. How could the majority of the populace ever afford Legolas some measure of tolerance when Glorfindel and Erestor made it their chief pastime to enumerate his shortcomings and point out his differences? When the meeting adjourned she remained in her chair as Glorfindel bowed himself out of the room.

Erestor sighed for he knew what was coming. "Arwen, I love your father dearly and thus it is more than my sworn duty to ensure his safety. That is my motivation and well you know it. Now, say what you must."

"Erestor, I do understand your reasons and I know your intent is genuinely benign; however, you must stop this. We know that Glorfindel is correct on the issue of love; everyone in Imladris knows. It doesn't help matters when you use the affair as a source for crude jokes."

"Well, one must either laugh or cringe. The whole situation is too bizarre and defies comprehension. Many people feel Glorfindel is right about enchantment, thinking The Sylvan has achieved a sort of mental control over your father. If I fail to poke fun at their antics, that simmering worry will erupt
into explosive fear! I don't know what might become of the Wood Elf if mass hysteria breaks out."

"There are other ways to counter such notions without mockery."

"And what would those methods be?"

"We could have Mithrandir examine Elrond from a Maia's perspective. If anyone understands magic, it is he. Once he declares my father is not mesmerised, the citizens will dispense with the idea once and for all."

Now Erestor was quiet for a time, considering this, and found the suggestion not only sound but one he should have come up with himself. That he hadn't truly bothered him, for The Sylvan had been in the valley over a decade now. The Chief Advisor wondered if he, also, was being subjected to some form of magical interference from the woodland fey, thus to prevent the truth from being discovered. Arwen had returned only two months ago, evaluated the threat, and determined the best course.

"That is a brilliant plan. I'm very disappointed that I can't claim it as my own. Arwen, I do wish you had rejoined us sooner."

"Well to be honest I dreaded coming back and seeing Ada with someone else, especially after Elrohir's scathing denouncements of Legolas' character. I didn't want to think about Ada engaged in a scandalous romantic intrigue. I wanted him to stay true to his vows and win back his wife's love. It pains me that Nana just turned away from their bond, though I understand her reasons and love her dearly for wanting Ada to find happiness. It took some time to work up the courage to face this new Elrond."

"I'm sorry, penneth. Yet you can be consoled, knowing this is just a temporary infatuation. Your Adar will come to his senses eventually and everything will be as it was before that regrettable day when fate shoved the Wood Elf into his path."

"How cold you are, Erestor! Can't you envision this from Legolas' perspective? I realise you imagine him to be stupid but I assure you this is a false conclusion. He is quite intuitive, almost to the point of mind-vision like Minya'mmë, and he has considered exactly the same puzzle Glorfindel expounded. If he has reached the same evaluation of Adar's feelings for him, what pain must he endure?"

"You give him far too much credit, Arwen, and now I must accuse you of romantic fantasy. The Sylvan doesn't love your father but simply craves the attention bestowed upon him, sexually and emotionally. He is enjoying a most advantageous promotion in status, living in luxury he couldn't have dreamed existed, and is catered to in every way by a most solicitous lover. I don't think he is suffering."

"Yet I think you may be the one who fails to grant Legolas his due. Many have attempted to lure him to their beds; indeed I tried to seduce him myself, but he is loyal and dedicated to Ada."

"You didn't!" Erestor was shocked and looked it.

"Please don't gawk at me with quite so much lurid fascination evident in your eyes, dear uncle," pleaded Arwen, her cheeks flaming. "And before you enquire, no, I will not give the details. Suffice it to say I was positively mortified and so was Legolas. He makes certain he is never alone with me now. He didn't tell Ada, though, and for that I have become his champion. He is very honourable."

"Perhaps so. I did not employ your methods to test The Sylvan's constancy," Erestor shrugged and grinned. "I still think he is shrewd enough to appreciate his improved circumstances. Besides, I believe the relationship is good for Elrond. If I didn't, I would have acted long ago to end it."
"Don't you see, Arwen, it doesn't matter that there is no love between them. Your father needed this outlet; he has been miserable since Celebrian's departure, trying so hard, out of love for his children and respect for Celeborn and Galadriel, to honour a commitment from which your Nana released him. Let him fuck The Sylvan for all he's worth; he'll tire of the golden Elf in a century or two anyway. By then the woodland warrior will either have acquired a sufficient veneer of refinement to occupy a niche in Imladrian society or he shall go home to his trees in the east."

"Erestor! Such crude language!"

"Don't even try, Arwen; your brothers taught you every nasty word they know, in every language you learned in the classroom. Saying it in Quenya doesn't rob the term of its meaning. I used the mannish form to emphasise the mannish connotation: a purely carnal act with no purpose other than the transient pleasure it imparts. That sums up Elrond's affinity for The Sylvan, and vice versa."

"I hope you're right about them," answered Arwen, but her voice carried her misgivings. No less lacking in ability to read hearts than her mother, Arwen's assessment of the unlikely pairing was not so straightforward. During her few encounters with the elusive Wood Elf, she sensed a disturbing combination of helpless devotion and deep sorrow emanating from his soul. Elrond, however, she couldn't read at all. "He's very young, and a young heart is prone to love."

"Your words hold the unmistakable ring of romance, the stuff of which ballads are composed," an engaging ellon remarked from the hallway where he leaned in through the open door, his golden hair cascading forward, a captivating smile lighting his handsome features. "Right about whom, Lady Arwen?"

"Lindir!" Arwen cried in delight and sprang from her seat to envelope the tall and willowy singer in a crushing embrace. "When did you arrive? It's been so long since we were both in Imladris at the same time that I almost forgot what you look like."

"Ai! My heart is shattered, Lady; how could you forget your first love?" The elegant minstrel held her back with one hand, dramatically seizing his breast with the other. "I shall fade from such a wound to my soul and it is entirely your fault."

"Oh you rogue," Arwen scolded, laughing as she landed a slap devoid of all force upon the upper arm of her dear friend. "Every maid of thirty summers swoons over gallant Lindir the Minstrel; why must you make me the culprit in your affliction?"

"That's easy; you are the only one whose sentiments I've ever returned," quoth the fair poet and bowed under her hand after laying upon it a chaste kiss. "Now, elaborate on that portentous phrase I overheard before I burst from curiosity. There are twenty-two years' worth of news and events of which I am wholly ignorant. How I have missed Imladris!"

The three sat down to tea and discussed the recent history of Elrond's hidden realm, informing Lindir of the latest immigrant to Rivendell and his unique link to their Lord.

Said Lord was at that precise moment in his private gardens strengthening that link. Glorfindel was correct; Elrond had skipped the dreary meeting in order to expand his carnal knowledge of his youthful lover. Not that he had planned to do so, of course, for he had only sought for Legolas to remind him of the weekly council with his advisors, lest the Wood Elf had forgotten. Elrond didn't want Legolas to become distraught when tea-time came and he didn't arrive for their daily substitute: a swim in a secluded pool the archer had discovered on his rambles through the vale.

It hadn't taken long to find Legolas for Elrond had come to realise that the sylvan Elf was able to generate a sub-audible sound that alerted his mate to his whereabouts within the valley. This had
been quite a puzzle to the wise Lord, how he could so unerringly locate the woodland warrior no matter how cleverly he was concealed from others. Four years into the relationship, he had chanced to remark upon this talent, rather proudly at that, only to have Legolas send him the most scornful gaze one can possibly imagine followed by a full explanation.

"You come to my call," he had declared possessively, at which Elrond had bridled.

"I have heard neither cry nor song, Aearen. I seek you with my heart and always find you," his tone had been one of indignant affront and wounded pride. The Lord of Imladris was not to be had at anyone's beck and call; he was the dominant partner in this affair.

"Aye. I call you. You hear it, not with ears but with the soul. And always you come. Why does this displease you? On the day your heart doesn't answer, surely I will die."

That statement had erased the injury to his ego, replacing the hurt with joy so profound it left Elrond dumbstruck with awe and completely awash in love and desire. He had coupled with Legolas more passionately than ever, for the first time acknowledging the bond growing between them. Every day since then, he had fervently prayed for this gift of silent vocalisation, that Legolas might have the same reassurance he now appreciated so tremendously.

Eru had not seen fit to grant this boon and the learned healer had wondered if it was a physical trait particular to sylvans or an ability any elf could develop with practice. Elrond then decided to examine Legolas' larynx to determine if there was anything significantly different about it, but Legolas had misinterpreted the throat palpitation as a new brand of foreplay. The intellectual analysis had ceased rather abruptly and neck-caressing was now a favoured method for arousing the young archer.

In any case, having failed to discover how to generate a similar silent call, if Elrond needed to let him know where he would be, he had to seek Legolas out.

His heart lead him true, as it ever did, right to the chuckling brook where the Wood Elf was working, painstakingly smoothing a branch of oak wood with abrasive cloth and water. "What is that you're doing, Aearen?" he asked with interest, for Legolas was a skilled bowyer.

"Revealing the inner Power of the nine sacred woods," said Legolas, smiling up with mischievous delight as he dropped the cloth into a basin of clear liquid drawn from the stream. "Have you forgotten? It is only four days until Ened Ethuil. Would you like to see?"

"I would, but I thought I wasn't permitted, not being an initiate of Pâd-en-Tawar." Elrond quickly joined the sylvan on the grass, reaching for the carving, only to have it coyly drawn back and hidden under Legolas' shirt.

"Wait! It is true you are forbidden to see, but veil your vision and let your other senses resolve the nature of this power," commanded Legolas, his gleaming eyes promising the outcome would be worth the effort as his body gave off the unmistakably earthy scent of arousal.

Elrond shut his lids into tight grooves and held up his hands to receive the carving, smiling in anticipation for he had a fairly good idea of what this was all about. As soon as the weight of the wood met his palms he grasped the rod and ran his sensitive fingers over it, a hugely lascivious grin transforming his face. Then he gave a little cry of surprise and Legolas giggled.

"Elbereth! You didn't!" the Elven Lord gasped out, fighting the urge to open his eyes and make certain.
"Trust your feelings, Nín’ódhel. Have you truly never guessed this?"

"Nay, I didn't think on it. I knew one of the symbols was a phallus but not that mine would become the model!"

Legolas had crafted a very accurate facsimile. With over six-thousand years behind him, Elrond had been lonely often enough to know the shape and feel of his own cock. He grasped the thick shaft with his fists, one above the other, and used the thumb of the top hand to circle the tip of the virile effigy. He heard a deeply in-drawn breath as the archer sidled up and wrapped him in a tight embrace, claiming his mouth in a decadent, inspiring, entreating kiss. While the sylvan sucked his tongue, impatient fingers quickly unfastened robes and leggings. Elrond moaned, tossing aside the oak wood shaft, and shifted to give the younger Elf room to manoeuvre.

"I have need to assure myself the sculpture is made to the right dimensions and proportions," Legolas panted and shoved Elrond hard, sending the venerable Lore-master sprawling backwards in the grass. He leaped but the Noldorin elder was faster and Legolas missed his chance, his fingers just catching the hem of a flowing robe before it was torn away. The next instant he was hoisted up and tumbled over, landing on his back, and found himself staring in breathless anticipation into grey eyes brimming with desire.

"You may satisfy your doubts as to the precision of your carving but there is a price."

"What is it?"

"I want you naked, of course."

Elrond proceeded to divest Legolas of his clothes and quickly had the sleek, resilient body exposed. He took a moment to admire the utter perfection of face and form that defined the archer's physique and smiled as Legolas rolled to his side, propping his head on a hand and bending a leg at the knee to flaunt his arousal. He flexed his hips provocatively and dropped the free hand down to fondle his penis. Elrond reached over and snatched the fingers away, swooping in to kiss his eager lover, savouring the taste of the warm wet mouth: not flavoured of wines or fruit or sweet confections but natural and clean. He probed gently against the mobile tongue dancing with his and the muscle curled up like a petal, allowing Elrond to stroke its tender underside. The soft moan this incited was no less exciting than the quivering shiver that ran through Legolas' frame from head to toe. It was Legolas who retreated from the kiss first, though, sitting up and scooting so close he was almost in Elrond's lap.

"Want to touch you, Nín’ódhel. Let me."

He reached out only to have his grasp deflected, his hopes thwarted. Legolas knew a challenge when he saw it and he wasn't averse to using dirty tactics to win. He leaned forward and buried his nose in Elrond's hair, breathing in the scent of the dark locks as his fingers cored through, pulling out clasps and ties and elaborately decorative knots. The noble Lord made a soft, urgent cry, high in his throat and highest in his vocal range, that signalled emergence of the more primal elements of his personality. Hair-play was Elrond's weakness and Legolas exploited it, taking up a handful of ebony hair to rub against his cheek, his limber carmine tongue slithering out to lay down a tantalising lick across the point of the ear thus revealed. "Let me," he exhaled the words in a husky whisper, the vibrations shimmering through the slick residue left on the skin.

Now it was Elrond who shuddered, a sparkingly delicious frisson travelling through every nerve of his body. "Where would you touch me, Aearen?" he whispered back, scarcely able to retain either air or reason enough to manage it, and gasped when ivory teeth closed over the sensitive cartilage just as strong fingers wrapped around his penis. A few brisk strokes and Elrond was practically
wailing, eyes fixed on the slender hand as its owner continued to lavish attention on the exposed ear. "Wait!" he hissed through gritted teeth, grabbing Legolas' wrist to halt the increasingly exquisite tempo. "Not like this, Aearen."

Then Legolas sat back and met his eyes, the light in them all warm and hazy like a summer sunset, and dragged the Elven Lord's heavy fall of locks over his chest, pressing the silken strands against his nipple, the motion circling, then back and forth, back and forth, circling. Legolas let his head loll backwards and removed his hand to lean upon his arms. The black filaments fanned over his flesh. The erect red peak poked out through them in wanton invitation.

Elrond promptly bent low to kiss it, lick it, suckle and bite it, the sensitive skin hot and hard between his lips. He straightened to see the results of this stimulation and the motion caused most of the hair to slip away. A few strands clung on, stuck to the heaving breast by his saliva, a dramatic contrast to the inflamed bud and its puckered, goose-pimpled areole. It made Elrond think of his dark burgundy cock, protruding from his robes, encircled by the black tangle of pubic hair, and the engorged organ twitched impatiently. He looked up to find Legolas breathing hard through parted lips, eyes locked on his own nipple, so Elrond flicked it, a sharp tap that made the sylvan jump. Grinning wickedly, Elrond took finger and thumb and tweaked, pulling and twisting a bit.

"NNín'ódhel!" Legolas cried out jaggedly.

Nipple-play was definitely the sylvan's weakness. Elrond's soul buzzed with erotic triumph, for the Wood Elf was not noisy by nature, and increased his efforts, taking Legolas' aroused penis in hand and working it whilst fiddling with the pert little nodes. He watched with glee as his lover arched up and shimmied into every tug. Fascinated, he sought to make Legolas rasp out his name again, wishing to hear his real name, the one limned with the power and prestige accumulated over the span of his life. He wanted the word to come out of those voluptuous lips coated with longing, reverence, perhaps even awe. Suddenly the archer's eyes, which had been sealed as he endured the tormenting stimulation, flew open and fixed on his, desperation bordering on panic plain within them.

"Daro! Nín'ódhel, daro!" his strained voice implored, fingers trying to stay the teasing hand pumping him even as he pressed into the tight, pinching pull. Every touch drew bright, slicing shards of ecstasy through his thoughts. "Elrond, saes Nín'ódhel, I shall" The sentence was completed without need for words as the archer's orgasm overtook him, a rush of semen perfuming the air and a quick, ragged gasp joining the light breeze. The arm holding him up gave out and he flinched when all his weight abruptly yanked the nipple from Elrond's grip. Legolas sprawled out on the lawn, eyes shuttered, flushed and shaking, one hand cupped protectively over the bruised peak but not daring to apply even the slightest pressure.

Gently Elrond touched the flat lean belly, sliding his fingers into the warm residue of seed, scooping it up and rubbing it between his fingers. He carried them to his lips where the acrid smell made his nostrils flare. He sucked all the bitter juices off and then crouched over Legolas, lapping up the rest of the sticky extrusion from creamy skin that rippled under his mouth. He moved up the expanse of that glorious body, all sheened in sweat and madder stained, impressing upon it adoring kisses.

It moved him beyond description to see Legolas reduced to this state of somatic slavery, lost in sensations he couldn't control, every response of his body under another's command, brought to exhilarating completion by Elrond's touch alone. The incongruity of this naked vulnerability and the courage it took to permit such total subjugation always amazed the Elven Lord. Legolas gave himself unconditionally, without reserve, with absolute trust.

Elrond's lips reached the archer's sternum and encountered the covering hand. Today he had unintentionally betrayed that trust. A twinge of dismay rumpled his conscience and he stopped,
sitting straight to carefully lift away the fingers and inspect the damage. Elrond was relieved it wasn't too severe; a purple contusion was already forming but Legolas would be tender there no more than a day.

"I'm sorry," he spoke earnestly, meeting the half-lidded gaze of the spent warrior. "I didn't mean to hurt you. You asked me to stop; I should have listened."

"Nay, 'tis the kind of pain that pleases," Legolas smiled, feeling all gooey and warm upon hearing this heartfelt apology. He rolled to his side and reached out to part the concealing robes, grinning in devious delight to find Elrond's cock rigid and ready. "I wanted something else, though, and you said I could."

He registered Elrond's bright-eyed smile as permission and dragged himself a tad closer, clasping the heavy erection firmly, running his tight grip up and down swiftly in a teasing promise of pleasure to be tendered. That achieved the expected gasp and pivoting relocation of Elrond's arse as the Lore-master shifted into a more comfortable reclining position. Legolas chuckled with smug assurance as he handled the aroused penis, ringing the head with finger and thumb, tracing the prominent vein from root to rim, examining the slippery tip minutely so that Elrond groaned and fidgeted. In short, he gave every indication that he was carefully measuring the organ's dimensions in order to ensure the reproduction in oak was correctly proportioned.

Then he cradled the substantial weight of the testicles and squeezed gently, wringing a deliciously lustful growl from his mate. He felt a palm connect with the back of his head and nudge him, a beseechingly tenuous jog accompanied by the enticement of legs parted wide.

Legolas toyed with the idea of holding back, pretending he didn't want to taste what his hands were investigating so thoroughly, that he wouldn't use more than his slender fingers to pleasure his lover. It was not in him to do it, though, for he loved being the one Elrond needed so desperately. Besides, the huge crimson cock sticking up through the gaping leggings and the flowing formal robes was an erotic vision he couldn't resist. This close to the exposed genitals, the musky smell of the pearly secretion welling at the slit made him salivate. He opened his mouth and carefully enveloped half the scrotum, his tongue swabbing the sensitive gland within, thrilling to the excited shout this provoked. The hand on his head clutched at his hair.

Cautiously Legolas released the hidden globe and nipped at the base of the stiff shaft, working up the column slowly, letting his fingers close around the girth and begin to pump as he neared the head. By now Elrond was frantic, rocking his pelvis in anticipation, impatient for the slippery suction to envelope him, the talented tongue to lave him. Legolas watched from the corner of his eye, noting how firmly the upper teeth had hold of the lower lip, how strenuously the air entered and left the aquiline nose, how dilated the grey eyes had become, losing their mask of detached superiority to reveal the fiery craving of raw, feral hunger. The sylvan judged the timing perfect and closed his lips over the blunt pinnacle, his hand simultaneously supplying a slow down-stroke that made the penis buck.

"Yes, Aearen, yes!" Elrond called brokenly, pushing the archer's head lower until he felt breath move through the tightly coiled pubic nest. The tongue was hot against his strained flesh and convulsed briefly as Legolas swallowed. Then the golden crown began to ascend, oh so slowly, and the faintest pressure of hard teeth razed him. Elrond groaned; the suction broke and a delicate bite pinched his glans for the barest second before he was encased in the wet tempest anew. He watched, enthralled, as Legolas began to work him in earnest, the devouring mouth rising and falling in a steady, unfaltering rhythm. All the while his hand alternated between gripping the thick root and coddling the brimming balls. "Eru! Go faster!" Elrond shouted, trying to thrust up every time the slick suction pulled him in, and quite suddenly Legolas stopped, raising eyes infused with delirious
triumph and scorching desire.

"Do me, too," he pleaded, voice rough and thick with lust. "Saes."

Elrond didn't need further encouragement, for it nearly made him come whenever Legolas demanded pleasure. He grasped a leg at the thigh and dragged the Wood Elf's lower body around to align with his face, pleased to see the ruby erection presented for his consumption. They settled side by side facing each other's crotches, each striving to get legs out of the way while still ensuring stability. The arrangements were awkward at first for Elrond was taller and had to curl up a bit more. After one or two tentative licks to determine orientation of orifices and protrusions was sufficiently adjusted, each took the other in.

Muffled moans, low and lurid, mingled with the rustle of Elrond's garments against Legolas' hair, silk and velvet on shining gold. The pair rocked together, slowly building momentum until the pace was right, each supplying and receiving the delights of such conjunction, until at last Elrond bucked hard, unable to contain the impulse, and had to stretch one arm above his head, clutching at the grass to prevent rolling atop Legolas and thrusting down his throat until he gagged. His knuckles touched on the discarded oak phallus and a vivid image of using it burst upon his mind. Before he could question the phantasm, Elrond snatched it up and let the archer's genitals slip from his lips.

"Why did you stop?" Legolas groaned and lifted his head, straining to find out what was wrong, but he couldn't see past his own rump. Then Elrond looked up, too, and sent him a wicked grin that made him tingle. He'd been hard all day dreaming this very fantasy and was prepared to wait, anticipation building as a warm, tight tension settled in his groin. He dropped his head back into the crux of the Elven Lord's legs and blew across the wet penis, snickering to see it jump and hear Elrond's yearning grunt. He resumed his contented suckling, just a bit disappointed the mutual stimulation had ceased. He hummed a restless sigh and pinched Elrond's bottom hard.

It was exactly the sort of thing Elrond liked and he gave a sharp yelp, playfully tapping his fingertips over Legolas' anus, pressing enough to let him know an intrusion was imminent. The puckered opening flexed under the feather-light impact and permitted two fingers entry. Elrond groped for Legolas' sweet spot and rubbed it, drowning out the archer's quietly pleased groan with his own cry of delight as the vibrations tickled through the nerves in his cock. He withdrew the fingers and reached to dip the phallus in the basin of water.

As soon as the muted sloshing began, Legolas ceased all movement and let the engorged organ slide from his mouth. He pressed his forehead to Elrond's hip and tried to calm his excited heart. It was going to happen just as he'd dreamed.

Their eyes met again; Elrond judged his mate receptive and quickly inserted the head of the wooden penis, pushing in half the length. The sight was more exciting than the fantasy, the thick brown rod protruding from Legolas' quivering arse, surrounded by tight red flesh.

"Ai!" Legolas shouted, squirming against the foreign object, unaccustomed to the sensation, familiar though the shape might be, for this hadn't been done before and it wasn't exactly as comfortable as his imagination had told him it would be. Instinctively pulled his leg forward in an attempt to get away. He surrendered instantly as a firm grip took hold of his knee and halted the motion.

"Don't. I won't harm you, Aearen," Elrond promised, the words dancing over the softened penis all coated with his spit.

He kissed it, drawing the phallus out a fraction and then pressing it in, deeper this time, angling for the sensitive zone overlying the prostate. He grinned as Legolas' entire body jerked, pleased to have struck home on the first try. He repeated the movement, maintaining the same level of penetration,
easing the rigid tool in and out carefully. The persistent internal pressure worked its charm; Legolas writhed against the phallus and moaned wantonly, his cock rising under the stimulus. Just as his lips brushed the archer's lovely red tip, Legolas sucked him in, humming out a decadently subdued wail as he did so. Elrond gasped and the penis beneath his mouth jerked towards the exhaled heat. He opened wide and enveloped it all right down to the balls.

The double stimulation was beyond Legolas' most vivid illusions and he quickly lost all control, relenting to the beat of the piercing rhythm and the escalating exhilaration. His heart was pounding so fast he would have feared to pass out had he been capable of rational thoughts. Instinct guided his motions and he matched the pace of his lover, subconsciously noting the signals of impending release and driving Elrond toward it. Their erotic duet built to a glorious crescendo and they spent in concert, sweating and shivering and shocked from the intensity of their physical and emotional union. Gently, Elrond withdrew the oaken tool. In perfect harmony, each rolled to his back and gave a satisfied sigh.

"Elbereth."

"Aye."

They rested in peaceful accord, Elrond's right hand seeking and finding Legolas' left; they held to one another thus for a time. Then the archer got up and tugged on Elrond's arm to draw him to his feet as well.

"Let's go to the lake. There's something I want to show you and I crave a bath."

Elrond laughed, pleased at the glowing, eager, hopeful enthusiasm suffusing Legolas' features and permitted himself to be led away. He could always arrange to meet with Glorfindel after the midnight gathering. He pulled the naked sylvan close and they left the garden in step, arms wrapped around each others' waists.

Now it was funny that Elrond should think of his old friend and commander of Imladris' troops just then, for Glorfindel was in fact right there in the garden, not a hundred metres distant. Well of course he had come to interrupt exactly what he'd witnessed, but upon arriving to find the lovers' coupling in full swing, he hadn't been able to do it. As discreetly as possible he'd disguised his presence within a small stand of maple trees. His fear of being discovered proved baseless, for the pair were too engrossed in one another to notice anyone else.

Glorfindel was confused. Not embarrassed and guilt-ridden over spying on such an intimate and private moment, but bewildered over his lack of same. He was not given to such lurid and salacious habits and never before had he considered playing the voyeur, yet he did not feel disgusted by what he'd seen or shamed for having seen it. That was the confusing part. Neither was he aroused physically as he surely would be had he imagined the scene in his mind. Somehow, he felt just the opposite. A strong urge to shelter and protect Elrond and his youthful mate filled every corner of the warrior's heart. He knew now that Erestor was correct, though he had only been joking in his sarcastic way. Elrond loved the Wood Elf and the sentiment was returned tenfold or more.

Worried and perplexed, he strode away for his house. Two decisions solidified almost simultaneously. First, he must come clean and admit to Elrond what he'd done and beg forgiveness. Second, he must find a way to deter the twins. He had sent for them two days ago, convinced someone had to make Elrond break with the sylvan and send him back to Mirkwood before his black magic infected all of Imladris. Elrohir, he decided, was just the one to do it, for his animosity toward Legolas was beyond reason. Now, the re-born warrior sincerely regretted taking matters into his own hands, but contrition was worthless if his impulsive action aroused the genie of ill-fate which plagued the House of Eärendil. Glorfindel would never forgive himself if fresh sorrows assailed his
Lord's beleaguered heart because of his interference.

TBC

Ened Ethuil: Mid-Spring
Aegas Mírdan: Mountain Peak the Jewel Smith, an Elf of Rivendell
Muindoradar: brother-father, Uncle
Minya'mmë: first mother, grandmother
Aearen: my ocean
Nín'ódhel: my Deep Elf
Thenin: True. (Yes.)
Man le presta, Aearen?: What troubles you, My Ocean?
Alnad, alnad, Nín'ódhel: Nothing, nothing, My Deep Elf.
Advae?: Better? (Well again?)
Pan vae: All right
Ringe: cold

**Note:** the celebration of Ened Ethuil: Mid-Spring is just made up. It is going to be patterned loosely on the old Celtic Beltane festival. The reference to nine sacred woods is from a description of a modern day Beltane celebration. Here's a list of the woods and what they were used to represent in that celebration. I thought it would fit nicely with this story.

* Birch - The Goddess, or female energy
* Oak - The God, or male energy
* Hazel - Knowledge and wisdom
* Rowan (Mountain Ash) - Life
* Hawthorne - Purity and fairy magic
* Willow - Death, sacred to Hecate
* Fir - Birth and rebirth
* Apple - Love and family
* Vine - Joy and happiness

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Lindir was incensed, positively livid with a rage more vicious and fiery than anything he had felt in well, he didn't like to think about the last time he'd felt so angry. Of course, as is the way with such painful recollections, the memory surfaced with all its horrific details intact. The images overwhelmed his thoughts with speed and force equal to the energy the minstrel usually employed to keep the ugly truth imprisoned in the abyssal depths of oblivion where it belonged. The harder he tried not to relive the terrifying event the more fully was the trauma realised.

After so many centuries gone by, he was seldom forced to confront this phantom of the past yet he knew that once awakened he must let it play out. He couldn't permit that here in the Last Homely House, though; not even behind the closed door of his private apartment. No, In Elrond's house there were too many ears always eagerly listening for any hint of gossip or intrigue. He had a reputation to uphold, and that reputation was one he had carefully developed and nurtured over the lengthy course of his affiliation to the House of Eärendil. Lindir the minstrel was care-free, jovial, ever ready with a song or a poem, a joke or a humorous anecdote. No one saw the truth; no one knew that gallant Lindir was a survivor of the second kinslaying and that was as he wished it.

The fair singer needed solitude and privacy to see the ordeal through and so he did what he had been doing for all the centuries since the fall of Doriath: he shucked off his robes, belted a tunic over his shirt and leggings, grabbed up his bow and quiver, and slipped out to spend his rage in the physically draining work of archery practice. He peered carefully about from his second story balcony before lightly springing over the rail, golden tresses streaming behind him, landing on the grassy lawn in a low crouch. He hastened down the path, not toward the practice field where the targets were set up but away from the estate, out into the surrounding woods. Once beneath the sheltering branches, he broke into a run as the terror of the phantasm broke through his defences.

He wept openly, nay, he sobbed like an elfling in great noisy gulping hiccups, nose snotty and vision blurred with tears. He raced for his very life, fleeing the destruction of Doriath, racing before the charging forces of the Noldorin soldiers, warriors cruel and vicious, trained by none other than Caranthir the Dark. How they laughed and jeered, purposefully holding back, steering him this way and that through the woods of Region as he tried so desperately to get away, to survive. But he was just an elfling of forty summers and he couldn't outrun them, out-think them, or outmanoeuvre them. He had spent all his arrows, not that they had done any good for he hadn't been able to bring himself to aim where they would do any harm. He hadn't believed it, the stories that were whispered about the Noldorin Elves and kinslaying. Even when the bloodshed and brutality spread from Nargothrond to the wild forest, even when he saw it with his own eyes, even when his sister was cut down right at his very feet, even then Lindir couldn't take another's life.

They caught him at last and carried him off to their camp. Two weeks of torment he endured at their hands and these elves treated him as less than an animal. He was made their slave and forced to wait upon them and do whatever they bid. The Noldorin warriors stripped him of innocence and took away his name, calling him hecilo and nârion. They played cruel games, setting him loose in the woods and promising him freedom if he could outwit them and evade them in the hunt. He never did, for they were false and always had hounds to track his scent and horses to bear them with speed
to cut off every avenue he tried to use. In that short span of days Lindir learned to hate them, but most of all to hate himself, for now he would gladly kill, now when it could aid no one. He couldn't forget that his sister died defending him when he could not lift his hand against these elves, and Lindir despised both his weakness then and his new-found craving to spill their blood now.

He was on the very brink of madness when Maedhros came upon the rogue troop of warriors, remnant of his brother's guard, and took the elfling from them. This was not whom he'd been seeking in the tangled trees, but his search for the twin sons of Dior had been thwarted. Close to despair himself and heartsick over the unknown fate of the lost princes of Doriath, the eldest Prince of the Noldor took the battered Green Elf away with him to his home in the forests of Ossiriand, where the last of his people lived. There the elfling slowly healed and grew under the guidance of Maedhros and his brothers, Maglor, Amros, and Amrod. It was Maglor who discovered his gift for singing and trained him to become a minstrel. It was thus Lindir was given a name, for he never again used the one his mother had bestowed upon him, feeling unworthy to claim kinship to his people after failing to defend his sister. Though he wondered, he never learned the fate of his parents and assumed they had both died in the slaughter.

Years passed, too many to recall, and then Maedhros learned of Elwing and the Silmaril, sheltered among the Exiles in the small colony at Sirion. Lindir rode with the force that descended upon the refugees and in that bloody battle turned against the Noldor who had fostered him. Lost in the recollection of the sack of Doriath, he joined the Exiles as they fought to repel the vile kinslayers, ready now to die for what was left of his people, convinced he was the last of his lineage. Imagine, then, his shock to turn a corner and come face to face with his father. There wasn't even time for a greeting; Lindir took his place beside his Adar, each having thought the other dead in the carnage of Doriath, each discovering the other in the bedlam of the current conflict, a blinding moment of delirious joy and horror combined, and together they gave in to their vengeance.

Lindir's position of trust within the Noldorin camp permitted them to draw close to the sons of Feanor and strike them a crushing blow. The pair killed Amros and Amrod in their frenzy of blood-lust and hatred. They killed Maglor's son. They killed elves that had fed and cared for and loved Lindir. They were pitiless and merciless.

Their reunion was short-lived, for Lindir's father perished during the fight. Not before granting his son the forgiveness so longed for, though, and this set Lindir's heart at ease, even in the depths of his grief.

The Noldor were much the stronger force and soon overwhelmed the elves of Sirion, though they did not capture their prize. Once Maedhros understood the jewel was beyond his reach, he withdrew his forces.

Lindir was captured again but the remaining Noldorin Princes said nothing about his treachery, for how could they? Instead, Lindir was embraced amid his tears and shouted curses, laying upon his benefactors the burden of all who were killed, even Amrod and Amros though their blood soaked his garments. Morose and bitter, the singer fell to grieving and began to fade. Why the sons of Feänor cared he didn't understand, but neither brother wanted him to die. Hoping to divert him from sorrow, Maglor gave into his care two young elves, hostages taken against the return of the Silmaril, the children of Elwing and Eärendil, and these of course were Elrond and Elros. It worked, for Lindir could not forget his own salvation under similar circumstances. He befriended the twins and the elflings came to love their foster-family, even as Lindir had done.

He had seen too much, that was all. He made himself pretend that it happened to someone else in some other life-time, part of an epic history of which he could sing but had no personal knowledge. That is what everyone in Imladris believed. Only Elrond, Glorfindel, Erestor, and Cîrdan knew his
real story, and of these only Círdan had seen him ravenous for blood and death. No one ever guessed that fair Lindir was a Green-Elf descended from Denethor son of Lenwë, not Sindarin, not born in Mithlond in the middling years of the Second Age, long after the massacre at Sirion. For out of love for his friend and mentor, Elrond had kept Lindir's secret and convinced the others to do likewise. It wasn't hard; they had all seen too much and if one of them could shed the weight of those horrors the rest were happy to aid him.

In this way Lindir dealt with the pain and guilt as best he could, travelling between the elven realms as the most celebrated minstrel since Maglor. Over time it became ever easier to suppress the memories and sometimes Lindir forgot the truth. Why, then, was the cheerful singer overcome with this woe so suddenly? Indeed, the dire tale was resurrected from its dormant sleep by the story Arwen had told, the story of Legolas and how he came to be in Imladris. The Wood Elf's recent history seemed to contain similar elements of violence and deception.

Truly, Lindir was more comfortable feeling the anger than defining it, for he couldn't bear naming the source of his wrath. This was something even Elrond didn't know. All those Ages ago when he was but forty summers old and fostered in the home of Maglor, under the impetuous and powerful urges of youth, he had fallen in love with the Noldorin prince and bound himself to the singer. Maglor had taken him as a lover but nothing more, for he was wed and had a family. After the kinslaying at Sirion, he touched Lindir never again, for the minstrel's apprentice had confessed his deeds, filled with grief and shame and bitter spite and self-pity. Now, here was Elrond keeping a sylvan lover to ease his wounded soul and sate his pleasure, returning nothing of his heart. Lindir could not stop thinking on Arwen's words when first he had stumbled on the story, for it was the very synthesis of his personal tragedy: 'He's very young, and a young heart is prone to love.'

He ran, trusting his knowledge of the region and the song of the trees all around to guide him, and let his heart break anew. He wept for Maglor and his son, for all the elves he had killed that day, for his parents and his sister, but mostly he wept for that elfling of forty summers, too young to understand that love is not always a blessing. In this way he blundered into the clearing he had set out for and with an abrupt cry pulled up short, for there on the opposite side of the glen stood another elf. Lindir gawked at the comely face unmarred by tears, the lithe and slender build, the long yellow hair bound back in warrior style, the bow clenched tight in a fisted hand, the simple garb of a woodland elf. He sobbed and fell upon his knees, for it was as if he looked upon himself, that tender youth he had been so long ago. He cast down his weapon and covered his face, keening in misery and confusion, for how could this be so?

Lindir was too distraught by the traumatic memories he was reliving to register that this must be Legolas, the sylvan lover of Lord Elrond, and not a phantom of his former self come to torment him. As for Legolas, he had heard the frantic pace of the approaching elf quite some time before Lindir's arrival. A pause in his archery practice and a quick query to the trees taught him the unexpected visitor was no threat. He'd waited, cautiously inquisitive to discover who in Imladris would seek to venture here, for this was a portion of the valley left wild for the benefit of the lesser creations of Yavanna. No hunting was permitted and thus none of the residents of Elrond's country had a reason to enter the woods. That was reason enough for the sylvan archer to adopt the area as his own. Once Lindir burst upon the secluded dell, Legolas, too, was overcome with confusion for it was like looking into a mirror with a span the length of Ages between one image and its reflection. As soon as this doppleganger went down, however, he threw aside his wary curiosity and rushed to aid this unknown kinsman, for there was no doubt this was another sylvan elf, the first he'd seen since his enforced residency began.

"Ai! Ai! What ails thee? Have you been hurt? Who has caused you this distress?" Legolas asked, reverting to his native Nandorin, and knelt beside Lindir. He enveloped the singer in his arms
without hesitation and held him close, gently soothing his hand over the shaking shoulders.

Lindir shifted in order to lower his hands and raise his head, glancing almost fearfully into the face so near to his, and saw this was no ghost. This elf had worried eyes of sun-bright blue while his were green; the hair was of a paler cast, the braiding style was not a pattern he knew, and the features were more refined than his. Relieved, the minstrel returned the hug and squeezed tight, breaking into fresh wails and weeping. They remained this way for some time, for Lindir had much sorrow to spend. Gradually he calmed, listening intently to the soothing murmur of consoling words whispered in Nandorin, a language he hadn't spoken in nearly an Age. Eventually they exchanged names, though Lindir knew who his kindly comforter was, and the conversation broadened beyond the minstrel's sad predicament.

"This is a rather remote portion of the realm for most of the folk of Rivendell. Still, I haven't seen you at the Last Homely House before; where have you come from? What sorrow brought you to this place?" asked Legolas, pleased by the return of composure. He sat back and offered his new acquaintance his handkerchief.

"I am minstrel to Lord Elrond," explained Lindir, matching Legolas' fluent Nandorin with his own halting rendition of the dialect. "I have been away for a time and returned yesterday. Imladris is my home and this glade has been my sanctuary for over a thousand years." Lindir refused the proffered cloth, for he had his own and retrieved it, cleaning up the evidence of his lapse into despair.

"Ah, that explains it." Legolas shook his head glumly and then continued, seeing a bewildered look pass over the singer's features. "The trees have often told me a sylvan elf used to come here and that he was missed. I did not mean to invade your refuge. I can leave if you wish for it's clear you sought this place under great duress."

"No, don't go. In some part it's because of you I needed to get away."

"What? That can't be true for I'm certain I've done nothing to cause you such pain. I've never even seen you before." Legolas was disturbed and quickly jumped to his feet.

"That's not what I meant," Lindir said, getting up to stop the fast retreating Wood Elf. He reached out and grabbed Legolas' arm to halt him. "Arwen told me how you came to be here and there is much in your tale that is like my own. I, too, was once bound to a Noldorin prince."

Legolas frowned and stiffened under the singer's grip. "Lord Elrond is not a Noldorin prince," he huffed irritably as if he'd heard this before and considered it highly insulting. "He is descended from Thingol and Melian."

"Still, he has Noldorin blood."

"He's got every kind of blood, if you want to get particular, so I would say it all depends on what race claims the most ancestors. In that contest the Noldor lose."

"True but he and his twin were raised by Noldorin princes. Elrond served the High-king of the Noldor and in Imladris keeps Noldorin traditions and culture. The combination of Noldorin heritage and upbringing counters whatever part of him is Sindarin, Maiarin, or human."

"What does it matter? I don't care about his lineage." Legolas tugged his arm irritably, wishing now he hadn't succoured the argumentative minstrel.

"Really?" Lindir tightened his grasp and yanked back, refusing to let go. "Is that why you haven't told any of your kinfolk in Mirkwood that you're here?" He reached for the archer's other arm and
before Legolas could react had both hands securely clasped in his. "You're not wearing a ring, Legolas," he said quietly.

All the air left Legolas' body in a harsh gasp of shock. He jerked his fingers free, staring at the minstrel, shame and anger equally present in his eyes. It was true, though, and so the next second shame won out and he turned his back to hide his face. "I have made such a terrible mistake," Legolas' voice trembled as his resolve threatened to give way. The weight of Lindir's arm across his shoulders at first made him tense but it had been so long since he'd had any of his kin around him that he didn't shrug it off. He discovered the contact lent him strength and he took a deep breath to steady his nerves. "I thought he would come to love me. It seemed that he did; otherwise I wouldn't have allowed it to happen."

"Nae, it's just as I feared," Lindir growled, half in anger half in resignation. "You hardly had any control over this, according to Arwen, so it certainly isn't your fault."

"Arwen?" Legolas cringed. "How can she possibly know? I haven't even told Elrond yet!"

"You haven't told him you love him?" Lindir turned Legolas around to look at him, somewhat confused.

Legolas realised Lindir had no idea what he was talking about and decided to say no more. What was he thinking? He didn't even know this person and he was about to pour out all his hidden fears and woes. He shook his head, trying to come up with a means to divert the conversation to a safer topic. He gave Lindir a more thorough examination and lifted his brows in surprise. "You are not Sindarin, but those are certainly Sindarin style braids."

"Aye, they are. Everyone here thinks I'm a Grey Elf, except Elrond and one or two others. Noldorin folk can't tell one variety of Telerin elf from another, it seems. That's how I want it and I hope you won't say anything." He watched Legolas make a carelessly dismissive shrug as he turned and retrieved his bow from the ground where he'd let it fall. Lindir was no fool. There was more going on than he'd first discerned and he was now more determined than ever to learn the meaning of the Wood Elf's broken admission.

"They would not believe me even if I did," Legolas snorted. He could understand why Lindir wished his true heritage to remain hidden, given the disrespect the Imladris elves had shown him. He moved to the furthest limit of the glen and readied himself for target practice, checking the bowstring's tension and drawing an arrow from the quiver. "I will keep your secret." He aimed and fired and in the distance the distinct thump of an arrow embedding in wood met their sensitive ears.

"Thank you," Lindir nodded approvingly as he followed Legolas, sighting the shaft where it protruded from a small knot in a tall pine tree several metres away. "Excellent shot. Do you mind if I join you? I find it eases my mind and improves concentration to practice this way. Besides, I travel widely and must keep my skills sharp."

"I welcome the company of another sylvan archer. The warriors of Imladris do not favour the bow over much. You were right; we have much in common."

They took turns firing at the targets, which were no more than variously chosen knots and branches on the surrounding trees, studying each other's techniques and offering supportive critique, though Lindir soon realised there was no advice he could give Legolas when it came to this skill. Only among the Galadhrim of Lorien had he seen archers of this calibre, though he never visited Mirkwood and couldn't say if this level of expertise was common there or not. Slowly the morning lengthened and the lazy hours passed, each elf growing more at ease with the other, and in unspoken accord realised they were friends. The singer decided to attempt to draw the archer out, taking a
breath before he started, but Legolas surprised him by asking a question of his own.

"Your lover, the Noldorin prince you spoke of, what happened to him?"

"We parted ways at the time of the War of Wrath. I know not his fate though many claim it must be evil for so were his deeds. Yet I hope that he has found peace after all this time; he suffered greatly before the end and lost everyone he ever loved. Surely that is punishment enough?"

"I cannot speak to that; it is beyond my wisdom. Did you love him?" Legolas glanced uneasily at Lindir and swallowed. "Did he give you a ring?"

"I loved him dearly but he was already wed. No, I was given nothing but his company. I still don't know if I meant anything more to him than a diversion, a sort of exciting comfort to distract him from his cares. He never spoke of love and neither did I." Lindir sighed, amazed that he was able to speak of this, astonished that it felt so easy to talk about it with Legolas. He smiled faintly at the sylvan archer, thinking again how much he reminded him of his youthful years before the tragedy began. He watched sadly as the shadow of hopelessness dulled Legolas bright eyes. "Arwen is right; you have given over your heart."

"It does not please me to have the Lady of Imladris discussing me so plainly with people I don't know," growled Legolas and stalked off to retrieve his arrows. "Though her words are at least cordial rather than coarse," he added bitterly. Lindir joined him and they gathered their missiles in silence, each lost in thought, until suddenly Legolas grew still and turned his head back toward the heart of the valley. He touched his hand to a tree and sighed, a momentary grimace of irritation passing over his features. "Elrond approaches; I must go." With that he vaulted into the tree and vanished into the branches just as a muffled thump and a muted curse reached the minstrel's hearing.

Lindir took up the remainder of his arrows and returned to the clearing in time to see Elrond break through a thicket of wild rose, snapping several dry stems and snagging his velvet robes on the thorny vine. He stumbled over an unseen obstacle and cursed again, snatching the spiny growth to steady his balance, which elicited yet another oath as he careened into the glade, plucking a thorn from his palm. The singer smirked at Elrond's obvious shock to find him there, pleased to see the mighty Lord at less than his best, garments torn and askew, tangled hair sporting the unbecoming adornment of stray leaves and stems.

"Lindir? What are you doing here?" he asked, looking around him and up in the branches as he advanced into the glen. "I'm looking for someone and I would swear this wood purposely deters my goal. Have you seen another elf, a sylvan elf?"

"He's not here," said the singer coldly, arming his weapon and firing an arrow that came precariously close to Elrond's foot.

"Did you seen him? Where did he go, Lindir?"

"I have no idea where he went. We spoke at length as we practised together but he left just a short time ago." Lindir sent a second arrow in Elrond's direction, grazing the flowing hem of his formal robes.

"Stop that! What is wrong with you?" shouted Elrond uneasily, backing away.

"Do not move a muscle, Elrond, or I will put the next one right through your left ankle," the singer threatened, his bow trained upon his target. "And you know I will; I have no compunction about skewering Noldorin elves, particularly those that take advantage of their power to abuse others."
"What are you talking about? Lindir, this is unacceptable; lower your weapon at once!" the ruler barked, face going red with rage.

"How old is Legolas?" Lindir demanded. "What right do you have to use him? Do you know you are breaking his heart? How can you be so cold and cruel after what he has endured? Answer!" He pulled the bowstring back tighter and the wood gave out a truly menacing creak as the tension increased.

"Lindir, calm yourself," Elrond entreated, trying to steady his own nerves. He held up supplicating hands. "I am not using him, I swear it. This is not like your history, believe me!"

"But I do not believe you; convince me! Explain why that elfling is bound to you yet wears no ring."

"Legolas isn't an elfling, first of all, and second there was no other means to save his life except to bind him to me. He's a sylvan elf; I saw the same thing happen at Dagorlad. A warrior severely wounded was saved from death by binding his soul to another. This is the way for his kind and you need not blame me for it; I was compelled. If you had been there, if you had seen it"

"I have seen it." Lindir sighed and lowered his bow, shaking his head. "That is not the point. What happened was instinct; the result is something you control. Why haven't you acknowledged him? Ten years have passed and I think if you were going to you would have. Thus, you are using him and deserve to be punished!" Lindir raised the bow again and had the satisfaction of watching Elrond hop around excitedly trying to find cover. He let loose the arrow and grinned as the noble Lord yelped and sat hard on the ground, his balance stolen by the grazing gash across his calf. He drew another arrow and nocked it, laughing at the look of horror that spread over his victim's features.

"Daro!" The command came from above and Lindir stilled at once, all the hairs on his neck uplifting as he met the threatening gaze of the Wood Elf, bow drawn and aimed upon him. "Put aside your weapon, melon."

"Legolas! Thank the Valar I found you," Elrond said, hands supplying pressure to the wound, smiling gratefully up at the young elf. "I'm sorry about this morning but I'm free until the banquet. I've been searching for hours but you didn't call. Please, let me make it up to you."

Lindir did as he was told, setting his bow against the tree trunk immediately. He stepped away and watched as Legolas leaped down and hastened to kneel beside Elrond. It made his heart contract to see how tenderly Legolas pried away the healer's fingers, uncovering the gash, carefully ripping away the fabric of the leggings to see the extent of the injury. He used his handkerchief to staunch the flow of blood and tie off the cut, uttering not a single sound. All the while Elrond babbled on, apologising and rationalising for something until Legolas was done and silenced him with a very soft kiss, filled with sadness and desire, and rose to his feet. He sent Lindir a pointed look of warning, returned to the trees, and was gone.

"Legolas?" Elrond scrambled awkwardly to his feet and stared overhead in vain. "Aearen, please come back. I am sorry, so sorry." His pleas went unanswered and the Lord of the valley sighed dejectedly.

"What is this about?" demanded Lindir, not as angry as before now that he had seen them together. Never had he seen Elrond so ingratiating, so genuinely contrite. Whatever he had done, he really regretted causing Legolas pain and it was clear he had wounded his own soul in the process. It wasn't the same as Lindir's situation after all. Perhaps there was still a chance. "For what were you apologising?"

Elrond, who had nearly forgotten Lindir was there, hastily turned to make sure he wasn't being held
under threat again. He hobbled next to the tree and sat back down with a grunt, massaging the bandaged gash. "He asked me to go walk with him in the woods this morning. I couldn't because the delegates from Dol Amroth were crossing the ford and I had to be there to greet them. He said Erestor could do it and I tried to explain that wouldn't have been appropriate but he doesn't understand that sort of thing and"

"Explain it to me for I don't understand either. Erestor could certainly have greeted those pompous idiots," retorted Lindir, arms crossed before his chest as he stared down at his former charge. He'd had Elrond over his knee more than once and was less than impressed by his exalted status.

"Lindir, we are speaking of the Adrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth, a Man who shares kinship with elf-kind. I am shocked for you to denigrate him so as he carries sylvan blood."

"That is open to debate. What became of Nimrodel and Mithrellas is more likely a tragic death at the hands of mortals. If she had been well and beloved, why did none of her people ever hear from her again? I shall tell you, because she was treated even as you treat Legolas and in her shame she hid herself from her kin until she wasted unto death!" Lindir was nearly beside himself again and Elrond flinched from his looming form and flailing arms.

"You go to far! There is no indication the Lady Mithrellas was mistreated in any way."

"It doesn't matter. Erestor is much higher in station than any of them and could have managed them without your aid."

"I am the Lord of this realm, not Erestor. It is imperative that I am present to greet these humans so that they understand who will be mediating their negotiations. If Erestor met the emissaries, the mortals might assume Imladris thinks little of the countries beset by the growing shadow of Sauron. I am trying to dispel the distrust that has blossomed between Men and Elves since Dagorlad and Isildur's folly. We need allies not enemies."

"That is a pitiful excuse. No wonder he didn't bother to acknowledge it. I don't think Legolas appreciates lies, Elrond. Do you think him stupid? Tell me, did you invite him to be at your side when you received these august visitors?" Elrond's guilty expression was all the answer he needed and Lindir had to fight the urge to kick the Peredhel's teeth in. "You are ashamed of him."

"Nay, not so, Lindir. It's just not what I expected to happen to me. I've fallen in love with him."

Now all Lindir's high emotion cooled and his lips curled into a kinder smile to hear this as he sat once more beside his former ward. "That is good news! What is the problem, then? Wed him, Elrond, for clearly he adores you."

"It's not so simple, Lindir, you must see that. I am the leader of the free people left on Arda. I have a reputation to consider, my children's feelings to think of, and Celebrian's honour to protect. I can't just abandon everything I've worked so hard to achieve."

"Ai Valar! You are despicable!" Lindir shouted and leaped to his feet, pressing his palm against the tree trunk, fearful that Legolas was still near enough to have heard that. The woods reassured him that the sylvan archer was no longer in the vicinity and the minstrel exhaled a deep breath as he glared down at Elrond in scorn. "You should have sent for someone from his country to come for him immediately if this is how you truly feel. You don't deserve to be loved the way he loves you."

"I never intended to harm him! I was trying to help and I wasn't entirely in control of things either. Elrohir sent a messenger to Mirkwood as soon as we brought him here but no answer was returned. It seems the brother he lost was his only family."
"It seems? Don't you even know? Have you even asked him about his family?"

"Please Lindir, all this yelling is not helping. You must understand that for some time we could barely communicate. Legolas does not speak Sindarin well and I spoke no Nandorin at all." Elrond was quite taken aback when Lindir erupted into derisive laughter.

"I can't believe you are considered wise," he sneered. "I'd bet my mithril harp he speaks more languages than you do, including Westron, Sindarin, Old Quenya, High Dwarven, Nandorin, Old Anûnaic, and probably several obscure Avarin dialects only common near Rhûn of which you have never even heard. You haven't any idea what you're dealing with, have you?"

"What do you know of him, Lindir? Tell me!" Elrond got up on his knees and clutched at his old mentor's tunic, tugging it as would a small child.

"No. If you want to know these things you must take it upon yourself to discover them. Don't you ever talk to him or is it all just hot sex with a young and vigorous lover?"

"Nay, please, it's more than that. Please, Lindir, help me understand him. I don't want to hurt him. I don't want to lose him. I don't know what to do!"

At the desperate quality contained in Elrond's voice and manner, Lindir found his heart and took pity on his old friend. He crouched down to meet Elrond eye to eye.

"Do you truly love him?"

"Yes."

"Do you want him for your mate for all time?"

"Yes, yes, just tell me what to do."

"You must court him formally and proclaim him your spouse. You must exchange rings and vows before the One, as is the custom of the Noldorin people."

"I can't do that! Weren't you listening? What am I to do about my family, my people? They already hold me up to ridicule for this and Elrohir refuses to come home unless I send Legolas away. But I can't send him away, I just can't be without him!" Elrond was nearly sobbing as he shook Lindir roughly by the arms. He gasped as a stinging slap bruised his cheek and sent him over sideways into the dirt.

"You are a hypocrite, Elrond Peredhil." Lindir glowered down at him in fury. "I am ashamed of you; you dishonour me and all your Telerin ancestors. I can't believe you turned out so badly when I had the raising of you. Where did you learn these haughty ways?" He rose and turned to leave but the Elf Lord's cutting reply halted him.

"I learned from you! Look at you; pretending to be Sindarin so that you won't be scorned or shunned! You are worse than I for you are a sylvan elf and hide it from everyone, even yourself! You are filled with false pride." Elrond was on his feet, red-faced and seething, hands curled into fists, ready to advance the confrontation if need be. His respect for Lindir went back to his childhood, his compassion for the singer meant he would forgive anything, but Elrond was at his limit and would stand no more.

"That is not pride, Elrond, but shame. I have given up my ancestry because I am unworthy to claim it, not the other way around. I am a kinslayer, doomed forever. I will not have my sins used against my race. Do you believe your motives for disdaining Legolas are the same?" With that Lindir ended.
the conversation, wheeling about and snatching up his bow as he left the glade.

TBC

Nîth Chall: Shadowed Youth
nârion: son of a rat
hecîlo: outcast (Quenya)
Ened Ethuil: Mid-Spring
Aegas Mírdan: Mountain Peak the Jewel Smith, an Elf of Rivendell
Muindoradar: brother-father, Uncle
Minya'mmë: first mother, grandmother
Aearen: my ocean
Nîn'ôdhel: my Deep Elf
Thenin: True. (Yes.)
Man le presta, Aearen?: What troubles you, My Ocean?
Alnad, alnad, Nîn'ôdhel: Nothing, nothing, My Deep Elf.
Advae?: Better? (Well again?)
Pan vae: All right
Ringe: cold

NOTE: Well, if you hadn't noticed it before it should be very obvious this is a very AU story. What Mpreg isn't? Hopefully no one is too put out about this extreme Lindir characterisation and his heavy-handed emotional hold over Elrond. My Lindir is a deeply troubled soul but in general controls his emotions well. This situation between his Lord and the Wood Elf has him reverting into a bleak, violent mindset. He will settle down now, having fought his demons and refrained from killing anyone else, and will apologise to his Lord. Legolas needs someone to talk to, Elrond needs direction and correction, and Lindir is going to be the go-between. Also, those who like that sort of thing will recognise the time-frame Adrahil of Dol Amroth and Ecthelion II of Gondor, the humans arriving for the negotiations, place this story in: just before the Ring War. This means we get to have Thorongil (Aragorn incognito) come along with Ecthelion and his creepy son, Denethor II, encountering our strange Legolas. Sorry about the lack of steaminess in this update. Disturbing naked Wood Elf action soon.

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The home of Elrond Half-elven was admittedly not as imposing as the white-turreted castle of the Kings on the Seventh Level of Minas Tirith in Gondor, it was probably not as exotic as the Prince of Dol Amroth's sea-side palazzo on the coast of Belfalas, it definitely could not rival the magnificence of Turgon's mansion in the hidden city of Gondolin, but Glorfindel was fairly certain the Last Homely House was a veritable palace compared to the underground stronghold of Thranduil's court in Mirkwood.

Not that he had ever been there, but he had seen the subterranean dwellings of Menegroth, having lived therein before joining Turgon to found the hidden City of Singing Stone. Thingol's cavernous fortress had been grand in its own way, but Glorfindel had never enjoyed the absence of fresh air and sunlight. The Balrog Slayer was inclined to think that any structure delved within Mirkwood would be significantly less astounding. This being the case, he was always a bit disgruntled by the failure of Imladris' resident Wood Elf to generate a sufficiently appreciative response to the glorious Hall of Fire, the Grand Banquet hall, the impressively commanding Council Chamber, the six massive libraries, or even the sumptuous interiors of the ample residential apartments housed within Lord Elrond's compound.

Almost everyone who ventured to the peaceful vale, mortal and immortal alike, was struck speechless with awe and wonder when touring Imladris the first time. The city was patterned after the Noldorin ghetto in the kingdom of Lindon, established by Gil-Galad after the War of Wrath and the destruction of Beleriand. The architecture of the buildings, from houses to markets to stables and barns, was Noldorin, denoted by exquisite stonework, gracefully soaring arches sculpted in relief, open breezeways and colonnades, lush gardens and artful fountains. The interior landscapes were as luxuriously decorated with tasteful elegance, appointed with finely carved furniture, masterfully crafted tapestries and paintings, musical instruments, and all manner of wondrous things wrought by Elven hands.

Elrond's abode epitomised the predominant style. Being Noldorin, there was perhaps a tendency to display swords and daggers and other kinds of metal-works in excess, but in Glorfindel's opinion this did not detract from the beauty of the secluded domicile. The Last Homely House, when it came right down to it, was gracious, refined, dignified, opulent; anything but homely.

He was thinking along this vein due to the fact that the entire household was turned out in the full flower of Noldorin might and majesty, all to honour and impress the visiting human dignitaries from Dol Amroth and Gondor. The Steward and his entourage had arrived at midmorning. After the obligatory perambulation of the grounds and some light refreshment, the two Men had met in council with Elrond and Erestor, sealing the pact between their countries. The Steward's son, Denethor, would take to wife the Prince of Dol Amroth's daughter, Finduilas. The wedding would be held in Imladris in just two days. To celebrate the betrothal a grand feast had been prepared and the elite of Imladris' society were in attendance.

Legolas, after a subdued but rancorous debate with Elrond the previous night, had likewise agreed.
to be present and was seated not by the Lore-master's side but far down the long table. Below the humans, in fact, amid a group of Glorfindel's high ranking warriors and their wives. That was what the argument had been about. Legolas hadn't wanted to attend at all if he couldn't sit beside Elrond. He knew who the guests were and understood what they were, but he was elf-kind and could not comprehend the importance of these ephemeral beings. Why, the meagre seventy-six summers he had lived were enough to render most mortals weakened and failing with the shadow of death. For himself, Legolas considered death an indication of Men's kinship with the lesser beings of Yavanna's design rather than with the First-born Children of Iluvatar. How could it be fit to treat them with greater dignity than nearly all the Elves?

Elrond had chastised him, calling Legolas an ignorant and stubborn child, admonishing that he knew nothing of the mind of Iluvatar to so disparage the Second-born. Elrond was not called half-elven for nothing, he had sternly rebuked. When Legolas countered that 'not for nothing had Elrond chosen to be counted among the First-born', the son of Eärendil actually raised his voice in answer, castigating the archer's cheek and impudence. Regardless of the sylvan's personal prejudices against humans, Elrond had added, the feast was important to him and that should be sufficient to warrant the archer's dutiful co-operation. The Elven Lord had accused Legolas of being deliberately recalcitrant, refusing to adopt the manner and mores of the realm which sheltered him. Elrond had stated that the archer's persistent and overt rejection of Noldorin custom was personally insulting. Legolas, he had roared, seemed determined to remain a habitual embarrassment.

It had become ominously quiet after that outburst. No one in Rivendell was privy to whatever else passed between them.

Of course Glorfindel hadn't heard the argument, for he had his own house in Imladris, but Arwen had, her apartment being situated in the same wing as her father's. Elven ears being so sensitive, there was no privacy in the Last Homely House, only discretion and tactful courtesy. What Arwen heard she shared only with Glorfindel, for the two were now confederates in the cause of the lowly Wood Elf. The household staff, however, were not so inclined to refrain from telling tales. The Balrog Slayer suspected that even the humans knew of the discord between Elrond and Legolas.

No one had seen Legolas until just before the feast was to start when he slipped in through the kitchen, armed with his bow and quiver. Figwit, Lord Elrond's personal valet, had apparently been given the task of lookout and reported the Wood Elf's hurried flight to his chambers to get dressed for the banquet.

The feast was now well into the main course and Glorfindel stole a swift peek at the woodland archer, who managed to simultaneously project absolute misery and jittery nervousness. The reason was not difficult to ascertain, for one of the Gondorians was openly staring at him, an appraising leer moulding his patrician features. Denethor.

One look at Elrond confirmed that he was well aware of the situation but chose not to intervene. The row with his lover had obviously not ended peacefully. Glorfindel grimaced, wishing he was a little closer to Legolas in order to distract him. The seating arrangements were Erestor's domain as seneschal. He would not situate the Wood Elf as a member of the Lord's family, there was no question as to that. Arwen's place was at Elrond's right and beside her was Erestor himself. On Elrond's left sat the Lady Finduilas and of course next to her was her fiancé, Denethor. The Balrog Slayer was on the Man's right followed by the Prince of Dol Amroth and his party, while across the table sat Echthelion with his courtiers alongside. Then the table filled out with various nobles of the valley seated according to their degree of importance, followed by the most prestigious of Imladris' generals.

Erestor's reasoning for placing Legolas with these warriors centred on the notion that, since he served
as a member of the patrols, he must have made friends among the soldiers. That Elrond could agree to this was a stark indication of how very little he understood about Legolas' life in the peaceful haven. Had either of them bothered to consult Glorfindel he would have told them this was a mistake. The Balrog Slayer was not proud of the fact that his openly expressed attitude of distrust and dislike was responsible for the low opinion of Legolas to which most of the warriors held. Thus the sylvan's proximity was utterly ignored; the others talked over and around him as if he was not there.

Their disregard couldn't go unnoticed and probably piqued the Man's interest. Denethor gave a soft guffaw and leaned forward to whisper to Throrongil. "Can't say that's what I expected to see when I learned there was a Wood Elf here. I thought they were rugged and wild, but that looks more like a frightened child than a fearsome warrior."

Thorongil's brow furrowed as his eyes swept over the sylvan. "The Elves can hear you, Den, mind your speech. And don't underestimate him. It is said that even a child in Mirkwood is well trained in the art of killing." A vaguely troubled smile hovered around the captain's features and he shook his head at the Steward's son, whispering his comments back.

Legolas certainly knew he was the subject of their scrutiny but refused to acknowledge the Men's attention.

The worthy re-born soldier scowled in icy disdain at Denethor to underscore Aragorn's statement. The Man gave an uneasy chuckle and turned to converse with his intended. Glorfindel glanced down the table again and caught the Wood Elf's eye, giving a slight frown and a minute shake of his head in remonstrance. Legolas was fidgeting terribly, hadn't touched his food, and had just run his index finger around the inside of the high collar of his formal robes, tugging in a most uncouth manner. The young elf immediately put his hands in his lap, a faint bloom of colour tinting his pale features, and turned his face upward. Glorfindel's eyes followed and tracked along the perimeter of the ceiling in the Grand Banquet hall, admiring the gilded border of leaves and vines defining a frame for the masterpiece painted overhead: the arrival of the host of the Valar and their warriors on the shores of Beleriand at the end of the First Age.

The Balrog Slayer sighed; he could understand Legolas' discomfort considering how rude the guests were behaving. Really, the woodland archer was conducting himself remarkably well and hadn't done anything bizarre thus far. Once, during a banquet held for Cîrdan's regular state visit, which happened to fall in the fifth year of Legolas' residence, he had de-boned his portion of a roast grouse with his fingers, set all the succulent meat aside, put the bones in his crystal goblet and used his soup spoon to grind them into a fine powder. Then, he'd mixed that with the creamed squash on his plate, spread the vile paste on his bread, and consumed it with relish. For a second course, he'd eaten the petals from the day-lilies in the floral arrangement decorating his end of the table. Cîrdan had looked on with tolerant concern, politely enquiring of the Wood Elf if his digestion was off a bit. Much to Elrond's mortification, Legolas had answered that he was quite pathrad a tafnen but the flowers ought to set him right by morning.

Things could definitely be worse.

He transferred his vision from the painting back to the Wood Elf and startled to see the odd expression of disgust? Contempt? Glorfindel couldn't tell but it was definitely not a look that indicated admiration for either the subject matter or the artistry on display. A sudden flare of exasperation coursed through him. Anyone more observant than a toad couldn't fail to miss Legolas' sneering lack of appreciation for the complexity, the exacting detail visible in the work of beauty above his head. And now he was worrying his clothes again, pulling at the cuffs of his undershirt beneath the wide, belled hems of the sleeves in the royal blue velvet robe. It would seem he didn't feel any gratitude for
the rich garments, either.

_No one in Mirkwood has such luxury; not even King Thranduil dons garb as princely, I'd wager. Really, in some sense Elrond is right; Legolas appears to encourage the discredit others assign to him._

Glorfindel tried to meet the archer's eye again and failed. Legolas was purposefully avoiding his glance; he was sure of it. Not for the first time, he pondered how such a primitive being could express what was at best indifference and really closer to disdain for the opulent surroundings. It was not a new phenomenon either but a defining characteristic, notable since his first days in Imladris.

Of course, the Wood Elf had been so badly wounded and ill with grief when he first arrived that his lack of interest was understandable. Glorfindel's anger departed, recalling how terrible it had been for Legolas then. Never had he witnessed such an extreme reaction of fear and dread. The Wood Elf had been absolutely terrified and over wrought with sorrow, consumed by infection from poisoned wounds, and delirious for many days. He'd fought his confinement in the House of Healing, attempting to escape more than once, cursing the poor medics in his rough native tongue. He struggled against them so much that his wounds repeatedly tore and eventually Elrond ordered him bound to the bed with restraints.

At this, the confused and hapless sylvan became so despondent that it seemed he would fade even after the esteemed Lord's heroic sacrifice to save him. Legolas refused food and drink and eventually the Lore-master had to personally take over the tending, hand-feeding the morose creature and keeping watch beside him night and day. Many a time Glorfindel had come upon them, both crowded into the narrow cot, Elrond cradling the miserable patient close to his heart. Only then could Legolas find some hint of peace and rest, the renowned healer had hastily explained. Legolas condition, physical and mental, was so poor that it took nearly a year before the injuries healed. Glorfindel's expression became more sympathetic and when Legolas sent him a fleeting glance to see if he was still being watched, gave him a smile this time instead of another frown, even though the Wood Elf was again shifting about restlessly in his seat.

Legolas' sight looked beyond Glorfindel and the Balrog Slayer turned to identify the new subject of his focus: Elrond. Glorfindel was not surprised by that but he was struck by the expression on his old friend's face and whipped his gaze back to Legolas. The sylvan visibly flinched, for the Lord of Imladris was glaring at his youthful lover, no doubt hoping to shame him into behaving with more decorum. That was a mistake, for abruptly Legolas shoved back his chair, rose so swiftly he knocked his plate of food to the floor, and nearly bolted from the room, causing a significant disturbance. Everyone exclaimed, the guests started murmuring, the citizens began making snide remarks, and Elrond had to stand up and apologise.

"Please, my honoured guests and friends, forgive this breach of etiquette and sudden departure. Perhaps he is unwell. Glorfindel, would you kindly look to the comfort of the afflicted Elf and make sure he gets to the House of Healing?" Elrond said.

"Of course, Hiren." Glorfindel held his annoyance in check as he rose and made a perfect bow to Elrond, but those who knew him well could discern from his very restraint how displeased he was to be the go-between sent to soothe his Lord's paramour. Elrond should be the one to follow Legolas and indeed was the only one the sylvan would obey.

A nearly imperceptible snicker directed his attention to one among the human dignitaries: Thorongil, captain of Gondor. The mighty warrior sent this mortal a narrowed stare promising chastisement in the very near future, for Thorongil was none other than Estel, Lord Elrond's foster son. Glorfindel had paddled the whelp's behind on more than one occasion and his expression warned he wasn't
against utilising that method of punishment for this latest offence. He left the room with grace and
dignity, following the Wood Elf, somewhat dismayed to hear footsteps behind him. He waited on the
veranda as Estel hurried forward.

"Aragorn, you should not have left the banquet. This defection from the Steward's party will
certainly be looked askance," admonished Glorfindel.

"Nay, Saelben, the feast has concluded. Dessert will be enjoyed amid the beauty of springtime in
these magnificent gardens. Alae!" the man indicated the open archways nearby with a flourish, for
the guests were indeed exiting the dining room and strolling in groups across the lawn. "I am
interested in accompanying you for I have many questions about that Elf. Is it true, the news Gandalf
told me? He is really bound to Elrond?"

"Have you ever known the old buzzard to lie?" snapped Glorfindel, but he quickly mastered himself
as another Man joined them: Denethor.

"I hope I am not intruding," he said graciously but with a definitive note of imperious snobbery
which clearly communicated that he really didn't care if he was. "Garden parties are not of interest to
me; might I join you on this quest? That sylvan seemed highly disturbed, didn't he? I've heard they
are fierce; mayhap you will need some assistance in detaining him."

Glorfindel and Aragorn both snorted in contemptuous outrage.

"Lord Denethor, I will forgive your obvious ignorance this once, yet do not so insult me again,"
rumbled Glorfindel and turned away to continue in the direction Legolas had gone.

"That was stupid, Den," said Aragorn and gave his comrade a pitying look. "Glorfindel of Gondolin
is an Elf you want as an ally, not an enemy. Killed a Balrog, you know."

"Perhaps," the Steward-to-be shrugged insolently. "Who can say if those old legends are true; were
you there? Was any Man? Nay, and I don't trust a history book just because it comes from Elves, as
do you. Elvish history is filled with notorious villains and fantastic heroes. It is no different from the
tall tales told of the Numenorians of old, and I know much of that is bunk."

"Oh? How's that; were you there to witness the downfall of your forebears?" quipped Aragorn.
"What of Fornost, then? That battle was in our recent past and even you can't ignore that. Glorfindel
it was who drove the Witch King from his lair at Carn Dûm."

"Pah!" Denethor spat upon the ground. "The account comes from the north men, uncouth Rangers,
descended from Black Numenorean renegades! You would take their word for truth?"

"They are no renegades nor are they base," contended Aragorn, yet he kept his voice level for he
knew Denethor was baiting him. It was no secret that he counted himself a Ranger. "You can trust to
their honour and their allegiance to all who strive against Mordor. The Rangers work against the
encroachment of the Shadow in lands where no other Men will raise a blade against Sauron's
minions. Discount them not." He did not wait for any rejoinder and headed after Glorfindel.

To his dismay, Denethor continued to tag along. As long as he was around, Aragorn wouldn't be
able to really talk with Glorfindel, for he couldn't permit his true identity to become known to the
folk from Gondor. None of them had a clue that he'd been raised in Rivendell and was in fact
Isildur's heir. He leaped into a run so to catch up to Glorfindel, Denethor right behind. The Elf Lord
was striding into the orchards, heading for the rugged country beyond and its tangle of woods. At the
border of the city and the wilds he waited for them, frowning and muttering to himself.
"You two must go back. There is little hope that even I will be able to track That Wood Elf and it is certain that if strangers accompany me he will not permit himself to be found," he grumped, clearly not looking forward to a ramble amid the trees.

"Then why go at all? Surely he will return when he calms down," said Denethor.

"I must attempt the impossible for Lord Elrond wishes him brought home."

"Whatever for? It's clear enough the sylvan just didn't like the company. Or perhaps it is the surroundings that bother him. I've never heard of a Wood Elf living in a city. What's he doing here?" Denethor demanded.

"Den, you know perfectly well he was injured and Lord Elrond took him in to heal him. Gandalf told us so," hedged Aragorn. Denethor had a way of smelling out a lie, even a partial one. He was always first to discover court intrigues and his insights had frequently given Echthelion the advantage whenever this or that noble or foreign emissary tried to get the better of the Steward.

"Do you take me for a fool, Gil? You know what I meant. He's not injured anymore but he's still here. Not that I mind; gives me a chance to test all those myths about the secretive creatures. Mayhap that's why Lord Elrond keeps such a dangerous pet, as an intellectual endeavour. He plans to document as much fact regarding the natural history of the species as he can," the Steward's son reasoned.

"You speak as if referring to an animal," Glorfindel's tone was filled with his disapproval. "The sylvan Elves are also First-born and thus unworthy of your scorn. Go; return to the party and attend your Ladies in song and dance."

It seemed at first that Denethor would defy him, but then the Man's features took on a calculating expression that always made both his friends and adversaries wary. He smiled and bowed, saying: "My apologies, Lord Glorfindel. I have fallen prey to one of the many notions spread abroad regarding the Wood Elves. It is said among Men that they are spurned by the rest of Elven society, that they are a savage and ignorant people, much like the wild woses. Of course there are other stories, more recent ones, told here on the estate suggesting Lord Elrond's interest is more visceral than academic." With that the human was content to leave, seeing he had scored over the imposing Balrog Slayer as a rapid flush of colour suffused the legendary Elf's cheeks, whether with anger or chagrin he couldn't tell and didn't care.

Glorfindel watched them retreat and for a second met Aragorn's baleful eye. The Gondorian noble's words had certainly found their mark. Legolas was treated just as he'd described: an inferior being, irrelevant to Noldorin life save as a curiosity to study or tease or use. That the human knew this indicated just how universal the idea was. Or how perceptive he is. Denethor bears watching for he has the manner of one who makes trouble for sport. Glorfindel was again beset by regret and a strong desire to find the sylvan, though he had no illusions that he would be successful. As yet, he hadn't had the chance to tell Elrond about the twins impending arrival. Were he to locate Legolas he would be able to explain the situation and prepare the youth for the looming disaster.

The Balrog Slayer sighed, reflecting on all the time he'd spent resenting the Wood Elf's presence. Too easily he'd believed Elrohir's admonishments of sorcery and ill-intent upon Legolas' part. The Wood Elf couldn't possibly be happy amid the folk of Imladris, given the contempt with which he was regarded. That he didn't leave spoke profoundly to the strength of the bond formed between him and Elrond; a bond that clearly caused him as much pain as it did joy. Probably the anguish outweighs the pleasure, most of the time.

With these sombre thoughts, Glorfindel entered the woods. Long he roamed, hoping for some sign of
Legolas' whereabouts, calling out now and again in encouragement, yet as the day waned to dusk he had to admit defeat. Not wanting to be late for the evening meal and wishing for an opportunity to at last speak with Elrond, he decided to cut across the paddocks and enter the estate from the stable yard. He was just crossing the Trysting Bridge, an ornate and secluded span over a small tributary of the Bruinen, when a high pitched shriek shattered the normal quietude.

It came from the direction of the Spa, a wonderful spot enjoyed by nearly everyone in the valley, where a clear spring created a series of deep, mineral rich pools for soaking and an oxbow of the river yielded a most wondrous clay bog suitable for pore-cleansing and revitalising mud-baths. The Balrog Slayer broke into a run, but his ears informed him others had arrived already.

A tremendous clamour arose, a mixture of angry yelling, scoffing laughter, and crude jokes filtered through the air. Before he got within sight of the Spa, Glorfindel heard the nearly imperceptible sound of Elvish footsteps, the rhythm of the stride indicative of someone running full tilt, and the next instant Legolas burst through the hedge and careened right into the re-born warrior. They both went down but Legolas was up in an instant, streaking away again, heading for the trees.

"Legolas! Wait!" Glorfindel scrambled to his feet and set off after the Elf, deeply disturbed by what had happened. Not that he was injured by the impact or angry about being tossed into the dirt; nay, he was instead shocked by Legolas' appearance and frame of mind. The Wood Elf retreating into the distance was completely naked, caked from head to toe in mud, and sobbing in what could only be described as hysteria, absolute torment written on his agonised features. Before Glorfindel had gone far, more footsteps joined his and the Balrog Slayer was rather surprised to find Lindir racing beside him. "What happened?" he gasped between huffing breaths.

"Cruelty! Vicious, unwarranted cruelty!" seethed the usually gentle-spirited minstrel. He came to an immediate halt, grabbing Glorfindel and yanking him to a standstill so forcefully the warrior thought his arm might become dislocated. Lindir pulled his comrade to within an inch of his face and glared into the Vanya's clear blue eyes.

"I will see to Legolas. You go tell Elrond to meet me in his quarters; I will take Legolas there. Tell him to bring that cure he invented for Estel when the boy got tangled in poison oak. Hurry!" With that Lindir darted off again, seeming to know exactly where he was going, as indeed he did.

Glorfindel stared after him in open-mouthed wonder for a second or two before the garbled sounds of heated voices raised in anger met his hearing. He turned and raced back the way he'd come and soon reached the Spa. A sizeable group was collected in the normally restful place, among them several of the ladies from Dol Amroth, Finduilas included, as well as Echthelion, Denethor, Thorongil, and Adrahil. Scattered across the ground were all the sylvan archer's clothes. Elrond was there attempting to pacify the infuriated humans, especially Adrahil and Denethor who were both volubly declaiming against the Wood Elf and demanding satisfaction.

"It is a disgrace! My daughter has never been subjected to such an affront! How is it said that the Elves are the most genteel of beings when this is the behaviour we must tolerate?" fumed the Prince of Dol Amroth. His daughter was weeping quietly behind him as her maids tried to calm her down.

"I assure you, Lord Adrahil, this was not intentional," Elrond tried to explain but was cut off by the Steward's son.

"Indeed? How else can you explain it? Are we to assume the Elves, or at least the sylvans, deem it normal and decent to put such intimate actions on public display?" Denethor sneered. "I had heard it is so and now have I beheld it with my own eyes: the First-born are given to obsession with pleasures of the flesh!"
"However it may have seemed, this is not the case," insisted Elrond, keeping his tone and manner calm even though his wrath tempted him to strike the foolish oaf down. "The Spa was deserted when Legolas came here and in fact the ladies intruded upon him. I regret fair Finduilas observed his ministrations yet his intention was not to offend her."

"No, that won't do!" shouted Denethor, shaking his fist at Elrond so that his father had to intervene and get between them.

"Son, control yourself!" he admonished. "Step back and tend to your betrothed; lead her from this place. Her father and I shall get to the bottom of this."

"Father, they can hear far better than humans. He must have heard them approaching; you know how they chatter and laugh at silly nothings. He could have departed or at least covered himself before they came within sight," the younger Man railed.

"That's true!" stormed Adrahil, his anger firing up even higher while his daughter wept more loudly.

"There must be a reasonable answer," insisted Aragorn, tugging at Denethor's elbow. "Come, let us escort the ladies elsewhere. Finduilas could use a restorative and you will accomplish nothing more here."

Denethor gave the Man a horrific scowl but a glance at the Lady of Dol Amroth confirmed that she wished more than anything to leave the scene. Indeed, it was likely she would swoon from the shock of being exposed to such a lurid display if she didn't partake of some invigorating tea and fast. She looked so young and fragile that his heart at once softened and his anger fled. The Steward's son hurried over and gently took her hand, tucking it into the crook of his arm. With quiet and comforting words he led her away, the maids and Aragorn trailing behind. Most of the gathered Elves began to disperse, but several only retreated slightly, wishing to remain close enough to glean more details. The three Lords suddenly noticed Glorfindel's presence and turned to him as if expecting he might have the answers they all desired.

"Lord Elrond, Lindir has requested your immediate aid. Please retrieve the salve made for Estel that summer he became entangled in the undergrowth during the hunt. I know not the specifics but the minstrel was most insistent that you join him in your apartment; the situation is an emergency," said Glorfindel.

That was enough for Elrond. His eyes grew very large and his face paled as he gave a quick nod, gathered up his robes, and sprinted back toward the Healing Wing of the compound. The two Men watched him go, plainly dissatisfied, and faced the Balrog Slayer with stern expressions.

"What can you say to this, Lord Glorfindel?" demanded Echthelion on his future law-daughter's behalf.

"Forgive me, Steward, but I was not present. Please tell me what happened and mayhap I can decipher this unpleasant riddle," suggested Glorfindel.

It was Adrahil who answered, heaving a great sigh before he started. "My daughter was told by Arwen of the wonders of this secluded Spa. The journey here was trying, for her constitution is not robust. Add to that her nervous anticipation of the pending nuptials and you can imagine her agitated emotional state. Finduilas decided to forego the rest of the party in order to spend time in the rejuvenating waters of the spring and the cleansing properties of the clays. She of course would never go alone and thus her maids accompanied her.

"When the ladies arrived, they found the grotto occupied. The Wood Elf was kneeling beside the
mud hole, stark naked, slathering the slippery stuff all over himself, rubbing it most vigourously between his legs and all over his fully exposed genitals, keening and moaning in his hedonistic revelling. Needless to say, the ladies were horrified and screamed as if a marauding band of Orcs had set upon them. That frightened the reprobate Elf and he fled just as we came upon the scene," the irate father concluded.

"What my son said bears considering," added Echthelion with dire disapproval. "I realise the Wood Elf did not plan this, yet he surely could have prevented it. The Lady's honour has been compromised and I fear my son will claim the right to settle the matter in a duel of combat."

"That would be unwise, Lord, and you would find yourself less one son and heir. Another means of resolving the dispute must be chosen," Glorfindel shook his head. He'd seen Legolas fight and in this the legend of the Wood Elves did not hold up to the reality. Of all the able soldiers that served in Imladris' ranks, there was no warrior so fierce or fearless as the sylvan archer. "Besides, I am sure there is something very wrong. Lindir's request was quite specific and I feel obliged to tell you it is for Legolas he has demanded Elrond's help."

"Illness among the First-born?" scoffed Adrahil. "Please, I know more than most about the nature of Elves."

"Then you must realise how unlikely it would be for a sylvan to behave as you have accused," countered Glorfindel pointedly. "They are the most fastidious and shy of any folk I have ever encountered, or at least Legolas is, as I have known no other Wood Elves."

"Aye. So it is said of my ancestral grandmother, Mithrellas. Seldom would she even come forth from Galadon's house and then only to gaze upon the sea and mourn. She expired there, alone amid the dunes." Adrahil's face was downcast and it was obvious he was abashed to have discounted his heritage so flagrantly. He lifted contrite yet inquisitive eyes to his host. "What can be amiss with that young warrior? Is he aggrieved, as was the first Lady of Dol Amroth? Yet, if so, how to explain such strange behaviour, for it is not like the symptoms for any type of grieving I have read about."

"I know not, Lord Adrahil, though you may have hit upon an important point. His brother died during an Orc attack; I know he must still mourn for him. Legolas was stabbed with a poisoned blade in the same battle and nearly perished of it. Mayhap some remnant of the taint lingers and troubles him still. His tale is an intriguing one. Come, I know you would like to ascertain your daughter's present condition and mayhap you might wish to hear the Wood Elf's history," coaxed Glorfindel. He was eager to return to the house and find out what was happening in Elrond's apartment. Both Men agreed with him and together they returned to the Last Homely House.

Well, the place was in an uproar, or as near to one as any Elven domicile can be, a-buzz with much rumour and gossip. Everyone from the noble guests to the scullery maids was discussing the case and several attempted to draw close enough to the venerable Lord's chambers to overhear what was said. From the suite wafted the muffled sounds of strife as the sylvan alternately moaned in evident pain and expounded volubly in his native language. Elrond's voice could also be picked out, patiently attempting to comprehend the responses to his questions, and frequently Lindir's melodic speech supplied the interpretation. Most of the actual words spoken in Sindarin were couched too low to make out, especially since the musicians engaged for the feast were set up in the Hall of Fire, playing merry dancing tunes quite loudly, so to shield the conversation as much as possible.

Fortunately, Erestor was not about to sit idly by while chaos erupted. He tactfully pronounced the festivities at an end, citing Finduilas' frailty as the cause though everyone could hear the clamour coming from Elrond's rooms. The seneschal shooed the valley's nobles back to their own estates and ordered his staff to tend their duties. Not one to leave anything to chance, he ordered Faelon, his
personal secretary, to stand guard in the hallway outside the door, so to discourage any curious Elves
or Men from eavesdropping. He charged the gardener with defending the open veranda from
onlookers hoping for a glimpse of what was happening in the bed chamber. Finally, Erestor collected
anyone lingering conspicuously about and herded them into the famous Hall where tales and songs
of old were sung.

There Glorfindel escorted the Men, for it was learned that Finduilas and her fiancé were there.
Apparently, the Lady found the Wood Elf's caterwauling unbearable, as her guest rooms were
situated near that area of the house. She was reclining on a chaise, a cool, damp cloth upon her brow
and Denethor's hand protectively clasping hers. Aragorn and Arwen were seated nearby, conversing
soberly, the Evenstar turning in the direction of the singer's rooms every now and then when her
sensitive ears picked up a particularly strident groan from the Wood Elf. There was no doubt, seeing
the concern on her lovely features, that she believed Legolas to be in acute distress and not at fault in
the unfortunate encounter at the mud-hole. Aragorn rose upon spying Glorfindel and approached him
as the mortals converged upon the drooping Lady of Dol Amroth.

"What news?" demanded the Balrog Slayer ere the Man could speak.

"Nothing. Elrond and Lindir have not left the suite. Arwen has ventured in twice and reports the
sylvan is in dire straights," answered Aragorn.

"I can tell you what Faelon has learned," inserted Erestor, joining the two as they ambled away from
straining ears and took up a corner behind the musicians. The trio bent their heads together the better
to insure their speech remained private.

"Go on, then, explain what caused him to behave so," Glorfindel impatiently cajoled his friend.

"Legolas repeats over and over that he cannot bear the pain, that his very skin is on fire. Elrond was
heard to admonish him to cease scratching for he had rubbed his body raw unto bleeding. Add to this
that the affliction seems most concentrated in the groin and crotch and one shudders to imagine what
agony he is in. Legolas begs to be set free of the house. Elrond refuses, of course, and has been
attempting to alleviate the suffering with various treatments. Nothing seems to be helping and
Legolas is near to breaking, as we can all tell. Elrond will have no choice but to drug him, but you
know how that frightens Legolas. He doesn't like to be unconscious and vulnerable." Erestor's tale
was both sobering and perplexing.

"Does Elrond say what caused this strange condition?" asked Aragorn, ever intrigued by any
unusual pathology.

"Nay, he hasn't even begun trying to determine the source of the irritation in his endeavour to ease
the symptoms," Erestor frowned. "It is quite peculiar, for he was just fine this morning. I saw him in
the garden at dawn just before Elrond and I had our morning tea."

"Was he eating anything?" Glorfindel knew all about the slug incident and suppressed a shiver of
revulsion.

"Nay. He was tending his pond plants in that little bog he made by damming up one of the brooks.
Wading around and singing, picking dead blooms from the water lilies but not eating them as far as I
could determine. I heard him making frog noises and that is usually a sign that he is in good spirits,"
replied Erestor. "I took it as a good omen, considering the conflict last night."

"Frog noises?" Aragorn asked, somewhat stunned to hear such a thing pronounced as if it were the
most commonplace activity in the world. He looked from one to the other of his old mentors and if
their serious countenances were any indication, they certainly didn't deem the statement outlandish.
"Aye, he claims to be able to communicate with just about every kind of living thing, no matter how simple," expounded Glorfindel. "I asked how that worked with the slugs, but he got rather offended and said Pedethryn Dailt do not have Voices, of course."

To this Aragorn made no comment, though he was thoroughly intrigued, for at that moment the Steward of Gondor approached them, angry no longer, concern written on his visage.

"I come at my future law-daughter's bidding. Finduilas is mortified that her startlement has caused such a furore. She realises she intruded on the sylvan whilst he was trying to mend whatever is so tearing at his reason just now. Aye, even we humans can pick up his cries now and again. Please, won't you set her heart at ease, sir? Will the Wood Elf be well again? Come, I beg you, and reassure her. Finduilas fears that had she not sent him from the Spa, mayhap the Elf would not be suffering."

"Gladly will I do so," stated Erestor, for he did not feel it was a breach of confidence to divulge that whatever was ailing the Elf was unlikely to have been cured by the sylvan's frantic applications of mud. The four joined the clutch of people hovering around the fainting Lady, who was weeping again.

"Hush, daughter," pleaded the Prince of Dol Amroth. "Look, here is Lord Erestor to report on the unfortunate Elf. Will you not sit up and hear him?"

"I will, Father," she sniffed, lifting her arm away from its position draped over her red-rimmed eyes. She pulled herself more upright with Denethor's aid and gazed imploringly at the erstwhile seneschal.

"Whatever is wrong with Legolas, my Lady, he is in the hands of the very best healer in all of Arda. His condition is most piteous, as we all can discern, yet I'm quite certain it has nothing to do with running him off from the Spa," consoled Erestor with a kind smile.

"That I believe also," added Arwen, "and I know Legolas wouldn't want you to blame yourself for what has happened to him. He will be satisfied if you forgive him for causing you such a fright."

"Forgive him!" exclaimed Finduilas, wringing her hands and twisting her damp handkerchief. "There is nothing to forgive. He was there first and couldn't know we planned to barge in. I was embarrassed, yet I'm sure he was more so."

"He could have spared you both that humiliation," intoned Denethor, still holding to his suspicions, yet for the sake of his Lady, spoke without his former wrath evident.

"No, I think you're wrong. Whatever is afflicting Legolas is terrible enough that it distracted him from his surroundings," Aragorn disagreed.

"I thought Wood Elves were always in tune with their environment," countered Denethor.

"So they are," nodded Erestor, "but his senses were diverted by this unknown bane assaulting his body. We don't really know the full extent of its impact. Besides, his subconscious wouldn't have alerted him, for what danger could Lady Finduilas and her maids present?"

Denethor could not deny the logic in this and remained silent, though his belligerence did not abate.

For an instant the lovely music was overborne by a particularly frightful wail of agony and everyone winced in sympathy. Finduilas covered her ears and began weeping again. Denethor patted her shoulder consolingly and Arwen squeezed Aragorn's hand, close to tears herself. The Prince of Dol Amroth muttered something about putting the Elf out of his misery. Glorfindel and Erestor exchanged grim looks. Echthelion took a great swallow from his goblet of wine and then tapped the Balrog Slayer's arm.
"You promised to relate the tale of this benighted creature. Come now, we dearly need the distraction," he said.

"Aye," Glorfindel nodded. "Be seated and I shall begin. I caution you, though, that it is not a pretty story. Mayhap the fair Lady should retire rather than attend."

"Nay!" Finduilas exclaimed through her sobs. "I could never rest easily while the Elf suffers so. Please, mere recitation can be no worse than what we are forced to hear now."

With her adamant assurance that she would endure, Glorfindel drew a chair forward and proceeded with the narration.

TBC

Carth Dalt: Slippery Deed
pathrad a tafnen: filled and stopped up - constipated
Saelben: Wise one
Alae!: Behold!
Pedethryn Dailt: Slippery Walkers - closest Sindarin translation Legolas could give for the Nandorin equivalent for 'slugs and/or snails'
Nîth Chall: Shadowed Youth
nárión: son of a rat
hecilo: outcast (Quenya)
Ened Ethuil: Mid-Spring
Aegas Mírdan: Mountain Peak the Jewel Smith, an Elf of Rivendell
Muindoradar: brother-father, Uncle
Minya’mmë: first mother, grandmother
Aearen: my ocean
Nín’ódhel: my Deep Elf
Thenin: True. (Yes.)
Man le presta, Aearen?: What troubles you, My Ocean?
Alnad, alnad, Nín’ódhel: Nothing, nothing, My Deep Elf.
Advae?: Better? (Well again?)
Pan vae: All right
Ringe: cold

GLOSSARY

NOTE: Ok, I think this is as good as it gets, meaning whatever is wrong I can't see or can't figure out how to fix it. I still think this and the next chapter should somehow have been combined as one, but how to do it evades me completely. Take note here that Legolas' age is revealed and also that Glorfindel has certainly made a complete about face in his attitude. That is meant to seem abrupt and a bit unreal, considering he has spent the last ten years actively degrading Legolas along with everyone else. The next chapter starts out very graphic and dark, involving a disturbing scene with Elrohir in a non-con situation. If such troubles you, please skip the first part and scroll down to where Glorfindel's tale begins; there is a nice bold divider for just that purpose. My sincere thanks to everyone who has found the story and sent me encouragement, whether in reviews or by signing the guestbook. You folks are very kind!

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Elrohir stood for a long time, watching, fury and hunger mixing, blood rising with more than wrath, enraged as much by his own desire as by the sight of his foster brother busy between the sylvan's wide-spread legs.

They didn't know he was there, of course; no one save Elladan could know he was already in Imladris. Glorfindel's message had reached him, camped with his brother and a group of Rangers on the eastern shore of the Brandywine just north of the Shire. He had not set forth for Rivendell alone, both twins heeding the summons with equal urgency, but he was so now. Elrohir had left his brother behind at the Prancing Pony in Bree, ensuring victory in the race homeward by bludgeoning his sibling over the head with an empty wine bottle. Upon regaining his senses, the elder twin would find his departure further delayed, having also been tied to a chair and gagged. Once he managed to free himself from that, or when the maid entered, whichever came first, Elladan would again discover his pursuit thwarted, for Elrohir had taken both their horses with him.

He'd urged his steed for all haste, despite the solid lead his nefarious cheating guaranteed, avoiding the road after traversing Hoarwell at the Last Bridge. Driven by some aberrant compulsion he couldn't, or wouldn't, define, Elrohir then cut through the bucolic peace of the Angle, crossing Loudwater into the outskirts of Eregion, following in reverse the very path they had taken that dreadful day, camping in the same place where the Wood Elf had first earned his repugnance by teasing his cock.

Now the vile scene replays; my foster brother ensorcelled just the same.

The sylvan Elf sighed faintly, a sound full of anxious discomfort, and shifted on the bed. Elrohir barely breathed, watching, struggling to master his hatred, yet not really, for if that cooled what more virulent emotions must he face then?

"Sîdh," Aragorn soothed. "Does this cause you pain?"

"Nnnay, prezh pressure." The Wood Elf's voice, hesitant and thick, wavered between fear and hope, hoarse and filled with tears unspilled. A hitched sob followed.

The sound did not move Elrohir to compassion and his lips snarled up in disgust. *Drugged again. Worry not, I have an antidote certain to rouse you fully.*

Too long he'd restrained his craving for the dissolute creature, fighting the unnatural attraction foisted on his soul the day they'd saved Legolas' life. He didn't find the consuming desire a fitting reward for so valourous a deed. Nay, this was a poison, a morbid, noxious disease. The unwanted perversion gave him no peace. Visions of Legolas troubled his dreams, always just like this, just like he had been then, luring him in with that helpless vulnerability, inciting a need to possess and claim the elf. No matter how much he resisted the hunger never diminished.
I did resist, though, and oh how you punished me for it!

A sharply drawn breath issued from the room. "Daro!" Legolas cried as he tried to pull back.

"Forgive me; you are still tender there," whispered the Man. One hand came away from its work and reached to caress the Elf's smooth belly.

Elrohir's eyes glinted and he swallowed to keep the bile down. He must not harbour anger toward Estel; he was only a Man and had not the strength to resist enchantment.

I resisted, muindor. Why didn't you?

Memories of Elladan's betrayal tore at his heart. The vivid image invaded at the worst moments. Moments when he felt his love for Elladan soothe his spirit, enjoining him to forgive and mend their broken bond. The memories stopped him every time. Over and over he relived it, finding his twin, the other half of his soul with the wounded archer, moving in him, gently supporting the injured body, whispering and cooing into the sylvan ear, stroking excited flesh to completion to the sound of his long low groan of glorious release. So clear was the vision that he could smell Legolas' semen where it shimmered, slick and silver, on Elladan's fingers, see the confusion and fear in glazed blue eyes trying to focus on the elder twin, hear the tender mercy in his brother's insistent reassurances that all was well, he was not alone.

Elrohir thought he would die that day, or become a murderer. He abhorred the Wood Elf, feeding the loathing with the unspent energy of his turbulent cravings. He had to for he couldn't bring himself to despise Elladan. Maybe it would have been wiser to kill the sylvan then, but he hadn't realised that day just what it would mean. He understood now; as long as Legolas breathed he would never be free. Nor would he be able to forgive Elladan, cold wrath drenching his desire for reconciliation, replacing compassion with disgust, reducing his love to impotent despair. It was madness, Elrohir knew that, but it couldn't be stopped. He couldn't fight it anymore.

"Saes, daro," the sylvan mumbled, shifting on the bed.

"Shhh, little one, it is well. Almost done here."

Elrohir's stomach turned even as his libido rose. He encouraged it, unlacing his breeches and fondling his erection. He imagined what the Man was doing with Legolas' unique anatomy. Were his hands in one hole, cock in the other? Aragorn certainly had his hands all up inside the Wood Elf. These final stages of coupling involved that particular fetish of Elladan's, something Elrohir hadn't done for his brother in many years. They didn't do much of anything any more and that was all Legolas' fault, too. Elrohir squeezed and pumped slowly, not wanting to come yet, tantalising himself, the odour of his lust slowly permeating the room so that Legolas would know he was there, waiting his turn.

Does that make you more eager to be done with your latest conquest or do you think to torment me by drawing out this encounter?

He wondered what Elladan would do were he here now. Would he charge in and yank the Man out? Would he be heart-broken to see this and henceforth spurn even the thought of Legolas? Or would he join them, offering the intoxicated Elf his engorged penis to suckle? So lost was he in his fantasy that he missed their moment of culmination, for suddenly Aragorn rose from the bed.

"All is well. There is no harm done that I can detect. Be at peace; I will go fetch Elrond."

"Nay, saes, avvedi," the archer protested.
Elrohir ceased his masturbation, watching as his foster-brother leaned down and kissed Legolas' forehead before leaving the chamber. He heard the low moan of misery that arose from the sylvan throat as the archer struggled against the bonds and a surge of repugnance and excitement coursed through him.

"Still so needy?" he said and stepped into the room. Legolas' eyes instantly sought his and Elrohir smiled cruelly as panic bloomed within them. He wasted no time gloating, however, for his father would soon arrive. Quickly he climbed on the mattress and spared just a moment to appreciate the sight before him, for Legolas was not only incapacitated with drugs but bound to the bed, each arm secured. Rope didn't encircle the wrists but instead was knotted about the crook of the elbow. As for the rest of him, the archer's legs were splayed wide and propped up on cushions, his genitals on display, lax but red and chaffed as if from continuous and vigourous friction. Elrohir's nose crinkled in distaste. "How many times have you been fucked this night?"

"Nay!" the Wood Elf cried and sluggishly aimed a kick at the younger twin. He struggled as his ankle was neatly caught, as was the other when he tried again to fend off this assault.

"Please, you have been wanting this for ten years, as have I." Elrohir's harsh words interrupted the futile effort at escape. He sent the captive Elf a triumphant leer, pulling the legs up high and wide, and penetrated the tight, dry anus with a powerful thrust bearing all the strength of his body and all the weight of his hatred. Legolas' frantic shout of pain, outrage, and desperation thrilled him and while a part of his soul recoiled from this grotesque delight Elrohir couldn't stop, ramming in and out in a quickening tempo, shutting his eyes to the writhing figure beneath him, refusing to acknowledge the overprint of sheer terror in the sylvan's sweat, driven to achieve orgasm and thus be cleansed of this unholy obsession.

"Will you be appeased now and lift the enchantment, now you've had us all?" he panted out, pounding against the rigid resistance, trying to block out the high-pitched keening issuing from the Wood Elf. He heard the faint impression of elven steps running down the hall followed by the heavier tread of a human. They were coming, but so was he. With a final, brutal shove Elrohir threw back his head and shouted out his deranged satisfaction just as the door flew open.

"Elrohir! No!"

Elrond's voice rang with horror and Elrohir turned to share his moment to victory. He pulled out of the body encasing him and dropped the long, lean legs so his father could see him, still half hard, still trembling as delicious tendrils of pleasure cours ed through his nerves. With a gurgling wail, Elrond turned aside and bent double from the waist, vomiting in revulsion.

"Ada? Nay! Adar!"

With a painful lurch of his gut Elrohir came to his senses, gasping and crying out as he flailed against his blankets, his hand sticky and the air redolent with the scent of his release. He sat up with a loud groan of anguish, chest heaving in the aftermath of the dream and its sordid conclusion, shocked and shamed and terrified of what it meant. Hastily he snatched at the grass and leaves, wiping frantically at the mess on his fingers, realising those were tears falling from his eyes and that strange noise he heard arose from his pitiful whimpering. He took a deep breath to steady his nerves and sat still, waiting for his heart to settle.

_Praise Eru I am alone._

He got up and fastened his leggings, knowing he would not sleep again, or rather fearing to do so. Elrohir gathered up his things and departed the camp, intent upon crossing the Bruinen before dawn.
Glorfindel was right; Legolas must go back over the mountains and into the forest. With so much distance between us, this dark passion will torment me no more.

Before he had journeyed a league, Elrohir spied the fading glow of embers from a dying fire and all around the small campsite clung the scent of sweet smoke and the hum of strong magic. Though he was still a ways off, he had come too close to the barrier not to have alerted the Istar and wasn't sure whether to be glad or irritated. Sometimes, listening to Gandalf's counsel made a situation much more complicated than it need be and yet there was no denying the Maia had an uncanny knack for turning up when counsel was sorely needed. Before he could decide the wizard materialised seemingly out of the air itself.

"Ah, Elrohir. Good. It's high time, too. Where is your brother?"

"Suilad, Mithrandir. Elladan's about half a day behind and closing fast. What news?"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Simultaneously, in the Hall of Fire, Glorfindel tells a story ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The dawn was no more than a glint of pale gold, a mere hint of the day peeking out through a bright slit of gleam beneath a sky walled over with dense, dull clouds, low and heavy like the ceiling of a cave. Dawns like this made the world seem a small, tight place, lean and joyless, lacking free space for moving, though all the vast plains betwixt Gwathlo and Mitheithel might fill one's gaze. It was cold, too, though winter was fast retreating, and a graceless frost clung to the rotted grass while the slow breeze had enough bite left to cause most living things to stay abed and wait for the sun to warm the land. Here and there upon the open verge crusty patches of old grey snow, mighty drifts in Narwain's prime, clung on tenaciously and dared Anor to show her face and contend against them. The compressed, red clay of the narrow road was frozen hard, as stiff and unyielding as stone to any foot that trod it.

Came three horses upon that road, necks arched proudly and tails flung high, fair beasts and noble, striking northwest out of the pass from the Dimrill Dale, heading for the lowlands of Bruinen across Eregion. Bold, broad, and mighty were these steeds, like the mounts of kings and legends from the Elder Days. In the stillness of the emergent day, the percussion of their hooves was jarring and loud and echoed from the retreating mountains as if a ghostly host followed. The trio did not travel abreast nor in file. One, wheaten and white like the colour of the dawn, cantered several lengths in the lead while the remaining pair, each dark as a moonless night save a white-starred brow, galloped side-by-side behind.

The riders borne by these uncommon chargers were no less majestic and regal to behold. Like Lords they rode, comely and stern of countenance, seated straight-backed and sure, cloaked and hooded against the climate. Gloved hands lightly gripped the reins and booted feet rested in the stirrups, yet it seemed these were but contrivances for show, so complete was their accord with the horses. The rich capes rippled in their wind-wake, rising and rolling with the steady gait, permitting intermittent glimpses of a hilt or scabbard, for the riders were armed with broadswords worthy to be wielded by such valiant and noble folk. Though their faces were shrouded in the shade of their down-drawn hoods, the very set of their shoulders and the proud carriage of their heads proclaimed them masters of all they passed along the way.

Anyone looking upon them then would be overcome with awe tending toward dread and quickly bow low, eyes cast down lest they draw the riders' piercing stares. Yet for all the aura of power restrained, there was no malice in their mien, only the natural grace and wisdom of their kind, for
these were not Men upon the road but Elves. Lords indeed they were and are, legendary Elves of a calibre seldom seen in any Age, being none other than Elrond Half-elven and his twin sons, Elladan and Elrohir. Still, though much of the known history of the world included their names, the trio went abroad unrecognised, for only when they wished it would their true nature be evident to lesser folk. At this time they wished it not and so to any who chanced to look they seemed instead to be mighty shoguns of Men.

Now their errand had taken them across Hithaeglir through Dîn Caradhras, escorting Arwen Undomiel to the land of Lothlorien, there to visit a time with her grandparents. The duty completed, the Lords of Imladris were returning to the peace and serenity of their hidden haven, glad to have met no obstacles yet grim over recollection of another time when they had not attended Elrond's fair Lady-wife on the same journey. Celebrian's soul had been marred beyond repair as a result. It will be long before Middle-earth recovers from the loss of such a gracious and kind being, it is said, and longer still before the son of Eärendil heals in heart and soul. So everyone who knew them believed, none more than Elrond himself. Therefore they travelled in silence, each lost in remembrance of unreconciled regrets and irrevocable deeds.

By mid morn, the west wind had come up to greet the Elven Lords, breaking the iron-hued clouds and promising to scatter the fragments away to the east. Across the lonely marches of Eregion they sped, through the once fair country of Hollin. The sun beamed down on tall stately holly trees, survivors of the rigours of battle, planted when Eregion was a thriving realm. There in times long past the Noldorin folk resided in prosperity and peace until the advent of Anatar and his treacherous gifts. Now Hollin was deserted, barren of even the lesser creatures of woods and meads. These few evergreens were the only living things dwelling there who remembered the place's history.

Beneath his cloak the face of Elrond was dour as he looked upon the land and recalled the terrible wars that had driven him in defeat to the hidden vale. He noted the trees but could not see them as they truly were: sturdy, stalwart, and filled with respectful joy to behold the hero of the war, one who had striven to the utmost to turn back the evil of Sauron. Elrond looked upon them and instead saw what they had been then: silent victims caught fast in the madness of battle and mayhem as Orcs and Elves fought and died at the roots of their unmoving bolls.

All around him he heard the discordant noise of violence: screams of agony and rage, cries of wrath and fear, pleas for help and curses of ignominy. The clash and screech of blade against blade underscored a lighter, higher sound as arrows flew from Elven bows. The fresh clean sent of wintry air was occluded with the dark odours of blood and entrails, burning wood and seared flesh, and tainting everything the stink of Mordor. Wherever he turned, Elrond's eye marked the spot of a comrade or kinsman's fall; death in all its gruesome forms marred the beauty of the place. Though many thousands of years had passed, the scars had not faded.

The Lord grimaced, sealing his eyes against the vision for a moment but it did not help. He could still hear it, still smell it. Cruel laughter of foul Orcish soldiers rang out. The persistent zing of an Elvish bowstring sang. A harried cry of pain and rage punctuated the noise. The smell of blood and fear permeated his nostrils. It was so clear and distinct he could almost believe it was happening now.

"Hark!" said Elladan and Elrohir together and reined back their steeds.

Elrond's eyes snapped open and he turned toward the undeniable sounds of a dire struggle that was most certainly happening now.

"Some evil work is at hand, for surely that was the fair voice of an Elf." Elladan announced.

"Fair was the voice but foul was the curse," growled Elrohir.
"And fraught with pain. One of our kin is beset," added Elladan, "though I have heard of no Elven folk wandering here."

"Whatever may be their country, let us hasten or mayhap there will be no fair voice left to answer such musings," admonished Elrond. He threw back his cloak with a flourish and unsheathed his sword. With a quiet word he urged his charger for speed and they sprang away toward the conflict.

His sons followed. Racing across country the three Lords discovered a small dip in the land where a tight copse of hollies filled the bowl. There among the trees clustered seven Orcs, taunting and jeering as they attempted to bring down a lone Elf who had taken to the branches. Even as they drew closer, the last of the archer's arrows was expended, piercing the cheek of one of the vile monsters as it heaved its bulk into an adjoining tree.

It fell with a screech and the Elf used the moment to draw a long knife from his belt. Laughing in derision, the remaining fiends swarmed into the branches, slashing out with their crude swords whenever they saw a chance. They inflicted numerous glancing slices and it was obvious they were toying with their prey. The Elf fought back, parrying and blocking with skill and agility, using the limbs and leaves for cover, striking a blow when he could, but time and numbers were against him. Already badly wounded, his thigh pulsed blood from a deep gash. Desperate, he sought to climb higher where the branches wouldn't bear the Orcs' weight, but was hindered by a new opponent from which he would not run, much to the Noldorin Lords' dismay.

"What madness is this?" cried Elladan. He didn't wait for a response, hurtling a soul chilling war-cry into the air as he charged into the frey. Elrohir was right beside him, of course, and together they leaped into the trees, stabbing and hacking at anything that reeked of Mordor. Lord Elrond was silent and cunning, letting his sons draw the enemies' attention and attacking unawares, hewing off a foot here, severing a spine there.

The battle between the archer and the Orc commander was horrible for the Elf cursed his opponent in his fey speech, the words fraught with horrific pain and grief, and he seemed not to care that his headlong attack was doomed to failure, for he had but a long knife between the Orc's sabre and his flesh. The other beasts drew back, suddenly discovering they had three more Elves to fight. Indeed, the Lords of Imladris proved more than their match. Even as Elladan sent the last one to its death, its ugly head falling while its putrid body sagged in the branches, the archer dispatched the leader.

With an enraged shout he buried his knife in its brain through the eye, kicked it from the heights, and watched in satisfaction as it plummeted down to land with a subdued thud. He grinned and spat upon it, his manner suggesting that was an even worse insult than being killed. His strength was failing, though, and the next instant he crumbled down into a groaning heap, latching tight to a branch with one hand while the other covered his latest wound: a nasty slash across the chest that dipped into his side, the price he had paid for the victory.

Now until Elrond and his sons heard the primitive tongue spoken by their valiant comrade, they had assumed the archer was from Lothlorien, for the Galadhrim ventured from the Golden Wood at times. They were nothing less than amazed to discover that the Elf huddled against the trunk was from Mirkwood across the mountains. It was a rare thing to see a Wood Elf at large in the lands of the west. In fact it was unprecedented. The twins had never set eyes on one while Elrond hadn't seen any since the end of the Second Age. It was a riddle to be solved later, however, for the sylvan was rapidly weakening.

"Elrohir, bring my supplies," Elrond called and hastily ascended to determine how serious the injuries were. Soon he reached an adjacent branch and reached for the Elf. To his shock he found a dagger at his throat and anguished blue eyes warning him off. Balancing as best he could, he lifted
one hand in a sign of friendship. "Sîdh, archer, I will not harm you. I am a healer; let me aid you."

He smiled to add reassurance but it was quite unnecessary for the knife hand dropped, the Elf slumped over unconscious, and Elrond had to make a hasty grab to prevent him from falling. Then it was all he could do to keep from losing his own footing. He was about to shout for help when he felt Elladan's strong grip on his arm. Together they managed to get the injured sylvan from the branches and being first on solid ground Elladan reached out and took the insensible warrior in his arms. Seeing their struggle to get out of the tree, Elrohir had wisely refrained from adding more weight to the burdened limbs and quickly laid out a blanket some distance away from the Orc corpses. To this Elladan carried the Elf, Elrond close behind, and laid him gently down.

"See if you can find water," suggested Elrond, kneeling to begin the examination. He could see at once how grave it was, for not only had the Elf lost a great deal of blood but one of the wounds looked to be poisoned. He was busy removing the torn tunic and shirt, concerned to learn if the blade had pierced a lung, and it wasn't until he needed the water that he realised neither one of his sons had moved. He looked up sharply, first at one and then the other, and caught each one's mesmerised gaze locked upon the injured archer's face. Elrond frowned, for it was quite unlike their normal efficient manner and at the same time he found the situation not unfamiliar. He hadn't time for such puzzles, or rather his patient didn't, and the Lord of Imladris found himself very determined to save this Elf.

"Elladan, I need water. Now, son."

The elder twin blinked and looked at his father in mild confusion. "Aye. Forgive me, I thought Elrohir had gone to get it." With that he ran to the horses and brought back his water skin. It wasn't enough but it would do for the time being. The task done, he knelt beside his father, ready to assist if needed.

Elrohir knelt on the other side of the prone figure, one hand upon the Elf's shoulder in case he should wake and need to be restrained. The sylvan moaned weakly as Elrond probed and cleaned the jagged cut. On impulse, Elrohir bent over and pressed his forehead against the patient's. "Be at peace, we will help you heal, you are not alone now." He smiled, feeling the faint sigh emitted from the archer, convinced his comforting words had been heard. He exclaimed in protest when a hand shoved him roughly back and in surprise Elrohir found himself staring into his father's furious face.

"You are hindering me," Elrond snapped. "If you would help, then apply pressure here and do not let up until I say." He grabbed Elrohir's hand and slapped it atop a thick wad of gauze over the chest wound, pushing down to show how much pressure to apply. "The rib is cracked, so not too hard."

"Aye, Adar," Elrohir's voice was cold. "I know how to do this; we have done it before many times."

"Then don't behave like a swooning maid who's never seen a sword wound, muindor," admonished Elladan. He had taken it upon himself to begin cutting away the cloth of the blood-soaked leggings to reveal the worst of the injuries. He shook his head in dismay. "I don't know how he climbed a tree with such a rent."

"Instinct," muttered Elrond. "The desire to live overrides the pain and Wood Elves will always take to the trees if any are near at hand." He sighed as he wiped away the thick blood attempting to clot around the gaping hole. There was a distinct odour, sickly sweet, arising from the fluid and the torn flesh looked as if it had been burned, blackened and puffy. "As I feared, he has been poisoned. Elladan, see if you can find an Orc blade and determine what toxin was used this time."

"Can't Elrohir do it? I went to fetch the water."

"What?"
"I'm rather busy, muindor," Elrohir reminded his brother. "Don't you want to help our friend recover?"

"Of course I do!" Elladan jumped up and stepped over the stricken warrior to loom above his twin, anger twisting his features, hands tightened into hard fists. "How dare you suggest such a thing? You don't want me to stay beside him. You want yours to be the voice he hears; your face he sees when he opens his eyes, that's what it is."

"Elladan!" Elrond stared in amazement at his eldest son. Rarely did this one raise his voice; even as an elfling he was not wont to shout in anger, preferring a level head to plot his schemes of revenge whenever the brothers were at odds. Which they have not been in many long centuries. "What has come over you?"

"I don't care which of us stays," countered Elrohir. "Come and take my place if you like and I will find the poisoned blade."

"Fine, I will." Elladan crouched down beside his brother and waited for him to rise. Elrohir didn't budge and the twins locked eyes, glaring in silent fury at one another. "Move," hissed the elder.

"You move," growled Elrohir, vaguely bewildered at his stubborn refusal, for he had really meant his offer to swap places. When it came down to it, however, he found he really didn't want to leave the Wood Elf after all.

"Both of you go," ordered Elrond, concerned over this bizarre behaviour but unable to spare the time to sort it out. "I can stabilise him enough for the moment. Search the area and find out if there are any other victims. I doubt he was out here alone. I will finish this and move our patient to a safer and more inviting locale." He was busy binding the chest wound and didn't bother to meet their eyes. He would have been disturbed if he had, for his sons were gazing at him with open suspicion.

They did as he bade them, grudgingly arising and walking slowly away into the surrounding land, casting many a backward glance toward their father and the sylvan archer. Once they were amid the stinking carcasses of the dead Orcs, the strange mood left them and they set about their task with stoic determination. In no time they discovered a bloody blade with the same sickening smell wafting from its gory surface. Searching the arrow-pierced body of the Orc in whose rigid grasp it was still clutched yielded a small leather pouch strongly saturated with the aroma. They cut the prize from the Orc's belt and moved on.

Following the trail of the battle was not difficult, for the ground was littered with many Orcs, each felled by Elven arrows drawn from their unknown comrade's quiver. At first there were only Orcs, but as they went along they found an Elf dead alongside the Orcs he had slain. The brothers halted and stared down in horror at the figure, for a gaping wound decorated his neck and this was the blow that had ended his life. That was not what had them so stupefied. It was the source of the fatal strike, for clutched in the warrior's hand was a mithril dagger, smeared with First-born blood. The warrior had slit his own throat. The twins shared their disbelief silently and moved on.

Five more Elves were found amid a large array of dead Orcs. The sylvan warriors had turned to make a stand, hoping to purchase the other two a chance for escape. They had all died gruesome deaths, one decapitated, one gutted, another bludgeoned about the head so severely his scull had broken, and two had killed themselves, just as the other they'd found. Feeling ill with outrage the brothers continued the journey and saw ahead the place where it had all started. The Elves had camped amid a knot of trees on a small rise of land.

The hill was the only high point in the area and everyone knew to avoid the place, for it was rumoured a hidden enclave of Orcs was nearby. The Wood Elves couldn't have known, of course,
for they were strangers to these lands. The brothers had been seeking it for many years, unsuccessfully. Usually when they heard of an Orc attack in the vicinity, their investigation revealed at most a few dead Orcs and the remnants of whatever human camp had been destroyed. Where the Orcs went remained a mystery, for their easily followed trail simply vanished at the bottom of the hill. The brothers suspected there was an underground fortress of sorts but had not located any entrance.

"Foul beasts!" spat Elladan as they reached the Elves' camp and found five more dead sylvans and some fifteen slain Orcs beneath the trees. "Obviously, they have never fought against Wood Elves or they would not have attempted such a raid. I doubt any of the Orcs in this band survived. Eriador owes a great debt to these Mirkwood fighters."

"Indeed," said Elrohir quietly. He was examining what was left of the Elves belongings in hopes of learning something of their reasons to be so far from home, but there was nothing conclusive. He caught his breath, however, as he came upon a fallen warrior who bore a significant resemblance to the one in their father's care. His eyes met Elladan's. "Brothers?"

"Aye, if not father and son. Adar has care of the younger, surely," answered Elladan.

"We must see to them before scavengers defile the bodies."

"True, but let us get this vile poison to Adar lest we lose the last survivor. Mayhap he can explain this puzzle if he survives."

That decided, the twins retraced their steps and after some time found their father and the injured Elf in a new location. It was easy to do so for the patient was screaming. Loud cries of excruciation were intermixed with pleas in a language they didn't comprehend, though they could tell it was derived from a primitive form of Quenya. One word only could they distinguish and that was because it was a name, one he called over and over, that and a heart-wrenching cry for his naneth.

Elrond had carried the Wood Elf a short distance to a shaded grove beside a small stream. There he had stripped off the patient's remaining clothes, bathed and sutured the wounds, and now was frantically trying to aid the suffering creature through the onslaught of the poison. The healer had removed his cloak to use as a blanket to cover the naked Elf and had also cast off his sword, his boots, and his tunic. This was rolled up and stuffed under the patient's neck in an attempt to provide some support and comfort. Horrific convulsions seized the Elf's body and he shook in rigid agony, terror and madness shining in his fevered eyes. Just as the twins ran into the makeshift surgery, the poor soul slipped into oblivion again.

"Thank Elbereth!" breathed Elrond as Elladan held out the noisome pouch. Yet as soon as Elrond opened the bag his praises turned to curses; a more insidious toxin he had never encountered, and indeed had only learned of it by studying the traces of its effects left in the humans brought to him by their kin to heal. He had never succeeded in saving a single one and their deaths had been terrible, racked with excruciation and loss of reason.

"Aye, we thought it was the same, too," mourned Elrohir. "Is there anything you can do to create a counter-poison?"

"There is, but I fear the process will take too long to be of aid to this victim," answered Elrond. "There were no other survivors?"

"Nay," Elladan shook his head. He fell to his knees beside the stricken warrior and took up his limp right hand, reverently cradling it between his own, caressing the calluses wrought by long years of handling a bow. Then he lifted the fingers up to his lips and kissed them gently, holding the hand
against his cheek afterward, a faraway look suffusing his eyes where they rested on the now peaceful
countenance of the archer. "He mustn't die," he whispered hoarsely.

"He will not," announced Elrond irritably and snatched the sylvan's hand from his son's clasp. "Don't
paw at him so, Elladan, he needs rest and comfort."

"I was giving comfort, Adar," complained the elder twin. "Shouldn't you be working on the cure?"

"I shall. Shouldn't you two see to the dead?"

"Aye, we must. Come, muindor, let us lay those valiant fighters to rest with as much honour as we
may in this befouled place." Elrohir leaned over and tugged at his brother's arm, drawing him up. He
did not understand the strange contention over the wounded Elf and it disturbed him, for he felt it
too: an overpowering urge to stay close and protect the failing sylvan. Somehow he knew, if this Elf
were his bond-mate he would never let him perish, so strong was the effect of his presence. If need
be, he would lend him his very soul to see him healthy and whole again. The next instant he was
considering the possibility of making the Elf his to ensure that outcome.

"What is it, Elrohir?" asked Elladan sharply, seeing the intensity of his brother's stare as his eyes
unmistakably tracked over the covered form from head to toe. His brother startled and looked back at
him in bewilderment.

"I know not. I feel strange. Don't you?"

"Nay, I do not," he denied and blushed, for it was a blatant lie and both knew it. "Come and aid me
in this task." Now Elladan was the one doing the tugging, eager to get Elrohir away from the
unconscious Elf, though he couldn't say why he wanted this so much. They set forth, again casting
their eyes behind them to mind what their father was doing with the Wood Elf. As before, once past
a certain point the uncommon sensations retreated. Abruptly Elrohir halted and Elladan turned to him
expectantly.

"The distance has put us beyond the range of scent!" he exclaimed in surprise, clutching at Elladan's
arm.

"Aye, you're right. What does it mean?" asked his brother, but Elrohir only shrugged.

The pair continued and set about the chore of burning the fallen Elves, for it was impossible for just
the two of them to dig graves quickly enough or deep enough to prevent buzzards and carrion
feeders from desecrating the remains. They decided to use the hilltop for the pyre and carried the
deceased there. The dead Orcs they dragged away and cast into the barren field below the hill, there
to rot, for no creature, no matter how starved, would consume the decaying flesh of an Orc, save
another Orc.

All the Elves' belongings that were salvageable they collected, hoping to be able to present those to
any kinfolk that awaited the warriors' return to Mirkwood. From the one who resembled their patient
they kept a fine bow and quiver, a hunting knife, a gold ring, and a cunning broach of mithril in the
shape of a stag with which his cloak had been fastened. They could not know that it was customary
among the sylvans to let all a fallen warrior's possessions go with him into death, for Noldorin beliefs
were quite different from those of the woodland folk.

The arrangements took quite some time and it was dusk before they lit the fires. Deciding to make a
spectacle that would be visible long leagues away, they let the entire hilltop burn, trees and all. Again
this was something that would have sickened the Wood Elves had they seen it, but to the twins the
place was too steeped in evil for the hollies there to escape ruin. They could not hear the voices of
green life and their respect for trees, while not insignificant, did not compare to their feeling for their own kind.

Orange and red the flames reached high and dispelled darkness; thick and acrid the smoke billowed out, caught and spread by the wind to lie upon the land, a thin and eerie fog filled with ash and sorrow. This blaze would be the starting point for the tale of the Wood Elves' heroic battle, their tragic victory over the Orcs. Gone was the plague of evil; no more would the hated monsters terrorise travellers and the mortals scattered in nearby farms and villages. The brothers would tell this story when folk asked them about the fire; they would share it with the Rangers. In this way the account would go into the lore of the humans and become part of their legends. It was fitting in the twins' thoughts for those who would benefit from the Wood Elves' sacrifice to know of it and so honour the memory of the fallen.

Long into the night the funeral pyres burned, and Elladan and Elrohir offered what songs and prayers they new to speed the departed to the safety of Námo's keeping. Every now and then the wind would shift and bring to their ears the dreadful cries of the suffering Elf in their father's care.

As dawn arrived the embers were reduced to black charcoal from which thin blue curls of ghostly smoke wended toward the west, for the wind had shifted, returning from the east and bringing back the ominous clouds. Carefully the brothers raked together all the smouldering ashes and remaining bits of bone, burying this as deeply as they could dig using the Orcish blades in place of spades. A few last prayers they spoke and then sought for clean water to cleanse away the soot, their mood sombre and depressed. Hours before the sky had brightened, the faint noise of the wounded Elf's cries had ceased and they feared the worst. Paused beside the spring which fed the freshet where their father kept watch over the patient, Elladan ventured to bring it up.

"Do you think he lives?"

"I doubt it. If he does then he has lapsed into coma and will not continue much longer. It sickens me."

"Aye, I feel a horrendous grief just imagining him dead. This is strange, for it is as strong as if I loved him, which I don't."

"I feel that, also."

They were silent for a time, each burdened with bewilderment and shame for experiencing such a reaction. Then Elrohir sighed.

"We must discuss it."

"I've no wish to confront such a fault in my character, yet I will with you. It's true, I desired the Elf for my own."

"'Twas the same for me. I know not how I could feel aroused by such a horrible catastrophe."

"Mayhap it is some kind of magic. It is rumoured these woodland fey can generate spells of enchantment."

"Then why wasn't Adar influenced by it?"

"He was. Didn't you see how angry he became when I tried to comfort the wounded creature?"

"Aye, and he was eager to send us off so he could be alone with the sylvan."
Now the brothers shared a look of dread between them and made haste to return to the camp. They knew as soon as they arrived that something was vastly different and their hearts sank. Elrond was seated with the injured Elf in his lap, holding him close in his arms and rocking him, stroking his hair and murmuring soft words in his ear. The Wood Elf was trembling but quiet and conscious, all his attention fixed on the Elven Lord, fingers knotted in the lore-master's long black tresses. Elrond planted a little kiss on his brow and smiled gently into his eyes before looking up to face his sons. He smiled as they stood there staring in disbelief.

"Adar." Elladan swallowed and tried to continue. "You have what have you done?"

"Saved his life of course. Did I not promise that he wouldn't die?"

"You bonded with him. How could you do this?" Elrohir stepped closer, angry and disgusted. "You have lain with a sick and fading Elf; there cannot have been consent!" His hostility affected the Wood Elf, who flinched and pressed his face against Elrond's chest.

"Be calm! Your wrath is misplaced, Elrohir. Sit and allow me to explain this."

"It is enchantment!" exclaimed Elladan, pointing at the wounded figure and taking a step back.

"Nay it is not so," Elrond shook his head vehemently. "It is purely an instinctive response for the preservation of life, unique among the sylvan Elves, I believe. Please, be seated and hear me." He waited a moment or two but they refused to join him by the fire, glaring in disappointed outrage. Finally he grimaced and began the tale.

"I beheld the phenomenon after Oropher led his warriors in battle against Sauron's army at Dagorlad. The sylvans were ill-equipped for such a fight, for they had not been to war like that before, not in all the long years of the time before time, nor during the First Age. The only fighting they knew was beneath their trees where they were more than adept in keeping Melkor's dark creatures at bay.

"You must recall that they wore no armour of any kind. Only the Sindar among them carried swords. They were not accustomed to firing their bows when horsed and many had never ridden before the war. It was a massacre. So many died; the horror of it nearly broke our resolve to hold the siege and only Gil-galad's strong will prevented mass desertion that day. We saved as many as we could, sending in reinforcements to draw away the enemy and grant the few remaining a chance to retreat.

"The healthy left none still breathing behind, yet most of the injured were so badly damaged that they expired in the arms of family members or bond-mates. That is when I saw this thing, and felt it, for the first time. As a healer, I did what I could to aid them and came upon a warrior in as bad a state as our friend here. I felt a powerful urge to protect him, to give over to him my own soul so that he would not perish, for his own light was too depleted to redeem him. As I pondered this peculiar desire, feeling just as you two do now: disgusted with myself for an unclean lust, another sylvan came to me and pulled me away.

"This is not your place,' he growled, a look within his eyes that promised my death if I got between him and the other Elf.

"I wisely stepped aside and watched as he gave in to the same intoxicating feelings coursing through my veins, mating with the Elf on the spot! Of course I was scandalised but that diminished when the injured one's condition improved. His natural healing gift was supplemented by the other Elf's life energy. The two were bonded, soul to soul. I left them to tend others in need of my care." Elrond paused, trying to gage his sons' reaction to this account. "There was no sylvan warrior to step in this time," he concluded quietly.
The brothers were silent, trying to digest this news, and shared their apprehension and dawning fury in a wordless whorl of conflicting thoughts and emotions. At last Elrohir spoke.

"You have given this unknown Elf your soul. You have replaced our Naneth with this Wood Elf!" his voice shook with his outrage.

"Nay! No one could replace Celebrian! Her place in my heart is sacred," Elrond carefully laid the archer down and rose to confront this accusation.

"Sacred? How can you speak such a word when you have just bound your soul to another?" Elrohir demanded. It was Elladan who answered him.

"Peace, muindor. It was not something he chose. Were you not listening? The sylvan has bewitched him. You know we felt it, too."

"It is not magic," insisted Elrond, "but a natural defence particular to their race. Who knows, mayhap all Elves have this mechanism inherent in their nature, but only the Wood Elves have been close enough to extinction to bring it forth."

"Aye, we felt it, but Adar chose to act on it." Elrohir ignored his father's input. He turned away, unable to bear the sight of the afflicted Elf, abandoned on the blanket. "He chose that over our Nana." He flung out his hand to point at the figure huddled on the ground.

"Elrohir, please listen to me," his father pleaded, reaching out to clasp his son's shoulder. "Nothing could be further from the truth. I have done this only to spare his life. No love cements the bond and no doubt it will fade as his own strength returns. I beg you to try and understand. Celebrian would not hold this infidelity to heart and neither should you."

"Heed him, muindor. It could have easily been one of us. I am certain the link is temporary; have faith," implored Elladan.

Elrohir glared hard at his father and jerked free of his hold. He moved toward the fragile warrior but found Elrond barring his way, eyes blazing with warning. Elrohir's lips twisted into a bitter smile and he nodded grimly. "Have faith? Look at him! He would attack me, his own flesh and blood, to protect his new lover. Does that seem like a shallow bond to you? I tell you this is sorcery and we will not soon be rid of that creature. I am not content to have him in our mother's place. Can you not see the shame this will bring to our family? What are we to say to Arwen?"

"It is not your place to speak of it to Arwen," cautioned Elrond. "This is my concern as it is my soul that is encumbered. I am her father and I will tell her."

"An encumbrance he did not have any choice over, Elrohir," added Elladan. "We must make the best of it. Arwen will understand."

"How can you so quickly change your thoughts and support this?" demanded Elrohir, furious with his brother. Then his eyes narrowed and he backed away several steps. "It is that dissolute creature's doing! This is some kind of sylvan spell and now you are under its pall, too."

"That is nonsense and you know it!" shouted Elrond, but regretted it at once as the Wood Elf moaned in fright to hear the anger in his voice. He forgot Elrohir and hurried back to the blankets, gathering up the archer and cradling him carefully against his heart. He was soon rocking again, whispering consolation and encouragement as his fingers carded through the long golden hair.

"You see?" queried Elrohir sourly. "This is not meet. The Lord of Imladris should not be bound to a lowly woodland archer. He doesn't even know the Elf's name."
"Legolas," said Elrond softly, his voice limned in the first blush of a powerful emotion he was not yet prepared to acknowledge. "His name is Legolas."

Glorfindel paused and took a deep breath, gazing around at the faces surrounding him, meeting the eyes fixed upon his features, for his audience was rapt in the enthralling tale. The flames danced in the hearth of the Hall of Fire, casting a soft warm glow of radiance over all, and the room was so quiet the sound of the breeze in the leaves seemed loud. Yet none paid it any notice for their attention was centred on the Balrog Slayer. Even Erestor and Arwen, who knew the story as well as he, listened with eager ears. The humans were completely caught up in the narration, leaning forward where they were seated so not to miss a single word nor the most minute nuance of tone and inflection, and Glorfindel was pleased.

Now it must be remarked here that this is all of the story that Glorfindel knew to tell, yet it was not the entire truth. That was known only between the four elves involved, though those close to Elrond's family could guess there was more to the contention than this, for after the passing of ten years, Elrond had yet to reconcile with Elladan and Elrohir. The mortals of Gondor and Dol Amroth would not suspect a darker chain of events, however, and were satisfied with what they heard, for it was fantastic enough to their ears.

By now the woebegone outbursts from Elrond's chambers had ceased and the Elves knew the sylvan had been drugged. The humans were merely grateful the poor creature was beyond suffering but Erestor, Glorfindel, and Arwen were concerned, realising how much Legolas hated to be helpless. They were not sure it was better to spare him one discomfort by inducing another.

"It was the poison, wasn't it?" asked Echthelion, grimly breaking the silence. "The other Elves cut their throats rather than face the torment of the poisoned wounds." To this Glorfindel only nodded.

"This hidden outpost of Sauron's minions, has that been found?" Aragorn wondered aloud, for he had heard of it many years ago and even searched for it before departing Eriador to begin his errantry in Gondor.

"Nay, though the raids have ceased. It is as the twins surmised; all the Orcs were destroyed by the sylvan warriors that day. No others have replaced them and the way is safe from Imladris to the Pass because of it," replied the Balrog Slayer proudly.

"What happened next?" asked Prince Adrahil.

"They brought The Sylvan here and he has been in Imladris ever since," Erestor concluded the story, shrugging slightly for this should be plain enough even to mortals. Truly he wished to divert the topic to something else, for he wasn't comfortable with revealing anymore to these humans. They would perceive his Lord's affair with the sylvan as weakness and attribute the connection to an unwholesome influence. Of course, he was of that opinion himself but he still did not want his kinsman to be subjected to derision or scorn for being unable to overcome the spell.

"Nay, what of the conflict with his sons?" insisted Denethor, understanding the Chief Councillor's ploy. "After all, the Elf is still here. Has the legendary Lord of Imladris really succumbed to the dubious charms of such illicit coupling?"

"Den, do not be crude," admonished Aragorn. "If it is a charm it must be a powerful one, yet I'm not so certain it is."

"It is an enchantment, but not of an evil sort," said Finduilas, and she smiled at her fiancé. "It is just the magic generated between two hearts that beat as one. They are in love, Denethor, can't you see it?"
"Love?" the Steward's son scoffed. "It is unnatural for a male to have such cravings for another of his sex."

"Aye, it is a deplorable moral weakness," nodded Echthelion, his features contorted with disgust. "I think the Lord's son was right; this should not have been allowed. Whatever primitive urges motivate the sylvans must not infect the High Elves. Elrond is of noble blood and ought not to be brought so low."

Arwen and Finduilas both stood up, angry and insulted, one for her Adar and the other for herself and her own forebears. Before they could utter their remonstrances, Elrond stormed into the room, his face transfigured with absolute fury, his right fist clutching a small tin from which issued the tangy scent of cinnamon. His eyes passed among the gathered people until they found Glorfindel's.

"Where are the clothes Legolas was wearing today?" he demanded, much to the confusion of the room's occupants.

"His clothes? I'm not sure. They were left behind at the grotto, I suppose," said Glorfindel. His own wrath quickly flared up, for he understood then how the Wood Elf had been harmed. Elrond had mentioned the sylvan's bizarre reaction to the spice at breakfast the day after discovering the peculiar allergy. Knowing the Last Homely House, the Balrog Slayer had no doubt the entire household was aware of it within minutes. He stood and motioned for two warriors nearby to accompany him; together they exited into the gardens to find the garments.

"What is amiss, Ada?" asked Arwen, moving to her father's side.

"I have found the cause of Legolas' suffering. It can only have been deliberate, just as Lindir insisted, and the culprits will pay dearly for his pain." He turned then to Erestor. "Fetch Figwit, mellon, for I find that my valet has abruptly quit my service." Without waiting for confirmation that his order would be carried out, Elrond retreated from the Hall of Fire, Arwen following, and the humans were left to gossip over the unfolding events.

TBC

Úgerth uin Ionnath: Sins of the Sons
Narwain: January
Nay, saes, avvedi: No, please, don't go.
Dîn Caradhras: Red Horn Pass
Carth Dalt: Slippery Deed
Saelben: Wise one
Alae!: Behold!
Pedethryn Dailt: Slippery Walkers - closest Sindarin translation Legolas could give for the Nandorin equivalent for 'slugs and/or snails'
Nîth Chall: Shadowed Youth
nàrion: son of a rat
hecilo: outcast (Quenya)
Ened Ethuil: Mid-Spring
Aegas Mírdan: Mountain Peak the Jewel Smith, an Elf of Rivendell
Muindoradar: brother-father, Uncle
Minya'mmë: first mother, grandmother
Aearen: my ocean
Nín'ódhel: my Deep Elf
Thenin: True. (Yes.)
Man le presta, Aearen?: What troubles you, My Ocean?
NOTE: Now be calm, my friends, be calm! It was only a DREAM and Elrohir would NEVER do that to anyone, much less Legolas. Neither would Elladan. Like all nightmares, this one is a mixture of real and invented scenes, peopled with emotions and actions the dreamer's mind would never permit him to experience while awake. Elrohir is tormented and nearly mad, burdened with a desire he does not want or understand, heart-broken by what he perceives as his brother's betrayal. Be assured, what Elladan did is not as bad as he imagines and yes, the depth of Elrohir's pain means the brothers are lovers. That much of the dream is real. Because the twins are Galadriel's grandchildren, I am making them somewhat clairvoyant, though not so much as she. Thus, part of the dream is also a vision of the future, though Elrohir can't distinguish that, for he is too upset.

Like Lindir, Elrohir does not permit his troubles to undermine him and continues to protect the lands of Eriador, experiencing these horrors infrequently and only when he is so exhausted he falls into deep reverie. Glorfindel's summons has brought all his fears to the front of his subconscious, so to speak. Hopefully, the second half of the chapter gave a little information as to what has happened to bring about this most gruelling and unexpected quatern, a kind of forced, pheromone induced love-tetrad between Elrond, his sons, and our sylvan hero. How will they resolve it? And WHAT was Aragorn doing in Elrohir's dark wet-dream? When will Legolas tell Elrond about the baby? Not telling. Yet. :)

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Lindir sighed and shook his head, frowning in sad dismay over the limp and senseless figure reposed upon the bed, naked and bound. The defenceless posture made Legolas seem even more like a youth just shy of majority and the restraints were just wrong. It was too much to bear. He turned his attention to Elrond, seated on the edge of the bed, and watched as the healer tended his lover, gently arranging the sylvan's sweaty hair, brushing it back from his wan face, then taking up a cloth soaked in a soothing athelas infusion and wiping away the salty smears of tears and perspiration from the archer's countenance.

When the Noldorin Lord reached the slender neck he paused, rewetting the cloth, and delicately dabbed at the angry abrasion encircling the base of the throat like a necklace, ugly and red as the mark of a hangman's noose. The Wood Elf made a faint, plaintive noise and his arms twitched against the hithlain cords bound about the crease of his elbows. Elrond dipped the cloth again and quietly shushed him, carefully bathing each underarm where the fiery rash was even more apparent. Legolas had scratched himself raw and the shallow scrapes were not sealing over, no doubt due to the residue of the toxin still present.

Elrond was at a loss over how to cure it, for as yet he hadn't figured out what type of substance had caused the outbreak. Yet he was more hopeful of discovering the solution now that Legolas was unconscious and thus unable to feel the torment the poison worked upon his skin. He regretted having to resort to drugs, yet when none of the medications he'd tried produced any results, not even the camomile lotion that had so effectively eased Estel's discomfort after becoming entangled in poison ivy, the Lore-master had deemed there was no other course. Legolas had been going mad with the agony, which increased and spread the more he rubbed the afflicted areas. Tying him down had only increased his panic and the sylvan had ceased hearing his lover's reassurances, pleading to be let loose to fly into the woods, there to seek solace amid the trees. This Elrond had feared to do, for though Imladris was safe from intrusion by any enemies, still the symptoms might worsen and the Elven Lord wouldn't permit his love to endure the torment alone.

"Will you at least untie him now," said Lindir darkly, for it was like a sword through his soul to see the youthful archer so helpless and debased. The raw, bleeding patches were an abomination and not only this, but the scarring retained from older wounds stood out starkly on the otherwise perfect form. Elrond did not answer him but did pause long enough in his care to obey, turning to his old mentor to hand him the ropes, eyes wide in apology. The minstrel snatched them up and cast them away across the room with a curse. "He begged you, Elrond. Was there truly no other way?"

"Do not imagine I enjoyed this," hissed Elrond, angry to be placed in the role of antagonist. He rose and brushed past the singer, pacing into the bathing chamber to retrieve a clean, white cotton sheet with which to cover his beloved's cruelly used body. "You were not here when I brought him home the first time. You have no idea how much it rips my heart into rags to see him suffer. He will forgive me." He spoke that last part in faltering tones, wondering if it would be true or not. The look of betrayal and accusation in the sylvan Elf's deep blue eyes had been crushing to behold and even now Elrond flinched at the recollection of Legolas' last word before slipping into oblivion: 'Liar'. A small sigh escaped him as he fanned out the linen and draped it over the unconscious patient. It was true, he was a liar, and yet he had meant no harm by it, only hoping to soothe Legolas' mounting terror.

"I had to do it!" he burst out suddenly, answering both the minstrel's impeachment and the internal one, rounding on his old friend with such vehemence in his face and manner that Lindir was startled.
"He needs help; can't you see it? How am I to aid him if I can't learn what's wrong? How am I to figure that out if I must stay by the bedside and comfort him through the strain of the poison's brutal effects?

"Tell me, Lindir, another way, if you can, for I welcome any ideas on the subject. If I didn't bind him, he would have gouged his skin so deeply there would be scars left behind. If I permitted him to flee the house, what would become of him if the symptoms become more dangerous still? What if his throat swells until he can't breathe?

"None know more than I how he fears to be drugged. Do you think his pleas were ignored solely to spare us the sounds of his cries and wailing? The panic has driven his reason aside; he is operating on pure instinct now, yet even that might fail him here. What if he succumbs to this madness and gives in to the grief I have worked so hard to dispel? Could you live with it if he took his own life, alone out there in the forest?"

"Peace, peace!" Lindir exhorted, genuinely moved by Elrond's explanation and obvious distress over such hard choices. "It just hurts me to see him like this."

"Then you understand my own pain. I promised to stay with him while he was under the influence of the sleeping draught, yet this I cannot do. I have to find the cure before he wakes, Lindir. You can see that, can't you? Was I so wrong to make a false pledge in such circumstances?"

"I think you have already answered yourself and I will not add to your regret anymore. I will stay beside him if that will ease your heart a little, Elrond. You can see that, can't you? Was I so wrong to make a false pledge in such circumstances?"

"I think you have already answered yourself and I will not add to your regret anymore. I will stay beside him if that will ease your heart a little, Elrond." Lindir went forward and clasped the Elf Lord's shoulder before sitting on the edge of the bed. He took up the cloth and dipped it, wiping the fluid over the abraded neck again.

"My thanks, Lindir, that does grant me peace of mind. I don't want him alone; whoever did this may try to do him further harm if no one is near to watch." With that and a weak smile, Elrond moved from the bedside and pulled open the doors of the archer's clothes press, right next to his, and immediately a strong, sweet, familiar scent wafted into the room. Elrond gave a low growl and slammed the door with a reverberating clash that made the panel rebound.

"So it was cinnamon?" asked Lindir, worried by the Elf Lord's violent reaction. "I guessed it might be, for Erestor told the tale about Legolas' intolerance for the spice."

"Aye. This is all my fault, for had I not joked and boasted about the results of his reaction to it, maybe none of this would have come to pass." The smell intensified and Elrond rethought his action. Instead of trying to seal the odour away, he began pulling all the clothing out, burying his nose in it, and if the scent seemed to be coming from the article he threw it to the floor.

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Before long he had dropped all of the silken small clothes upon the rug and stood glaring at the inanimate heap of garments in disgust, hands on hips, contemplating whether or not the aromatic ingredient could be washed from the fabric. He couldn't get past the vindictive attitude that had prompted saturating the archer's undergarments with something so virulent, where the heat of his body and the close contact against bare skin would be most unbearable. At last he swore and bent to scoop them all up, carrying them to the hearth. Into the grate he stuffed them and set the cloth afire.

That done, Elrond went searching for the silver tin of the spice he was known to keep in his study. He was very partial to cinnamon and liked to sprinkle it over buttered toast in the morning and stir it into his wine in the evening. Since learning of Legolas' peculiar allergy, he had stopped adding it to his food or drink, worried about kissing his love and making him suffer a recurrence of the cold sensation. He found it, as he suspected he would, but when he opened the container it was nearly empty, only a few grains of the ruddy brown powder sticking to the sides and bottom. He carried it
back and showed Lindir the evidence grimly.

"I'm surprised anyone would try to hurt him so severely," murmured Lindir, not liking the mounting fury evident in his Lord's visage. "No doubt they never imagined he would suffer such terrible anguish. Now that you know the cause, will you be able to ease the symptoms?" The minstrel hoped this query would turn Elrond from the desire to seek out and punish the perpetrators in favour of aiding his lover.

"No, for I have never seen it as a toxic agent. I don't recall any other cases in which an Elf" Elrond broke in mid-sentence, staring at Legolas strangely for several seconds, for he suddenly remembered a story Celebrian had repeated long ago about an elleth afflicted with a sudden dislike for the flavour of thyme. Anything consumed that had the herb in it made her vomit almost immediately. The Elven lady in question was of sylvan descent, one of the folk who had inhabited Amon Lanc before the Necromancer drove them away to Lorien.

"What is it?" demanded Lindir.

"Nothing that will help, unfortunately, for while there was a similar incident in Ages past the only treatment known was to avoid the offensive substance. We shall have to trust to the natural ability of the body to heal itself."

"How long will it be?"

"I know not," Elrond shrugged. "I hope the burning diminishes before the potion wears off. I don't want to induce sleep again, for the after-affects are almost as terrible for Legolas. Lindir, I must find the fiends who did this. Will you stay with him?"

"Of course, mellon, but why don't you remain here and keep your word; let me take Glorfindel and have the offenders apprehended. The Council will see to their punishment."

"No. I caused this to happen and I must see to it such a thing never happens again. I need to make it unmistakably clear that Legolas is as much a citizen here as anyone else and will be granted the same rights as every other Elf." As he spoke, Elrond drew near the bed and leaned over his love, carefully lifting the fallen eyelids to reveal only the bald whites of the back-rolled eyes. He sighed and straightened up, moving back to the study where the tell-tale sounds of clinking glassware indicated he was preparing yet another concoction. He returned with a small vial of amber fluid and set it on the table by the bed. "When he wakes, make him drink this right away. It will ease the headache and nausea. Then come find me; I will be with the Council."

"Wait!" called Lindir but Elrond was already stalking through the sitting room and next the door to the apartment slammed shut with a loud report.

The hours of the night passed slowly and Elrond returned to his suite before dawn, for it did not take long to discover that Figwit, along with two of the novice warriors and a tailor, had conspired to cause the disaster. Figwit turned himself in and told Elrond the whole story, for the sounds of Legolas' suffering had made him repent his malicious actions. The others, however, feared the punishment with which they were sure to be sentenced and had fled from Imladris. Glorfindel set out with a small contingent of soldiers to catch them and bring them back, and if Elrond was surprised by the strength of his captain's wrath he didn't remark on it. A short conference with Erestor and it was decided that the trial should be held for all three together and thus the Council was not to be summoned until the Balrog Slayer returned. Thus, the Lord of Imladris was free to stay beside his beloved's bedside, gently bathing the slowly healing wounds and murmuring soft promises of amending his errors.
Now as it came about, the offenders had not had time to get too far from Imladris' borders and Glorfindel guessed rightly that they were fleeing for Lothlorien. He captured the renegades easily where they were attempting to cross the grassy plains of the Angle, for they surrendered at once when they realised who was running them down. This was in part due to the fact that the criminals discovered their way ahead blocked by Mithrandir and Elrohir, who were nearing the ford. By the time the sun had just tipped the horizon with gold, they were all back in Rivendell. Erestor sent word to Elrond and the lore-master left the insensible sylvan again in Lindir's care, eager to confront the servants who had betrayed him so terribly, though his anger was tempered with enough remorse of his own to keep from any unjust reprisals. The ultimate result of this sequence of events, however, was that when Legolas finally awoke, Elrond was not there.

Lindir was staring out into the fair morning, appreciating the song of the birds as the world awakened to the new day, plucking absently at a lyre he'd brought with him to while away the time. The strident sound of a moan, a chord of pure misery, recalled him swiftly to the bedside where he found the wild Elf curled up in a knot, one arm shielding his eyes from the sun and the other wrapped around his middle. He coughed and gagged a bit and the minstrel feared he was going to be sick. He hurried over and placed a comforting hand on the archer's trembling shoulder as another groan issued from the miserable Elf.

"Lie still, breathe deeply," he whispered, cognisant of Elrond's warnings about the fierce stabbing pain of the migraine the drug induced, accompanied by high sensitivity to light and sound. "I have some medicine for the headache, Legolas. Do you think you can sit up?"

"GalGalbreth?" the sylvan mumbled in confusion, staring through slitted eyes at the bleary face and its long fall of golden hair. He blinked, frowning, and licked his lips, coughing again.

"Nay, 'tis Lindir, mellon. Can you not see me clearly? Who is Galbreth?" asked the singer, helping Legolas prop himself up on an elbow. As he watched, the Wood Elf's eyes cleared, his focus sharpened, and he recognised the Green Elf. Lindir smiled, but the response returned was not what he could have expected, for the archer's features contorted into such an expression of grief-stricken pain and sorrow that it made the minstrel's heart skip. The next instant Legolas exhaled a sharp gasp and curled up on the mattress again, clutching at his stomach and struggling for breath.

"Ai! What is it? Does the drug always have this effect? Elrond said nothing about it. Legolas, can you speak to me?" Lindir was worried, gently shaking the Elf's shoulder.

"Elrond?" the Wood Elf cried brokenly. "Where's he? Not here, not here, alas."

He sounded thoroughly distraught and seemed not to notice the singer at all, which made Lindir frightened, for he had long suffered from grieving sickness himself and knew the signs full well. "I'll go get him straight away, pen neth. Lie still now and try to relax. Do you hear me, Legolas? I'll be right back with Elrond, all right?" He shook the Elf harder and finally this elicited a shaky nod and a muffled sob.

"Need to get out, please," Legolas' whispered words were entirely missed by the minstrel, for he was already running through the study and soon left the apartment.

Which was the exact thought on the Wood Elf's addled mind though his choice of destination was somewhat different. He must have fresh air and the light touch of the wind in his hair, the cool sweetness of water from the brook in the garden, the feel of soft grass under his feet and the song of the trees to soothe his tormented soul. With effort he raised himself and sat on the edge of the bed, holding tight to the sheets, head lowered and eyes scrunched shut. The pain in his head was blinding, pounding in time to the pulse of his blood, and he ground his teeth in agony. When at last he was able to open his eyes, he was shocked to learn he was naked. Then it all came back in a flood of
memories and he groaned over this latest humiliation. He struggled to stand as a wave of vertigo swept him sideways and he found himself clutching to the bedpost as if for dear life, eyes squeezed closed against the reeling room.

When he opened them he identified the reason for his near-fall: his legs were still entangled in the sheets, which his movements had dragged from the bed. Of course he couldn't go out naked again; anyone might be in the gardens, specifically Erestor who took a stroll every single morning. Fortunately, there was something else on the floor and with slow, careful movements, still anchored to the post, he crouched awkwardly down until he could snatch it up. It was Elrond's sleep-shirt, laid out by the valet the night before and forgotten, and Legolas pulled it over his head, glad Elrond was taller for the thin chemise reached almost to his knees. The activity initiated another round of dizziness and then another strong cramp through his gut made him double over. That was when his heart froze, terrified the pain was because something was wrong with the tiny life just settling within him.

His instincts screamed for him to get up and get out, for he was not safe in Imladris, where everyone had the sanction of the Lord of the realm do do what they would, even to poisoning him. 

*Blessed Elbereth, protect my child! I need help and it can't be had in this place. Don't take back my faer dithen; I promise to leave here as soon as I can ride.*

Legolas prayed and it seemed to work for the spasm passed and he was able to stand upright. Determined to reach the restorative Music of nature, he struggled to get out on the balcony, tottering unevenly and using whatever pieces of furniture were available for support. He made it and leaned heavily on the railing, panting from the effort and the pain in his head that nearly obliterated the ability to think. Two stories below, the dew-damp, fair green lawn beckoned. That being the case, he hauled himself up over the banister, hung by his hands a moment, and simply allowed himself to drop. He did this every day and it was no distance at all for a Wood Elf accustomed to jump from much greater heights to the forest floor, but because he was still unsettled by the after-effects of the sedative, Legolas landed in a graceless clump and lay still, fingers entwining gratefully in the lush emerald blades.

The sudden appearance of a Wood Elf falling from the sky quite startled Mithrandir, who was seated in a comfortable chair enjoying a morning smoke, for Elrond did not permit the habit indoors. He choked on the drawn vapours and coughed as he jumped to his feet, glancing up at the overhanging balcony with disapproval written on his wrinkled and scowling face. Once he could inhale again he returned his attention to the new arrival, stepping over to where the Elf was pushing himself up to a seated position. The Elf clutched his head between his hands and moaned, rocking back and forth a bit, and the old Istar knelt down next to him.

"How now, elfling?" he said with a kindly smile. "Where did you fall from?" He reached out, intending only a friendly pat on the back, knowing this must be Legolas, and found his hand rudely shoved away as the sylvan scrambled beyond reach as if he hadn't even seen him. Well, this was exactly the case, for Legolas was of course very disoriented and the pain slicing through his brain coupled with the dread fear of losing the life he had been graced to create was all that occupied his thoughts.

"Nay! Leave me be, Muilengôl! What do you want of me?" he demanded, recognising that this was one of the Maiar though he had not met one before. The words had hardly left his lips before he was once more clutching at his middle as another wave of discomfort seized him. He struggled not to let it show and failed.

"Don't be alarmed, Legolas, for surely you know I am Manwë's own messenger and would never do
harm to you. Let me help you, for it is clear there is something serious amiss." Gandalf hoped to calm the archer, having heard the whole lurid story of the cinnamon saturated under-garments, and it was obvious that he was not well yet. Mithrandir was astounded to hear the gasp that left the young one's lungs and see the look of stunned amazement evinced by his gaping mouth, huge blue eyes staring at him in awe and wonder. He was even more perplexed when this expression of reverent surprise was slowly replaced by one of deep gratitude and palpable relief. Before he quite knew what was happening, Mithrandir found his hand grasped in both the Elf's as Legolas bent over it and kissed it repeatedly, quietly giving thanks in a jumbled mixture of Nandorin and Sindarin praises.

"Eglerio Elbereth! Eglerio Sulimo, Hîr od Valinor! You are learned in the healing arts? My thanks a thousand times and more, ithron sael, and my bow to protect you would you but aid me now!"

Of course Mithrandir could not know of the silent entreaty that had just moments ago sped from the sylvan archer's soul to Elbereth Star-kindler. And was she not the beloved wife-mate of Manwë and had this wizard not just announced himself the disciple of that very King of the West? As far as Legolas was concerned, his prayer had been received and answered with unheard of speed. This he took as a hopeful sign that his child would be spared, yet his misgivings were not entirely allayed as the insistent cramps continued to afflict him every now and then.

"Peace! No need for such pledges, elfling, I will gladly assist you. But come, you ought not to be out here in the garden when you are unwell. Let me get you back inside and then"

"No! No! I have just escaped and will not go in!" The Wood Elf frantically tried to get his feet under him but didn't succeed for Mithrandir quickly caught him at the elbow and refused to let go.

"What? Escape? Calm yourself, you are overwrought, for only within will you find healers. Indeed, there is none better than Lord Elrond. He will see that you come to no harm."

"You know nothing! They hate me here! He's a liar who doesn't care about anything but his exalted reputation and I will never go in again! You are false; why did you come here? Ai, how could I trust you so foolishly, for no doubt you are the friend of these people!" Legolas' was struggling desperately to get loose but though he kicked and thrashed and struck the wizard with his free hand the Istar remained firm. It didn't take long for Legolas to deplete what little strength his fear gave him, for the activity only exacerbated his migraine and another sharp cramp made him hunch over with a miserable moan.

"Well, if you wished your escape to remain unknown, you have just ruined it, elfling. Any number of Elves must have heard you," complained Mithrandir, rubbing his shoulder where a particularly potent kick had landed.

The outburst disturbed him deeply and he decided that Legolas' half of the story, which he had yet to hear, must be sad indeed. He glanced behind him across the terrace, fearful to find Erestor or Glorfindel running from the house to learn what all the fuss was about. He met instead the piercing gaze of an Elf who had obviously both seen and heard the sylvan's desperation and shook his head to prevent Elrohir from revealing his presence, for it was he. Gandalf didn't think Legolas was in any state to withstand the younger twin's aggressive disdain. In fact, he didn't believe the Wood Elf could bear the strain of dealing with Elrond's censure for leaving his room and quietly muttered a small incantation that would prevent anyone from recognising who was by the wizard's side, should they be spotted walking across the lawn.

Which was a wise thing to do for of course Elrond was at that moment just entering his empty chambers and hastened to the balcony, knowing Legolas generally came and went that way. As soon as he heard the plaintive voice arguing with the wizard he leaned over and called down. "Mithrandir, where has he gone? Why didn't you stop him?" He peered at the Elf by the wizard's side in
bewilderment. "Is that Rumil with you there? When did he arrive?"

"Nay, this is not Rumil. I am sorry, Elrond, but Legolas seems determined to avoid you for the time being. He was heading in a vaguely easterly direction across the gardens and I've got a nasty bruise on my left shoulder as proof of my efforts to prevent him from leaving. You will have to discover his whereabouts without my further assistance," he intoned somewhat dramatically.

"I must discover his whereabouts," Elrond repeated in a rather strange manner. "I'm sorry, mellon, he is not well just now. Normally he would not do you harm, I assure you," insisted the Lord of Imladris with his more customary courtesy and grace. He waited until Mithrandir acknowledged his apology with a grim smile and a nod and then turned back inside. He and Lindir set forth to search for Legolas, each taking a different section of the gardens, each laded with a vial of the restorative tonic the sylvan had never ingested. They passed very near to the wizard and his charge without giving them a second look.

Legolas watched them go with wonder and gave the Istar a wry smile. "Mayhap you are the answer to my prayers after all," he said cheekily.

"Hah!" exclaimed Mithrandir and laughed. "I will help you but we must have a healer see to this, for you are bleeding a little. Here, lean upon my shoulder and let's move down by the brook."

Mithrandir was gratified to note that the Wood Elf's frenzied emotions had quieted and slowly led him away from the house.

Elrohir followed but kept to the shadows of the trees and the shelter of the shrubs so to remain hidden. He was as shocked by the Wood Elf's condition as the wizard and found that rather than hatred for the Elf he felt a growing pity tinged with compassion. This was enough to invite investigation, and as he had already discussed his ideas about enchantment with Gandalf, he couldn't help but think this was another sort of spell. He just couldn't quite get the notion to assume the weighty certainty of fact, however, for Legolas had no idea he was even near Imladris.

Perhaps the spell was cast to garner Mithrandir's aid and I am just affected by association, being nearby. He rejected this thought almost the instant it formed, for it was impossible that Gandalf would be unaware of any magic aimed at him, nor would he fail to nullify it.

As soon as Legolas could hear the soft ruffling of the flowing stream he broke from the Maia's hold and careened drunkenly to the bank, collapsed two feet from the water's edge, and dragged himself the rest of the way until he could at last plunge his throbbing head into the cold fluid. Then he drank long and greedily, rolled to his back with a sigh, and instantly regretted it as the bright light of the morning sun pierced his brain. He sealed his sight with a complaining grunt. He heard the wizard take a seat beside him and sighed, cautiously turning over before trying to focus on his new ally.

"Don't you know any incantations to promote healing among all the spells and liturgies of your Order, Saelben?"

"Nay, I know not one, for I was not an apprentice to Estë but to Manwë, he the chief over all, even of the Fëanturi. Aewnedil is learned in herb lore and such but he is far from here. We must rely on other means to improving your health. Now then, there must be some among the curing class that have earned your trust and friendship, for by all accounts you had to spend many days in the House of Healing when first you came to Imladris."

"I would sooner trust my health to the blacksmith in Dunnland than to any of them!" spat Legolas, and he truly did, turning his head aside and gracing the grass with a small bead of saliva. "Besides, they will just tell Elrond everything right away and I have important things to discuss that are nobody's business but my own."
"Hmmmm. I'm not sure it's wise to try and hide such an important fact from the one you love, Legolas, but it is not my decision to make."

"What do you mean? What do you know?"

"Never mind, it's more suspicion than knowledge, young one, and time will tell at any rate. What are we to do about this? I must get you aid but you won't let any of Elrond's staff touch you. Quite a dilemma you've set before your saviour. Ah! Of course, the Dûnadan will do nicely."

"The what? Man of the West? You want me to trust my care to some human?"

"Not just any human, Legolas, but a dear friend and a Man of Destiny. He is very much a part of the cause for which I have been sent to Middle-earth. Now that I let myself think on it, you are mixed up in it, too. I should have known." The old wizard chuckled as if at some joke and shook his head, but instantly left jollity aside when Legolas cringed and folded up again, clutching his middle with a frightened moan.

"Ai, it's much worse now. Mithrandir, if you say he can help me I will trust your word. Who is it and where is he to be found? I don't know if I can ride," he gasped out when the spasm eased.

"That won't be necessary for he is here in the valley. You know him as Thorongil or Aragorn and he learned much of the healer's craft when he was fostered here during his youth."

"Then it's hopeless!" cried Legolas. "He will only go running to Elrond straight away!"

"No he will not. If you ask his discretion he will grant it; for the trust between physician and patient he holds sacred. Come along, can you walk? He is sure to be in the gardens and if we go now we should meet him as he returns to the house."

He helped Legolas up, concerned with how light-headed the simple act of standing made the Wood Elf. Together they ambled through the glades and dells of the Last Homely House's extensive gardens until they came near to the Trysting Bridge and sure enough, there came the Man, arm in arm with Arwen Undomiel, their heads bent together as they whispered and giggled like secret lovers would. They were so engrossed in one another that it wasn't until Legolas exhaled a shocked breath that they noticed the other two. The couple shared a concerned glance and then Arwen shrugged.

"Mar govannen, Mithrandir," she said and then transferred her stare to Legolas, who blushed to the roots of his hair and looked quickly away. Arwen smiled sympathetically and squeezed Aragorn's arm when he sent her a probing look. "Mae govannen, Legolas. Although you do not look well yet, I am happy to see you up and about."

"Thank you, my Lady," the sylvan stuttered, attempting a small bow that made his stomach lurch and the world spin. He moaned in misery and clutched more tightly to the wizard's robes to keep from toppling down to the earth again.

"What's this?" cried Arwen in alarm, detaching from Aragorn and flying to the Wood Elf's side in concern. "You are certainly not recovered enough to be wandering through the estate." The lady felt his forehead, which was damp with sweat, and frowned, turning her displeasure upon the Istar. "Mithrandir, how could you permit this? He should be abed, for I can tell the after effects of one of Adar's sedatives and this one is suffering a pronounced reaction."

"I assure you I had nothing to do with his leaving his bed," huffed Gandalf. "In fact, I am seeking someone to help him out and naturally thought of Aragorn. What say you, Dûnadan? Will you deign to treat a Wood Elf with your skill?"
"That will do, wizard. I don't share those unreasoning prejudices as well you know." Aragorn glared at the Maia a moment before turning his attention to the sylvan and passing a critical eye over the debilitated form. He caught the young archer's guarded gaze and smiled congenially. "Will you accept my care, Legolas?"

"I'm not sure. I need to ask things and I"

"Say no more, I understand," the Man held up his palm to stop the halting words and then took the Lady's hand, raising it to his lips briefly as he smiled into her grey eyes. "I would ask your pardon, but I can't breakfast with you this morn. Will you still ride beside me in the hunt?"

"You are forgiven and I will have no one else as my partner. I will go attend our guests, for I can well imagine my father's distraction if Legolas' departure from the house was without his sanction." At these words she sent the Wood Elf a pointed glance that made him turn an even deeper shade of crimson as he muttered something in Nandorin and stared studiously at his toes amid the grass.

Aragorn watched, a whimsically voracious smile upon his lips, until her comely shape was barred from his sight by distance and the abundant foliage. Then he regarded his new patient frankly, hands on hips as he looked him over from crown to soles. "Now then, please sit before you collapse, for I perceive you are exhausting your strength just by standing there. What would you ask of me?" He joined the wizard and the sylvan on the turf and waited until Legolas shot Mithrandir a pleading look that made him turn an even deeper shade of crimson as he muttered something in Nandorin and stared studiously at his toes amid the grass.

Aragorn was dismayed to hear this proof of Legolas' displeasure with Elrond, though he had wondered why the wizard had brought the young Elf to him instead of the renowned healer. He decided, based on the bitterness in Legolas' tone, to let it go for the time and concentrate on securing the sylvan's trust. "I count myself an ally to Imladris, that is true, but my duty as a healer is to my patient. What you ask me to hold in confidence I will keep secret to the grave." This strong affirmation didn't seem to appease the Elf, for Legolas was shaking his head.

"Nay, those are fine words but how can I know you mean them? Elrond must certainly command more of your regard than I ever could, despite your assertions of fair-mindedness."

"I am equally uncertain of your trustworthiness to keep my secret, yet you haven't heard me demand any assurance," retorted Aragorn, but he didn't say it unkindly for he doubted Legolas understood that he held such privileged knowledge, and this was born out by the archer's immediate denial.

"I have barely met you! What can you mean?"

"Why, you have witnessed my devotion to the fair Evenstar and hers to me. This is not something known to Lord Elrond, for he has as much as forbidden me to think on her until I have raised my station among my people to that of the very highest estate," answered Aragorn, letting his new friend, for so he hoped Legolas would be, search his honest gaze to the very depths of his soul. This obviously amazed the Elf, unused to having a Man be willing to permit such a thing, and his brows rose as he surveyed the human.

"I am happy for you, then," he said at last with the most dazzling smile Aragorn had ever seen on anyone save his Lady love. It made the Man grin in joy to finally be able to share his giddy exuberance with someone who would not frown and caution him that he had reached too high. "I wonder if your training exceeds the needs of the battlefield, though," Legolas continued, the smile
leaving his eyes as another wave of nausea turned him pale as water and he rubbed his stomach.

"I have been taught as much as any other healer here. Tell me, are you in pain or do you feel the need to empty your stomach?"

"Both. But what about matters pertaining to the creation of new life, have you any experience in that area?" continued the ailing sylvan.

"Child-bearing?" Aragorn stared at his patient quizzically, not sure if the Elf was about to admit some indiscretion that had compromised his relationship to the Lord of the Valley, for it seemed so unlikely considering all he had heard of the bond between the two.

"Aye, that is what I mean." Now Legolas looked to his right and left and over his shoulder before he leaned in very close so to whisper in the Man's ear. "I carry new life and fear that Elrond has unknowingly poisoned our child with his potions." Then he sat back to gage the effect his words produced. Startled bewilderment could not come close to describing the open disbelief displayed upon the Man's countenance as he once again let his scrutiny pass over the body before him, lingering at the juncture between the torso and the legs, hidden beneath the thin night-shirt. It made Legolas go scarlet again and he shifted uncomfortably.

"Forgive me!" Aragorn stuttered. "I understood you were male, that is I was told this by Arwen and Mithrandir both, yet"

"I am," shrugged Legolas, "but that term doesn't mean the same among my people as it does among yours, or even among the Noldorin folk here. Please, I must know if the child is endangered; will you not help me?"

"Aye, aye, of course," Aragorn stammered, remembering at last the terrifying words Legolas had whispered. "He doesn't know then?"

"Nay." Legolas stubbornly set his jaw and defiantly dared the mortal to question him further, pleased when the Man declined to do so.

"All right, I shall need to examine your body and that can't be done here in the open, for at any time someone may come wandering through. Will you consent to accompany me to my rooms?" asked Aragorn.

"Examine me? In what way?" Legolas scooted backwards a little bit. "Can't you just determine the risk based on the ingredients of the sedative?"

"Yes, partly, but I fear to let it go at that for there is a tinge of blood on the hem of that chemise. Are you having any pains?"

"Yes, strong ones that make me shake!" Legolas was now alarmed again, hearing the healer confirm, as it seemed, what he suspected. "Can you make it stop? Can you save my babe? I can't lose him, I can't!" Legolas was near mad with grief and protectively covered his abdomen with both arms, his eyes bright with a wild light of unbearable despair.

"Peace! You mustn't assume this is happening, that is why the examination is required. I won't know until I can place my hands on your body and learn if the safety of the womb has indeed been breached. Trust me, if there is anything to do to protect both you and the child, I will see it done." He gripped the Elf at the shoulders and shook him a little, forcing him to focus on his face and voice, determined to impart hope and forestall the inevitable sorrow should the worst be the case. Aragorn was in truth not as confident as he tried to project, for he had little doubt that if Legolas lost the child
"Fear not," Aragorn announced with evident relief, "the bleeding is external, for some of these raw patches aren't entirely healed over and your activity has aggravated the wounds. I can feel no undue swelling nor detect any leakage from the womb." He moved from between the raised knees, lowering the night shirt back over the exposed crotch, still in wonderment over the unique arrangement.

Being a healer, he couldn't help but be intrigued, and had perhaps investigated more thoroughly than he needed to. The gentle palpation of the testicles, while not appreciated in the least by Legolas, had convinced him they were at best immature and probably incapable of producing potent seed. The female organs were undeniably viable as the internal exam easily confirmed the small walnut sized uterus and the paired ovaries. As for means of pleasurable experience in the act of coupling, he could find nothing of the female's clitoris while the prostate was located much more forward than normal. He doubted Legolas would feel much enjoyment in being taken anally while vaginal penetration must stimulate the hidden male gland and produce a satisfactory outcome. He smiled down at the tear-streaked visage.

"Then what of the pains?" asked Legolas, still afraid to hope all would be well.

"I think it is easy to surmise, taking in your reduced state. The sharp pangs result from hunger, deep and long unsatisfied. How many days have passed since you ate any sustaining food, Legolas?" the Man asked, truly concerned to find someone this thin in Imladris. The Wood Elf was all lean wiry muscle and sharp angular bones, without a lick of fat to soften his shape or guard against the depletion which would overtake him while the babe developed.

"I don't really know," admitted Legolas quietly and wouldn't meet the human's gaze. How could he tell this person he hardly knew about sorrow and guilt that ran so deep it consumed him? The child within him was his only hope for redemption.

"It won't do," scolded Aragorn mildly, moving away to prepare the very same restorative Elrond had left with Lindir. He bought the glass to the bed and helped the Elf sit up. "This will ease the migraine and calm your stomach's lurching, but you need to eat properly or you won't have the strength to bear this child. It can't be done alone in the best of conditions, and yours is hardly that. You must speak with Elrond and let him aid you."

To this Legolas didn't reply, merely swallowing down the medicine obediently. He wasn't going to tell anyone of his prayer and its outcome, that he would leave for Aman and give birth there where he would die, and quickly.
the Valar would care for him and the child.

Aragorn sighed, recognising a stubborn streak when he saw it and possessing wisdom enough not to combat it. The Elf couldn't hide the truth from Elrond for long in any case, for as slight as it was Legolas' body would give away his secret in a matter of weeks. He moved over to his clothes press and withdrew a shirt and trousers which he draped across the back of a chair. Then he rooted around in his pack for a minute and brought forth a small leaf-wrapped packet. This he handed over to Legolas, sitting next to him on the bed as the archer opened it to find way-bread within.

"I expect you to swallow down all of that and remain abed, resting until the dizziness has passed. Wear those, if you wish, for while they will be ill-fitting you can hardly go unnoticed back to your rooms in that sleep-shirt. Above all else, eat a nourishing meal several time every day or you will weaken your body and by so doing endanger your child. I must go, for I am expected to join the hunt with the Men of Gondor. Do you wish me to tell Elrond where you are?" A slight shake of the head was all the answer he received, for Legolas was working on an enormous bite of the bread, his hunger at last demanding attention.

Aragorn rose only after the very last crumb disappeared and then stood for a moment looking down at his patient with compassion, for he looked so utterly forlorn and lonely, and on impulse bent to press a kiss to his forehead, brushing back the long golden strands as he straightened. "Be at peace and stay as long as you need. No one will come looking for you here." With these words he turned to leave but found his progress stalled as his hand was grasped by the sylvan.

"Aragorn, is my babe truly well?" he implored, still clutching at the mortal's hand.

The Man smiled gently and patted the tense fingers wound around his. "Aye, all is well, but the anxiety and stress you are suffering are far more harmful over the long term than one dose of sleeping potion could ever be. You must give me your word that you will heed my instructions."

"You have it, and my undying thanks, Estel." The sylvan again presented that bedazzling smile and squeezed the Ranger's rough hand before releasing it to permit his exit. As the door shut he sighed, settling comfortably back into the pillows and finally permitted himself to relax, softly humming as he caressed his flat belly where the child lay sleeping within.

TBC

Thyrin Trenor: Secrets Told
Galbreth: beech tree, from a dialect of Doriath
faer dithen: little soul
Muilengôl: Veiled magic-a Doriath-derived name for wizards.
Eglerio Elbereth! Eglerio Sulimo, Hir od Valinor!: Praise Elbereth! Praise Sulimo (a name for Manwë) Lord of Valinor!
ithron sael: wise wizard
Saelben: wise one

GLOSSARY

NOTE: Well, the Wood Elf is finally making new friends and while he is sad and bitter from what he believes to be Elrond's lack of care and concern, he hasn't completely given up. He has strong reasons for wanting his child to survive beyond the basic instinct to procreate. Those two will have it out next chapter, for Legolas realises he is too ill and weak to ride for at least another day. He will finally speak his mind and tell Elrond just how awful it's been these last ten years, and how much he needed the Elf Lord's love, which he believes he will never receive. Elrond has a sure fire way to prove otherwise. As you can probably tell, Elrond began to suspect the impossible, and
you can bet he used his skills as a healer to confirm those suspicions while Legolas was unconscious. The secret is out. Yes, he knows, but hasn't had the chance to speak of it with Legolas, of course. And I know I just left Elrohir where he was, peeking in through the windows of Aragorn's chambers, with Mithrandir lurking not too far away, but be assured he is not going to do anything to hurt Legolas. Let's not forget that Elladan should be riding up on a newly purchased horse any time now, too. Everybody is almost there.:)
"You are certain of this?" Elladan spoke from the doorway of his father's bedroom where he leaned against the framed opening, his back to Elrohir, gazing into the chamber as if he had never seen the room before.

This was false, of course, and the fact that the furnishings hadn't changed one iota since his earliest recollections only encouraged his scrutiny. Nothing could be so staid and resistant to alteration, but he could find not the slightest indication of anything new. He frowned, noting the solid walnut canopied bed, heavy, substantial, and boasting a masculine elegance that was purely reflective of Elrond's taste. It dominated the room; even the cumbersome paired clothes closets could not compete for attention and the substantial secretary near the window, overloaded with parchments and scrolls, seemed a child's school desk so much did the bed dwarf every other article of furniture.

Celebrian had never liked it much, he recalled, finding the swirled turnings of the posts and the equally fanciful carving of interlocking swans and waves across the headboard a bit ostentatious. There was nothing about the decor which hinted at her presence in any way and it was as if she had never lived there. In truth, she had spent little time in Elrond's suite, having a comfortable apartment of her own on the ground floor, just next to where Aragorn's rooms likewise abutted the flower garden she had so lovingly tended. In many ways, Elladan felt those rooms and that retreat of bright blooms were the centre of the Last Homely House. There he had spent so many happy days of his childhood.

Growing up, Elladan hadn't considered there was anything amiss to warrant separate quarters; he never questioned the lengthy visits he and his brother spent with Celebrian in Lothlorien. This was simply the way of things in his family. It was how they lived; it was all he knew. He remembered the day he'd discovered his parents' marriage to be a rather one-sided love affair and experienced anew the shock he'd felt to see his Naneth in the arms one of Glorfindel's captains. Elladan had been all of forty and he'd thought then that his whole world would come crashing down around him. He couldn't imagine his Adar's response, envisioning his Nana run out of Imladris for this breech of faith, the shame of her indiscretion staining her forever.

He still didn't know if Celebrian's explanation had been easier to bear or worse. Elrond knew she loved another and indeed had never returned the full fervour of his affections for her. There would be no reprisals; the couple would remain as the elder twin had always observed them: loving parents devoted to their sons' upbringing and future happiness.

"Quite certain; I overheard everything the two discussed and was present for the examination. Unofficially, of course," replied Elrohir curtly, watching his brother's reaction closely, for Elladan shielded his thoughts these days, but nothing in his manner betrayed his sentiments regarding the news. "What are you so interested in over there?" He joined Elladan, staring over his shoulder into the room.

"The curtains and canopy have been changed, but it is just the same white gauze used when the season warms," remarked Elladan.
"This surprises you? Ada always has the draperies switched this time of year."

"That's just the point. It's as if nothing untoward has occurred here. I wonder if Legolas has his own rooms now."

"Nay, according to Glorfindel he sleeps here, when he sleeps indoors, and all his belongings are in this suite."

"What belongings? There's nothing in here that hasn't been in this room since Ada built the house."

The twins shared a silent look and in tandem stepped over the threshold. They moved over to the clothes presses and Elladan pulled one open.

"Look, here are Ada's robes, just as they always have been." He yanked the door of the second and as it yawned wide the scent of cinnamon filled his nostrils. "Valar!"

"Ah, those are the tainted garments. It was a brutal trick to play on anyone and banishment is too mild a sentence," said Elrohir.

"Aye, it was."

Neither twin seemed prepared to discuss the unexpected addition to their family and conversation paused. Elladan reached in and lifted out the only formal garb hanging in the space, a long dove grey velvet outer-robe, intricately embroidered with stylised wolves in silver and trimmed at the cuffs of the wide, belled sleeves with rich salt-and-pepper fur. Both brothers arched critical left brows at this, imagining Legolas in such a thing, as the creation was replaced. It was meant to be worn with a set of midnight blue silk leggings and a sleeveless tunic of dusky rose finished in mithril braid around the high neck. Hanging beside these were two more tunics, one in supple leather the colour of malachite and the other a lightweight flannel dyed that shade of marine blue that bespoke squalls over a violent sea. These and two pair of low leather boots were the only clothes in evidence, and in comparison to the over-packed capacity in their father's closet the sylvan's possessions seemed scant indeed.

"I heard he had everything burned," commented Elrohir quietly, for he found the bareness of the clothes press unsettling for reasons he couldn't make himself confront.

"Nay, just the undergarments," Elladan corrected and opened one of the uppermost drawers to demonstrate the point. Well, there were no small clothes within it but it was hardly empty, though the contents were the last sorts of objects one might expect to find in a place for storing apparel.

A long hunting knife in its scabbard rested atop the folded length of woven leather used to secure it about the Wood Elf's slender frame. Beside this was a scatter of arrowheads hand-crafted from glossy black obsidian, the delicate scallops along the lethal points exact and perfect. There was a hand-made, double-tubed reed flute. A flint and a glistening golden clot of a striker stone were revealed when Elladan opened the tightly drawn leather pouch that housed them. A whetstone resided amid a strange assortment of shells, agates, and variegated pebbles. Feathers shed by many kinds of wild birds common to the valley mingled with a handful of faintly faceted green gems still locked within their lithic matrix. The cut crystal stopper from a decanter clinked as it rolled into a fragment of pottery, brightly patterned in a blue floral motif on white. At the very back, a stubby but solid dirk, two-edged and well-cared for, fronted a stack of square parchment sheets weighted down with a large round river rock.

Elladan sighed in a melancholy way and took up the shard with a shake of his head, for this assortment of odds and ends, excepting the weapons, reminded him of the collection Aragorn had kept in a tin box at the back of his own closet when he was just a boy. "Adar has taken a child for his
"You were willing enough to do the same," rejoined Elrohir bitterly.

"And so were you!" Elladan shot back, his tone equally acidic and reproachful. He glared at his twin, eyes filled with both remorse and remonstrance, clenching his fist tight around the remnant of the china cup until the sheered edge cut his skin. "We can't continue this way, Elrohir. It's time to stop hating him. Stop blaming Legolas for the rift between us. If you need me to accept responsibility in order to forgive yourself, so be it."

"I have done nothing that deserves reproachment, from myself or anyone else. I am not the one who sought to make a dying Elf his mate. You and Adar must share whatever weakness of character made you susceptible." Elrohir drew himself up in indignation. "Yes, I can stop blaming Legolas. He could not know what you mean to me, what we are together. Yet I do need forgiveness after all, from him, for my vehement attacks on his character. My misplaced disgust set up the conditions of his life here. You are the one I should have scorned and defamed! It is time you acknowledge your betrayal of my trust and our bond. I want to hear you admit it: you were ready to throw away that which I treasure most in favour of a purely sexual entanglement."

"I have never denied the beguilement but I never meant to either hurt you or to leave you. That scene of enticement was removed from all reality that I knew and still I can't explain it. I know you felt it, too; you confirmed it then."

"Felt it but resisted, while you didn't even try to withstand the pull. Why? What made it so easy to forget me?" Elrohir found he had to turn away from his brother's eyes, for it was painful to observe the sorrowful bewilderment visible within them.

"If I knew I would eradicate it from my being!" exclaimed Elladan and grabbed his twin by the arm to bring him back around and force him to witness the truth of his words. "We have to face this, please. It's been ten years of separation though we've travelled and fought together side by side. No more, Elrohir, no more! I need to know you can forgive me. Even if it takes uncounted years I don't care as long as you give me hope that you will."

"It's still there, isn't it, like a poison in the blood?" asked Elrohir, but he already knew the answer, for the same frustrating fascination plagued him. "What horror is this and why must we be burdened with it?" He shuddered and permitted Elladan to draw him close and hold him.

"I don't know, Elrohir. Maybe if I go and talk to him we can dispel the temptation."

"Ai, muindor, at least be honest!" fumed Elrohir, shoving his brother away harshly. "If you go to him you will but seek to woo and win him. Can't you see this?"

"Then you go!" Elladan shouted and turned away, red-faced in shame and anger. He glared at the bizarre juxtaposition of the trinkets and junk strewn about the deadly knives and shook his head. "What manner of Elf is this Legolas? Are all the Wood Elves made this way? Valar! He is pregnant with our brother and still I feel the tingling, captivating awareness of his presence. I want him as much as I did then and it is not only me. He feels my need; he reciprocates it. I'm certain this is so."

The elder twin's voice was fraught with frantic insistence and dire resentment.

"I know," Elrohir sighed, a hand upon Elladan's shoulder. "I suffer it, too, and thus I can't approach him either. I have been too close already and can hardly trust myself. My intentions in arriving first were anything but honourable. How I wish we'd never seen him!"

"Aye, but I think it was touch that has made this awful situation worse. It's as if his very blood is
tainted and exposure to it has contaminated us. I still feel our bond but this overwhelming hunger will not be ignored. What are we to do? I love you but I would have him.” He opened his hand and stared at his bloody palm in dismay.

"He belongs to Adar now. Somehow we must come to terms with it. I've spoken to Mithrandir but he has no idea of how to clear the curse. We could ask Miny’ammë perhaps. She was acquainted with Melian.” Elrohir transferred the shard to Elladan's opposite hand and pulled out his handkerchief to carefully wipe away the ruddy smear.

"Elbereth! I don't want to discuss this with my grandmother, Elrohir. It was hard enough to admit it to you. How shall I explain that my younger brother and I, long ago bonded one to another in the manner of mates, desire my father's sylvan lover who is now nurturing the nascent being of our baby brother? It is too horrible!” Elladan screwed his eyes shut, imagining the disapproving repugnance which would suffuse the clear gaze of Lady Galadriel should he apprise her of their predicament.

"What is the meaning of this?” the accusing voice boomed out before Elrohir could answer his twin and both wheeled about to find Elrond glaring in fury from the doorway. There could be no doubt he had heard this last statement at least. He blazed into the room and shoved them back, snatching the pottery chip from his eldest's fingers. "Answer me! What do you mean, coming in here and rifling through his things?” He slammed shut the drawer, causing the contents to rattle and shift noisily, and closed the cupboard door with a loud snap.

"We weren't really prying, Adar,” Elladan began. "We were curious about the tainted clothes.”

"You lie!” Elrond raised his voice and his hand, pointing an accusing forefinger at his first-born.

"If you must know, then, we wondered why there is so little evidence of your sylvan sylph in these rooms. Nothing has changed that we could note and so we began a closer examination.” Elrohir knew it was pointless to attempt to deceive their father, for he could always spot a falsehood the second the breath of the lungs gave it life.

Elrond looked startled at this and sent a piercingly speculative glance about the bed chamber, scowling as he returned his sight to his sons. "What difference can it make to either of you, what Legolas does or does not keep here?” he demanded, though his voice had lost its voluminous wrath and projected instead a hint of anxiety. "He isn't used to possessions; he has lived, continues to live, a very simple life.”

"There isn't anything simple about this situation,” scoffed Elladan and pushed past his father and brother to return to the more neutral territory of the study. He paced before the empty hearth a few times as he waited for them to follow him out.

"None know this more than I,” averred Elrond. "Why have you come? This could not be worse if someone had planned my ruination. You know how your presence disturbs him and on top of the dreadful attack he has suffered through I don't know if he will ever return to me,” Elrond's words began with impatient irritation but ended on a note of pure despair just short of a sob. "I can't lose him, not now! I've put him at terrible risk. If anything is amiss I'll never forgive myself.” He cast himself into an armchair and clutched at his temples, the long ebony tresses spilling forward to shield his anguished features.

His sons shared a look that expressed a silent evaluation of these statements and mutual surprise at their summation.

"You know? I was certain from his talk that you were completely unaware of the pregnancy,” Elrohir announced.
"Of course I know; the question is how you two came to the knowledge," Elrond glared from one to the other, no less astonished, and stood. "You have spoken to him? Is that why he has disappeared? I've been searching since the dawn and can find him no where in the valley. Tell me at once, have you driven him away? How could you do that to someone in such poor condition?" He was raging at them again, fists clenched and ready.

"Peace! We have done nothing of the sort nor have we said a word to him," insisted Elladan, finally noticing his father's appearance: hair wind-blown and tangled, clothing bedraggled and besmudged with dust and dirt, tunic torn at the sleeve and leggings spotted with briars and burrs as if he'd spent a month wandering through rough and wild terrain instead of but a day. "Elrohir was eavesdropping when Legolas consulted with Aragorn."

"Aragorn?" Elrond was too worried to work out all these connections and shook his head, saddened beyond words to understand how great was the chasm between him and the Wood Elf.

Before anything more could be said, a knock came at the door followed by the entrance of Mithrandir and Lindir. The minstrel sent the twins his most admonishing stare, for he saw them as the source for all the unpleasant rumours regarding spells and enchantment, and went at once to serve out a glass of miruvor, which he carried to Elrond, while the wizard settled into a chair with an unhappy grunt.

"I convinced him to see Estel," said Gandalf, having caught the Man's name and guessed the reason it was voiced. "I came upon the elfling in the garden this morning and he refused to go in and face you yet it was plain enough he needed help. I could think of no other solution, for he has absolutely no confidence in your staff of physicians. It is a sad commentary on his life here that he placed his trust in complete strangers over those he has dwelt among for so many years."

"Aye, too late do I realise how far things have gone. You did right to take him to Estel and my mind is relieved, for he would never let a patient beyond his care if there was any immediate danger. I'm grateful to you, mellon." With a sigh the Lord of Imladris swallowed down the drink and set aside the glass, permitting his partner in the search to guide him back to his seat. "What news, Lindir?"

"None that will please you. He is determined to remain hidden; we've no choice but to wait for the bond to draw him back," answered the singer morosely.

"Nay, he mustn't be alone," Elrond groaned, once more dropping his head upon his hands.

"Why? You just said you trust to Aragorn's diagnosis," said Lindir.

"There is a more serious condition to worry over now, for grief will overtake him if I can't make him see that everything will be all right," mourned Elrond.

"He's with child, Lindir," stated Elrohir bluntly. "We're to have a brother in due time."

"What?" The singer's eyes shot wide at this and he looked from the wizard to the elven Lord for confirmation.

"So it's true," Mithrandir nodded. "I had my suspicions but felt it wiser to leave the matter for Aragorn's discretion and treatment." Of course, he'd known Elrohir was following and had seen him steal up to peer into the Man's room. He'd done nothing to prevent this, feeling Elrond needed to be informed of the illness but desiring to keep his word to the elfling. The wizard had harboured no doubt that the younger twin would confront his father over Legolas' health at the first opportunity.

"How does everyone know this?" Elrond inquired with some agitation. "Is nothing in my life private
"Not something this important," huffed Gandalf, "or so obvious. It won't be long before everyone learns of it, for he is so slight he will surely grow round in a most suspicious manner."

"Aye, what awful mockery will be made of us then," groaned Elladan, shaking his head. "An illegitimate child begat upon a male sylvan youth. If it weren't happening to my family, I would laugh. Adar, how could you bring us so low?"

"It wasn't planned, Elladan, at least not by me. Do you seriously believe I would subject an innocent child to such harsh judgement?" insisted Elrond.

"Of course not," agreed Elrohir, "the choice was the sylvan's entirely and the reason is obvious. He hopes to make a respectable place for himself by using the pregnancy to force you to marriage."

"You're wrong!" argued Lindir, eager to defend his young friend. "That is not his plan at all and I can tell you he has been in a terrible moral dilemma over this for some time. How can you so easily dismiss the possibility that Legolas loves Elrond? Your own guilty thoughts have made you blind to his nature." Legolas' words to him in the glade made sense now. "If he meant to manipulate Elrond's conscience, why has he kept silent?" He turned on Elrond next. "You sit there feeling sorry for yourself and speaking of this child as of a disgrace. I will say it again, Elrond, you do not deserve the kind of love Legolas has for you."

"I don't think love is an issue here," snarled Elladan. "We are all agreed it's just some raw animal instinct at best and a deliberate ploy to enthral a powerful mate at worst. Disgrace will be the result in either case."

"There will be no ignominy assigned to this elfling's birth," spoke a quiet and resolute voice at their backs. "I would never subject my child to the sort of disdainful hatred I have endured here."

It was Legolas, who had regained the bed chamber the same way he'd left it, over the balcony rails, and stood now observing their argument with sorrowful eyes but a most determined set to his sensual mouth. He was still wearing the borrowed clothing Aragorn had lent him, the pants cinched tight with a bit of rope and the legs rolled up around his ankles. The long sleeves of the tunic were likewise folded back and the top hung open, revealing the mottled pink and red areas under the arms, around the neckline, and at each wrist where the painful open scrapes and scratches had at last healed over. His hair was damp and tangled as if he'd been caught in a storm though no rain had fallen.

"Legolas!" Elrond sprang from his chair and bounded across the room, intending to scoop his lover up in a tight embrace, only to be met with rigid arms held out to block him as the sylvan took a backward step.

"No. I am just here to collect my belongings. Hinder me not," he stated firmly as he retreated.

"You mustn't leave me!" Elrond insisted, somehow sounding both commanding and beseeching, and followed him into the room. He shut the bedroom door as he went.

"That is my cue to retire," announced Gandalf, heaving himself up with a creaking spine and protesting knees. "I suggest we leave them to it."

It seemed at first that the twins would defy him, for their sullen countenances presented a mulish reluctance to quit the rooms, but with the addition of Lindir's equally menacing glower the brothers relented. The minstrel ushered them into the hallway and quietly shut the door behind him. From below, the merry sounds of music and dancing continued to dilute the tense atmosphere of the Last
"I'm in no mood for frivolity and jesting," complained Elladan.

"Nor I," mimicked his twin.

"Well, I'm not so sure it's a good idea to brood over this new development," cautioned Gandalf, "but as you seem determined to do it you might as well come along and continue your grousing in the relative privacy of my apartment."

"We've ample reason for our displeasure, wizard, and you can't deny that," Elrohir defended his staunch disapproval over the affair as the group made their way down the corridor and descended a rear stairwell, so to avoid observation by the revellers in the Hall of Fire.

"Legolas has far more reason to be angry than either of you," Lindir stated. "He's lost everything and is entirely alone here. All he has is Elrond, and we see what troubles his foolish young heart has procured. I don't know how he'll survive this, for without a fully committed mate I foresee a grisly and tragic end to this tale."

Back in the bedroom, Elrond was having nearly the same thoughts and the terror this inspired made his pulse race and his mind whirl. He watched in mute disbelief as Legolas retrieved his pack from the bottom of the clothes press and began loading in the essentials required for a journey beyond the borders of Imladris.

"I must know; did Aragorn tell you?" Legolas demanded, not ready to condemn the Man just yet but struggling to keep his faith intact.

"Nay, I had no idea Aragorn was aware of it, or that anyone else was. I wasn't even certain you understood" Elrond's voice trailed into silence at the contemptuous expression that filled those cold blue eyes.

"I am glad he kept his word," was the sylvan's only remark to this, however, and he resumed his sorting and packing. "How did you find out?"

"While you were unconscious I examined you, for your sudden reaction to the cinnamon reminded me of a similar case long ago. The elleth afflicted was pregnant at the time and, given your physical structure, I decided it might not be impossible."

Legolas gave a short laugh at that but his countenance revealed anything but amusement. He was incensed that everyone knew his secret, already debasing his elfling and twisting his motives for desiring a child. Especially the twins. He slammed shut the treasure drawer and pulled another loose, taking out a pair of leggings and the leather tunic. He shrugged out of the over-sized shirt, intending to don his own clothes, but Elrond leaned forward and took them from his hands.

"Please stop and speak to me. Please, I know you're hurt and angry; I wish only to do what is right, what is best," the Noldorin Lord pleaded quietly. He saw a shuddery sigh pass from the Wood Elf as Legolas crossed his arms before him and delivered a fleeting glance accompanied by a brief shake of his head.

"I have to leave, Elrond. I can't protect my babe here; it isn't safe. It would be less dangerous to wander the wilds of Rhovanian alone than to remain in Imladris," he whispered, fighting the urge to abandon his plan and run to Elrond's arms. All day he'd stayed away, determined to prove he could resist the longing and survive on his own, returning under the excuse of needing to prepare for the lengthy journey. In reality, he wanted nothing more than to feel the comforting strength of Elrond's
body against his, to hear the steady beat of the Noldorin Lord's heart, to be kissed and caressed and made love to, with genuine passion rather than mere lust.

"I will protect you both; this I swear. He's my babe, too, Aearen. Don't take him away. I couldn't bear it; to lose you both would finish me." Elrond meant every word but the incredulous look the sylvan flashed at him divulged how hollow such a pledge must sound in light of the history between them thus far. He took a step closer and tentatively raised his hand toward Legolas. "Don't you know that I love you?" The effect this produced was not what he'd hoped and shocked him, for Legolas rounded on him in absolute rage.

"Liar!" he accused. "Noldorin folk toss about the meanings of words as if they were mere whims, vagaries of mood and moment! You say one thing and tie to it the sense belonging to another term altogether, then alter it again the next instant as easily as exchanging one robe for another. No matter what you may say, if the words are called back to you an excuse can be made of misunderstanding, or worse. How often have I been made to stomach that condescending tone of superior knowledge and insight from you and your many friends? I will listen to no more of it!"

"Aye, I don't deny it; I am guilty of that attitude. I can only beg forgiveness, but this"

"Nor are your promises of value, so swear no oathes to me." Elrond's apology was interrupted by the sylvan's strident recriminations, which had merely paused in order for breath to be drawn. "Just last night you promised not to leave me and yet I awoke to find you gone. How can I depend upon you to protect my child when you care not to keep watch by my side?"

"But I was there nearly the whole time, Legolas! You can ask Lindir to corroborate my words if you don't believe me."

"Lies! Lies!" Legolas cried, the angry outburst only serving to more fully reveal the underlying injury burdening his heart. "You see? It is as I said; you simply redefine the meaning of your promise so to escape fault. You promised to stay, not to stay most of the time."

"Nay, that is too harsh. You must see that I had to try and find a cure and I needed to ensure the culprits were captured and punished. It was love for you that motivated me. I have lied to you many times, thinking it for the best and imagining that by pretending things were fine you would accept it. My love for you is not a lie."

The young sylvan considered this explanation and could not refute the logic of it, yet though his rage subsided somewhat the loss of its pressing strain only permitted the deep pool of anguished grief to well up until his eyes were fairly drowning in it. He exhaled a sharp, shuddery gust of air and straightened his back as one who sees his end yet wills himself to face a truly daunting foe.

"What can it mean to say that you love me?" Legolas countered, voice low and humming with that mixture of wrath and sorrow that was the worst combination of emotions, for the one defied hope and the other obscured it. "How could you love someone who is a 'habitual embarrassment' to you? How can you claim any real feeling for someone you deem an 'ignorant and stubborn child'?"

"Nay, that's not fair. Those words were spoken in anger and not to be taken so tacitly. Surely you can see that only a heart tried beyond the limits of reason could dare to utter such recriminations?"

"I have not said such like to you, though my own trial hasn't been lesser," the archer said sadly and shook his head. "It is easy for me to see this clearly and harder for you to understand, for the factors responsible for our bond are foreign and strange to you.

"We sylvans have no love of Námo and even greater dread of wandering unhoused, open to
predation by the Dark Lord's wraiths. A soul in peril of being dimmed ignites a fiery passion within the failing hroa, a call that is undeniable, a yearning that will bring the light of another's faer to share. All you feel is the ebb and flow of that compulsion, a physical draw that, because its result is pleasurable, you have come to confuse it with stronger emotions that spring from the heart.

"I am not ignorant of this unusual sylvan trait, for I observed it in action at Dagorlad centuries ago. Still I contest your conclusion. Would I have sent away my own sons from their home, dreaded the return of my daughter, endured the scorn of my peers and the loss of my peoples' respect if not for love?"

"Yes. That is the nature of this bond. You are compelled to protect your claim upon me. Your sons are your rivals, your daughter a painful reminder of the family you held so dear and the wife lost to you. As for the rest, you have not endured so much as joined in the sport. The people follow your lead; if they scorn and revile me it is because you do so."

They stared in silence upon one another for a time, each aching in the terrible grip of this union that was at once a curse and a blessing, and it seemed that Elrond was on the verge of relenting and accepting this explanation for all the fomented convolutions his senses had undergone since encountering Legolas. Yet he was much older and much wiser and certainly knew his own mind and spirit well enough, and this awareness broke through with a strong pulse of illumination that drove out the dreary convictions of a mind racked with guilt and grief. He shook his head and let the barriers thrown up by position and place fall away. What he felt for this Elf was true and abiding, a tie that would only grow more binding as the years passed, and Elrond found that this was not a truth made for sorrow but a cause for rejoicing.

"No. Some of what you say I can't deny, but while I might acknowledge this compulsion I also see there is more to motivate my actions than involuntary carnal attraction. I don't wonder that you have decided against the possibility that I could love you; I've given little indication that such a thing could be plausible. I am proud and in my arrogance I have lied to myself; like a child believed the fantasies woven around my name and the legend attached to my family and our deeds. I liked to feel superior and justify my claim to respect and admiration, to power and esteem, to wealth and happiness.

"It's all a farce, for after all I am just an Elf, Legolas, nothing more and nothing less, as are you, but I have been so consumed with being Lord Elron of Imladris that I'd forgotten how to simply be. I say that I do love you and have the proof of it. Peace!" the Lord of Imladris held up his hand, a stern look upon his features, and halted whatever rebuttal the Wood Elf hoped to make. "It is not your beauty I love nor the delights of your body when you share it with mine, although these are not qualities I am ashamed to admit please me."

"It is you, Aearen, you just as you are: genuine and pure. Your heart and soul possess a natural integrity that throws a brilliant light upon the petty and selfish motives others seek to veil through elaborate posturing and protocol. Under the glare of this luminous spirit of yours, everyone else is revealed as false, all playing parts designed to keep the masquerade going. Our disguises are transparent as water beside you and it is hard to have to see oneself so naked when the truth revealed is less than flattering."

"That does not sound like someone you would love, yet perhaps you have at last explained why I am so despised," said Legolas.

"Aye, many react that way to such exposure, I am guilty, too. You showed me what I had become and I didn't like it. I lashed out, pushed you back, hurt you." The mighty Lord faltered then and rubbed at his eyes, for these were hard words to say aloud when he really wanted to just catch up his Wood Elf, hold him close, uncover his body and cover it again with his own, driving out the pain in
those eyes with the glorious ecstasy their union never failed to produce.

"But why?" Legolas shook his head to hide the flinch those words worked upon his bones. "The very essence of what I am somehow offends everyone in Imladris, but it never occurred to you that it might be just as hard for me to find admirable qualities among the Noldor. Why can't you love me as I love you?"

"I do love you!" Elrond sprang forward, falling to his knees before the Wood Elf, for how could he not respond to such a declaration, wrapped as it was in despairing confusion? He gripped the rigid arms held so tightly pressed together and tried to meet his lover's eyes, but Legolas had his squeezed shut.

"Despite my denial and resistance, you have brought me joy, for you respond not to the external façade I so vigourously maintain but to those fundamental attributes only you can see. Somehow, you blew right through the false front and found me, and I know not why but you decided my character is worthy of your love. I don't have to hide from you, Legolas. You have returned me to myself." Elrond smiled as the sylvan's eyes opened, hoping his words made sense, for he found it hard to properly convey the magnitude of such a gift. His lips turned down almost at once, however, for Legolas did not seem impressed and instead bore the chilling look he often wore when he caught Elrond being false. The Lore-master's heart lurched, for this avowal was anything but deceitful.

"I don't understand you at all," the archer rejoined, still defiant, determined not to let himself fall prey to the whims of his desires despite the intoxicating proximity of his beloved. He kept his arms folded protectively across the sore heart beneath the lean bare chest. "If you were pleased by this you hid it well. In fact, whenever I suggest some activity that might disturb this 'façade' of yours, you hesitate and make excuses. Unless it involves sex."

Elrond could hardly deny the charge and had no wish to, for he could see that Legolas had stated this in all seriousness and expected some reply. He sighed and sat back upon his heels, letting his forehead come to rest against the warm smooth skin of the Wood Elf's navel. What answer could he give? It was true that the physical allure of his sylvan lover was hopelessly entangled with the more noble sensations that uplifted his heart and spirit whenever they were together. Elrond had difficulty sharing these feelings in any other than a physical way, for it was when his heart was most deeply moved that he longed most to join with his mate, and likewise when they were striving to reach that peak of ecstasy that his soul rejoiced nearly to bursting with love.

Now had he simply stated this, Legolas would have understood at once, yet Elrond still languished under the lifelong habits of prejudice, subconsciously thinking the sylvan would fail to grasp his meaning. Thus his efforts to explain took them into deeper waters.

"You can't fault me for delighting in the pleasures we share, but it isn't only that. You have made everything new for me in a thousand ways. I find myself smiling just from observing you. I share your exultation over every sunrise. Your efforts to number the stars, picking out favourites and following their courses, all with wonder and delight, has made me recall when I once did the same. It gave me a shock to realise I hardly ever bother to notice the gifts of Varda anymore and take no pleasure in them when I do.

"I watched you frolicking with those ducklings in the pond and had to laugh when they all paddled round behind you in a line. I listened to your excited description of flowers and plants you never knew existed, smiled at your catalogue of pressed leaves and blossoms under that rock in your drawer, chuckled over your determination to collect a feather from every type of bird dwelling in the valley." Elrond lifted his face to judge his lover's response to this and with a sharp pang of dismay saw Legolas' jaw tighten and his spine stiffen. The Lore-master shook his head, straightening from
knee to hip, and increased the pressure of his hold. "Wait!" he urged, but was not heeded this time.

"You describe the antics of a child and so you view me still, for so you judge my entire race to be infantile compared to yours," the Wood Elf retorted.

"Aye, your indictment is partially correct." Elrond's instincts warned him not to try dissembling in the face of this harsh assessment and he wisely obeyed. Legolas had shown in the past that real remorse was rewarded with remission. A blunt statement, no matter how difficult its meaning might be to bear, was preferred over showy words used for distraction. "It was at times the wrong kind of amusement, for I indulged it at your expense rather than permitting myself to accept the gifts you so often hoped to give. Your personality is child-like: open, trusting, ever seeking, but that does not mean I consider you a child. There are Ages between us, however, and I can't forget those years."

"Nor will you let me! I can never be your equal, then, but I won't abide your infernal, paternalistic humouring any longer."

"What would you have me do?" demanded an exasperated Elven Lord. "I can't advance your years or diminish mine. There are bound to be numerous instances where my experience will supply more thorough knowledge and wisdom than you can produce. Shall I withhold it, then, in deference to your sensitivity to being young, a fact hidden from none?"

"I would have your respect if nothing else. I am not a beggar here; I do my part on patrol yet even this you scorn. The trophies I have brought as proof of my fealty and devotion to your lands lie hidden in a drawer. In my country, I was an honoured warrior. Under the eaves, no one cares about age or titles or possessions; it is how well one wields a bow that matters."

Now through all of this heated dialogue Legolas had made no move to push Elrond away. The noble Lord took this as a good omen and pressed his case the harder, gazing earnestly into blue eyes glistening in both pain and anger, daring to wind one arm about the sylvan's slender waist as he spoke, for he was sure he discerned the glint of desire in the cobalt depths. Legolas loved him still and yearned for an end to this odious quarrel as much as he.

"I do respect you, but for more than your remarkable ability in warfare. Your trust in sharing what is new to you, what grants your heart joy, the way you set aside your own woes and seek what is good and beautiful in your new home, this I didn't appreciate at first; that is true. Yet, it took courage and determination and hope to pour so much effort into making this union work. In the face of what you suffered, I cannot respect you more. Few elves could surmount such obstacles or persist under such averse conditions. You never gave up hope before; don't lose faith in me now."

Elrond lowered his head to press a tender kiss upon the bare belly and felt the quick spasm that ran through the taut muscles beneath his lips. He inhaled the tantalising scent of Legolas and laid his cheek against the smooth and supple skin, locking both arms behind the sylvan's back. His heart leaped as he heard a long drawn sigh and felt the shield of arms unfolding, delighting when one hand came to rest atop his head and the other upon his shoulder. Fingers, long and elegant and lethal, played among the strands of hair upon his crown. A shiver ran through the Elven Lord and a smile lit up every centimetre of his soul. He could feel Legolas relenting, unable to deny the love which had supplied him such distress, though the tension had not left the Wood Elf and there was much injury left to repair.

"I don't know what to say." Legolas drew another disconsolate breath, chastising himself for permitting this physical contact, for it was swiftly draining away his cold rage, supplanting it with the kindling warmth of longing. He resolved to say the worst and be done with it, for if this last and greatest fear remained he would never be able to stay when that was exactly what he needed most to do, for himself and the child. "I've done a foolish thing yet I can't regret it. I do love you but how can
"Not true." Elrond sat back again to meet this indictment eye to eye, for it was the one notion Legolas had revealed that was entirely false. "It isn't the child that has opened my eyes but the poisoning. I understand now what I've done. It may as well have been my hand that saturated your clothes with cinnamon. I dared to imagine that you were the fortunate one to find yourself with me. I let my inconsiderate and pompous attitude disseminate unchecked through my household. I am the one behaving like a fool, an arrogant, selfish fool but you have paid the price. I don't know how to earn your forgiveness but I will; I must. Please, Legolas, let me try. Do not part from me."

At this Legolas uttered a strange sound, half a cry of frustration and half a groan of intense desire, and covered his ears with his hands as he tore away from his lover's embrace and fled to the balcony. He wanted to believe this solemn testimony but resited, reminding himself of the numerous examples he'd been given to counter them. There was little in the balance to sway the scales to Elrond's side, but his own love and the persistent throb of the new life within him refused to ignore them. He stood there for a moment or two, vacillating between escaping back into the trees and remaining with Elrond. At last it was too much. He could not fight such a trio of overwhelming impulses: his heart's desire, the insistent soul-bond, and the needs of his unborn babe. Legolas collapsed into a chair, a muffled wail erupting as he wrapped his arms around his head and folded up into a tight, miserable ball.

"Why must I love you this much? I never asked for such a thing to happen and I can't see what I've done to" and there his words choked off abruptly, for he didn't want to think about that, knowing only too well what horrible errors lay at the root of this suffering. That his sins would now be foisted onto the unborn innocent he carried made his soul cringe in dread. "I have to go from you for surely grief such as this will steal my life and our babe's."

"No, you don't. I can make it right; truly it is not so bad as it must seem," Elrond had hurried over the minute Legolas dropped to the chair and now knelt by the Wood Elf's side, a hand gently soothing over the bowed back.

"I must. I promised the Valar."

"What?"

"For my brother. I promised that if the Powers let me keep the babe, I would sail for Aman and let the child be born there. Nothing can harm him there; he'll be safe and loved."

"Legolas, how is your brother connected to this decision?" Elrond unwrapped his young lover, concerned over the stresses straining the lithe body, and gently lifted Legolas' face, forcing the tear-filled eyes to meet his. He made this query with no small trepidation, for he was unhappily convinced he knew what the answer would be.

"If not for me my brother would never have died. This babe will be the vessel for his faer; Galbreth will have life anew. I should have told you last night, then you wouldn't have drugged me, but I was terrified and the burning was unrelenting and Lindir was there and I just couldn't. I woke in such awful pain and bargained with Elbereth for my little one. I promised to sail if his life would be spared." The truth tumbled out in a rush of broken sobs and Legolas' form contracted even tighter, if such were possible.

Elrond exhaled a deep sigh and sadly pulled the sylvan archer into a close hug, rocking him carefully, stroking the damp, tangled tresses. During the delirium of the early days following Legolas' arrival, Elrond had listened to numerous conversations between Legolas and Námo concerning this deceased brother, usually pleading mercy and forgiveness, promising his own life if Galbreth would
only be returned to the forests of Greenwood again. He lost count of the number of times the Wood Elf had tried to make good his promise and end his existence in the healing rooms with whatever means he could find to hand. Only the severity of his injuries had made him too weak to achieve this goal. That and the fact that he was kept bound and drugged after a nearly successful attempt to slit his wrists with the broken fragments of a smashed water pitcher. Yet once the fever had abated, Legolas never mentioned his brother or alluded to the attack that had ended in such tremendous loss and grief.

"Legolas, I understand this, yet I don't believe such a promise can only be kept by sailing for Eldamar," Elrond began carefully, murmuring his words into an attentive ear. He had no wish to insult his lover's beliefs and so drive him further away, and truly it mattered little if there was any credence to such notions as long as Legolas held to them wholly. The result would be the same and that he would not allow. He would not give up this unexpected love and its amazingly fruitful bounty.

"Nor is your vow binding," he continued, "for didn't Aragorn assure you the babe was never in danger from the sleeping draught? How can you owe anything when no service was rendered? We must let this new life come into being here and would that not be better? Then our child shall have both his parents and thus secure his strength and vigour, while Galbreth's spirit would not be so removed from his homeland, for Imladris would become in part his homeland, too."

"I won't permit him to be scorned and mocked. I have borne it for love of you, Nín'ódhel, and because I hadn't any right to expect happiness any longer, but I will not tolerate anyone making my son feel ashamed of who he is." The scarcely audible words were draped over a scaffold of steel and there was no doubting the sylvan warrior would back such a declaration with action.

Elrond smiled to hear it, for he perceived within the terms Legolas' desire to be convinced and persuaded, but it was also a sad smile for at last he saw things as they truly had been for Legolas.

"I didn't intend for you to suffer for love of me," he said. "Nor do I believe your brother would want that, or even the Valar, capricious and indifferent though their moods may be. Yet I cannot help but rejoice to hear you mention love. Lindir is right, little do I deserve it, but I am not foolish enough to let such a gift go once it is given. I can't change the past or undo the harm my selfish arrogance has caused you, and again I plead forgiveness though it is not justified. I am still selfish; I will not live without you.

"What comes next, that is in your power to mould. I would make this right and return to you a thousand fold the love and dedication you have shown. You will be mine, Legolas, and our child will grow up happy and healthy under our guidance. What say you? Will you consent to the Noldorin custom and wed this ancient Elf with which Vairë has afflicted you? You have given yourself entirely and entrusted your well-being to me: heart, mind, soul, and body. You have given me now the greatest token of that pledge in the life of our child. I would grant you the honour such tributes demand. Stand with me before Eru and wear my ring for all time."

There was an intense silence that followed these words as the two remained locked together, Elrond refusing to let go for fear his sylvan lover would slip away forever and Legolas frozen in disbelief over the proposal just spoken. He drew a shaky breath and stirred, turning his face to Elrond's, daring to peer into the molten grey eyes, hunting for truth and afraid of what that might be, but hopeful nonetheless.

"Did you just ask me to become your mate?" he whispered.

"Yes."
"Is this because I'm carrying your child?"

"Partly, and he's OUR child. Mostly it's because I can't fight it anymore. I tried very hard not to love you but it's quite impossible. Our souls are all mixed up together and now my heart is thoroughly entangled with yours, too. I have no idea where one ends and the other begins, nor any desire to learn such a thing."

Another short period of wordless anxiety passed between them as Legolas struggled to make sure his answer, already determined years ago, was to be given for the right reasons.

"The people will say I have entrapped you with magic and made this babe to secure an exalted station for myself."

"I don't care what people think. Well, that's not true, but I suddenly find myself highly irritated that anyone could fail to comprehend your merit and worth. At the same time, I know it's entirely my fault and as such I can change this. If anyone dares to bring it up I will gladly tell them I am indeed enchanted and would wish the same good fortune to befall each and every one of them. Praise Eru for making the Wood Elves so unique, for I am so stubborn and proud I would never have met you otherwise. I could almost bless those Orcs for making sure you would need a saviour."

Legolas smiled a little then, but was not quite finished. "What about Elladan and Elrohir?"

"What about them? They have each other, though they are temporarily at odds. As for the rest, they will just have to figure out how to make their own child; I can't help them in that department. Mayhap there is a sylvan spell you could recommend?"

Legolas snorted out a giggle at that but it was a high, nervous sort of sound. The situation was not one that would right itself yet Elrond didn't seem inclined to delve into its perplexities at the moment. Legolas couldn't truly say he wished to, either, finding one soul-wrenching confrontation sufficiently draining. He pressed his forehead against Elrond's and worked an arm round his shoulders.

"So be it, though none in my line have ever mixed blood with kinslayers before now. I hope my people may forgive me."

"Ai! My folk are not counted among those followers of Feänaro. I am only one-eighth Noldorin at best. But did you consent, Legolas? Tell me your answer again and leave out those unpleasant references to my dubious heritage." Elrond was grinning hugely despite his shock to hear these disparaging objections raised.

"I did consent. I will wear your ring, Elrond, and I will bear your child. I will be your mate for all time," Legolas was smiling in dreamy delight, bathed in the turbulent effluence of unreserved love pouring from his beloved's clear eyes. Yes, there was the very evidence that had convinced him Elrond's heart was his alone, and for the intensity in that one look he had given himself over long ago.

He did not resist when the Lore-master's lips sought his and opened joyfully to the possessive exploration of the questing tongue. He hummed out a little moan of relief as every nerve and sinew eased into this more stimulating sort of contest. He didn't press very hard for dominance, however, for Elrond knew too well exactly what pleased him. He did manage to close his teeth down upon the wet protrusion just enough to provoke a shuddery groan and an impulsive shift in position that somehow brought him out of the chair and Elrond into it. Legolas realised he was now straddling his lover's lap and felt the healer's fingers busy at work upon the knotted cord that bound the borrowed pants. Elrond withdrew his tongue to briefly put it to use for speech.
"The wounds from your mad scratching and chafing seem to be healed, but I'd best conduct a thorough inspection to make sure." The rope came away then and one hand dived beneath the gaping wasitband to find Legolas' penis hard and at full attention. Elrond grasped it and then stroked down from tip to base, thumbing across the slick glans firmly as he dipped his head to lick and nip at the archer's neck, careful to avoid the new pink skin ringing the throat. Legolas gave a strong jerk, not the eager thrust of libido driven hips but a retreat from the encompassing friction, and he stopped, meeting the sylvan's gaze with concern. "You are still a bit tender," he said.

"Nay, nay, it's all right. Don't stop."

"No, better let me have a look," insisted Elrond and lifted Legolas up from his lap.

As soon as the Wood Elf was upright the over-large trousers slipped down and clumped in a heap atop his feet. He could barely restrain his delight as his lover's hungry eyes seemed to scrutinise every atom of his aroused genitals. "Look all you like," breathed Legolas eagerly.

"You seem to be healing up well, but I'll do nothing that hinders the process," Elrond intoned clinically, eyes glinting with devilish glee to see the Wood Elf's expression shift sharply from wanton expectation to dismayed frustration. "I think it would be wise to bathe the afflicted regions with a warm, viscous, mineral-rich fluid rather than increase the irritation excessive handling would surely induce."

Legolas had but a matter of seconds to consider whether Elrond was proposing a soak at the Spa or a more romantic encounter in their private bathroom before the Elven Lord leaned forward and demonstrated the prescribed therapy. The noble legend's parted lips enveloped his penis; that epicurean tongue deliberately swabbing across the sensitive tip. He held tight to the hands securing him at the waist and watched, spellbound by the sight of his erection slowly disappearing into the hidden chamber where the repeated application of the massaging muscle raised his desire and vanquished all thought of troubles or cares.

"Ai, Nín'ódhel, the things you do to me!" he whispered, transferring one hand to the crown of dark hair, entangling the fingers amid the black strands and pressing lightly. When Elrond grunted out an admonishing growl, Legolas shifted those clever digits to the point of a Noldorin ear and gave it a very sound tweaking. The noise his lover made then was purely a squeal of excited surprise and the vibrations sent a piercing jolt of equivalent passion coursing through his cock. Legolas shuddered and grabbed onto Elrond's shoulder for support, respiration accelerating and heart singing, desperately trying to be still and let things happen, such lovely things.

All at once the mouth pulled away but the cool night air had little chance to settle around the spit-slapthered organ before Elrond pressed his face into the juncture of pelvis and thigh, nose nuzzling against the soft, damp curls collected at the root, lips and tongue nipping at the tight, smooth sac crouched beneath it. Hands that had staunchly held Legolas back pulled him closer, reached behind and beneath him, squeezing at his buttocks, tracing over the tightly sealed anal orifice and slipping just past the slippery rim of the second opening. Then a more regular stimulation began again as Elrond slowly worked his way back to the pinnacle, sampling the musky flesh as he went, and his fingers went to work inside the separate cavities, probing and stroking. All of this he did with slow and steady deliberation, occasionally adding a rumbling moan to the pleasing sound of the sylvan's deep and laboured efforts to maintain sufficient air.

For Legolas it was nothing less than bliss and he could not find energy to compare the experience with any other they'd shared, for every time they joined his heart found ease and freedom from the guilt and grief that plagued him nearly every minute, whether waking or in reverie. Yet his soul was aware of his senses building to a high state of exhilaration in the aftermath of the long days of
escalating conflict and rejoiced. Here at last they would find completion without the shadowed
doubts that had ever inhibited them for a decade. This time, he would not only perceive the great
love hoarded in the Noldorin Lord's heart; this time, Elrond would give it to him.

Unable to reach anything else, Legolas' fingertips delicately travelled the elegant curves and whorls
of his mate's ears, rubbing harder here, tugging at the small, firm lobes, pressing a quick pinch atop
the points, over and over. He closed his eyes and smiled, luxuriating in the erotic sounds Elrond
made in reply to this attention, relishing the sensation of the thick black drape of hair drifting lazily
against his naked legs as the noble head rose and fell, trembling under the feverish blasts of pleasure
shocking his body whenever prostate, penis, and balls were simultaneously tickled in exactly the
right way. He wanted it to go on forever and Elrond's skilful manipulation kept his nerves afire, the
mounting seminal pressure always just on the brink of boiling up, until he lost all ability to command
function. He could but hang on, hands fist ed now in the ebony locks, mouth agape and eyes glazed
as passion finally overtook him and sent him soaring.

Legolas didn't realise he called out Elrond's name at the moment of release, but the Lore-master
surely did and he exulted, clutching his Wood Elf close as he let the relaxing penis slide from his lips.
The limp and quivery body was draped haphazardly against him, arms lazily encircling his neck as
the archer's cheek rested on the crown of his head, legs splayed out awkwardly and trembling faintly.
The only thing holding Legolas up was the firm grip of Elrond's arms, one across the back of his
thighs just beneath the supple curve of that enticing behind, the other wrapped tight against the small
of his back where trickles of sweat seeped between the join. Elrond drew Legolas onto his lap and
thus freed a hand to run through the thick, golden mane.

"Kiss me," he demanded and was instantly obeyed, Legolas' eyes alight with love as grinning lips
snatching at Elrond's, biting the lower lip only to retreat and lap against the bruise, teasing the high
grooved roof of the palate before devouring his tongue.

"I want you, Nín'ódhel; make me yours. Take me." He was a weightless mote floating free in the
thrill of his climax and wasn't entirely conscious of this entreaty, murmured between frantic oral
gropings from lips alternately fused and sundered as his need for oxygen directed.

"Ah, Aearen." Elrond's reply was little more than a feral purr.

He'd had been waiting for just that request, anticipating it with aching excitement but minimally
checked, and his greedy hands palmed and petted and plucked at every accessible bit of flushed flesh
reposed against him, all the while returning the fiery kisses with escalating control until finally he
seized the tangled hair and so thoroughly ravaged the sylvan's mouth that he wrung a soft moan of
surprise from the suddenly compliant Elf. The wet sound as they separated underscored their harsh
panting, breathing in each other's breath, vision locked, parted lips spare inches apart. They formed
matching smiles and abruptly Elrond stood, lifting his Wood Elf and then replacing him on the chair.
He took a step back and bent to pull off one of his low ankle boots, tossing it carelessly aside.

"Ah!" Legolas' was pleased beyond words, for Elrond seldom stripped for him this way, and
wriggled around until he found a comfortable position that managed to expose as much of his groin
as possible. As soon as Elrond's hands moved to unfasten the closures of his tunic, Legolas' travelled
south to stroke and fondle his quickening cock.

Slowly, slowly Elrond opened the outer garment, noting how Legolas' eyes moved to each
successive clasp as he worked it loose, until finally he slipped the top from his shoulders and let it fall
where it would. He had a long, wide embroidered sash binding his silk undershirt about the waist
and this he unknotted and unwrapped with excruciating sloth. Once free, he flung it out toward
Legolas, who caught it and pulled playfully, hoping to yank Elrond closer, but the Lore-master had
expected that and let it go. Legolas draped it around his neck, hooked one knee up over the arm of his chair, and waited.

Elrond's nostrils flared at this blatant challenge. With a smugly lascivious grin he tugged the tail of the shirt free of his pants and then removed the fine sapphire studs clasping the cuffs at each wrist. These he pocketed as he stepped farther back and leaned against the balcony rail, his eyes raking over the moonlit skin of his lover's exposed body. Legolas glistened like opal under Ithil's subtle glow and the secret places beckoned in shadowy shades of dusky rouge, but the Elven Lord resisted.

A full minute passed, then another, and yet a third ticked by until the Wood Elf gave an impatient exclamation of intense distress and twitched in his seat. "Please, don't stop," he begged, all demure and contrite, the dare discarded and dismissed. "I need you, Nín'ódhel."

"Oh, you do?" The Noldorin Lord tossed his head, gloating over the victory, and stood straight. He raised his hand and motioned Legolas to him. "Come, Aearen; you finish undressing me." He chuckled approvingly at the speed with which his youthful lover reached him and began undoing the remaining ties and clasps, whisking the shirt over his head and managing to steal a quick kiss almost at the same time.

Then Legolas grew venturesome again and pressed each palm over a peaked brown nipple, languidly circling and smoothing over the tender points, lavishing loving attention over the exposed expanse of Elrond's broadly muscled chest, tasting and touching the places he knew to be most sensitive. Elrond permitted this, expressing his approval in a soft stream of rumbling moans, until he felt the sylvan's incisors sink into the skin of his shoulder with sufficient force to mark him. The sting made him cry out in surprise and abruptly he took hold of the Wood Elf's shoulders and held him back at arms length, intending to scold his lover, but upon meeting the oddly apologetic triumph in those cobalt eyes Elrond found his anger dissolved away into a warm sense of security and belonging. Inexplicably, recognising the pride of ownership in Legolas' bold trespass raised Elrond's desire even higher. The concept blazed through his mind that perhaps there were unforeseen benefits to relinquishing the dominant position every now and then.

"You would claim me, Aearen?" he asked.

For answer, Legolas flushed from his toes to his scalp and swallowed down a hitched breath as his cock positively leaped in his hand. His eyes gleamed with a mixture of voracious longing, confused uncertainty, and outright fear as they tracked over the solid strength of the masculine form before him. He let his head tilt ever so slightly and his left shoulder shrug the barest increment, mouth too dry to attempt even a simple yes or no.

Elrond decided the correct interpretation of this elusive posturing, which his instinct believed to be 'yes', could be examined more fully another time. He threw back his head and shook all his hair behind him, dismantling what remained of his braids and knotted tendrils, relishing the obvious stimulus this posed to Legolas, who stood enraptured with lips parted and eyes wide.

"Shall I finish?" he asked teasingly, already undoing the ties of his leggings as Legolas offered a brief nod. Certain the sylvan's vision was locked on the widening gap in the fabric, Elrond shoved his hand down inside and worked his cock free, fisting it with a loud groan as he pumped, thrilling to the sharp gasp this provoked from his lover. His other hand casually tugged at the waistband to lower the pants and slowly expose what his hand was holding to the subdued light of the mild spring night. Legolas fulfilled his expectation, giving a hoarse cry as he dropped to his knees, taking hold of the cloth and drawing the pants down in one forceful jerk. As Elrond stepped out of them, he let the slippery tip of his rigid organ rub against Legolas' cheek and was rewarded with a flickery swipe of a hot red tongue.
The next instant the Wood Elf had the engorged head in his mouth and the heavy sac cupped in his hand, sucking and gently squeezing as Elrond held the long shaft forward, continuing to stroke himself. He uttered a startled groan when the sylvan pulled his hand off the erection and replaced it with his own, pumping more quickly and alternating the strong suction with faint touches of his teeth and tongue up and down the length. The august healer caught his breath at the sight of this vision of golden glory worshipping at his feet, supplicating his favour in the most erotic fashion. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind he realised Legolas had gained the upper hand and was controlling the pace of their love-making again, yet it seemed a paltry sort of point to argue at the moment. He was more for action, anyway.

In a single fluid motion Elrond gripped Legolas under the arms and hoisted him up, pulling him off his cock with a grunt of exquisite pain as teeth nipped him right on its crowning slit, and pivoted about so that he had the sylvan trapped against the railing, bent forward so the long swath of gilded hair cascaded out into the open air. He gave the exposed rear a squeeze and a soft pat before slipping a finger between the cheeks and pushing against the taut constriction until it gave entry. He worked quickly, attuned to the rhythms of his lover's body, and in rapid succession added a second and third intrusion. Yet for all his haste he was not unmindful of the tender new skin surrounding this tight ingress and hesitated, thinking to retrieve a salve with which to protect the region.

By then Legolas was straining hard against the banister, pushing onto every thrust to encourage the ultimate melding of their bodies, and almost cursed as the preparation slowed nearly to a halt. As it was he groaned aloud and opened his eyes, which had been sealed, and discovered that his noise had alerted someone in the garden below. A couple lay entwined in the shadows on the lawn, engaged in the same activity as that on the balcony, and Legolas gasped as he met the equally startled stare of two sets of shining eyes.

"Elrond!" he whispered in frantic panic and turned his head to see whether his lover was aware, but the smouldering heat in the grey eyes of the Elven Lord froze him still and set him on fire all at once, for he was suddenly grasped at the hips and entered with a solid, steady thrust that sheathed the Noldorin penis in him to the hilt. He bucked as it retreated and filled him again and then he was lost to the powerful force of the bond between them and the love only just confessed but familiar and welcome and all-enveloping. He gave in to the demands of body and soul and was conscious of the intoxicating flood of energy Elrond seemed to pour over him with every fresh penetration. He smiled and called out softly in Nandorin as one of his mate's hands covered his on the railing and the other slipped beneath his belly to capture his cock in a clasp that was somehow protective as it worked the slender column with delicate precision.

Elrond claimed Legolas, taking more than the physical pleasure found in the searing heat of their union, seeking at last to possess all that was so freely given, striving to open his soul and offer in return the entirety of his being if it would heal the remaining wounds in his Wood Elf's grieving spirit. The vows were silent, the concussion of flesh upon flesh speaking the promises he had been unwilling to admit before, his thrusts more tender than since their first coupling, when Legolas had barely been conscious, but steady, relentless, and true. This, he knew now, was how it should have been then; this was what Legolas had needed.

He heard the sylvan make that peculiar trilling call, amazed to feel something like an echo of its vibrations arise from a deep and distant place in his psyche, and it was as if Elrond's heart burst, not in pain or anguish but with overwhelming joy. A barrier disintegrated, one raised so long ago he'd ceased to acknowledge its presence, and with its destruction a sudden influx of vitality enveloped him. Like the rising tide of Legolas' limitless love, that great ocean that washed through him and over him, this energy surged and billowed and swept them both up in its relentless gale. Yet if he had felt adrift before he could now perceive a course and a purpose.
"Ah, Aearen, how I love you," Elrond whispered against the florid point of his beloved's ear. He felt Legolas shudder, a wave of trembling that ran through every nerve in the lithe body. His answered, tremor for tremor, and together they reached a glorious moment of mutual surrender.

TBC

To DeLurker: Thank you! I appreciate each and every review. I can't promise they will make me write faster, but they definitely make my life brighter and give me cause to smile. I am very grateful!

Gwaedh Prestannen: Troubled Troth
Thyrin Trenor: Secrets Told
Galbreth: beech tree, from a dialect of Doriath
faer dithen: little soul
Muilengôl: Veiled magic-a Doriath-derived name for wizards.
Eglerio Elbereth! Eglerio Sulimo, Hîr od Valinor!: Praise Elbereth! Praise Sulimo (a name for Manwë) Lord of Valinor!
ithron sael: wise wizard
Saelben: wise one
Úgerth uin Ionnath: Sins of the Sons
Narwain: January
Nay, saes, avvedi: No, please, don't go.
Dîn Caradhras: Red Horn Pass
Carth Dalt: Slippery Deed
Saelben: Wise one
Alae!: Behold!
Pedethryn Dailt: Slippery Walkers - slugs and/or snails
Nîth Chall: Shadowed Youth
nârion: son of a rat
hecilo: outcast (Quenya)

GLOSSARY

NOTE: There now, Elrond is going to do the right thing and Legolas is not going to be stubborn or prideful. He needs Elrond and the baby needs Elrond and so he will stay and marry the stuffy old Noldorin Lord. Besides, it seems he was right and the ancient legend truly does love him after all. The twins are still acting like nincompoops but they are at least talking about the situation. You may have noticed they went off with Gandalf and Lindir, and so maybe those two will talk some sense into them. There is a means to settle their rather unnerving problem and still remain true to one another. More on that later. With this crisis passed, there is now the wedding between the mortals and the celebration of Ened Ethuil which follows. Once the humans return to their own realms, things will calm down in Imladris. Hah! Not in this story.

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Elrond sighed in utter contentment, relishing the sensation of running the tips of his fingers over the slender elegance of the sylvan elf beside him. Legolas lay stretched out on the down filled mattress, completely at ease and relaxed, radiating a serene peace and fulfilment the Elven Lord had never observed in him before. Trust and love were there as well and Elrond's soul eagerly absorbed both, drawing on the strength of such powerful gifts so freely given while matching the outpouring with the same energetic delight. It was a unique experience, for though Elrond had enjoyed this inundation of ardent affection and absolute acceptance he had not reciprocated to the same degree. Always he had restrained his heart's surge of elation, convincing himself it was nothing more than the thrill of physical release, denying the depth of his joy.

"No longer," he whispered and smiled at the questioning look in Legolas' eyes. "I was in the habit of fighting against the real devotion I feel toward you. I will not be doing that any more, Aearen."

"Yet I am still your ocean?" Legolas teased, grinning in devilish amusement for he knew Elrond thought he didn't understand the allusion to the curse of the Teleri tribe. He had asked, the first time the pet name was spoken, and for answer was told something that was not the truth and yet was neither a lie. 'I call you that because you are as fascinating and untamed as the unending expanse of the Encircling Sea,' Elrond had said. Legolas had understood what his mate could not yet perceive: both meanings, revealed and concealed, were true. The rather abashed expression now reorganising the noble Elf's proud features made the Wood Elf giggle.

"I intend to keep you at my mercy, too; tossed and buffeted by the turbulent storm of those long-repressed emotions; lured, captured, and enthralled by the Siren Song of the sylvans. You'll be helpless to predict from one day to the next whether this mysterious sea will be calm and the current favourable or wild, drawing you away over uncharted waters. I can, however, promise that the journey will be a most wondrous one." Legolas reached up and felt the contours of the stern and ancient face he had so come to love. Elrond didn't look so formidable now. The tension around his lips and eyes had vanished; his mask of guarded dignity was gone. There was no distance between them.

"I've been a fool," Elrond confessed and turned his head to kiss the palm pressed lightly against his cheek. He smiled over those sensitive fingers and gripped them tightly with his own, pleased to encounter shining eyes filled with compassion and gratitude. So much better to see that than the distrust and betrayal harboured there before. He sighed and let his gaze roam over the supine figure, focusing on the firm, bare naval beneath which a tiny new life glimmered. "How wrong I was! My love for you is no sickness. My passion, my source of strength," he bent and kissed the flat belly, "my purpose, yes, all of that and more. Tell me again that you will stay, Legolas."

"I will stay, Nín'ódhel."

As he heard this declaration, Elrond realised there was more than one meaning in his lover's
endearment, too. Legolas had always known the truth even when he hadn't permitted himself this insight. He had fought against their unorthodox union, yet as soon as he'd given in it had seemed right. Elrond had welcomed Legolas' torn and fragile fae crowding close to his, drawing on his strength, intertwining so tightly that their two souls were warp and weft of a single fabric. Even so, he would deny his mate and love had never been factored into the Lore-master's evaluation of the unique situation. That Legolas had discovered Elrond's deeply hidden love was astounding. That he had quietly, patiently tended and encouraged it with his own stole away Elrond's breath. He pillowed his head upon the lithe form, grateful beyond words, clutching desperately to the young elf so wise in the ways of the heart.

"Elrond? I meant those words; I won't leave you." Legolas held on just as tight, disturbed by the sudden silence.

"All is well, beloved, I just can't get over how amazing you are," Elrond murmured, rocking to soothe away Legolas' worry. A light caress over his head stilled him and he sighed. "Lindir was right; little do I deserve such love."

"Nay, he was wrong but it isn't his fault. Lindir's vision is altered for he views everything from a very long distance away. He is so removed from everything, surrounded by his music so he does not have to acknowledge any other Song; I worry for him. Is there no one to whom he is all the world?"

Elrond lifted his face to stare at his lover, too nonplussed to be able to respond. What Legolas said was so and yet the renowned healer had accepted the minstrel's perpetual loneliness as his normal state, too used to Lindir's solitary life to find it a cause for concern.

"Nay, his heart was claimed long ago in his youth and I don't think there has ever been anyone else." It shocked Elrond to make this statement for the Ages of time gone into history since then were staggering.

"It is because he thinks as you do, or rather you have learned to think as he does. He doesn't believe he is worthy of love and has earned this fate of isolation and eternal bereavement."

"How do you know all this? I am completely embarrassed for was I not expounding about being older and wiser just last night? You shame me, Legolas," Elrond fussed in mild irritation, though he was genuinely worried about his beloved mentor. Lindir was like a father to him in many ways and yet in others was more his brother, and still found means to act as the Elven Lord's friend and confidant.

"Pah! Maybe I am a re-born soul who just hasn't remembered everything yet. I'm still young; there's plenty of time to discover who I am, really," the Wood Elf smiled a secretive, knowing smile and graced his lover with another placating pat upon the head. Then he became serious again. "You will try to help Lindir, won't you?"

"Aye, I love him dearly. He gives so much joy to others and does not permit his sorrow to afflict anyone in his vicinity. We must find a way to turn his eyes from the past," Elrond nodded as he spoke, considering what means he might employ to do this, for Lindir was very good at hiding away his injuries and concealing his broken heart. Elrond glanced back at Legolas and smiled. "I would have him know bliss such as I feel right now."

"Tomorrow is Ened Ethuil and that is a good place to start. We must pair him up with someone for the celebration; do not let him separate himself among the musicians. He must dance at the bonfire and let that youth he was live again."

Elrond had to laugh at his mate's match-making mien but thinking of the festival brought other ideas
to mind. His gaze took on a more visceral cast and he shifted up onto an elbow in order to resume his appreciative inspection of the lean form reclining beside him. Slowly he let his touch explore, stroking silken skin tanned a creamy golden hue that immediately made him wonder how often his Wood Elf was wont to cavort about among the trees in only nature's garments. The image was highly appealing and made his smile grow larger.

He traced the sharp line of the clavicle and up the slender neck, pausing to circle the deep maroon oval where he'd left a love bite sometime during the night. That made Legolas sigh and their eyes met, smiles of equal satisfaction and amazement shared between cool, collected grey and clear, exuberant azure. When Elrond's gaze moved lower and encountered parted lips, just a hint of ivory teeth behind them, he bent at once to sample the inviting orifice, drawn as surely as a loadstone to iron.

It was not a kiss of passion and desire but more of familiar endearment and contented harmony, for the hours of the night had all been spent in love-making and the lovers were more than spent in turn. What remained was this lazy, languid, luxurious glow; a fire surely but one that burned between them with steady, even flames, warming their souls and promising to flare to bright white heat whenever they wished. There was no need to hasten the moment for the bond between them ensured that lovely spark would remain forever kindled.

"You wouldn't believe how happy I am right now," Elrond said quietly and the light suffusing his countenance matched the gentle, tender expression that transformed Legolas' features.

"Surely I would, for I feel exactly the same," replied the Wood Elf. He inhaled deeply, filing his lungs with the scent of his mate, letting his eyelids drift to half-mast as the soft, pliant pads of the healer's fingertips waltzed slowly down his breastbone.

Elrond trailed his touch around the supple, sculpted curve of the archer's pectoral muscles, tight and hard beneath the pliant apricot skin, and could not resist traipsing up the small rise to trip lightly over the points of rosy flesh there. He swooped in and kissed them, first one tiny nipple and then the other, and then a thought occurred to him and he straightened a bit. His fingers pressed and palpated the muscle as his healer's curiosity could not be restrained, seeking to learn whether his mate would be able to nurture their youngling when he was born. A snickery giggle diverted his attention back to the grinning countenance of the woodland warrior and Elrond's sheepish smile was partnered with a half-shrug.

"How can I help myself?" he defended his actions. "You are the most uniquely fascinating Elf I know. I can safely assume your body will adapt to the infant's needs, then?"

"Aye, when the time is near. It is much too soon to notice any change." Legolas wriggled beside him as much in delight as to get closer to his love, obviously pleased by this description. "I'm hardly unique among my kind," he added, letting his hand wander to the dark hair cascading down across his midriff. Elrond's black locks were thick and cool within his grasp. "Although, not so many males are born with the gift to bear young as once before. Even among those so blessed, few choose to become life-givers. For that matter, not so many females seek to create offspring these days. More and more of my people are leaving the forest, fearful of the encroaching Darkness. That is why I am here now."

At this the Elven Lord's interest sharpened, for Legolas referenced a story he had never told before. Indeed, the sylvan spoke little about his life before coming to Imladris and Elrond was eager to encourage such revelations. At the same time, he could not suppress a small pricking of fear from invading his peaceful mood, for the threat of grief was ever-present in Legolas' soul and any mention of his brother could bring it out.
"Tell me. You were not the one leaving, were you?"

"Nay." Legolas paused and his sight retreated from Elrond's for a moment as he watched the memories replay. "We were bound for the Havens, that's true, not as an escort but to negotiate with Cirdan. A rather large group wished to migrate and Aran Thranduil felt it best to send a delegation ahead to prepare the way. We were charged to make contact with the mortal folk also, so that none would be fearful of such a sizeable incursion of armed Elves upon their lands. We are peaceful people with those who are peaceful to us and have no wish for a misunderstanding to provoke conflict."

"That is a wise policy," Elrond nodded, for the fearsome reputation of the Wood Elves might indeed lead to an erroneous conclusion should a great number of them suddenly encroach upon the various human holdings of Eriador. "You and your brother must be highly favoured to have been chosen for such an important task."

"Galbreth was, but I" Legolas' voice faltered and his brow creased as his features contracted into an expression of sorrow and regret. He clamped his lips tightly and abruptly turned, huddling up against Elrond's chest and hiding his face against the elder elf's neck. Legolas shivered and exhaled a heavy sigh that gusted across the healer's bare shoulder.

"Ai!" Elrond exclaimed and wrapped his whole body around his mate in a tight embrace. "Nay, Legolas, I know you take responsibility for the death of your brother, but only in your mind is this a rational notion. There is nothing you could have done to prevent the tragedy; that region has long been known as a perilous one."

"I was the one who wished to stop there. I was trying to convince Galbreth to make a side trip to Imladris, for I wanted to see the Hidden Valley. Much had been told of the beauty of this place, for my Naneth was born here and dwelt among the Noldor a short time as a young maid. Though she was but five summers old when her family returned to Greenwood, she recalled much and loved to tell me of her childhood memories."

The Lord of Imladris was amazed, though he didn't know why he should be. After the defeat of Sauron at Dagorlad, those Wood Elves too badly injured to make the trek over Hithaeglir had been carried in litters to the haven of Rivendell. There they had remained until their strength and vigour returned, and many a 'battlefield bonding' resulted in the birth of offspring the second year after the injured Elf was recovered. With female warriors as common as their male counterparts, Elrond had never imagined any of the elflings were birthed from masculine bodies.

The small group had not remained among the cities of stone houses and paved streets, but had begged leave to occupy the tangled woodlands in the northernmost corner of the enchanted realm. This had been granted and few of the valley's citizens ever encountered the sylvans. The Wood Elves proved to be entirely self-sufficient, hunting for food and manufacturing their own clothing, never venturing into the Noldorin community to barter or trade. Should anyone try to visit them on the forested slopes, not that anyone did, no sign of them would be seen. What dwellings they made must have been much smaller than those elaborate talans of the Galadhrim and well concealed among the branches. If not for the occasional wisp of smoke from their cooking fires and the faint sound of their fair voices carried on the breeze, it would have been impossible to know the sylvans were in the valley.

"Aye, I remember this. None of them stayed more than a few seasons and it seemed five or six years was the set period: enough time for an elfling to be able to ride well and, in the case of the Wood Elves, wield a dagger with deadly skill," Elrond said. One spring, the designated leader of this band appeared in Erestor's office, presented an impressive collection of sylvan war bows, and with thanks
and pledges of eternal friendship for the people of Imladris, informed the seneschal that they were leaving. In all the thousands of years since, not a single Wood Elf had come back.

Elrond felt a pang of regret; his pointless prejudice had kept him from gaining knowledge of sylvan ways that would be invaluable to him now. It crossed his mind to wonder if Legolas' naneth was born of a male and that made him realise with a shock that Legolas might himself be the product of such a union. Another shudder, too close to a repressed sob for the healer's taste, jarred Legolas' frame and drove the idle musing from Elrond's thoughts. He frowned in concern as he rubbed the archer's tense shoulders. This unreasonable guilt was deeply embedded in Legolas' soul, anchored there by the trauma and terror of the battle, compounded by the grief and desolation of his brother's death, enhanced by the poison that had so stubbornly resisted erradication.

"The blame you assign yourself is unjust," he began carefully. "It would have made no difference whether you camped upon the hill or down in the broad plain below. That place is enchanted in some evil magic we have not been able to counter, even with Mithrandir's aid. How else would the Orcs have over taken your warriors by surprise?"

"No." Legolas raised his head and gazed from tear bright eyes into his mate's. "I need you to understand it correctly. We would not have even been close to that region at all but for me. I was stubborn and childish; I told Galbreth that I would go to Imladris whether the troop accompanied me or not. I left and they had no choice but to come after me."

Now Elrond sighed deeply, gently cupping the sylvan's chin and studying the youthful face before him, realising anew just how little experience in life this Elf possessed. It was easy to see what Legolas needed; his entire visage radiated confusion and a desperate hope, a silent pleading for his statement to be countered. Yet this crisis could not be so easily averted for there was no noble cause to allude to, no comrades left to console or comfort him. He had wished to visit the land where his naneth was born and his obstinate adherence to this whim had resulted in the death of his brother and all the soldiers in the herth. So it was, an unbreakable link between what he had done and the needless waste of immortal life. His eyes searched Elrond's, seeking a reason for it that he could live with, one that neither dismissed nor glossed over the truth but answered and acknowledged it honestly. Legolas needed to be forgiven so that he might finally forgive himself.

"I will not refute what you have said; your failure to obey orders was indeed foolish and put everyone in your party at risk," Elrond told him seriously and had to grip a little tighter to keep the sylvan's head from dropping low in shame. "Nay! Listen to me now and heed me well. You cannot undo this. For whatever reason, this terrible thing has happened. I can't lift the burden from you but I am here to help you bear it. Among all the Elves with you, you were meant to live on, for were you not brought under my care? Were you not given to me as my mate? Indeed, now we have a child to bring into being and raise to maturity. You must stop brooding over your errors and do what you can to compensate for them."

"How? How can I amend such horrible wrongs?"

"All the evil that happened that day does not lie at your feet. Most of it is for Sauron to answer, as someday he surely shall. He created that vile magic and enhanced the fighting skills of the Orcs hiding behind it. If not for that your people would never have lost their lives."

"Aye, but if we hadn't gone there then"

"You did go there; that can't be changed now. Didn't you listen earlier? Your mistake was a small one but it was seized upon and magnified by the Darkness. Such is the way of evil, for then not only are the dead lost to us but the survivors are damaged almost beyond repair also. Ai, Legolas, it has been more than ten years and today is the first you have ever spoken to anyone about this. Glad I am
for it, too, since it tells me you are ready to face it. You want to live and not in denial or pretence that this is some sort of dream, that your brother is still alive somewhere under Greenwood's protective canopy."

The rigid body in Elrond's arms startled and the wide, blue eyes peering at him revealed that this was exactly how Legolas had been getting through day by day. Elrond smiled gently and leaned to kiss his lover's forehead, drawing him close again to hold against his heart.

"Aye, I have lived a long time and have seen that before, young one. Indeed, I have used the same tactic to survive. For long centuries after my parents left Middle-earth, my brother and I pretended that we were only sleeping, that we had suffered injuries during the fighting at Sirion and Estë made Lorien keep us locked in dreams until we healed. It isn't really so far from the truth, in many ways. But you have awakened now, Legolas. Now you must choose how you will spend your years and there are only two options.

"You can make your life a monument to evil, grieving forever for the loss of Galbreth and your comrades, blaming yourself, punishing yourself, refusing to accept the grace and forgiveness of the Valar. Surely they must have granted it, for they have showered you with blessings. Here you are in the arms of the noble, the mighty, the esteemed Elrond Half-elven, Lord of Imladris. Are you not fortunate?" Now Elrond meant that last part as a jest and was rewarded with a mild sort of scoffing snort that made him smile.

"The other choice is the one I believe you've already made. You will live as a testament to the glory of Eru's design, playing out your part in the Music he created, showing by your actions how even the most sombre themes can become transformed into that which is noble and honourable, beautiful and worthy of praise. I will help you in this; it will be my greatest joy to do so. Have you not already said our child shall become Galbreth's vessel should the Valar ordain it? What greater recompense can you make for a life lost than to offer in its place another, even more precious to your heart?"

Elrond meant those words sincerely for who was he to place limits on the Powers? If an Elf could be re-born, a fact he could not refute in light of Glorfindel's avowal of reincarnation, and a male sylvan Elf could bear offspring, for which he now also had indisputable evidence, then a faer could surely be housed in the body of a child so conceived. He was content to love his hybrid elfling, regardless the source of its eternal spark.

Then Legolas stirred and drew back so he could look upon his beloved Noldorin prince. His eyes were wet from the tears these words had brought forth but he was not overwhelmed in gloom and misery as he had been only hours before. Every syllable Elrond had uttered poured like a balm upon his wounded spirit and he knew the truth of them in the healing that had already begun.

"You do not despise me," he stated calmly and placed a finger quickly over lips that parted to reinforce that notion. "Instead you have come to love me and this is what has made it possible to believe the things you have spoken. I will not spurn the gift of forgiveness nor squander the chance to lessen the tragedy of Galbreth's untimely death. I needed only to hear it from your lips; now I am ready."

This caused a huge grin to break out on Elrond's features and he whooped in a most undignified manner as he swooped in and smothered his Wood Elf with adoring kisses. He planted his eager lips everywhere and at the same time let his hands roam over the squirming figure beneath him, seeking for every tender spot and tickling mercilessly, delighting in the peals of giddy laughter erupting from Legolas. When Elrond's face hovered over the abdomen, the muscles all contracted with uncontrollable giggling, the Elven Lord bent to sputter a sloppy raspberry there when abruptly a loud and protracted rumble issued from the underlying stomach. He sat back, surprised, met the archer's
chagrined and blushing countenance, and burst out laughing as he collected Legolas into his arms.

"It isn't funny," complained the embarrassed Elf, struggling to push his lover off. "Aragorn says I haven't been eating properly and it isn't healthy for the babe."

That sobered Elrond up immediately and he sat up, eyeing Legolas critically from head to toe with his healer's insight.

"He's right. When did you last eat? You missed every meal yesterday and touched nothing of the feast the night before. Erestor said he saw you sneaking an apple from the kitchens before then but that"

"I was not sneaking! I have permission; Meribel likes the little soapstone charms I make and lets me take whatever I wish in exchange."

Elrond's brows rose in surprise; he'd noticed the array of small sculptures proudly displayed on a shelf amid the cook's recipe books but would never have guessed either their source or their significance. "Nevertheless, a piece of fruit or two every few days is not sufficient nourishment," he scolded.

"Nay, I did eat yesterday. Aragorn gave me way bread and then I went hunting. Elrond, I ate an entire rabbit! Oh, not the bones or fur, of course, or the entrails, I buried that, but all the rest of it." Legolas stopped, noting the hint of aversion, which Elrond was trying so very hard to conceal, suffusing the noble elder's eyes. In spite of himself, he had to smile as the struggle between ingrained customs and social norms contended against the resolve to be open-minded. He waited patiently to see how it would play out.

For his part, Elrond could not prevent his mind from ticking off the facts: he hadn't noticed any sign of a cooking-fire during the long hours of searching, he knew Legolas wouldn't lie, therefore he had to conclude that the rabbit had indeed been consumed. Raw. An additional notion arose illuminating that there were various definitions of the word 'entrails' and that for sylvans this was probably quite a literal one. Thus another image came forward that involved various organs being chewed and swallowed as well. Elrond shuddered and shut his eyes as if to hide from the internal vision and willed himself to consider some equally obvious though previously unremarked truths.

Legolas was a Wood Elf born and raised in one of the most dangerous places in all of Arda. He had probably been included in patrols and hunting parties long before he'd reached majority. In a land nearly overrun with Orcs and spiders, a fire would serve as a beacon to foes. Yet an Elf must eat and fruit and acorns were not sufficient to supply all the body's needs. When meat was required, how else was it to be consumed without giving away their hidden outposts? Also, knowing how particular Legolas was, there were undoubtedly specific ways to prepare and clean the flesh before consuming it, even without the heat of fire. Indeed, in Mithlond certain delicacies were created using uncooked fish that made Elrond's mouth water just to think of them. Was there really so much to disdain, then?

Besides, he had been kissing Legolas all night and hadn't detected any unpalatable residual flavours from the rabbit. To ratify the point, Elrond pulled his mate close and gave him a deep and passionate tongue-tangling osculation. When the kiss ended he let Legolas flop back against the pillows and gloated over the shaky gasp of surprise and pleasure that left the Wood Elf's lungs.

"I'm glad you ate yesterday," he said, evidently quite proud of his ability to overcome his qualms, "but that was yesterday. Dawn has broken and you need to break your fast. Time to get out of this bed and ready ourselves for the day."

Legolas groaned and burrowed under the mound of linens. "I do not want to get up. There's fruit in
the sitting room; I'll have some of that." Even as he said this, his stomach growled again and he had
to admit a couple of apples would not be satisfactory. The notion of succulent flatfish, boned and
battered and seared amid wild shallots, sprinkled with sesame and garlic, filled his thoughts.
Suddenly he did not mind arising and fairly bounded from the bed, eager to gather his gear and go
fishing.

"On reconsidering, I think it would be grand to go down to the brook where the old footbridge bears
such quaint impressions of the valley's many love affairs upon its brick and mortar. I will make for
you a favourite dish from my childhood days."

Elrond sighed, wishing for nothing more than to accept that invitation, yet he was well aware that he
had guests in the house whom he had neglected entirely the previous day. He watched Legolas
grabbing up his clothes and heading for the bathing chamber, wondering how to broach this
unpleasant reminder that his life was not entirely his own and many obligations pressed upon him.
He didn't need to, as it turns out, for his very silence and lack of action alerted Legolas. Slowly the
Wood Elf leaned through the doorway, a frown marring his previously joyful features.

"Oh, I forgot about those bloody humans. I don't suppose you'll let Erestor handle them and roam the
valley with me today."

"Now be reasonable, Legolas. I left them alone all day yesterday to search for you. I can't ignore
them again or the whole point of their visit here will be for naught." Elrond wished he had bitten his
tongue rather than speak these words, for at once Legolas' face smoothed out into that inscrutable
mask of emotionless disinterest he used when his feelings were really hurting. The elder Lord rose
quickly, intending to hurry over and beg forgiveness before Legolas disappeared again but to his
surprise the archer visibly shook himself and made a disgusted sort of snatch of his tongue against his
teeth.

"Aye, I do understand this, but I wish it could be otherwise. You will not be disappointed if I have
no desire to join the planned activities? I have Ened Ethuil for which to prepare; someone must find
Lindir a suitor." Legolas sent his love a faint but encouraging smile; he was not happy but he was
determined not to behave like a spoiled elfling just because he couldn't have his way. The elder Lord rose
quickly, intending to hurry over and beg forgiveness before Legolas disappeared again but to his
surprise the archer visibly shook himself and made a disgusted sort of snatch of his tongue against his
teeth.

"Thank you, Aearen, that means more than you know. I realise you are leery of the humans but there
isn't anything so terrible about them. They are the Second-born of Iluvatar, after all." Elrond joined
his mate in the bathroom. Together they grasped the handle of the pump the clever lore-master had
installed and primed it until the gilded spout spurted forth a clear stream of cool water into the marble
basin.

"Aye, and the legends say the Men are not bound to Arda but will go from here to some other place
when they die. How can they love all that Yavanna and Aulë created if this isn't their true home? In
fact, the way they live indicates they place almost no value on the land except for the wealth they can
wring from it, whether in metal and gems or food stuffs and livestock."

By now the pair were in the tub and commenced bathing one another with the sort of relaxed
pleasure that comes from the absolute trust and contentment of committed mates. At a slight tug on
his locks, Elrond bent forward and permitted Legolas to pour water over his hair in order to wash it.
Without doubt, besides the complete union of their bodies, this was the activity he most enjoyed with
the sylvan youth and all talking ceased. He sighed in luxurious abandon, eyes closed and lips
upturned as the long fingers massaged and kneaded his scalp, working the lather through every
single strand. By the time the last trace of soap was rinsed away, Elrond had the beginnings of an
erection bobbing between his thighs but didn't mind in the least. Nor did Legolas, and they smiled and kissed sweetly.

Of course, Elrond desired to return the favour and could hardly wait to get his hands in the archer's fine, golden tresses, though he knew the experience was not as erotic for Legolas. After the initial soaking, Legolas took up the conversation where he'd dropped it.

"I have to say one of the most surprising things about Imladris is the way you people have adopted the human custom of keeping captive animals for food. Flocks of ducks and gaggles of geese serenely paddling on the lakes, herds of goats and sheep and great, lumbering cattle grazing the grass and leaves, scurrying chickens squawking around the kitchen yard and huge wooden cages filled with rabbits, all available for killing at your whim." He shook his head and his tone clearly indicated his disapproval.

"We must keep animals restricted here for Imladris is not a large realm and open space is limited. How else would we feed so many Elves? Besides, the animals are not unkindly treated and when their lives end it is done quickly and with as little pain as possible. Certainly the butcher's blade is no more cruel than your arrows," retorted the Elven Lord, hastily dousing Legolas with a pitcher full of water, astonished that he had felt this way so long and never mentioned it.

"Nay, when I go out to hunt it is the way of things. The prey might elude me or it may not but it is a free creature separate from me with its own dignity and value. The wild things of the woods do not depend on me for their food and water; they live as Yavanna designed them, knowing how to find these necessities for themselves and their kind. If I succeed in the hunt it is with a mixture of regret and respect and gratitude. The animals without voices know the Wood Elves are both their benefactors, for we protect the forest from the Darkness, and the beneficiaries of their bounty. I could never kill and eat an animal kept like a pet in a pen."

"They are domesticated but definitely not pets!" exclaimed Elrond, staring in dismay at his lover. Suddenly his brows rose high as an idea presented itself to him and he laid a hand on Legolas' shoulder. "Is this why you refuse food from my table?"

"Aye. You don't think I particularly like to eat slugs, newts, frogs, and fish morning, noon, and night, do you? Yet for a long time I was not strong enough to go out hunting; I could barely lift my bow much less draw and fire, and climbing even small trees seemed to exhaust me. I was limited to what could be found in the gardens of the estate. You can't imagine how overjoyed I felt the first time I was able to get out into the fields and snare a rabbit. No fare ever tasted better than that, plain though it was."

"Why didn't you tell me?" the Elven Lord cried, thoroughly mortified that his ailing mate had gone hungry for such a cause.

"I was not sure of my place here," Legolas shrugged. "I didn't want to offend the one trying to save my life and it was uncertain if I would last long anyway."

The bath was over and both were standing on the slate-tiled floor drying off, quiet as they thought over this basic difference in lifestyles. Then Elrond again took hold of his lover's shoulders to force him to acknowledge what he was about to say.

"Your place is beside me, Aearen. I will make it official as soon as the humans are gone. Indeed, I will announce our betrothal at this evening's feast if you wish."

"Ai! Not so fast, Nín'ódhel. We can't have a formal bonding without a proper courtship and you must ask permission from my family, of course." Legolas' laughed to see anxiety suffuse the elder
Elf's eyes. "Don't be alarmed; they love me and would do anything to see me happy."

"Family! But I thought..." Elrond stuttered, utterly dumfounded. "All this time you've had kinfolk in Greenwood? Why haven't any of them come to see you? I believed you were alone in the world."

"It's difficult to explain." Legolas moved away to sit upon a bench and busied himself with drying his hair, eyes upon the floor as he continued. "My situation here, it isn't an honourable one. Among my people, refusing to formalise a bond such as ours is a grave insult, a sign that the Elf so claimed is no more than a slave, unworthy to join his saviour's family as kin-by-bond. I didn't want them to know for it would shame them and cause bad feeling between the people of the Valley and those of the Greenwood. Then there is Galbreth. It was kinder to let them think both Galbreth and I perished that day. And, truthfully, I couldn't bear to see their love for me turn to hatred, for I killed my own brother."

Elrond stared, unable to find words in response to such a statement, lost in the realisation that Legolas had carried this stain of dishonour in addition to the grief and sorrow of losing his brother. In truth, he had lost everyone he cared about. It was no longer so difficult to comprehend the numerous attempts to end his life.

"Yet you didn't speak of these things. Had I understood, I would not have denied my heart for so long. I could have helped you face your kin and you would have seen how quickly they would have forgiven you. Why, Aearen?" Elrond moved to sit beside his lover, stilling the fidgeting hands and lifting the lowered face to meet his.

"I feared," Legolas swallowed against the tight knot forming in his throat and tangling up his thoughts. "As long as you didn't know, I could only have hoped that you might yet learn to love me and make me yours. I could not have borne it, hearing you scorn me, bidding me to go for I was well again and you had tired of me and..." He didn't get the chance to finish the hateful words for Elrond covered his mouth firmly with his hand.

"No, I won't let you give voice to those fears; they are without basis. I will never tire of you and if you ever leave me I shall fade from grief. Your family must be informed at once and I plan to share my delight in our union with all of Imladris at the feast of Ened Ethuil. I don't know the customs for courting among your kind but it is a Noldorin tradition for rings of promise to be worn until the day of the official ceremony."

"More rings? This is something of an obsession for the Noldorin folk, I see." The Wood Elf was smiling as he wrapped both arms around his lover and squeezed, relieved beyond words to have his greatest dread so completely negated.

"Well, the Noldorin people are known for a streak of treachery, so I suppose we must plainly mark whatever we hold as our own lest some other Elf attempt to steal it away. You are my own love, are you not? Tell me it won't be a burden to wear such a sign of possession upon your finger." Elrond whispered into the flushed ear so near his lips and managed to lick it as his hands wound around the sylvan and tried to draw him upon his lap.

"Nay, that is no hardship, beloved, especially since you will permit me to dress your lovely hair in the traditional braids of my House. That is how we sylvans announce such claims of one heart upon another," Legolas shivered and had to quickly pull away for the thought of seating himself upon the Noldo Lord's dripping erection was becoming entirely too tempting.

He hastened to a small dressing table by the window and retrieved a tortoiseshell comb. The archer returned with a smile and at once set about grooming the glorious blue-black tresses as he indulged his mate's third-most favourite activity. By the time the last braid was tied off, Elrond's penis was
thoroughly and painfully hard. Legolas snickered and ran a trailing, whisper-light stroke from root to tip as Elrond stood, thrilling as the organ quivered in accord with the groan this provoked.

"Ah, you are the one burdened, Nín’ódhel. Shall I lend you a hand to lighten the load a bit?"

"Raug dithen!" grumbled Elrond, but he was smiling. "That is so generous of you to offer, but I think I will leave things as they are for now. Once I am free of the 'bloody humans' I will, however, avail myself of your assistance. You can imagine how much greater will be my need by then."

"Ai Elbereth!" Legolas was quite pleased and becoming aroused at the prospect. "How long will you be with them? I don't know if I want to wait after all." He wrapped his fist around the long erection and tugged, drawing Elrond toward the bedroom, only to have his querulous stomach interrupt his plans with enough force to make him let go and press against the offending region, for the pain was sharp and a fiery sensation bubbled up just beneath his heart.

"Ah, is this what you were suffering yesterday?" Elrond demanded, received a wordless nod in answer, and took hold of his mate at the elbow, guiding him into the bedroom and seating him on the edge of the bed. "Enough, I will not leave here until you have eaten something." Throwing on his dressing gown, Elrond went out to the sitting room and retrieved the bowl of fruit. A slight cough alerted him to Erestor's presence in the study just beyond and he grimaced; it was much later than he'd realised.

"I'm sorry, beloved, but I must dress quickly and go; the seneschal is impatiently pacing the study." He handed Legolas an orange and watched a moment as the Wood Elf ripped it open and began to devour the sweet and tangy fruit. With his lover's attention thus diverted, Elond succeeded in binding up his achy penis so it wouldn't wag and nod and rub distractingly against his robes when he walked. Having donned suitable attire for his meeting with the Steward and the Prince, he bent to kiss sticky, citrus scented lips and passed loving eyes over the still undressed Elf. Then abruptly he knelt on the floor before Legolas and caught his face between both hands.

"I miss you already. I can't tell you how frantic I was yesterday, thinking you'd left. You didn't call me once during all of Anor's hours. Please let me know where you are today, Legolas, for it will give my heart ease while we are parted," he implored, searching the aqua irises for reassurance.

"I couldn't call you; I needed time alone to think. Be calm; today I will sing for you more plainly than the birds. You will know where to find me." Legolas was practically bursting with love and pride to find his soundless signal had been so sorely missed, for up till now little had been said of their short separation. He had worried that anger would be the primary response from Elrond and thus the needy plea was doubly satisfying. It did him even greater good to see how light was the Noldorin Lord's step as he left the room.

Legolas tossed the rind of the orange into the waste bin and got up to rinse away the residue of sugary juice before pulling one of Elrond's silk breech clouts from the wardrobe drawer. He grinned as he wrapped it around his body, imagining the look on his love's face when he revealed it later, then drew on his leggings and tunic. Not bothering to braid his hair, he gathered it all in a thick tail and tied it at the nape of his neck. He decided to forego his boots as well and just as he was about to exit from the suite over the balcony rails, a slight sound caught his ear and he paused. The noise repeated and Legolas let a protracted sigh escape his nostrils.

Glorfindel

A short, light scraping sounded from the study, as of a boot dragging toe first against the floor, followed by a brisk, sharp tap as a rigid leather heel knocked against the wooden boards. It could only be the Balrog Slayer, for this was his signature means of announcing his presence in Elrond's
study when he thought Legolas was with his Lord. In cool weather, Glorfindel poked at the iron grate in the hearth with the fireplace tongs but in warm weather he scraped his boots upon the floor. Erestor coughed to alert the apartment's occupants of his arrival and that worked no matter the season, but for whatever reason Glorfindel would not use the same means and it was considered impolite to simply knock on the door in Imladris.

Legolas shook his head minutely and turned back for though he hadn't planned to do so this day, he needed to inform the legendary general that he would not be participating in the patrols for a time. He made his way along the balcony, which ran the length of the apartment, and stepped silently into the office to find Glorfindel frowning in worry, poised to make the shoe-scrape announcement again.

"Suilad, Lord Glorfindel," said Legolas and suppressed the grin that rose to his eyes anyway when the mighty warrior jumped in startlement. "You've just missed Elrond and Erestor. No doubt they are at the morning meal with the humans."

"Ah! Legolas, mae govannen. How do you fare this day? Has the cinnamon left your system?" he asked, a rather nervous timbre to his voice that was quite uncharacteristic.

"It has and I am well again. I thank you for your concern." Legolas was intrigued. Glorfindel was not the sort of Elf who became uncomfortable. Not even if Manwë himself stepped into the room would he show any kind of uneasiness, for he occasionally boasted about the time he'd played a game of cards with the august Vala in the gardens of Lorien. Yet here he was, fidgeting anxiously, shifting a small paper parcel from hand to hand.

"I am glad you came by for"

"I would speak with you if"

They began in concert and halted simultaneously, each mildly perturbed, but, being the youngest, Legolas bowed and indicated for Glorfindel to proceed.

"Legolas, I have something serious to discuss with you," the Balrog Slayer began.

Legolas nodded and observed him closely, sensing some momentous, perhaps even portentous, news was forthcoming from his captain. Glorfindel stood straight and tall with that forbiddingly impeccable formality he exuded whenever some unpleasant task fell to his hand for disposal. The Vanya noble was indeed significantly imposing. At least a head greater in stature than any other Elf in Imladris and maybe a tad more lofty than King Thranduil, Legolas thought for not the first time how much the Balrog Slayer reminded him of his Adar. He wondered if Glorfindel had been reborn more than once, for he could easily pass for Thranduil's elder brother, who had been killed at Dagonlad long before Legolas had been conceived. Mayhap Glorfindel had been Glorfindel then the King's brother and now Glorfindel again.

"my responsibility due to the vow I made before Manwë. I thought it was the right thing to do. I want only what is best for Elrond and the people of Imladris and I'm sorry but I didn't think you fit such a definition. I didn't understand, you see, because Elrond didn't speak of his feelings."

Glorfindel was babbling and the rapid, rambling soliloquy couched in apologetic tones drew Legolas back from his random speculations.

"What are you talking about?" he asked in rather a more peremptory fashion than was usual for the quiet sylvan.

"I am trying to explain," said Glorfindel, somewhat surprised at the interruption. "Do you understand
my place in this House? I am the chosen guardian over the descendants of Eärendil, chosen by the Mariner himself to watch over his sons and their progeny in the troubled times ahead."

"Yes, this is not a secret."

"Indeed." The Balrog Slayer cocked a brow at what he thought was a hint of impertinence from the lowly Wood Elf. "Legolas, I believed in all that enchantment nonsense. I thought you were trying to undermine the prestige and power of Elrond's House and because of that I took initiative and acted. Hastily, it turns out, and now it can't be undone."

"I see," Legolas couldn't help smiling at the idea of Wood Elves caring one whit about the exalted reputation of the Lord of Imladris. "I can but assure you that my people have enough to contend against without trying to make enemies among our own kind. What have you done, then?"

"I'm the one who sent for the twins."

Legolas visibly flinched and Glorfindel dropped his eyes to the floor, mortified to see that the reaction was just as he'd formerly hoped. A tense silence threatened to smother his resolve and so the re-born warrior gathered his courage and moved a step closer, extending his hand to Legolas.

"I was hoping to drive you away and now I am as desperately determined to prevent it. I understand now that you love Elrond and he returns your feelings. I beg your forgiveness, Legolas, and promise to do all I can to make Elrohir see reason. He and Elladan will have to accept your presence in their lives. I swear to you I will be your staunchest supporter in the looming conflict."

Legolas sighed; looking upon the contrite and humble posture of this proud and noble warrior, how could he do otherwise than forgive? Glorfindel had never hidden his disapproval of his connection to Elrond but he had never been cruel, saving his unpleasant remarks for times when he believed Legolas could not hear them. Besides, having him as an ally would be most beneficial.

"Be at peace, you only did what you thought was right. I don't hold it against you."

"That is very gracious and I thank you. This only reinforces the wisdom of Elrond's decision to take you for his mate. I ask that you accept this small gift as a tribute to such a generous spirit." Glorfindel stood tall again and held forth the paper parcel he'd brought with him, smiling brightly.

"That isn't necessary," Legolas spoke the polite words while eagerly taking the offering, as pleased as any elfling would be. He unwrapped the soft tissue and gasped, staring at the exquisitely crafted mithril comb revealed. "Oh, ah, this is a comb!" he stumbled over the words, his ears suddenly scarlet, unable to meet the Balrog Slayer's eyes. He turned the present over, uncertain whether to be furious or simply embarrassed, and then quickly bundled it back in the wrapping. He cleared his throat and finally managed to shoot a fleeting glance at the venerable general, noting the complete bafflement in the comely face.

"Lord Glorfindel, I thank you, but I cannot accept such a personal gift. You understand? I belong to Elrond; I bear his child; I'm in love with him. I'm sorry but there is no room for any other in my life."

"Ai! I didn't mean anything improper!" exclaimed the equally flustered Vanya, now as red of face as Legolas. He took back the parcel with an awkward little bow. "This must have special significance among your customs. I truly was not aware. Please don't mention this to Elrond, or Erestor," he paused. "Actually, I would be most grateful if no one else ever hears of this." With that a worried look passed through his azure eyes and he hurried over to the door and flung it open, glancing up and down the hall to make sure no witnesses could spread gossip over his gaff. When he returned, he found the sylvan regarding him with a most mischievous expression that made him exceedingly
uncomfortable.

"I would be glad to keep this between us, so long as you grant me a favour in return."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing so terrible," Legolas laughed at the look of dread on his new friend's face. "Just give that to Elrond with the suggestion that it would make a fine Ened Ethuil offering to me. That will more than make up for the misunderstandings between us. Actually, if you do this I think it will put me in your debt, for I fear Elrond has forgotten to procure a present and that would make for hurt feelings. That sort of thing tends to ruin the mood."

"I see," Glorfindel was grinning, eyeing Legolas with perhaps more intensity than was exactly proper as he recalled the erotic coupling he'd inadvertently witnessed in the gardens. His interpretation of Legolas' use of the word 'mood' was not inaccurate, but the lascivious gleam in his gaze made the archer take a step back and now it was Glorfindel's turn to laugh. "Do not be alarmed; I'm not going to seduce you. I will make sure Elrond presents this to you at the festival."

"Good then!" Legolas smiled. Before more could be said his stomach spoke for him, rumbling for more than a single orange, and he remembered the plan to go fishing. "I must go down to the stream where the sandy shallows are, for as my body so rudely demonstrated I am in need of some nourishment. Perhaps I will see you later in the day, Lord Glorfindel."

"As you wish," the Balrog Slayer didn't even blink at the Wood Elf's explanation. It was no longer a cause for shock to hear of Legolas preferring to find his own food rather than sit down to the abundant fare presented at every meal in the Last Homely House. He was not even surprised when Legolas turned to go back to the balcony rather than through the door. Glorfindel shook his head and smiled kindly, wondering why he'd ever thought an Elf with such quaint and natural ways could be a source for evil.

"Oh, I nearly forgot," Legolas turned back suddenly and caught him, returning the friendly expression with real happiness, startled to see the formerly forbidding countenance so open and accepting. "I meant to tell you that I won't be joining the guard again when my rotation comes up."

"No? Why ever not? Your skill will be sorely missed, Legolas. I know I haven't given you your due in that regard, but let me amend my error now," Glorfindel insisted, but then his countenance shifted into true amazement as his mind finally registered what Legolas had said a few moments ago. The warrior's eyes tracked at once to the Wood Elf's mid-section as his brow furrowed in confused disbelief. "Nay, that can't be true."

"It is, but I would ask you not to speak of it except with Elrond and those closest to him. Mithrandir and the Dûnadan know and so does Lindir; Arwen has probably been informed by now. Beyond that only the twins are aware. I am certain those two won't repeat the news, for they are in horror over the prospect of an illegitimate brother born of a sylvan male. I will tell you now something none other yet has heard, save me of course. Elrond is about to announce our plans to formalise the bond we share. I don't believe Elladan and Elrohir will be happy about that and so, you see, your unexpected support will be most needed."

"Ai! Now I am even more regretful for my precipitous interfering!" fumed Glorfindel, imagining the unpleasant things Elrohir would have to say about this.

"Nay, don't worry over it; what's done is done. Perhaps it is for the best. This conflict needs to be resolved one way or another," consoled Legolas. "They might listen to you for they respect your opinion highly. Namarie, Lord Glorfindel."
With those hopeful words, Legolas leaped over the rails and was soon loping away across the lawn, leaving a doubtful yet determined Balrog Slayer to formulate a strategy to overcome the twins’ opposition.

TBC

To Wreath of Roses: So glad you are still with me! Yes, I cut out a lot of that scene and gave Elrond a huge break. That’s OK, though, because he is in for much aggravation as Legolas’ pregnancy advances and the Wood Elf becomes more demanding. Now that everything’s going to be made all right and proper, Legolas won’t be the shy retiring little elf anymore. Thanks for your kind praises and I'm glad the make-up scene worked!

To DeLurker: Awww shucks! Thank you again.

Pesseg Athrabeth: pillow conversation
Raug dithen: little demon (imp)
herth: troop, as of warriors
Gwaedh Prestannen: Troubled Troth
Thyrin Trenor: Secrets Told
Galbreth: beech tree, from a dialect of Doriath
faer dithen: little soul
Muilengôl: Veiled magic-a Doriath-derived name for wizards.
Eglerio Elbereth! Eglerio Sulimo, Hir od Valinor!: Praise Elbereth! Praise Sulimo (a name for Manwë) Lord of Valinor!
ithron sael: wise wizard
Saelben: wise one
Úgerth uin Ionnath: Sins of the Sons
Narwain: January
Nay, saes, avvedi: No, please, don't go.
GLOSSARY

NOTE: Wonder of wonders, these two are finally TALKING to each other! Legolas has held back a lot, it seems, and Elrond is a fool if he doesn't realise this is the proverbial tip of the iceberg. It isn’t easy for Legolas to open up and Elrond will have to do a great deal of prompting to keep the revelations coming. He’s probably worried about the reaction of Legolas’ family now that he knows a bit more about how such battlefield bonds are viewed in Greenwood. It took him ten years to decide he loves his Wood Elf and that is bound to be seen as an insult to Legolas’ House. I have a feeling that when the relatives descend upon Imladris they won’t be as retiring and unobtrusive as that last band of Wood Elves. Is anyone wondering who the couple coupling in the garden was? And who might Legolas choose for Lindir's secret suitor? Will he ever get new underwear and what about his fried flounder breakfast? Will those humans NEVER leave so we can get on to more important things?

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"Elrond, I think you should know" Erestor began the very instant the Lord of the land exited his sleeping chamber but stopped mid-sentence as his gaze travelled over the new hair style. Lindir used to weave similar plaits into the locks of Eärendil's twins when they were young. Elrond hadn't worn warrior braids like that since he attained his majority and was drafted into Gil-galad's army.

"What? Is there something you wish to say, mellon vrûn?"

"Yes." Erestor cleared his throat. "That is a style I haven't seen you use in a very long time. There's a reason?"

"There is," Elrond puffed up rather like a pheasant fanning out its showy feathers. "This is a sylvan tradition. These braids are the pattern used in Legolas' House and by wearing them I signify my allegiance to it as his betrothed. What do you think?"

Erestor was sorely tempted to make a derisive comment regarding the notion of a primitive Wood Elf belonging to a 'House' but found he hadn't the heart to do it. He stared at Elrond's eager face and bright eyes, so much clearer and filled with hope rather than worry and sorrow, took in the high brow smooth and free from the lines of strain normally there. How could he possibly tell his dear friend he looked utterly ridiculous?

"I think you look happier than I've seen you since Arwen was born," the advisor smiled, an expression that grew more genuine as it was returned with a huge grin and a hearty laugh as his Lord clapped him on the shoulder. Then the merriment fled from Erestor's eyes as he remembered the rest of the statement. "Betrothed? You will make it official and marry The Sylvan?"

"Yes, yes, it's so," Elrond was nodding as they resumed ambling down the hall.

"Are you sure that's wise? What will the people say of this, not to mention your sons?"

"They will say 'eglerio elenath' and 'hartham glass veleg' if they know what's good for them," Elrond frowned. Erestor's curt retort spoiled his delightfully relaxed and ebullient after-glow.

"It's quite sudden, mellon vrûn, just two days ago you were regaling me with a lurid recitation of your latest carnal encounter with the Wood Elf. Now you wish to make him your spouse, an equal in your House and thus a Lord of the Valley?"

"I'm in love with him, have been for years. This incident with the poisoning made me realise how very dear to me he is."

"I see," Erestor was troubled and didn't hide it. This was not what he'd expected and the repercussions of such a radical change were not to be brushed off lightly. "This isn't going to be easy, Elrond. People aren't ready for a common sylvan archer to be made into a ruler over them."

"What nonsense! Legolas doesn't wish to rule over anyone; he just wants to be loved and to feel safe. He's with child, Erestor, he bears me an ellfling!"

"He's what?" Erestor stalled and had to put his hand out against the wall to catch his faltering balance. "Very funny, you made my heart stop." The Chief Advisor was displeased to be made a
fool and actually blushed.

"I'm serious. Legolas is pregnant."

"Impossible."

"I assure you it isn't. I'm a healer and the sire so I think you should accept my evaluation."

Erestor stared in incredulous confusion. He'd seen Legolas naked but hadn't been close enough to observe the unique configuration of dual genitalia. He scrutinised the face before him, noting nothing that hinted at jesting. Elrond was serious and this only baffled the seneschal more. He must have misunderstood the words, then, or perhaps he'd had more to drink than he'd realised and this was some kind of remnant hallucination. Erestor shook his head and laughed nervously.

"I'm sorry, my mind must be muddled. I thought you just said Legolas is pregnant."

"I did. What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with me?" Erestor loosed an exasperated noise from his throat and gestured ineffectually with his arms as if to clear away whatever clouds of delirium were creating this grotesque misunderstanding. "You are the one spouting absurdities. How exactly do you make a male conceive? Let me think, if he swallows your seed that won't work for its potency is sure to be destroyed during digestion."

"Erestor!"

"At the other extreme, spilling whilst buried up to the balls in his arse is equally useless as anything inside tends to come out from that end."

"Stop it!" Elrond shouted and before either one knew what was happening landed a resounding slap on his cousin's left cheek. They both startled at the loud clap and Erestor jumped back, his hand lifting to touch the stinging red palm-print.

"You struck me!"

"You earned it! Don't you ever let me hear you mocking my lover. What we do together is private and not a subject for your rude comments."

They were silent for a few heartbeats, each one trying to find a way to calm down and regain control of the volatile situation. At last Erestor sucked in a huge breath and heaved it back out, dropping his hand from the fading imprint.

"I'm sorry. This is a shock and I believed you were deliberately bating me."

"I'm sorry, too. I'm telling you the absolute truth, Erestor, and you'll just have to trust me when I say Legolas was not made the way other males are put together. He has everything required to both conceive and bear young."

"Ai Valar! What next? You're certain this child is yours, I hope?" The words were out before he realised what he'd said and the seneschal paled as he retreated before Elrond's livid advance. They both stopped when his back reached the wall of the corridor. "Forgive me, Elrond, that didn't come out very tactfully but it is bound to be said sooner or later by someone."

"Am I supposed to me grateful to have heard it from you?" Elrond's voice shook as hands curled into fists. He struggled to maintain control of his temper, ashamed of his earlier reaction and determined
"No, and I am sorry." Erestor sighed, and he was, too, for the relaxed contentment had vanished from his friend's features long ago. He hadn't meant to burden Elrond's soul with anger. Resigned to another blow, the seneschal decided he would neither defend himself nor strike back, feeling perhaps he deserved it somewhat. His desire for penance must have communicated to his Lord and it was with no small relief that Erestor watched the fury crest in his kinsman's eyes and then just ebb away.

"Erestor, I love you as a brother but if you ever say anything like that again I will feed you your tongue."

"Fine, but there will be more questions and accusations of the sort, whether voiced publicly or whispered behind your back, so you'd best be prepared to allay these doubts in a less violent manner," Erestor said seriously.

"Can I expect your support or are you going to be the one leading the opposition?" Elrond asked, hurt by the response his joyous news had generated.

"I am your kinsman; how can you ask that?" Erestor's feelings were just as bruised. "It's my job to be brutally honest with you, Elrond, even when no one else will."

"All right, then say it plainly. What do you fear in this union becoming formalised? Tell me your just concerns and I will answer them fully."

"I worry that you're becoming distracted from the great task set before you at the close of the Second Age." The seneschal fell back on Glorfindel's continual complaint, disturbed that he couldn't really name what made him so uneasy. "You are one of the three Keepers and that is no light duty. The Shadow grows and your strength will need to be at its peak. An elfling will take much from you in the first few years; none know this better than you do."

"You didn't object when it was Celebrian bearing my children," remarked Elrond sadly. "No one would have dared accuse me of neglecting my responsibilities in favour of supporting my wife through pregnancy and childbirth. Not once was the suggestion raised that I was unfit to remain the Lord of this valley. That is what you imply, Erestor."

"Nay, I didn't mean it that way," rejoined the advisor, but it was a rebuttal without merit and he knew it, for if he didn't mean that then precisely what were his objections about?

"I see through you how it will be for Legolas now, for if you, my cousin, my closest friend, can say such a thing in all seriousness then those who hold me less dear will have no trouble maligning my mate and our babe, whether we are formally wed or not." Elrond was silent a moment or two, regarding his kinsman solemnly, and then he shrugged and ran his fingers across the ridge of tightly braided hair at his temple. "So be it. If the citizens of Imladris wish me to step down because of my love for Legolas, I will do so. I will even counsel for you to be named my successor if that is your wish."

"Ai! Elrond, I meant nothing at all like that, please!" Erestor gripped his cousin's biceps and shook him a little, shocked at the level of devotion such a statement underscored. He had joked often enough with Glorfindel about Elrond's intentions, but never imagined the raillery would become reality. "If it comes to that, surely your sons will be asked to oversee the realm until the child is old enough to be beyond risk. I am not hoping to usurp your place, mellonen."

"I'm glad to hear you say it," Elrond replied. "From Glorfindel I might expect such resistance yet I find you the source of my concerns instead."
"I am your kinsman, Elrond, and I am your Chief Advisor. I will not desert you."

"Good, though it is less than I might wish," Elrond sighed dejectedly and pulled free of Erestor's hold, proceeding toward the dining room. "I admit it seems ridiculous in light of your staunch dislike for Legolas, but I'd hoped you'd be happy for me."

"You ask much," answered the advisor warily. "Try to see it as others do. This union you undertook to save the Elf's life was difficult enough to accept. It goes against the grain to see our respected Lord succumb to such primitive drives, disconnected from any knowledge of the sylvan, not even his name, when you took him and so readily gave up as much of your light as he would accept. How can we not view that with suspicion? Think on what harm might be done if such a power were to be used for ill intent. It has crossed more than one mind that the Wood Elves' mission was to retrieve that which you guard."

"He knows nothing of what you speak," insisted Elrond. "One look into his eyes is proof of his utter innocence regarding intrigues and dark designs. Furthermore, whatever unkind things people say about King Thranduil, he is not one to wish for the kind of burden I bear. He holds nothing but contempt for the last renderings from Celebrimbor's forge and was most outspoken on the subject when last we met. If you must know, he cautioned me in the strongest terms to lock the gem away and never wear it on my person."

"That was long ago and who knows what trials he has endured under the eaves of his forest? Perhaps he sees a reason to want such power now."

"Even if that were true, which I vehemently reject, he is not so cruel a ruler as to sacrifice so many lives to bring it about. Think on what you suggest! He would have had to cold-bloodedly send his warriors into that trap, the existence of which he can't possibly know, hoping for one to survive and end up in Imladris, there to ensnare me in the sylvan way. It is inconceivable he would design such a horridious plot, even if such a thing could be brought about with any certainty. You are learned and wise; admit there is not a shred of evidence to support this argument."

"True, it is far-fetched, yet that and other equally improbable scenarios will arise among the populace. I repeat, it won't be easy for them to accept you have true feelings for Legolas. We will be doing a great deal of reassuring and spend many hours deflating these rumours."

"Oh, so it is 'we' again?" Elrond smiled at his cousin. "Well, I'm pleased."

"Aye, I could never renounce our friendship. We have always backed one another and I won't fail you, though it astonishes me that your marriage should be the cause of the moment. Knowing he's pregnant explains much, though. I admit The Sylvan is beautiful and alluring, but I can't understand how you've come to love him truly. There is so little in common between you." Erestor smiled back, perhaps a bit wickedly. "Beyond the outstandingly gratifying sex you describe, of course."

"It's not simply a case of legitimising my paternity," Elrond was serious and did not laugh at the jest. "Do not question if my love is real for it is truer than any I have ever experienced, even for Celebrian. That was but infatuation compared to the bond I share with Legolas. I'd forgotten, Erestor. Other things always needed my attention and I simply let it get away from me."

"What do you mean?"

"My life, cousin, I let my life just slip away entirely, substituting this routine, this role."

"Elrond, what you term routine is vital to the preservation of what remains of Iluvatar's design for the world. Your work is your life and that is no triviality." He pursed his lips in dismay. "That's exactly
the kind of remark that gives everyone reason to worry."

"Where is it ordained that I must give up all hope for happiness while striving against the Darkness? Seems that would give Sauron some kind of victory, however shallow, if people are no longer free to simply enjoy the blessing of being loved and cherish each opportunity to laugh and smile. We used to have such fun together when we were young, you and me and Elros. Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember," said Erestor quietly, more than stunned to hear Elrond speak his brother's Elvish name. Once Elros chose the fate of Men, he'd taken a new name and insisted on everyone using it, especially his twin. The seneschal had thought it a cruel thing to do, though he'd never dared speak that aloud. He was glad for that in the end, for the last one hundred years of mortal life were hard ones as Elros' body failed him and he grew steadily weaker. By the time he exhaled his last breath, Erestor felt he understood. Tar Minyatur had died but Elros would never perish, eternally young in the hearts of his friends and kin.

"He would be pleased; though his jesting would be unbearable, Elros would've approved of Legolas," Elrond said.

"And the finest wines are fermented in Mordor!" Erestor exclaimed, shaking his head. "He would have been appalled and you know it. He was a great Man and a good king, but it is principally due to his beliefs that there is so much prejudice against same-sex bonds among humans. How often did he tell you to abandon your 'vulgar cravings and wed a good elleth'?"

"Every time we spoke," Elrond sighed, "but as he grew closer to the end he came to regret his hatred of male pairing, admitting it was all due to the heartbreak Lindir suffered over love for Maglor. I stand by what I say; Elros would have liked Legolas."

There they let it drop, neither wishing to reactivate sensibilities still so sore and strained. They continued quietly down the corridor.

"Yet there is a reason you came to fetch me, is there not?" asked Elrond finally.

"Indeed, something is amiss between the mortal couple," Erestor answered.

"Amiss? What happened? Really, Erestor, I wish Legolas could hear this so he would understand more fully just why I am so reluctant to leave the cares of the country to you and your councillors," Elrond scolded. "It was but a simple hunt and a ball; what could possibly have gone wrong to put the pair at odds?"

"Don't blame me for it!" groused Erestor, but his eyes were alight with a distinct gleam of merriment. "The hunting party was a great success and we made sure to let the human Lords make the kill. The banquet and ball were magnificent and offered abundant opportunities for the Men and their Ladies to dance, sing, drink to excess, and stumble away in inebriated lechery. Echthelion and Adrahil are now close confidants and seem to genuinely like one another. Adrahil has invited the Steward to the seaside in the summer and Echthelion accepted. The event was thoroughly appreciated by guests and citizens alike."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"I came upon Denethor very early this morning during my walk amid the gardens. He was alone, quite dishevelled and highly irritated to have been discovered. I placated him as best I could and sent him off to ready himself for the day, but I am sure he will be late if he shows up at all."

"Did you speak to him? Please get to the point, Erestor."
“Of course.” Erestor had to hide his smirk with a deferential dip of the head, amused at how quickly Elrond resumed the dreary tedium of lordship. “I can only tell you he was very disturbed in mind and appeared to be upset that I saw him. Thus, I simply bade him a good morning and pretended nothing was out of order in his dress, though it certainly looked as though he’d slept out in the grass for his garb was damp with dew. I went on my way and eventually returned to the house.

“Prince Adrahil was already at table, sipping on a truly obnoxious smelling tonic that he avows cures all ill-effects of drunkenness. How he managed to swallow it down without vomiting I shall never understand. Beyond that one indication, there was nothing improper in his presentation; that Man certainly has a trace of Teleri yet in his veins for he was the picture of princely grace and refinement.”

“Erestor.”

“Yes, Elrond, I am at the pivotal point now. Adrahil still looked rather pale and green, so I naturally inquired if there was more our healers might do to relieve his distress, but he whispered that his discomfort had nothing to do with the pounding headache. He confided that his daughter refuses to come out of her suite and will not permit him to see her. When he barged in anyway, she fled to the bath chamber and locked the door, in tears no less, but she wasn’t fast enough to prevent him noticing her appearance. She was still in her party clothes, though their charm was greatly diminished for having been put on inside out. The Prince fears his daughter has been indiscreet and will not follow through with the marriage.”

“What in Mordor?” Elrond hissed, coming to a full stop and taking his cousin's arm in a steely grip. “Did the Lady Finduilas not leave the ball with her maiden attendants?”

“Nay, she left with her betrothed but I didn't follow them. It didn't seem necessary; she was very intoxicated and Denethor was practically carrying her. He was not so far gone, I don't believe, for he appeared to have everything under control.”

“Ceryn O Caranthir!” Elrond growled. Erestor couldn't help himself; he sputtered out a laugh through his nose and struggled to control the grin trying to break free. "What is so amusing about this?"

"Nothing, nothing, it's just such a funny thing to say."

"This is serious, Erestor. We, that is to say I, will be blamed for this since the incident happened under my roof as a result of the ball. Yet if she and Denethor spent the night together that can hardly bring about a breaking of the betrothal."

"One would not think so,” Erestor shrugged, "but Adrahil said the Lady was quite distraught and kept saying she could never hold up her head again and how could Denethor still marry her."

"That doesn't sound good."

"No."

"Where is the Steward and has he heard this rumour yet?"

"I believe he is still abed and likely to remain so for at least another hour or two. He didn't succumb to the wine until very early this morning. I observed his valet struggling to get him back to his chambers before he lost consciousness."

"Good.” Elrond managed a grim smile and squeezed his friend's arm. "Now then, you go find Denethor and determine what happened. I will go calm Adrahil and send Arwen to comfort
Finduilas and ease the fair Lady's conscience. Quickly! The wedding is to be held at sunset.

Erestor watched as Elrond disappeared down through a doorway, elegant robes flowing in undulating waves of velvet expedience, very glad for the release of his arm, for though the Lord of Imladris did not participate in the patrols he had never let his battle skills deteriorate and possessed the strength of a warrior. The seneschal rubbed his biceps but was smiling nonetheless, for everything had gone just as he'd hoped. He chuckled smugly; Elrond was so easy to manipulate and would never realise events had been engineered to get him out of the way for a time. Erestor's step was light as he proceeded through the house, whistling the long, lyrical sequence of a morning-lark's song as he went.

Now, Erestor was not really up to anything too terrible, lest anyone think he was purposely trying to undermine the goals of his Lord and kinsman. He was merely intrigued and desired to be the one sent to determine Denethor's level of comprehension regarding the ugly little mishap. Erestor had withheld a small piece of information from his Lord, for the Steward's son had stopped him in the garden and made a most unexpected request. Denethor had demanded to know whether Legolas would be at breakfast and if not where the Man might find him.

At first he'd assumed this was about the Spa incident and Denethor's desire to defend Finduilas' honour, but with Adrahil's revelation following immediately after Erestor was beyond curious. He didn't for one minute believe Legolas could possibly be the culprit responsible for the Lady of Dol Amroth's fall from grace, yet it was certain the Steward's heir was more than a little agitated. The seneschal hadn't known about the brewing scandal when he'd encountered Denethor, of course, and had coldly told the human that Legolas was a Wood Elf and spent his mornings in the grounds of the estate near the brook, though it was unlikely the mortal would be able to locate him. Now Erestor was hoping to witness a confrontation between the two and made his way outside, ostensibly to prevent Denethor's demise should he actually find Legolas and challenge him to some sort of duel, but really just to pacify his penchant for prying.

His reasons for doing this were not consciously meant to be cruel, as he already explained to Arwen, and Erestor's main concern was keeping everyone in Imladris blind to the truth: Elrond was losing his heart to the The Sylvan; a truth confirmed this very day from Elrond's own lips. The effect this knowledge would work on the peoples' confidence in their Lord was not likely to be positive. Its effect on Erestor was too primitive for the upright Noldorin noble to acknowledge: he was jealous.

Not, let it be made clear, of Legolas' claim to Elrond's love but rather Erestor was envious of his kinsman's claim upon the sylvan's lean and supple body. He coveted Legolas and to hide it, from himself as much as everyone else, Erestor indulged in supplying the valley's occupants with endless proofs of the Wood Elf's unsophisticated nature. Somewhere in the depths of his psyche, the seneschal had hoped Elrond would tire of Legolas and then Erestor would satisfy his desires. In those same unsounded chasms of the subconscious, the Noldo Lord now understood this would never come to pass and his motives for snooping, never innocent in the first place, became perhaps a mite vindictive.

None of this was on his mind at the moment, however, as he melted into the shade cast by a large hedge of blueberry bushes, for the anticipated drama had already commenced.

"What will you do? I know you saw us." Denethor stood tall and proud though his voice betrayed an underlying fear no Elf would fail to miss, even if the human denied it to himself.

"Aye, but as I said it is a private matter, is it not? I feel no need to ever bring it up." Legolas shook his head; no one ever listened to him even when it was in their best interests to do so. "Lord Denethor, just because you do not see any Elves near us does not mean you are beyond hearing
"Bah! Stop trying to evade the subject! What if someone finds out and word of it reaches Finduilas, or her father? Worse, should my father learn of it he will spurn me. I cannot have that happen! I will do whatever is necessary to prevent it." The Man took a step closer, looming over the smaller and slighter figure with a most menacing scowl adorning his stern face.

"Enough. I am not your enemy," Legolas dismissed the attempt at intimidation with a wave of his hand. "The affair doesn't concern me in the least. Believe me, I've troubles of my own to resolve without taking on yours."

"No doubt!" The Man snorted in contempt. "Your position here is not exactly comfortable, I'd warrant, especially the one you were in last night. Still, you seemed to find it quite pleasurable and here you are, none the worse for wear."

"That isn't an appropriate thing to say, Lord Denethor," rejoined Legolas coldly, shifting from his relaxed pose into a more formal stance. "Confine your comments to your own predicament. You have but two days left in the valley; my advice is to carry on as you would had this never occurred. Marry the fair princess and return to your father's lands; forget the adventure of the night."

"Don't mistake me for a simpleton!" Denethor spat. "I will settle this now rather than wait for the whole thing to erupt into public knowledge at the worst moment. I will not shame my people or embarrass my father before the rulers of foreign lands, all because of one drunken escapade. It is due to your influence this came to pass and so I shall say should it come out."

"Me? How do you arrive at that result? I am not the one who went wandering during the night, invading private areas of the estate to use for a romantic encounter. Drunkenness is the culprit here, or rather you're inability to monitor your own intake of wine."

"Nay, I have never had such a thing happen to me before and many a party has left me less than sober. It is that wicked magic I've heard of with which you ensnared the Lord of these lands!"

"Keep your voice down! I do not work spells and enchantments, Lord Denethor, nor have I anything to do with your personal relationships."

"What transpired was according to your wishes. I was drawn to that garden path and surely you sent Bertran there to intercept me and bring me low."

"I did no such thing," Legolas scowled. "I have had no contact with your servants and even if I had I've no reason to involve myself in your interactions with them. Look elsewhere for someone to blame." He decided he'd listened to enough and a low rumbling in his belly warned him to get on with his preparations for a filling meal. "No more, Lord Denethor; I can't see what benefit this conversation will reap. Let us part and cease this antagonism."

"No, you will answer me!" Denethor hissed. "You used enchantment to redirect my steps and alter my thoughts. It must be so, for I've never lain with a male before. So I will state if it becomes common knowledge. I will denounce you as a sorcerer!"

"You would speak a lie, then, for those were not the tentative and unfamiliar gropings of innocents I beheld. Your accusation is groundless. What purpose would I have in doing such a thing, even were it possible?"

"That is what I am here to learn. You think you have me in your grasp and maybe that is so; what is it you want of me? Riches? Influence at my father's court? Name the price of your silence!"
"This is ridiculous," breathed Legolas. "I am a Wood Elf; I have no interest in either the affairs of Men or the accumulation of wealth. There is nothing you have which I desire. Be assured, I will simply be glad to see you go, the lot of you."

"Then you did it for spite, you wretched devil, in return for my comments at dinner. So be it; consider us even though what you have done is wholly indecent and vile. Yet, I must have some assurance of your discretion, Elf."

"My name is Legolas; please use it," Legolas drew himself to stiff attention, incensed to have his morals so thoroughly maligned. "Your accusations are baseless; I have done nothing to you whatsoever. Such slanders as you can manage cause me no discomfort and instead tell upon your poor breeding. Thus, I will not speak to those insulting remarks but instead address your fear of discovery."

"Fear? I do not fear any"

"Silence! You have said more than enough! My up-bringing has no doubt been unlike to yours, for in my country and among my people such an intimate experience would never be discussed in this manner. We Wood Elves respect the confidential nature inherent in having knowledge such as you and I share. I trust you not to speak of it, yet you allude to it so crudely, assuming no one will hear you. I tell you that is a mistake and you disregard my warning. I urge you now to say no more!"

"You dare reprimand me, catamite? You, no more than a male concubine for the use of Lord Elrond, stand there and order me to be silent?" Denethor was red-faced and angry in his shame, lashing out as cruelly as he knew how. The reaction did not please him, for rather than becoming upset in turn Legolas merely smiled; a minimal, sardonic expression completed by the utter contempt within his eyes.

"I don't care what ugly words you use, human, for you will be dead long before I have even begun my second century. What can it mean to me, an immortal, if your opinion is so skewed? Nothing, I say, and that is all the assurance you will get from me. Do what you will; I have no more words to share with you. Ego!" The sylvan motioned with his hand a curt dismissal that could not be misunderstood. He waited as the Man remained rooted, open-mouthed and livid with fury.

"If I hear this being whispered about the estate" he raised his hand and pointed at Legolas, taking another step closer, and the next instant found the accusing appendage snatched hard, twisted, bent behind him. He cried out in pain, astonished as a flash of golden hair whisked across his line of vision while the slender Elf seemed to have vanished. Then he was air-born, flipping head over heals until he landed hard on his backside with a grunt and sat staring up at the irritated sylvan.

"Should word of it be broadcast among the people of Imladris, you will know one thing for certain, Denethor," Legolas growled bending down to glare into the mortal's startled face. "You will know that Legolas of Greenwood never mentioned it to any living soul and the fault lies elsewhere. Do you understand me, human?" He held out his hand to help the Man rise only to see Denethor shrink from it in dread.

"Is this another example of Wood Elves' magic?" the human asked, scrambling to his feet and backing away, eyes warily appraising the Elf. "It must be for no one of your size should be physically capable of overpowering me."

"Ai Valar, why must I suffer these idiots?" Legolas asked of the clear blue sky overhead. With a sigh and a shrug he decided it was hopeless and affirmed the mortal's fears. "Aye, this is but a small taste of the Power of the sylvan people. Do not forget it and be grateful I didn't take unfair advantage of your inferior strength and skill. Had I exerted any real effort you would have a badly broken arm."
"Inferior? I am one of the best warriors in all the realm of Gondor and if not for such sorcery as you possess I would pummel you into pulp for such talk," the Man tried to resume his haughty manner though the result was less than convincing.

"Aye, no Man is a match for me and few are the Elves who could best me either. Call it magic if you will, I care not a bit as long as you remember that I can break every bone in your body and yet leave you alive, crippled and helpless and dependent upon the suffrage of healers to care for your inert and paralysed form. I suggest you refrain from insulting me again. Do we understand one another?"

Lord Denethor gaped as his hand felt at the hilt of his dagger, yet he was not willing to test the Wood Elf further. He'd desired to learn if the legends were true and he'd been given ample proof. If this small and willowy Elf could wield such force, of what violence might a specimen similar to Glorfindel be capable? His heart leaped, for he remembered that he'd used insulting words to the mighty Elf Lord also. He swallowed as Legolas' eyes narrowed, focusing on his fingers where they played upon the weapon, and hastily drew his hand away, holding forth both palms, empty and placating.

"Yes, yes, we understand each other, Legolas. I will not forget your warnings. I would ask your indulgence for my behaviour. I suffer from the residue of strong Elven wine in my blood and thus my tongue runs amok before my thoughts can govern it. Of course, I trust your discretion over this awkward incident. Indeed, there is no reason not to be cordial. Perhaps we will speak again in future and a treaty of alliance drawn up between my people and the Elves."

At this sudden change of demeanour Legolas arched his brows but shrugged his shoulders and would not permit the Man's attempt to save face. "I suppose that is what is called diplomacy but to me it sounds like lies. You were not drunk at the feast the night of your arrival here and your words then were equally rude. Later, you again impugned my character by suggesting I deliberately subjected Lady Finduilas to my agony at the Spa. Today you accuse me of sorcery and plotting to blackmail you over your secret lover. I see no reason to counsel my people to come to the aid of Gondor, should my opinion ever be asked, for you would never bring your armies to defend the lives of the Wood Elves."

"You know nothing of the situation in Gondor!" the Steward's son yelled, features twisted in wrath to have his offer of a truce refused. "We need no aid from such as you. It is Men who hold the Darkness of Mordor at bay. If not for that, your pitiful forest would be overrun and your people massacred."

"It's true, I know little of your world. Yet you know even less of mine, for at least I have studied the history of your realm while you are satisfied with rumours and tall tales concerning mine. My people owe nothing to yours; we defend our own and have done so since before there was a country called Gondor. Now leave here, unless you hanker for broken bones. I've no more words to trade with you today."

After a few tense seconds, the Man finally stalked away and Legolas drew a deep breath to cleanse his soul. He had come entirely too close to letting his temper get the better of him and was relieved the human had backed down. It would have been truly shameful to get into a common brawl with an opponent so far beneath him in skill and strength, and he shuddered to imagine Elrond's disapproving frown should it have happened. As it was, Legolas regretted his boasting and contentious words and remembered who had overheard them.

"The wind has many voices," he said quietly and sighed. "The sound of air moving among leaves is very different from the noise of the breeze ruffling through velvet robes and long Elven hair. Then again, the wind carries many scents within its invisible tendrils. An Elf, especially a Noldorin one,
has a most distinct odour. Will you not come out of the hedge, Lord Erestor?"

TBC

mellon vrûn: old friend
'egetherio elenath': praise the stars
'hartham glass veleg': we wish you great joy
Ceryn O Caranthir: Caranthir's balls
Erin Pâd an Sîr: On the Way to the River
Pessag Athrabeth: pillow conversation
Raug dithen: little demon (imp)
herth: troop, as of warriors
Gwaedh Prestannen: Troubled Troth
Thyrin Trenor: Secrets Told
Galbreth: beech tree, from a dialect of Doriath
faer dithen: little soul
Muilengôl: Veiled magic—a Doriath-derived name for wizards.

GLOSSARY

NOTE: Oh I just couldn't help having Legolas teach that nasty Denethor his place. I just feel terrible for Finduilas to be marrying such a complete jerk. To be fair, I've made him a very conflicted man, sexually involved with one of his father's menservants while wishing to play the part of the noble heir before his betters and that of debonaire lover to Finduilas. Does he have any feelings for her? I have to admit I think he does, and quite similar to Elrond's own regard for Celebrian. Maybe that can all be made clearer in the next chapter, for this one does not explain what is going on with the Lady from Dol Amroth, does it? Elrond's argument with his seneschal seems to have cleared the air between them. Looks like Erestor has become an unwilling ally for the happy couple, though his hidden feelings might cause trouble. And I have to confess that while there was talk of flounder in the previous chapter, this one is full of red herrings. The real trouble hasn't even begun and Erestor won't be its nexus. Forgive me for stopping here, but Chapter Ten is a big one, what with Ened Ethuil and all its implications, and represents the story's midpoint. A word of caution now, for it will be very angsty and very graphic. Well, we haven't heard the last of that flatfish dish, either, and Erestor's confrontation with Legolas might be a bit of a surprise for him.

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The Valley of the Bruinen was a deep and narrow wedge of fertile ground pressed against the forbidding heights of Hithaeglir and abutting the broader, bowl-shaper depression defined by the Hoarwell's icy flow and the bounding uplift called the Weather Hills. The secluded vale seemed small in comparison to the greater expanses of Eriador and was so removed from those regions dominated by mortal kind that its existence was falling into myth. In the hidden sanctuary of the Elves, time had stalled and the people there were quickly left behind by the swiftly shifting years outside its borders.

Or perhaps it was the other way round. Maybe in Rivendell the seasons revolved as they had been designed in the beginning while beyond the high, forested walls the rest of Arda progressed through the years at an accelerated pace engendered by the advent of Men. Human existence took place in a frenzy of activity that left little opportunity for contemplation and reflection. The people of the mortal realms were very busy with the job of survival and the span of days allotted them short. It is likely this factor which formed so strong an impression of tranquility and peace upon those few of Iluvatar's younger children destined to visit Elrond's haven.

So mused Aragorn, Estel of Rivendell, as he strolled along one particularly idyllic byway laced through the carefully tended groves of pear and apple trees in his foster-father's estate, the Lady Arwen humming sweetly at his side.

For the Noldorin and Sindarin inhabitants, such an ideal never existed and none of them would deem their fair realm a sedate, serene locale though they were currently shielded from open war with any of the Shadow's many agents. There were always undercurrents and intrigues, dramas and comedies, tragedies and joys occurring throughout the length and breadth of the sheltered dale, as there would be in any community. An enclave of Elves was probably more riddled with scenes of domestic conflict between family members, neighbours, and friends, a consequence of virtual immortality being that one tended to learn a great deal about one another's strengths and weaknesses over time and how to exploit, encourage, or hinder them. The pace of all interactions followed the natural rhythms patterned by the form in which Iluvatar cast his favoured Star Children.

A 'day' for an Elf, when defined as a period of wakeful activity, was not measured in the cycle of Arien's journey through the sky, though that term was readily used among the Noldor for practical purposes. No, among the First-born real sleep was rare and seldom needed, so that there was instead a slow oscillation between a brightly animated mental state and a more dream-like one in which the spirit sought communion with Eru. During the latter phase, the body proceeded in a semi-conscious limbo, continuing to perform required functions, senses ever alert should emergency require the intellect to wake. The duration of each condition was not equal; the mind might remain hyperaware for more than ten turns of the sun before the subtle shift into Ôlpathu, the living-dream, happened.

An elf in Ôlpathu could carry out just about any duty or activity, converse with others rationally, and was usually found singing a wordless song, more a vibrational resonance of the soul than a tune, whether alone or among family. A mated couple would drift through this continuum in synchrony while individual members of a household tended to enter and exit the resting state in waves so that never was every member of a family in the dream-time together. The eyes, usually so piercing and
focused that a mortal could not abide their gaze, were often filled with a soft and mellow light that seemed to glance rather than perceive. Movements did not necessarily slow but became more fluent and agile, every muscle and fibre attuned to the work of renewal, the perpetual grace of the eldar enhanced as their beings became submerged in the Music.

Conversations with an elf in Ólpathu were limited out of respect and reluctance to disturb Pathrol na Gail. Words uttered from this fugue of deep association with the Song of Life were considered Pith Thenid and depending on the lineage of the given elf might also be deemed prophetic or sacred. Answers thus given from this mental state, being direct and unequivocal, tended to belie the notion of spurning the counsel of elves. Nonetheless, it was considered extremely rude to intrude upon another's Lu Eden, though some might do so without reprisal. Parents, for instance, were permitted to oversee their elflings' dreaming. There was good reason for the strict tabu against such interaction; most disagreements arose due to something said when tact and decorum were set aside for absolute truth. Fortunately, except in times of great duress or physical exertion, Ólpathu was short in comparison to the days of vibrant lucidity for which the elves were known.

Every elf knew these things, but among mortals the idea of wakeful sleep was incomprehensible. This ignorance no doubt gave rise to many misconceptions regarding elves, that they were aloof, distant, and held themselves above interaction with other people. The truth was that elves had simply given up trying to explain it and if there was arrogance in that it was born from long centuries of trying to educate the other free peoples on Arda on the nature of the First-born with very limited success. Elves could not make others comprehend the concept of immortality, the need for a separate Elven Home across the Great Sea, or the magnificence of Iluvatar's Song. Was it any wonder that they were leaving Middle-earth for Aman? Nay, and those that remained secreted themselves away from mortals as much as possible. In fact, the Noldorin and Sindarin and Telerin elves had become just as reclusive and xenophobic as the Wood Elves.

Such were the thoughts of Aragorn. He shook his head with a wry grin; the folk of Imladris would be appalled to hear their culture likened to that of the primitive sylvans inhabiting wild Mirkwood's dark domain. He reached up for a flower-laden bow of hawthorn, directed thus by the pointing hand of the Evenstar, and neatly sliced it free with his dagger. His smile gentled as he laid the branch upon the others in her basket, humming along for a moment as she sang her soul-song, for she walked at his side in Ólpathu and that was the reason for his rambling introspection. She smiled, too, as their eyes met and then she ambled on through the wooded path, plucking blossoms as she went.

Having grown up in Imladris, Aragorn was certainly familiar with this periodic merging of the feä with the One, yet it never ceased to fill him with quiet awe to see Arwen lost in the strains of the Music. Though he could not hear what she heard or see what she viewed in her dreams, he believed he was a part of them. The melodic tone of her vocal chords held a sombre timbre, a hint of something more earthy than star-like, as if her Song was bound not to the elusive source somewhere across the ocean but grounded here, in the land she walked on now. Somehow, it always made him feel that she was weaving together the random strands of energy that would become his very life, for there was a solidity, a finite quality to her voice that he had heard from no other elf. The idea filled him with loving pride and despairing sorrow, for how could he accept her love when it meant she must choose his mortal fate?

Still, not every thought he had while watching her was so weighty and dire. Aragorn was not above using the rare chance to glean some information that he was certain would never be revealed otherwise. He was an astute Man and not blind by any means; he had noticed Legolas' extreme discomfort whenever he chanced to meet Arwen. Aragorn wanted to know the reason for it, not that he was jealous of the bizarre 'male' as a rival. No, he was just curious. Really.

"Arwen, melethen."
"Hmmm?"

"Legolas does not seem easy in your presence."

"Nay, he is not."

"Why is that?"

"He is embarrassed to face me."

"Why is he embarrassed to face you?"

"Because I fondled his soft, velvety sac and yanked on his lovely little cock."

"WHAT?!" Somehow that was not what the Man had imagined he would hear and he stopped in mid-step.

The strident note of furious disbelief jolted through the Evenstar's dream and brought her to the lesser plane of her mortal lover's existence in a heartbeat. She blinked and then frowned, her face colouring as she realised what Aragorn was up to. "That is inexcusable," she scolded and then smiled wickedly as she realised exactly what the most fitting revenge would be. "Shall I tell you the whole story, dearest?"

"Yes. No! Arwen, what has been going on here?" Aragorn didn't like that gleam in her eyes. "I apologise for intruding on Ôlpathu; I swear I will never do so again."

"Too late for that," Arwen shook her head, enjoying his discomfort immensely.

"No, you must forgive me, beloved. I was but playing a prank on you but I see how wrong it was. I should have trusted you and simply asked about Legolas' strange reaction to you."

"Ah, but you didn't and that's because you correctly surmised that I would refrain from telling you. It doesn't concern you and I wouldn't think it right to reveal something that obviously gives Legolas so much pain to recall. Well, now I think it will cause you more pain to know of it and that is a punishment your unscrupulous attempt at manipulation deserves."

"Nay, Arwen, I just wanted to"

"Legolas, more so than most elves, loves to bathe." Arwen talked over his attempts at apology and proceeded with her story. "He is a creature of most regular habits and follows a strict routine of daily cleansing. It did not take me long to learn this for Adar and Erestor talk about him almost constantly. Ada has enough discretion not to reveal to his cousin exactly where Legolas likes to bathe, but to me he was most forthcoming. I followed Legolas."

"I don't want to hear any more."

"No? Then you shouldn't have asked. As I said, I was following but he's a Wood Elf and knew at once, so on that day I was thwarted. I had to make up an excuse and leave him standing there in nothing but a thin cotton robe, tied quite loosely, I might add, for he was in a part of the valley few would chance to go. The robe was slipping off his shoulder because he had a bag containing his bath things slung over it. A very fine view of that lovely apricot skin was exposed from his neck all the way down to his cute little belly button. Do you know, his nipples are pink instead of brown; must be his fair colouring."

"Arwen!"
"Well, I had to figure out a means to see him completely naked; nipples and belly-buttons are just plain teasing by themselves."

"Arwen!"

"Of course the answer was so obvious: I had to get there first. So the very next day I rose extra early, donned my bathing robe and gathered up what I would need from my bathroom, prepared to forego the luxury of hot water in order to satisfy my curiosity over this sylvan beauty and his magical allure."

At this point the Man just groaned, dropping his head low in defeated agony.

"Now just to prove how much I trust you, Estel, despite your lack of same for me, I will tell you a secret only Miny'ammë knows. I can do a little magic of my own and cast a screening spell so he wouldn't sense my presence in his private domain. Yet even in that I was fortunate, for had there been any trees about I'm sure they would have given away my hiding place.

"He arrived right on schedule and set aside his bag, stripped off the robe, and stepped into the quiet pool. As soon as he ducked his head under the surface to wet his hair, I cast off my own robe and jumped in." As she spoke, the Evenstar slowly circled around the contrite man and noticed with grim pleasure that he was rigid to the point of trembling. "The splash startled him but I am very fast when I want to be and I was at his side in an instant. You should have seen the shock on his face! Such becoming blue eyes all wide and innocent, his luscious red lips parted like a drawn bow. A mouth most inviting, a kissable, delectable mouth."

"You didn't!"

"I'm not a virgin, Estel, did you think I was? I've done more than kissing with more than a few elves and I would have very much liked to sample his"

"Enough! I beg you, Arwen. Tell me no more of this!" Aragorn pleaded, falling to his knees and clapping his hands over his ears.

"Nonsense, you're an adult male and I'm sure you're no virgin either. I think you're sneaky soul-spying was wise after all; it is good to discuss such issues openly. Now, where was I? Oh yes, I grabbed him by the wrist and wouldn't let go though he tried frantically to get free, all with his eyes squeezed shut, making every effort not to touch me anywhere.

"What's wrong? Don't you want this? Am I so unappealing you must shut your eyes? I teased him and he let out a strangled sort of panicked denial."

"Nay, Lady, saes, I belong to your Adar!"

"I shrugged and made my breast bump his arm. "I don't see any ring on your finger, Legolas," said I and the response was most enlightening. He put a hand to my shoulder and pressed back, trying to make me let go, an expression I can only describe as hurt and betrayal darkening his brow."

"You were trying to seduce him," Aragorn's tone was flat and hard. His mouth tasted as if he'd dumped the residue of his pipe on his tongue. This could not be real. Somehow he was the one who'd fallen into dreams and now it had changed into a nightmare.

"Of course and I wasn't about to be so easily convinced; my whole purpose was to see if I could tempt him. Thus, I grabbed his hand off my shoulder and pulled hard until I was flush against him, bosom to bosom as it were, circling my arm around his waist to hold him tight."
"Please, no more. You are avenged, Lady. I know my place again." Aragorn made no effort to conceal his bitterness.

Arwen glared but otherwise ignored his interruption. "The poor elfling! How he gasped and squirmed trying to twist loose! It was thrilling; his chest is nicely muscled and it felt wondrous as my nipples were pulled and tugged against his. He felt lithe and warm and strong and lean. Yet one thing I did not feel. The thrill was not reciprocated; the press of my body against his was not enjoyable to him." Arwen's gaze softened as she saw her beloved's eyes fill with both hope and pain.

"You would think that would be sufficient evidence to gain my trust, yet I am stubborn. Many elves can master their bodies and perhaps for all his youth this sylvan was counted among them. Mayhap he was merely clever as Erestor claims, protecting his newly exalted status by pretending to feel nothing. That's when I grabbed his penis and palmed his balls." Her words made Aragorn wince and look away but in a second she grabbed his chin between her fingers and made him face her as she continued.

"That woke him up! Not caring a bit that I was a Lady and his lover's daughter, he kicked me hard and sent me splashing backwards. When I regained my balance, he was gone, but I'd learned what I wanted to know. He did not like being touched that way. Instead of being tempted to take advantage of my offer, he was horrified and ashamed. He was also frightened, Aragorn." Arwen paused, her tone no longer jeering and mocking, and waited for her betrothed to raise his eyes to hers.

"I don't understand. Why would he be scared of you?" Aragorn could not mask his relief to hear the outcome of this lurid tale. Had his fair Evenstar gone on to describe a coupling between herself and the Wood Elf, his soul would have been crushed and he'd have lost all faith in life. He breathed a deep lungful of the sweetly scented air and exhaled away his strife and tension, focusing on her fully, for it was plain what she would say next was to her the most important aspect of the encounter.

"He fears me because he is the subject of nothing but rumours, the victim of many such propositions. Adar does not seem to be aware that the people in his household consider Legolas fair game. They all believe he is only with my father because he wants to better his station. They don't think it possible for him to love Elrond or for Elrond to love him, so he is viewed as a courtesan would be. He was fearful that I would be like the others who boasted of bedding him even though he has turned down every single one. Do you know why that worried him so?"

"Aye, I do," Aragorn nodded, recalling now the clear, unmarred goodwill in Legolas' smile upon learning of his love for Arwen and hers for him. "He didn't want Elrond to be hurt, as surely he would be if he heard his daughter had lain with his young lover. Ai, Arwen, why did you do this thing?"

"Now I will reveal what I was truly trying to hide from you. I didn't want you to know I shared those hateful thoughts about Legolas. I believed all the horrid things Elrohir said and I resented a lowly Wood Elf usurping my Nana's place. I was sure he would succumb to my seduction and then I would reveal the truth to Ada. So, now you see that I am just as small-minded and prejudiced as those 'arrogant, self-serving, aristocratic Noldorin fools' you so abhor." Aragorn got to his feet and reached out for her hand, smiling to reassure her of his devotion.

"Oh, Arwen, I would never think of you that way! I understand how grief for your mother's departure made you vulnerable to suspicion and innuendo. You don't distrust Legolas now."

"True, but look what was required before I would open my eyes and see him for what he is. I owe him an apology of mountainous proportions yet I know not how I can ever make it. He will not let me near him now." Arwen scowled in self-recrimination as she squeezed Aragorn's hand.
"Give it time, you will find the right moment. He will be uncomfortable for a long time, though, I would think," Aragorn was smiling over the mental image of Undomiel's ambuscade now. "So, not even a little tremble of excitement coursed through him to have the most beautiful elf in all the world naked in his arms?" He chuckled, seeing how Arwen frowned and coloured in chagrinned remorse mixed with wounded feminine pride.

"It isn't funny!" she insisted. "He has been very well brought up and I can't imagine what he must think of me. I don't think he's every actually felt a female's body before and hasn't touched a breast since he was weaned."

Aragorn laughed outright at this remark and shook his head. "Oh, no doubt he was thoroughly scandalised! Worry not, he knows of our love for one another now and will someday find the means to forgive you."

"I don't know which is worse, having him think me brazen and promiscuous or distrustful and wicked. Even so, he has not so much as hinted of anything improper to you or to Ada. Legolas is chivalrous and deserves to be treated with honour and respect."

"That he does," Aragorn agreed, smiling. He wished he could tell Arwen about the unborn babe, but he was not about to betray his new friend's confidence. "I have a feeling your father will make new efforts to see that this comes to pass."

"I pray you're right, but whatever upset him earlier today sounded serious. I'm glad Adar went after him."

"Aye, Legolas needs him close just now; he's been under a lot of stress. The night's festivities should go far toward easing his sore heart, I'm sure."

"Yes." A pause proceeded as their eyes locked and each became lost in the other's smile. Then Arwen sighed and tugged her Man back into step beside her. "I'm pleased the issue between Finduilas and Denethor has been resolved, but I am saddened that their marriage heralds your departure, my love. Who knows when next we will enjoy such a time as this? It may be many years before we can walk hand in hand in such tranquility and peace."

"True and I don't want to leave you. The only thing that sustains me is knowing each effort I put forth leads me closer to the day when others spend their morning decorating for our bonding ceremony."

"Aye, that is a day to look forward to, a future to nurture with love and patience."

Now it was Aragorn who exhaled a woebegone breath. "Will you remain in Imladris for a time?"

"Nay, I will take my aching heart back to Lothlorien where Miny'ammë can console me. At least there I can keep watch over you through the Mirror."

Aragorn stumbled and he blinked as if a bright light had blinded him. "You spy on me whilst we're parted?" he hissed out, indignant and somewhat fearful. "Ai! What has she seen?"

"Spying? That's a rather ugly term for it, Estel. I merely consult the oracle when my heart forewarns of some dire threat. Is there something you wish to keep secret from me, beloved?"

"Of course there is! There are many things I've no wish for you to observe! Don't you relish your privacy and independence? How would you feel if I were to" Aragorn was stopped mid-tirade by her bubbling laughter and he smiled in turn. She was only joking with him; a fitting prank on someone who had just violated the sanctity of Ôlpathu. "Enough! You are incorrigible."
"A truce then, mortal, if you will but pick me that bough filled with pear blossoms." Aragorn did so and they resumed their leisurely stroll.

The couple were gathering flowers and foliage to festoon the Last Homely House for Ened Ethuil and the marriage ceremony for Denethor and Finduilas. In fact, all of the valley was preparing for the festival, which had become quite popular among the younger inhabitants due to the relaxation of the more stringent of Noldorin customs regarding sexual activity among unbonded elves. The rather licentious dallying associated with the celebration was one of the main arguments against Legolas' place as Elrond's lover, for the august leader had neither banned the holiday nor forbidden his citizens to participate if they so wished.

Aragorn had ever heard of Mid-spring Rites before, though celebrations of renewal at the time of planting were common throughout the human settlements of Eriador. Nothing quite so free as the activities described by Erestor in such colourful language that it had made Aragorn, a seasoned Ranger, blush crimson. Still, he was looking forward to the ritual with growing excitement, especially since he was in Imladris with Arwen, for rarely did their visits to the valley coincide, and never on so fortuitous an occasion. The Man cast a rather wolfish sidelong glance at his Lady and found to his immense delight that her cool grey eyes slid left to meet his, the composure displayed on her patrician features unable to disguise the fire in her soul.

On impulse he stopped on the woodland path and darted aside. There a wild tangle of Morning Glories clung to the trunk and limbs of an old apple, the vine spilling from the branches in long trailing sprays of clear, white blossoms. He gathered several lengths and quickly wove them into a fair crown of blooms, setting the simple circlet upon his beloved's brow. Arwen laughed in delight and leaned up to reward him with a kiss, short, sweet and with enough heat in it to melt him, before bounding off ahead, long black hair dancing behind her, merry giggles daring him to follow. With a grin Aragorn cast aside the greenery he held and sprinted in her wake, wishing Arien would hurry in her journey for once, eager for the promise of the night and the light of the bonfire.

That's All, folks. (not of the Story, just of this prelude.)

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GLOSSARY
Ölpathu: Dreamscape
Pathrol na Gail: Filling with Light - Enlightenment
Pith Thenid:True Words
Lu Eden: New Time

Aragorn rather sabotaged himself, didn't he now? If only he hadn't yelled out like that Arwen would probably have continued on and told all in a much less provocative manner. I don't know, maybe he deserved it. Perhaps Arwen has observed some hanky-panky on his part through Galadriel's Mirror! Well, I had to get this out of my system, it seems. I began writing the last part of chapter ten and this came out instead. A good friend wanted to know the details of how Arwen determined that Legolas' heart was true. Since the humans will be leaving after chapter ten, I couldn't really figure out where to put this scene, for Aragorn will leave with the Steward's retinue. It serves as a nice little prelude to the Main Event of Ened Ethuil, which will be a very long read and should be ready in about a week from now if all goes well. I'm in the home stretch. The reference to Legolas' upset does not refer to his confrontation with Denethor. What happened will become clear once chapter ten posts, for this actually happens after the upsetting event. Sorry if that sounds cryptic but just wanting to assure people that I'm not losing my mind
(yet) and they didn't miss something important from the previous chapter. Hope you liked this take on the elven dream-state.
"There, there's one! Quickly, muindor!" Elladan loudly whispered, pointing excitedly at a spot just inches from his brother's toes.

With lightning speed Elrohir plunged his rake down through the water into the sand, striking as if the prey were an aquatic orc of some sort, and at once an explosive PLOP resounded, followed by a bright fountain shooting from the creek's rippled surface while a great volume of muddy grit clouded the pristine flux. Elladan tossed his ebony tresses and made an indignant sound as he was thoroughly soaked, but otherwise waited in motionless suspense to learn the outcome of the attack. Elrohir raised the peculiar tool from the obscuring murk and frowned, for the trawler's tines were empty.

"You missed!" Elladan berated his brother, sloshing over to his side to stare in disbelief at the dripping rake. "How could you let it get away? It was right there at your very feet!"

"I don't know; I was sure I had it. It must have burrowed under the sand or something," Elrohir offered this abashed excuse, staring woefully at the clearing liquid as the gentle current carried the suspended load away and the sand settled back upon the bottom, twinkling in the sun as if to mock the mighty warrior's defeat.

"Give me that thing," demanded the elder twin, snatching away the unfamiliar implement. "You obviously aren't using it correctly. It isn't a sword, you know."

"Fine, see how well you can do, then," retorted Elrohir as he waded carefully away up stream, pant legs rolled high around his knees, sans tunic, shirtsleeves shoved haphazardly past his elbows, loose hair falling in damp tendrils about his face. Now that he was completely drenched, the efforts to spare his clothes seemed absolutely inane. Making certain not to upset the soft bottom with his bare feet, not even the slight displacement elven steps would generate, he leaned forward as he stalked, sharp eyes relentlessly scanning the sandy shallows.

His twin, identically underdressed and over-wet, brandished the fish-snaring contraption before him in a two-fisted grasp as he would a staff. The pair of famed orc hunters moved stealthily through the cheerful little brook, their every motion synchronised and as fluid as the water itself, their every sense absorbed in tracking this unlikely foe. Elladan's brows were drawn down in a severe frown and he adjusted his grip on the rake, uncertain how he should be holding it or what the correct manner of using it truly could be. He'd never seen anything like it, not even on trips to Mithlond where all the Sea Elves were enamoured of fishing in the crashing surf. It resembled nothing so much as a cross between an over-sized fork and a diminutive garden rake with a mesh bag attached for collecting fallen leaves. Yet Lindir had assured him and his brother that this was the proper article to employ when seeking to catch flathfish. While neglecting to give any indication of the means for so doing.

Their conversation with the wizard and the minstrel had not gone well at first, for he and Elrohir had remained staunchly resistant to the notion of welcoming Legolas as a member of the family.
Mithrandir had finally had enough of it and ordered them all from his rooms, stating he wished to hear no more 'infantile and judgemental whining' from elves involved in a relationship even the most open-minded people would deem 'sordid and grotesquely inappropriate'. Upon hearing that insulting dismissal, the brothers had stormed from the suite, livid in outrage for while logically they realised those close to them understood, their union was a topic they refused to discuss, precisely to avoid hearing comments like that. Intending to go drown their fury in strong drink at a tavern on the Great East Road just beyond the ford of the Bruinen, Lindir had forestalled their plans with one simple statement: 'You'll never win the Wood Elf this way.'

Elladan grinned darkly, recalling how he and his brother had simultaneously grabbed Lindir by the arms and hoisted him up off the floor, slamming his back against the corridor wall quite forcefully. The minstrel had neither flinched nor blinked and instead used the elevation to land a double-footed kick of immense power against Elrohir's chest. This had sent the younger twin staggering back, gasping for air, and of course had broken the hold Elladan had on the singer as well. In the mere seconds that elapsed as his attention was distracted by his twin's plight, Lindir somehow managed to plant his right fist solidly into Elladan's gut as his left hooked across the elder twin's jaw and sent him reeling. He had crashed into Elrohir and both had collapsed to the floor in a surprised and humiliated heap.

'Don't be daft; I was trained by the sons of Feänor. You can't begin to imagine the fighting moves I've learned and kept secret from you two.' The minstrel had stood smiling down at them in smug and victorious delight, not even offering to help as they staggered back to upright posture. 'Now, if you are prepared to at least pretend to be adults, perhaps we can discuss this unfortunate predicament and the detrimental effect it is having upon Legolas. There is a solution, but not one which temperamental, spoiled elflings can comprehend.'

They had followed him back to his apartment in silence and listened to his counsel. Before he gave it, however, he had demanded the full tale of finding Legolas. Not the story related to Glorfindel and Erestor upon their return, that white-washed version agreed upon by father and sons, but the ugly, gritty, harrowing truth. It had not been so hard to tell as Elladan would have imagined and in fact once begun the story just gushed out along with all the pain and bewildered doubts it encompassed. Lindir had been neither shocked nor disgusted and instead had been so thoroughly sympathetic that the brothers had gone further and expressed the ensuing desolation between them, confirming aloud for the first time the true nature of their bond. After hearing the singer's non-judgemental reassurances that their hearts could be healed, the twins listened eagerly to his explanation of how this might be achieved, yet with their mounting excitement was mingled concern and scepticism. Still, here we are, following his suggestion to the letter, stalking the elusive freshwater flounder in the early Imladris dawn.

Elrohir's thought interrupted Elladan's, unbidden but welcomed with much joy; for too long his brother had kept their minds separated. Shaking his head with a distinctly self-effacing sniff, Elladan looked across the shimmering water to meet Elrohir's eyes and smiled. "Do you believe him?"

"Would I be out here wading through the stream, trying to master the dubious skill of flatfish procurement if I did not?" scoffed Elrohir, grinning and tossing his ebony hair identically in bemusement. He eyed his twin with no small degree of chagrin, for once displeased to view himself as others beheld him. "It had better work; we look absolutely ridiculous. If Glorfindel finds out we'll never hear the end of it."

"Aye, and imagine Aragorn's reaction. He'll laugh for an hour then spread the tale among every Ranger camp from here to the Shire. 'Behold the mighty Orc-slayers of Imladris: wet, bedraggled,
utterly defeated by a lowly, scaly minute creature of the shallows,' chuckled Elladan, pleased to hear his brother laugh in kind.

He readjusted his hold on the curiously designed rake, settling his grip where patience and skill had worked a comfortable indentation just the right size to fit Legolas' smaller hands, for it was his of course. Lindir had informed them of its existence and where it might be found, having asked the trees within the grounds which among them Legolas most preferred. It was an ancient and massive tulip poplar with a thick, straight trunk, branchless for a good fifteen metres, and climbing the rough, furrowed bark had been a challenge Elladan wouldn't soon forget.

High in its upper limbs, the twins had discovered a neatly organised assortment of handmade gadgets and various nondescript stuff, all carefully arranged within a cleverly concealed cabinet constructed of woven branches and leaves. It seemed a part of the living tree and had they not been told by Lindir what to seek never would they have spotted the cupboard. Inside was a collection of odd items, not unlike those Legolas kept in their father's rooms, comprising mundanely ordinary things, like obsidian arrowheads and stone-working tools, to totally incomprehensible, intricately crafted implements the use for which they could not determine. Among these latter objects had reposed the one currently in their possession.

Elladan had taken it reluctantly, for it seemed to him they were violating the sylvan's most private possessions, articles even Elrond probably didn't know about. He felt like a thief, regardless Lindir's assurance that it was not the sylvan way to begrudge another's use of what was needed as long as it was returned. The elder twin was nearly certain Legolas did not expect anyone in Imladris to have such a need and would not look kindly on such borrowing, especially from him and his brother.

He sighed and shifted his grip again, carrying the strange creation defensively before him like a long knife. "I wish I knew what to do with this bizarre thing. How on Arda am I supposed to capture anything with it?"

"I haven't a clue. The net part I understand, for how else would we get the slimy little creature out of the water, but it's how to get it into the grip of those reedy fingers that escapes me," admitted Elrohir, reaching out to bend the slim, flexible extensions protruding from the end of the wooden handle. They both stopped and inspected the device intently, the third time they had done so.

"Why a rake? If we use it to drag the bottom the flatfish will note the disturbance and flee, yet trying to take it by surprise didn't work either," added Elladan, alluding to his brother's unsuccessful assault upon the water.

"Perhaps if we took the net off the rake could be used to startle the flounder into revealing itself. As soon as it flutters up from the mud to get away, we snatch the net up from the bottom, fish and all!" exclaimed Elrohir.

The brothers' eyes met with determination and conviction; no mindless water creature would get the better of them. They cautiously unwrapped the knotted string mesh, fearful of breaking the tool, and discovered that it was attached to the handle by a two metre strand of twine. This was laced through the holes around the perimeter of the open-work bag at the other end. An experimental tug allowed them to open out the net into a full, flat circle and with identical smirks the brothers shared their enlightenment. They separated, one cautiously setting the net loose in the water a few feet away as the other began dragging the little hand trawler through the sand. Soon, a plume of suspended detritus bloomed behind them, fanning out in the current.

"Elo!" Elrohir pointed as a flapping motion caught his eye. He jerked quickly on the twine and the net closed tight, its sudden weight informing him of their success. "We did it!" with this gleeful shout he hoisted the catch from the water as Elladan splashed over to admire the fine specimen flopping
around in the net.

"Aye, a big fat one, too," Elladan was equally proud of their achievement and laughed as he poked the squirming, sand coloured scales. He whisks out his dagger and stabbed it where he hoped its brain would be and the fish went limp. "Should we get another? Aragorn said Legolas isn't eating properly."

"Yes, good idea. If it's truly considered a delicacy among sylvan elves, as Lindir assured us, then he'll consume every bit of it without even thinking of the implications of who supplied it," agreed Elrohir, transferring the fish into a leather pouch hanging from a strap across his shoulder.

"Until it's too late," Elladan finished their conjoined thought as they shared predatory leers and moved on to a new spot that was not disturbed.

It took a little longer to net the second flounder and their patience was tested sorely, for the creatures of the shallows were alert to their presence. Once they had the additional qurry bagged, not quite as large as the first but still not a shameful catch, they moved from the brook and set about preparing the dish according to Lindir's recipe. Being partial neither to eating fish nor to cooking them, the chore was accompanied by much good-natured joking and complaining over the disgusting task of cleaning and boning the meat, the unpleasant smell of the seared flesh, and the effect pungent wild onions and garlic wreaked upon their refined senses.

Through it all they worked in harmony and relaxed, falling back into the familiar pattern of companionable camaraderie they had achieved long centuries past when they'd given in and become soul-mates. With chagrined amazement, the brothers realised they had not enjoyed a morning together like this since their mother's horrific capture by orcs. It occurred to them simultaneously that this was probably because their actions were not centred on alleviating the pain within themselves but rather on Legolas. Their vision locked as the notion dawned between them: mayhap the Wood Elf could heal them as he had their father. Elladan and Elrohir smiled together and completed the meal's preparation in quiet meditation on this concept.

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While the twins were thus involved in the unlikely duty of making a traditional sylvan breakfast, Erestor was crawling out from under the blueberry hedge. With as much dignity as someone caught eavesdropping can manage to assemble, the distinguished seneschal straightened his clothing and approached under the disapproving eye of the Wood Elf, finding the gaze trained upon him far removed from the perception of callow inexperience he usually associated with Legolas. That sage and knowing expression was much more disconcerting than being caught at spying and Erestor at last understood what Elrond meant when he spoke about the aspect of 'ancient presence' the youth sometimes revealed.

"Before you say anything, Legolas, allow me to thank you." Erestor did not hesitate to take command of the compromising situation. Not for nothing was he deemed Elrond's cleverest advisor. As expected, the gracious compliment took The Sylvan by surprise and his brows rose, chasing away that daunting glare of censure and disappointment levelled upon the Chief Advisor.

"Thank me for what?" the fair voice demanded, once more revealing his lack of experience regarding intrigue and deception.

"I have suspected some such treachery among the humans but had no idea from which realm it would emerge. Your confrontation with Denethor has revealed the culprit: this servant named, oh
what was it, Bergil? Nay, Bertran, that's it."

"What?" Legolas didn't understand at all. What he'd discussed with Denethor had nothing to do with politics and he was sure Erestor must understand this. His eyes narrowed, trying to determine if the Noldorin Lord was mocking him or not.

"Yes, that manservant employed by the Steward is but a spy of Mordor. The evil dwelling there has no wish for these two kingdoms of Men to join forces by marriage between the ruling families. Such ties are stronger than mere treaties on parchment and ink, for the offspring of the union will belong to both lands."

"You expected this?" Legolas was still incredulous, though the advisor's demeanour expressed nothing false and lacked any hint of the contemptuous scorn that usually coloured every word Erestor spoke to him or about him.

"Indeed, I was sure some ploy would be enacted to stop the wedding but the exact particulars were unknown." This was actually true; Erestor had been feeling an uneasy dread ever since the Steward's party arrived. "That is why I am so grateful, you see. Picture how terrible this would be for all involved if this Bertran were permitted to reveal his sordid affair with the Steward's son at the ceremony? The Prince of Dol Amroth would be incensed, furious for such an insult to his daughter, mortified by such an immoral situation, confronted at the altar by her fiancé's male paramour.

"Imagine the embarrassment of the Steward; his son's weakness revealed, an inclination disdain'd by mortals as indecent and unnatural. How could he answer Adrahil's just condemnations? Nay, they would become bitter enemies if this erupted in such a public and scandalous manner. Of course, this would all reflect poorly on Lord Elrond as well, for it was his suggestion to Adrahil that initiated the betrothal in the first place. My kinsman desires to foster stronger ties between the First and Second-born, but this tribulation will create a chasm between our peoples that will be difficult to bridge."

"Ai! I had no idea!" Legolas forgot his own anger over being spied upon and drew closer to Erestor, concern plain on his honest features. "Can you do anything to stop it, Lord Erestor? I won't have Elrond made a fool because of that pompous Man's inability to use discretion regarding his affairs."

Erestor smiled; this was precisely the effect he'd hoped his words would produce. "Fear not, it is in averting such catastrophes that all my training and experience is best deployed. I will detain this Bertran and prevent his tongue from wagging, by removing it if necessary."

"But that won't change anything now!" exclaimed Legolas. "There is something more that even Denethor doesn't realise. The Lady Finduilas saw them."

"Valar! Are you certain?" Erestor stuttered out, though it was obvious Legolas wouldn't suggest this were it not true.

"Aye. She followed her husband-to-be, no doubt intending to make him her mate a day early, for she was completely naked. Completely drunk as well, I may say, but still managed to track him. She noticed two lovers entwined upon the grass but they did not notice her. Curiosity got the better of the fair Lady, but when she realised who the couple was she sobered up quickly enough. She fled in the direction of her rooms."

"Naneth Nastaron!" Erestor hissed out this vile obscenity and barely even took note of the uplifted brows and crimson flush overtaking The Sylvan's burning ears. "That explains her odd behaviour this morn. Why didn't you do something?"

"What exactly might I have done?" Legolas bent an exasperated glare on the harried advisor.
"Besides, I was not close by, Lord Erestor, but on the balcony and otherwise engaged." This was said with all the aplomb he could manage, though his deepening blush revealed fully what and who had so engaged the woodland archer.

Erestor made a mental note to stroll through the gardens beneath Elrond's balcony of an evening sometime in the future, enjoying for an instant the lurid vision that flashed across his brain. Long years of life enabled him to put the pleasing image aside for later reference. "Eru's arse, what more?" He paced about after voicing this blasphemy, running his hand through his long black hair as he tried to sort out how to amend the situation.

"I don't want Elrond or Imladris to suffer for these humans' weaknesses," Legolas commented, "but perhaps it is better for the fair Lady of Dol Amroth to know the worst, for it is unlikely that selfish Man will give up his lover for her. Why should she endure such indignity? As for the alliance, mayhap Gondor would not prove so strong if it is beset by traitors from within its own borders. Dol Amroth could always form a confederation with the lands of Lebennin and Lossarnach."

Erestor was pulled from his ruminations by this unexpectedly astute observation from the supposedly ignorant Wood Elf. He sent an appraising examination over the unassuming presence before him, noting for the first time the light of intellect within the cerulean gaze. It was suddenly apparent that Legolas' bold remarks to Denethor were not merely boastful posturing. Somehow he had received something of an education, most likely from Elrond. That made sense, considering his cousin's desire to make Legolas a permanent part of his life. Erestor had a sudden picture of the two lover's entangled on the bed, hot, panting, and sweaty, discussing politics in between their bouts of passionate pleasuring. *Mayhap hearing The Sylvan expound on affairs of state enhances Elrond's excitement.* The notion struck him as deliriously funny and he struggled to stifle the urge to laugh out loud, ducking his head and coughing to cover the abrupt snort of mirth that exited his nostrils.

"Something wrong, Hîren?" asked Legolas drily, not fooled by the advisor's loss of composure, certain he'd seen amusement fill those dark, compelling eyes. Amusement at his expense, he was equally sure.

"Nothing serious," replied Erestor sharply, again brought up short by a tone he'd never heard in the youth's voice before. That unsettling expression of deep disappointment had returned to the Wood Elf's eyes. He found that he wished to appease this unknown aspect of Legolas' personality and reflected anew on the proposed alliance of the three coastal realms. Arguing such a remedy revealed a lack of wisdom only age could grant but the idea wasn't without merit and it was clear enough that Legolas comprehended those advantages. The Chief Advisor decided to respond without the usual tone of dismissive derision he employed when forced to address The Sylvan directly.

"Those lands would indeed benefit from such an agreement, yet not even that confederation would fare well should Gondor fall to the enemy. Consider this: the alliance Elrond seeks would bring those other human realms into stronger allegiance than before, for they are as proud of their free status as is Dol Amroth. None of them wish to become mere fifes of Gondor, yet neither can they withstand the forces of Mordor and Harad combined.

"If Adrahil unites his blood with Echthelion's, the lesser kingdoms will be more willing to recognise the rule of the next Steward, for they already share kinship with Dol Amroth. The three coastal realms have long practised intermarriage between the ruling Houses and their pact is strong. The time is near when Lebennin and Lossarnach will be asked to risk lands and lives in defence of Minas Tirith and they must perceive in that sacrifice the preservation of their own. They must unite or all will fall, one by one, should Gondor stand alone in the dark days ahead."

Legolas nodded, for this was wise counsel and he understood the trust Elrond placed in the elder
statesman. He opened his mouth to express this but all that came forth was a loud, uncouth grumble as his body once more insisted on making its needs foremost. If he had been blushing before he was crimson in humiliation now and turned aside from the expression of vaguely disgusted amusement clouding the advisor's eyes. "Excuse me!" the Wood Elf blurted out. "I beg pardon, Lord; I haven't broken fast as yet but for one bite of fruit."

"Indeed, you must be famished. Please, go and appease your appetite for I know of the life you nurture," Erestor intoned, smiling as Legolas whipped around to gape at him, obviously stunned. "Elrond told me just minutes ago; I offer my congratulations to you for your pregnancy has won my cousin's heart and assured your place in our valley. Now I must tend to the unpleasant business of Denethor's inconstancy and avert the traitor's plot. Namarie, Legolas." With that and a slight nod Erestor turned on his heel, rather ashamed to have caused the swift shadow of hurt and sorrow that suffused the Wood Elf's eyes, and marched back to the house, glancing back once to behold Legolas moving deeper into the grounds.

Legolas was at once furious with Erestor and frustrated with his uncooperative physique. Never before had he voiced his opinions and he was sure the advisor had been impressed that he'd done so with such insight. Of all the times to emit such a ghastly noise! The only thing worse would have been for the sound to emerge from the other end. Yet, his stomach's rude emission had been unplanned while the Noldorin advisor's unkind remarks had been specifically chosen to insult and denigrate both him and his unborn child. Just when it seemed he would treat me at least with as much regard as he grants to Dwarven folk, since I daren't hope to be accorded the rank of an equal. Legolas was dismayed, having no idea how to make Erestor stop, well aware that most of the unpleasant references to his race and status arose due to the seneschal's gossiping. If he could not gain Erestor's respect he would forever be an outsider in Imladris, no matter what Elrond decreed.

His insides churned and groaned anew and Legolas rubbed his belly, the persistent ache painfully acidic, the hunger so overpowering that his senses were affected. He could swear he smelled his favourite dish roasting somewhere nearby and without consciously realising it permitted the enticing aroma to govern his path. By the time the jolly sound of the running brook met his ears, he could hear mingled within the congenial turbulence the muted voices of two elves laughing and talking together. The strong scent of garlic and onion made his mouth water and Legolas was convinced he was not imagining it. A few steps more confirmed his belief. He passed through a stand of junipers and there found the source of the voices and the delicious aromas. Elladan and Elrohir were seated on the bank of the stream, tending a small fire over which the delectable flounder steamed. They paused and looked up at him, shared a gaze, and then stood from the ground, all in perfect unison.

"Aur Maur, Legolas," said Elladan with a friendly wave and a smile.

"We've been waiting for you," added Elrohir, the same expression upon his features.

"Won't you join us?" they chorused together and though Legolas felt it would be wiser to turn and run his stomach and his curiosity both overruled him. Cautiously he approached.

"You like flatfish and shallots?" he asked with no small surprise, eyeing the feast greedily.

"Nay, we despise it," laughed Elladan.

"This is for you, Legolas. Sit, it is plain enough you would like to have some," urged Elrohir, reaching out and taking hold of the sylvan's arm to guide him to their little camp.

"I hope you don't mind that we used your fishing gear," said Elladan apologetically, flanking the Wood Elf and taking his other arm. "Lindir said it would be all right."
"Oh, no, it's fine." Legolas gazed from one to the other, overwhelmed by the friendly timbre in their tone and manner. "You caught and made this meal for me?" He was dumbfounded; they couldn't understand what that would mean to him, could they? If not, why were they so welcoming, so pleased to see him? Never had they done other than frown and scowl and bark at him to get out of their lives. Except that one time when all this trouble started. Legolas' heart gave a tremendous leap and he sucked in a loud breath, eyes going wide and mouth going dry.

As it had been ten years past, instincts he could not control awoke. The pressure of their hands on his arms was warm, strong, and comforting, the scent of their desire, now more prominent than the delectable breakfast, was intoxicating, and the expression of devotion and feral hunger shining from their stormy eyes nothing less than hypnotic. They didn't seem like the haughty noble Lords he knew; they were simply elves, wild and fair and free, hair unfettered, clothes askew and damp from the brook, here and there a scatter of fish scales clinging to skin and cloth winking with the light of Anor. Their presence enveloped him. So near he could hear the paired beating of their hearts, he was caught in their dual auras, captured by that mysterious something they possessed, virile and dynamic personas, just like their father.

He made a choking sort of gasp as this comparison erupted through his thoughts and sought to shake them off. One look in the identical grey depths confirmed they had no intention of permitting that and they simultaneously tightened their grips while murmuring soothing reassurances.

"Aye, we caught the fish for you."

"Come, you should not go so long without nourishment."

"We'll see to it that doesn't happen any more."

"You mustn't neglect yourself; the little one will suffer, too."

His soul cried out in silent despair for these were the very words he needed to hear yet the voice speaking them belonged not to the one who held his heart. He hadn't any defences at hand, however, for his body responded with sensuous resonation, recognising the link he shared with them, and craved more. Dumbly he let them lead him to the fire and sit him down upon the lawn, watching, entranced, as they resumed their places before him. Elladan took up a morsel of the fish and held it out, sidling closer until Legolas felt his knee touch upon his thigh. He transferred his sight from the hand bearing the food to the intense and confident expression adorning the handsome visage.

"Try it; we cooked it just for you," Elladan coaxed, his tone gentle and tender yet subtly salacious. His nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with Legolas' scent, and brought the succulent, white flesh right up to the woodland archer's lips. He waited patiently, certain of the response this would generate.

Obediently, Legolas opened his mouth and let Elladan feed him, closing his lips over the Noldorin elf's fingers ere he withdrew them. They both shuddered. His heart was pounding and he suddenly felt dizzy, a combination of exhilaration and fear just as he'd experienced all those years ago when first he'd encountered the Lord of Imladris and his sons.

Elladan raised his fingers and licked them, eyes never wavering from the wide blue depths of the astounded sylvan. "Mmmmmm, so good." He let his eyelids flutter shut as he relished the residue left by Legolas' tongue.

Legolas chewed and swallowed slowly, mesmerised by the sight, until Elrohir also drew nigh, bringing to his lips another bite of the flounder. He met the younger twin's compelling stare and once more opened for the nourishing food, now caught in the spell of identical passion mirrored in
Elrohir's countenance. He shifted closer to them, longing for the comfort of physical contact, setting a hand on each one's thigh, lightly massaging the strong muscles through the soft leather. A sense of urgency built within him as an emptiness opened in his soul; a sense of something lacking from his spirit made itself known to a nearly painful degree.

When Elrohir withdrew his fingers, he lightly traced Legolas' mouth, a sigh escaping him, his eyes tracking even the slightest movement of facial muscles, thrilling to the bobbing motion of the larynx as the offering was consumed. He could hear how much effort it took for Legolas to breathe and the increasing tempo of his pulse, he could smell the hunger rising in the archer's tense body. He leaned closer and lifted a handful of the golden locks, burying his nose within the yellow tresses. "You are magnificent," he whispered hoarsly.

"Oh," Legolas whimpered, pressing for more contact, panting for air, helpless under the powerful urge awakened on the deserted plains of Eregion ten years ago; awakened and unfulfilled.

"Be at peace; we will protect you," Elrohir murmured, nuzzling the elegant neck and nipping at Legolas earlobe, "you and your elfling." He smiled as another deep shiver worked through the aroused Wood Elf.

While Elrohir had him thus distracted, Elladan carefully loosened the ties of Legolas' shirt with one hand and fed him another morsel of fish with the other. "You will be ours," he whispered, sight locked on hazy blue eyes laced with longing. As he pulled his wet fingers from the sylvan's mouth, he casually slipped them inside the open fabric and caressed the taut peak of a rosy nipple, hard and hot beneath his touch.

The intimate pressure sent a scintillating jolt of pleasure racing unerringly from breast to groin and Legolas' penis twitched in his leggings. "Nay! Daro!" The stimulation awoke him from his stupor and he cried out in alarm and shame, jumping to his feet as he shoved away what seemed a multitude of hands groping and petting him. He was gasping in near sobs, frantic to get free, staring in horror from one to the other as they rose and followed. He shook his head, arms held before him to block further liberties, imploring and warning them at the same time, and turned in panic. With all the speed he could gather he fled from the sons of Elrond, confused and shocked and guilt-ridden, running for the house, running for his beloved. "Nín'ódhel!"

The twins watched him go, flustered and flushed and racked with remorse but satisfied with the outcome of their seduction.

Just as Lindir said it would be.

Aye. Now we must convince Adar.

With this wordless exchange Elladan and Elrohir resumed their places by the brook, certain their father would come storming out of the house to confront them for their trespass upon his mate.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Elsewhere in the Garden, near Aragorn's Rooms ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"That was unbelievably stupid, Den," snarled the heir of Isildur, shaking his head ere he clamped the stem of his pipe between his teeth, shooting a glance at the wizard to judge his assessment of the situation. "You should not have treated with Legolas that way. He seems to me an honourable elf and has every right to demand a formal retraction, you know, and should you refuse he could humiliate you quite thoroughly by challenging you to combat."

"Most regrettable, young steward," intoned frowning Istar, glowering at the shame-faced Man
from beneath his bristling grey eyebrows. "What made you choose to insult him? He's never done anything to you." He drew in a lung-full of smoke from his own briar-wood bowl and blew the resultant vapours in Denethor's face.

"Do you think he will tell her?" Denethor's gaze shifted from one to the other as he worried the hilt of his dagger. Unwilling to face his father with his transgression, he'd sought out those advisors he believed most trustworthy: Thorongil and Gandalf.

"Who, Legolas?" asked Gandalf irritably. "Of course not, dullard! He's an elf and a sylvan at that."

"And that is supposed to signify something to me? I care not for these elves, Noldorin, sylvan or whatever variety they may be. Would that we had never come to this cursed place!" snapped the frightened mortal. He pounded the heavy fist of one hand into the palm of the other, an ugly scowl contorting his features.

"Mind your words," cautioned Aragorn, pointing at his friend with his pipe. "The elves have done you no wrong. The Lord of Imladris wishes only to bolster the stability of the region most beset by Mordor's evil influence. It is this lover of yours who poses a threat to your marriage and the alliance to Dol Amroth, not the Wood Elf."

"Nonsense! Bertran is entirely loyal to me and to my father. He would never seek to betray our interests."

Mithrandir sighed dramatically and rubbed his forehead. "Can you not perceive that not everyone in Gondor has the same view on what those interests are or should be? You must at least consider the possibility that Bertran is a dupe, a well trained pawn set to topple the ruling Stewards by revealing what many would call a weakness in your character. Such upheaval in the governance of Gondor would produce chaos that can serve only one realm, and that is Mordor."

There was a short silence as all three considered this. The Dunedan and the Istar could verily hear the gears turning in the other Man's brain as he digested this insight. Even as they watched, his dark eyes glittered with outrage and his jaw clenched in fury.

"Bertran must be arrested at once," he hissed in low and venomous tones.

"On what grounds?" demanded Aragorn, appalled at this announcement. "There is no evidence that he is guilty of any crime against Gondor or the House of the Stewards. Would you adopt the policies of the Dark Lord?"

"Well what am I to do?" exclaimed the enraged son of the Steward. The flustered mortal paced about and flung his arms up in belligerent despair. "I will not have my father learn of this! I will not be ousted from my rightful place of Lordship before my day has even dawned! I must expose Bertran's treachery before he has the chance to reveal his sordid tale. I have no choice but to restrain him."

"Mayhap the elves could intervene and convince this Man to change his mind," pondered Mithrandir, a rather unpleasant smile upending his lips as he puffed his tobacco into a great fluffy cloud about his head. "Glorfindel can be quite persuasive when he so wishes." He shared a cunning glance at Aragorn who gave a small, noncommittal shrug.

"Would they do this?" asked Denethor, eyes shining with hope as he looked from the wizard to Thorongil.

"Perhaps, if you hadn't behaved so poorly to Legolas. I doubt Elrond will care to intervene on your behalf now," remarked the captain drily. Of course, he was but toying with the Steward's son, in
repayment for his crude and insulting behaviour. Legolas needed no more burdens to bear just now and the altercation Denethor had described quite displeased the Ranger on his new friend's behalf. On top of this, Denethor only expressed concern over his possible loss of power and prestige. Not once had he spoken of the hurt that would be done to the fair Lady should the news be made public. His cohort's response to this modest rebuke was surprising and disappointing, for Denethor rounded on him in fury.

"Fine, then. I do not need the aid of these elves to tend my affairs. I will deal with this traitor myself. Bertran shall remain as silent as the grave." His voice shook with cold hatred and his eyes looked murder at the Ranger and the wizard, freezing their hearts and their tongues both so that they could but stare at this brutal revelation. Denethor turned to go while his ire was high enough to carry out this foul deed and nearly fell over in shock to find his way blocked by two unexpected witnesses.

The Lady Finduilas stood framed by sweeping tendrils of sweetly scented wisteria cascading from the shaded arbour abutting the house. Regal and noble, cloaked in the august antiquity of her sylvan heritage, her calm face remained impassive as her eyes, unblurred by tears, gazed in cool appraisal upon the participants in the impromptu council. She came as a Princess of her people, garbed in rich, royal attire with a golden diadem upon her brow from which an array of fine translucent pearls gleamed in mellow splendour. At her side was Arwen Undomiel, the Evenstar of Imladris, no less a presence of authority and might than her revered Adar and Lord would be. This aura of power superseded even the external beauty for which she was renowned. Yet her light was subdued and this was not accidental, for she would not permit the glory of her essence to detract from Finduilas. Together these Ladies approached and it was for the Men as if Varda and Yavanna walked in their midst, invoking their wordless awe.

Finduilas spoke: "There is no need for you to resort to evil means to manage such a trifle." Her eyes sliced deeply into Denethor's soul as they fell upon him and he could not bear to meet her gaze, finding the grass an easier thing to study. "This morning it was brought to the attention of Lord Erestor that Bertran was spying upon the Lord of the Vale in his own grounds last night, intruding upon his most private moments. When Glorfindel confronted the Man to learn his motives for this crude and lascivious behaviour, the dismal creature denied anything of the sort. The witness against him, however, was unimpeachable; it was clear that the Man was there.

"Steward Echthelion was called forth and together with Lord Elrond the interrogation continued, but Bertran became sullen and refused to admit his wrong, hinting at greater crimes that others should answer for yet never revealing his meaning. While this went on, one of Lord Elrond's staff came forward, bringing evidence of a plot meant to unseat the ruling House of the Stewards, found whilst tidying Bertran's room. Based on that revelation, the valet broke down and confessed at last. He is being detained in one of the cellars, locked in a storage closet, until the rest of the conspirators can be arrested in Minas Tirith where they shall all be brought to trial. It would seem that Gondor owes much to the Lord of Imladris and this anonymous witness."

"Extraordinary!" breathed Gandalf, his brows all wrinkled up in wonderment and admiration for the Lady of Dol Amroth. He puffed out a large smoke ring that settled briefly around Denethor's neck before dissipating.

Denethor gawked at Finduilas, uncomprehending and still fearful of her transformation from frail and weeping maiden to this vision of beauty and strength. Such sons a woman like this would give him! What honour would be his with her at his side! Thinking on his ugly thoughts and words, Denethor was shamed and once more tore his sight away, for such as he should not look upon someone of such pure intent. Little did he merit a wife with such dignity and grace. With a hoarse cry he fell to his knees before her and took up the hem of her gown, kissing it, for he felt his hands unworthy to touch hers, his lips too sullied and dirty to press against those slender, white digits. He kept his face
cast down as he drew in a choking breath, attempting to speak what was in his mind without success.

"Come," said Arwen quietly, addressing the others as she held out her hand to Aragorn. "Let us permit these two some privacy in which to express their hearts." Her kindly eyes had not missed the wave of sorrow that swept over her Lady-friend's features as she beheld Denethor's reaction. When Finduilas turned to meet her gaze Arwen poured forth sufficient sisterly support and comfort to bolster the Princess's strength anew. With that silent communication completed, Arwen laid her hand upon Aragorn's arm and together they followed the wizard back inside the house. Yet before the limit of her elven ears was exceeded, she heard Finduilas' words to her husband-to-be:

"Rise, Denethor, and bow no more to me for it is to Arwen you owe this obeisance. I was the witness to Bertran's rendezvous with you and at first it seemed a greater injury than my pride could bear. Then she came to me; I poured out my woe to the Evenstar and she returned great wisdom and the courage to do what is right.

"I will wed you and rule beside you, for what are the concerns of one woman's heart against the protection of all the people whom she loves in this world? Dol Amroth needs this alliance. We will not speak of this indiscreet episode, for I am not yet your wife and cannot demand fidelity to vows as yet unspoken. In future, I hope not to be confronted with your lovers."

"I swear to you; for me there will be no other lover, my Lady, none other than you," Denethor's raspy reply feebly drifted in the air.

"Do not invoke a promise to which you cannot hold," she rebuked him softly. "I am satisfied with my fate as long as you will abide by the terms I have set. Swear to that instead and we will understand one another at last."

"You have my solemn oath, Finduilas. Never shall you be made to face such unseemly behaviour from me again." Denethor's words were limned in tears for he had meant his initial pledge with every atom of his being: as long as she was beside him, he would have no other. As long as she breathed, Denethor would be great and good and noble, a faithful Steward like Mardil of old. Yet it was with both resentment and sorrow that he considered this, for he knew she would never believe him, never trust him, and never, ever love him.

Arwen sighed as a corner was turned and they passed through a heavy oak door, relieved to be at last out of range of the breaking of all Finduilas' hopes for a happy union, and Aragorn patted her arm in comfort.

"You know something of this unexpected outcome, I think," he prompted, smiling with all the love he held in his heart.

Arwen inclined her head gravely. "I do," she said and sighed again but offered no details.

Ahead of them Gandalf suddenly stopped and turned around to look her in the eye. "This mysterious witness to Bertran's purported peeping, or other unsavoury predilections, was that you dear Arwen?" He lifted a brow in challenge as if he doubted she would care to admit this were it the truth, but the Evenstar only laughed, pleased to have something so ridiculous to distract her gloomy thoughts.

"My, my, Gandalf, what a filthy mind you have! Do you really believe I would find the intimate activities of two Men to my taste? Even worse, do you imagine I wander Adaren's gardens in the night, hoping to catch him in the act with Legolas? For shame!"

"What? Oh, you impish elfling!" he blustered out, eyes tremendous in flustered denial, flushing a bright scarlet as the vulgarity of his suggestion hit home. "By chance, I meant, by chance!"
"Oh, of course you did!" Aragorn sang out in mock affront. "You have insulted the Lady Arwen; I believe it is my duty to defend her honour."

"By the stars!" huffed Mithrandir, striding away from the couple just as fast as he could so that his beard and long robes billowed like gale-tattered clouds around him. "Intolerable conduct, no respect for elders these days."

They were all headed to Elrond's office to report what had transpired, Aragorn and Arwen still chuckling over Mithrandir's embarrassment, when Arwen's step halted and she let a small gasp of dismay leave her lips as all merriment faded from her features. Neither the ears of her beloved mortal Man nor those of the revered Maia could detect what her sharper senses had discerned. From the interior of the house drifted the disjointed sound of an agitated voice raised in high distress, divulging a long lament in a language seldom heard in Rivendell. The voice belonged to Legolas, of course, and his excited diatribe fled from his heart in his native Nandorin, for he was too distraught to manage Sindarin. In a fraction of time he was done and silence reigned, for his flight from Lord Elrond's council room was rendered inaudible by the innate lightness of his sylvan nature.

"Arwen?" Aragorn gazed at her worried frown anxiously. His tone brought Gandalf to a halt immediately.

"I don't know what's happened, Estel, only that it isn't good. I heard Legolas speaking with greater volume than I have ever noted before, and the meaning of the words was indecipherable but not his misery."

"Let us make haste, then, for perhaps we can help," urged Mithrandir and resumed his progress with greater speed, the two lovers right behind him.

Their concern was not unwarranted, for while the uneasy truce between Denethor and Finduilas was taking place, a fracture split the newly patched wound in the bond between the Noldorin noble and his woodland archer.

TBC

Lím-dalu Aur: Flat-fish Morning
Mereth od Ened Ethuil: The Celebration of Mid-Spring
Naneth Nastaron: mother f-er
Pethron: narrator
Kwingarô nethrá: Archer youthful - from a VERY ancient form of elvish
Ech Vrassen: White-hot Spear - lightning
elenillé: little stars - sparks - from ancient elvish forms
Emil o Gladgalan: Prince of Greenwood
Ceryn o Cabor: frog's balls
Minnon?: May I enter?
Líltta Nár: Fire Dance
Cundithen: Little Prince
Tawaro: spirit of the woods, dryad
Padathon Dalt: snail or slug - Slipping Walker
Tulus Iaur: Ancient Poplar
Pen Vrûn: Old One

GLOSSARY

NOTE: AI! I know I promised to get to the nitty-gritty in this chapter, and I did, but it's just way too long to post as a single chapter. So, I am breaking it up; the sections will post in succession
rapidly over the next few days. This way you get a little breathing room to get used to the ideas being presented here. I realise that this is going to be controversial; people are VERY protective of the twins! Yet I love them, too, and I don’t think I've made them really dark, certainly no worse than Elrond in this tale. At least there is a reason for what is happening, something beyond themselves that they do not control. Yes, they seem rather predatory here but it isn’t as bad as it looks on the surface. Trust me, they will find their hearts again; a change is in the wind.

OH, Erestor had a little epiphany didn’t he now? That’s something I want to expand on in future, once all this intrigue is over with. At least the mortal’s conflict has been resolved. I surprised myself, thinking I was going to make Finduilas noble in this tale, but I think she is rather naive here, and guilty of employing a double standard while at the same time exhibiting that ‘hell hath no fury’ cliche. Yet it is Denethor I pity. It’s very sad; Denethor is already convinced he is unforgivable and unloveable. Was the death of Lady Finduilas the slipping of the keystone that supported his character? Perhaps, but I think it is equally likely that his resentment of her cold dismissal poisoned him over time. Other changes: the word list at the bottom was getting impossibly long, so from now on all the words will be housed in the Glossary and just the new ones will appear at the end of the chapters. Also, the BONUS chapter can now be accessed from the Chapters Button Bar.

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Chapter 12

NOTE: Do not let the title scare you off; the twins and Elrond will NOT be engaging in intercourse with each other, in this or any chapter.

Aearlinn - Adar, Ionath, Melethryn

Frantic, desperate, terrified, and angry Legolas sped away from the twins, hurtling toward the house and the safety of Elrond's arms. Yet as soon as he achieved a small distance from the stream-side camp, the impact of the instinctive yearning diminished and his outrage came to the fore. How dare they! He was already bound, the mate to their father, the life-bearer for their youngest sibling and still they pursued him as if he were any unfettered elf. How clever they were to learn of sylvan ways and court him so sweetly, hunting for him, bringing food and comfort and promises of protection and devotion. Such things were Elrond's deeds to do, not theirs!

A sudden spasm of grief assailed him and he faltered in mid-stride, for it was undeniable that these were the very things his beloved had not done. Why? Why must it be the twin brothers who found the means to care for him as mates truly should? They seemed more concerned over his health and their unborn brother's than their Adar. Yet if this was so, then why had they not claimed him all those years ago? They could not choose which one would have me then. This grim thought was fortified by vague and broken memories of much strife and a brief image of a ferocious physical conflict between the brothers. They had been in deadly earnest, each determined to prevent the other from offering his soul to the fading warrior in their care. And while they were distracted in combat, Elrond finally claimed me.

It didn't make sense; he couldn't grasp the reason for it. His injuries had been too severe, the poison accosting him too virulent and evil; he hadn't really been aware of what was taking place. Still, he had enough knowledge to comprehend that the coupling with the Noldorin Lord had been delayed long enough to reduce his health to the point of expiration. Legolas had felt his light dwindle until only a pale glimmer of it remained and had heard the call of Nāmo before the searing heat and energy of Elrond's strength and vitality yanked him back in a blistering explosion of glorious delight. The horrific pain that followed their wound-jarring coitus and the lingering sickness attested to the near failure of the bonding.

There was only one conclusion his distraught and grief-clouded mind could conjure. With renewed wrath, Legolas sprang back into motion, his speed fuelled by his need to confront Elrond. He tore across the grounds, leaping over a stone wall dividing the formal gardens from the more private areas of the estate, and bounded across the front courtyard. Up the stairs he bolted and into the house, making for the offices where he knew he would find the valley's ruler. Disregarding the closed door and the serious voices behind it, Legolas threw open the barrier and blazed into the room, sweeping the occupants with a glare of such open ferocity that the Men and elves fell silent and quailed under this scalding scrutiny: Erestor, Echthelion, Glorfindel, Adrahil, and finally Elrond. On him the icy cobalt fire rested as Legolas advanced, arm upraised and finger pointing, chest heaving more from his over-wrought emotions than the exertions that had carried him so quickly hence.

"You! This is all your fault! It isn't supposed to be like this!" the Wood Elf shouted in his native tongue. "I knew I would find you in here with your councillors and your precious human guests. In here instead of with me, always somewhere else instead of with me. Why is it that I must endure this? Do you even know or care? Erestor haunts my steps, a lustful predator waiting for a chance to
pounce; Glorfindel gifts me with combs; and your sons seduce me whilst securing my meals. All this while you preen and posture before these odious mortals, too absorbed in your exalted notion of saving their pitiful realms to take note!” By now he was close enough to see the flecks of brown in the startled grey of Elrond's eyes.

"Legolas, please calm down; I can't underst…” Elrond's attempts to placate his lover were rudely cut off.

"No! You relish this sense of power and control, intervening in the affairs of lesser people to make yourself feel important. Is that why you deigned to mate with me? Did it give you a sense of satisfaction to salvage me from Mandos while simultaneously removing the source of contention between Elladan and Elrohir? You let them tend me; you let death tease me, you toyed with me, with us all!"

"What are you saying?" Elrond was horrified to hear the anger in these words, though Legolas was speaking too rapidly for him to follow the statements clearly. Whatever the basis for these recriminations, nothing could be resolved like this. He tried to grasp Legolas' arms, hoping for what he knew not, only believing the physical contact would make him recall the love professed just hours past.

"I don't understand you," Legolas shied back from the reaching arms. His voice nearly broke as he continued, the magnitude of his sorrow exceeding that of his rage. "Why is it your sons who court me, foregoing their own comfort to prepare my favourite dish for breakfast, succouring my fears with kind words and gentleness while all you would give me was a single orange and a multitude of excuses?" Having spoken these thoughts aloud and granted them life and reality, Legolas could stand Elrond's rattled and uncomprehending gaze no more. Without waiting for any answers he turned and retreated with speed equal to that which had propelled him thither, eager to get away before he dissolved into tears before the gaping audience. He was gone in a flash of dancing golden hair.

For a few tense moments silence ruled as every eye now fixed upon Elrond, who stood still as stone, staring in disbelief at the empty space which his beloved had occupied just minutes ago. Then the mortals shifted in their seats, looking to each other in concern before focusing on Erestor. The seneschal shot the Balrog-slayer a quick glance and received a minute shrug of bewilderment in return. Erestor cleared his throat and the noise drew Elrond's eyes to him.

"Perhaps you should…"

"Yes. Please excuse me," Elrond spoke calmly and gave the Men a shallow bow before exiting the room.

He followed the path Legolas had taken, trying to translate from Nandorin to Sindarin as he walked. The speech had been mostly incomprehensible, but he'd caught the names of both his Chief Advisor and his revered captain, a mention of stalking prey, combs, something about breakfast, and reference to his sons. Now it was his turn to become embroiled in anger, certain that therein lay the root of the archer's sudden turn from happiness to infuriated sorrow. How they had found Legolas he couldn't understand, but he was sure Elladan and Elrohir had harmed him. Originally intent upon catching up to the sylvan youth, the Noldorin lord changed his mind. Recalling Legolas' desire to go down to the stream, he altered direction and set off, determined to settle this conflict once and for all.

Elrond found them more quickly than he'd at first believed, for he'd imagined his sons would avoid him rather than face his just wrath. Yet Legolas' trail was not hard to follow and the scent of the fish soon caught his awareness; the bizarre reference to food became less obscure. They were waiting for him beside the embers of the cook fire, standing side by side, a sobering agglomeration of dread, defiance, and wistful hope within their contritely stormy eyes. He glared from one to the other, not
prepared for the sense of conflicted remorse that verily suffused the air around them, and warily weighed their half-penitent, half-pugilistic posture. Angry though he was, he had no intention of initiating a crude brawling contest with his own offspring.

He'd expected them to present the accusing disdain which had become the norm whenever they chanced to look at him. In an instant he recognised his own guilty shame invited that response and checked himself; yes, he believed in his heart that whatever Legolas was so upset about, he was to blame. Before the regrets could overwhelm his anger, which had the mighty warriors temporarily cowed, Elrond halted a metre distant and assumed his most regally imposing stance, crossing his arms over his chest. He would play the stern father to their mirrored personas of adolescent guile.

"Tell me what you have done," he demanded.

"Only what you should have," retorted Elrohir, words meant to indict his father coloured in self-reproach. "Ten years you've had him and still you know nothing of how to treat him?" It was a low blow, for in truth neither he nor his brother would own such knowledge but for their long discussion with Lindir.

"If you aren't prepared to court him properly perhaps you aren't fit to remain his mate," added Elladan, a deliberate jab at his Adar's pride. As predicted, Elrond gave a violent start at these bold challenges.

"I am his mate, like it or not, and you two will let him be!" thundered the Lord of Imladris. Before him stood his rivals; the wise and patient parent transformed into a menacing, dominant male.

"Are you certain?" goaded Elrohir, sharing a glance with his brother. There was a slight shift in their disposition reminiscent of the tense gathering of strength before plunging into battle. "If so then why does he long for our touch? How is it we had him eating from our very hands?"

"He is very, very hungry, Adar," added Elladan, his suggestive tone verily saturated with lust and longing.

A sharp gasp fled Elrond's lungs and he staggered back, for now he recalled something else about Legolas' impassioned speech: the scent of arousal. A heady hint of his sons' musky essence drifted in the atmosphere, too, and he could no longer deny it. "Nay," the elven Lord whispered and felt his spirit crumble even as his head dropped and his shoulders sagged. Legolas loved him and only him; how could this be happening?

"It isn't his fault," Elladan was quick to intrude on the gloomy thoughts he could see collecting in his father's heart. "No one is to blame. Truly we did seduce him but only to prove a point, to him and to you. Legolas is suffering terribly, Adar, and it is up to us to help him."

"All of us," chimed Elrohir as he reached for his father, drawing him down to sit on the grass. His relief to have reached this stage of the conversation unscathed was shared wordlessly with his brother. "His love for you must be tremendous, for according to Lindir it should be impossible for instinct such as this to be denied. We believe sincerely in that and rejoice for you both, and for the child."

"Then why?" Elrond's voice cracked and from the fissures oozed the bitter residue of this painful betrayal.

"Forgive us; we needed proof of that devotion. We've not been here to see the two of you together and the poisonous desire lingers in our veins, making us reluctant to consider the possibility that his heart is beyond our reach," explained Elladan.
"To say nothing of the guilt we both feel for desiring it," Elrohir elaborated their dilemma. "There's no thrill in this lechery but we find it impossible to quell. We are suffering, too, Ada."

"But he...he wants you?" Elrond didn't even attempt to hide the terrible grief this realisation provoked, looking from one to the other of his sons. "How can he love me and still desire another?"

"No, Legolas does not want us," Elrohir said and then shook his head with a frown, "or rather I should say he does not WANT to want us, but it is beyond his ability to control. It all goes back to that day in Eregion, Adar. None of us really understood what was happening; even you tried to deny the urge and fend off the need to bond with him until there was no other option. Had you coupled with him at once, before we got so involved, this situation would never have come to pass."

"We would have forgotten the unreasoning craving or at least remembered it only instead of experiencing it daily," Elladan's statement was packed with the frustration of this reality.

"I caused this?"

"Nay, not purposefully so, Ada," the elder twin reassured. Never had he seen his father so vulnerable and the sight went right to his heart. He leaned forward to clasp Elrond's arm in a comforting grip and offered a slender smile of encouragement. "You thought it would be wrong to engage in such a carnal act with someone wounded, unable to give consent.

"We thought the same, for we couldn't comprehend that the very call of his body to ours was consent in itself, so near was he to death. We were all trying to fight off the overwhelming lust while hoping to preserve his life and subconsciously plotting to be the one to claim him."

"Aye, even me, though I have pretended the opposite all this time," Elrohir admitted, reaching for Elladan's hand as he did so. The answering squeeze made him smile, though sadly, as he continued. "There's no need to recite the events that transpired, the harm that was done." Elrohir could not contain the rancour these memories generated and heavy silence followed his words as each one relived those tormenting days and their unthinkable conclusion.

It was not a thing any son wished to witness, his father petting and stroking an overtly aroused male, especially one nearly insensible from blood loss and poison, yet just this scene had met the brothers upon returning from seeking the source of the contaminant. They had hastily concluded their reconnaissance of the area, drawn by a curious need to be close to the fallen elf, and there was Elrond bent over the prone, naked figure, licking and biting the unknown warrior's ears, fist wrapped around both his and the archer's penis, rapidly pumping as he groaned and rocked into the motion. The odour of their combined release overprinted the air and left a lingering tinge of disgust and shame. Elrond had dared to meet his sons' horrified stares while wiping the cooling ejaculate from his hand.

He'd explained about the sylvan way and justified his actions as a lesser means of saving the sole survivor of the Orc attack, offering a limited intimacy that he hoped would assure the archer he was cared for while refusing to force a union upon someone he didn't know. Really, it was just an excuse; Elrond had no idea if such a method would succeed. He simply couldn't deny his own craving and had given in using the least offensive means he could think of to achieve satisfaction without hurting his patient.

At first it seemed to work. The warrior lapsed into unconsciousness but his condition stabilised. The trio of Noldorin lords established a secure camp and cared for the horses. Elrond wandered off, seeking roots he needed to create an antidote; Elrohir left to tend to the dead; and Elladan remained with the patient. It was not long before he'd felt the tingling beginnings of passion and erotic visions of coupling with the pale, golden-haired sylvan occupied his thoughts. In vain he sought to ignore
them. Telling himself he meant only to assuage poison-induced fever, Elladan had bathed the battered body, cleaning away blood, dirt, and semen, discovering the secret hidden behind the scrotum, fingers probing and penetrating that most private domain.

His touch had aroused the elf and lured his exhausted mind out of oblivion. Drawn by the attar emitted as he explored the hot, slippery hole, Elladan was soon sampling the flavour of the resultant secretions, his tongue invading, retreating to sweep over the sensitive sac, lapping inside again, pressing hard against the glans elicited a more strident cry and a sever jolt wracked the suffering warrior. Elladan raised his head and met the startled and frightened blue eyes in which unbidden yearning glittered. Instantly, repugnance filled the elder twin's heart as he realised what he was doing. He fairly bolted from the elf, wiping at his lips and grabbing up the water skin to try and rinse away the musky aftertaste. On top of this fell the burden of guilt for betraying his true soul-mate in such a way, for while nothing more happened he was hard as iron.

The sylvan's need did not abate and neither did Elladan's, though he stayed well away on the other side of the camp, masturbating until he came in shuddering humiliation, alternately biting his arm to keep silent and clutching at the grass to refrain from hastened back to soothe the troubled warrior's plaintive moans of pain, those softly pleading cries of desire. Elrond arrived first and found them like that. An unreasoning, jealous rage flooded every nerve of his body and he berated his eldest in scalding terms of condemnation and contempt, ordering him away to assist Elrohir in the chore of burial. Because he was so consumed in his own remorse, Elladan obeyed. As soon as he was gone, Elrond repeated his initial manual stimulation and once more spent himself over the prone body, wringing a trembling but dry orgasm from the depleted sylvan in return.

Again the suffocating miasma of gnawing avidity subsided and the Wood Elf seemed to rally. When the twins rejoined their sire, a palpable grief cloaked their brows and in Elrohir's eyes swirled a fury such as had never dwelled before, save when he'd found the Orcs who'd violated his naneth. Elrond didn't ask what had passed between them and concentrated on developing the desperately needed cure. The tension between the trio increased after that, each one distrusting the other, watching for any sign of untoward contact with the ailing elf, looking for any excuse to send the rest away and have him alone. In this Elrond believed he would be victorious, for he drugged his sons' water skins with a strong sedative, ostensibly to force them to sleep and forego their animosity. Unbeknownst to him, Elrohir switched the containers and the healer only succeeded in medicating himself and the older twin.

Elrohir's rationale had seemed logical; he was the only sane one of them left, the only one immune to the unseemly urges, and it was up to him to protect everyone from the strange sylvan magic. Of course, that was what he needed to believe. Mere minutes after the other two fell into slumber he succumbed to the same instinctive hunger. All that they had done he repeated, but then self-reproach consumed him, seeing the elf shivering in the aftermath of his attentions, staring at him with confusion and alarm. Elrohir had straightened himself up and set about doing what he could to calm the patient, and when his father and brother awoke they found him gently applying a fresh bandage to the oozing wound in the sylvan's thigh.

Both Elrond and Elladan accused Elrohir of treachery and he denied it fully, refusing to acknowledge that he, too, had shared his passion with the Wood Elf. Elrond's quick examination proved Elrohir had not penetrated the patient's body yet Elladan felt his trust had been violated, for he knew the truth. They argued loudly and the words uttered were such that Elrond could not bear to hear them while the sylvan, coherent for the moment, frantically tried to get to his feet and flee. The healer restrained him easily enough but had to add his own shouting voice to the dreadful cacophony in order to get the twins to cease. They withdrew in sullen silence to opposite ends of the camp and their father resumed treatment of the wounded warrior.
The first try at counteracting the toxin failed; indeed, the effect worsened the sylvan's condition and he slipped into a deep coma. Alarmed, all three Noldorin Lords felt the surge of pheromones as the expiring soul reached one last time for renewal. Elladan and Elrond found themselves face to face across the prone body, each one readying themselves to mount the warrior, each prepared to subdue the other to achieve that goal. Elrohir gave a shout of such rending rage and torment that it stopped them cold. He snatched at Elladan's arm, jerking him away, throwing him into the dirt, diving atop him, pounding him with his fists as he shouted curses and named him all manner of vile things he could conjure in such a state of mind.

While they fought, Elrond seized the opportunity to thrust his cock into the weakening ellon, rutting wildly as he moaned kisses into pliant lips. He reached his peak quickly and gathered his mate to him, breathing hard, dizzy in the aftermath of his soul's sudden burden, frightened by the transference of essence, shocked by the loss of independence in the mingling of their feär.

As soon as the twins realised what had happened, they polarised yet again over the cause of the unseemly bond, but together they denounced the union and scorned the elf both had so much desired just moments ago. Still, they were not completely devoid of honour and loyalty; they remained and aided their father, guarding the camp and providing food and water until the sylvan was strong enough to survive the ride back to Imladris. They kept their lingering hunger to themselves, refusing to discuss it even with each other. Once home, they turned their anger and humiliation outward, declaiming against Legolas' presence, although mostly it was Elrohir's doing.

With a simultaneous sigh all three completed that walk through the past and found themselves no closer to resolving the strife their selfless wish to aid another had initiated.

"I thought the yearning ended between you and him," said Elrond, "afterall, I was the one who consummated the bond. You've been so hateful," he directed his sight to his younger son for that.

Elrohir coloured and dropped his gaze. "True enough. No doubt we convinced ourselves it was the sense of betrayal in seeing another take Naneth's place, yet my anger was fuelled by something else entirely. Did you never consider it could be jealousy that spawned such hatred?" He lifted his head and searched his father's eyes for an answer, acknowledging it with a sad half smile. "No, you didn't want to think of that more than we did."

"My bond to him is not false," conviction returned to Elrond's tone for that was a truth he would not deny. Legolas had conceived a child by him; what greater proof could he present?

"Yes, but we had already invoked a similar link to some extent also," answered Elladan. "We both spilled with him, tasted his essence, did all but penetrate him. Our bond with him is not as strong, but it easily might have been…"

"…would have been but for the love we already share," appended Elrohir. He did not miss the way Elrond's lips compressed and his eyes narrowed at this open reference to their relationship. "We resisted even as Legolas does now, because of that love he bears for you."

"According to Lindir, what we experienced with Legolas did impart some of our light to him. I don't think I need to tell you how that feels, the aching emptiness that arises if separated for very long," said Elrohir with a shuddery sigh. "We have been parted over ten years now: from our home, our family, from him, from each other. We are weary of it; this cannot go on."

"You discussed this with Lindir?" Elrond was not happy with that thought.

"Aye. Turns out he's a Green Elf and not Sindarin. Didn't you know?" retorted Elladan sarcastically. "Our perceptive minstrel asserts there is a way to heal such soul-wounds. Spirit longs to touch spirit
and the only way to do that is to couple with him. We need to cement this bond, as does Legolas. When we are near, his body turns on that sylvan chemistry and he is as lost in it as we are." He hoped that reminder would soften the shock of his blunt proposal.

"Then perhaps you should not be so near," Elrond's voice was hard and bitter. The fact that he was suggesting his sons permanently depart from their home and family was lost on none of them. He couldn't help it; his eldest had just demanded sexual access to his mate and he could not get past his resentment.

"If only it were so simply resolved," intoned Elrohir, "but unfortunately it isn't for us. We will be forever plagued with this need to reunite with that part of ourselves which he possesses. We need him in a manner none of us can reconcile, none of us: not you, not Elladan and I, not even Legolas. For we have been brought up to believe it is wrong to join with the mate of another and he has learned this bias from you."

"You would name so grave a sin mere bias?" scoffed Elrond in disbelief. Where were the sons he'd raised? Who were these Elves so brashly insisting that his beloved ought to be theirs?

"We have learned that 'sin' is a term with a largely subjective definition. What others deem a vile abomination is the only thing that sustains us," Elrohir paused and gauged his father's reaction before continuing. "You are aware of our unique bond, a bond of soul-mates like to the one you share with Legolas."

Elrond winced, his features contorting as if in pain. Of course he knew; everyone in the Last Homely House did and probably many of the valley's citizens were likewise aware of his sons' incestuous desires. Knowing about it was bad enough; discussing it openly was, in a word, unspeakable and the harried father wasn't sure he could handle this on top of the other looming issue.

"Lindir spoke of elves already bound to someone else who have endured such life-threatening injuries," Elladan went on. "If their mate is not present at that moment, another will be drawn to salvage them. Sometimes the bound elf rejects the offered light and perishes, sometimes not. When this additional union is allowed, it remains as a secondary connection and the three elves then become entangled in a rather complicated relationship, sharing one another, body and soul."

Elrond did not like the way his mind told him this conversation was turning and held up a hand to make them stop. "Legolas wasn't bound to anyone else beforehand. He is bound to me and that is how it shall remain."

"He was not bound to you when this happened, Adar, and there is no point denying it any longer. His soul was receptive to any light and readily took what little we lent of ours. We are a part of him and he knows it now, too. I'm sure he's quite disturbed, thinking how this will hurt you, fearing you will reject him and the babe," Elrohir opined.

"Aye," Elrond sighed, lowering his head to carefully rub at his brow as if he'd sustained a blow and the spot was fragile. He took a deep breath and met their eyes bravely. "I understand all this, but I do not want to share my Legolas with anyone, not even you two. Perhaps especially not you two."

"At least you're honest about it," said Elladan, "and I might accept that decision except for the pain it is giving Legolas. He is feeling this same hollow ache, Adar, and on top of that he feels guilty as if he's done some wrong to you."

"And to us, as well, though he is thoroughly terrified of us both," continued Elrohir. "Lindir's description of sylvan culture tells of the acceptance of such bonds, for none are responsible for what Eru has ordained. This is how they are made and nothing can change that. For us, that idea makes a
great deal of sense as you might imagine."

"He's a mess, Ada, frantic that he'll lose you if you learn of this, desperate to find some way to end
the torment without betraying the strict moral code of Imladrian society…"

"…ashamed of needs that are completely natural to him and against which he has no defence,
tormented by thoughts that he is being punished for surviving while all his comrades and kin
perished…"

"…fearful of losing his child. We must help him allay these fears." As always when their emotions
were high, the twins fell to completing each other's sentences, speaking the last in chorus.

Elrond looked from one to the other, convinced of the sincerity in their words yet still reluctant to
permit anyone else to lie with his mate. In his heart of hearts, he feared Legolas would choose them
over him, for they were young, attractive, and strong, virile warriors engaged in an eternal quest
against evil, romantic figures sure to lure the impressionable youth. What if they proved to be better
lovers? After all, they had been practising with each other for centuries while Elrond had not taken a
male lover since his warrior days. As for Legolas, Elrond was his first and only partner; thus far he'd
had nothing with which to compare their erotic escapades.

"He loves you, that is why you will not lose him," Elladan rightly guessed his father's secret dread
and offered an encouraging smile when the lore-master's gaze met his.

"He is suffering and that is not good for the child. You're a healer; you know what will happen. He'll
pour all his energy into nurturing the new life and when the time comes to deliver he'll die in
childbirth," Elrohir used the opposite means of convincing his Adar. It was the correct choice, for
Elrond's eyes grew wide in realisation of this possibility.

"There's every likelihood the babe will succumb to grief and expire before a ten-day, too. Is it worth
such risks just to hold fast to customs established arbitrarily by folk in Ages past?" The elder twin
quickly switched to his brother's argument.

"How often would this sharing take place?" Elrond finally said, cautiously trying out the idea. His
heart suffered a twinge but he gritted his teeth against it. *I mustn't lose him nor our babe. I couldn't
bear such pain.*

The twins exchanged a glance but refrained from displaying their triumphant relief. "I think that
should be left up to Legolas, for such is the custom of his kind," said Elrohir gently.

"We will not intrude upon your place, Adar, for you hold his heart and the majority of his soul. You
shall always remain the primary mate," added Elladan.

*Primary mate!* Elrond's mind was reeling; this was simply unheard of and his sense of propriety
rebuked. He physically shook as if warding off a gruesome substance. "I had planned to marry him;
he's agreed to it and wants to invite his family here. He fixed his mark upon me." Unconsciously his
hand drifted to his temple and he caressed the tightly braided hair.

"Yes, we wondered about the new style," Elrohir smirked at the unusual arrangement. "I see no
reason for any of that to change. His family won't mind about the triple bond for there must be others
in Mirkwood who've undergone something similar."

"There is no need for us to be recognised in such a formal way," Elladan elaborated. "We are not
suggesting that our private dealings with Legolas be announced to the people of Imladris."

"Indeed, he suffers enough abuse over the magic and enchantment he's worked on you. Imagine the
fear he'll inspire if anyone learns we're ensnared, too," Elrohir joked.

"I don't know if I can do this," Elrond grimaced and stood up, putting some distance between his sons and himself, wrapping protective arms around his heart. Unbidden those memories resurfaced and he imagined Legolas and his sons naked together, spent and content. A convulsive shudder ran through his bones and he forced the image back. Would he have to watch them? Would he have to participate? Were they all going to take turns, penetrating Legolas one after the other? With a hoarse shout he squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head violently to dispel the visions generated by such questions. "I can't do this!" he wailed and paced before the stream.

"We said as much to Lindir when he proposed this solution," admitted Elladan and rose.

"Perhaps you should speak openly with Legolas and find out his feelings for yourself," Elrohir joined his brother. "He's with our fair singer in the wooded glade."

"Go to him, Ada."

"He needs you."

Elrond stared at them blankly for a moment, registering their real concern for both him and the sylvan they so dearly coveted. That softened his heart and cooled his abhorrence, for he could see they were suffering. No matter the outcome, they were right; he had to talk to Legolas and get to the bottom of this maddening conundrum. It crossed his mind that perhaps there was another way to alleviate the recurring desires and he intended to interrogate his former mentor closely on the subject of sylvan customs and courting rituals. As his spirit calmed he felt the low, deep, sonorous thrumming near his heart that told him Legolas was calling, calling with an insistent and almost fearful intensity. All else was forgotten and Elrond turned from the stream, racing through the estate to reach his Wood Elf.

With identical bemused smiles the brothers watched the Lord of Imladris, robes hike up from around his feet and braided hair bouncing, tearing over the grounds and out into the surrounding wilds, heading for the little clearing where the sylvans of the valley were wont to seek solace in seclusion.

_That was much easier than I thought it would be._

_Aye, he hasn't really let it hit him yet. Denial is a powerful way to block out unpleasant reality._

_Speaking from experience, Muindor?_

_As well you know. Don't pretend you are looking forward to watching Adar take him again._

_Nay, no more pretending. It's serious, what we're going to do. He'll be our mate now, too._

_Does it trouble you to share me that way?_

_Not anymore. I don't think of it as sharing you; I consider that we shall instead be sharing him._

_I know what it is that has changed your mind._

_Aye, I see it in your heart, too: an elfling of our own._

_TBC_

Adar, Ionath, Melethryn: Father, Sons, Lovers
Lim-dalu Aur: Flat-fish Morning
Mereth od Ened Ethuil: The Celebration of Mid-Spring
Naneth Nastaron: mother f-er
Pethron: narrator
Kwingarô nethrâ: Archer youthful - from a VERY ancient form of elvish
Ech Vrassen: White-hot Spear - lightning
elenille: little stars - sparks - from ancient elvish forms
Emil o Gladgalan: Prince of Greenwood
Ceryn o Cabor: frog’s balls
Minnon?: May I enter?
Lilta Nár: Fire Dance
Cundithen: Little Prince
Tawaro: spirit of the woods, dryad
Padathron Dalt: snail or slug - Slipping Walker
Tulus Iaur: Ancient Poplar
Pen Vrûn: Old One

GLOSSARY

NOTE: Allow me to repeat: the twins and Elrond will NOT be engaging in intercourse with one another! You have my solemn promise. Well, I’s all out in the open now, past and present, almost. I hope it is very obvious that the nature of the sylvan bonding instinct arises from intimate contact, sharing of essence like blood, saliva, semen. The three Lords of Imladris certainly made that kind of contact with Legolas, though only Elrond achieved penetration and consummated the bond fully. The lingering biochemical reaction with the twins is not going to vanish. How the four deal with it is still to come, both immediately and in future.

Notice how they have made an abrupt change in attitude; this is not a mistake on my part. Once Lindir made it clear they needn’t forsake the love they harbour for each other to have Legolas, they suddenly realised some unforeseen possibilities. It is more than the chance to have elflings of their own to cherish, however. They have an almost wistful envy of the fulfilment Legolas has brought to their father’s life, the healing his heart has undergone whilst healing the Wood Elf’s broken body and burdened soul. Their drastic adjustment in perception is not unlike the way Glorfindel suddenly came around. Has anyone guessed what’s going on? Next, Elrond and Legolas have it out. We will have to wait a bit to understand Lindir’s motivation, or at least all of it. My thanks to everyone for so much support on this story!

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Chapter 13

Aearlinn - Radol an Estel

Now Elrond began his journey on the track that led to the grassy meadow deep in the woods, but it was not long before the insistent call of Legolas' soul drew him in a different direction. At first he didn't think anything of it and retained his headlong acceleration, yet soon there was no denying exactly where his Wood Elf was waiting and Elrond came to a complete stop. Just there, just beyond that last brake of trees was a spot so picturesque it made the heart tremble. He could hear the delicate cascade of the falls, so ephemeral as to resemble a veil of mist, the sound soft and lyrical, intermingled with the occasional notes of chimes as drops of water struck a collection of copper bells.

The land didn't rise so steeply here, where Elrond's neatly tended groves of pear and apple occupied a sloping terrace. The domestic trees in their ordered ranks merged gradually into the disarray of mixed hardwoods and bracken and these in turn gave way to evergreens: cedars, firs, and pines better acclimated to higher elevation and thinner soil. The rill that fed the garden, no more than an arm's length in width at its broadest, was actually a small branch of the Rhosshîr, the bounding flow of Rivendell's south west corner. It zigzagged from the top of the ridge before pouring over an exposed lip of rock halfway down the valley wall, dropping a little over ten metres in a fine pale sheet of silver and white.

The pool hollowed by the water's impact was shallow, the clear space around the bare rock ringed in looming hemlocks and limned in emerald ferns. A soft fog of mist overcast the hidden site where the sun peeked in only obliquely even at noon so that it was ever-cool and fresh. The miniature cataract hurried on through the woods, across the orchard, and down into the formal gardens, filling a small lake, a set of reflecting pools, Legolas' water lily bog and ultimately wending its way to join the Bruinen.

It was one of the most idyllic spots in the valley and for many centuries Elrond had made it his habit to visit the place, yet not so much in these latter days of the Third Age. Even without seeing it, the sound of the falls and the chimes evoked the image of the serene grotto. He could picture the cluster of verdigris bowls, a metallic imitation of lotuses, swaying and bobbing on long slender rods drilled into the stone. The upturned cups captured the cascading fluid, the pressure of the droplets causing them to strike one against the other in a harmoniously random pattern. Instead of wind-chimes, these were water-chimes and they had been Celebrian’s invention. There was another set, smaller and tuned to a higher octave, planted in her private garden, but those only played when rain came to Imladris. Hearing them always gave his soul a severe twist yet Elrond refused to have them removed.

More than the sound of the bells surrounded Elrond's heart with such a squeezing pang. The place itself was almost sacred to his memories of Celebrian and he hadn't imagined Legolas even knew about it. Standing on the path, he realised it would be absurd for him not to know, for Legolas spent nearly all of his time out in the wilds and in ten years time must certainly have explored every cove and brae of Elrond's haven. The Elven Lord scoffed at himself; it seemed he was operating on nothing less than an interminable string of interconnected abnegations of everything in his life that conflicted with his carefully maintained, appropriate, and manageable reality.

Lanthir Fân, she had named it without pretence of grandeur or romantic flair, saying she had no need of grandiose word-dressing for a place that was perfection in and of itself. Celebrian could appreciate the beauty and solemn majesty of the hidden alcove without any sentimentality or emotion. It was a place of seclusion and solitude where she would often go to meditate, saying it reminded her of her
youth in Lorien, though there were no water falls there. She was talking about the atmosphere of the location, Elrond believed, the sense of quietude and of presence as if elves from Ages past had come to sit beside the fern-rimmed pool and listen to the falling water.

He had been extremely surprised when she offered to share this private place with him. Celebrian was kind and compassionate and did all she could to mask the irritation her husband's worshipful adoration worked on her nerves, yet Elrond always knew how much she hated it. In some part of his mind, he believed that if he'd been able to let go of that visionary image he held of her, the mysteriously beautiful daughter of the world's most powerful enchantress, and see her instead as simply Celebrian, a maiden of the woods and dales, she might have learned to love him truly. He hadn't been able to manage it, though, even then caught up in the idea of legend and destiny that had brought them together. Should not the newest Lord of Elves, Keeper of Vilya, have to wife the fair daughter of the Lord and Lady of Lorien? Indeed, there was no other elven Lady of high enough station to merit his interest.

It had taken many long years for Elrond to understand why this was viewed as an insult by his chosen mate. It was not Celebrian he'd loved after all but merely the idea of Celebrian as his noble and steadfast mate, the mother of his children, his regal Queen in all but title, his most trusted advisor. By the time he figured this out it was too late; she despised him and had found comfort and love in the arms of another. His efforts to learn about who she was and what her likes and dislikes might be, in short his attempts to court his own wife, were met with amused pity and gentle avoidance. Thus, the day she had led him to her personal sanctuary he was filled with anticipation composed of equal parts hope and terror. Was she about to demand he release her from their bond in order to legitimise her union with the one she loved? Was she about to tell him she had ended the affair and wished to try for a true meeting of hearts between them?

As with almost everything concerning her, he'd been completely wrong. The look in her eyes when he'd expressed that dread was filled with such anger and disgust that he thought she was going to strike him. Somehow she'd mastered herself; she always did, and explained what she believed should not need elucidation. She wished for neither of those options; indeed, the idea of breaking from her marriage and causing her sons strife in such a manner was unthinkable. She had brought him to this place for a specific reason, a reason that had much to do with the destiny with which Elrond was so entwined. They were to bring another child into the world, a daughter, a Lady who would rival Luthien in beauty and grace, a being who would through her unfailing love change the shape of Arda and aid in the defeat of evil's most hated champion. It was in Lanthir Fân that Arwen had been conceived.

Elrond stood on the pathway remembering all this as the chimes rang in their calming, soothing way, and suddenly felt so terribly old. Despite all the time transpired he'd learned nothing, hadn't changed; he was standing in this place, about to make the same mistakes with Legolas. He had revered Celebrian as far above him while he treated the sylvan just the opposite, yet the error was identical. In both cases Elrond had set a gulf between himself and his mate. If he couldn't alter this pattern he was going to lose the elf he loved for the second time.

"Do you so much despise me that you will refuse to answer my call, then?"

This woeful query drifted through the remaining distance, mixing with the singing bells that seemed to have taken on a mourning note. Elrond felt a sharp jolt rip through his morbid memories, recalling Legolas' explanation of the call and its importance: on the day you fail to answer, surely I shall die. He fairly leaped through the trees and broke into the small clearing to find Legolas seated by the little pool dangling his feet in the water, head lowered so that his golden mane veiled his face from view. Even so, the uneasy set of his shoulders revealed his fear and loneliness, as if Elrond had already cast him off.
"Nay, don't ever think that. I could never despise you, Legolas. I just wasn't expecting to find you here; it's a place with many memories for me." Elrond sat beside his youthful lover, who still had not raised his eyes, and gently laid his hand over the long, lethal fingers splayed upon the smooth sandstone surface. There was no reaction to this touch and Elrond decided that was better than an abrupt retreat from contact. He took a deep breath, not sure how he was going to get through this discussion, and started the only way he knew how. "I will always love you; that's what makes this so very difficult."

"Aye, for us all. My love for you is no less strong, nor have your sons learned to hate one another or their Adar." Now it was Legolas' turn to heave a long sigh in and out as he spared a swift glance at Elrond's face. "If...if you think it best, I will leave."

"What?" Elrond hadn't expected that and it was impossible not to feel hurt by it. "How can you speak of leaving when last night you promised not to go? Now you want to desert me and take our babe away with you to Mirkwood. What of my heart, Legolas? Don't you care for that at all?"

"Of course I do!" Legolas insisted. "I would leave for Aman, not Greenwood. I could not face my people as things stand and it wouldn't be fair to our babe either. Yet if I stay here... Elrond, I do not want to do anything that will hurt you or cause you to learn to hate me."

"Then speak no more of leaving."

For a long time they remained silent and only the soft intermittent chiming contested with the rustling cascade. Somehow there was too much to say and all the words in existence too few to express even the smallest part of it. Legolas broke the quiet.

"Lindir says that if we do this thing, the sensation of longing will lessen. He says I can return to them the light they gave and this should restore balance between our feär."

"Lindir says? Lindir, Lindir, Lindir! Why is everyone discussing the most private aspects of my life with that minstrel?" Elrond fumed, suddenly angry, and snatched his hand away.

Legolas climbed to his feet and moved away, his back to Elrond. "It's my life, too. Who else am I to turn to for counsel? None of my kin are here and he at least is another sylvan elf. He has been as a brother to me."

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean you shouldn't confide in someone. Of course you should."

"This is not something I have any experience with, Elrond," Legolas' voice was trembling. "I was taught about the instinct for self-preservation but never about multiple bonds. I don't think it's very common. No doubt it's a private thing between those involved and probably everyone thought I was too young to understand it. Lindir knows all about it; he's very old you know."

"Aye, I know," Elrond smiled and stood up, walking cautiously toward Legolas, afraid he might bolt and disappear amid the trees. Aye, you are so very young. "I hadn't thought of that, forgive me." He reached the Wood Elf and laid his hands upon the tense shoulders, kneading them firmly, relieved not to be shrugged off.

"I don't suppose there will be any ring for me now."

_Could more misery be packed into such a simple sentence? _"You no longer wish to formalise our bond?"

"I do wish it, but I thought you wouldn't allow it considering..." Legolas' words trailed into silence as he cast a speculative glance over his shoulder.
"Listen to me, Aearen, and set aside your cloak of agony for a moment." As he spoke Elrond turned Legolas around, and to his great relief the sylvan complied, blue eyes all aglitter with umbrage. "You are young and thus I understand how you came to such erroneous conclusions. My feelings haven't changed; I would have us be formally wed according to the customs of my people."

Legolas exhaled away his affronted dignity and some of the strain vanished from around his eyes. "What of Elladan and Elrohir?"

"They agree; the marriage ceremony should go forward."

"That isn't what I meant. If you permit me to bond with them, how can my bond to you be recognised?"

"That is between you and me and the One; no one else has any business knowing the particulars. The same may be said for the secondary bond with my sons. It is a private matter and need not be explained or even mentioned. Did you not say that such ties were unknown to you, even in Greenwood? It must be that the sylvan elves keep these unions secret to protect their hearts and the hearts of any children born of those bonds." It was as if a thousand stars suddenly exploded in Elrond's mind as he said those words; until that instant the idea of Legolas bearing his sons' offspring had not presented itself. Would he do it? Valar, my mate could breed my grandchildren!

"Aye, 'tis true." Legolas saw the twitch in Elrond's frame, the strangely panicked gleam in the grey eyes, and frowned, not realising the thoughts he'd answered. "Yet what I feel for them is nothing at all like the feeling my heart holds for you. I don't love them; I'm not even sure I would like them as friends. I don't want you to think I'm a..." Legolas swallowed, "...a promiscuous whore."

"Aiya! I think that word has no translation into your language and you learned the concept here from my beloved citizens." Elrond was glad to have something else on which to focus. "I don't ever want to hear your lips form that ugly term again, understood?"

"Aye."

"Legolas, do not judge this situation by the skewed standards imposed by old Noldorin customs. Return to the teachings with which you were raised and if it helps, consider that not all bonds are grounded in emotion. Your romantic heart rejects the more practical aspects of courtship and marriage; that is to be expected. I have lived a long time and have observed many bonded couples; indeed, many of them asked me to officiate at the formal ceremony. Love is not always the primary ingredient in a union."

"But I do love you!"

"Ah, did I imply otherwise? Listen to me, Legolas. I am talking about the half-bond my sons created that day in Eregion all those years ago. I know you were helpless to stop it even as I know that you love me now. As far as my sons are concerned, even I can see how torn they must have been, wanting you and hating themselves for feeling that way. It is not a part of our culture, not part of our nature; we do not have a means of self-preservation such as Wood Elves do. Were one of my sons to fall wounded as you were, his twin could not save him, though he poured out all his love upon him."

Legolas' eyes widened in alarm. "That is incredibly sad and frightening. That means if something happens to you, no one can save you, not even me!" He reached up to clutch two handfuls of heavy velvet.

"Do not fear," Elrond murmured and kissed the brow all wrinkled with worry, rejoicing as Legolas melted against him, burying his face into the thick robes. With monumental relief he felt no physical
evidence of his beloved's response to the twin's seduction. "I have no plans to go forth into battle any time soon and no desire to join Glorfindel's patrols. My resistance against the Shadow is of a different nature. You have chosen well in selecting a mate who is considered too important to expose to unnecessary risk."

Knowing this was supposed to be a joke, Legolas obliged by raising his face, complete with a wan and watery smile, pressing a quick kiss against the smirking lips before laying his cheek against the solid strength of the elven Lord's chest. The heart beneath his ear thudded with steadfast resolve. He began to dare hope the worst could be averted and the four of them could come to a resolution that spared harm to either couple.

"I'm glad you understand. I need them, but I don't want them. To be honest; it scares me more than a little. I've only been with you; what are they going to do, Elrond? Will it be the same? Will they both..."

"I don't know!" The Elven Lord's blood froze and he thought his heart would stop. He could not discuss that! He broke from Legolas and took several paces away. "Didn't you ask them? Maybe you should have sought Lindir's advice."

"You're angry," Legolas stared at the tall elegant form radiating the fury of a wronged lover. "All you've said; it's a lie. You can't accept this. Why did you pretend?" he demanded and immediately knew the answer. "It's the child. You fear the elfling will die."

"Yes!" Elrond returned to his young lover in a swirl of robes and ebony braids, clutching at Legolas' arms to stop him from fleeing, to make him hear. "I fear that and more. I can't stand to think of you with another, especially my sons! Maybe you will like them, perhaps even love them. I could lose you so easily and then what shall I do? You will have our babe and a pair of lovers to care for you and I will be left alone!"

"Nay, Elrond!"

"With everything I am I want to forbid this...this farce of a union." He was shouting now but didn't care when Legolas winced and tried to twist free. "Everything inside me says this is wrong! How can you expect me to accept it? You're mine..."

"You do not own me!" Legolas yelled back. "I had no choice in this but I am not a slave. Do you think this is what I imagined as my fate? Perhaps you believe this is how Wood Elves normally choose a mate?"

"Well, isn't it? A combat between the suitors and whoever gets his cock in first wins. I'm your mate by default, Legolas." It was a cruel thing to say and Elrond regretted it at once, for Legolas' breath left his lungs and all the strength left his body. He shut his eyes and sagged in Elrond's arms and together they dropped to sit heavily on the ground. "Legolas, Aearen, saes!" Elrond whispered, horrified that he'd really said that. "I don't know what I...Forgive me, please, do not heed those vicious words. Once more my pride and ignorance takes over. Fear and jealousy made me speak so; oh, how I wish I hadn't."

"It's what you really think, no need to ask forgiveness for being truthful for once. Better to have it clear." Legolas' voice was filled with bitterness. He longed to get away but found he hadn't the energy to move. "I've been such a fool."

"No, that isn't me, Aearen, I'm just so terrified I'll lose you. And you aren't foolish. I know you've tried to deny the feelings you have for..."
"These aren't feelings!" barked Legolas, straightening up. "I do not feel anything for them but dread. Valar! They hate me yet I am compelled to let them…" He couldn't even finish the thought out loud, flinching and shuddering at the same time. "Yet I can't turn to the one I love with these fears for you are offended, your dominance compromised, your precious position of authority and power threatened."

"Nae! That's not true; I can comfort you, beloved. Give me another chance; I won't fail you. Difficult as this is, I love you and will find a way to keep my jealousy in check." Elrond's eyes were wide in shock; he hadn't imagined this from Legolas' perspective at all, or rather, he'd imagined an entirely different scenario. Legolas wasn't looking forward to this encounter with excited anticipation but contemplating the act with terror, its possible consequences with dread. He drew Legolas against his chest, propping his chin upon the crown of golden strands, slowly caressing the tense, resistant spine.

Legolas said nothing; once burned, twice shy. He wasn't about to utter a single syllable on the subject again and was already visualising the journey to Mithlond, wondering if he could send word and ask his Naneth to meet him there, to see her one more time before he left forever. He wanted her to know about the child and Galbreth's rebirth. Would she heed the summons or bow to tradition and pretend he was dead? The idea overwhelmed him; he was so weary and needed to be loved yet now it was all too obvious he didn't warrant that gift. He crumpled up with a low moan and gave in to the sorrow.

Elrond felt the quaking of suppressed sobs and wrapped his arms tight around Legolas, alarmed, squeezing hard and rocking him. Time for me to stop acting like a broken-hearted adolescent jilted by his first crush. Somehow he had to be strong for it was obvious Legolas could not be. No matter how much they both wished it this partial bond would not just vanish and could not be ignored without paying a heavy price.

"They will not do anything you don't want," he began quietly, a tremor in his voice, and he had to take a breath and swallow before he could go on. "Elladan and Elrohir don't hate you; they hate the fact that you came between them. They believed they would have to choose between you and the love they already share. Elrohir truly thought Elladan had made that decision and meant to leave him; Elladan felt guilty for almost giving in to forces he couldn't overpower. I think, from what they said to me, that with these obstacles removed they are very amenable to taking you into their bond." Still Legolas did not respond but the trembling ceased and his respiration became more normal; he was listening and Elrond thanked the Valar for it.

"My sons will not hurt you, that much I can promise, but beyond that I really don't know what they have planned. I believe they would rather have you direct them in this." Finally Legolas stirred as a soft sigh left him, but still he didn't speak. "I haven't any experience in such a situation either, nor do they, but I've a feeling my sons received instruction from our resident minstrel. Tell me more of what Lindir said," Elrond prompted softly and squeezed harder. "He must have given you some idea of what to expect."

"Aye, but it doesn't matter anymore. I'm not going to join with them."

"What?" Elrond sat up straight and held Legolas out from him, searching the defeated face worriedly. "You're thinking of leaving again. You must not do so unless you are comfortable with the idea of your mate ending up in Mandos while you languish in Estë's healing gardens."

"You must hear me now, Legolas. I give you my permission, not as someone who owns you but as your mate who loves you. This is going to take some adjustment in thought on my part but I swear I can achieve it. I will not suffer you to leave me, Aearen, nor permit you to grieve so sorely that you yearn for death. We can make this work, I promise. What say you?"
Legolas was silent for long minutes. Eventually he pulled from Elrond's hold, sidling over to the rim of the pool again, trailing his fingers into the gracefully cascading shower, recalling a happier day when he'd played in the spray of Elrond's fountain. "I want to believe that but I'm afraid. What if you can't change your mindset and never want to touch me again. I can't survive that and I must live for the child. I've no choice left but to go."

"And break your word? I refuse to be responsible for making you choose such a dishonourable option." Elrond followed him to the water's edge, sitting behind him, trapping him between his arms and legs, pressing his body against the resistant back. "You are brave and strong, a Wood Elf, this is natural for you. Far greater threats you have faced before. It will not be as you imagine, though I know my deplorable attitude gives you every reason to believe your fears will become reality.

"I can't pretend to be happy about this, nor can I promise not to feel saddened and even angry about it. I can promise not to burden you with blame for my emotions. It's my fault, really, for I should not have resisted the bonding all those years ago. I will work hard to prove that I can be a good mate to you, but you must not break your oath to me. I am your mate. I know now that I would have fallen in love with you no matter how we met, instinctive urge or not. I love you and our babe. We will raise him together."

"And your sons?" Legolas whispered, once more grasping at this hope, no matter how faint, for the love Elrond felt was in his voice and the fear of losing the object of that love evident in the strength of his clasping arms.

Elrond exhaled in relief; once more Legolas would permit him another chance. He kissed the bowed head again. "I will leave it to you. Where and how you add them into your life is your decision, as long as they don't move into our rooms."

"Varda forbid!" Legolas shivered in revulsion. He relaxed and let his head fall back against Elrond's shoulder, relishing the comfort of the gentle swaying motion he'd established, entwining his fingers in one of the elven Lord's hands where it was pressed against his ribs. For several minutes they remained quiet.

"When?" asked Elrond, the word barely a whisper of sound amid the pattering percussion of the falls.

"It must be soon for this tension is not healthy for me and the child. The celebration tonight lends itself to such things as you know."

In spite of himself Elrond flinched. "Tonight? I hoped there would be more time to get used to the idea. Am I to be there? I…I don't think I can watch."

Legolas turned enough to look into Elrond's eyes, worried about the lingering aversion such a notion evoked in his staid and proper lover. "I know this. I will be with you first, then them, and after…I want to be with you for the sunrise, if you will permit it."

He shifted until he was draped across Elrond's lap and then framed the noble, serious face with his hands, pulling the pensive mouth to meet his in a soft, placating kiss. He caressed each corner, nibbled the upper peaks and their dividing indentation, laved the lower lip with a tentative tongue tip, sucked in the red flesh. Finally Elrond kissed back, hard, yanking Legolas close in a bruising crush, invading his mouth and laying claim to every inch of its interior, pulling back to give a final bite to the bottom lip as Legolas gasped in a quick breath. Their eyes locked in searing communion.

"I want you now." Elrond wasn't sure what was driving his desire and had no wish to analyse it. He didn't care if this was jealous insecurity, a need for reassurance, a need to prove to them both that he
was in control. Legolas was his; he would have him if he so wished. He initiated another ferocious kiss, registering Legolas' plaintive moan, fingers urgently working to unfasten the Wood Elf's leggings. This was not going to be a romantic encounter. To his amazement, Legolas broke the kiss and snatched away the hand digging at his crotch.

"And at dawn? Will you still want me then? Will you still love me, Elrond?" he demanded, voice low and brittle, his gleaming eyes full of both challenge and fear. He was a Wood Elf and all that was happening to them was due to that simple fact, yet he would not be ashamed of what he was, nor would he abide that reaction from his mate.

The intensity in the blue gaze sobered Elrond immediately. He stopped and looked at Legolas clearly, acknowledging him thoroughly, searching his innermost heart for the answer to that question. He truly didn't want to share his Wood Elf with anyone yet he would lose him and the child if he insisted on monogamy. Could he love this sylvan archer without reservation, accepting every unique aspect of his nature? No, he deserves to be cherished rather than granted a grudging acceptance. Can I love him, as he is, what he is, without secretly hoping to change him and scorning what cannot be altered?

In rapid succession there passed before his mind's eye highlights of their many days together, all those things he had recounted to Legolas that endeared the sylvan to him, culminating in the memory of the absolute joy in Legolas' eyes when Elrond had finally asked him to formalise their union. It was as Lindir said; the bond of their souls had been forced upon the archer but the love he offered Elrond was his choice. He loved Elrond without reservation, caring not about the current wife in Aman, the scorn of her family in Imladris and Lorien, or the disdain of the valley's citizens.

The strength of Legolas' devotion superseded all: grief, guilt, homesickness, and fear. Even if Elrond rejected him Legolas would still love him; indeed, the woodland warrior had ample reason to despise the Lord of Imladris but chose instead to forgive, again and again. No one had ever loved Elrond so intensely, so completely. Suddenly the question wasn't so difficult and his countenance brightened in a jubilant smile as he drew Legolas back against his chest warmly.

"Yes, Aearen, I will love you at tomorrow's dawn and every other until Arda is no more."

He made love to Legolas gently then, passionately, devotedly, all thoughts of dominance, control, and possession drowned in the depths of their abiding bond.

TBC

Radol an Estel: Finding a Way towards Trust
Rhosshîr: Rustling Stream
Lanthir Fâ'n: waterfall veil
Lim-dalu Aur: Flat-fish Morning
Mereth od Ened Ethuil: The Celebration of Mid-Spring
Naneth Nastaron: mother f-er
Pethron: narrator
Kwingarô nethrâ: Archer youthful - from a VERY ancient form of elvish
Ech Vrassen: White-hot Spear - lightning
elenille: little stars - sparks - from ancient elvish forms
Emil o Gladgalan: Prince of Greenwood
Ceryn o Cabor: frog's balls
Minnon?: May I enter?
Lilta Nár: Fire Dance
Cundithen: Little Prince
NOTE: It should be clear how difficult this is for our troubled lovers. Neither one wants this situation yet the only alternative is separation. Elrond wants to do the right thing, Legolas wants so desperately to believe he can, but this is really very sticky, isn't it? The Noldorin elves have some very rigid ideas about marriage and if you doubt that check out what Tolkien had to say on the subject regarding these laws and customs [here](#). OK, here's where we all remember this is AU (it's an mpreg, after all) but even if it weren't, these customs were attributed to the Noldorin elves. Nothing mentioned about the elves of Mirkwood, of whom we know so little, really, and who had dwelled as a closed society until the Second Age, and then Oropher and his folk became absorbed into that culture. Certainly some Sindarin traditions must have been incorporated, but Tolkien tells us next to nothing on their customs, either. So, it should be obvious my idea of sylvan customs is very different. Well, maybe there is a way for our two couples to work it out.

Remember back in the third chapter or so when Lindir's sylvan heritage was revealed? It had to be so, for without him to explain things to Elrond and his sons, how would they get through any of this without disowning each other or worse? Lindir is trying very hard to keep this from becoming a catastrophe, for we all know Legolas is the one who would suffer most and no doubt the unborn child would be lost. We all want to see this little one born, don't we? So I will not keep you worrying; there will be a happy ending to all this turmoil. Once we get past these next few gruelling chapters things will improve and we can all smile and have fun as the Wood Elves show up with their own set of customs and predetermined prejudices regarding home, family ties, and those prone-to-kinslaying Noldorin elves.

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Aearlinn - Mereth od Ened Ethuil

A bow, perhaps.

No, there's nothing in Imladris to equal the ones he already has.

All right, what about a dagger?

He has several of those, too. I think we should get a traditional sylvan courting gift like Lindir says.

We're Noldorin in manner and custom; shouldn't we give him something that signifies our heritage?

Why? Our heritage is mixed, anyway, so we can choose what we want.

This is supposed to be about what Legolas wants. Lindir says a comb is a traditional bonding gift.

Well, ours isn't going to be a traditional bonding. It has to be something special, something unique.

We don't know anything about him yet; what you say is impossible. Let's stick with something safe lest we offend him.

We've already spent ten years offending him; it's too late to prevent that.

What, then?

The twins argued in amicable silence as they strolled through the market square, casting appraising glances at various stalls and shop windows as they went. There were tailors and cobblers and armorer's and smiths of all sorts among the population as well as bakers and butchers and florists, jewelers and tanners and artists of all kinds. Most made their wares available in the central square of the city everyday, some keeping permanent shops right in their homes. The streets were crowded for it was Ened Ethuil and many people were seeking a token to present to their desired partner for the night. Seeing the sons of Elrond browsing through the stalls was an uncommon event; normally the brothers knew what they wanted, went straight to the purveyor of said item, procured it, and left.

What do we know about him? He's a warrior, a Wood Elf. He loves to be outdoors all the time. He likes to play in water…

Ooooh! Water-sport! Do you think he likes that? He's terribly young and I doubt Adar has introduced anything unconventional into their love-making.

Ai! Daro, Muindoren! This is not the place for such thoughts.

Right. The gift. Well, what does it matter? He collects all kinds of oddments.

He loves plants and birds; remember that stack of pressed leaves and feathers?

Aye, and he likes frogs and other slippery, slimy things, too. None of those would make a fitting gift.

I can think of one slippery thing I'd like to give him that is most fitting.

Stop!
You were thinking it, too.

Never mind. How about a horse? He doesn't have one, does he?

Well, you've seen Ada naked; he fills out much as we do and thus Legolas does, indeed, already have a stud.

"Eru's Arse! You're impossible!" exclaimed Elrohir through grinning lips.

They were both overcome by a fit of giggles and drew one or two indulgent smiles from the passers-by. It was safe to say many were curious as to why they were there, for the brothers made no mystery of their disdain for everything concerning Legolas and had never been in Imladris for the festival. It was also possible that considerable conjecture arose as to whom they would be giving the gift for which they were obviously shopping. The news started to spread almost at once.

Stopping in front of Aegas Mírdan's shop, Elladan and Elrohir peered through the open door to find the place nearly packed. The brother's produced identical grimaces of disgust, having no desire to go in and have their purchase spied upon by what appeared to be half the valley's population of non-bonded elves. They stood in silent conversation for a minute and then turned sharply about and hurried off, making their way back to the Last Homely House, grinning as only a matched pair of exceptionally well-pleased Noldorin Lords can. Once back in their own grounds they went straight to their Naneth's old rooms and hauled out a small trunk from inside her closet. Carrying it into her parlour, they sat upon the sofa to search for treasure.

"This was an excellent idea," boasted Elladan as he opened the lid.

Inside were things Celebrian had left behind, articles she wanted her children to have in remembrance of her until they journeyed across the sea: books, some jewelled hair clips, a few rings and necklaces, bracelets of mithril. All of that she'd left for her children to sort between them and each had taken one or two items. Arwen always wore a hair clasp that had been Celebrian's favourite while the twins each wore a simple gold band hung from a chain about their necks: secret symbols of their bond. The rings had been in separate boxes each inscribed with a twin's name, each holding a ring with a note explaining she wanted them to be used at her sons' wedding ceremonies. Since that wasn't ever going to occur, they'd had a private ceremony of their own and since that day never had the tokens been removed.

Yet there was another tradition among the Noldorin folk regarding betrothal and marriage: that a father should give to his son's bride a fine gemstone borne upon a necklace, the mother to do the same for a daughter's bridegroom. Celebrian had chosen both the gems for her sons' mates and that for the future spouse of Arwen, knowing Elrond would select something too ostentatious. It was this for which they searched now and sure enough there were the identical boxes, one for Elladan and one for Elrohir. Clearly, not even Celebrian's foresight had permitted her knowledge of the twins' forbidden love. These gifts for their lady-wives would never be used as intended and thus the brothers hadn't bothered to investigate them before. Elrohir handed over the one with Elladan's name and took up his own. "You first."

Elladan nodded and lifted the small hinged lid, revealing a beautiful mesh of mithril, delicate and fine, a series of tiny links worked into a high, throat-hugging collar. At its center was a spectacular sapphire the size of his thumbnail; it winked and flashed even in the low light of the drawing room. The elder brother shook his head; it was magnificent but not something that could be worn everyday. "Perhaps yours is more fitting."

Elrohir sprung the lid and lifted out a long length of jade stones cut in the shape of small oak leaves, each one separated from the next by a golden acorn bead. At the center of the necklace hung an
ornament of red and green jasper, a finely carved miniature of a swallow in flight, suspended from
the tip of one outspread wing. For a moment they stared, evaluating the jewellery's potential, judging
it appropriate for a sylvan elf yet not likely to be comfortable when worn underneath a close fitting
tunic every day. Simultaneously, an idea erupted and the brothers' eyes met in obvious delight as a
series of images flashed between them. They would dismantle the necklace to produce a simpler, less
cumbersome one consisting of the swift born on a durable mithril chain. For this they didn't need the
aid of the jewel-smith. It would be the perfect memento of their unique union to Legolas.

As for the rest, the jade leaves and golden acorns would be reworked later. Three matching hair
clasps would be made, one for each, even though they knew Legolas probably wouldn't wear his
unless he was alone with them, and for such occasions they had something else in mind. The twins
envisioned the acorns secured with studs through the Wood Elf's nipples and the tips of his ears,
delicate golden chains linking the piercings, trailing down from the sensitive points to his hips where
the strands would encircle his waist in a gentle tri-part drape, joining together at the navel from which
a cluster of three green leaves would dangle. One final length of chain would descend to connect
with a mithril ring adorning the pinnacle of the sylvan archer's cock. That would be perfectly,
erotically stunning.

They sighed in unison, the stirrings of arousal restrained as other considerations intruded, for who
could they trust to pierce the Wood Elf and what would their father think of it? To say nothing of
whether Legolas would agree to wear such a decadent design with its not so subtle implications of
bondage and possession. Elladan replaced all their mother's trinkets, including the elaborate sapphire
and mithril choker, sharing the idea that it would do well for their son's bride someday. As they rose
from the settee movement out in the garden caught their notice. Legolas was striding across the lawn,
no doubt heading for the cedar tree and their Adar's rooms. The brothers shared a look, Elrohir
tucked the jewel case in his pocket, and they hurried out through the long glass doors into the yard.
There was still much to prepare and the day was waning.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ While that little scene played out ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"In the ancient days, before the rising of Anor and Ithil, fire was something we feared greatly. It was
believed to be a living thing, though its life was finite, spawned we knew not how and designed for
the sole purpose of destroying that which Yavanna had so carefully wrought.

"What use had we for fire? The changing seasons have never been a hindrance to our comfort and in
those days we consumed only plants, roots, and mast." Lindir spoke these age-old words, those that
had been said on every Ened Ethuil he could remember, to the only one in Imladris who knew the
litany by heart, and Legolas smiled to hear them.

"Were you there, Pethron?" he said his part on cue, pouring a little water on the next great boulder,
water that had been blessed on the last Ened Ethuil and kept back for this purpose.

"Nay, Kwingarô nethrâ, but I have been told these words by my mother as she was told by her
mother, down through the Ages to the very beginning of our existence when my First Mother lived." Lindir likewise had a skin of this sacred water and bestowed it upon the stone nearest him, moving to
the next one as he waited for Legolas' contribution.

"What is her name, Pethron? Is she still living?"
"Her name I do not know, for too many years lie between her time and mine. She lives but no longer resides here in Middle-earth. She dwells now in Nâmo's Keeping, or perhaps she has been reborn and has her home beside the shore in Eldamar, there to welcome all of her lineage who venture across the sea."

"I weep for your loss but rejoice in the hope of her rebirth." Legolas paused and bowed deeply, hand across his breast.

Lindir bowed in turn. "My thanks to you; there is indeed cause for joy." There was a silent pause as they shared a smile, for both were thinking of Legolas' child. Dearly did Lindir want to question his friend on the decision to create life outside the bond of marriage but had no desire to censure Legolas. The singer was concerned, however, for he was certain the Wood Elf must have observed some signs or portents that convinced him to do so. Their quiet communion was broken only by the soft splatter of water upon the stones, a reverent moment to honour the ancient forebear who had witnessed the crucial events surrounding Ened Ethuil. Lindir began the narration anew.

"All was peaceful there beside the Holy Lake, until Ech Vrassen hurtled from the sky and set ablaze the woods behind the Ancient Ones. Our people fled in terror as the quiet darkness of the starlit pool was suddenly disrupted with a blinding yellow and orange gleam and in this strange light we could see the very air! Ech Vrassen had changed it, though, into a choking smog of black, acrid smoke that burned our lungs and stole breath instead of giving it.

"Some were curious and showed no fear, advancing into the heat to touch this new thing and learn its nature. Nae! They were consumed by this terrible entity, their screams of agony louder than the crackle and snap of the burning trees. In this way did the Ancient Ones leave the sacred place of awakening and search for shelter in the wide world beyond."

"Where did Ech Vrassen come from?"

"From the heavens."

"Is not this air above us the domain of Manwê?"

"We did not know him then anymore than we know him now, for he has never come among the sylvan elves. Arâramê told us of the Lord of Aman and of his brother, Melkor, who resided in some hidden place in the deeps of Arda, a thing elves could not understand then. We were told Melkor made Ech Vrassen to hurt us, for he was filled with envy for the power of creation and the love Iluvatar bore for the First-born. Melkor could not create and so he destroyed."

"What can we do, then, if a Vala seeks to destroy our world? How can we fight such an evil?"

"We cannot defeat such an enemy, that is true, yet Vala may contest against Vala. Melkor fashioned Ech Vrassen not from his own designs but those of Aulë the Smith. He learned how to create tension between the elements of the heavens and the elements of the earth, concentrating this energy until enough was gathered to make Ech Vrassen.

"Aulë was not pleased with this and spoke to Manwê, saying: 'How is it that the heat of my forges deep within the heart of the earth spoil the air and devour the open lands below? Likewise, Yavanna was angry, for all her hard work in growing the forest was ruined. The Lord of the Valar was himself disturbed, for Melkor was using his domain to render this weapon, and because he sought to destroy the Children of Eru.

"Yet he could not bring himself to harm his brother and instead appealed to Melkor, asking him to cease his savage enmity and join in correcting the errors he had unleashed. The Dark One would not
listen and only increased his efforts, thinking to burn all of the earth until there was no place left for us to hide. Then Manwë met with Aulë, Yavanna, Ulmo, and Arâramê and they made a council of war. Manwë and Ulmo conspired to create great storms, stealing from the tension Melkor built to make clouds heavy with water. The rains fell over the earth in conjunction with Ech Vrassen and the strength of the fire was drowned under the force of the downpour.

"At the same time, Yavanna modified her trees, making them more resistant to flame, creating new ones that would scatter seed which could only be germinated after the searing of the fires. In this way she defied Melkor's destruction and stole from his devastation the power to make new life. Then Aulë took Arâramê down to his forges and taught him the skill of making fire. The Huntsman carried this knowledge to the First-born, showing us how to strike stone against stone to make elenille and how these could make bright tongues of little flames sprout from dry leaves and grass. The Ancient Ones were afraid at first, not understanding what the Valar wished them to learn."

"What was the teaching of Manwë and Ulmo?"

"That flames were not beings with thought and direction but rather restless tension between energies out of balance. Nor was fire invincible. Water defeated it; Earth defeated it. Flame was not to be feared nor must it be a source of evil."

"What was the teaching of Yavanna?"

"That even such dire loss of life need not be the end. She showed us how close we are to the great trees, for even in death they contain life, just as an elf may be killed in body but not in spirit. We create new life within our bodies that may house the sundered souls, or those who wish it may remain in Mandos until their hurts are healed and stay in Aman thereafter."

"What was the teaching of Arâramê?"

"The Hunter taught us to slay the lesser creatures of Yavanna when Ech Vressen destroyed the plants and trees. He revealed that fire can purify flesh and make it wholesome. Arâramê exhorted us to honour the animal from which it was taken, showed us how to use the hides to make clothing, the bones to make tools, the blood and entrails to nourish the land for green things to feed upon."

"Does fire now serve the First-born?"

"No, for service implies intent and fire has neither intellect nor will. It is part of our world; something to be kindled with caution and monitored for the duration of its life. It is to be kept bound within stone or iron lest it escape into the trees and devour them."

"Why do we celebrate Ened Ethuil with fire, then? We don't depend upon it for life nor for rebirth. We do not forge weapons or make ornaments from molten metal, as the Noldorin people and the Children of Aulë. We don't need it for heat and light as the Second-born."

"We do this to proclaim our mastery over it, to give thanks to the Valar who helped us achieve that victory, and to remember those who have departed from us by the hand of Darkness, whether the means of their death was fire, arrow, sword, or sorrow. This is Arda's season of renewal; let those conceived on this night of the fire become vessels for the unhoused spirits of loved ones lost."

"What must we do to bring this about?"

"Let lovers leap through the flames and ignite the seeds of passion even as wildfire's scorching heat frees the kernels from the cones, making new trees sprout and grow. They will lie together sharing the essence of body and soul while Ithil watches over them and the fire burns, consuming the
offering of Tewair Nedir Aer, releasing the power locked in the bark and pith.

"At sunrise, all the wood must be consumed and the ashes buried to mark Canad Englennaid. Let the lovers bath at dawn in the sacred pool to cool their ardour just as Ulmo's rain quenches the raging inferno. May the water purify the couple's love for one another if a true bond is made and a child is conceived. If not, then let no ties remain betwixt the two beyond a coronar."

"Let it be as you have said, Pethron." Legolas concluded the rubric solemnly, pouring out the last of his water over the last of the thirty-six stones, for the fire ring was immense and the blaze from the bonfire would be visible throughout the valley. He sighed with satisfaction and met Lindir's gaze.

"You have done well here; I've not seen such an altar since my days in Region," the singer complimented his young friend, truly impressed for the stones of the ring were quite weighty and all were carefully cut and sanded smooth. It must have taken Legolas a lengthy span of days to construct Amon Naur all by himself.

"An entire coronar, labouring through many tours of Anor and Ithil without rest." Legolas answered the unspoken question with a rueful smile and a shake of his head.

Not everything was as it would be in Greenwood and some traditions had been eliminated to accommodate the more inhibited Noldorin folk. There would be no fire-jumping, for example. In the Woodland Realm this was a much favoured event, with all the young warriors competing. Prior to the festival, each would fashion a long, flexible wooden pole, the topmost end carved in the likeness of phallus. With these rods the elves would race toward the bonfire, waiting until the last moment to plunge the staff against the ground as they jumped, using the momentum to boost them high in the air. Everyone tried to leap the highest or farthest, some inventing acrobatic spins and loops as they catapulted through the bonfire, tongues of flame licking at their limbs and singing their braids. It was a mark of honour to pass through the blaze and land with a lighted torch made of the Nine Woods, a token to present to, and a sure way to impress, a desired mate.

"How did you convince Elrond to permit the mid-spring rites? I'm sure none of the elves of Imladris were familiar with the festival."

"Oh, that was the easy part; I didn't ask him."

Lindir's eyes grew huge and he laughed aloud at the audacity of the young archer. "Oh, how I wish I'd been here for the first lighting of the fire!" he exclaimed once he could draw enough air. "Does he know the meaning behind the ritual now?"

"Not from me," Legolas shrugged, turning to grab up the prepared wood to start building the bonfire. "He wouldn't have understood then and even now I'm not sure he can appreciate what this is all about. They don't believe in this form of rebirth."

"Ah, but they certainly appreciate the means of achieving it," intoned Lindir, sending Legolas a devilish smirk that was acknowledged with a snickery giggle, and joined the sylvan's task.

The kindling was already laid, being a cone of dried Willow branches. The next layer was composed
of Fir, seasoned carefully yet not completely lacking in sap so that the flames would flare up bright
and hot once the boughs caught. Next would be Hawthorne, followed by a thick layer of Hazel. Oak
was then capped by Birch and between them were limbs of Apple and Rowan mixed together. Over
all, a long trailing cascade of Grape Vines spiralled down to the ground. Once the construction was
completed the two sylvans climbed down and stood back to admire their handiwork: the stack was a
veritable tower nearly Lindir's not insignificant height, and was broad as a tree of two hundred year's
growth. The blaze would be visible from every corner of the vale. (See List of Woods)

"I am indebted to you, Legolas, for I never thought I would see this festival again much less
participate," said Lindir with genuine admiration. "I never had the courage to do such a thing when I
was your age living among Maglor's people."

"My Adar would say I am stubborn and proud rather than brave, but he would say it with a great
deal of paternal love and no lack of pride himself," laughed Legolas.

"Speaking of which, when are your kinfolk arriving?"

"Soon," Legolas shrugged, an enigmatic smile adorning his features as his hand moved to softly
caress his abdomen. "I will send word tomorrow or the day after; the message should reach them in a
week or so. The journey is long and arduous, especially with so many in the caravan, but surely in
two complete cycles of Ithil's phases they will be here."

"I am so pleased for you!" Lindir smiled to see him peaceful for a change and spontaneously hugged
the young woodland warrior.

He knew more about the pending visit from Mirkwood than his friend might imagine, for the minstrel
had spent a bit of time conversing intensively with his beloved trees. As he'd hoped, they'd been
curious enough over the new sylvan among them to investigate his antecedents. Tree-speech was
slow, deliberate, exceedingly tactful and discreet, but over the course of ten years the valley's green
citizens had learned almost everything there was to know about Legolas. The Wood Elf had needed
someone to share his secrets with, after all, and while his wooden friends wouldn't reveal their
privileged knowledge to just anyone, they considered Lindir the archer's kin and thus there was no
breach of confidence in sharing with him.

As for the minstrel, he was content to let Legolas retain his anonymity as long as he wished. His
smile became a tad malicious; the meeting of Elrond and the archer's family was sure to be a most
interesting event. "I'm going to write a song for your wedding day. Will the news go by standard
post or by bird?"

"Both, just to be sure. The messengers from Imladris don't like to go to Greenwood. More often than
not, their idea of a successful delivery consists of tacking the missive to an outlying tree on the verge
of the forest."

Lindir chuckled. "The messengers claim the woodland warriors shoot arrows at them; perhaps that is
the cause for their hesitance."

Legolas sneered. "We do not shoot at them. If we shot at them, they'd all be dead. We shoot near
them, a test of both wisdom and courage."

"Have any passed this test?"

"Aye, every one. They prove their fortitude and sense of duty by showing up at all, and their wisdom
is as universally manifest. They drop their post and run." They shared a laugh at that and then fell
silent for a while, each contemplating the result of their labours and their own thoughts. Finally
Legolas stirred. "Lindir, about tonight, you are certain this potion will work?" he asked, reaching into his pocket for the small vial of lavender liquid.

"Yes, it's very potent. Once mixed with Lótešë Límpë Elrond won't notice the taste. It will make him very receptive but quite vague regarding particulars once the drug wears off."

"Is there enough to drug the twins as well?"

"I don't think they're going to need any help," remarked Lindir dryly.

"Aye, but I might. I don't really know what to do and I would rather have them be…controllable."

"You're worried? Ai! What an idiot I've been; of course you are. Set aside your fears; I've helped to raise them and they aren't as bad as they've presented in recent years. Normally, they aren't cruel or unkind in the least. Were they not gentle and benevolent this morning?"

"Aye, but I don't even know them, Lindir."

"Legolas, neither did you know Elrond when he claimed you. Trust me, penneth, instinct will take over and all will be well. It saddens me to hear you speak this way, but I understand. Rest assured; I have told them what they need to know. As far as the actual coupling, I think you should trust them to take care of you. You will not be hurt and I promise they will see to it you enjoy their attentions."

"I appreciate that, gwador, yet I still think it will be easier to manage this multiple bond if none of my mates remember anything too distinctly. I have to sit down and eat with them and act as if all is normal. No one in Imladris is to know of this except for you and the four of us."

"It is normal, for a sylvan elf," argued the singer.

"Aye, but it isn't all that common even for Wood Elves, and the Lords of Imladris have not one iota of sylvan blood, despite their interestingly blended heritage."

"That they will admit to, anyway," inserted Lindir.

"Be that as it may," Legolas heaved a tired sigh, "Please, Lindir, for my own peace of mind?"

"Very well, I will make a second batch of the drug for you. Now, it's getting late and you're not ready. Go gather what you need and change your garments; I'll get the aphrodisiac and the wine safely to the clearing. When the time comes, make sure they each drink a full glass."

"I will," averred Legolas. "Hantanyel, Tjalañgando. I am in your debt, myself and all my heirs and all my ancestors, here and across the Sundering Sea, until the world changes." With that he knelt on the ground and bowed his head to the very grass.

Lindir gasped in shock as he quickly bent to pull the young elf up on his feet, honoured and at the same time fearful of such a vow. Even more, he was stunned to hear this name for him pass Legolas' lips, for none had called him that since the days of torment in Doriath. "Saes, that isn't necessary between brothers; haven't you already named me 'gwador'? Even so, you make my ears ring, for how did you know to call me Tjalañgando? I haven't spoken that word since my mother perished; it's the name she chose for me."

Legolas smiled, shrugged, and embraced his friend all at once. "It's a mystery; as is how you learned Galbreth's nick-name for me was Kwingarô. We must ask Naneth when she arrives, for she is something of a seer." With that he turned and sprinted from the hilltop.
It didn't take him long to reach the Last Homely House where he entered Elrond's suite by his usual method: up the cedar tree near the balcony, jumping the two metres between the branches and the rail with ease. No one was in the bedroom nor would he expect to find Elrond there, for he was busy preparing for the wedding ceremony of the mortals. Legolas would not be attending that, feeling the whole proceeding was a farce given what he knew of Denethor. His heart ached for the Lady of Dol Amroth's unhappy fate and he loosed a sombre sigh into the room as he went to his wardrobe and pulled wide the door.

There was the formal costume he'd commissioned, the fur-trimmed grey velvet robe, midnight blue leggings, and rose-coloured tunic. Legolas smiled, running his fingers over the salt-and-pepper pelt at the cuffs of the sleeves; he loved this outfit very much as it was made in the style common to his native land. He would not wear shoes, of course, and his hair would have to be carefully bound to protect it from the fire, yet he believed he would look quite becoming and hoped Elrond agreed.

Before he could prevent it, he found himself wondering what the twins would think. The idea made his stomach wrench in nervous anticipation, for while he could not deny the attraction he felt neither could he forget Elrond's anger. It was one thing to succumb to the dire need of his expiring soul, another to go willingly into the arms of his mate's sons. It hurt his heart to do this, and truly he wondered if he'd be able to follow through with it.

Perhaps the additional bond to the twins will lend me strength. They did seem protective of my babe. He gave himself this hopeful thought, not entirely believing it. Inhaling deeply, Legolas held the breath and silently recited a mantra designed to still the mind and quell such daunting tribulations. As he exhaled the air, he expelled all the fear with it. Calmer, he hastened to change clothes and gather Elrond's Ened Ethuil gift. It was then he realised he had no gifts for Elladan and Elrohir.

"Ai Valar, this it too complicated," he complained aloud, setting aside the box and pulling open his treasure drawer to see if there was anything suitable.

His eyes alit upon the anklet made from the troll-teeth turned to gemstones. The delicate lavender colour was that hue seen in the western sky during iavas at the completion or Arien's daily trek. There was a hint of this shade in Elrohir's eyes and that decided him instantly. Grabbing up the jewellery, he went to Elrond's clothes press and quickly rifled through the drawers, seeking the matching article he'd presented to his love on the anniversary of their bonding, a day which Elrond had never yet acknowledged, the day of Galbreth's death, the day he'd chosen for their elfling's conception. Elrond would never even notice the anklet was missing. He found it and with a small sigh of contentment wrapped both up, each in a separate parcel of parchment, as he hadn't anything else to use.

It didn't matter; the twins wouldn't care about the paper. The gifts would be appreciated for what they were: pledges of loyalty and devotion to their homeland. Legolas believed they would wear these tokens and found the mental image of the bared, paired, bejewelled ankles gave him a thrill. He shoved the vision from his mind, gathered up the box for Elrond, retrieved his flint and striker, and turned to leave from the balcony. Before he reached it he halted, spotting a small white folded parchment resting on the pillow of the bed.

Hesitantly he moved to retrieve it, knowing it would be for him, dreading to see who had left it. He sighed in relief upon recognising Lindir's hand as he took it up and turned it over. His name was upon it and the seal was unbroken. Inside was but a short note, in Nandorin just for extra caution, exhorting him to hasten to the clearing in the woods regarding the matter of the twins. Legolas frowned; hadn't they discussed everything that was to occur? What more could there be to say? Indeed, this note must have been left much earlier, before he'd met with the minstrel to build the tower for the bonfire. Still, Legolas thought it best not to disregard the request in case there was
something important Lindir had forgotten to impart. He pocketed the note and leapt from the balcony.

The trees were happy for him, sighing out congratulations and encouragement. The pink and white dogwoods lauded him with intermittent falls of flowers, the petals spiralling gently in the warm air before landing at the path before his feet. Legolas gazed about curiously; seldom were the woods of Imladris so outspoken in the afternoon, preferring the dawn to the sunset as waning light made them sleepy and slow. The Wood Elf made sure to offer his thanks as he walked, catching a cherry-red blossom and settling it behind his ear. The genial welcome eased his worries; at least these among Imladris' residents understood and accepted his nature.

Of course, the trees knew of the encounter about to transpire in the grassy glen and were perhaps pleased for something other than archery practise and gloomy confrontations to grace their space.

Before long, the song of the woods was joined by the pleasing strains of a harp playing in the distance. Legolas smiled, the mystery solved; Lindir had promised him a song and wanted to let him hear it first in their shared domain. This air, however, was not the newly composed tune but an ancient one he knew well: the Lay of Thingol and Melian. He broke into song as he walked for it was a favourite ballad among sylvan folk. The lyrics formed a romantic poem wrapped within a sweetly lilting melody evoking thoughts of eternal devotion, undaunted love, and the courage to accept a fate unlooked for and unprecedented. Yet though he enjoyed this carol as much as any Wood Elf, Legolas' voice faltered and fell silent as soon as he entered the clearing, for it was not Lindir strumming the strings of the lute.

There upon the grass reposed the twin Lords of Imladris and it was Elladan who held the harp. His eyes were bright with welcome but he didn't speak, instead plucking an exultant chord and a graceful arpeggio to honour the sylvan's entrance. Beside him, Elrohir smiled and lifted his hand in that same, child-like wave he'd made by the brook. Legolas found it surprisingly endearing and smiled back as the younger brother raised a small silver flute to his lips and began to accompany Elladan. Legolas resumed the lyrics and now Elladan smiled, no small amount of relief evident in his fathomless eyes, adding his deeper baritone to underscore and echo the younger elf's fair voice.

Legolas stood where he was and gazed in wonder for the plain little glen was transformed. Garlands of flowers were draped amid the branches of the surrounding trees and trailed to the ground. The delicious scent of abelia, calycanthus, and buddleia perfumed the air, bunches of the fragrant blossoms fastened to the frame of a beautifully arched bower made from apple wood, the rough branches bound together with long lengths of ivy, honeysuckle, and wisteria vines. Woven through the rugged trellis were gossamer panels of silk fabric, sheer drapes of yellow and white gauze that billowed gently when the breeze drifted through the scene. Beneath this canopy was an elaborate collection of cushions upon a pallet of downy feathers ticked in bold red satin, all trimmed and tasselled with golden threads. On a white square of linen beside stood a basket from which the neck of a wine bottle projected, hinting of other delicacies.

At either side of this small pavilion sat a twin, dressed identically in simple clothing. Plain, loose white silk shirts fell open at the neck to reveal smooth, pale skin and a glint of gold where each wore a simple chain necklace against his breast. Beneath these the brothers wore comfortable pants of black satin. No shoes were on their feet and their midnight hair was unbound, framing their comely features, falling in thick luxuriance about their shoulders. Calm and confident, they radiated a reassuring dominance that was natural and protective rather than overbearing and manipulative. Legolas didn't feel diminished in their presence, as he usually did, and realised the clinging aura of power did not derive from subjugating others but arose from a sense of real purpose and responsibility. They were not here to take or to hurt but to give, to comfort.
Legolas relaxed considerably; there was nothing of the grim, embittered Orc-slayers about them this day and the twins had obviously gone to great effort to make the setting for this rendezvous welcoming and agreeable. All was rendered in the sylvan way, no doubt based on Lindir's direction, yet the decor was subtly their own, bearing the mark of their unique interpretation of the traditional bonding bower. Such opulence of silk and satin would hardly be found in the Woodland Realm and the pavilion rested upon the grass instead of amid the branches above, yet the thoughtfulness of their intent warmed Legolas' soul. He found he was drawn to them. Slowly he moved forward, still singing, eyes alternating between matched sets of mesmerising grey irises, flickering to the tempting triangles of bare chest, his pulse increasing as each step closer made the scent of their desire more evident.

The trio concluded the ballad with a flourish and then all three were silent, gazing at one another intently. Legolas had stopped as the last note dwindled away and stood a scant metre distant, uncertain what to do, and neither twin dared move for fear of scaring him off. At last Elrohir spoke, his voice softened not by design but by the nature of his emotions, which were at once grateful, protective, and avidly passionate.

"There is much we would say to you, Legolas, if you would grant us the honour to sit for a time and listen," He raised his hand and held it out in invitation for the sylvan to join them, cautious to make the motion open and fluid. Even so, he noticed the small flinch in the Wood Elf's frame and the bright spark of fear that lit his blue eyes. You see, he is terrified of us.

"Speak, and nothing more," assured Elladan calmly, "unless you wish otherwise. Come and rest a moment with us; hear what we would tell you." He rose and set aside the harp, then stooped under the bower, retrieving a small square cushion which he placed on the ground one step away from Legolas' feet, noting the delicate grace of the long slender appendages as he sat back again. It required every bit of his resolve not to touch them.

We will remedy that today and he will fear us no more.

"As you wish," murmured Legolas and slowly took that single stride, understanding the implications; they wanted a clear sign of his open consent. He lowered himself to the pillow in gradual increments, vision locked to theirs the while. Their intent was all too obvious despite Elladan's promise, for surely that petal-strewn mattress could serve but one purpose. Lindir was a clever conspirator and yet Legolas wasn't angry; had he not doubted his ability to willing go to these unlikely suitors? Perhaps it was better this way; perhaps it was the only way. Another second or two of silence followed.

Elladan mentally elbowed Elrohir, who cleared his throat. "We wish to apologise, Legolas. We're quite ashamed of the things we've said…"

"…It's too soon to forgive us; we're certain you can't believe these words yet…"

"…but we will prove their truth to you in time. We need to tell you how deeply we regret all this turmoil that's surrounded you…"

"…You know we're mostly to blame for it and we want to acknowledge that guilt openly. We are going to work as actively to undo the harm as we did to inflict it…"

"…We are to be your mates and you ours. It is not a thing we take lightly…"

"…and though it must remain secret, we will honour you in our hearts as hervinn should…"

"…while publicly we will respect our Adar's herenn and our little brother's odhron. We have a bonding gift for you." This last they spoke in unison as Elladan turned and rummaged in the basket, producing a small leather jewel case. With matched smiles they edged closer as the elder brother held
out the offering.

A bonding gift, not merely a token for Ened Ethuil! Legolas felt his heart leap. No excuses, no rationalisation; just a simple, direct apology acknowledging their error and asking the indulgence to make it right. He approved such a forthright manner and appreciated the respect for him such an address denoted.

He reached for the gift, a moment of uncertainty making him pause; to accept meant accepting all, yet he couldn't resist. A jolt of energy coursed through him as his fingers grazed over the lethal elegance of the elder swordsman's hand, not realising he had caught and held his breath until he had to release it to inhale again. With bemused dismay he saw that his own grip trembled as he raised the hinged lid up but immediately forgot his embarrassment as he peered at the fine ornament revealed.

"Ah!" he exclaimed in surprise, for it was not a ring, discarding the box as he lifted out the necklace, flashing each twin a look of genuine delight. "This is wonderful," he added, and faltered for only the briefest of seconds as he slipped the chain over his head. "How did you know I am descended of Noss Tuilinn?" The happy expression in his eyes took on shades of shy encouragement, for he had just signalled accord with this union.

Elladan and Elrohir shared a silent moment of triumph and nodded in concert, smiling back at the sylvan. "That looks even lovelier than we imagined it would," commented Elladan and leaned closer to take up the small charm upon his fingers. "We didn't know; the pendant was designed long ago by our Naneth, before ever you were imagined much less conceived. She is Galadriel's daughter, so perhaps some foresight governed her choice."

Legolas did not shrink from him and Elladan's expression grew bolder. With a swift motion he tucked the necklace beneath the Wood Elf's rose tunic and simultaneously impressed the lightest of kisses upon surprised but pliant lips. A surge of warmth suffused him to behold the blush that stole over Legolas' face, to see him touch the tingling remnant of fleeting pleasure the unexpected contact rendered. You see, he doesn't abhor us after all.

"Aye, you look magnificent," whispered Elrohir, shifting closer, nuzzling the fair cheek, catching his breath as Legolas responded in kind. Together the brothers divested him of the glorious outer robe, taking it up and carefully folding it. "That's more comfortable, isn't it?" asked Elrohir, unable to keep the desire from his voice even at such soft timbre.

Legolas nodded, his mouth too dry and his thoughts too scattered for speech, for Lindir was correct and all his inhibitions melted away in the heat of instinctive yearning. Tentatively he reached out to touch Elrohir's hair.

The thick ebony locks slid through his fingers, gloriously rich with light, shimmering with myriad metallic colours like the wings of a raven caught in the sun, and the younger twin shuddered. That sent a thrill through Legolas and without even thinking he fisted the strands and pulled Elrohir to him, stealing a quick kiss that became a restless exploration of cheek and jaw. He found his lips nipping at an ear tip, brought out of his haze of desire by the low, deep moan his efforts raised. He sat back to discover that while he was busy sampling Elrohir, Elladan had managed to unlace his tunic.

The brothers took hold of the hem and whisked the garment over their fair lover's head, baring his upper body. With mutual sighs they smiled, moving closer as two set of hands caressed the pale skin, lovingly exploring, tenderly examining faded scars and patches of pink, evidence of torments old and new. Simultaneously each lightly brushed a nipple, delighted when Legolas reacted with evident pleasure, inhaling and squaring his shoulders to enhance the erotic lure of tight ripe points, red and erect. Elrohir bent to claim lips that parted for him readily, humming out in excitement as Legolas'
tongue met and stroked his.

Elladan separated them to sample the sylvan's mouth passionately this time, pinching the sensitive node under his fingers as Elrohir exploited an exposed ear-tip. Then they switched, Elladan lapping at the other ear as Elrohir kissed the sylvan. They shared Legolas this way, taking turns at his mouth, his ears, his throat; hands stroking golden skin of abdomen and chest, sides and arms, fingers plucking nipples and poking his navel. Legolas could only hold on, one hand tangled in each twin's hair, overwhelmed by the sensations. While practising this sweet seduction, Elrohir worked loose the ties to the Wood Elf's leggings and when next the two drew back the brothers eased the pants off. Legolas was naked.

He blushed to see them both grinning over his blatant erection and gasped when Elladan reached out and took hold of him. The older twin met his eyes with twinkling delight and pumped twice before letting go so Elrohir could do the same. Then they laced their fingers together, enclosing his shaft in a single grip of both hands, and slowly worked him. Legolas leaned back on one arm and felt one of them encircle his waist for support; which one he cared not. He struggled for air, senses on fire, enthralled by the sight of the combined grasp and the exquisite pressure building, wishing one of those thumbs would sweep across the glans, but neither did. Just as he arrived at the brink of release the pleasing stimulation ceased. He sagged in a boneless heap, head lolling back against Elrohir's chest.

They smiled at his frustrated moan and the disapproving, enquiring glare sent their way.

So quiet!

He almost came before we realised.

"No need for hurry," stated Elrohir, pulling Legolas up on his knees, fondling the tight sac crowded up at the base of the archer's cock. The jerky shiver that rocked the slender body made him smile. "Liked that, did you?" he breathed against a flushed ear as he kissed it, and fisted the silky penis again.

"Aye!" Legolas really hadn't sufficient presence of mind to utter anything more. Impatiently he pawed and pulled at the clothes, lapping and sucking Elrohir's neck as he did so, but the elf made no effort to disrobe. Suddenly Elrohir turned him around and Legolas found himself flush against Elladan's bare chest, his erection hard, the head slick, the vein pulsing where it pressed against his stomach. He sidled closer; Elladan's balls were hot within the smooth sac, the weight of them substantial when they slid against his cock. Legolas inhaled a shaky breath, palms gliding over the firmly muscled torso, relishing the contrast of solid strength and trembling passion as they passed over engorged nipples.

The same hands that had so ably played the harp-strings now wrapped around Legolas' upper arms and pulled him closer; he was caught by the light of desire in the darkened eyes boring into his. Elladan flexed his hips as he lunged for Legolas' mouth and they locked together, the sylvan's arms encircling the broad shoulders, fingers slipping beneath the heavy fall of onyx tresses to cup the curve of his scull. They rocked together, lips urgently mimicking the carnal fusion both longed for, until a new sensation jarred Legolas from the erotic fugue. A second virile male crushed against his back, the potent shaft settling in the crevice of his buttocks, one arm possessively forcing a way in to encircle his waist, eager fingers tugging away hair to expose his neck, teeth nipping, lips sucking.

Legolas broke from Elladan's demanding tongue, the shock forcing a cry from him at last. Both his lovers exulted in it, responding with approving groans of desire. His eyes opened wide as they simultaneously leaned over his left shoulder and shared a hungry kiss between them, the sight unlike anything he'd ever imagined. Never in any of his fantasies had he experienced such an ardent thrill;
he wanted them both. He shifted, knees sliding apart in the grass, and sank down a little before straightening back up, the press of their bodies stroking all three cocks at once. In concert the trio uttered muffled sounds of appreciation.

The twins disengaged and a look of exhilarated love passed between them. Then Elladan pressed Legolas' head back until it rested on his brother's shoulder, watching with avid delight as Elrohir took his turn at the inviting orifice. The fingers pressed against Legolas' navel shifted to teasingly circle atop the archer's seeping slit. With the younger twin supplying this pleasing distraction, Elladan's fingers migrated underneath and began investigating the dual entries to Legolas' body.

"Hot and wet," whispered Elladan huskily, his breathing irregular, pushing his thumb into the narrow vaginal canal and his index finger past the tight ring of muscles sealing the anus. "Tight and resistant."

Legolas' bucked between them, eyes huge as he gaped up at Elrohir, trilling out a pleading call as Elladan's fingers probed him. They meant to take him together. He shuddered as Elrohir suddenly squeezed the glans of his cock, forcing a clear bead of fluid from the tip.

"Hard and dripping," added Elrohir. "He's ready for us."

Elladan's fingers retreated and Elrohir relinquished his pinching grip. Legolas braced himself, expecting the double penetration immediately, but that was not their plan. They stood, drawing him up as well and led him to the bower, making sure he remained securely sandwiched between them. There they knelt upon the soft satin pallet and this time Legolas found he was facing Elrohir, those eyes of lavender-shot grey beaming at him with both desire and uncertainty. It was a surprise and Legolas' expression revealed it, for the younger brother smiled sheepishly.

"Don't worry, we've never done this before but we'll make sure it's good for you."

"Never done this?" Legolas was confused.

"With someone else," explained Elladan. "We're exclusive to each other and haven't taken a third during love." While speaking he'd turned aside to the basket, taking from it a bottle of oil which he uncapped, pouring a little on his fingers. Legolas was watching him and he smiled, crowding close to kiss him as he slid the slicked digits over the inviting curve of firm flesh to delve between the cheeks. He probed carefully, wishing he could do so with his tongue instead but the brothers had decided the first time would be a simple, joint coupling, for they were all nervous about the bonding.

Abruptly Legolas was jerked from Elladan's lips as Elrohir turned him, excited by the way the archer's cock twitched in response to the anal stimulation, and claimed a searing kiss so deep it seemed he sought to plumb the sylvan's soul. His fingers dived between Legolas' parted legs and sought the second crevice, feeling the wet heat and absorbing the sultry scent arising from the cavity. It was too much; he couldn't be patient any longer. He broke the kiss and captured the vividly wanton blue eyes, his intent plain, and took his cock in hand as Legolas placed both hands upon his shoulders, pushing himself up a bit.

Behind them, Elladan removed his fingers and gripped the Wood Elf beneath each thigh, spreading the legs wide for Elrohir's entry and supporting Legolas' weight. His heart thumped as a sharp breath exited the sylvan's lungs and a solid pulse of force translated through the rigid body, announcing the moment of union. The blur of scintillating emotions bursting through his brother's mind spurred the elder twin to action. In haste he sought to complete the triple junction, hunkering lower to push the head of his penis against the tight annular ring, entering with a slow penetration until he was thoroughly encased in the gripping enclosure. Over the Wood Elf's shoulder, his eyes met Elrohir's.
"Valar! I can feel you inside him," groaned Elladan, panting with the effort to restrain his need to thrust and know the sensation of his cock sliding against Elrohir's between that thin barrier of muscled flesh.

"Such sweet torment!" exhaled Elrohir in breathy wonder over the same thought, holding back as well, and turned to lay his cheek against the golden head bowed upon his shoulder.

"Saes!" Legolas shaky voice demanded, simultaneously frightened and titillated to be claimed this way, completely at their mercy, the rigid male organs filling him, alive with potent vitality. He thought his heart was going to burst it was pounding so hard.

It was nothing less than the amplified vibration of all three hearts beating the same excited tempo, sending vital energy to the buried extremities, inciting them all into motion at once. Legolas wrapped his legs around Elrohir's waist, his arms around the younger twin's neck. Elrohir placed strong hands at his sides beneath his arms as Elladan's gripped his hips. Together they lifted him while pulling back and the next second shoved hard and deep, paired shouts of exhilarated mastery erupting from their throats. There was no more conscious thought after that as the twins drove toward culmination, loud in their revelry while Legolas was silent in his.

The Wood Elf succumbed to the frenetic friction first, unconsciously biting down into Elrohir's shoulder as he felt his essence leave him. The sudden burst of pain made Elrohir shout, his eyes wide when they met Elladan's. The feeling of Legolas' seed coating his abdomen, the scent of the sticky fluid, the throbbing ache in his shoulder combined to carry him the last degree and Elladan followed. The brothers came in unison, their release sending them into an ecstasy of wailing delight, clutching tight to the lithe body between them as they emptied their cocks with three hard thrusts.

Gasping and groaning softly, the twins settled slowly to their heels upon the bed, Legolas limp and still between them, struggling to stabilise his breath as well. Elladan and Elrohir gazed at one another in wonder; the fusing of their souls was comforting and exhilarating at the same time. Each removed an arm from Legolas to reach for and hold to the other, smiling and finally at peace. Together they turned their attention to the Wood Elf, a sense equally protective and possessive infusing their thoughts. None of them wanted to move and break the union and each twin bent to gently kiss a bare sylvan shoulder.

"All right, Lúthadron?" they murmured in concert, but Legolas could only nod his reassurance.

There wasn't really any need for speech. Each felt the unique convergence as the sundered segments of incomplete souls swirled and eddied between their conjoined flesh, trust established and balance restored.

TBC

The Nine Sacred Woods

* Birch - The Goddess, or female energy
* Oak - The God, or male energy
* Hazel - Knowledge and wisdom
* Rowan (Mountain Ash) - Life
* Hawthorne - Purity and fairy magic
* Willow - Death, sacred to Hecate
* Fir - Birth and rebirth
* Apple - Love and family
* Vine - Joy and happiness

(back to story)

**GLOSSARY**

Mereth od Ened Ethuil: The Celebration of Mid-Spring
Pen Vallen: Golden One
iavas: autumn
coronar: one year
Pethron: narrator
Kwingarô nethrâ: Archer youthful - from a VERY ancient form of elvish
Tjalaŋgando: Harp-player, also ancient elvish (pronounce the J like English Y)
Arâramê: Very ancient form of Oromê
Canad Englennaid (plural of Canad Anglennad): Four Approaches - the cardinal Directions W, N, E, S
Ech Vrassen: White-hot Spear - lightning
elenille: little stars - sparks - from ancient elvish forms
Tewair Nedir Aer: Nine Sacred Woods
Hantanyel: I thank you - Quenya. Did you know there's no word for 'thanks' in Sindarin (primitive or TA), Telerin, Nandorin, Doriathrin, ancient elvish, or common Eldarin? So, guess they all used the Quenya verb.
Amon Naur: Fire Hill
Ceryn o Cabor: frog's balls
hervenn/hervinn: husband/husbands
odhron: male parent
Noss Tuilinn: House of the Swallow
Lûthadron: Enchantor, the twins' nickname for Legolas.

**NOTE:** Well, hope that was satisfactory. This isn't exactly how I envisioned it but that's how it goes sometimes. There's more to come but I seem to be suffering a sort of internal resistance to writing this as it was initially imagined in my mind. We'll see if I can bring it back in line with the next part. Thanks to everyone for the continued interest.

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Elrond stood behind his desk, his official desk, the huge one of finely crafted golden oak with finely turned legs, the one in his Office of Magistracy, the center of governance for Imladris wherein met his council. Dressed in his most severely regal robes of state, the dark royal blue ones trimmed in silver satin and lined in mauve silk, mithril circlet resting atop his sylvan Betrothal Braids, he presented his most stern and forbidding face, forehead lined and frowning, mouth grimly set, eyes flashing in absolutely livid yet confounded outrage. Never in his entire life had he so desired to throttle another elf, yet he couldn't give in to the urge to wrap his fingers around Lindir's gifted throat and strangle the life out of him. It just wasn't the sort of behaviour one would expect from a wise and learned leader and not likely to be tolerated by the valley's citizens. The Lord's minstrel was universally beloved among the populace.

Besides, the Last Homely House was already pulsing with esurient fascination over the escalating disharmony between the principal inhabitants. First, the sensational poisoning incident; second, the twin Lords' sudden, acrimonious return to the valley, followed by Elrond's unexpected physical confrontation with Erestor in the hall, whispers of treachery among the humans, and finally Legolas' explosive outburst in the middle of a delicate diplomatic negotiation. All of this as Mereth Ened Ethuil was poised to unleash its erotic energy upon the realm and its agitated citizens. The Lord and his sylvan lover had become the locus of cathexis for the entire valley. The minstrel was no exception; indeed, he might be the very personification of that pent and escalating passion.

There stood Lindir on the other side of the desk, the petitioner's side of the desk, the subordinate side where that great expanse of polished wood provided the appropriate distance from which to address the valley's Lord with reverence and respect. The singer did not, however, look especially deferential and certainly presented no trace of penitence. Tall and slender, lithe and graceful, Lindir displayed that maddening opposition of moods, aloof and alluring, that many great beauties perfected.

His flowing golden hair was unbound save for a narrow braided band of mithril set upon his brow. A long, slender staff nearly twice his height was in his right hand, red and yellow ribbons streaming from its obscenely life-like effigy, for Lindir had chosen to paint the dark wood to match his personal pigment. His garb was rich in subtle shades of emerald to match his eyes, a costume from another Age and culture, one that flaunted the essential procreative power of the physical form.

Soft silk trousers, the fabric so sheer it was almost transparent, dropped from his hips in luxuriant fullness to be gathered again at each ankle, secured by cuffs of gold studded with green garnets. The abundant cloth was slit down the outside of the leg from thigh to calf so that when he moved a hint of naked skin flashed a decadent temptation. The pants were held bound at the waist by a bold red sash that fit snugly just beneath his navel. In that small fold of skin was a sparkling jewel, a clear stone that enticed any fragment of light nearby to enter its planes and play within, casting winking glimpses of rainbow hues that changed with every breath the singer took.
From that point upward, Lindir was bare. No shirt or tunic covered his pale creamy chest or hid the pointed nipples from view, though he did wear over his shoulders a long, open, sheer, sleeveless robe that seemed to be spun from translucent strands of silver, each filament of warp and weft finer than any elven hair. The robe spilled upon the floor behind him, the hem edged in an elaborate border of knotted beads that when he walked somehow evoked the soft sound of a rustling brook. He wore no ornament around his neck but a glimmery tracing as of stardust outlined a design upon his breastbone that might have been a tree but then again might have spelled a name. Each bicep bore a broad golden band engraved in the same pattern, but while the etching made the image plain it did nothing to clarify its meaning.

"No shoes were on the minstrel's feet, no rings adorned his hands, yet despite the dearth of finery he'd never looked so grand." Lindir lilted lightly and laughed for Elrond's eyes had grown immense in startlement. "Yes, this is not my usual manner of dress for one of your soirës, but this is no ordinary feast."

Elrond found to his dismay that his carefully nursed outrage over the singer's interference had dulled down from towering indignation to minor annoyance. Here he'd been prepared to issue a scathing denouncement of Lindir's meddling, a cutting indictment of the brazen coaching afforded the twins in seducing Legolas, a blistering accusation of treacherous disloyalty, of punishing Elrond for wrongs Maglor committed against the minstrel in Ages past. Now he couldn't seem to find either the words or the impetus to do so. Instead, he found himself comparing Lindir and Legolas, discovering much that was similar, imagining his Wood Elf in such an outfit, and belatedly attempting to reign in the surge of blood to his groin.

Lindir laughed again, not exactly cruelly but with that smug and mocking delight, glorying in the power to evoke such a visceral response, for of course he knew. Elrond scowled, the teasing smile on the minstrel's face enough to bring him out of his lusty daydream. He wasn't sure exactly why, but to behold Lindir like this was more than a little unsettling. Elrond had never seen the minstrel look so deliberately sexual, so unbearably enticing, so thoroughly sylvan. He might be Tawaro sprung to life, that forest sprite from ancient fables he crooned to Éarendil's twins when they fought against Ólpathu, fearing nightmares.

Elrond shook his head slowly, his eye travelling over the exotically beautiful elf before him, suddenly grateful that Legolas was so fastidiously modest in public. "Lindir, what is this?" he motioned vaguely with his hand.

"Ah, not a Sindarin style, I assure you. I've decided something important, Elrond. As of today, Imladris has two sylvan citizens. This evening's entertainment in the Hall of Fire will be a tale never sung before. It's a tragic account of spurned love and I want you to be there to hear it."

"You mean to tell of your own history," Elrond's gaze became softer, remembering Legolas' request to aid the lonely singer.

"Yes, and I would like you to be near." Lindir flashed imploring green eyes. "You are all I have to claim as family, though we share not a drop of blood in kind. I'm not as brave as your woodland archer and cannot stand alone through such a trial."

"You fear to be shunned? Mellonen, you are among friends here; none will hold your heritage against you." Elrond paused and cautiously evaluated his old mentor. There was more to the singer's change of mien than this change in manner of dress.

"I wish that were true but we both know otherwise. Still, those who fit the definition of friend will not turn from me. I'm weary of pretending and tired of hiding who I am."
That was but part of his motive. Lindir wanted Elrond to understand the shame enveloping Legolas. To be kept for pleasure alone after giving one's heart was a terrible fate among Legolas' people. Such an elf was pitied, not strong enough to master his emotions, not worthy enough to be loved. To remain in such a one-sided bond was wholly dishonourable and Lindir hoped that by revealing his history Elrond's eyes would be opened.

The Lord of Imladris was not satisfied with the answer. "Why are you doing this now, Lindir? Is it to teach me more lessons? I've come to terms with the situation, though your method of instruction was painfully harsh; I will not turn away from my beloved."

"I'm glad to hear you say so. I did try to use other means to teach you and indeed you should not have required educating at all. I would much rather you'd responded to the out-pouring of love Legolas has bestowed upon you. Since that had no effect other than to sponsor a tendency to take so great a gift as your just due, I decided a little competition might enlighten you. Jealousy is a powerful motivator, isn't it?"

"So you are responsible for inviting my sons home at this specific time of the year? I wouldn't have thought you would be so devious." The anger flared back a bit, but at least Elrond wasn't struggling against the desire to do the minstrel violence.

"Now you're just reacting hysterically. Think, Elrond; I only arrived a few days before the twins. I didn't even know of Legolas before; how could I have sent for them? I'm not surprised they're here, though; the bond draws them."

"Aye, the bloody sylvan bonding instinct! Tell me truthfully, Lindir, is there no other means to end their tormented attraction?" Elrond contracted his hands into hard and angry fists but remained calm despite the sudden rush of crimson wrath speeding to his ears.

"Nay. If there were, do you really believe I would withhold it from them? I love Elladan and Elrohir dearly; they are like grandchildren to me. Legolas is..." The singer paused and dropped his eyes from Elrond's face, fingers fidgeting with the edge of the robe. After a moment of reflection he drew breath and raised a resolute countenance. "Well, to you I will say it: Legolas is me, my chance to save what was torn from me. He's still innocent in spirit, still believes in love. I don't want that to change. If the three of you crush his heart, I swear I will take him and the elfling from you and sail with him myself."

"I will not let him come to harm," Elrond vowed, "for I love him more than I dreamed possible." Now it was his turn to pause and gather his thoughts. "My sons, though, do not hold any kind of feeling toward him besides this urgent craving. What's going to happen after they join with him?"

"I'm no seer," Lindir shrugged. "Much depends on you. If you give in to jealousy and lay blame upon Legolas, you will only drive him into their arms." Indeed, old friend, he is in their arms even now. "The twins don't love him, you say, but I say 'beware!' for they surely will, once they get to know him."

"Nay, I do not need to fear," Elrond scowled at his minstrel. "Legolas loves me and that will not change. If my sons learn to care for him, so be it. Since I must abide their inclusion, I'd rather they feel for him at least a little; however, I also want to establish my ascendancy in this unorthodox relationship. I'm the primary mate; I hold Legolas' heart and nearly all of his soul. Indeed, his feär and mine are so entwined that neither can exist separately any longer. Even so, I'll need your help. Teach me about sylvan courtship, Lindir."

"Good, that's an excellent attitude, Elrond," Lindir smiled his approval, but kept quiet on his speculation of what Elrond's reaction might be should Legolas in turn learn to love the twins. "I will
help you all I can, starting now. What have you chosen for his Ened Ethuil gift?" The pleased expression on the singer's face slowly transformed into one of grim disappointment as Elrond gaped in mute chagrin. "You forgot. Ai, Elrond!"

"Valar! What can I do? I've no time for the market place, Lindir, I'm due to conduct the marriage ceremony in less than an hour, then there's the feast and the dratted ball, your 'entertainment', and then this awful Ened Ethuil ritual of fire!" Elrond paced behind his desk, berating himself for failing once again. He was brought out of his sour internal recriminations by a familiar scrape and tap noise in the corridor: Glorfindel's signature means of presenting himself. Elrond heaved a loud and ponderous sigh, rubbing at his eyes; he really didn't need anymore unpleasant surprises today. "What is it now, Glorfindel?"

"Lord Elrond, forgive me for…" The mighty Balrog-slayer paused in the doorway, frozen in mid-sentence, one foot off the floor. It came to rest with an ungainly little thump as his eyes travelled slowly over the under-dressed elf smiling at him so amiably. His sight reached the hand curled round the 'staff', followed the line of the lengthy rod, observed its crowning glory spurting streamers, and turned a vivid scarlet. It required a second or two of mental effort for his brain to realise that this was in fact Lindir, who burst into bright laughter at the warrior's reaction.

"Perfect!" purred the singer. "Glorfindel, that is exactly the response I was craving," his voice was unmistakably sensual and suggestive and he laughed again when the formidable ellon shut his gaping mouth and physically turned his sight from the seductive image.

"You pardon, Lindir; I didn't recognise you," he stammered.

"Oh no apologies required, Pen Vallen. Your appreciation is flattering but I won't ask your company during the night, for I know you're content with your trio of fair warrior nymphs," Lindir assured him with a wink.

"Trio?" Elrond couldn't help his raised brows and broad smile as the First Age hero became even more uncomfortable. "Never mind, I'm not sure I want to know if that's true or not. What did you need, Glorfindel?"

The re-born warrior glared at the smirking minstrel but wisely chose to ignore the reference to his private life and addressed his Lord instead. "Forgive me for not bringing this sooner, Elrond. Things have been a bit chaotic since Finduilas made her charges against Bertran and all the excitement incumbent with sorting them out." The Balrog-slayer smiled as he held out a wrapped parcel. "I spoke with Legolas this morn and he told me of your joyous news. Congratulations, mellonen! If there is aught I can do to lighten your burdens you need but ask. Here is the Ened Ethuil gift for Legolas. He told me he wanted a lovely comb just like this one."

"Glorfindel, I would kiss you if the rumours weren't already thick as the snow on Caradras." Elrond snatched the paper package eagerly, great relief rearranging his harried features, and brought forth the present, showing it to Lindir to garner his approval.

Lindir gasped, his hand rising to his throat as his eyes grew huge. "Oh!" His eyes ricocheted between both unenlightened elves. "Where did you get that and who in Imladris made it for you?"

The Balrog Slayer shifted his weight from one foot to the other and back. "No one here made it. I bought it from a Dwarven peddlar out on the East Road last time I took provisions to the Rangers camped near the 'shaws. Is there something wrong?" he asked, for Lindir looked like he was going to have a fit.

"A Dwarf? A Dwarf had that among his wares?" he pointed accusingly at the ornate hair device.
"Yes. Why?"

"What's the matter, Lindir?" demanded Elrond. "It's just a comb and while I've my own reasons for appreciating such a gift I don't see anything about it to cause you such agitation."

Lindir mastered his shock and decided the whole thing was quite amusing, really, and an irreverent gleam lit his viridian eyes. He nodded toward the innocent-looking mithril article and addressed Elrond. "Just run it lightly through you hair, just the ends there," he instructed.

Elrond took in the strange light dawning over his minstrel's visage, looked over at Glorfindel, cleared his throat and took up the comb with fingers that shook a bit. "Run it through…"

"Your hair, yes, quickly and just through the fringe," urged the singer.

Elrond did as he was told.

"Fuck me hard you…"

A sexy melodic male voice sang out softly through the room and Elrond almost dropped the comb while Glorfindel's eyes grew enormous and his mouth gaped wide enough to engulf a palantir. Before anyone could speak the sound of running feet preceded Erestor into the room. The seneschal skidded to a halt beside Glorfindel, staring from one to the other as if to figure which one of them had voiced that abruptly silenced directive. His sight fell upon Lindir and remained, all but one thought leaving him as he regarded the singer with obvious lust, following the staff to its pinnacle with a gradually increasing grin.

"Dear friend, you look ravishing but don't waste your breath entreating these two; they're spoken for already," he said with a lascivious leer.

Lindir uttered a throaty growl and brazenly poked the Chief Advisor in the belly with the tip of his rod, Glorfindel laughed aloud, and Elrond's eyes implored the heavens, or at least the ceiling of the office, for some form of salvation from his randy comrades.

"It wasn't him," the Lord intoned and noticed how disappointed Erestor looked. "It was this obnoxious item," he held it up, "which seems to be possessed by a rather horny spector of some sort. Explain it to us, Lindir."

"Do NOT tell Legolas it was purchased from a Dwarven peddlar if you plan to use it as it was intended," admonished Lindir. Like everyone else, he believed the woodland folk were prejudiced against the Naugrim. "Such toys as these are quite rare in present times, for the art of making them has vanished. They were common among my people in Ossiriand where B'rittêjen, daughter of Aulë, taught some of the Green Elves to cast magic into molten metal. WHATSOEVER is whispered to the enchanted article as it cools it will reveal when put to the use for which it was crafted. Combs being traditional courting gifts became the recipients of some rather suggestive phraseology."

"Suggestive!" snorted Erestor.

"Gwaedhdain were highly respected and their's was a much sought after art," Lindir continued, "but one that disappeared after the Second Kinslaying. Or so I thought. Glorfindel, you said Legolas has seen this?"

Just then Elrond recalled the Wood Elf mentioning this very item during his enraged tirade that morning and his eyes narrowed to a chilling glare as he focused on his revered general anew. "Yes, Glorfindel, tell me how you came to offer my beloved such a…an indecent object?"
"I assure you, Lord, I had no idea of its unusual nature," insisted the valiant ellon, quite pleased that broad expanse of desk surface separated him from Elrond. "I only wanted to find some small token to demonstrate my regrets to Legolas, nothing more. As soon as he saw it, he reacted with extreme embarrassment and appropriate propriety, informing me he was yours and yours alone, suggesting I let you present it to him instead. I would say in retrospect that he certainly knew its hidden purpose."

"You offered The Sylvan that?" Erestor's grin showed more teeth than any of them had ever seen as he pointed at the lewd grooming tool.

Elrond scowled at his cousin. "I believe you, Glorfindel; have no concerns over any reprisals regarding the gift. These regrets, however, are another matter. What have you done to my Legolas?"

A heavy silence enveloped the office and the Balrog Slayer actually felt sweat break out on his brow. His eyes flickered to Erestor before he spoke. "I'm the one who sent for your sons, Elrond."

It is doubtful that any of them imagined the result of this announcement in the fleeting seconds of quietude which followed it, least of all Elrond. Then the Lord of Imladris bellowed out an unearthly war cry and lunged across the desk, clearing the obstacle with ease and tackling the Balrog Slayer to the floor. Lindir jumped back just in time but Erestor was thrown aside as Glorfindel staggered into him, reeling under the weight of the enraged elf. The seneschal ended up crashing against the bookcase, which teetered ominously as he tried in vain to steady it.

"Look out!" he shouted as he dove for cover.

The grappling elves on the floor froze as an eerie creaky groaning filled the room, reminiscent of the sound a tree makes when it is felled in the woods, and rolled beyond the range of the crushing weight seconds before the bookshelf would have buried them. A stentorian cracking and a rumble of thunderous proportions accompanied the rending of the shelves, the avalanche of books, and the tenuous cloud of dusty motes that perfused the air.

In the echoing cacophony of scurring feet and alarmed voices that followed, the warrior from Gondolin and the second son of Eärendil picked themselves up from the floor and settled their clothing. No one was seriously hurt though Elrond's robe was torn and Glorfindel's lip was bleeding a little. Elrond looked at the destruction he'd caused and felt both relieved and contrite. The emotional turmoil that had been building all day was finally dispelled, but had anything really happened to Glorfindel he would never have forgiven himself. He met the Balrog Slayer's eyes bravely and placed his hand on the warrior's shoulder.

"Forgive me, mellon vrun. I know you did this out of concern for me and I had no right to attack you."

"I'm the one in need of forgiveness. I shouldn't have taken it upon myself to reorder your life." Glorfindel reached over and imitated his Lord's gesture, a smile upon his lips. "I didn't know you loved him and I was too busy looking for Legolas' faults to see that he almost worships you."

"Why we may never understand," inserted Lindir with a shake of his head.

"Don't stir things up," admonished Erestor testily. "Everything's resolved and we're all in accord for once."

"Oh? What about your deplorable attitude concerning Legolas?" Lindir accused.

"My attitude is not deplorable!"

"Yes it is," chorused the other three.
Erestor fidgetted, uncomfortable under the daunting glares of his three friends, and finally gave an exasperated shrug. "Well, but he' a *Wood Elf*! A male Wood Elf. Sort of. I'm happy you've found your soul-mate, Elrond, but why does it have to be a barbaric, ignorant, sylvan tree-climber?"

"There, that's the attitude we're talking about," Glorfindel shook his head as if he felt pity for the Chief Advisor.

"Indeed," droned Elrond, his features not surprisingly presenting a disappointed, one might even say affronted, scowl.

"Erestor, do you consider me a worthwhile companion?" asked Lindir.

"What?" The seneschal looked at him curiously and then couldn't help letting his gaze enjoy the full effect of the minstrel's abbreviated garments. "Of course, we've been friends a very long time. How can you doubt that?"

"I happen to be one of those 'barbaric, ignorant, silvan tree-climbers' you so disdain."

Erestor's face flushed a dark maroon. He knew this, of course, but it was something he usually managed to forget, mostly because Lindir did not present himself as anything other than a noble Sindarin refugee from Thingol's court in Doriath. "You're different," he insisted. "You've been among other cultures much longer than you spent among your own." He winced; even to his ears that sounded offensive and terribly insensitive.

"Laegel. Laiquendi. What you would term a Green Elf, though that's not what we call ourselves, born in the forests of Region early in the First Age. I told that other story because I didn't want to deal with attitudes like yours." Lindir replied, thumping Erestor on the sternum with his vaulting pole.

"Oh. I'm sorry, Lindir."

"Well, I'm not! Tonight in the Hall of Fire I will reveal the truth to all. It is my hope that those I consider my friends will stand by me."

"I won't abandon our friendship just because of your heritage, Lindir." Erestor actually was shocked, as well as hurt, that the minstrel would think such a thing possible. His heart sank; his manner toward Legolas certainly didn't show him to be tolerant. No wonder Lindir doubted him.

"I'm very glad to hear that," Lindir beamed at the nonplussed noble advisor, "and I'm going to make it my personal mission to enlighten you concerning the many laudable characteristics inherent to being silvan."

An eager gleam bloomed in Erestor's eyes as they once more tracked over the singer's blatantly enticing form. "You are? Is this outfit part of some silvan tradition you'd care to explain?"

Glorfindel snickered. "Seems fairly obvious to me what the costume is designed to do."

Elrond groaned; the conversation was heading in a direction he preferred not to travel. On top of that, the commotion had drawn every elf in the household and the hallway was packed. Various members of the Lord's staff gaped and gawked and assessed the scene with avid curiosity, their scrutiny lingering on Lindir. Elrond couldn't really blame them; this was evolving into one of the most exciting days in the Last Homely House any of them could recall. He decided it was time to restore order and turned to address them.

"Thank you, my friends, for your concern. No one was injured severely. If one or two would be so
kind as to straighten up and arrange for a new shelf to be constructed, I will accompany Glorfindel to the House of Healing to tend this minor wound," announced Elrond in his lordly Unofficial-Heir-to-the-High King voice. He was answered with numerous calls of assurance that it would be done even as he wished and the crowd parted. Elrond led the general from the room, Lindir and Erestor following.

The seneschal looked his companion over with unhidden hunger, smiling as the singer tossed his golden hair. "What would you do if I presented you with one of those enchanted combs, Lanc Vallen?" he asked.

"You couldn't afford such a gift, Erestor, for you never save a single silver coin and you're a terrible card player. Be that as it may, nothing so elaborate is required for an Ened Ethuil offering."

"Oh? Does that mean…"

"Come to the bonfire tonight and if your gift is acceptable, perhaps I will expound upon the many uses of my long, slender rod." Lindir smiled coyly, gave his hips a little shimmy, and tapped his staff provocatively on the floor. With that he turned aside and exited the Last Homely House, leaving an excited seneschal, a snickering Balrog Slayer, and an Elven Lord much lighter in spirits than he had been.

Wasn't that fun? Hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

TBC

Fast: shaggy hair
Mereth od Ened Ethuil: The Celebration of Mid-Spring
Pen Vallen: Golden One
B'rittêjen: Daughter of the Broken Rocks - from very ancient elvish forms. I made her up, no such person exists in Tolkien's world
Lanc Vallen: Golden Throat
Gwaedhdain: Bond-smiths - Matchmakers
iavas: autumn
Pethron: narrator
Kwingarô nethrâ: Archer youthful - from a VERY ancient form of elvish
Ech Vrassen: White-hot Spear - lightning
elenille: little stars - sparks - from ancient elvish forms
Ceryn o Cabor: frog's balls
Minnon?: May I enter?
hervenn mîn

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Chapter 16

Aearlinn - Lïlta Nár

Gentle and joyous was the song of the trees surrounding the sylvans' glade; soft and soothing the
rush and rustle of leaves stirred to mellow exultation by the breeze, proof of the Wind Lord's blessing
upon the new bond between these three of Eru's children. Balance was restored, the union eternal
and true, and all Imladris felt the easing of tension as the twinned souls, already immutably
intertwined, merged with the younger, brighter spirits of their mate and his nascent child. The
confluence was not a complete immersion, as was Legolas and Elrond's fusion, but rather a blending
of auras. The three feär revolved in a repeating dance, swirling close, touching, retreating to return
anew, like ternary stars caught in the irresistible pull of each other's twinkling brilliance.

They remained conjoined, arms draped in a droopily proprietary pose, slackened genitals held in
place within Legolas' uniquely made body by the weight of the Wood Elf and the nature of their
position, though the archer's legs had dropped from around Elrohir's hips. He was too tired to hold
them there. They were all recovering from the sensation of shared essence, both physical and
spiritual, content just to hold onto one another for a time.

For Legolas, though, this was his second coupling of the day and he was starting to feel fatigued. It
made him weary just thinking of the night to come with Elrond, for if their earlier bout of love-
making in the grotto was any indication, he would be in fine form. The elven Lord had incredible
stamina and could remain hard for hours, controlling and restraining his release for he enjoyed the act
of fucking Legolas as much as the ultimate moment of orgasm. In addition, he recovered with
inordinate alacrity and seemed to be capable of producing voluminous quantities of sperm on
demand. Legolas had often wondered why Elrond only sired three other children.

Legolas felt his face grow hot, not certain of the etiquette concerning multiple bonds but feeling
innately it was rather rude to be ruminating about one mate's prowess whilst locked in the embrace of
the other two. Which was, he had to admit, a very nice place to be. He felt safe and secure, no longer
fearful of the twins at all. Perhaps the new bond truly would strengthen him. He smiled; the echoing
reverberation of their paired hearts was comforting and he had no desire to hasten from their
protective clasp. Just as they had been his foremost detractors before, now their acceptance would
serve as a shield against the slurs and insults of others.

It was about then he realised he'd completely forgotten to administer the drug designed to make the
twins forgetful. Lindir, he decided, was indeed a wise and worthy elf. Legolas no longer wanted
them to forget their bond with him. He sighed lightly and wriggled between his two mates, nuzzling
Elrohir's neck and reaching back to caress Elladan's head where it rested on his shoulder. Even so,
what happens now? That thought made Legolas' heart jump a little, for he'd been so sure he wouldn't
want or need anything more from them than this one encounter.

Elrohir stirred and lifted Legolas' head from his shoulder, smoothing back the tangled, sweaty hair,
smiling into the bright blue eyes that met his for but a second before dropping away. "That was
wonderful, Lúthadron. Thank you for trusting us," he whispered, dipping his head to kiss the ruby
lips still so plump with passion. His tone was gentle and encouraging but try as he might Elrohir
could not get the young elf to lift his lowered countenance. "I wasn't expecting you to mark me,
though. Is there something, perhaps, you want from me?"

The archer's head came up in an instant, his stunned expression revealing he had no recollection of
doing such a thing. "Ai Valar! I'm sorry, Elrohir! I didn't mean..."
"Did I sound disappointed or angry about it?" interrupted the younger twin, his smile winningly compassionate and playful. "I'm rather pleased, if you must know."

"And I'm a trifle jealous," pouted Elladan, pulling Legolas back so he rested more against his chest than his brother's.

"Oh, I didn't mean to neglect…"

"Hush, Legolas!" exclaimed Elladan, wrapping strong arms around his new mate's shoulders, laughing gently as he pressed his nose into the abundant golden tresses. "I wasn't scolding you in earnest. You can surely correct the oversight anyway, hmmm?"

"Ai Valar!" breathed Legolas, turning to peer over his shoulder, an answering grin dawning on his blushing features.

"Legolas, everything was perfect, you did fine, and we will treasure this day forever. We're your mates now, too, and there is nothing we wouldn't share with you." Elrohir said, shifting aside the golden mane so that he could lick and kiss the throbbing artery in the Wood Elf's neck. "Anything, everything you desire, whatever it may be…"

"…we're more than willing to try." Elladan finished, contenting himself with a lovely red ear-tip poking provocatively through the flaxen strands. We both know what he wants to do; what you want him to do. Try to convince him, Muindoren.

"Legolas," Elrohir felt his heart pounding anew as his brother affirmed his wishes. "Look at me, please." He waited until his hervenn found the wherewithal to do so, for the renewed stimulation to his neck and ear had the archer in a foggy haze of somatic pleasure. The wide pools of blue blinked at him inquiringly. Elrohir smiled, taking hold of the sturdy chin and impulsively kissing the tip of the fine straight nose. "Legolas, are you listening?"

"Aye, Elrohir."

"I like how he always knows who is whom," Elladan announced brightly, giving the slim frame another squeeze before shrugging sheepishly in response to his twin's impatient glare. He didn't care; he could feel Legolas' smile even if he couldn't see it.

"So do I, but that's not what I was about to say." complained an annoyed Elrohir. His brother had that disappointing habit of voicing even a lovely, romantic thought in a prosaic and mundane manner. He was also prone to expounding upon things totally unrelated to the intense passion of the moment during love-making. He sincerely hoped he wasn't going to do that now and spoil the mood. To make sure he didn't, Elrohir insinuated his hand between Legolas' back and his brother's chest, seeking for a tight brown nipple to pluck.

"Ah, Muindoren!" Elladan shuddered and imitated what his brother was doing on Legolas' body. He claimed the left ear while Elrohir licked the right.

"Ai Valar," Legolas mumbled, eyelids fluttering shut. He squirmed; they were becoming aroused, slowly hardening inside him, the twin shafts stretching him as they grew erect and solid. They meant to fuck him again. Like father, like sons. His penis responded in kind and he reached for Elrohir, pulling him close, claiming the mouth that so readily opened to him.

Elrohir let him take control of the kiss, moaning wantonly as his hand dropped to fondle the swelling organ jammed against his belly, using the sticky residue he found there as a lubricant. He smiled against the groping tongue as Legolas startled and parted their lips. "I want you." Elrohir's voice was
almost pleading, the words barely more than a whispered sigh mingling with the archer's panting breath.

Legolas' vision shifted between Elrohir's eyes, now shimmering with desire like pools of steely fire. "You... you have me."

"Differently," explained Elladan, biting down on the ear beneath his lips while pinching the nipple beneath his fingers. The resultant shimmer rippling through the Wood Elf's nerves made his penis flex deep inside Legolas. "He wants you to thrust your lovely cock inside him while I ride you until we all come."

Hearing this crude description of the position made Elrohir's penis swell and twitch; suddenly he didn't so much mind his brother's blunt demeanour.

"I..." Legolas found himself unable to speak, vision locked with the smoulderingly hopeful expression defining Elrohir's features. This was one of the archer's most dearly cherished fantasies, though it was always Elrond he envisioned in the submissive roll. "You... want...?"

"Very much." Elrohir kissed him twice in quick succession, the swift wet sounds a sultry supplication, hands resuming their solid press upon his sides. *Lift him* he sent the silent command to his brother, groaning as it was obeyed.

Elladan rose to his knees, arms wound around their mate's waist, and drew him gradually up, enthralled as Elrohir slowly reclined on his elbows, his cock retreating, straining forward until at last it slipped free, rocking back toward his belly, slick with the combined juices of his release and the archer's secretions. Elladan couldn't help shoving his hips hard as Legolas quivered at the moment of separation, overwhelmed with the need to placate the quietly bereft whimper that arose from the silvan's soul. "Sidh, aderthatham." He slid one hand lower to massage the rigid shaft and cup the tender balls, encountering a slippery smear where the tip of Elrohir's penis had dragged against the scrotum.

"Bring him to me now," urged Elrohir, legs bent at the knee and spread wide in welcome, arms stretching to reach his mates. He caught and clasped Legolas' hand as Elladan gradually knelt and settled them on the mattress.

Legolas found himself poised above Elrohir, one arm planted just beside his ear, fingers cushioned by the dark hair, very aware of the tingling zone of contact where the flesh of his thighs met the exposed underside of the younger twin's legs. Before he had a chance to panic over his lack of experience in such a position, Elrohir reached down and grasped both their cocks in one hand. Legolas heard himself warble out a very eager call and bucked forward, pulling off Elladan only to feel the elder twin shove back at once. Legolas groaned; he'd never known such an agony of desire before, and blushed as the sound raised a triumphant grin upon the younger twin's face.

"Oil," Elrohir gasped out. "Where is it, Muindoren?" There was no hiding the urgency in his voice.

"Don't know," murmured Elladan, pivoting his hips for another thrust, revelling in the tight heat in which he was encased, the delicious friction as he retreated and advanced. He exhaled an impatient moan. "Doesn't matter. Take him, Legolas, I can't hold back..." True to his word, Elladan shoved hard, arm cinching fast around the sylvan's waist and manoeuvring his body into alignment with Elrohir's anus.

"Nay, wait, Elladan, Ai!" Legolas resisted with difficulty, for Elrohir was aiding to guide his cock, holding the sensitive tip against the puckered red opening. "He isn't prepared," wailed Legolas, thinking on the care with which Elrond stretched and oiled him before entry.
"He's not a virgin, Lúthadron; it will be well," insisted Elladan and then both brothers froze, the same revelation inundating their combined consciousness. *But he is!* Their eyes locked and they shared their excitement. Elladan groped around on the mattress for the small vial in earnest now. "Sidh, I found it," he announced triumphantly and held it out to Legolas.

The archer took it with a trembling hand, casting a fleeting look into Elladan's eyes, imploring assistance, but it was Elrohir who acted.

He opened the oil and then removed the glass from Legolas' fingers. "Here, hold out your hand," he said and as Legolas complied poured out a dollop onto the upturned palm. He smiled at the sylvan's confused expression. "I don't need preparation, hervenn. Just make sure you are thoroughly slippery and it will be enough."

Elrohir led Legolas' hand to his own cock, covering the long, slender fingers with his, together stroking down and up, down and up.

"Enough," breathed Elladan. "He needs you now, Legolas." As before, the older twin took control, removing the hands from the archer's penis and shifting until they were all in proper position. Then he retreated completely from Legolas' body and re-entered the second opening with a mighty thrust that drove Legolas' shaft completely inside his brother's body. Both Elrohir and Legolas cried out and Elladan gave a feral growl of satisfaction, allowing no pause, plunging into the hot hole with sufficient impetus to reach Elrohir's sweet-spot every time.

Elrohir arched and writhed beneath them, eyes shut tight as he relished the sensation of Elladan claiming him in such a manner, using Legolas' cock as an extension of his own. Just that thought sent him into a feverish frenzy of delight and he crooned out an incoherently pleading cry for more.

Suddenly he felt the press of Legolas' lips upon his, wet red tongue seeking entrance, and Elrohir granted it, opening his eyes to find a veil of golden strands cascading around his head.

Legolas lapped and laved Elrohir's mouth frantically, grasping his cock and pumping in tandem with Elladan's forceful lunges. The sensation of having every fraction of his aroused penis buried inside the warm, constricting walls of such willing and responsive flesh thrilled him, and yet he was almost frightened. As before, he had absolutely no control; Elladan was driving him relentlessly, hands gripping at his hips to keep him where he wanted him. Every motion he made was governed by the rigid organ verily skewering him as if Elladan wanted to merge with him completely, their cocks as one, stoking Elrohir into a frenzy of passionate abandon. They were not playing out his fantasy, he realised, but Elrohir's.

At that moment Elladan altered his angle and achieved a deeper penetration, striking Legolas' core and raising a blinding explosion of tiny stars before his eyes. He broke from Elrohir's lips, a shout escaping his lungs, back curling as his head fell back, mouth open and eyes sealed.

"Aye Elladan, like that, just like that!" urged Elrohir, deeply roused by the sylvan's reaction. His brother grunted a reply and redoubled his efforts, straining to lick the Wood Elf's upturned face, his tongue flickering inside the gaping mouth. Elrohir shivered and strove to get his legs higher, wider. The slender penis inside him was new, the shape unique, the idea of being taken by a stranger dangerous, captivating, erotic.

Through it all, Legolas' fist never relinquished the throbbing rod, working Elrohir in quick, jerking movements. The placement of calluses moulded by use of a bow, the breadth of the palm covering him, the subtle difference in the pace and pressure was unique and tantalising. None but Elladan had touched him this way; no other penis had pierced him before. The combination sent Elrohir's pulse surging. *Now, Muindoren!* he commanded and Elladan obeyed, shuddering in uncontrollable delight as they both erupted in orgasm.

Legolas gasped as the hot semen spilled over his fingers just as the quick pulse of liquid heat bathed
his interior, Elladan gripping him so tight about the waist he could scarcely breathe while Elrohir seized him at the back of the head and crushed their lips together, plumbing his mouth with ferocious intensity. The sylvan was too spent already to experience a similar rush of ecstasy but he didn't mind. He was still reeling and giddy from the overpowering dominion of Elladan, the equally urgent desire to be dominated in Elrohir. What his role was still eluded him, yet a deep sense of fulfilment ensued, pleased and proud he could render such pleasure.

The pace slowed and finally halted as Elladan abruptly sagged against his back, the sudden weight pushing Legolas flush atop Elrohir. They lay in this tangled heap in absolutely harmonious exhaustion, relishing the lingering warmth of their union. Yet the brothers were perplexed.

_He didn't come._

_Maybe I shouldn't have switched openings._

_Nay, he's not made like us. You felt the small gland, saw his response, didn't you?_  
_Aye, you know I don't miss my mark once I've found it, Muindor._  
_Then it's something else. Maybe he only wanted to do that with Ad...his other mate._

The twins argued in silence but their subtly building uneasiness did not go un-noticed by Legolas. He raised his head from Elrohir's chest and gazed into the worried grey eyes that met his. "What is it? Did I do something wrong?"

"Nay!" the twins cried as one, the tone strident enough to make the sylvan wince and drop his face back to the strong body beneath him.

"If you but think a moment you will have no doubt of the pleasure you've given us both," reminded Elrohir. "We are worried about you._

"Aye, and rudely discussing you within our mental link, for which we humbly apologise..."  
"...Yet can't promise never to do it again for it is too much part of our nature."

"I wouldn't want you to cease mind-speaking because of me," insisted Legolas, "and there's no reason to be concerned on my behalf. I'm just a bit tired._

Elladan began to withdraw and at once perceived the strain in Legolas' body. Comprehension dawned. "Ai! We're idiots, Muindoren." _Tired indeed, not to mention sore. He was with Adar most of the morning._ He settled on his side and drew Legolas carefully from within Elrohir, for which he received two disgruntled groans, and then turned the archer to face him. "Legolas, forgive me for not realising sooner. This was your first time with us, but not your first time this day, correct?"

"Aye." Legolas was blushing in embarrassment and kept his eyes on the depression where Elladan's throat met his collarbones.

"No need to hide such things from us," murmured Elrohir, spooning up close behind the Wood Elf and kissing him below the ear. "We've both experienced that, though Elladan not so much as I._

That revelation only made Legolas' cheeks even redder and now he squeezed his eyes closed. How could they talk so freely about something so personal and private?

"Quiet, Muindoren. You're not helping," scolded Elladan. "Be at peace, Legolas, we've arranged for a soothing bath and while I guide you there Elrohir will run back to the healing wards and get..."
something to remedy the soreness."

"Right," announced the younger twin with purpose, rising from the comfortable bed. "Go with Elladan now and have a good soak. I'll be right back."

Legolas watched him stride over to the pile of discarded clothes and grab up a pair of the trousers, stepping into them and tying them up even as he moved away, smiling over his shoulder. A quick wave and he was gone. "I don't believe he did that," the sylvan blurted out before he realised it, then glanced to see what Elladan made of this criticism.

"Did what?" the elder son of Elrond was mystified.

"He walked off half-dressed, with all the evidence of what he's…we've been doing still on him," explained Legolas with something close to horror.

"Hah!" Elladan snorted in high humour. "That is nothing new for us; the folk of the household are accustomed to our hedonistic ways." He stood and stretched all the way up onto his toes, arms reaching high, and then held out a hand to help Legolas up as well, a cheeky grin adorning his fine features. He was absolutely certain his new mate had enjoyed that little show and the high colour staining the archer's cheeks confirmed it. "Come on, we've planned this all out, you know. You're going to love it."

"I am?" Legolas grasped the hand and let Elladan hoist him up, casting his eyes about to learn where this bath was meant to take place and finding nothing in the clearing useful for cleansing. "I am not going to wander the grounds naked, Elladan, no matter how lovely the bath at the end of the journey. Nor will I don my clothes over all this…"

"Evidence?" asked Elladan, breaking into snickery giggling with a shake of his head. "My, you truly are the modest one! Worry no more; I won't make you get your party clothes all sticky. See? Lindir warned us about your obsession with excessive, secretive bathing and advised we provide a robe for you to wear." With a flourish he pulled from behind the cushions a truly lovely, fluffy cotton bathing robe in pure white with a sky-blue silk sash. He held it out for Legolas.

"It isn't obsession to want to be clean," argued Legolas, permitting Elladan to wrap the garment around him and cinch the sash with a loose bow-knot. He did not add that he wondered if the twins would have appreciated it very much if he'd arrived with the scent, and other residues, of their Adar still clinging to him. Elladan just smiled and took his hand, leading him off toward the woods, stark naked and not a bit bothered by it.

"No arguing with you, I can see that. Stubborn streak, knew it at once."

"What? I am not stubborn. I'm conscientious, well-mannered, and forthright. Those are admirable qualities, not something to mock or scorn." Legolas was not pleased and sought to get his hand free.

"Yes, those are excellent qualities. I was but teasing you; forgive me?" Elladan tightened his grip around the slender fingers and sent an imploring and contrite smile to the sylvan youth. Legolas wouldn't look at him though, merely heaving out an exasperated and disappointed sigh. The elder twin became serious at once. "Nay, listen here," he said, stopping and turning to face Legolas, both hands now clasping the archer's. "I was wrong to tease, considering how we've treated you. I wasn't thinking of that and I'm truly sorry. It's too soon for you to know this, but it's my manner to joke when I'm a little nervous."

"You're nervous?"
"Aye."

"Oh." Legolas studied him, seeing the hesitant and worried caste to the bright grey eyes now that the glinting light of jesting mirth was gone. "Because of this binding?"

"Yes, and how it's all going to work out." Elladan hesitated a moment and took a breath. "I don't want this to drive you and Adar apart, yet I am most pleased to have Elrohir back. Is that terribly selfish?"

"You can't know; he's been so filled with anger. When he would look at me, the mixture of pain and disgust was unbearable. I believed I would fade if something didn't change soon."

"No, I don't think you're selfish. I would do anything to keep Elrond in my life." He smiled and gave the older elf a thorough scrutiny. "I shouldn't be so surprised you're nervous, wandering around in the woods without a shred of cloth to guard your dignity."

Elladan gave a gentle laugh but decided not to respond in kind.

They resumed their walk in companionable silence and by-and-by the trees began to thin out once more. The pleasing noise of a rushing freshet met their hearing and before long the destination was reached. Trees and bracken gave way to a lush meadow carpeted in wildflowers and bordered by an offshoot of the Bruinen, the clear water leaping over a scatter of boulders loosed from the cliff long ago. The place was aglow with the warmth of the afternoon sun and the water sparkled in open invitation. Legolas sighed. "This is lovely spot, yet not one I would choose for bathing,"

"Why not? No one from the city ever comes out here; it's part of Adar's estate. Go on, ask your trees if you doubt me." Elladan left him, traipsing out into the open without a care at all, shaking his tangled hair as he went.

And his rear end, too. Legolas noted with a silly smile. He did as suggested, placing his palm against the bark of a weeping willow, and learned that this was a place favoured by the twins since their childhood days. That surprised him, for he didn't think of them as lovers of nature so much as warriors forced to endure the wilds to pursue their quest. He followed to the banks of the stream where Elladan was already in the water, seated in the shallow tumble with his back against one of the stones, eyes closed, head cushioned on arms crossed behind his neck. Now he shows off the admirably well-muscled torso. He startled when Elladan opened his eyes just then and caught him staring.

"Join me," the command was softly spoken and accompanied by a pleased smile as Elladan held out his hand to the Wood Elf for the third time this day. His sight fell on the chain adorning Legolas' neck as the sun caught on the mithril links, glinting so brightly it hurt his eyes.

Glancing around him once more to ensure no eyes were watching, Legolas discarded the robe and waded into the water, catching Elladan's fingers and lowering himself carefully to sit in the rushing flow. He sighed and relaxed, shifting to take some of the pressure off his aching underside whilst parting his legs enough to let the cooling water soothe delicate tissues inflamed by passionate coupling. "This is very nice."

"You like our place? We pretty much laid claim to this section of the estate when we were but elflings and Adar deeded it over to us once we reached our majority. The idea was to build our homes here, for we were expected to find mates and raise families." Elladan stopped speaking, eyes flickering over the sylvan's abdomen, afraid he would say too much too soon and frighten Legolas. He half-rose, reaching into a basket wedged between the rocks and from it withdrew a soft cotton cloth and a bottle of soap. Lathering it liberally, he began washing Legolas, smiling at the faint blush.
"This raised in the fair sylvan's cheeks. "Ah! Don't be offended, but I love it when your face gets all pink and your ears positively rosy."

"What are you doing to him now, Muindoren?" Elrohir's voice reached them before he did but in no time he was striding through the flowered field, a medicinal kit in hand.

"It's not my fault," insisted Elladan. "Legolas' colouring is so fair he can't hide his reactions and the most innocent phrases make him blush." To both their enjoyment, this statement intensified the effect.

"Stop taunting him; it must be an onerous burden to have every little discomforting thought so readily revealed," admonished Elrohir. He tossed the kit to his brother and hurriedly pulled off his pants, splashing into the water to join them. "I get to wash his hair then, since you're the lucky one smoothing that slippery cloth all over his lovely body. So that's why you sent me to get the healing herbs."

"True, you've figured it out, oh Wise One, but I wasn't taunting him. Besides, there's another cloth if you want to help."

"I can wash myself, you know," Legolas insisted.

They both froze, Elladan's bubbly rag making a soft splat as he dropped his hand into the water, Elrohir halting in the act of grabbing the extra cloth. The brothers shared a rueful look between them before turning this apologetic expression upon their mate.

"Aye, we're sorry," began Elladan. "Would you rather we left you alone?"

The idea filled Legolas with a strange mixture of panic and relief. On one hand he had no desire to be watched as he cleaned himself of their seed, inside and out. On the other, he was a bit uncomfortable bathing in this place, fearing someone would come along unexpectedly as when Finduilas arrived at the spa. Both scenarios were mortifying yet the latter he deemed the worse of the evils.

"I don't want to be left by myself here," he said haltingly, "but I need my privacy, too." Of course, he could feel how his cheeks fairly flamed. He was grateful to see that neither twin was smiling about it.

"That is well," said Elrohir. "We will stay but refrain from gawking. We can just go sit on the other side of these rocks. Would that suit?"

"It will," agreed Legolas and accepted the washcloth from Elladan with a smile. He watched as they rose and climbed over the boulders, certain they were deliberately showing off again, and relaxed as they began chattering together as they bathed. He wasted no time, quickly and thoroughly cleansing the more intimate areas of his anatomy, and discovered that Elladan had left the medical kit in easy reach.

In it he found the same soothing ointment Aragorn had given him for the irritation left by the cinnamon poisoning. Checking to make sure they weren't watching, Legolas applied it and sighed as the ingredients began their work. He could almost feel the tissue rejuvenating and leaned back to relax. A light spray of water cascaded over head as one twin playfully splashed his brother and both laughed. Legolas smiled, glad they were no longer divided. He was just beginning to feel a bit lonely, excluded from their companionable banter, when Elrohir called to him.

"Is everything well with you, Legolas?"

"Aye."
There was enough uncertainty in his tone to cause them both to frown. In unison they turned and peered over the rock ledge dividing them to find a pair of slightly forlorn blue eyes gazing back. Without hesitation they simultaneously rose and leaped over into his side of the stream.

"What is it?"

"Don't hold back, please. We wish to ease whatever fears you have."

"Nay, it's just..." Legolas looked from one concerned face to the other and shrugged, dropping his sight to the running water. "I missed you, I think."  

Ai Valar, could I sound more foolish?

Before he could brave another glance to see what they might make of so childish a statement, two pairs of strong arms enveloped him and he was smothered in a thick drape of ebony locks, sandwiched between their hard, wet bodies.

"We're right here."

"We didn't mean to neglect you."

"Let me wash your hair, please?"

That was from Elrohir who smiled hopefully as both drew back enough to let Legolas breathe properly. He nodded and learned that the younger son had inherited his sire's love of hair, taking a great deal more time to clean the golden mane than it really required. He wasn't surprised to feel the press of a partial erection against his hip as he lay across Elrohir's lap, hair drifting in the current around them both. Legolas shared a glance with Elladan, who gave a slight lift of his brows and a barely discernible shake of his head.

"There is something we want to discuss," he said quietly as both helped Legolas sit up. "About tonight. We don't want to cause any friction between you and Adar..."

"...Nor do we want anyone in the valley to suspect what has happened today..."

"...So this is what we have planned. At the bonfire, we will arrive together...."

"...and Lindir will be there; he has elected to seduce Erestor."

Legolas' eyes grew huge but they continued before he could interrupt.

"We will dance with them and to the crowd it will seem that Elrohir has chosen Erestor while I shall leave with our beloved minstrel."

"That is only for show, Legolas. Please don't be offended or hurt."

"It must appear that we choose to scorn your presence..."

"...As we have always done before..."

"...We are not about to lie with them, or anyone else, except ourselves."

"We will honour our bond to you." They spoke their pledge together and waited for Legolas' response. It was more than gratifying, for he threw his arms first around one and then the other before draping one arm across each neck, drawing them close to impress a brief kiss on each set of lips.

"You honour me indeed. The same vow I give to you." With a jolt of surprise he realised he hadn't given them anything; the anklets were still in the clearing wrapped in parchment. "Elbereth, I'm all
scattered today," he announced dejectedly.

"What now?" asked Elladan.

"I haven't given you the presents I brought," admitted Legolas.

"You got us gifts?" Elrohir was clearly delighted. "Hurry up, I want mine." He stood and drew the other two alongside, dragging them as he waded through the water.

"They won't vanish, Muindoren. By the way, what did you get for me?"

"Why, my eternal devotion and benevolent forgiveness, of course. Didn't you notice those wondrous benefits?"

"I did," spoke Elladan softly, completely serious now as he pulled back to make his beloved stop. "I confess; I've nothing to offer you of equal value."

"Nonsense, Muindor," crooned Elrohir. They both released Legolas and drew together, tightly clasping one another, heart to heart. "Grant me the same and I'll be content."

They fell silent, tenderly touching each other's face and hair in wonder, discovering anew their overwhelming need for one another, whatever their souls needed to express too private for voices to utter. They shared a tender kiss and breathed in and out as one before separating, hands linked, turning with peaceful smiles to Legolas. They found he had politely turned away and left the stream. They gazed upon him, realising they beheld the source of their reconciliation, and if they had wondered at the swift dissolution of their resentful anger they did so no more. The twins joined him on the bank where he was just tying on the robe and Elrohir reached for his elbow, drawing him back between them.

"We're in accord, then," Elladan smiled.

"Good, now can I have my present?" quipped Elrohir, picking up the pace again so that Legolas laughed.

He broke free and raced ahead, eager to get there first, thinking to take some of the flowers to tuck into the humble wrapping. They chased after with muffled curses and caught him just as they were at the verged of the dell. Once in the clearing, Legolas was again amazed for another transformation had taken place. All the bedding had been changed, the red satin replaced by fresh coverings in vibrant sapphire trimmed in silver. His elegant clothes had been collected from the grass and neatly folded. Amid the trees and garlands now hung a hundred little silver lanterns, as yet unlit, ready to provide soft illumination for his time with Elrond later.

That they had thought of changing the bedding made him embarrassed but extremely grateful, for he had no wish to bring Elrond to the bower in the condition he'd just left it. "This is...Thank you," sighed the Wood Elf.

"My brother's idea." Elladan leaned in and gave him a quick kiss.

"We had the thought at the same time, as usual. I was just here when it happened, so I did the redecorating," Elrohir explained. He raised expectant brows at his youthful mate, hands on his bare hips.

Legolas took the hint and moved over to the stack of clothes, finding the packages and bringing them over. "I hope you like them. The colour matches the light in your eyes at dawn," he flashed a shy glance at Elrohir, whose turn it was to blush.
The twins made short work of tearing loose the paper and let out simultaneous gasps of delight as each held up the jewellery, marvelling as the translucent gems sparkled in the golden glint of the departing sun. They swarmed over Legolas, once more smothering him in a double embrace and dual kisses before settling on the grass, each attaching an anklet to his brother's left leg. "We love them, Lúthadron," they announced in chorus, gazing up with winning smiles.

"Glorfindel told us the story that goes with them, too."

"It was an amazing kill; neither of us have faced down one troll alone much less two."

"Imladris is fortunate to have your skill at her defence."

Legolas beamed, very pleased indeed, and stood up straight and tall.

Elladan chuckled to see it. What I want to know is what happened to those huge garnets. "Now, there's a little time before sunset and you need rest. Elrohir will stay here and I am going to see what I can steal from the kitchens."

"You are to eat and sleep... I'm fairly certain they're in the wooden box but I couldn't get it to open. Wood Elf magic."

"...Truly sleep..." Ah well, we'll just have to snoop in Ada's wardrobe while he's in council.

"...While we watch over you. Fear not; we'll wake you before it is completely dark." Won't work if he keeps them in that spell-bound box.

With that they settled Legolas among the pillows and moved into the clearing to dress. Elladan departed and Elrohir located his flute, sitting against the trunk of a tree close to the bower. "Sleep!" he ordered with a smile and began to play a dreamy tune.

Legolas bypassed Ôlpathu, plunging into a deep and peaceful slumber, eyes drifting half-closed, the dulcet tones of the melody swirling and eddying around him, the vision of the dark-haired piper ever before him.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Sidh, aderthatham: peace, we shall reunite
Lilta Nár: Fire Dance
hervenn/hervinn: husband/husbands
Lúthadron: Enchanter, the twins' nickname for Legolas.

NOTE: More between the twins and Legolas, hopefully to highlight the differences/similarities between what he shares with Elrond and what he shares with them. The bath and the talk again offering counterpoint to a similar episode with Elrond. I guess this should have been in the last chapter but I was just having difficulty with it so please forgive me. The Fire Dance and Elrond's gift are next, and of course we STILL don't know what Legolas has procured for Elrond's Ened Ethuol present. If anyone missed it, there's an Extra Treat Chapter, a fun scene I just had to write but again couldn't figure out where it should go. There's also a link for it now in the new fiery celtic emblems button bar up top. See below for the link to get these and other terrific celtic designs for buttons and such.
Chapter 17

Aearlinn - Glîr o Nár

Elo! Lasto!
Lasto a Tiri!

Now comes the night of Ened Ethuil, the night of Fire and Love,
A night of renewal and rejoicing, of merry song and dance.
Tilion, bring Ithil-bant to light the sky;
Bear witness to our deeds.

Gather the sweet essence of the Sacred Wood

to the Valar in their Western Realm
across the sea.

Tonight flame and fire come at our command, a foe subdued.
No longer feared, no longer spurned, a mighty tool within our hands.

Let sparks rain down upon the wood, kindle the pyre, ignite our hearts.

Come, Yavanna and Arârâmê! Sing the Song:

With your grace shall the limbs become imbued; the flames shall set it free.

Come, revellers! Dance amid the smoke and fire; dance beneath the stars,

Leap across the soaring blaze; feel Love’s quickening desire.
Seek amid flickering the gleam, seek your heart’s companion.

Share the Love, share the night,

Body, soul, and mind as one,

At Dawn shall the fire be quenched, passion spent, and yearning done.
Then in Sacred Waters bathe; soul-to-soul behold your fire-mate.

If the Light of Love yet burns, then mates you shall remain.

For a year and a day until the night of Fire returns.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ The Wedding ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The Last Homely House did not require any additional dressing in order to present the most pleasingly elegant setting possible in which to conduct the holy ceremony of matrimony, yet even so the grounds and mansion were embellished to honour the couple and their respective lands. The fact that the wedding coincided with Ened Ethuil only added to the abundant decorations symbolic of romantic love, passion, and appreciation for beauty in all its manifestations.

In the central courtyard the banner of the White City floated on the breeze beside the standard of the Golden Dunes and the Swan’s Wing pennant of Eärendil’s House. Out in the garden where the ceremony would be conducted, every trellis and fountain was bedecked in garlands of scented blossoms. Every statue and green-way was adorned and draped with silk and satin streamers in colours of sand and ultramarine for Dol Amroth, sable and silver for Gondor. The gentle cadence of tinkling chimes filled the air, for from nearly every branch and bower hung clear, crystal tubes clustered around mithril strikers, flashing panes of polished silver dangling down to capture the breeze. Amid this harmony of wind and glass drifted the more structured sound of Elven music from pipe and lyre, harp and voice.

Everyone of importance in Imladrian society collected upon an idyllic knoll beside the reflecting pools where the marriage ceremony was to be performed. Erected thereon was a canopy of wrought silver, an arch of graceful lines and swirling ornaments through which ribbons and buntings and garlands abounded. A taut hithlain rope spanned the interior at the peak of the temporary gazebo and
to this was attached a series of the crystal bells. A handle in the frame of the structure could be worked to send a wave of motion across the line and set all the chimes to ringing. A small table dressed in white linen served as a simple altar, and bore two golden bands beside a single mithril chalice. To one side of the pavilion stood Lord Elrond and his household while on the other was space for the Gondorian folk and the people of Dol Amroth. The humans could not be said to rival the magnificence of the First-born, yet there was no doubt they were folk of high blood and ample means.

Gandalf stood before this assembly, bride and groom hand-in-hand beside him, and presided over the sacred rite, intoning the prayers, reading from ancient texts handed down from Numenor, and reciting the traditional words of creed and canon that served to recognise, seal, and consecrate the union of man and woman. The couple were duly solemn and reserved as befitted the taking of vows that would bind their lives together and with them the fate of their combined realms. Of course, each had a more private and personal reason to be so grim upon such a grand occasion. Yet when the moment came for each to declare their intent to honour this pledge, the words were edged in both courage and hope, for Finduilas meant to be a good wife to Denethor, and he was determined to keep the promise he'd made and open her heart once more.

The wizard smiled to see the hostility gone. Perhaps it was only duty that motivated them now, but neither wished to live in enmity and Finduilas had shown herself to be of stronger stuff than anyone would have guessed. If anyone could steady the mercurial Steward-to-be, it would be she. *Once she's with child all this trouble will be forgotten.* He sprinkled the golden bands with sacred water from the chalice and pronounced over them an ancient blessing in Quenya. At his prompting, Finduilas placed her ring upon her betrothed and he did likewise. Now they were married, yet one more custom remained before they could face the crowd as husband and wife. Mithrandir handed Denethor the cup and he raised it to Finduilas lips that she might sip the consecrated fluid and she returned the favour to him. As soon as Denethor swallowed, the wizard raised his staff and called out loudly: "Hail Denethor and Finduilas, husband and wife, destined to rule the land of Gondor! May the marriage be both joyful and fruitful."

Just then the sun set, sending a last glimmering shaft of ruddy golden light to linger over the little silver pavilion, flashing like fire through the crystal bells so that a burst of coloured light briefly illuminated the scene. Unable to contain an awed outcry over this unlooked for blessing from Arien, the newly wedded couple turned for one final bow to the west before facing the gathered crowd. The humans all leaped to their feet, clamouring in raucous praise, every bell began clanging, and from some hidden location a flock of golden finches flew into the air, a swirling cloud of yellow wings.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ The Feast and the Fire Dance ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Husband and wife retreated down the petalled path, laughing as everyone began flinging blossoms into the air and at their feet. Their respective families and countrymen followed, yet it was a much less staid and formal procession than before. In no time the garden had cleared and all the revellers, guests, and citizens were enjoying the wedding feast, save one.

Elrond found his nerves stretched beyond tolerable limits while his stomach churned, forming agonised knots of worry and dread. He could not taste the food and finally gave up even the pretence of eating. One or two sips of wine was the best he could manage, enough to toast the couple's happiness and the future well-being of the allied realms. Several times Arwen tried to draw him out but he refused to speak, growing more morose as time passed. The twins did not appear for the sumptuous repast either and their father was now convinced his Wood Elf must be with them. Try as he might, he could not prevent fleeting images of their hands caressing Legolas' bare skin, their lips claiming his, their bodies covering him, moving in that most delicious of all rhythms. The scenes
danced blithely through his mind and after each one Elrond grew paler.

Never had a happy occasion been such a cause for discomfort and irritation. With a heavy sigh the Elven Lord rose and declared the evening’s entertainment about to begin with song and dancing in the Hall of Fire. Elrond came as close to stomping as it was possible for one of the First-born, angered for he was certain his sons had somehow seduced Legolas and brought about the joining before the Wood Elf was ready for it. His protective side was invoked, recalling how truly frightened of the encounter Legolas had been. The sylvan archer had come close to begging Elrond not to leave him, though the words never left his heart, his eyes betraying what his soul knew: the answer would have been negative.

That truth made Elrond even more perturbed. He realised how often and how quickly he must have refused a spoken request to spend a day with Legolas. Aye, and with aggravation in my tone, as if the mere question itself was an imposition upon my oh so valuable time. He felt sick and hurried to find a seat near the hearth, mindful of his promise to remain in support of Lindir’s revelation in song. Hah, I did not even think to refuse him. Why is it so much harder to say yes to Aearen? His thoughts could manage no coherent answer and this only troubled the noble ruler more. He wondered how his sons would treat such a petition and ruefully concluded they would be thrilled. No doubt they would find all manner of activities to wile away the hours, never noticing the passing of the day.

His wrath doubled. If they harm my beloved or cause him one second of pain or fear, I shall disown them! Elrond raged internally; it was either that or collapse in sorrow and grief, for he had almost convinced himself he was to lose his golden warrior to the dashing and daring cavaliers. Unable to keep his fiery emotions from showing on his features, none could guess the cause of his ire nor its swift transition to absolute misery and despair. Ai! Elbereth, do not let them take him from me! I swear to show him my love and share my life with him henceforth. Grant me this last chance at redemption and I shall not fail!

Had Lindir not arrived at that moment in all his sylvan glory, Elrond might very well have deserted his guests and run from the room. As it was, the minstrel garnered everyone’s attention and soon held them enthralled. Before beginning his own Song, he rendered one or two ballads for the newlyweds, some sweetly romantic, others bawdy and suggestive. He couldn’t help but notice Elrond’s despondency and understood. Lindir sent him a reassuring smile but it did little to comfort the worried suitor. Well, perhaps the singer took a small amount of sadistic pleasure in that, believing Elrond deserved this punishment for all the years he’d made Legolas suffer. With that thought in mind, the minstrel strummed a new chord upon his harp and began his Song, often returning his eyes to Elrond to ensure the Noldorin prince comprehended what he was saying.

He needn’t have wondered, for Elrond became more and more disheartened and ashamed with every note and every word. Had he subjected his beloved Wood Elf to such shame? Had he regarded Legolas only as his possession? Worse, I treated him as an unwanted responsibility and a burden. I wasn’t even mindful of the disgrace he bore, never even imagined such a thing possible for him to feel. Eru, mayhap I am not the best choice for him. Perhaps he should remain in the care of my sons. It wounded him to admit this and brought salty tears to his eyes, but he didn’t bother to check them. To all observing, it seemed he was but deeply moved by the sorrow and strife in his dear friend’s history.

Just when Elrond could bear no more, Lindir’s song finished and truly there were few who remained dry eyed. The singer was not ashamed of the tears he shed, either, as he made his way to Elrond and Arwen, who was a sniffly mass of satin and dark tresses tumbled in her father’s arms. Even Erestor was suspiciously misty and Glorfindel openly wept, standing to envelope the singer in a tight embrace as soon as he was close enough to do so.
"Mellonen, mellonen, I never knew; I didn't fully comprehend. How I wish I had been there then to protect you from so dreadful a fate," he said.

"It's all right, Glorfindel. There was no one who could stop them and if events hadn't transpired as they did, then mayhap something similar would have befallen Elrond and Elros. So you see, though it is a painful story, I am glad I lived through it to meet those two miscreants. Who knows, without my careful tutoring and mentoring, they might have become as twisted and obsessed as their Noldorin cousins." Lindir smiled, glad to have such good friends. He met Elrond's gaze over the Balrog Slayer's shoulder before settling his eyes on Erestor. As soon as Glorfindel released the sylvan singer and stepped aside, the solemn seneschal gravely bowed.

"Lindir, never again will I use your people as the subject of my jests nor subject them to my scorn," said Erestor. "I hope you can forgive the crass injustice wrought by my crude words."

"Of course, mellonen, consider it forgotten. I cherish our friendship too much to harbour such a grudge. I'm sure there's some remedy we can find for that wicked, wayward tongue." Lindir's mellow voice was laced with more than absolving mercy and his entire person presented an open invitation.

This perked up Erestor's downcast demeanour immediately. He unconsciously felt in his pocket for the small leather box containing the minstrel's Ened Ethuil gift, a uniquely carved stone amulet he'd discovered an Age ago while roaming the grounds. Erestor believed the artefact was left behind by Avarin Elves, proof that sylvans may have once populated Imladris long centuries before Elrond discovered the hidden valley. He hoped it would please the fair harpist and was about to utter a wittily provocative rejoinder when Arwen flung herself upon Lindir.

Weeping and trying to speak of her sorrow and distress, the fair Evenstar was sobbing too brokenly to be understood. Lindir was touched by her compassion and rubbed her back gently, soothing her as best he could with soft assurances of his soul's complete healing. It was only in telling her this that he realised the truth of his observation and it was as if a new melody burst into song within his heart, replacing his dirge of bitter sorrow with a triumphant flourish. He hugged the Evenstar with great joy, silently blessing the day Legolas came to Imladris, for surely it was encountering the sylvan archer that had given Lindir the courage to face his past and lay it finally to rest.

"Lindir, never ever doubt that you are loved," Arwen sniffed, smiling as she pulled forth her handkerchief and dabbed at her nose, gathering composure as she stood back to give her father a chance to greet his former mentor and eternal friend.

"I never will again, dear Undomiel," said Lindir, elated in this outpouring of genuine affection and compassion. He turned to Elrond, who was on his feet, red-eyed and haggard and looking as he had the day Elros had died. Some of the singer's joy diminished and he opened his arms to his former charge. Elrond fell into them readily, clutching at the flimsy fabric of the diaphanous robe, bawling like an elfling.

"All will be well, Alph Brannon. Trust in the love he has abundantly given; remember his pledge is sealed in the gift of new life. You will not lose him," Lindir crooned only loud enough for Elrond's hearing. A long shuddery breath preceded their parting and the minstrel gave his dear friend a bolstering smile.

"I'm trying, muindor iaur, yet he hasn't called and I fear…"

"Nay, don't permit such thoughts to overshadow your heart," reproved Lindir, holding Elrond away from him so he could peer into the stormy grey eyes. "He will be waiting for you at Amon Naur and you will see that he is eager for your arrival. Come on, it's full dark now and Ithil is rising. We must
go for many revellers are already ahead of us. You don't want Legolas to think you won't be there, do you?"

"No!" Elrond gasped, shaking free from Lindir's hold and turning toward the exit in distraction, reaching into one pocket to make certain the comb was there, carefully rewrapped in rich purple velvet and tied with a golden ribbon, while tugging from the other a cloth to wipe his face. "Hurry! I want to be in front; I don't want to miss the Fire Dance. Well, are you coming, my friends? Arwen?" Elrond called over his shoulder as he retreated from the rooms.

The four stared, amazed at the rapid transformation from desolate hopelessness to undaunted determination. Lindir hastened to rejoin his Lord and Erestor fell in behind him. Glorfindel did not attend the bonfire rites, finding the idea distasteful to his strict moral code, and Arwen discretely turned aside in the courtyard to wait for Aragorn, counting on confusion and the milling throng to guard their secret assignation.

The trio dashed through the gardens, joining the flux of merry-makers heading for Amon Naur. They could see the blaze long before they reached it; someone had lit the bonfire and already a great crowd of Elves was circling the roaring beacon. The way parted before Lindir, his alluring costume garnering numerous appreciative remarks and offers to share the rites of the night, and thus Elrond and Erestor managed to make it to the centre of the scene as well. Erestor arranged his features in the most forbidding façade of menace he could produce, determined to ward off any from reaching Lindir's side. The minstrel would be his tonight and no other's. The advisor managed to keep a possessive hold on the singer's elbow as well, which amused Lindir highly, yet he didn't shake free nor encourage any other suitor.

The grassy slope of the altered hill was all but obliterated by the immense numbers of feet covering its surface and the light of the fire cast the billowing tide of bodies attached to them in sharply contrasting planes of light and shadow. All the revellers smiled and laughed and called for a jumper to come and begin the festivities, shouted for the musicians to start the dance. Who among them had kindled the flames was impossible to tell and what Legolas would make of it Elrond couldn't predict. He ran his gaze amid the throng, searching for the woodland archer but finding his sons instead. They saw him at the same time and as one moved forward to greet him, wary and watchful for his mood was somewhat fey.

"Adar," they bowed and spoke in unison.

"Where is he?" Elrond demanded tersely, rigid in anger as he peered into their eyes. Yes, there was something new there, faint but clear and pure nonetheless. His soul cringed as a spike of pain pierced his heart and deflated his anger. "You…have you…?"

"Yes," said Elladan honestly and directly. "Do not be alarmed; he is well and will be here in a moment or two."

"He said he needed his vaulting pole," added Elrohir with a smile and a shake of his head.

Despite the noisy crowd the three Elves felt the silence that followed their brief exchange intensely. Lindir cleared his throat.

"It is for the best, Elrond, now this need not interfere with the rest of the night's fun."

"Fun?" snapped Elrond. "How can you expect me to enjoy this knowing my beloved has…has been…"

"Healed is the word you're seeking, Adar," Elladan spoke seriously, a disapproving frown turning
down his lips. "Healed, as we are."

"Aye, all is well unless you do something to upset things," said Elrohir.

"Something stupid and thoughtless and hurtful," growled Elladan, "like blaming Legolas…"

"…or showing anger and disgust."

"He loves you so; it would break him to feel this harsh and judgemental scorn you bear."

"I do not scorn him!"

"We will not permit you to hurt him," they said together, presenting an intractable determination that defied dissent.

Elrond was dumbfounded, staring from one to the other. They would not permit him to harm Legolas? "I would never hurt him," he insisted hotly, guilt inundating this inadequate and false denial. He swallowed, seeing that his sons were all too aware of the truth.

"See that you don't," snarled Elrohir.

"And neither shall we," appended Elladan.

"Well then it's settled!" announced Lindir brightly, a jovial smile upon his face. "Now that you three have declared a truce, let's…"

His words were interrupted by a great shout of excitement lifting from the crowd. They turned to see the throng dividing before a running figure, a long, phallus-capped rod lifted high above the bobbing heads, and then Legolas broke into the centre, beaming joyfully, clothes soaked to the skin, his formal robe left behind in the glade.

His eyes found Elrond's for a second and between them passed a spark so potent it would have ignited the fire were it not already burning high. Without pause, the Wood Elf raced at full speed toward the blaze, only at the last second thrusting the end of the pike down against the ground, catapulting his body through the air. Higher and higher he rose, tucking into a tight somersault and whirling through the very top of the skyward flames, straightening into a graceful pirouette for a turn and a half ere landing on the other side.

The assembly erupted in loud cheers and whistles, shouting compliments and pleading for more. Legolas absorbed it all triumphantly, traversing the circumference of the stone ring until he was back at the point of lift-off and retrieved his staff. He raised it high, acknowledging the thunderous applause, and turned to meet his beloved Nín'ódhel. No sooner had their eyes met anew than Elrond fiercely snatched him close, holding him tight, burying his nose in the steaming mane, murmuring Legolas' name over and over.

"How I missed you!" Elrond whispered.

Legolas' heart swelled to hear this and he held on just as hard, letting Elrond cover him with kisses. "I am here now and for the entirety of the night."

Elrond pulled back a bit but refused to let go, searching his sylvan lover's eyes again, and found what he dreaded: that same small hint of peace and joy the twins' harboured, a flickering ember of contentment that belonged not to him. "And beyond this night, Aearen? Will you be with me then also?"
"Always, beloved, for as long as you permit it," Legolas answered tenderly, shocked and deeply moved to hear the very fears he had held voiced by the usually confident Lord of the land. He captured Elrond's lips in a kiss filled with promise and desire and only relinquished them when he began to grow light-headed. He realised the crowd was cheering again, this time for their display of passionate ardour, and once more his spirit uplifted in hope. Perhaps their union would be accepted after all.

"Jump for us!" someone shouted.

"Aye, another leap, another leap!" many voices cried at once.

Soon the entire assembly was chanting for more and Legolas could not deny them. He broke from Elrond and only then did he discover Lindir. Mouth agape and brows high, Legolas looked him over, a scarlet blush climbing to his ears as the minstrel laughed and shook his staff.

"Are you up for a bit of competition, penneth?" he asked and that set the onlookers to shouting in gleeful encouragement. Lindir carefully removed the gossamer robe and handed it solemnly to Erestor.

"Competition? How long has it been since you leaped the blaze, peniaur?" countered Legolas with a grin. "Better bind up your locks and take a soak in the pond first."

Thus the frivolity began and the sylvan residents of Imladris delivered a thrilling exhibition, for while Legolas was the unequivocal expert in the art of fire jumping, Lindir demonstrated quite ably that any skill once mastered was never truly lost. The contest ended as the music for the dance began and everyone paired off together. Through all this Elladan and Elrohir remained apart from Legolas and their father, attending to Lindir and Erestor instead, and for this the Elven Lord was grateful. By midnight the long, serpentine chain of dancers weaving in and out about the bonfire had thinned significantly. The minstrel assumed the role of the prelate and declared the public revelries at an end, bidding all peace and joy through the night. The remaining Elves needed no other prompting and eagerly descended the hill. Lindir linked arms with Elladan and Elrohir tugged Erestor away, whispering their real plan in his ear to soften the blow to the seneschal's ego upon seeing Lindir racing away with Elrond's elder son.

This left only those who would tend the fire, the Lord of Imladris, and the Wood Elf. Elrond recognised his head groom and one of Glorfindel's warriors as they bowed and smiled and made urgent shooing motions with their hands to get him moving. He quickly dismissed his internal curiosity as to how they had come to accept this task when Legolas snuggled close, nipped at his ear, and darted away into the night. Elrond had to move quickly so as not to lose sight of him, yet truly he knew Legolas wouldn't leave him behind.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Alone at Last! ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

They raced through the darkened woods, hand in hand, laughing as they dodged around this tree and that, the jubilant sound underscored by the rustle and stir of nocturnal fauna startled into motion by their headlong pace. The way was marked by eyelets of argent gleam as Ithil poured his lustrous splendour into these pockets of open ground where the grass was half-green, half-grey, bordered by a lacy fringe of shadow cast by the trembling leaves of the over-hanging limbs. Amid one such zone no larger than a metre round, Elrond stopped, pulling Legolas hard against him, sealing their mouths and lapping up the excited gasp that fled his Wood Elf's lungs.

The sylvan archer broke away but did not try to entirely escape the possessive grip concentrated at the small of his back. Smiling, he draped his arms upon Elrond's neck and sighed, the silver glint of
the Moon flashing in his eyes just like the playful sparkle of starlight. He laughed and closed the gap between them, resuming the kiss with joyful abandon, snaking his fingers up through the dark cascade of ebony locks, quickly unravelling the braids, seeking for sensitive ears.

Elrond gave an encouraging little grunt of approval and tightened his hold around the svelte figure, widening his stance for better stability and to ensure his growing arousal was pressed close against Legolas.

Aearen smelled strongly of wood-smoke and faintly of singed hair, for his braided tresses had swept through the roaring bonfire no less than three times. Ah, that had made Elrond's heart thunder in both trepidation and proud admiration, for Legolas' acrobatics were more daring than in previous years, whether due to the enhanced thrill of competition or the elevated approval from the citizenry he couldn't guess. He was only glad to have the Wood Elf all to himself at last and it was difficult to resist stripping him down and taking him there and then in the moonlit grass. As it was, one hand found its way beneath the waist of the leggings where a firm, round rear flexed in response to the appreciative caress, the other released the golden mane from the confining plait and separated the crimped and crinkled strands.

Legolas ended their languid oral duet and brushed his nose against Elrond's, eyes shut as he inhaled and released the breath, so overwhelmed with blissful contentment that every particle of his being was suffused with warmth, like having a small piece of the sun tucked inside his heart. He felt the bond between him and Elrond and their child expanding and strengthening, becoming a sustaining, splendid presence. He felt restored instead of depleted and realised this was primarily due to the unexpected accord achieved with Elladan and Elrohir. All this was underscored by the lack of anger or judgement in Elrond's response of needy insecurity, his almost desperate desire. Even so, Legolas was unwilling to share any of this, uncertain how such news would be received.

Reluctantly, Legolas pried the exploring fingers out of his pants and giggled at the resistance encountered. "Nay, let go for we have yet to reach our destination, melethen."

"Why don't we stay the night here? This place is more than suitable; it's perfect, for only here will Ithil's light set your eyes to sparkling so brightly," Elrond's rebuttal was enforced by fingers swiftly loosening the ties of the soot-smudged tunic.

"Ai! Not here, saes Elrond; anyone may happen along, seeking a hidden clearing for their coupling. Everything is already prepared for us; come with me," Legolas pleaded, trying to keep up with those healing digits that somehow seemed to have multiplied, becoming twenty instead of ten, and possessed of a will of their own, all bent on divesting him of his clothes.

Elrond relented, chuckling as his hands were tightly gripped within Legolas' and held out well away from contact with the lithely muscled body, affording him a moment to appreciate his work for the sylvan's tunic was all but discarded and the sheer silken shirt gaped wide. His smile faded, for there upon the creamy skin of Legolas' chest lay a necklace, just a simple chain with a single charm, but it was not one he had given the archer. Tentatively, Elrond reached out and touched it, just letting the tips of his fingers trace the links, warm from the heat of Legolas' body. Carefully he lifted the charm and at once recognised whence it originated. His brows rose in surprise but before he could speak Legolas burst into frantic babble, apologising and trying to explain.

"Forgive me, I fell asleep and then I was running late and forgot to take it off. I didn't mean for you to..."

Elrond quickly moved his fingers, pressing them against Legolas' lips to silence him, shaking his head as he held the young Elf's gaze. "Nay, no more of that. This is a bonding gift between my sons and you, is it not?" He waited as Legolas gave a quick nod, eyes so round the whites of them
glowed. Elrond sighed, saddened that he had put his beloved in such a conflicted position, for Legolas had said nothing of his union with the twins and most likely had hoped the topic would not come up. *I have trained him to keep quiet about what his heart most needs to speak.* The idea disgusted Elrond but he kept his features calm and open. It was up to him to repair the trust he'd so foolishly tarnished; with time Legolas would be able to confide in him fully.

"Aearen, there is no cause for you to apologise. The twins told me it was done and you are whole again, as are they. You owe me no explanation for why you're wearing this," he trailed his index finger down the chain lightly. "A symbol of bonding is usually a ring, yet I'm grateful they did not choose to give you one, for I want only my ring on your hand. This is a fitting substitute and its history is important to the twins; did they speak of it?"

"Nay." He could scarcely find air to voice the simple word, for he'd suspended respiration, tensely braced for harsh repudiation.

"Then I will not," Elrond offered a rueful smile. "It is for them to reveal. I must tell you, though, that it would not be proper to remove this chain for my sake. Keep it on for it represents the link you three share; that is the right thing to do."

"You are not displeased to see it?" Legolas searched his beloved's face for any hint of wrath, any glimmer of wounded feelings. "Above all things, I would never betray your heart," he swore fervently, squeezing the hand still within his grip.

"This I know," Elrond's features described an exultant smile and he touched the graceful cheek with adoring fingers, "and you have not. I won't lie to you; seeing the necklace was a shock, but I realised, somewhere in my subconscious, that tokens would be exchanged to secure the bond. It doesn't distress me as much now as the idea of it did before it occurred. Remember, I granted my permission before hand, though I suspect the choice of time and place was removed from you."

"Aye, 'twas Lindir's doing, yet I can't fault him for I wasn't sure I would be able to…" He spoke the sentence diminished into silence as Legolas tried to look away, colour rapidly suffusing his face.

Elrond gently raised the averted countenance and carefully bent forward, pressing the tenderest of kisses on the grimly set lips. He retreated only far enough to clearly focus on the troubled eyes. "I'm sorry you had to endure such doubt and turmoil alone," he whispered and leaned in to impart another soft impression upon the archer's mouth, letting his tongue just faintly glaze the lower lip. "I love you, Legolas. I want to be the one you turn to for support when you need it, no matter the reason." He kissed him again, sighing as Legolas opened for him, arms winding about his neck as a barely heard moan passed between them. He relinquished the inviting orifice only because he wanted to sample the slender neck and shivered when he felt warm breath gust over his ear.

"Nín'ódhel?"

"Hmmm?

"Thank you." The whispered words were quickly followed by a swift lick across the reddening tip and another tantalising rush of cool air over the wet skin as Legolas continued: "We tarry over-long here; I would renew my bond with you this night, but not in this place."

"Oh, so eager, Aearen?" Elrond grinned and forced himself to step back, holding Legolas at arm's length the better to appreciate the erotic display. Under the light of the moon, Legolas' exposed torso glowed in soft, warm tones of ochre and mahogany where peaked nipples tempted him to taste. Elrond decided that was not an enticement he needed to resist and leaned low, laving each hard little node of nerves thoroughly, settling a delicate bite on the left one that raised a fretful groan from his
beloved. Now Elrond was eager to get where they were going and, guessing it was Lindir's clearing in the woods, tugged on Legolas' hands and resumed their journey.

The night-lit landscape fled beneath their racing feet, its quality of veiled beauty unappreciated, its magical potential unremarked for the lovers heard only the pounding concussion of their hearts, saw only the inner vision of what they wished to do. They burst within the secluded circle of trees and then Elrond froze, astounded by the change. Always a picturesque glen, the meadow presented an atmosphere of romantic allure he would not have believed possible. From the limbs of the surrounding trees the subdued light of tiny oil lanterns winked and flickered, highlighting the bower and its opulent invitation to recline amid the cushiony comfort of silk and down-filled pillows. The sapphire colour of the coverlet looked as rich and dark as the midnight sky and the trailing vines of honeysuckle released a hint of sweet nectar into the air.

"Amazing! It hardly seems the same place. Legolas, this is beautiful," the Elven Lord enthused, smiling as he drew Legolas into his arms.

"I can't accept the praise for it. This was Lindir's idea." Legolas simply could not bring himself to speak the twins' names. Instead, he wriggled closer and lifted his lips for another kiss, eyes half-lidded, hips gently swaying side to side, thigh rubbing against the thickening bulge beneath Elrond's robes. As he hoped, his beloved happily responded by sealing their mouths together and while they were thus engaged, Legolas managed to shrug off his shirt and tunic.

That done, he began working loose the clasps on the heavy robes concealing the Elven Lord's magnificent body, smiling as Elrond's lips released him only to resume marking his neck and shoulders. He sighed as the talented tongue began moving upwards again while the gifted healer's fingers stroked across his stomach and traipsed up the centre of his chest. Just as Elrond's mouth reached his ear, the fingers began flicking across his nipples, pulling and rhythmically circling the rising points until Legolas believed they had to be standing out a thumb's breadth from his body.

"Ai! Nín'ódhel, the things you do to me!"

"You know you like it, Aearen."

Elrond slid down to his knees, lips and tongue and teeth partaking of smooth, smoky flesh as he went, hands working feverishly at the leggings. The task was perhaps not as easy to perform or as quickly accomplished as it should be, but that was solely due to Legolas flagrantly fondling the luxurious black hair, twisting his fingers through it, lifting up handfuls that fell through his grasp in cascades like fine silk, using the very ends to brush and tickle the Elven Lord's exposed ears.

"Elbereth!" this sacrilegious exhalation preceded the poking of Elrond's tongue right in the centre of Legolas' belly-button, which earned him a sharp gasp and an unintentional yank on his hair.

Elrond didn't mind at all and in fact smiled up at the youthful sylvan as he dragged the pants down. Legolas' erection bobbed up and nudged him in the chin and that was sufficient seduction to lure his attention back to the sultry crux of sexual delight. He burrowed into the soft downy hair surrounding the root, nuzzling the crease where the leg joined the body and lapping the salty sweat, fingers languidly teasing the tip of the rigid shaft that was as a consequence pressed against his cheek. The other hand Elrond used to massage those long lean thighs from the back of the knees to the tight little arse, up and down, pinching the firm cheeks now and again, until he could feel shivers running over Legolas' frame.

By then the archer's slender cock was quite slick about the head and Elrond heard a faint but distinct whimper. Grinning, he sat back slightly on his haunches, pulling the organ toward him so that Legolas staggered forward a step as the penis entered his mouth. It was rare for the sylvan to be loud but surprise was on Elrond's side and he was delighted to wring a sharp cry from his beloved. Elrond
sucked, moaning as he reached underneath and rolled the testicles in their smooth, hot sac, relishing the uncontrolled thrust of Legolas' hips that drove the shaft down deeper. One hand held him there, securely planted on one soft mound of arse, its counterpart slipped from the sensitive balls and stroked the narrow opening behind them, just penetrating slightly to feel the heat radiating from it, gathering the silky secretions to lubricate the digits. Elrond relinquished the penis, dipping his head lower to take in the scrotum as he pushed the fingers inside the resistant anus.

"Ah, saes," Legolas whispered, panting as he was spread and another finger entered him. "I need you. Can't you get rid of these clothes?"

Elrond lifted his head and met the furrowed brow and pleading eyes, quirking a brow in mock dismay. "Why, Aearen, you are entirely too coherent. I thought my technique would take you beyond the capacity to make such demands."

"Yes, it does; I am, but all I can get to is an ear and I've been dreaming of your naked body next to mine and…"

"What if I just undo my breeches and take you into my lap, pin you right to me, and fuck your slick hot hole?"

Before Legolas found the means to respond to this suggestion, Elrond removed his fingers and rapidly made good on his offer, releasing the long hard column of maroon flesh from his leggings, holding it up and out. Next Legolas was jerked strongly, the noble Lore-master's hand firmly pulling at his hip. He sat as Elrond rose slightly; in one swift motion he was impaled on the ruddy cock. He tried to lift up and begin the delicious friction that would please them both so thoroughly, but found he was held fast. The confused sylvan sought Elrond's eyes for enlightenment.

"A few rules," the Lord of Imladris smirked at the wide-eyed stare of disbelief this elicited. "First, you may ride me as hard as you like but I'm not going to come this way."

"It was your idea!"

"Second, you are not to come either, for you will spend too quickly and I have something special in mind."

"Valar! Now who's too coherent? Normally when I've got your cock this deep inside me you can't think of anything except how good it feels." Legolas wasn't sure if he was amused or worried and decided it was both at once. If this was a new game, he was certainly intrigued.

"I can't and it does, beloved Wood Elf mine, now give me a few strands of your hair." Elrond chuckled at the complete confusion on his lover's face and dropped his hand between their bodies to tickle the tip of the hard penis poking him in the stomach. Legolas shuddered and tried to grind into the tantalising grip, but Elrond was the one shocked when the archer decided to take several strands of his ebony tresses instead. "Ai!" The stroking hand came away from the rigid organ and raised a plaintive groan from the sylvan. "That smarts, Aearen, but no matter; hand them over."

Legolas obeyed and watched, spellbound, as the Elven Lord wove the threads into a single thin string, realising just a second too late exactly what Elrond wanted it for. By then the black hair was wound tightly around the base of his cock, effectively cutting off any possibility of achieving orgasm. He gasped, squirming as the cock inside somehow got even harder and thicker. "Saes, Nín’ódhel, untie me! I can hold on."

"Nay, you won't be able to; not with the sort of pleasure I have in mind. Trust me, Aearen, this will be the most enjoyable joining we've yet completed," Elrond soothed his mate, kissing him all over
his face, rocking his hips to send little jolts of sheer delight racing through the slender body.

Legolas growled softly but his eyes sparkled as he began to shift in concert with the gentle thrusts. "That is quite a promise, beloved. Our time together always results in the most wondrous ecstasy."

"Oh, this is good," muttered Elrond, steadying and assisting Legolas' lifts with hands at either hip. "Bend a bit when you come up. Aye! Ah, Legolas!" His words dwindled away into naught but heavy breathing.

Legolas settled his arms around his beloved's neck and leaned down to kiss the parted lips. "Aye, it's grand, beloved. Would be better if you were naked. And better still to enjoy this in the comfort of that soft bed behind us."

Elrond merely rumbled out an incoherent and non-committal noise and kissed him back eagerly, removing one hand in order to stroke a tantalising caress across the glans of the sylvan cock, which made Legolas jump and all the internal muscles contract around the penis inside him. Elrond moaned under the exquisite compression and then in complaint as Legolas slowed his movements. The noble Lord severed their oral entanglement and found his mate's expression was one of worry rather than pleasure. He stopped what he was doing, fear clutching at his heart, fanned to greater heights by the little golden swallow charm pressing into his skin. Mayhap he couldn't provide the kind of excitement the twins could. "Do you truly not wish to continue?"

"I do!" Legolas cried, alarmed by the tone of defeat. "Elrond, you know this well. It's just that… the archer faltered, his cheeks flaming, and shut his eyes.

"What? Tell me, Aearen; you're frightening me," pleaded Elrond, framing Legolas' face and shaking it a bit, hoping to induce him to lift the lowered lids.

A miserable groan exited the sylvan's lungs but he bolstered his courage and continued. "There's no cause to fear. I just don't want to be so sore that I can't appreciate whatever this new game is about." He slowly opened his eyes to see how Elrond was taking this statement and found an expression composed of equal parts dumbstruck surprise and self-recrimination.

Elrond bowed his head against Legolas' shoulder, mentally berating himself for not considering this, comprehending why he hadn't as a surge of jealousy raced through every nerve right behind a vivid vision of his Wood Elf being ravished by his two sons. It took a great effort to control this undesirable reaction and Elrond knew his tension would translate to his mate. Indeed, Legolas wrapped him in his arms and started caressing his hair, murmuring apologies again. Elrond's heart sank and so did his erection. With a sigh he snuggled into the lean frame and kissed the clavicle beneath his cheek, encircling Legolas in a secure embrace.

"Shhhh, Aearen, don't be sorry, don't say those words, please. I'm the one who should beg forgiveness; I didn't think about this very carefully. Listen to me, Legolas. I promise you will enjoy the new experience; trust me."

"I do." Legolas straightened up, very aware of the decreasing girth of the penis inside him and feeling terrible about it. Exactly what he didn't want to do: spoil Elrond's fun. He waited as the elder Elf raised his head and then offered a faint smile and a one-shoulder shrug. "I'm sorry; I shouldn't have said anything."

"Nonsense! It's a valid concern and this night's pleasures aren't all about me, you know. We're to relish the joining mutually or not at all; agreed?" Elrond smiled with gentle amusement at the eager nod that followed this. So very young, so willing to please. "A compromise is in order, then. You have consented to being 'restrained' for the duration of the game; I will allow you to strip me so you
may have ready access to this glorious body you've been dreaming of all day."

"Oh yes, a good diplomacy, my Lord," tittered Legolas, fingers resuming their earlier efforts to divest Elrond of the many layers adorning him.

"Wait, there's more," Elrond took one of those busy hands and carried it to his lips, kissing the calluses on the deadly digits. "We shall remove to yon bower of luxury and comfort. Up, woodland fey, your magic only works under a canopy of apple boughs and floral garlands."

"Nay, you can't escape my enchantment, mighty Lord," Legolas whispered seductively in Elrond's pointed ear. "I'm in your blood now."

They rose together, Elrond's slackened penis already beginning to come to life even as it slipped from its warm confinement; Legolas' throbbing erection flush against his belly. It rocked and bobbed as they walked and Elrond giggled, reaching out to flick its tip with finger and thumb.

"Ai!" Legolas shouted indignantly and reached down to squeeze the large balls peeking through the gaping pants. The Lord of Imladris wheezed out an undignified little squeal and Legolas let go quickly, darting out of reach, running for the bower, laughing over his shoulder.

"Ah, raug!" Elrond bounded after him and lunged the last metre, catching his beloved Wood Elf round the waist and bearing them both down upon the fluffy bed. They landed in the position he most favoured, on top, his thickening penis wedged between the parted cheeks of that lovely rump. Elrond couldn't resist a few swift shoves against that inviting rear and decided to plant his teeth into Legolas' left shoulder blade, too. He hummed a deep, dark growl low in his throat and thrilled as the sylvan shivered and shimmied under him.

"Aearen, how you rule me," he exhaled this remark in strained and husky notes. "It's true; you're in my very bones now." He smoothed his hands down the strong back as he forced himself to sit up, determined to follow through on his promise though thought was rather inhibited by the consuming desire to shove his aching organ back inside the Wood Elf where it belonged. He shifted and settled on his heels, unable to resist kneading the pale flesh before him. Elrond parted the graceful limbs and explored the darkly shadowed region between them, each hand delving a separate cavity, and Legolas' resultant moan accompanied a submissive tremble as he adjusted his hips for penetration.

He'd decided just to let Elrond do as he would. Sore or not, their bond would be renewed before dawn and only then would he feel content and complete. He needed this joining; his soul craved the union and his body fairly cried for Elrond's essence to fill him. Legolas relaxed and spread his legs further when suddenly the fingers withdrew, but the invasive thrust of hot, hard flesh didn't follow. He turned to look over his shoulder and found Elrond regarding him with blatant hunger. "Why did you stop?"

"You always tempt me thus," Elrond pouted, an expression not accustomed to residing on his visage so that Legolas blinked to be sure it was really there. "You lure me in with your scent, entice me with such compelling submission, so open, so willing that I can't resist the urge to bury my cock in you as deep as it will go and spill there. But not tonight, Aearen. Tonight it's my turn to be lavished with such adoring caresses, to feel your teeth and tongue lingering over every inch of my skin, to know what you feel like from the inside."

Legolas' eyes widened and he sat up. "It is?"

"You said you wanted me naked, too, but haven't done a thing about it," the noble Lord complained, "and it's Ened Ethuil yet you've brought me no gift." He crossed his arms over his chest in petulant displeasure, but Elrond's eyes were glimmering brightly and the corners of his mouth twitched in
their struggle to remain down-turned.

"Ai! I do have a gift, a wonderful present," Legolas insisted, scrambling over to the small table where his robe was neatly folded. From beneath it he retrieved an elaborately carved box of black oak and held it out to Elrond.

He had made it himself, of course, working into the top surface an intricately carved relief of Lanthir Fân and its veil of falling water. All around the sides were other scenes from places he loved in the valley: the pond where he and Elrond spent tea-time, his lily-bog, the cedar and their balcony as viewed from the gardens, the merry brook and its well-marked trysting bridge. On the bottom were inscribed his and Elrond's names, intertwined amid a scene of flowering vines and birds. He grinned as Elrond took and inspected the box, admiring the design and then attempting to open it. The lid remained firmly shut and the Elven Lord flashed his mate a disgruntled grimace as he began pressing and pushing on this carving or that, searching for the hidden clasp.

"It's true Wood Elf magic this time," Legolas announced proudly. "You must speak the correct words to release the lock."

"Well, what are they?" demanded Elrond, pleased to find Legolas could use the whispered rumours for a joke of his own.

"You must guess," giggled Legolas, "and while you do that, I will see to the removal of these numerous garments." He started with Elrond's boots so as not to be overly distracting.

"Oh Valar, how am I to know?" whined Elrond, viewing the box from all angles as if it would reveal the answer to him. One glance at Legolas' happy and expectant features convinced him; it was, after all, no harsh task to play at riddles while a beautiful, naked, aroused Elf disrobed him. "Edro enni!" he commanded and tried to lift the top. Nothing happened.

Legolas exhaled a snickery snort from his nose. "You'll have to be more original, beloved," he said, dragging his nails lightly across the sole of Elrond's foot, which jerked involuntarily as all the toes curled up. Quite abruptly Legolas found himself wondering what they tasted like and before he could question the new desire he had the small appendages in his lips, sucking greedily.

"Aearen!" Elrond shouted and laughed at the same time, twisting under such ticklish torment. "Daro! Saes, daro. I can't think when you're doing that."

"Sorry," Legolas blushed and set the foot back down contritely. "Guess again, Nín’ódhel." He busied himself untying the long satin sash binding the plush robes about Elrond's waist.

Elrond considered carefully, or as carefully as anyone can with a naked wood-sprite slowly unwrapping a satin sash from around one's mid-section. Especially challenging as Legolas managed to brush the fabric over the weeping head of his cock where it jutted from the enveloping folds of velvet. "Ah, I have it: Erchad Daer And."

Legolas whooped and fell over sideways, rolling to his back and howling with laughter. The soft strip of fabric escaped from his hands and arranged itself provocatively across his genitals. The black thread binding the base of the shaft stood out in sharp contrast to the red erection and the pale blue belt. The Wood Elf's guffaws transmuted into decadent moans as the silky cloth was slowly drawn off him and he looked up to find Elrond hovering over him, the box forgotten and cast aside. He gasped as a wet tongue licked him from root to tip. "Ai, Nín’ódhel, saes!" Lips closed over him and his hips rocked off the mattress as the slick muscle probed the sensitive slit. Suction drew from him a trickle of fluid and a reedy wail but then as quickly as the pleasing stimulus had begun it ended. "Elrond, please," Legolas begged, heart pounding and every nerve on fire.
"No. I made a promise and I'm nothing if my word can't be honoured," Elrond's voice trembled with lust as he turned away from the vision of quivering desire splayed upon the quilt. He retrieved the box and cleared his throat, refusing to allow his eyes to ogle the naked, moaning Elf beside him. "I want my gift," he told himself stubbornly.

"I'll be your gift, beloved; take me," whispered Legolas.

Elrond couldn't help himself; he had to look. What he saw took his breath away in a low and jagged whine of decadent discomfort as he watched Legolas bend his knees and lift them high, one hand reaching down to frantically pick at the tightly wound strands of hair as the other carefully cradled his sac. Elrond was on him before the will to move registered in his brain, snatching the errant hands away, sheathing himself fully in one swift, smooth motion. He steadied himself and gave a quick push out and in, striking deep at the hidden gland so that Legolas gasped and arched into the thrust, wrapping his legs around Elrond's waist. "Is that how you like it, Aearen?" Elrond grinned, securely pinning his sylvan's hands against the mattress to prevent any further infractions of the rules.

"Aye. Nay. Let me touch you. Valar, let me touch myself!" Legolas panted out, meeting the simmering stare of lecherous glee, torn between frustration and delight.

"No." Elrond set to fucking, slow and deliberate strokes that soon had Legolas in a torment of thrilling ecstasy. The sight of the Wood Elf was exhilarating; body trembling into every move, head tipped backwards, elbows digging into the bed, hair swaying in a shimmering cascade across his chest and shoulders, lost in his passion. The golden swallow charm slid off to the side, the fine mithril chain catching on his nipple; Elrond bent forward and bit it on his next thrust, savouring the sensation of cold metal between his teeth and the hot flesh, and kept his mouth there for a soft sucking lick as Legolas pressed closer into the warm, wet kiss. A deep, shuddering groan left his lungs.

"Elrond…"

"Look at me, Aearen. Open your eyes," Elrond ordered and stopped moving, enthralled as Legolas struggled to obey, slowly raising his face and forcing his wrinkled lids to part. The blue irises were nearly vanished, just a thin band rimming the dilated pupils, and the Elven Lord saw himself reflected within them. Then Legolas moaned again, twitching in urgent impatience as his brow scrunched up into deep creases and he blinked, licking his lips.

"Please, finish me, please."

There was real distress in his voice and Elrond came back to reality at once, all his elaborate plans discarded as he cradled the golden head and kissed his beloved archer tenderly, wrapping his other arm around the narrow waist to support the quaking frame as he slowly rocked back. With care he shifted one leg and then the other until he had Legolas in his lap, leaking penis still snug and tight in its comfortable socket. Their mouths parted and Legolas leaned heavily on Elrond's shoulder, curling his torso inward to give him room to untie the cincture around his cock. A long sigh of relief escaped him as the searing pressure subsided but try as he might he could not take himself in hand for Elrond still prevented his efforts. He lifted a confused and distraught countenance, uncertain why Nín'ódhel would be so cruel.

"Nay, don't fret, trust me, Aearen, you won't be denied any longer," Elrond was quick to reassure him, kissing him again as he slowly leaned back, lowering himself to the bed until Legolas was straddling him, the inflamed cock pointing at him accusingly. "I told you; I want to feel you from the inside."

"Inside you." Legolas really didn't believe his ears. Elrond had never expressed interest in being on
the receiving end during their sexual exploits.

"Aye," Elrond chuckled lightly and swept away the wisps of hair hanging over Legolas' face. "That inside me." He pointed at the rigid erection. "I would know this pleasure with you, Legolas, and only you. Will you consent?"

"Yes, of course I do," Legolas breathed, eyes very bright indeed and a triumphant smile overtaking his features. He dismounted quickly and barely registered the sound as the thick rod slapped back against Elrond's stomach, too busy yanking on the waist of the leggings. The venerable Lord of Imladris was truly a magnificent example of male perfection and the sylvan archer frequently regretted, silently of course, that the fine physique was always so thoroughly covered in a way that masked the hard muscles in arms and legs and obscured the broad, masculine chest.

Still, he could understand the reason for such voluminous robes and so many layers. Elrond's genitals were about as amenable to conscious control as his, which meant not at all, and thus whenever they were in close proximity a massive erection made itself known. *Not very dignified for a noble Lord.* Legolas sighed as he caressed the powerful legs, admiring the shape of the calf, the graceful transition from thigh to hip, and found that he was kissing his way up the limb. Elrond seemed to like it but shivered impatiently and no sooner than Legolas raised his head to meet his gaze than the long maroon penis twitched up toward him in blatant invitation. He smiled and dragged his tongue across it as he crawled higher, thrilling to the eager moan this aroused, licking the flat belly and dabbing into the navel. There those omnipresent formal flowing garments halted further oral adoration.

"Off with these infernal robes!" commanded Legolas, straddling his lover's thighs in order to make it so, smiling as Elrond giggled in response. Finally the mighty Lord co-operated, even if that was simply to lie still and permit Legolas to do as he willed, and in no time the offending velvet and brocade was cast aside upon the grass. "Ah, beloved, you are too glorious for words. I would have you naked all the time, just like this," Legolas sighed, scooting further along so that he was now seated right atop the throbbing heat of that solid organ as his hands slid seductively up the smooth, supple skin, stopping when his palms felt the hard points of erect nipples beneath them. He pressed down, massaging in tight little circles as he did, and bent low to lick and kiss the rest of the chest, smiling as Elrond's hands came up to play with his hair and smooth down his back, settling on his rear where he was cupped and squeezed.

"Aearen," Elrond exhaled, straining to draw sufficient air to satisfy his heart's increasing tempo.

"What?" Legolas removed one hand and attacked the dark, puckered bud revealed, biting in swift little nips that tugged just enough to be unbearably titillating.

Elrond's answer returned as a series of wheedling cries, pelvis rocking as he sought to enhance the sensation. When Legolas switched to tease the opposite nipple, he slid one hand down into the crease of the archer's arse and pressed against the anus. That made the Wood Elf wiggle a bit and that almost made Elrond forget his promise to remain yielding and compliant. "Aearen!" he rasped out, unable to resist rolling to the side and dislodging the slick and tempting pressure tauntingly poised above his inflamed organ.

"Elrond?" Legolas lay in the Elven Lord's arms, confused about what he'd done now, staring into eyes darkened by the night and filled with fiery emotion that might be passion and yet again might be something else. "Was that too hard?"

"What?" Elrond was completely lost, being that he was trying to banish images of flipping the sylvan over, prying his legs apart, and taking his pleasure first in one opening and then the other.

"You've changed your mind, then."
The drab tone of stoic acceptance brought Elrond out of his tempestuous battle with temptation and he sighed heavily, shaking his head and drawing Legolas close for another kiss. "No; it's just not what I'm used to, beloved. Before you, I hadn't taken a male lover in many many centuries; not since my warrior days in Lindon. Even then, I wasn't partial to this role."

"Are you saying you haven't been… penetrated since…"

"…the mid-Second Age, yes. I think I want to slow down, or maybe you should just hurry so I don't have to struggle not to break my word." He smiled and gave a sheepish shrug.

"Nín'ódhel, we don't have to do this tonight," Legolas soothed, a little disappointed but not so much that his lust lost its edge. "We have eternity to try out new positions. I just want to be with you; I need you; need this union." He trailed a fingertip down his mate's breastbone and settled a kiss on his lips. "Make love to me." he whispered, the sultry command mingling with Elrond's breath as they parted.

"Oh, Legolas, I want that, believe me, and I will, but I want you to make love to me first. It's important to me, no matter how awkward I feel about it. I truly want to give in to you this time." He paused and studied the uncertain face before him, smiling with just a hint of wicked pleasure. "I know you fantasise about this. Do you imagine it while you're bathing, thrusting your hard shaft deep inside me, hearing me beg for it?"

"Uh…I…"

"Well, then, take me, Aearen; I'm yours."

With that Elrond drew aside and flipped over on his stomach, collecting his arms under his chin and turning to stare at Legolas with a look the sylvan could only describe as apprehensively seductive. Despite the direct and exciting invitation, the archer had to bite his lip and lower his eyes to keep from laughing as one Noldorin brow rose skyward in what he supposed was meant to be a coy come-hither manner.

"In my dreams," he began slowly, mastering his mirth as he reached out and caressed the curve of the fine, strong back, "I always start by combing your hair."

"Really?" Elrond was now fully intrigued and joyfully recalled the naughty grooming tool he'd brought. "I would like that, Legolas, and there in the pocket of my robes you'll find a magnificent comb."

"My Ened Ethuil gift?" Legolas asked, sliding to the edge of the mattress and rifling the voluminous garment's many hidden pouches. He removed a fob with two golden keys on it, a scrap of parchment with a scribbled list of tasks to complete, a time keeper, a palm-sized abacus, and a damp, rumpled handkerchief before at last locating the prize. With a huge smile he carried the velvet-wrapped parcel back to Elrond's side and hastily disposed of the ribbon. He gasped in exaggerated surprise as the mithril comb was revealed. "Just what I've always wanted, Nín'ódhel; how did you know?"

"Imp! You know Glorfindel delivered it into my hands this morning," scolded Elrond, but he was smiling. "It was Lindir, however, who revealed the real appeal of such an article."

"Ah, it seems to me we owe much to your minstrel, then. Did he explain how the game is played?"

"There's a game?" Elrond sat up eagerly and crossed his legs under him so that his rigid penis was on flagrant display.

Legolas noticed, of course, and suddenly reached over, touching the edge of the comb to the very tip
of the engorged organ. Elrond's grunt almost obscured the decadent sigh that issued from the shining teeth. "Aye, there's a game. You choose a number, not a large one, please, and then I will draw the comb through your lovely ebony locks that many times. Whatever the comb says on the final stroke, we do."

"Valar!" Elrond's eyes were huge in disbelieving appreciation for the Wood Elves' highly evolved sense of erotic enjoyment. He swallowed, "Five," and shivered, unconsciously gripping his cock and pumping it.

"Five it is," repeated Legolas, carefully taking hold of the wrist in motion and halting it, "but none of that, melethen, or I'll have to restrain you."

"Oh? Perhaps later, Aearen, now demonstrate how the game is played." Another shiver passed along his spine as Legolas moved around behind him and carefully gathered all his hair together.

"One." announced Legolas and sank the fine tines into the thick mane, drawing it all the way through to the end.

"Oohhhh, do that again!" the lurid male voice pleaded and both Elves laughed.

"With pleasure. Two." The second pass began.

"Ahhhhh! Tongue my ear, you wicked Elf."

"Oh," Elrond's voice held mild regret that he had chosen a higher number.

"Three."

"I want you to swallow my cock and drink my seed."

The lovers groaned in unison at that and it was with a trembling hand that Legolas raised the comb again. "Four," his voice was faint and fraught with escalating desire.

"Touch yourself."

Elrond whimpered; he loved watching Legolas do exactly that. He met the archer's eyes over his shoulder; this was it.

"Five." The comb began its descent.

"Taste me! I want to feel your hot tongue inside me."

"Yes!" Legolas grinned and tossed the comb aside. "Lie down again, beloved, let me …" he didn't finish the sentence for Elrond quickly returned to his prone position, on his back this time, and willingly bent his knees, spreading his legs wide. Legolas was presented with an incredible view of the huge crimson cock between naked thighs while the tiny crinkled entrance remained hidden by the darkness. No matter, he was sure he could find it.

He crouched low, eager to set about preparing his beloved Nín’ódhél in such a thoroughly decadent manner, but decided to pay homage to the exposed genitals first. A quick swipe across the base of the tight sac made Elrond gasp, penis and legs twitching of their own volition, so Legolas repeated the action, adding a plaintive purr that remained just short of a hungry growl. Then he sampled the tender skin of the perineum and that almost made the Elven Lord come on the spot as a huge jolt rocked his spine. Legolas wasn't sure if the garbled shout was meant to be his name or a plea to be quick. He decided he needed to hear it again to be certain and licked the smooth skin slowly, settling
a dainty nibble on the inside of the right leg.

He paused to sneak a peak between the legs and found Elrond clutching the quilt, arms so stiff they trembled, mouth open and eyes squinched shut. It wasn't exactly a look expressive of ecstasy but Legolas checked the groin and found the proud erection unflagging. The covers rustled and he turned to see Elrond gazing at him with a peculiar mix of trepidation and hunger, the unspoken question clear within his eyes.

"Just making sure you're all right," Legolas said and gave a reassuring smile when both those dark brows soared upward. He decided he didn't want to hear any retort couched in indignant tones laced with superiority and licked the potent root whilst breathing out the most decadently wanton moan he knew how to make.

Ignoring the imploring uplift of the thick shaft, he resumed his place lower, laving over the creased, red opening thoroughly. This was all territory he'd explored before, however, and it was time to expand the bounds of his experience. Cautiously he pressed the tip if his tongue against the small ingress and met strong resistance; Elrond's body did not relax and welcome him inside. Again he circled round the sealed hole and then gently blew across it. That raised another surprised cry from Elrond as a shuddery spasm worked through him.

Legolas was pleased by the response and remembered what Elrond used to do in the early days when all this was new to him, too. He reached up and took hold of the solid organ, squeezing and pumping slowly as he resumed lapping at the tightened anus. The effect was immediate and most gratifying for Elrond groaned and worked his hips to enhance the sensation as his body visibly relaxed. Legolas pressed against the opening again and this time the tip of his tongue made it past the strong ring of muscles.

The taste was acrid and biting, the scent earthy and musky and Legolas wasn't sure if he liked it or not. He pushed in further and felt the ripple as the internal walls tried to expel him. He fought against it, seeking to reach the small swell beneath which the prostate lay hidden. His tongue was not that long, it seemed, and he withdrew, sitting up and ceasing his stimulation of the hard penis at the same time. This was really not so simple and he suddenly felt incredibly inadequate to the task. Elrond truly didn't want this, no matter how much he might say so, and it was rather difficult to maintain a high state of arousal in the face of such denial. He met his mate's questioning eyes.

"I'm not sure I can do this, Elrond," he said dejectedly.

The Lord of Imladris was upright in a flash, arms encircling the drooping shoulders and lips pressing kisses against the golden hair. "Of course you can. What's wrong, Legolas?"

"It's just not the same. I want to be with you; I want it to feel the way it always does. This is different." He shrugged, unable to find means to express his worried dissatisfaction. "I'm…I know you don't really want me inside you. You're just offering because you know I wanted that. Now that it comes down to it, I don't want to be taking pleasure from you; I want to give it instead. I don't think I can, not this way."

Elrond lifted Legolas' chin and searched his eyes carefully, not liking the small glint of hurt and the faint spark of fear shining there. He sighed; once more he'd failed his beloved. Legolas should be lost in his fantasy but instead he was worrying about what Elrond was feeling. "Aearen. Legolas." He smiled and hugged his sylvan archer. "You mustn't give up so easily. You may not remember but in the beginning you were quite wary of our bond and resisted joining with me. In fact, that first year we coupled exactly three times."

"That was different!" exclaimed Legolas, eyes wide as he wriggled out of Elrond's arms to meet his
indulgent gaze. "I was sick. I didn't know you at all; I didn't love you then. I was driven by the bond alone."

"Ai! Don't get angry; I know all this. I only meant it wasn't easy for you at first, even though our union was pleasurable. It was difficult to get you to relax for anal penetration, as if you didn't much care for it."

"That sounds so clinical and to be truthful, I don't."

"What?" Elrond's spine straightened and he lost every thought in his head, shocked to hear this admission.

Legolas flinched, dropping his eyes to the mattress. "I didn't mean I don't like it at all; I like everything you do to me, I just like joining with you more the other way. Feels better."

"Don't do that," Elrond's voice was sharp with anger and he regretted seeing Legolas cringe but couldn't help it. "Don't tell me what you think I need to hear. If you're not honest with me how can I hope to please you? You should have told me you didn't want me to enter you that way."

Legolas stared at him. How could he make Elrond understand? "It wasn't my place," he started and swallowed, feeling his throat tighten up and tears start to gather. "I belonged to you but you didn't belong to me." He couldn't manage more just then and was grateful to feel Elrond's strong arms around him again. He leaned his head on the broad shoulder and held on tight, tears escaping despite his efforts to hold them back.

"Ai, Legolas," Elrond could barely speak, feeling as if he'd been kicked in the gut as all the truth in Lindir's Song was revealed anew. "You thought you were mine, like a…" he inhaled sharply, unable to voice the word that came to mind, "like a pet or a toy." Rapid motion of the bowed head indicated agreement as the Wood Elf quietly sobbed, a faint mumble succeeding it of which 'ruined everything' was all Elrond could make out. It was more than enough. "Nay, that's not true. You haven't ruined things, Legolas, you haven't." Elrond shook him a little for emphasis and then squeezed him tight, rocking slowly back and forth, realising he just needed to let Legolas cry. "It's going to be all right; I promise you," he whispered in a pointed ear and kissed it tenderly.

The tears stopped after a few minutes and Legolas felt around until he found the hem of the velvet robe, dragging it close to dry his eyes and wipe his running nose. He inhaled a deep and steadying breath that hitched slightly and settled back in the comforting protection of Elrond's embrace, ear pressed against the warm, bare chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. For a long time they stayed like that, Elrond offering support and reassurance in calm, soothing words, Legolas clinging to every syllable. Soon consolation and apologies melted into affirmations of love. Pledges and endearments were punctuated with sweet kisses; fingers traced familiar contours and lingered in favoured places; desire rose and replaced despair.

They made love to one another under the bower, discovering they didn't need the festival's heightened atmosphere of sensual frenzy or elaborate erotic toys to enjoy the experience. They only needed each other and confirmation that both felt the same consuming passion, the same blinding terror of losing the only thing in life that mattered. It was a blissful joining if a rather conservative one, each in their accustomed positions, that left them smiling and locked in on another's arms again.

"I thought I would lose you tonight." The pair spoke their penultimate fear in unison, startled but not too much as they laughed over it and kissed. Both inhaled and smiled, foreheads touching, and answered: "Never."

TBC
~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Glîr o Nár: Fire Song
Elo! Lasto!: Look! Listen!
Lasto a Tiri!: Listen and Watch!
Erchad Daer And: Big, Long Prick
Alph Brannon: Swan Lord - a reference to the Mariner's House
Alphdal: Swan-foot
melethen: my love
meril: rose/roses
Sidh, aderthatham: peace, we shall reunite
Lîltâ Nár: Fire Dance
hervenn/hervinn: husband/husbands
Lûthadron: Enchanter, the twins' nickname for Legolas.

NOTE: If you read this earlier, you will note that the beginning bit about the wedding of Finduilas and Denethor has been largely cut out from the chapter. I just felt it dragged on too long, though I tried to get some important Elrond soul-searching and discomfort worked into it, as well as some hope for happiness for Finduilas, as requested by a dear friend. The wedding is not gone, it has just been given its own place. Check the menu bar at the bottom and you will find it at the bottom of the page along with a NEVER BEFORE SEEN alternative chapter regarding Legolas and Denethor. (I had a lovely CSS menu there, but IE6 cannot manage to display the code properly, so that's gone. I despise IE.)

Thanks once again for all the kind support from everyone reading!
© 12/06/2007 Ellen Robey
Aearlinn - Dor Eden Cuil

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Two or Three Weeks Pass By… ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Erestor sat upon The Ledge gazing down upon the Last Homely House, its snowy spires and red-capped cupolas suffused with the misty lark-light of another dawn, listening to the bright and piercing song of minuial's chorusers, the Lauds of finches and sparrows in the morrowdim, heralds of Arien's return. She would not spill the golden glare of Anor upon the lush valley for another hour, yet the earliest warblers and crooners had already begun their sweetly tuned affirmations of nesting rights, melodic challenges to any and all trespassers upon their habitual territory. Erestor smiled as he turned his face to the east, but the horizon was obscured for The Ledge was only half way up the rugged cliff wall and in fact was part of the very outcrop over which the falls of Lanthir Fân spilled.

He'd been coming to this spot since the refuge was founded, observing the region's transformation from untamed woods and meadows to the beacon of hope and healing that was Imladris. He had seen it all, every aspect of the haven's development from plans and sketches and detailed descriptions voiced in jubilant excitement to ultimate fruition; watching in approving pride as the elegant structures and gardens, walled paddocks and terraced fields took shape, transitioning from dream into reality. Through it all he'd worked side by side with his cousin, aiding Elrond in whatever task came before him, from allocation of lands and resources to establishing a governing Council. There had never been an inkling of a doubt that the son of Eärendil would be named Lord of the Realm and upon convening the first council his candidacy had been endorsed with unanimous approval. Not a single voice had spoken against the election.

Erestor sighed and shifted slightly in order to peer down into the grounds of the house that had been his home for an Age and a half. In all that time, none had challenged Elrond's right to rule. Yet now the people of Imladris did exactly that, evoking a law the Chief Advisor had never thought would come to bear upon the stately valley's venerable ruler. The Council would convene to establish proof of Elrond's autonomy; the influence of sylvan magic had been officially entered into the record of affairs as a serious concern to the safety and security of the realm and the secret power her Lord both wielded and protected. Erestor was now in the uncomfortable position of being right, having warned his kinsman of this very eventuality, while feeling wrong, his guilty conscience berating him every other second for upholding the twins' unsavoury condemnation of Legolas' motives for remaining with their father.

That thought brought him up short. When did my perception of Legolas shift? Within seconds he had his answer; indeed, he could pinpoint the exact moment he'd become convinced The Sylvan's heart was as fully engaged as Elrond's. He'd caught them in the garden one dusky twilight in the very earliest stages of amorous activity, tunics discarded already, sharing kisses and caresses as they moved into the mood. Elrond had just undone Legolas' shirt and slowly peeled it back, exposing a shoulder, leaning in to kiss the bared skin. Legolas had shuddered and whispered something into the Elven Lord's ear; Elrond had raised his head with a smile, meeting the Wood Elf's eyes as he pressed him down to lie upon the green turf.

Erestor hadn't stayed any longer, hurrying away before they realised he'd been watching. He'd found his throat tight and his heart both heavy and lightened at the same time. There had been something so tender and endearing about the way Elrond had uncovered the archer's body, the impression of his
lips upon the skin almost reverent. Erestor decided it was probably the most intimate act he'd ever witnessed and all he'd seen was one naked shoulder. Nay, so much more. The smile on Elrond's face, the tremor that ran through Legolas, the quiet submission as he was settled on the grass, all these small things spoke volumes. What I saw was a couple in love, completely besotted with one another. That only made him feel worse about the escalating troubles they now faced.

It had all started the day after the humans departed the valley. Elrond had called for an Assembly of Lords and Councillors in order to announce his formal betrothal to the Wood Elf. Legolas had fortunately not been present for this was an official meeting of the full Council. A feast was planned for the evening to which all were invited and during which Elrond planned to present his affianced mate to his people. That celebration never took place. It had been a moment of excruciating embarrassment for Erestor, watching as his cousin's joyful countenance slowly dissolved into shocked disbelief as stunned silence met his happy news, replaced the next instant by an outcry of indignant fury and fear.

The folk of the valley did not want a lowly sylvan archer raised to the status of a Lord, even if it was only by marriage. They did not care a bit for Elrond's assurances that Legolas had no interest in either politics or power. His words, they cried, were tinged with his enchantment; his reason diluted by the un-natural bond, a union forged by sylvan wiles. Elrond had been struck dumb, unwilling or unable to relate the one bit of news that might have fended off the disaster. He breathed not a word of his mate's pregnancy, instead erupting in a vocal barrage of rebukes and remonstrances, declaring his disappointment and shame for the bias and bigotry so wilfully presented.

His recriminations did not move the noble citizens to reconsider. A motion was made to conduct an inquiry and instantly seconded. The vote was not unanimous but the motion passed. Never had the Assembly so fully denounced their leader. He was still the Lord of Imladris in title, but all pending decisions regarding the governing of the valley were set aside until the conclusion of the hearing. Elrond had gone still then, a strange sort of calm resignation restructuring his features. He'd quietly ordered them all out of his house, declaring them false friends, stopping just short of naming them traitors, forbidding any to enter the grounds of his estate unless formally invited to do so. For the first time since the gates had been erected, the elegant wrought iron barriers had been shut and bolted.

This behaviour only made the ministers more concerned. They could not comprehend that Elrond was only trying to shield his mate from the growing enmity. After a few days went past with no solution, that is to say Elrond declined their demands either to renounce the engagement or permit them to interrogate Legolas directly, they sent for Mithrandir, recalling him from Gondor to act as an official emissary from Aman. His judgement alone they would abide and the hearing was delayed until his arrival. Word had been relayed to Elladan and Elrohir in the event they were required to succeed their Adar and take on the burden of Vilya. Neither they nor the wizard had returned as yet but were expected any moment. The atmosphere in the Hidden Vale had grown increasingly tense and edgy as the days wore on.

How did it come to this? Erestor shook his head, an uneasy frown sketching lines across his forehead. I should have done something years ago. If I had made greater effort to contact Legolas' people perhaps they would have come and taken him home. Now, they'll arrive within a cycle of Ithil at most, expecting to celebrate Legolas' change of fortune only to learn his lordly suitor has been unseated because of the union. He wondered what their reaction to this would be and how many warriors they were bringing along. Surprisingly, Glorfindel did not seem to be concerned at all. Once the most vocal declaimant against Elrond's domestic arrangement, the Balrog-slayer now staunchly supported the marriage and held that all the trouble would come to nothing once the pending birth was revealed.

The seneschal sighed, glancing again toward the scrubby woods beneath his lofty perch, and in spite
of his sour mood found his lips turning upward as a silent chuckle constricted his ribs. Elrond was emerging from beneath the trees, striding through the regimented ranks of plum and pear trees toward the kitchen whilst singing a rather salty tune, a large pheasant slung over his shoulder. The Lord of Imladris did not present a very stately figure this day. He was wearing hunting clothes sturdily constructed from soft leather dyed in shades that matched the shadowed viridian common to woodlands, tall boots sheathing his legs to the knee, hair efficiently, if a mite austerely, braided in the style of Legolas' 'House', a quiver strapped to his back and a bow in his right hand. So had it been everyday since the Council's decision, though the type of game changed and sometimes the bow was replaced by fishing gear, and Erestor had to admit he hadn't seen his cousin so genuinely happy since Arwen was a wee babe.

And proud. He is absolutely thrilled about this elfling and thoroughly enjoying the role of nurturing husband and provider. Perhaps I would have served him better had I insisted he seek a new mate after Celebrian's departure. Erestor grimaced; Elrond would have vehemently opposed such an idea. No, only the direst circumstances could have jolted Elrond from his relentless adherence to dignity, honour, and duty. That or the sylvan sorcery of allure. Much as he disparaged and ridiculed it, Erestor had never believed that beguilement was detrimental to Elrond personally. His kinsman's new state of peace and contentment was solely Legolas' doing. A sudden twinge accosted the seneschal's heart and with surprise he realised its root was envy.

Lindir's cutting words from the morning after their Ened Ethuil encounter lashed across his reeling mind and anger surged in to flush out the sharp pain they invoked. Angry at himself as much as Lindir for feeling any sort of regret at all, his spine unconsciously straightened as he reverted to his customary attitude of haughty scorn.

My life is neither pathetic nor solitary; I play a vital role in the affairs of my people and have my choice of bed-partners whenever I wish one.

Yet a partner for the night, a season, or even a century was a far cry from a mate for all time. Erestor had never wanted the commitment inherent in such a bond. Or did I convince myself to believe that because the truth was too painful? I did love once, yet she chose another. The vision of her face rose before him, clear and distinct as if it had been only the previous day that they'd parted. Her refusal had stung but not so much that his spirit faltered.

Was that love?

He hadn't thought of her in more than an Age, yet neither had he considered wooing another for anything more than physical pleasure. Why should I think on Lindir as anything more? Erestor had known the minstrel since his days of youth in Sirion. Indeed, he had spent much time under the singer's tutelage along with Elrond and Elros, for the three were of similar age and all were orphans under Cirdan's guardianship. In all that time up till this very year, this very spring, Erestor had not once desired Lindir as a bed-mate.

Alarms started going off in the seneschal's mind, for this sudden attraction seemed highly unlikely and entirely too coincidental. In revealing his sylvan heritage, was Lindir unleashing the same mysterious magnetism Legolas used upon Elrond? The notion fit right in with the seneschal's derogatory evaluation of sylvan elves and made him furious; how dare the singer lure him in only to so coldly cast him off?

Well, it is hard to see truth when it is so counter to one's internal perceptions of one's own character. This was a much easier and more satisfying conclusion to make than examining his bigotry, facing his lecherous coveting of Elrond's young mate, or considering how physically similar Lindir and Legolas were. Erestor leaped up and hastened down the steep slope, determined to confront the minstrel, and blundered into the cove of Lanthir Fân.
"Maur-aur, Lord Erestor." The greeting stopped the seneschal cold for he knew that voice. All about him and up into the trees he stared, searching for the speaker, for it was Legolas. He could not spot the archer and cursed in the silence of his agitated mind. A soft chuckle wafted through the air and then a brisk "I am here" followed as the sylvan dropped from the limbs right in front of him, a polite smile adorning his comely face.

"Yes, so you are. I didn't know you were partial to this place."

"I am, very much so. It is without doubt the very finest location in all of Elrond's estate. I was not aware you liked to venture here," answered Legolas. In fact, during the entire time he'd been out and about on the grounds, never once had he come across any sign of Erestor near the secluded grotto. Even the trees had confirmed it was not a site the Noldorin advisor favoured. It was partly for this reason that he liked it so much.

"Well, it is lovely in a shadowy sort of way but there's not enough sunlight here for my taste. I generally await the sunrise from the ridge above," Erestor replied, immediately wondering why he was offering that bit of personal information when a simple 'I don't' would suffice. He wasn't in the habit of trading small-talk with The Sylvan and it was even more unexpected for Legolas to initiate the conversation when he could have remained hidden. While he was thinking all that, Erestor noted that for some incomprehensible reason his simple explanation made the Wood Elf frown.

"Oh." A great sigh followed. "They didn't think to tell me that."

"Who? And why are you inquiring as to my preferred haunts?" demanded Erestor. "I am Elrond's cousin and the grounds are open to me. I may wander at will, even as you do."

"That's different; I'm his mate and I've good reason for my roaming." He set out walking and Erestor fell in step. "Besides, I am not asking where you prefer to wander; I have been seeking a place to call my own. Lindir has one; you have one, so does Elrond and practically everyone who works on the estate."

"This cove is quite special to Elrond. You might want to speak with him about it before you try to claim it. He will not want you taking over Celebrian's sanctuary." The look this statement wrought on the archer's face was nothing short of crestfallen dismay and while Erestor had initially intended to invoke exactly that effect, seeing it was not satisfying in the least. Legolas looked vulnerable and almost desperate and the seneschal suddenly felt the urge to console and comfort him.

"Celebrian's sanctuary? This was her place? They didn't tell me that either." Legolas came to a halt and fidgeted with the hem of his tunic as he gazed mournfully around the placid place. "It is the best spot; I'll never find another quite so right."

"Ah, perhaps they, whoever 'they' are, didn't know she liked to come here. Whom did you ask? Maybe Elrond won't mind at all and I'm certain Celebrian wouldn't care if you find solace here."

"The trees. Perhaps they don't comprehend Nandorin so well these days and I can't converse with them in Sindarin." Legolas related this matter-of-factly and ignored the advisor's arched, incredulous brow. "I need much more than solace, Lord Erestor, and had planned to bring Elrond here after breakfast." Another huge sigh left him and the anxiety had not abated.

Erestor didn't know exactly what to make of the language barrier with the hemlocks or what to do to set things right but very much wanted to. "Well then, let's go in to breakfast and I will add my encouragement to your request. Lanthir Fân need not be a shrine; the Lady of Imladris is at peace in Aman and has at her side one whom she loves. It is fitting for Elrond to have his love at his side also and if this is the only location in the valley that suits you then so be it."
Legolas' eyes were wide in amazement and tinged with lingering doubt as to Erestor's motives for being so gracious. Yet he had clearly referred to Elrond's love for him in tones that revealed his acceptance of this truth. "I am grateful for your support," the Wood Elf managed to say before too much time went by. "Let me talk with him first and if there is any resistance then perhaps I may call on you to convince him."

"Agreed. Come along; the pheasant should be nearly done roasting when we get there," Erestor found he was smiling and his sour mood all but vanished. He held out his hand and the smile faltered as Legolas shied back from it.

"Lord Erestor, you have just spoken of Elrond's love for me and I hope you understand that feeling is returned fully," the sylvan warned.

Erestor was thoroughly chagrined for there was no doubt Legolas was aware of the vulgar lechery with which he had so long and so secretly surveyed the youth's every move. "Aye," he dropped his eyes to the ground in shame and hid it with a half-bow. "I beg your forgiveness. I should not have permitted myself to behave so basely. You and I both know that, except for Elrohir, I am the one most responsible for the strong opposition your union with Elrond has invoked. It isn't behaviour I am proud of and quite unlike my true nature." He could see that Legolas considered the verity of this information dubious at best. "No matter, I will prove it to you in time," the seneschal replied to the unvoiced distrust.

"You could prove it now," Legolas said. "This break with the Council, could you not mitigate the harm and convince the Lords and Advisors that I am not a threat?"

"Ah, I wondered why you spoke to me earlier. Had you not I would never have known you were there," Erestor nodded thoughtfully. He was actually very curious about Legolas' reaction to the trouble, for Elrond was completely mulish in regards to revealing anything of their discussions.

"Aye. I saw my chance and took it. If you really do regret your previous actions then help us now. I do not work spells on people, Lord Erestor. Only wizards have such powers. You must tell them. These Elves will listen to you for you've been here in the house the entire time. Tell them you've seen no evidence of sorcery on my part."

"It isn't that simple anymore; the other advisors will only say you have enchanted me as well. A hearing has been ordered and it will have to take place. Once it convenes I will gladly lend Elrond my support as I always have. Mithrandir is on his way, as you know, and it is his testimony that will clear you. There will be a vote to determine Elrond's future as Imladris' principal Lord and ruler. I have no doubt that he will be duly reinstated once the Istar reassures them." Erestor was really not that certain at all but it was obvious Legolas was deeply troubled by the whole mess. He smiled kindly and reached out to lay a comforting hand on the young archer's shoulder, pleased that the contact was permitted this time.

"You're sure? I can't abide for Elrond to lose his place among his people because of me," Legolas studied Erestor's visage for signs of deceit but as always the wily seneschal was completely inscrutable.

"He will not. He is a good and wise leader and none of that has changed since you're inclusion in his life. That is what I plan to point out to my esteemed though misguided colleagues. Surely Elrond has told you something similar." He couldn't rein in his curiosity.

"Aye," Legolas replied with less than enthusiastic articulation. "Yet he seeks to protect me from troubles and worries, so what he says often leaves much truth unspoken."
Erestor peered at him closely, evaluating the tightness around those firmly set lips and the nervous way those lethal fingers kept bothering the edge of the soft leather tunic. Elrond's efforts to spare his lover additional stress were not successful. The seneschal made the decision to point this out to his cousin at the earliest opportunity. "He doesn't mean to keep you in the dark; he's just concerned for your welfare. Now then, I know Elrond is determined to maintain your strength and health over the course of the pregnancy and will be fraught with dread if you don't come in soon. You like pheasant, don't you?" Erestor started walking, glancing behind to see that Legolas followed, and presented the most disarmingly charming smile in his repertoire. The Wood Elf gave a rather pallid facsimile as they set out once more.

"Pheasant is among my favourite types of game. They are not so common in Greenwood as once they were and we have had to stop hunting them. The Orcs like them, too, it seems, as do the Men in the forest. We've been able to convince the humans to stop killing them but still their numbers diminish. Soon, there may be none at all."

"That is unfortunate. I didn't know the Orcs had multiplied to that extent."

"Aye. They grow ever more bold and we dare not go beyond the central regions of the woods anymore, for all the southern portion of the forest is now under the dominion of the Wraiths. They are organising and training the Orcs to be better fighters and everyday their numbers seem to double."

Erestor eyed the woodland warrior at his side, suddenly realising the deep sorrow that always hovered around him might have more than one cause. "It must be hard for you to be separated from your home," he ventured into difficult ground with both caution and compassion.

A rueful smile and a short nod were returned but Legolas let the topic drop. It truly was a hardship, knowing his people were struggling for survival while he was ensconced in luxurious safety. It was not something he could speak of to Erestor or even to Elrond. He might possibly consider discussing such things with Lindir but had not had the opportunity as yet. It wasn't that he didn't want to divulge these woes to Elrond, but until recently his status had not permitted sharing personal information or confiding his fears. Now, he had no desire to add to his beloved's burdens. Besides, Nín'ódhel would want to do something to help if for no other reason than to alleviate Legolas' sorrow. An incursion of Noldorin warriors upon the borders of Rhovanion, however, would not be viewed with gratitude by King Thranduil. And I have already done enough to displease him.

By this time they had moved out of the rugged beauty of hills and rills and into the manicured perfection of the Lord's groves and gardens. Once they cleared the orchards and rounded a bend in the stream, the formal gardens and the great house came into view. There in the distance upon the lower terrace stood Elrond, scanning the landscape for his mate. As soon as he saw who was with Legolas, the Elven Lord took off across the lawn, tearing through flower beds and pathways alike without regard until he reached them. Without hesitation he got between the two, wrapping an arm about Legolas and sending his cousin a ferocious glower.

"Maur-aur, Elrond." Legolas was grinning delightedly, quite enjoying the new protective quality to his mate's actions whenever a threat was perceived. And he perceives them everywhere, from everyone. Legolas settled his arm across his beloved's shoulders and leaned in for a swift kiss, a light chuckle leaving his lips as they met Elrond's. "Lord Erestor was just escorting me in to breakfast to make certain I did not become distracted and forget to eat this morn."

"Indeed?" Elrond sent another narrow glare his seneschal's way. "Thank you, Erestor. After we break fast, you and I need to have a talk." There were dire threats woven into the chilling tones.

"Nay, we are to go walking in the woods. There is something I need you to see," Legolas
intervened, noting the expression of gratitude that quickly suffused the seneschal's face.

"Can it not wait for an hour? I swear what I need to say will not take longer than that," replied Elrond. It was the wrong response.

"An hour?" Legolas shook free and hastened his pace. "If it is so trivial a thing that you can complete the discussion that quickly then surely it can be delayed until later. You always refuse to come out with me into the trees and this is important, much more important than emphasising your claim on me to your kinsman. Obviously, what I deem vital is secondary to your need to strut about and play the dominant male."

"Ai! Legolas, that is not true." Elrond was dumbfounded; Legolas had complained, just two days prior, that he never intervened when others attempted to seduce him. Surely it was right to make Erestor stop his salacious stalking. This complete reversal was an unexpected obstacle to his new resolve: proclaiming his real feelings for Legolas through actions as well as words. "I will do as you wish, Aearen, only I thought insisting that Erestor cease his predatory activities and his unkind gossiping would please you."

"My what?" Erestor was now even more mortified to learn that he had clearly been the topic of much conversation between the two. Had Legolas asked Elrond to speak to him before and been denied so basic a need for respect? The thought made the advisor rather disappointed in his cousin. "I am not doing either of those things anymore, Elrond. The time to bring it up would have been just about anytime prior to this year's Ened Ethuil."

"Really?" Elrond's sneering sarcasm made his kinsman flinch.

"Yes, really." It was Legolas who answered, turning around and walking backwards in order to face them. "He hasn't said one nasty thing to or about me since Ened Ethuil. I would have thought you'd notice but obviously I was wrong, and if you feel so strongly about it then you should speak to him because it's right rather than because it would please me. I am still only a secondary consideration for you." With that he spun about and marched away with even greater speed.

Elrond broke into a fast trot to catch up and caught hold of Legolas' arm to slow him. "Wait, Legolas. These things you say of me are not so. I have been watching him and it's true Erestor hasn't been telling tales lately, but I do feel it's right to demand an apology and secure his promise to undo, as much as is possible, the harm his derogatory contempt has inflicted. I have you foremost in my heart and my every thought, beloved. Please, do not be angry any longer."

"I apologised this morning and as to the promise, I will invoke something even more binding. As far as I'm concerned, Legolas is now part of the family and comes under the same protection I would give to you or your children," announced Erestor. All three halted then as the Lord of Imladris and his Sylvan lover turned to gape at him. Their shock made the seneschal colour with remorse, for such had been his duty all along and he was not pleased to have been caught acting out in a manner so far beneath his station.

"Well." Elrond wasn't exactly sure what to say, not wanting to upset Legolas further than he already had. While he was mentally debating that, Legolas stepped around him and approached Erestor, hand uplifted in a gesture of peace.

"I accept your forthright contrition, Lord Erestor, and declare that any and all unpleasantness between us shall be forgotten as well as forgiven. You honour me and my child with this oath of fealty and I acknowledge it with both pride and humility, for I have come as a stranger among you from lands shrouded in mystery and myth. Your generous tolerance is most appreciated." Legolas bowed from the waist, straightening to discover both his mate and his law-kinsman staring in bald
stupefaction. Well, he wasn't a contemptible bond-slave anymore and he needn't pretend to a lower station than was rightly his. He smirked as he resumed his forward motion, his step lighter and his carriage almost regal.

The Lord and his advisor shared a befuddled look to confirm what they'd just heard before hurrying after the sylvan. Never had Legolas spoken with such a sense of dignified munificence and they were beyond intrigued. They entered the house just behind him and followed as the Wood Elf's nose led his empty belly to the morning room where the meal was laid out.

He took a plate and proceeded to the buffet, selecting a few morsels before perching in his favourite chair, a surreptitious glance providing him assurance that Elrond was tracking his every motion. Predictably, the mighty lore-master aimed an aggravated scowl upon the under-filled platter and advanced upon Legolas.

"Aearen, that is hardly enough to sustain a wee elfling and here you are with child. Give me that and let me select what you need." Elrond was overjoyed to see the Wood Elf's features transformed with that beaming grin of undiluted exultation; an expression far too rarely seen upon Legolas' visage.

"As you wish, herenn," came the demure reply as the plate was duly handed over.

While Elrond scurried back to the sideboard and proceeded to load up the dish, Erestor watched Legolas watching him do it. There was nothing but pride and absolute contentment in his eyes; that and the unmistakable glow of romantic love. The youthful warrior was totally smitten and the seneschal wondered how he could have missed it all this time. He shook his head in bemusement as Legolas sat forward, one elbow propped on the table to support his chin while he monitored Elrond's choices with rapt devotion.

\textit{He would eat dirt if his beloved wanted him to do so.}

As if on cue, a sigh of adoring appreciation left the seated Elf and Erestor gave a light laugh as he proceeded to the buffet to take up his meal.\textit{'Seated' is perhaps the wrong verb. 'Roosting' might better describe the manner in which our resident sylvan occupies a chair.} He glanced back, taking in Legolas' posture. True to form, he was balanced on the furniture just as if he were aloft on a branch amid the trees, one foot tucked beneath him as the other rested on the floor in what could only be called a loose crouch. There was no doubt that he could spring from such a position with great speed and force enough to carry him quite a distance. It was also evident that this was his natural stance for he assumed it quite unconsciously whenever he bothered to eat at table. \textit{Which he is doing much more often now.}

Erestor thought that was a good indication of Legolas' willingness to at least try and fit in to Imladrian ways and Elrond's world. He took his place beside Elrond, noting the generous portions of meat and fruit now obliterating the surface of the Wood Elf's dish. It crossed his mind to discuss the tense political situation with the couple but he gave up the notion as soon as Elrond began hand-feeding select morsels to his adoring mate. Both were completely oblivious to the seneschal's presence and the temperature in the small room began to climb significantly. The Chief Advisor tapped his fork on his glass to get their attention.

"Elrond, perhaps you could wrap the meal up and take it with you. Legolas wants to show you the place he has selected for his own."

The spooning Elves both smiled and Legolas blushed, realising he was nearly fully aroused and Erestor must know it.

"An excellent suggestion, cousin," answered Elrond, gazing into his mate's gleaming eyes. "What is
this about choosing a place for your own? My home is yours, Aearen, as is all that is mine. Your rightful place is here in the Last Homely House with me." He was not angry but definitely concerned, fearing he had once more failed his sylvan archer and made him feel like a visitor in their rooms. His sons' perceptive comment regarding the lack of evidence for a new inhabitant resurfaced.

"Aye, this I know," Legolas answered, his features suddenly taking on a cautious caste as his eyes flickered to Erestor and then back to Elrond. "I can't explain it here," he said softly, regretting how rude this must seem to the seneschal.

"Ah, forgive me, Legolas. I didn't mean to bring it up and spoil your surprise. Sometimes I am less than astute regarding the ways of the sylvan people." Erestor graciously offered this means of saving face but just as he noted Legolas' grateful smile another voice joined the conversation.

"I would say completely ignorant more accurately describes your level of knowledge regarding sylvan Elves." The speaker was Lindir and these contentious words flowed out in contrastingly rich, melodic tones such as only the most gifted singer possesses.

"'Tis all right, gwador; he is learning," said Legolas, uncertain what lay at the root of the minstrel's heightened animosity.

"Kwingarô, your heart is overly generous," countered Lindir, "but it is one of the many things that make you dear to me."

"And to me." Elrond noted all this with some degree of interest but was far more curious to find out what Legolas meant by needing a place of his own. He rose and offered a hand to his mate. "Show me this site you have chosen, Aearen, and let me repeat that any location in my valley is equally owned by you. I will gladly make over a deed of possession in your name should you wish it."

Legolas giggled and gave a bemused shake of his head as he helped cover the plates with their napkins. How could a piece of parchment with a few inked words and a wax seal make a part of the living earth belong to a single Elf? The ideas of the Noldor he truly could not fathom at times. They strolled outside and ambled in leisurely accord across the lawn, Elrond allowing Legolas to be his guide. Before long they reached the wall surrounding the revered Lord's private garden. This was kept locked to prevent unwanted intrusions, a policy begun long ago when Celebrian had briefly dwelled in her husband's rooms and would come down to this haven to read or tend the flowers. She soon grew tired of all things designated as Elrond's and took possession of the ground floor apartment, leaving the high-walled haven to the Lord of the realm, along with the custom of keeping it bolted.

Elrond took out his set of keys and opened the gate for Legolas, rather confused for they seemed to be heading for his rooms. OUR rooms, he corrected himself, watching as Legolas moved away to sit on the basin of the fountain, smiling as each recalled that morning just a few months ago when the Wood Elf had suddenly been consumed with heat so unbearable he had to shed every stitch of clothing. Already partially hard, Elrond grew more aroused wondering if there was about to be a repeat of that delightful experience.

"You remember that day we played in the fountain?" Legolas asked coyly, dipping his fingers in the dancing fluid and flicking the water in his mate's direction. Quicker than two heartbeats Elrond was beside him, one arm snaked around his waist as the opposing hand groped his crotch and stroked his stiffly confined penis. The contact made him shiver and Legolas spread his legs wider, entwining his fingers in thick ebony hair as he pulled Elrond close for a lingering kiss.

"Of course I remember. It's not the sort of thing a husband forgets. You were quite playful and most
demanding that day and the next." Elrond murmured these words between delightful tastes of Legolas' lips.

"I was demanding?" Legolas' eyes twinkled in cerulean deviltry. "If so it was for a good cause." He was prevented from continuing as Elrond sought and gained entrance to his mouth. The resulting stimulation left him breathless and giddy and he was glad for the close embrace that held him securely against the strong Noldorin chest. He couldn't say how it happened but he was now in his beloved's lap. Elrond was nibbling his way up the side of his neck and Legolas failed to restrain a warbling whimper.

Elrond loved it and redoubled his efforts, eager to wring more of those involuntary signs of bliss from his sylvan archer. "Aye, a very good cause," he managed to whisper into a pointed ear just before biting its blushing tip. A thrilling tremor rippled through Legolas' entire body.

"It was here by the fountain," Legolas huffed out, trying to regain control and failing. He wanted to tell Elrond that this was where their child had been conceived.

"Aye, the fountain," Elrond mimicked. "I shall enjoy watching you spill in it again." He reached between their bodies and squeezed the solid erection through the Wood Elf's leggings.

Legolas bucked into the pressure and started caressing the rock hard cock hidden under Elrond's leather breeches. "Have I told you how much I like seeing you in these hunting clothes?" he breathed out, delighting in the rumbling groan his efforts evoked.

"Wouldn't you rather see me out of them?" asked Elrond, claiming the parted lips again as he ground his hips into Legolas, relishing the friction.

"Oh yes," Legolas gusting whisper replied. "I want you to take me and claim me. I want you in me, your essence filling me. Ai, Elrond, I need you."

"Aearen," Elrond could not say more, too overwhelmed by the pleading intensity in his mate's trembling voice. Quickly he began working free the ties of Legolas' leggings, lavishing the juncture of his neck and jaw with little bites and sucking kisses. Thus, he was startled to feel a sudden and forceful shove against his chest.

"Nay, not here," Legolas commanded as he wriggled free. "In our new place; the place I have chosen for our child's birth."

Well that wasn't what Elrond had expected to hear and it rather caught him off guard. "What? Our child will be born upstairs in our rooms."

"No. I could no more birth our child in this house than I could in the main courtyard. A Wood Elf needs seclusion, a secure place to bring forth life and there remain to nurture the babe for the first three months. I have chosen that place. I want you to make love to me there." Legolas explanation was accompanied by a tentatively hopeful smile as he studied his beloved's eyes to see how this news would be met. It was always rather daunting to bring up these culturally specific practices for he never knew whether Elrond would laugh outright or try to hide his aversion. The face staring back at him indicated neither amusement nor disgust but confusion and concern were evident in abundance.

"Legolas, I will make love to you on the roof if such brings you pleasure," Elrond began, leaning in to kiss the small, straight nose. "Yet you speak of things I don't understand. What place can be more secure than our own home?" He could not help feeling his failure to prevent the cinnamon poisoning had caused this lack of faith.
"It is the way among my people," Legolas said. "By the ninth month a suitable nest must be ready. Food and water and any other needs must be stored in sufficient quantity to see me and the child through three months of isolation from any but immediate family." He paused as they sat together on the rim of the fountain's basin. Elrond was attentive but still in the dark but that was to be expected. Still, there was no attempt made to interrupt or contradict what he was saying, as Elrond so often did when he tried to speak of customs among his kind, so Legolas continued.

"I will be getting quite large by then. It won't be easy to climb into the trees and even harder to climb down. I will need to be slow and careful. When it is nearly time, about two or three weeks from birth, I won't be able to climb down at all. From then until about a week or so after the birth I must remain in the talan. After that my strength should start to rebuild and healing should be nearly complete." He stopped again, noting the wide-eyed alarm on his mate's face, and waited for the outburst.

"Talan?" Elrond did not disappoint, having honed in on the references to climbing trees. "Are you telling me you want our babe to be born outside in the woods?"

"Aye. I was born that way, Elrond. All Wood Elves come into the world in the tops of the trees. It is the only way to ensure both parent and child are safe from predators. We are very vulnerable then for much of the spirit is imparted to the child to sustain him through the process of birthing."

"This is Imladris; there are no predators here, Legolas. You must see that it is far safer and much more sanitary to deliver our babe in the comfort of our bedchamber."

"Nay, it shall not be so," Legolas announced, rising from the marble basin. "There is nothing unsanitary about a talan in the trees. You have been to Lothlorien, have you not? There the protection of the Lady's Burden holds back evil just as your Ring does here. Even so, the folk dwell in talans. How and where do you imagine the Galadhrim are born?"

That made the Elven Lord's brows rise high. It was the first time Legolas had revealed knowledge of the three Elven Rings' existence. Elrond wasn't sure what to make of that for he'd never mentioned Vilya even indirectly in Legolas' presence and doubted anyone else in Imladris would have done so. Instead of addressing that news, he focused on the rest of the remark. It was true enough but only the Galadhrim did so. The Noldorin folks who had accompanied Celeborn and Galadriel there from Eregion had proper houses beneath the Mellyrn trees. Elrond sighed and shook his head, standing and reaching to take hold of Legolas' hand.

"Beloved, this is not Lothlorien. Here we have the advantage of Ages of learning and enlightenment. The Noldorin folk spent much time in Aman where the Valar abide in fine homes of wood and stone. The science and engineering of architecture were imparted to my people by the Vanyarin Elves, who learned these things from the Powers themselves. Surely you cannot doubt that what is sufficient for the Lords and Ladies of the West is not also best for our little babe, and for you."

"I can and do doubt it. What do I know of the Powers? They care little for my people. We have faced every Age without their aid and have flourished under the same customs since the time of the Awakening. Even the Vanyarin and Noldorin Elves did not build houses on the shore of the Lake at Cuiviennen."

"Legolas, I cannot condone our child being born in a tree."

"It is not for you to decide. I have chosen the place and if you want to be present to greet your son then you shall have to abide by my wishes."

They stared at one another; Legolas stubborn and intractable; Elrond exasperated and close to panic.
He had absolutely no doubt that Legolas could vanish from sight, planning to remain hidden until their elfling was three months old, and the thought filled him with dread. He had no idea if male deliveries were difficult in general but he had realised that Legolas' would be the instant he'd confirmed the pregnancy. He wouldn't have strength to survive it on his own and Elrond was secretly terrified that even with the aid of his light Legolas would suffer serious harm. Indeed, he had already made the decision to use the power of Vilya to sustain his beloved if his life seemed to be in jeopardy during labour. He heaved a long sigh and tried to smile.

"Please, Legolas, be reasonable. I could have an addition made to the house, a new wing with a nursery and…" His words dwindled into silence as all the Wood Elf's wilful obstinacy transformed into hurt disappointment and Legolas turned away.

"A new wing and a nursery sound lovely," he said morosely, "but that will be for after the third month. I will not deliver our child in this house, no matter how exalted its design or certain its master. In this self-same house I was poisoned, Elrond. How can you even consider exposing our child to such risks? You say there are no predators in Imladris and I say 'look to your gates'. They are barred and bolted, for you do not trust your own people to support you because of me."

Elrond could not counter these truths. He reconsidered what Legolas was suggesting, or rather, demanding. What harm could there be as long as the necessary supplies and medicines were there? The real danger was not contained in the place but in the slender physiology of his mate. That being the case, was it not wiser to provide whatever reassurance Legolas' required to minimise taxing him emotionally as well? Aragorn could come back to lend aid if it should be required and would not be put off by assisting a birth in a treetop talan. The Lord of Imladris couldn't deny his suspicions regarding his own staff; he now sampled every meal his mate consumed. Mayhap it would ease his worries as well to know Aearen was safely secluded from any interference, even that which was benign. He studied the drooping shoulders and lowered head and immediately made his choice. In a rush he swooped in and encircled his sylvan warrior, holding tight and pressing hard against the rigid back, nuzzling his nose into the thick golden mane to kiss the nape of his neck.

"You're right, Aearen. Forgive me for being so short-sighted. Show me this place you have selected. Although, I confess I have absolutely no skill in building a talan."

Legolas squirmed loose so he could turn about and throw his arms around Elrond's neck, hanging on and squeezing hard as he raised kisses on the elder Elf's serious features. "Ah, I knew I was right to fall in love with you," he gushed. "Worry not about the structure itself; my people will be here soon and they will see to everything."

"Wait here a moment; there's something in our rooms I want to take with us." So saying he raced to the cedar and was on the balcony in seconds.

Elrond did not have long to consider that ominous reference to his beloved's relatives before the slender Elf vaulted from the open rails and landed perfectly in front of him. Whatever he'd gone to retrieve was carefully hidden from view, wrapped up in a soft wool blanket. The Noldorin Lord's libido sparked high for Legolas only used such discretion for their naughty playthings. "What is it?" he asked excitedly, trying to peel back the corner of the covering to see.

"Nay, you shall have to wait. Go and gather our food again before the insects make a meal of it," laughed Legolas, overjoyed to have won such an important battle so quickly and easily. He led the way out into the grounds and they walked in silence, stealing kisses and sharing little pinches and caresses in sensitive zones that had them both fully aroused again long before the sound of the wispy falls reached them. When that moment came, Elrond looked around in surprise; Lanthir Fân was the last place he would have imagined Legolas would pick.
"This is where you wish to conclude the pregnancy?"

"Aye. It is perfect, Elrond. Everything I will need is here: clear, fresh water close at hand; crayfish, snails, flatfish, and molluscs for food right in the stream and the pool," he couldn't resist that little reference to his unorthodox preferences and inwardly commended his mate for revealing only the faintest distaste. "The shade and comfort of these stately hemlocks will shield us from the heat and from unwelcome spies; the high cliff wall will protect our backs while the narrow approach is easily guarded by even just two Elves. We will be safe here, our son and I, and he will learn first the rhythm and wonder of the natural world before he must encounter the artificial order imposed by your so very civilised society." He was smiling cheekily when he said this but there was no doubt he was only partly joking. Legolas waited anxiously for Elrond's response.

"I agree; this place is magnificent. It was Celebrian's favourite spot in all of the valley. She would come here when she craved solitude and it was she who made those chimes," Elrond said quietly. It should feel strange to be here with Legolas and yet he had to admit that it did not. It felt right. He inhaled and gazed up into the towering trees. "We haven't spoken much of her."

"Nay, but others have said much."

"What have you been told?" Elrond peered at Legolas, realising he had once more refused to consider what was all too obvious now. Legolas probably had been harangued with all manner of accusations pertaining to disrupting a sacred vow ordained by the Valar to be eternal.

"Many things." Legolas shrugged. "I was told you love her still, that I was trying to take her place, trying to make my life a better one. It was explained with absolute clarity that such as I could never hope to replace her; that I was just your 'moment of weakness' in an esteemed, even legendary, life. Most still say that. I don't bother to argue with them; they have no understanding of what brought us together." He paused and considered carefully what to say next; he hadn't any wish to be callous or sound resentful. "I think she must be a good person for many of the people here are so angry on her behalf, defending her honour and her status. They must care for her very deeply. Lindir has told me other things, that she was not content in her marriage and Glorfindel, once so staunchly opposed to our bond, has since become my ally and confirmed the singer's information. This morning, Erestor also alluded to this distance between you and Celebrian."

"I should have talked to you about my life with her," Elrond said, impressed with Legolas' mature response but aware of the pain underlying it. "She was as you describe: beloved by all here and even in the neighbouring human villages. I did love her, but not the way she deserved to be loved. I never saw her as she was and so how could I really hold her heart? She was a good wife and there is no better mother on Arda, but we did not live as a mated couple for many many centuries, long before her decision to leave. She met someone else rather early on, when the twins were about 30, and that ellon went with her to Aman after the attack. I hope she has found happiness with him gain, for if any deserves it she does. I will not take up my life with her anew when at last I journey over sea."

They were silent for a time, Elrond worried over the impact all this really supplied, Legolas thoughtful over his mate's words. He wandered deeper into the grotto and stood near the collection of chiming bells glistening with the sheen of mist from the falls. "Do you love her still?"

"No." Elrond's answer was immediate and firm, accompanied by an almost sad shake of his head. "In truth, I never did, not as an equal, not as my mate and spouse. I am ashamed to say it, but I used her to make myself seem more prestigious. She is descended from royalty and her place in Aman must be high indeed, for her grandfather is Finarfin, the son of Finwë." He followed until he stood at Legolas' side, raising his arm to catch the falling spray. "She would not be displeased that you found Lanthir Fân and love it as she does. I think it would make her smile to know an elfling would be
"Then you also approve?" Legolas turned to watch Elrond's eyes again. He was convinced this was the best location, but if his mate was truly opposed then he was willing to go with him and select another.

"Yes, I find it fitting. My fourth elfling is to be half sylvan, the first in my lineage to claim that distinction. What could be more suitable than to be born in what must surely be the heart and soul of this valley. Sometimes I have felt this to be hallowed ground, a place other Elves in Ages past once sought out to gain solace and peace, though its history is lost."

"Nay, no land's history is lost if trees still dwell there. These hemlocks, though, are most reticent. They did not inform me that this was Celebrian's favourite locale." He did not bother to correct Elrond's assumption about their child's heredity. *Won't my Sindarin side be a nice surprise.*

Elrond gave his youthful mate a bemused smile. "Do you really converse with them? Lindir claims to have the gift but I confess to being highly sceptical for there is no a way to prove or disprove the notion."

"How can you doubt it? If you need proofs I can supply them. I will query them on something that happened long before my arrival here."

"That's not necessary; besides, I know that when you are indoors, your favourite place is my library. There can be little of Imladris' history that you don't know. I'll trust your word." Elrond shook his head, staring up into the heights. It was almost dizzying to do for with Vilya's aid and whatever natural protection this area held, the trees soared toward heaven. They were ancient and majestic, their huge limbs as thick as the trunks of lesser trees, sweeping out in graceful lines to embrace one another. He had no doubt Legolas could move from one to the other without ever leaving the branches or even having to leap through the air. *Not something I'll be doing, though. Is there to be a fine spiral stairway such as the Galadhrim built for Galadriel's home?*

Legolas laughed at that and capered over to one of the oldest and largest of the trees, patting its bark lightly as he would a horse's neck. "Don't you think that defeats the purpose of making our talan inaccessible? It must be impossible to ascend without alerting you or me."

"Am I to climb in and out of it then just like a Wood Elf? I warn you, I have no innate ability in such things," Elrond complained in good humour, just happy to have made Legolas happy, and drew near to his side.

"I will teach you well; I would not risk losing you. Ai! My Naneth would be mortified to have me widowed because my mate fell out of a tree." As he spoke he slowly unwrapped the mysterious article he'd brought, revealing the carved wooden box that held his Ened Ethuil gift to Elrond, a most luridly lascivious grin upending his lips.

"The Garnets," Elrond intoned, imbuing the words with unctuous desire. He reached for Legolas and stole a kiss as he took away the box. "Ceryn o Cabor," he said and smiled in satisfaction when the latch sprung open, revealing the cleverly made pleasure toy. The garnets had been worked into four lightly faceted spheres of graduated size linked to a fine mithril chain. Elrond loved inserting them deep inside Legolas' arse and relished the sight of the archer on hands and knees, the tail of the chain dangling down between his legs, trembling as he awaited penetration. He wasn't averse to having Legolas shove them inside him, either, and found the sensation as they were slowly withdrawn enhanced his orgasm immensely. Sometimes it was hard to decide which of them should go first.

There would be no uncertainty this morning. Legolas kicked off his shoes, fanned out the blanket,
and knelt upon it. In no time he stripped off his tunic and shirt, casting theme haphazardly away, and unfastened his leggings. He shimmied out of them and threw them onto the small pile, settling on his side. He reclined with his rump angled provocatively in Elrond's direction, propped his head on his hand and drew one leg up toward his chest the better to expose everything obscured beneath it. His blue eyes glittered as his mate's gaze transfixed there. "Join me." The sultry invitation sweltered in the heat of his longing.

Elrond said nothing as he pounced on the naked body, eagerly smoothing one hand up the thighs to caress the supple arse, the garnets clenched in the fist of the other. He leaned down to kiss the jutting hip and abruptly inserted the largest ball, thrilling to see Legolas jerk in response as a sharp breath left his lungs. He pushed it in more, easing the ruddy globe deeper until the second one brushed the heel of his hand. Carefully he eased his fingers out and pressed against it to force it past the anus, tightly drawn again. He heard Legolas grunt as the intrusion proceeded, unable to refrain from an instinctive need to expel the foreign objects. Elrond dealt quickly with that by reaching between the tense legs and stroking the rigid erection he found there.

"So hard already, Aearen. You're eager today." He smiled as the azure eyes met his and crawled over the recumbent frame to lavish a kiss on parted and panting lips, for Legolas hadn't enough air to respond. By then the third ball was poised for entry and Elrond sent it through, feeling the muscles dragging it inward until the final, smallest gem disappeared inside and only the gleaming mithril chain revealed their presence.

Elrond sat back a bit to enjoy the sight better. Legolas had shifted, resting chest down upon his elbows, hands gripping the blanket with dire strength, forehead leaning against the ground as his golden hair cascaded forward and hid his features. He was trembling under the strain of holding in the spheres and a fine sheen of sweat testified to the mingled pleasure and discomfort. Elrond moved closer and settled his hands about the narrow waist, lifting up so Legolas could get his knees under him, parting the strong legs and soothing a tantalising touch over the quivering muscles, just feathering the tips of his fingers over the scrotum.

The contact made Legolas gasp and he shivered in anticipation, now propped on hands and knees, elbows locked to maintain stability, staring over his shoulder.

Elrond's attention was fixed on the aroused genitals, mesmerised as he dipped two fingers inside the second opening, vivid images of his cock sliding into the slippery cavity filling his mind. He withdrew and wrapped the digits around Legolas' shaft, stroking slowly, finally turning yearning eyes upon his beloved, a look of intense lust and an almost gloating triumph shining in the grey depths.

Legolas shuddered and licked his lips, knowing then he was going to be tormented into ecstasy by the sweetest and slowest means. He wanted to thrust into the tight grip around his penis but found it difficult to do while so full. He could but rock a bit and even that set the chain to swinging; the sensation as it drifted against his skin a ticklish precursor of pleasures to come.

"Ai, Nín'ódhel, the things you..." he couldn't finish, struggling for breath and exhaling a plaintive moan as the pressure left his aching cock. The next instant Elrond was before him, lifting his chin to partake of his mouth as fingers, rich with the musky scent of his arousal, worked their way through his hair to fondle a sensitive ear.

"I know you like it, Aearen," the reply was laced with smug satisfaction. He began to slowly undress, casting off his tunic but not the shirt, working with painstaking sloth upon the ties of his leather leggings. "I know how you much you like it when I mount you, the initial thrust of this big Noldorin cock always makes you gasp and tremble." Elrond had the pants open and smiled for
Legolas' sight was fixed upon the gaping triangle where a hint of dark hair and ruddy flesh could be seen. He moved his hand inside with a long, low groan, caressing his restrained erection with steady, seductive touches. He moaned again and knelt down in front of Legolas. "You want it, don't you?"

"Yes, yes!" Legolas panted out, nodding vigourously as he lifted glittering eyes to Elrond's.

"Good. Open wide." Elrond eased the leggings lower on his hips and allowed his erection freedom, cupping his sac and drawing forth the heavy balls, too. He stroked himself as he palmed the weighty glands and hummed out a decadent note of pleasure as he watched Legolas' reaction. The archer was fixated on the weeping red tip, breath harsh and fast; he licked his lips and lifted his gaze to meet Elrond's.

It was the invitation the Lore-master had been waiting for and he smiled, shuffling closer as he bent his penis forward. He grasped Legolas' chin to angle the mouth higher, eagerly inserting his erection between the parted lips. Immediately, hot wet suction drew him deeper and a silky tongue danced around his shaft. Elrond bucked into the confinement, delighted to see most of the organ disappear inside the archer's mouth. He pulled against the vacuum, relishing the resistance and the tight press of slippery red flesh against his slit. It was their shared signal that Legolas was ready and with a shout of delight Elrond drove back in. His rhythm was quick, pivoting back and forth in short, swift thrusts, all the while squeezing and caressing the archer's ear.

Legolas voiced a series of soft calls against the solid intrusion, trusting Elrond not to push too far or too fast. They had established what worked long ago and this was often the way Elrond chose to start their love-making: coming down his throat with a victorious shout. Today was no different and Legolas worked to bring his mate to completion, for it was the next stage that catered to his needs and desires. He let his tongue swirl over the seeping glans on Elrond's next retreat and could feel the ripple of pleasure that coursed through the swollen flesh. In two more shoves the first salty hint of semen pelted the roof of his mouth and then a burst of the bitter essence filled his mouth. With practised skill he swallowed it down whilst gently tickling the sensitive orifice from whence it flowed, heart surging with love to hear Elrond sound his name in obvious approval. Motion ceased and the penis was withdrawn, still nearly as firm and hot as before, and Elrond flopped down on the blanket, breathing hard and smiling as he leaned in and kissed the lips that had tendered such adoring pleasure.

"Aearen. Legolas, my beloved." He whispered out, sitting back enough to focus on the deep blue eyes. "How I love you; nay, that word is not sufficient. Need and want and devotion are all mixed, combined into something else. What words are there to describe what I feel when we are together? How do I explain that you have made me more than I was before? Your soul and mine together are indescribably beautiful. I wish I knew how to say it properly."

"There is nothing lacking in your description, Nín'ódhel. You're right; this is not something so easy to express. What we share is as close to sacred as Elven souls are permitted. Indeed, we become greater than the Powers and more like unto Iluvatar, for only in this state are we creators."

"Aye," Elrond grinned, gave his mate a quick peck on the lips and rolled to his back. In seconds he scooted between the rigidly trembling arms, licking across smooth, creamy skin as he went, until he reached the navel. He kissed the little pouch there, for Legolas was no longer flat as a board, gently petting heaving sides and tickling the Wood Elf's underarms. "How is tinu mín?" He couldn't resist sliding lower in order to graze his lips across the erection poised just beneath the belly.

"Ai!" Legolas had expected that tantalising lick but it sent a thrill through him nonetheless. "He is well and content, beloved. I am not so content."

"No? Why is that, Aearen?"
"You have just touched on the reason, as well you know. Let me demonstrate." Legolas dipped his
head lower and leaned forward to reach the Elven Lord's cock, still erect and getting harder by the
second, bestowing a demure little smooch on its tip. The organ bobbed up for more as Elrond
laughed and landed a playful bite on a bare thigh. "Come out from there if that's the best you have to
offer," Legolas commanded, giving every impression he was about to rise from his submissive
position.

"All right!" That spurred Elrond into action and he hastily wriggled from under the tempting body.
He sat up and removed his boots, throwing them away without concern, discarding his shirt as he
continued. "Don't move a muscle, Aearen. I promise I have much more to give you." He whipped
off the leggings at last and swooped in for another kiss, almost wishing Legolas' hands were free to
roam through his hair. The mental image made him groan and he sundered the oral connection in
order to let his fingers explore the silky, golden mane. "Valar, I love having you like this. Have you
kept the gems inside?" To learn the answer he hurried around to the sylvan's rear, finding one red
stone had slipped out and the next only just inside the tight ingress. "Tch! You're to let me pull them
free. No matter, in it goes." With that he pressed the two jewels deeper, excited as strong muscles
gripped his invading fingers and Legolas strained to remain compliant.

"Nín'ódhel!"

"Hmmm?" Elrond knew Legolas could not hold this pose indefinitely; his limbs were already
shaking under the tension. He took up the trailing chain and used the small ring on its end to trace
graceful spirals over the fleshy mounds. The other hand found its way to the archer's cock and
casually stroked it. Elrond shifted closer, positioning himself for penetration so that his penis pressed
against the anus. He watched as Legolas peered over his shoulder, wide-eyed and questioning, and
for a moment or two Elrond considered plunging in behind the garnets, thrusting them deeper and
deeper, the chain and the last gem rubbing on his shaft. He grunted, finding it hard to resist the
impulse to try it, but that was not something they'd discussed and Elrond didn't want to hurt Legolas,
physically or emotionally.

"You want to be fucked," he whispered, changing his stance and letting go of the rigid erection,
kissing the small of Legolas' back as his fingers again intruded into the second opening, rocking
softly against the sylvan's arse.

"Aye, what are you waiting for? I need you in me now!" Legolas abruptly pushed back and bumped
Elrond's cock with his rear as if seeking to impale himself. He sent an accusing glare over his
shoulder. "Do not deny me."

"Nay, Legolas, nay. I could never, never," Elrond reassured, fondling the soft sac and the tender
balls inside. He smiled as that made Legolas quiver all over and a small, mewing complaint fled his
lips. He waited no longer, guiding himself into the slippery cavity, penetrating gradually with steady,
forceful pressure until he could feel the mithril chain against his crotch. The press of the garnets
against his penis was distinct, each one's faceted surface unique, the first and largest verily capping
his cock. Every thrust would drive his glans into it and Elrond shuddered in expectation of the
pleasure that would furnish. It was going to be a glorious orgasm and he wanted Legolas to share it.
He held still, though, wondering if he was demanding too much, for he would not be able to remove
the garnets in this position. He would need to take Legolas again, facing him, in order to do that and
then he always like to fuck the loosened anal canal once the balls were pulled out and Legolas was
reduced to a limp and gasping heap. "Is it all right like this?"

Legolas gave a long, low sigh and shivered, his head bowed and every nerve alive in anticipation,
waiting for the motion to start. He could not reply in words and nodded twice emphatically. Ai
Valar, if Elrond didn't start moving he would go mad with this burning need.

He needn't have worried for his patience was rewarded almost as soon as the thought crossed his mind. Elrond retreated and then rushed forward, slamming against his arse with a loud slap, an equally voluble cry leaving his lungs as he did. The garnets, drawn down with the motion, ground back inside and rubbed against the walls of his bowels. He had only felt so completely filled when the twins took him jointly and he found comfort in the sensation as well as excitement. Elrond's lunges grew more potent and yet failed to reach that internal point of exhilaration. Legolas wanted more; he wanted to see stars.

"Ai, Nín'ódhel, saes. Deeper, beloved, deeper," he struggled to make his wishes comprehensible, urgently spreading his knees further apart to emphasise his desire.

Elrond growled, a raw, victorious noise, as he gripped tight to the slender hips and adjusted his angle slightly. He'd been waiting for that intense plea of decadent desperation, holding back until Legolas begged. Now he relented, driving unerringly against the hidden gland, rejoicing to see he'd scored a direct hit on the first attempt, for the sylvan archer's whole body jerked and his head arched backwards, flaxen hair trailing down his back as his fingers dug into the blanket and gripped the soft, mossy soil beneath it. He gave a short sharp cry as Elrond pulled back for another penetrating incursion and the Elven Lord exulted.

"Like that, maethor nín?" he husked out, ramming his cock home again and again. He expected no answer and was soon incapable of recalling the query himself, for if the archer was lost in ecstasy the Noldorin Lord was adrift in pure bliss. Without conscious thought he reached beneath the perfect body he had claimed and gripped the straining erection, pumping in concert with his escalating thrusts. The combined stimuli quickly brought the younger Elf to the edge of completion and Elrond gladly joined him there, sinking his teeth into a shoulder blade as he felt his seed begin to crest. It was beyond his mate's ability to hold back and they exploded together, Legolas collapsing beneath the suddenly heavy weight above him, gratefully slumping into the comfort of their mingled bodies.

They were quiet, if heaving lungs and pounding hearts are quiet. In time, Elrond withdrew and sat up, a warm smile filling his spirit and eyes as he languidly massaged his woodland mate's exhausted body. He bent low again and kissed the tooth-marked bruise, shifting aside sweaty tresses to press his lips against the nape of the neck and around to the pulsing vein. His smile grew as a sigh of absolute trust fled his beloved and Legolas turned to grin back, groggy and hazy in the afterglow of their gratifying exertions.

"Was lovely, Nín'ódhel," he whispered and pillowed his cheek upon his crossed arms. He shimmied a little and gave a soft groan for the pressure of the garnets reasserted itself over his awareness.

"Aye. Every time with you is wondrous, Legolas. We're not done, though, so rest a bit. Are you thirsty?" A short nod and a brief glimpse of blue before the lazy lids lowered sent Elrond away to the pool. He filled his cupped hands to the brim and hastened to bring the rejuvenating fluid to his mate's parched lips before the water seeped through his fingers. He loved taking care of Legolas afterwards. Too young to have learned how to pace himself, Legolas gave everything and let the sensations rip through him like a gale. Their love-making left him spent and placid for hours, especially sessions like this when they used their naughty toys. There was no doubt the archer preferred the garnets but he was willing to let Elrond use other means to enhance their pleasure also. With that thought, Elrond sought for the box just to see if anything else was inside, searching the velvet fabric until he heard a soft snickery giggle and looked up to find Legolas watching.

"What are you seeking?" he asked playfully, easing over on his side, awkward because of the jewels deeply seated up his arse.
"These," answered Elrond, holding up a small velvet pouch. He opened the drawstring and withdrew a set of mithril nipple clamps embellished with garnet chips and tiny green emeralds. What he really wished was that the garnets were set in studs that pierced the archer's tight little pink buds clean through, but he wasn't sure how such an idea would be taken and hadn't brought it up.

The clamps were fun in their own rights, for the pair were connected by a chain which formed a 'T', the long portion ending in an ingenious ring made just the right size to encircle the root of his cock. It was hinged and had a secure clasp so Elrond could get it over the engorged penis without needing to be lax; a detail that filled him with pride when he thought of Legolas considering this indication of his stamina and embarrassment when he imagined the conversation his lover must have had with Aegas Mírdan. Once he had the clamps in place on Legolas and the ring firmly anchored around his shaft, he had no trouble forgetting his chagrin. Nonetheless, Elrond was concerned for there were only a few positions that were comfortable to Legolas when the garnets and the clamps were used together. Being outside, there was a decided lack of furniture to use for support and nothing in the way of cushioning. He wondered how Wood Elves got around such limitations.

"Well, are you going to stare at them or use them?" inquired Legolas impatiently for the gems were not getting any easier to contain as time progressed.

"Aye, no need to get testy, Aearen. I am only trying to be considerate of your comfort."

"Most gracious of you, my love, but I don't see the dilemma. It's perfectly clear to me how to proceed."

"Enlighten me, Pen Vallen."

"I'll roll to my back; you'll get to your knees. The rest should be obvious."

"Nay, lying that way hurts when the garnets are inside," Elrond spoke from experience, for they'd mistakenly attempted that position before and Legolas had howled in agony and quickly thrown Elrond off him. He'd been bruised inside and removing the gems had been torture instead of pleasure. The Elven Lord wanted no repeat of that.

"Not if we take precautions and you hold me up," countered Legolas. He smirked at his mate's speculative expression. "That is, if you think you're able to pleasure me and keep me off the ground at the same time."

"Is that a challenge, Aearen?" Elrond grinned at the devilish snicker that accompanied his beloved sylvan's lascivious leer. Legolas reached down and began stroking himself, for he was just beginning to get aroused again. The sight was highly erotic and maddeningly tempting, for Elrond wanted nothing so much as to tear that hand away and replace it with his mouth. He swallowed hard and turned his attention back to the flushed, dreamy countenance regarding him. "It's obvious you've given this quite a lot of thought. Perhaps you'd care to instruct me?"

"Of course, Nín'ôdhel. We Wood Elves know lots of ways to achieve satisfaction without big wooden beds or conveniently located desks, bookshelves, tables, or assorted chairs of varying style and comfort."

"Indeed?"

"Oh yes, many methods and even some particularly stimulating types of furniture I have noticed the Noldorin Elves here have absolutely no knowledge of whatsoever. It is my dearest hope that someone form my homeland will see fit to present me with a wedding gift in the form of one of these articles."
"You intrigue me; tell me more."

"Nay, I shall wait and save that for another day. I am more interested in feeling these garnets sliding out of me while you are sliding in. Put the clamps on me, beloved, and come closer so I may shackle your cock."

Elrond was at his side in a second, plucking and kneading the erect ruby points as Legolas twitched and writhed in delight. Once they were hard and darkly coloured, Elrond carefully applied the pincers and gave a quick tug to make sure they were secure. Legolas' back flexed up off the ground and his toes curled tight, a look of pure elation flashing through his eyes. He eased back to rest on his elbow, bending one leg at the knee to ease some of the pressure from his arse and the garnets within.

"Now you," he huffed out when he was able to draw enough breath for speech, reaching one long arm to grasp the engorged cock sprouting from his mates' crotch. In seconds he had the ring clamped tight and tugged on the chain to make sure it was not too loose, smirking at Elrond's grunt as his shaft jerked forward. Elrond came closer on hands and knees and covered him, leaning down to claim his mouth, fingers trailing across the jewel-studded clamps, and Legolas moaned, half-flinching and half-leaning into the subtle touch that set his nipples throbbing. "Need you," he whispered, breaking from Elrond's dominating kiss just long enough to get the words out, fisting his hands in the long black hair curtained around his face.

"Aearen, this will hurt you just the same as before," Elrond relinquished his command of the sylvan's lips and searched his eyes, confused and somewhat frightened. He hated to make Legolas feel real pain, having witnessed too much of it during the lengthy recovery from the battle with the Orcs.

"Nay, not like this. You must lift me up, let my legs rest on your shoulders. I can brace myself with my arms. Now do you see?" Legolas felt quite proud to have thought this up on his own, considering Elrond had so much more experience. He had noticed the Noldorin Lord's reluctance to try anything that might even hint of discomfort for him and hoped to overcome this over-scrupulous solicitude. Well, perhaps the idea was not entirely his own; Lindir had one or two very interesting books in his personal library and was not shy of answering whatever questions Legolas might have. In this position, Lindir had explained, Legolas would not only have control over when the garnets were pulled free but would do the pulling himself.

Elrond gazed at him in wonder, thoroughly pleased and highly aroused to have this suggestion come from Legolas. Yet he was still worried about the strain to Aearen's neck and looked about for something to give support. In short order he gathered up their clothes and rolled them into a thick mass of fabric, placing the make-shift pillow at the base of Legolas' scull.

They shared adoring smiles packed with lustful anticipation as Elrond resumed his place between the archer's legs, carefully lifting them. Legolas rocked back onto his shoulders and stabilised his position, all of his lower body suspended above the blanket, the chain between his nipples and Elrond's cock exquisitely taut. Silent agreement passed through their locked gazes and Elrond shuffled closer, his penis finding its way unerringly, and as soon as the silky heat of the vaginal walls closed around its head he lost control, lunging with all his strength into that luxurious confinement.

"Ai, Legolas!" he shouted, relishing the deep penetration and the added friction from the hidden gems. As he pulled out, the motioned snapped the chain tight again and now it was Legolas who cried out, his head dropping backwards as the shock travelled through him. That only added to Elrond's elation; he tried to come nearly all the way out on the next motion, watching as the ruddy bits of sensitive flesh on Legolas' chest were pulled and stretched, delighted to make Legolas wail and thrash in wanton enthralment.
As for the Wood Elf, it was like nothing he'd ever known, for Elrod never missed his sweet spot and the rapid, repeated, yanking at his breasts was an incessant source of delicious,aching torment. When he felt his mate's hand encircle his cock he thought he must go mad in a frenzy of passionate abandon. Cautiously Legolas manoeuvred his hand lower, lifting his body closer, feeling for the chain that was dancing against his skin. It was taxing to do while keeping the right distance between his nipples and Elrod's cock, so to reap the strongest sensation from the pounding intrusion. At last his fingers closed around the mithril tail and at the next thrust he pulled. The smallest garnet popped free and the others slid down and both Elves screamed.

Their vision fused in erotic amazement and Elrod found new energy surging through him as he continued his forceful penetration. He realised Legolas would spill as the next ball was extracted and decided to prevent it. Despite the woebegone groan of protest, he clamped tight to the rigid penis and held firm, pumping his own shaft as deeply as possible, anticipating another rush when the third gem stroked him from tip to base as Legolas drew it out. He wasn't disappointed and, though his mate was silent this time, Elrod felt the tremor that ran through him.

Then Elrod knew he wouldn't be able to restrain himself any more than Legolas could. As so often happened, something about fusing with this elf's lithe, lean body, this sylvan soul, practically turned his heart inside out and laid all his emotions bare. It was intoxicating and exhilarating and he was powerless against the drive to achieve completion. His pace quickened and became more erratic, jolting as the second ball slowly came free. He started pumping Legolas' cock frantically; he would come as the last ball exited and they had to spill together.

They did, though what Legolas had to contribute was less than a trickle. It didn't matter. In the aftermath, Elrod found himself bent nearly double, his forehead resting against a muscular thigh which he kissed between efforts to catch his breath. He was reluctant to separate, for the union was a comfort beyond the excitement of orgasm. He felt safe with Legolas, and while the thought surprised him, Elrod could not deny its truth. Gently he settled the lax limbs upon the ground, smiling as Legolas exhaled a great sigh and flopped flat on his back. Next he unfastened the ring and carefully collected the chain as he moved to lie beside his love. The clamps were removed quickly, for it was always painful, and the Elven Lord spent several minutes softly soothing the inflamed flesh with doting licks and the lightest kisses he could impress, all the while whispering endearments and stroking the little bulge just beneath Legolas' navel.

At last he gathered his Wood Elf close, content to quench his desire for anal penetration until later. Elrod rolled to his back, cradling Legolas against his chest, relishing the soft sighing breath that drifted over his sweaty skin and gave him little chills. He stroked the damp hair and tightly wrapped an arm around the svelte waist, dreamily aware and pleased at the tangled picture they must present to the birds and the trees and the sky above. Elrod laughed at this childish image but it pleased him to have it. Only with Legolas could he allow himself to be happy and at peace, as a child was with his parents, simply and purely because of the love poured over him and him alone. He believed that if he could do it, he would merge completely with Legolas, body and soul, and take up permanent residence inside that heart and its unlimited capacity for devotion.

"What?" Legolas asked, not able to lift his head to look at Elrod; his eyes were almost closed anyway and he hadn't energy enough to open them. He felt the swift pressure of lips atop his head and smiled, snuggling closer, though it was truly not possible.

"Nothing. I have just been thinking how right you were. This is the perfect place. I've never felt so secure and at ease and utterly content as I do right now."

"Mmmm. Good."
"Our babe is lucky to have you for his parent. Love like yours is a rare gift, Aearen. How am I to match it?"

"What nonsense," Legolas shook his head a bit. "You're already a wonderful father and tinu mín feels the strength of your love increasing every day."

Elrond smiled, pleased by Legolas' confident reply, and squeezed his beloved Wood Elf tighter, burying his nose in the tangle of golden locks, inhaling the scent he'd so come to adore, silently thanking whatever Powers were responsible for this unexpected happiness, overwhelmed to know it would endure throughout every instant of time until every last star was extinguished.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Dor Eden Cuil: Place of New Life
Ceryn o Cabor: frog's balls
tinu mín: our little star
maethor nín: my warrior
Pen Vallen: Golden One

NOTE: Thanks to Kathy who let me know of a time discrepancy I missed in all the editing. Hopefully, it makes a little more sense now for Mithrandir and the twins to be gone already. As usual, voluminous quantities of words were typed and saved and cut and store away elsewhere. It seems to be the way this story has developed, almost from the start, even though I know what is going to happen and when it is going to happen. There will be a link for all the 'deleted scenes' added to the menu at the bottom of the page, in case you're ever curious as to what gets dropped. The Wedding and Legolas vs. Denethor will be moved into that section, so if you no longer see the link for them that's where they've gone.

What did I accomplish? I hope I've started sorting Erestor out. I also hope it is clear that Legolas is a bit more assertive and sure of himself. More revelations about sylvan ways were revealed and of course there is the terrible break between Elrond and his people. Though they are improving, our happy couple still have a few communication problems, for Elrond simply refuses to discuss the situation with Legolas, believing it would be too great a strain on him and their growing babe. At the same time, Legolas wants to fix things and is not above going behind Elrond's back to do it, even reaching out for help from Erestor.

Elrond is really enjoying his vacation from being Lord of Imladris, devoting all his time to his mate. Hope folks enjoyed the image of Elrond the Hunter. :-) There are lots of hints of things to come scattered throughout, partly because some of the text was edited out and now the references to it are rather vague in places. I hope it isn't too confusing.

For those waiting for more Balrog, I hit a snag and it took some working out to fix. Hoping to get that done soon now. For those waiting for another Feud update, I have to admit it is very hard to go from the grim scenes in that story to the lighter feeling in these other two. It is also hard to switch back and forth from one story to another because the fabric of their backdrops is so different. It is easy to slip into the style of one when writing another. Keeping them separate is much more difficult than I thought it would be. I will keep plugging away, however, and greatly appreciate your patience and understanding.

Finally, thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!
Chapter 19

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Another Week Later... ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"How now, elfling? You are round as a winter melon!"

The wizard's playful quip caused the smile already moulding Legolas' features to increase in brilliance and sheer exuberance as he stood before the venerable Istar in Elrond's office. He shifted, wavering between shy self-consciousness and blossoming pride, one hand softly following the new curvature to his anatomy, a lovely tinge of rose staining his high cheeks. Legolas' sight flickered to his mate, marking the candidly proprietary delight suffusing Elrond's features, and utterly failed to suppress the exultant flashes of gold that lit up his normally subdued elven glow.

"Ai! Mithrandir, I am not so big yet," he complained with what was quite obviously feigned indignation, for the gleam in his blue eyes sparkled all the more as Elrond's adoring gaze tracked over his transforming figure.

"Nay, not yet, maethor neth, but I am glad to see you filling out a little," said the wizard, his face creased into a maze of jubilant folds and crevasses, so happy was he to see the marked improvement in both the Wood Elf's mental and physical health. Of course, in this early stage gestation was hardly noticeable at all, but Legolas no longer looked so haunted and discontent; in fact, he looked positively radiant.

Mithrandir settled into Elrond's most comfortable upholstered chair beside the empty hearth, foregoing his usual place on the balcony where smoking was permitted. It was impossible to judge what substances might give Legolas a serious reaction and no-one wanted another case of poisoning to afflict him or the developing babe. He watched as the pair left the desk, which was littered with enormous scrolls displaying what looked like plans for some sort of construction, the discredited Lord leading his mate by their tightly clasped hands. There was no doubt in the wizard's mind that Elrond's decision to recognise the bond had been the right one, for both the parents and the unborn child.

He was also convinced this was best for Imladris' citizens as well, though it might be difficult for them to envision the benefit one lowly Wood Elf could bring to their world. The Maia had become quite concerned over the deep-seated distrust and poorly restrained hostility toward the sylvan people, now openly displayed, that had been gradually increasing as time went on. It was a wonder to him that the Imladrians could not realise they were behaving just as xenophobic and proud as they frequently accused Thranduil and his folk of being. No matter, Mithrandir was about to set them right, with Legolas' help, and was happy to do it. The Age was steadily growing dark and dangerous; it was no time for petty biases to divide what remained of the First-born. Legolas' presence at Elrond's side and the ensuing pregnancy was as clear an indication as one could hope to find that the Valar were determined to bring those divisions to an end.

Considering time gave him another thought: "How many months along are you now?"

"Ah, nearly three I should think," answered the revered healer as he took the chair opposite the wizard. Elrond was a bit taken aback by his youthful mate's outburst of sprightly laughter and looked askance as Legolas settled on the arm of the seat.

"Nearly? Surely you can be more exact than that." Now, Legolas knew full well that Elrond had no
idea of the exact day of conception and wasn't above ribbing him about it. Truly, it was a serious issue yet he feared to broach it with the gravity that was its due.

"Well, no. I have made a fair estimation, in general terms, but can't name the exact day itself," Elrond admitted with rueful hesitance, wondering if his ignorance would upset Legolas.

He never knew from one day to the next what would or would not send the sylvan archer into either furious outrage, miserable despondency, or elated joy. Indeed, sometimes his moods shift from minute to minute. He was pleased to see that happy contentment had the upper hand just now. Elrond didn't really mind the moodiness, though, and did all he could to ease the anxiety these rapid swings of emotion caused his beloved. Legolas was sometimes frightened of the changes overtaking him with ever increasing intensity, for he had finally admitted he'd never observed another male with child. Getting him to reveal that had been easy compared to convincing him that the symptoms were normal.

Elrond had never attended a male pregnancy either, needless to say, and nothing was known about such cases. Not a single word in a single book in all of his magnificent collection referred to the unique configuration of select sylvan males. The renowned healer could only base his assessment of Legolas' new traits on comparisons to common female child-bearing complaints. Yet, except for his oscillating temperament and the amplified radiance of his elvish aura, none of the pregnancy's manifestations followed a predictable pattern. There were no extended periods of Ôlpathu, no decrease in desire for intimacy, no light-headedness, no loss of acuity in hearing and sight. Instead, Legolas had become hyperaware, his natural senses enhanced so that it seemed nothing taking place anywhere on the grounds of the estate escaped his notice. He was completely at ease with sifting through and discarding most of the signals but the few incidents he'd brought to Elrond's attention proved beyond doubt how much his perception had increased.

Not all the changes were so bizarre. Much to the Elven Lord's satisfaction, Legolas' need for lovemaking seemed to be increasing and when not engaged in such delightful congress he craved to be close, refusing to permit protracted separations. The two spent long hours in one another's company, almost as indivisible as the twins, and their dream-cycles were finally beginning to separate. Never precisely in synchrony due to the inequitable nature of their bond, the couples' Ôlpathu stages had nonetheless become closely co-ordinated over the passing of ten years. Now, the inexorable power of instinct and the unshakeable fervour of his love caused Elrond to remain alert and vigilant when Legolas entered deep reverie. The famed lore-master couldn't recall anything that filled him with a greater sense of purpose, accomplishment, and serenity as watching Aearen, curled in his lap or clinging to his arm, gradually returning from dream-time, the vibration of his sylvan soul-song seamlessly giving way to softly sung Nandorin lays of love.

Beyond these pleasurable permutations, Legolas had become incredibly industrious over the last two weeks, making all manner of things from arrows to woven reed baskets, hampers, and mats, the latter presumably to line the floor of the talan once it was built. Its design was the other most obvious sign of his changing focus, for Legolas spent hours sketching and then presenting various floor plans for his mate's approval. Elrond was amazed at the amount of sophistication contained in these designs and commended Legolas on both his skill and sense of style. If the plans could truly be safely built, their talan would be as grand as any he'd seen in Lothlorien, barring the absence of stairs. Yet, though each layout was equally impressive and Elrond's approbation for every adaptation was both effusive and genuine, the Wood Elf was not satisfied and continued to make modifications and improvements.

Now the deposed Lord, once so pompously imperious, recalled the failure of his first marriage and vowed not to repeat his errors. Elrond sought to be solicitous in all his interactions with his betrothed and was mindful of Legolas' expectations regarding his role as affianced mate and sire of the nascent
child. The Wood Elf wished for him to take part in all this zealous planning and production with equal or greater enthusiasm and involvement. Elrond did try and his insight and sensitivity were much improved, but it was undeniable that whatever discord arose between them was rooted in his inadequate ability to discern when Legolas' requests were linked to this innate drive to be ready and when they were merely whims of the moment. Thus, having just admitted his ignorance over so vital and momentous an event, the date of their first child's conception, he waited in a state of wary suspense to learn what the archer's response would be.

"I will tell our wise wizard, then," Legolas stated brightly, not unmindful of Elrond's apprehension. "Tinu Mîn has been with us now for ninety-six days." He watched as his beloved Nín'ôdhel worked that out, waiting for the realisation, thrilled to see mingled surprise and apologetic adoration filling the elder Elf's eyes. He'd been wanting to reveal this for weeks and every time he made the attempt something held him back. Secretly, he worried Elrond would feel rancour due to the way it had all come about, for Legolas had neither consulted him regarding children nor divulged his reasons for wanting a babe just then at that specific time. It had been rather sneaky; actually, it had been wholly deceitful and Legolas feared that somewhere inside Elrond might resent him for it, especially in light of the rift in the valley's political order.

"Aye, that makes things much clearer to me," Elrond nodded as he embraced Legolas. The peculiar sensation of unbearable heat, the Wood Elf's heightened libido, the unexpected initiation of sexual overtures, traipsing about in naked splendour, shamelessly flaunting his engorged arousal: all these things were out of character for Legolas and all these things denoted the day of the fountain. The Elven Lord bit back the desire to express remorse over Legolas' inability to confide in him then, for it would not benefit either of them and could possibly raise unpleasant memories. Besides, ninety-six days ago, he probably wouldn't have been open to the prospect of fathering an elfling with Legolas, even if he'd considered such a feat possible. Indeed, I couldn't imagine a proper binding ceremony uniting us; is it any wonder he was forced to such extremes? "You chose a good day and a finer place I could not imagine." He tipped down the chin so given to stubbornness and settled a gentle kiss on smiling lips.

"Delightful," murmured the old Maia as he observed this charming display of billing and cooing, pleased the pair were holding up so well. Of course he'd expected trouble but the harshness of the reaction was beyond his imagining. He'd been accosted almost as soon as he crossed Bruinen by several of the Councillors and Lords eager to give him an earful of the 'dangerous situation' into which their fair valley had fallen. He'd let them talk, for he needed to assess the severity of the breach, but refused to give any counsel one way or the other. They had called a hearing and now they would have to endure it, including the regret they would feel once the truth was known. Thinking in that vein prompted another question. "Any word as to when your family arrives, Legolas?"

"I had a letter five days ago that they were crossing the pass through Hithaeglir. It is a treacherous place and I won't be easy in my soul until another message confirms their safety. I hope to hear from them soon," replied Legolas. He was impatient for this missive to get to him, unable to quell the unreasoning fears that accosted his thoughts with nightmarish images of battle, blood, and death. He hid all this from Elrond, feeling there was enough on the Noldorin Lord's mind just now.

"I'm sure they're fine. No doubt your Adar will bring along plenty of warriors to protect the entourage," asserted the wizard. He had his own reasons for wanting the Wood Elves to get to Imladris with all speed and turned a speculative look upon Elrond. The reference to warriors had widened his eyes a bit but certainly this was a possibility Glorfindel and Erestor had already broached. It was equally as clear as water that the son of Éarendil still had no notion of who was about to become his law-father.
Mithrandir sighed just a minute amount and let a split-second's worth of visual chastisement fall upon Legolas, for he wasn't sure how he felt about the magnitude of this looming prank. Yet, perhaps the sylvan was entitled to some retribution for the last ten years of humiliation he'd endured. Mithrandir gave a mental shrug; it wasn't any of his business, really, and it was mostly Elrond's fault for failing to delve into his mate's history with greater interest. He returned his attention to the Elven Lord with a grimace. "Now then, much as I hate to bring any unpleasant thought into this happy house, it must be done. Mellon, what do you want me to do about these misguided fools with which you have peopled your Council?"

"Aye, they are seemingly both blind and deaf these days," groused Elrond, visibly agitated by the mere thought of dealing with the disgruntled nobles. He sighed and shrugged. "I cannot deny that most of what they claim could have been refuted long ago had I taken appropriate action. Now, they will not listen to anything I say."

"No matter, they will heed me. I've arranged for the hearing to convene this morning," said the wizard.

"They are coming here now?" Elrond didn't attempt to moderate his surprise. "Mithrandir, you've only just arrived. I expected to have time to confer with you as to the best course of action."

"Nay, delaying it will only allow them to grow suspicious of my autonomy. We don't want anyone bringing up the Melian situation," warned the wise Istar.

"True, except that Thingol was Sindarin and he was the one ensnared by her magic, not the other way round," reminded the Elven Lord.

"Who can say what really happened?" Mithrandir shrugged. "The Sindar are of the Teleri tribe also, are they not? The point is, I would rather not have to argue the point."

"Beloved, would the Lords of the vale feel differently about our union if I were Sindarin instead of Nandorin?" Legolas asked.

"Yes, sadly that is the unpleasant reality I have permitted and even fostered for many long centuries. There has never been much contact between your people and mine in Ages past, none at all since the Last Alliance, yet our ties to the Sindarin folk are strong in both Mithlond and Lothlorien. Celeborn of Lothlorien, kin to Thingol himself, is my law-father and thus the grandfather of my children with Celebrian, who was half-Sindarin herself," Elrond's tone was honestly apologetic.

"Ah, being even half-Sindarin would help, then?" Legolas worked hard to subdue the grin attempting to break free.

"Yes, elfling, it would indeed," nodded Mithrandir hopefully. If Legolas would reveal his true heritage to the Council of Imladris, a major obstacle would dissipate as quickly as a smoke ring in the wind. "Of course, there is still the problem of your gender, the previous marriage, the silvan enchantment issue, and sizeable cultural differences to manage somehow, but I think the obvious love between you two and the little babe will overcome most of the objections."

"Well, not meaning any offence, Legolas, but debating bloodlines is not beneficial to our cause. Mithrandir, you are right; no need to complicate things with the Melian issue. Let them come now," agreed Elrond. He stood and raised Legolas with him, meeting the clear blue gaze and wondering a bit about the sparkle of amusement dancing through it. He began to lead the way toward the open balcony. "Aearen, this is not something in which you should participate. I want you to go along and start the project you told me of last night."
"Ai! Let me stay for the Council, Elrond." Legolas balked at being sent away like a child and found his temper flaring. He ducked out from under his mate's protective arm and reversed direction to rejoin the Maia, now also on his feet. "I wish to answer their objections openly."

"I know you want to help, but the Lords and Councillors will only assert you are attempting to exert magical influence over them. It is a fine morning and the hearing may go on for some hours; you did say you had no wish to remain indoors all day."

"Aye, but this is more important than…"

"Nay, nothing is more important than your well-being. I will not allow them to insult you ever again, especially here in my…our house, and neither will I countenance their presence to cause you either heartache or vexation."

"But if I'm not here won't they think I'm trying to hide from Mithrandir's scrutiny?"

"He does have a point," the Maia interposed, observing the exchange closely, wondering what Vairë was thinking to bring two such bull-headed Elves together. "They may use Legolas' absence as an indication of his certain guilt."

"Saes, Beloved, I cannot stand the thought of them unseating you because of me. Mayhap if I am here and they see that no ill effects perturb them, they will relent at last." Legolas pleaded.

"I concur with Legolas' view of the matter. Let the Elves stand in his presence and see if they still harbour such negative opinions," added the wizard. "They will quickly discover how delightful he really is." He laid two gnarled but kindly hands upon the Wood Elf's shoulders and gave an encouraging squeeze, returning Legolas' smile of gratitude with one of benevolent compassion.

"Nay, I will not permit the bearer of my babe to be brought to trial, enduring whatever inquisition their addled minds imagine would prove their fears true. If they want me to step down permanently, so be it. My sons are more than of age and fit for the task of governing the valley," came Elrond's belligerent response. "And if you want to know the truth of it, I'm enjoying this simpler life with my mate. I think I deserve a time of harmonious domestic bliss, unhampered by the cares of every living soul in the realm. Legolas and the child need me and I intend to provide every comfort and solace I'm capable of producing."

"Oh, Nín'ódhel," Legolas sighed, all his anxiety melting away in the warmth of this avowal. He scurried right back to his beloved's side and regained hold of his hand, leaning up to demand a kiss. It was swift and sweet, for the wizard was watching, but it made his heart sing nonetheless. "It needn't come to that, surely. Promise me you will reason with your people and let Mithrandir's testimony win them over. Besides, your sons have a calling already and would not be pleased to abandon a vow so close to their hearts."

"Legolas is right. Imladris needs you, Elrond, and I will do all I can to prevent this dissension from evolving into ugly schism. Your wisdom and knowledge will be required for a greater task that even now approaches its dawn. Forces are moving, both of good and of evil, and the son of Eärendil must be ready to play his vital part," intoned the venerable Istar.

The two Elves stared at him in consternation for his words had the ring of prophecy. Legolas reached up with his free hand and clutched to Elrond's tunic, eyes wide and fearful as they met his mate's. Elrond sighed and squeezed the archer's fingers, running a soothing caress over shining golden hair as he bent to kiss the worry-wrinkled forehead.

"Be not afraid, Aearen. He is not talking about sending me off to war. Are you Mithrandir?" The
Elven Lord sent his friend an admonishing glare for causing Legolas such needless distress.

"No, no, of course not. Young one, I swear to you I will not have your mate placed in harm's way. He is to remain here in the protected valley, that much I can promise." The wizard hastily amended his dire proclamation, knowing full well that he could not offer the same assurance to Elrond and glad not to be asked.

"You see? Nothing to fear. You must leave this unfortunate trial for me and Mithrandir to weather. If the Valar wish me to remain as the leader of these stubborn, pridelful, and ignorant people then it shall be so. I will defer to their will and accept my fate, as always. You are part of that fate now, too, and so I cannot help but desire to do what is best for you and our child. If the two duties can't be reconciled, I reserve the right to choose which shall receive my undivided devotion.

"Have no more doubts as to my preference; I have fully realised the folly of denying my heart in favour of this false sense of majesty and power I have jealousy nurtured for so long. Please, let me handle my colleagues' concerns alone; I would spare you their hostile stares and cruel words." Elrond drew Legolas close so to murmur these comforting entreaties into a delicate ear that grew warm and rosy under the touch of his breath. He felt the little shiver that ran through the Wood Elf's muscles, driving away all tension.

"I will do whatever you think is best," Legolas replied obediently. He gave Elrond a quick hug and stood back, smiling with only a hint of his anxiety showing through. With that he gave a short nod to Mithrandir and exited over the railing and into the grounds.

Elrond moved onto the balcony to watch him loping away toward the lily-bog, smiling in anticipation of the days ahead. He was almost hoping the Council would refuse to accept his marriage and thus free him to spend all of his time with Legolas. He found he grew more and more eager for the next surprising thing he would discover about his unusual Wood Elf. It hadn't taken long at all for him to simply stop thinking about what was going on in the realm. Erestor and Glorfindel were acting as his emissaries, bringing him updates on the affairs of the Hidden Vale and the welfare of its people, carrying his advice back to the community where these 'suggestions' were almost unilaterally incorporated. Everything was functioning just as it always had done before and he quite liked the new arrangement.

"He's a remarkable Elf," said Mithrandir, joining his friend and fishing out his pipe and pouch from within his coarse grey robes.

"That he is," beamed Elrond. "Worth ten of any of those haughty Imladrian nobles so set on condemning him."

"Aye, yet you haven't given them much of a chance to form a kind opinion of your young mate," berated the wizard. He lit the shredded tobacco with practised speed and soon had a soft white cloud collecting around his long grey hair. "Why have you kept Legolas so much apart from your people? I assure you, the key to resolving this is for them to see and know him. Legolas is an absolute delight and anyone who can resist his genuine goodwill is someone I would not be likely to trust in a serious situation."

"Aye, I agree with you. The fault is both his and mine. I didn't understand all the nuances and repercussions to this instinctive bond of last resort. He couldn't reveal this to me, at first because he was so very ill and later because he was overwhelmed in guilt and shame." A discreet cough arose from outside the study door, announcing Erestor's presence. "Come in," called Elrond, "we are out here. Is Glorfindel with you?"

"Nay, he is on the way. He went to the main gate to give instruction to the wardens assigned to it,"
answered the seneschal as he advanced. "Legolas is not to attend?"

"No, I see no reason to subject him and our child to the unwarranted malice these pompous aristocrats would direct their way," brooded Elrond.

"Well, I must tell you bluntly that your outlook is completely erroneous," announced the wizard. "Have you noticed anything about the people who ARE in daily contact with Legolas?"

The Lord and his kinsman looked at one another in obvious confusion. "What do you mean?" demanded Elrond.

"No time to explain it all now; I'll reveal this to the Council at large. Erestor is here to tell us the Lords and Advisors have arrived, correct?"

"Aye, they are waiting in the Council Hall, highly displeased and eager to get started."

"Displeased about what?" demanded Elrond.

"The common folk insisted on attending and the Lords wished to close the hearing. There was quite a little altercation brewing before your gates, cousin. Legolas must have heard the commotion on his way to the woods and suddenly showed up, telling the guards to let in all who wanted to be there. He said the Last Homely House has never been closed to any who sought counsel or needed healing and Glorfindel sided with him. The citizens thanked Legolas and many promised their support."

Such a story would once have made Erestor laugh but now he worried over the ill feeling this could generate among the nobles.

"Good for him and good for the sensible folk of the fair vale!" exclaimed Mithrandir with heartfelt admiration. "Let us convene this hearing and put an end to this nonsense once and for all."

"Aye. I want this done by noon so I may join Legolas and help with his latest project," announced Elrond.

"You aren't going down there dressed like that, are you?" demanded Erestor, horrified.

As had become the norm, the esteemed scion of Eärendil was wearing hunting regalia much of the sort that Legolas was wont to don, consisting of close-fitting leggings, knee-high leather boots, silk shirt, and a short tunic that reached mid-thigh. He found such an outfit eminently more comfortable and appropriate for he really was hunting nearly every day and much of his time was spent outdoors. Now, he'd not had the gumption to actually go and commission new togs from his personal tailor so Elrond had simply raided his sons' closets where there were ample examples of the rugged, though finely made, sporting apparel. These were crafted of the very best leather and wool and decorated almost as elegantly as any formal robe might be, as suited the sons of such a noble House. Being nearly the same size as their father, the twins' clothes fit him well.

"Why not?" barked the Elven Lord. "This is more suitable for the new life I lead and compliments the sylvan braids perfectly."

"That may well be but it is hardly appropriate attire for a formal hearing before the full Council and a good portion of the valley's population at large," objected the seneschal. "Are you purposely seeking to antagonise them? Do you want to be deposed permanently?"

"That won't do," fussed the wizard. "Elrond, dress in your traditional garb; we've enough of a challenge before us without making so bold a statement. Once we've won these haughty Lords over, your change of style will be accepted without question."
"Aye, you must present an authoritative yet conservative figure, unchanged by the inclusion of Legolas in your life," averred Erestor, "and don't forget the mithril circlet Elros gave you."

"I have changed and I'm not ashamed to admit it is for the better. Legolas has forced me to re-evaluate my priorities," insisted Elrond.

"We do not disagree," cajoled the Istar, "but this is not the time to expound upon the benefits of taking a youthful sylvan lover. Please, mellon, go and change your garments."

"Fine, but I will not remove the braids and absolutely refuse to wear the circlet," Elrond compromised. "Elros had that made as a cruel joke in retribution for that time I hired all those human dancing girls to crash his third son's Coming of Age party."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Thirty Minutes Later, the Council Hall ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Now, the Council Hall of Imladris was actually not a hall at all. This critical locus of power, the very beacon of hope for freedom and autonomy amid the darkening world, was located in a classically elegant outdoor amphitheatre. Classical in the Noldorin sense, of course, complete with a great oval stone table of polished marble, matching high-backed chairs in groups of three, carved with the symbols and seals of the various noble Houses for which they were designated, and a secondary ring of marble benches, not so fancy or finely carved, upon which would settle the Advisors elected from the among the citizens to represent the various guilds to which they belonged. Behind the benches, a semi-circular gallery of pale green limestone surrounded the entire elaborate construction so that any citizens who wished might attend the meetings of their government.

The important concerns of military defence were the sole domain of Glorfindel and he had an appropriately remarkable chair of his own set apart yet just to the right of Elrond's. Visiting delegates from foreign lands were not permitted, as a rule, to attend Imladris' Council Sessions, but seats for them were situated at Elrond's left. These were empty unless the White Council met in Imladris and Galadriel, Círdan, Saruman, Radagast, and Mithrandir were present. At the foot of the great table was the seat for the Chief Advisor to the Lord of the Vale where Erestor resided over procedure and protocol and took meticulously accurate minutes of every assembly. Erestor had a lovely bell cast of mithril with which he called such meetings to order and it was there on the table now.

This day, there weren't enough places in the gallery to hold the spectators for practically every Elf in the valley wished to witness the momentous proceedings. Glorfindel had given the gate-wardens strict instructions to allow in only the exact number of people that could comfortably fill the seats. All others were turned away, though they didn't leave and a huge throng collected on the other side of the locked gates, murmuring and grumbling in complaint to be left out. In hopes of placating them, Erestor had ordered refreshments and sent Lindir to keep them entertained. He didn't think too deeply about that request since Lindir was after all Elrond's official minstrel, but the citizens were suddenly curious about the golden-haired singer now that they knew he was silvan. Lindir was unconcerned and considered it not only his duty but his honour to answer their questions and prove how ridiculous the rumours of Elrond's enchantment were.

(Ah, yes. That spot of trouble between our prejudiced Chief Advisor and our beloved, though emotionally scarred, minstrel has not been forgotten and shall be both revealed and resolved in good time. For now, let's just accept that they are both adults with Ages of experience in diplomacy. They are treating each other with courteous, if somewhat chilly, civility.)

When Elrond, Mithrandir, and Erestor arrived in the Council Hall, they found Glorfindel already there attempting to allay the irritation of the nobles who had been kept waiting while the denounced
Lord changed his clothes. They milled about in small clumps, some mixing with the Advisors while others held themselves aloof from these highly regarded though common folk. As is usually the case in such groups, there were a few who took the lead and tried to sway everyone else to their view. In Imladris, the principal adversaries to whatever Elrond proposed were Fennas, a direct descendant of one of Turgon's cousins and Badhor, an influential commoner of Sindarin heritage and head of the Cattle-herders' Guild. They were moving amid the aristocrats and the livestock merchants, soliciting votes for denouncing the wedding, and few disputed with them.

In the secondary ring for the elected Advisors, the delegates were much more vocal and contentious, for opinions concerning Legolas differed widely. Some were fearful and suspicious of magic; some harboured resentment over loved ones lost at the Last Alliance, clinging to the theory that the Wood Elves' stubbornness caused the demise of Gil-galad and a goodly portion of his elite warriors. Yet, many spoke of him with warmth and compassion, remarking on his efforts as one of the guards, his love for all of nature, and his quiet, unassuming presence among them. Chief among these proponents were Aegas the jewel-smith, head of the Gem-cutters' Guild and Alphdal the gardener of the Last Homely House and chief of the Horticultural Guild. It should be obvious how these two knew Legolas and it was equally apparent that many of the regular folk were allied with them, approving the betrothal.

All the the indistinct chatter ceased as the Elven Lord entered and every eye tracked him as he passed among the crowd and stood before his chair, Mithrandir and Erestor on either side of him. Elrond did not shy from meeting the nobles' stern, disapproving stares and returned the looks with openly affronted disdain moulding his refined features. He was not surprised by those who sent him smiles and nods of encouragement either, for he had marked well who among his people had voted against the motion to suspend his authority. He made sure to acknowledge these supporters, noting that nearly all belonged to the merchants, craftsmen, and artisans of the realm. The wizard and the seneschal left him to take their places and everyone else followed suit. Elrond sat and then a soft clamour of padding feet, swishing robes, and the muted plops of many posteriors settling on stone replaced the silence for a moment. A rather tense interval transpired and then Erestor struck three chimes upon his bell.

"I hear by call this assembly to order," he announced briskly. "Our task today is to determine what effect, if any, the presence of Legolas of Mirkwood has upon our Lord, Elrond of Imladris, and, if such impact is proved, whether or not it is detrimental to him and to our realm as a whole. Is it still the intent of this body to conduct this hearing?"

"Aye!" the Lords and Advisors chorused as one.

"So be it. Will you accept the testimony of Mithrandir as an expert on matters pertaining to magic, sorcery, and the will of the Valar?" demanded Erestor. Again a resounding call affirmed his question. "Then, let us hear what the herald of Manwë has to say."

Mithrandir rose but before he could speak one of the nobles lifted his right hand to signal his desire to take the floor. Erestor recognised the Elf and Fennas rose also, for it was he. With a polite bow to Mithrandir, he turned on Elrond and fired off the first volley in the battle for control of Imladris.

"I do not see the Wood Elf here. How can we test his integrity if he is absent? Is this how you would instil confidence in your choice for a mate?" he demanded.

Elrond opened his mouth to answer but Erestor beat him to it.

"We have not convened this assembly to test Legolas' integrity but to determine if he is exerting magical influence upon our Lord. The two issues are not the same and I put it to you that the silvan archer has more than proved his virtue through his unfailing service in the guard. If you need specific
examples of his probity I am certain Glorfindel can provide them." The Chief Advisor's terse rebuke thoroughly demonstrated where his loyalty lay.

"Thank you, Lord Erestor," Elrond sent him a pleased smile which was acknowledged with a nod, their solidarity established beyond doubt.

"Very well. I reserve the right to question Lord Glorfindel upon the subject," groused the noble as he resumed his seat, his hopes and expectations shattered. He had erroneously assumed Erestor would back him in this effort to remove Legolas. A quick glance around proved that the other Lords were equally displeased and rather at a loss, for the seneschal of the Last Homely House was a potent adversary. Few would be bold enough to stand against him and Elrond together.

"Now then," Mithrandir at last began, "I understand that you are all fearful of Legolas because…"

"We are not fearful!" announced Badhor as he leaped to his feet. "We are justly concerned about this Wood Elf's purpose for being here."

"Aye, one Wood Elf is nothing to worry about; a host of them is quite another matter," agreed Fennas.

"No army has marched out of Mirkwood since the Last Alliance," Alphdal spoke up. "The Wood Elves are not a war-like race and in any case would never turn against their own kind. If you are looking for kinslayers, your search need go no further than your own ancestry."

That caused a flurry of raucous laughter at the aristocratic lord's expense and Erestor had to strike his bell for order.

"Thank you, Alphdal. As to Legolas' purpose for being here, it is not unlike that of every other resident of Imladris. Are we not all refugees, forced from our homes by wars and strife? Legolas was in need of healing and a safe haven," Elrond stated clearly and calmly though his displeasure was plain upon his face. "Never has anyone been turned away from my House or this valley."

"Nor shall that policy change, Valar willing," Mithrandir affirmed and took control anew. "Let us address the concerns you folk have regarding this particular refugee. Is it because he is silvan that you worry or because he is betrothed to Lord Elrond?"

"Both!" exclaimed Lord Fennas amid many concurring voices. "Having a silvan come here to live is nothing to me, but we all know the manner of his arrival was not usual. I was suspicious enough of the 'battle-field bond of last resort', but Lord Elrond assured us that it would fade as the injured Elf regained his health and vitality. Instead, the union is to be officially recognised. What does this mean for the safety of our lands? I concede the Wood Elves' lack of pluck and daring where open battle is concerned, but there are other ways to gain victory over one's foes. Does Legolas know of the power you guard, Elrond?"

"He is aware that I am the Keeper of one of the Three. I must assume he also knows which of the Three I wield."

The Lord of the Valley frowned, having just learned that his beloved mate did indeed possess such knowledge. He had no desire to reveal this yet could not hope to convince his people by resorting to falsehoods and deception. "He is aware that I am the Keeper of one of the Three. I must assume he also knows which of the Three I wield."

A loud commotion filled the air as everyone reacted at once, a turbulent mixture of distressed dismay and scoffing indifference.

"You told him this?"

"It is common knowledge among the First-born and even many mortals. What can it matter?"
"It is as we feared; with silvan wiles he gains our direst secrets."

"He doesn't need tricks for that, he could have found out by talking with any among the guards."

"What if he is a spy? Who can say what power the Elven King serves with Wraiths in his domain?"

"Did you tell him about the other Rings also?"

"I have heard enough; we must act to preserve our safety."

"Nay, the Wood Elves don't desire that sort of power. They have potent magic that serves them."

Erestor rang three chimes on his bell to silence the agitated hubbub. "We will have order," he insisted with fitting censure. "Lord Elrond, what say you to this?" Erestor was as surprised as the others and disappointed in his cousin, for he believed as the majority did, that Elrond had divulged a truth best kept hidden.

"I did not share my Burden with Legolas," announced Elrond. "He must have learned of it from the trees. As we trust them, we may rely upon him. He is loyal and true; Legolas is a citizen of our realm and would guard Imladris' secrets and her people with his life."

"No one can speak with trees; that is absolute nonsense," said Badhor the Advisor. "He does work magic and has placed an enchantment upon you, extracting this most sensitive information. What if he decides to place you in a deep slumber and steal the Ring for his homeland? Mirkwood is beset with evil and mayhap he was sent here to secure it as a weapon."

"Badhor, you always talk more than you listen and speak before considering," retorted Aegas Mírdan. "Legolas, and every silvan Elf, does communicate with trees and just about every kind of creature in nature, great or small. The folk of Lothlorien have this gift as well, though they do not discuss it openly, probably because they weary of ignorant responses such as yours."

"How could you possibly know that?" demanded Fennas in sneering contempt. "Did he give you a personal demonstration?" His scoffing disrespect elicited a scatter of smug laughter among the upper echelons of Imladrian society.

"As a matter of fact, he did," countered the jewel-smith. "He informed me that the reason my grapes were so sour and small was because of the waste buried beneath the land. My house occupies the spot where the old tannery was until the people petitioned to have it removed to the southern borders due to the unpleasant smell. I asked him how he knew all that, for it was centuries ago, and he said my old maple tree complained about the foul sludge still poisoning the ground beneath its roots."

"That proves nothing; Elrond probably told him about the tannery," snapped Badhor.

"Nay, I did not. Why would the tannery's location even come up?" retorted Elrond. "Unless you wish to call me a liar to my face, I suggest you concede that silvan Elves have the ability to converse with green life." As expected, the Advisor was not prepared to do any such thing. The Lord of the vale smirked. "Furthermore, had he any designs upon the Ring, Legolas would have acted on them before now. The fact is, he does not care about it and Aran Thranduil distrusts its power. The Elven King would not have it in his lands much less upon his person."

"Let us leave the King of the Woodland Realm outside this discussion for now," enjoined Mithrandir, "for it is Legolas who is in your midst. I am happy to confirm Elrond's claim regarding silvan affinity for speech with lesser creations of Yavanna. I am even more pleased to emphatically denounce either propensity or skill in sorcery. Only the Istari can work spells and command the will of others. Do not confuse their canny wood craft with unwholesome chicanery. The silvan folk of
Greenwood are honourable people and you would have to search diligently to find Elves more committed to the defence of Arda and the subjugation of evil."

The wizard's strong declaration of support left the Noldorin nobles and the disgruntled livestock breeders speechless. While they were uncomfortable disputing an emissary from Aman, a disciple of Manwë, and a Keeper of one of the Three, they were not ready to accept the lowly warrior as a fitting mate for their Lord. They murmured in grumbling discontent as they tried to think of another charge to level upon the Wood Elf.

"I cannot comprehend why you must wed him formally," complained Fennas. "Let things remain as they are; I've no objection to you keeping a consort, even a male one. If that's not good enough for him, let the Wood Elf return to his people. Even after the Last Alliance those few silvan folk who sheltered here to cure their hurts left as soon as they were able. They prefer their dark and gloomy world beneath the trees, so why is Legolas still here?"

"We have already established that," said Alphdal in exasperation. "Have you not denounced the bond between them? Surely that is what holds Legolas here, so far from all he knows and loves."

"That is true and yet not completely accurate. The reality is plain as the sunrise for any who wish to see," announced Glorfindel, smiling as he surveyed the collected Elves. They were going to be so completely shocked when they learned of the babe and he was not above being amused by the thought. "Legolas is deeply in love with Elrond."

"Aye, it has been so almost from the beginning. I recall how Legolas could not bear to be parted from Elrond during his stay in the healing wards, for I had need of stitching for a small wound and saw them there," added Aegas. "I will never forget the young Elf's terror and despair, nor the comfort and care Lord Elrond lavished upon him. Forgive me for saying it, Hiren, but I believed you would even use Vilya to spare him, so strong was the connection between you."

"I did not realise the strength of his feelings was obvious to others, for I had so effectively hidden the truth from myself," Elrond sent his friend a nod. "Nor was your thought inaccurate. I did use the Ring to aid him then and will not hesitate to do so in the future should it ever come to that." A collective gasp arose at this admission but before any of the nobles could pounce upon this opportunity to cry fault, Elrond stood and continued. "This should not surprise anyone, for I have done so in the past for many, including Celebrían and numerous Elves you folk hold dear to your hearts. Your nephew, Fennas, only survived his run in with wargs due to the Ring's gift. I am a healer and decided long ago that the power of Vilya was given into my hands primarily for that purpose." He paused, noting how many of his loyal citizens were nodding in assent, and smiled.

"Beyond that, I am pleased and very proud to confirm Glorfindel's statement." He met the speculative scrutiny trained upon him with calm and open honesty. It was safe to say he had seldom endured such complete and total deliberation from his subjects. "For whatever reason, Legolas loves me. I am equally overjoyed to announce that I feel exactly the same toward him. Can it be so difficult to imagine that I would give my heart and soul to him? Would I wish to wed him otherwise?"

"Yet you did not wed him for all this time," Badhor pointed out. "You were most adamant in telling us, repeatedly, that the bond between you was created solely out of dire necessity. I understood your desire to keep a young and attractive lover, yet believed you would eventually tire of him and send him away. So Erestor assured me numerous times. Now you talk of love and a devotion so profound you would risk the disfavour of the Valar by spurning your lawful marriage to Celebrían."

"Aye, and what do the Lord and Lady of the Golden Wood think of that? Surely they will be offended for their beloved daughter to be so cruelly slighted," added Fennas. "Is it wise to incur their displeasure? Lorien is our strongest ally."
"Let us leave the Lady of Imladris outside this hearing also," insisted Elrond grimly. He had no wish
to bring up any of his history with her or reveal her long-standing affair with another Elf.

"Forgive me, cousin, but I fear we must answer this concern," said Erestor as gently as he was able.
"Everyone knows she has departed these shores, never to return. Few understand that she dissolved
her bond with you upon so doing."

A hushed exclamation of dismay chased around the area and many heads bent close to whisper of
their shock and disbelief. The Chief Advisor tapped his bell twice.

"My kinsman speaks the truth," said Elrond sadly. "Our marriage was a trial for her and it is to her
credit that so few of you good people suspected. I do not fault her and she forgave my shortcomings
long ago. It is in the past and our lives will not intersect in the future."

"What of your sons? Elladan and Elrohir have not hidden their disgust over their naneth's
replacement. Your Chief Advisor repeatedly refers to your chosen mate in terms best reserved for
those among the mortals who sell their chastity for coin," argued Badhor. "This is the Elf you claim
to love? Only magic could make you say such a thing."

At that everyone decided to add their opinions and the folk in the gallery were boisterous in their
desire to be heard. The cacophony of competing shouts, both for and against Legolas, rendered most
of the comments into nothing more than a jumbled thunder of strife and dissension. It was impossible
to tell whether the majority had shifted to back Elrond and his chosen mate or not. Mithrandir
thumped his long staff hard upon the ground to gain everyone's attention. Erestor stood up and
clanged his bell unceasingly until they all grew quiet and resumed their seats, for many had arisen in
hopes of making their statements more forceful.

"This is intolerable! I will close this hearing and clear the hall if there is another such outburst!" he
chastised them coldly and none could hold his angry glower for more than a few seconds. "You
called Mithrandir back from Gondor to hear his evaluation and judgement; now you refuse to heed
his advice?"

"I am thoroughly disappointed in your lack of trust in my counsel," boomed Mithrandir. "These
superstitious postulations sound like tales the mortals invent to explain what is beyond their
knowledge. What ails you lot? Are you truly so lacking in common sense? I will not answer a single
one of these irrational indictments." His tirade shamed them, for none of the Elves were pleased to be
likened to ignorant dwarves and humans.

"There is a logical, natural explanation for all your concerns but I will not detail them," Elrond said.
"Instead, I will speak of my failings and explain my poor conduct, for thus has it been. My treatment
of Legolas is inexcusable and has in turn inspired your unwarranted antagonism and scorn; indeed, it
shames me to admit I held a similar opinion at first. He has done nothing to merit this disdain. I am to
blame for the crude, lewd jokes at his expense. I am at fault for not prohibiting the nearly constant
attempts at seduction, the disgusting propositions, and the openly lustful ogling he has endured.

"Aye, I am the one lacking in honour and dignity, not Legolas. He has been true to me through it all
and not once complained of his predicament. None of you thought to wonder why and again I must
accept my own culpability in regarding him as little better than a slave to the bond we share. So it is
deemed among his people. Should a union such as ours fail to be formally recognised, it is the
gravest insult one can give to the individual so bound and his or her entire lineage. It means the other
party, meaning myself, considers the family beneath him, so lacking in character that he would never
consider linking with them through marriage."

Silence followed his speech and the expressions on the nobles' faces indicated confusion and
uneasiness, for this was exactly what they believed. They did not consider Legolas' family prestigious enough to join formally to the noble House of Eärendil, a heritage that included the very highest representatives of Elves, Men, and Maiar.

"I see it in your eyes," nodded Elrond. "The truth is, I did think as you do now. Even when I knew I loved him, knew that he had become everything to me, even then I would not consider making him my legal and rightful spouse for fear of the expressions of disgusted disappointment I observe upon your patrician features. It wasn't until the cinnamon poisoning that I perceived my stupidity, my madness. He might have died and a precious gift, the most precious gift of all, might have died with him.

"I realised that if I lost him, I would not survive the grief. When he did not perish, he was ready to leave Imladris and sail for Aman, for he believed I did not love him, not truly, and would not protect him. I cannot lose him; I will not permit him to go from me. Let it be known: if this hearing fails to endorse our union then I will step down as Lord of the realm and cross the sea with him."

A low murmuring susurrated through the gathered Elves but they fell silent at once when Erestor sounded a single, soft chime. All eyes fixed attentively upon the Elven Lord, yet Erestor's was the voice they heard next. Now through all this the seneschal had held back, waiting for the right moment to intervene, and now he was compelled by his cousin's open declaration to speak up and admit his own guilt. He took a deep breath and rose from his chair.

"Though I never deemed him a threat of any kind, I once viewed Legolas as an opportunist seeking only to improve his lot in life. I am no longer of that opinion. Everyone present has heard my ribald stories and demeaning remarks; let it be known that Legolas did nothing to incite them. To my utter shame, I realised my unseemly coveting of my kinsman's mate lay at the root of all my ugly words. I understand now; his heart is unconditionally committed to Elrond. I believe he would protect our Lord with his very life if such was required," averred the seneschal quietly, "and I know Elrond is utterly serious in his intent to retain Legolas' heart and soul within his."

"Muindor, your acceptance may be late but I am truly grateful for it," said Elrond, happy to ignore the past in light of this absolute endorsement.

"Please elaborate on this, Erestor," encouraged the wizard, not at all uncomfortable discussing the scandalous behaviour of Imladris' most notable Elves. "If you no longer experience this overwhelming lust, what do you feel toward Legolas?" Again a short silence ensued as the seneschal considered this.

"I have the strong desire to see him at peace, a compelling urge to protect him," came Erestor's pensive answer, for he was puzzled by the vehemence of these emotions, or rather, by the utter abrogation of views he had maintained for more than a decade. "It is similar to what I felt when Celebrian was expecting, yet this is far more intense."

"Thank you," said Elrond.

Before anyone else could comment, Mithrandir moved things along, for this was all to his purpose. He addressed the Balrog-slayer. "Glorfindel, you were once so opposed to Legolas' presence that you went behind Elrond's back and summoned the twins to chase him off. What is your outlook now?"

All eyes honed in on the intrepid warrior, who rose slowly to his feet, casting a fleeting glance at Elrond.

"I am Legolas' staunchest ally," he said firmly. "Whatever resentment I harboured was caused by my
respect for Celebrian and my sympathy for Elladan and Elrohir, who were so vehemently opposed to
the unexpected bond. In truth, Legolas is among my best warriors and I will sorely miss his presence
on patrol.

"I, too, harbour regret for my mistreatment of the silvan archer. I routinely dismissed his diligent
efforts to guard our borders and permitted my troops to ridicule his method of fighting from the
branches overhead. I am ashamed to say we named him cowardly and I have heard more than one
soldier accuse him of deserting his brother's company on the day of the Orc attack. None of that is
true.

"If I described his skill as bloodthirsty then so must I name the twins. Legolas abhors the foul
creatures of the world for similar reasons: because of them he has lost his brother and been torn from
his home and family. With such an incentive, who would not feel the need to rid the lands of such
evil?" He paused briefly and sent Elrond another surreptitious look. "Let me add that I have never
felt any type of desire or attraction for the Wood Elf. I am happily involved with someone and have
been for many years."

"When did you arrive at this altered outlook?" asked Erestor, his curiosity piqued. He'd wondered
what had caused the abrupt reversal of the Balrog-slayer's attitude but hadn't been able to get the
Vanyarin warrior to tell.

"I would rather not say," Glorfindel hedged, going decidedly pink around the ears.

"Ah, why is that?" Badhor pounced. "You have been enchanted, Glorfindel."

"Nay!"

"Then tell us what happened!" Fennas demanded.

"It might be best," sighed Elrond.

"Indeed. Glorfindel, if you don't explain it will only leave doubt in everyone's mind," added
Mithrandir.

The reborn warrior looked around at the faces and sighed heavily. This was not the proper place or
time for such admissions, yet he could see there was no alternative that wouldn't leave Legolas under
suspicion. "You must first understand; it was entirely accidental." The Balrog-slayer addressed
Elrond directly. "I was going to fetch you for the evening report and, well, you were already
otherwise engaged. With Legolas."

Elrond stifled a groan and covered his eyes, unable to meet the wary gaze of his Master-at-Arms for
a moment, wishing he could flee from the staring, glittering eyes and leering, whispering mouths
surrounding him. Never had he been so glad for Legolas to be far from his home and sincerely hoped
the archer was well beyond the range of detecting this particular part of the hearing. Then he steeled
himself and lowered his hand, resigned to knowing the whole truth. "How much exactly did you
accidentally observe?"

"Umm, ah, you know." The Vanyarin warrior motioned with his hands, managing to make the
vague movements explicitly risqué, his fair cheeks, already tinted with blossoming colour quickly
acquiring a hue that matched his ruby lips. "It was actually quite beautiful and touching," he insisted,
anger flaring as numerous giggles erupted around the place.

"Oh, Glorfindel," scolded Erestor reprovingly, shaking his head while a huge grin overtook his
features.
"Tut-tut, it's not like we are children. It was bound to happen, given Legolas' preference for the outdoors," placated Mithrandir. He could tell this was not very reassuring news for the Lord of Imladris.

"How is this possible if not through enchantment?" spat Badhor, not impressed by what he considered proof of Legolas' loose, or rather absent, morals. He refrained from alluding to enchantment again, but everyone knew he was thinking it for they were, too. "I can't understand how watching that made their perspectives alter so quickly and completely."

"This is precisely what I expected to happen, Badhor," proclaimed Mithrandir, not a bit perturbed.

"How could you know?" demanded the Balrog-slayer. "You were no where near the valley when this occurred."

"Didn't need to be; Celeborn explained it to me. Sylvan folk are remarkable!" he enthused.

Elrond startled. "Celeborn knows of Legolas?"

"Of course, mellon. Did you believe your sons would fail to reveal this unusual bond of yours to their grandparents?"

The Elven Lord studied his feet in sheepish chagrin, for that was exactly what he'd preferred to think and since neither Celeborn nor Galadriel had brought it up, he'd gone on believing they didn't know. Of course they had to be aware; if his sons hadn't told one of these oh so discreet nobles surely would have.

The Lord of the Vale looked over the faces he knew so well. Here were people he'd fought beside in times of war, people he'd trusted to stand firm beside him through whatever fate might befall their community, be it beneficial or detrimental. Yet now they defied his authority and refuted his right to claim for his own the one Elf in all the world who made him happy and whole. Elrond was disappointed and hurt and unwilling to use Legolas' pregnancy as a means to gain their approval, though it was clear this was the direction Mithrandir was taking. He sighed, trying to see a means to compromise and salvage the situation, for such was Aearen's wish. He decided that was the place to start.

"I will address Badhor's question only because Legolas wishes me to make peace with you. Personally, I no longer care very much what your opinion may be, good or ill. I have already said it: If it is best to step aside and allow my sons to rule, or even some other Elf you may wish to choose, so be it. Let me assure you, before it is brought up, that the Ring placed in my trust shall remain hidden here, whatever your decision may be, so that your lives may be ever blessed and peaceful. Legolas does not care about Vilya or have any desire to manipulate its power.

"If that is your decision, I will miss this place, yet neither Legolas nor I will miss the strife and discord you have generated. Indeed, I refuse to tolerate such treatment toward the one who holds my heart, one who has granted me the greatest gift of all. Considering Galadriel's gift of foresight, I am fairly sure the Lord and Lady have known of this gift from the beginning. It is this: my sylvan mate is with child. Legolas will bring forth new life, my fourth elfling, a blessing unexpected and undeserved.

"Before anyone dares call my issue illegitimate, let me remind you that Legolas and I are already husband and spouse in the sight of Eru. We have been bound in all ways for over ten years. The formal ceremony is necessary for his honour and for mine, but I will not permit any disgrace to touch my babe. He and Legolas are my first priority now and above all else Legolas needs to feel safe and secure. If that means we sail, so be it."
Needless to say, his remarks caused an uproar and more banging of the staff and clanging of the bell was required as all the nobles scoffed and disputed against this unlikely revelation, Erestor and Glorfindel upheld their Lord's statement, and the wizard called repeatedly for order. When it finally grew quiet enough to hear anything distinctly, the response was just as one might expect.

"Impossible, he's male." Fennas announced.

"And if it is true, then it can only be magic," added Badhor, still convinced the silvan had enchanted the mighty Elven Lord. "Any child bred in such a manner must be the spawn of evil intent."

"Silence!" the Istar shouted in his most imperious voice, reminding them that he was no mere old man but one among the Blessed. "If I hear one more reference to dark magic I will give the one who makes it a fitting example of spells and enchantments! Do you dare call Elrond's nascent elfling evil? I would banish you from the realm were it in my authority to do so!"

"Nay, mellon, do not forego your oathes to your order on my account," Elrond smiled sadly and laid a restraining hand upon the wizard's arm. "They know nothing of Wood Elves; how could they? Even I was unaware of this unique physical trait. Is our ignorance any wonder, considering that I have never attempted to develop an alliance their King? We went to them only when need was great and then forgot them and the price their people paid for the good of all."

"True. Very well, if they will not take my word for it, or yours, perhaps the words of Celeborn the Wise will convince them, for he is aware of this trouble and sent me this letter." Mithrandir produced the missive with a flourish and all were duly impressed. Not even Elrond had known of this evidence and his shock was apparent.

"Well, what did he tell you?" asked Erestor impatiently.

"It's quite simple, really. Wood Elves who are with child, whether male or female, produce a unique chemical signal similar to scent yet not consciously detectable to others. These aromatic communications reach everyone within the subconscious range of elven olfactory perception and prompt a fittingly protective response. It is a necessary instinct, given the dangerous world they inhabit and their diminished numbers after the Last Alliance, and serves to safeguard both parent and unborn child, thus ensuring survival of another generation. Celeborn, being in closer contact with Thranduil, his kinsman by blood, knows of the unusual trait."

"So it is magic after all," said Erestor quietly.

"No, not as is commonly envisioned; Legolas is no sorcerer. It is simply his nature to function this way," corrected Mithrandir, spearing the unfortunate Badhor with his icy glare.

A subdued and uneasy quiet settled over the assembly as the Noldorin folk attempted to assimilate this bizarre news. It was painfully obvious how conflicted they were. On the one hand, a pregnant male was something of a freak and many thought Legolas had deliberately used this unknown capability to ensnare their Lord and secure his future. On the other, none wished to condemn an innocent babe to the shame of being fatherless and only a few truly wanted their Lord unseated. It was clear enough that Elrond would desert his prestigious position, all his power, and his loyal subjects rather than renounce his paternity or give up his mate.

"Why didn't you tell us about the elfling?" asked Aegas.

"Aye, most of the people here would not want to cause any distress to a…someone with child," added Alphdal.
Elrond's lips parted in preparation of replying, but instead a loud shout issued forth and he leaped back from the table, his face a mask of panicked terror. He swayed, overcome for a moment, and the wizard grabbed at his arm. Before anyone could think to stop him, he yanked free and bolted.

"Aearen!" he shouted in frantic trepidation, the hearing and its outcome forgotten.

"Elrond, what is amiss?" demanded Glorfindel, racing close behind as all the Lords and Advisors stood and stared, babbling in confusion.

"He calls me; he is in despair!" cried the panic-stricken husband and father as he shoved his way through the crowd and ran for the trees.

~ ~ ~ ~ Elrond to the Rescue! ~ ~ ~ ~

Never had the younger son of Eärendil been so thoroughly terrified, not when his naneth deserted him and he was taken captive by the Noldorin kinslayers, not when he learned that Elros had chosen the Gift of Men, not even when he faced the Dark Lord before the gates of Mordor. He could not think or reason or formulate plans; he could only run with every ounce of strength and speed with which the First-born are endowed, his heart racing more from the fear of what horror was befalling his young mate and their unborn elfling. Orcs? Wargs? Trolls? Unscrupulous Men? Such enemies were unknown in Imladris, but he could not gather enough thought to counter the wrenching visions of violence peopled with these representatives of evil. He must reach Legolas in time; he could not let his beloved Aearen and their wee babe perish.

Blessed Eru! After all he's been through, how can you permit this? Preserve him from harm and spare our child; I beg you!

No more could he manage for the silent call from Legolas' soul was fraught with anguish and anger and hopeless desolation. Elrond thought he would go mad and truly did not realise he was shouting Legolas' name over and over, peppered with exhortations to hold fast, that he was almost there, that he would make it right and all would be well. He did not hear his sobbing voice pleading with Aearen not to die but to fight and live. He did not notice the reckless way he plowed through the fine hedges and flower beds, trampling fields of newly sprouted crops, crashing through whatever obstacle presented itself on the straightest, swiftest path to his beloved.

Nor did he notice that Glorfindel was following, dagger in hand for he never brought a sword to Council. Elrond was oblivious to Mithrandir puffing and blowing in his wake, grey beard flowing and robes held up around his knobby knees to aid his progress. Erestor was rapidly gaining on Glorfindel and a handful of the Lords and Advisors and common folk were pounding over the grounds behind him. The elegance for which the estate was known far and wide was quickly being rendered a catastrophic mess of squashed plants, churned turf, overturned lawn furniture, and broken fences. It wasn't until the untamed woods were reached that some of the throng gave up the chase, unwilling to confront brambles and thickets and whatever danger had provoked their Lord's unforeseen retreat from the hearing.

Thankfully, Legolas had not gone far from the Last Homely House, for since the conception he found he needed to be close to his mate. He was in a small clearing about a league downstream from Lanthir Fân where the brook was broad and slow, meandering with many turns across the fertile land. Here and there, the stream has altered course and left behind small bows of lakes surrounded by fine, blue clay. It was at one of these clay bogs that the Wood Elf was located.

Once close enough to actually hear the distraught and tearful noise issuing from his beloved, Elrond's
speed verily doubled. He could catch a glimpse of Legolas pacing too and fro, occasionally bending to heft and throw objects from the ground, no doubt hoping to deter whatever danger threatened him. The Lord of Imladris gave a blood-curdling war cry and burst through the thinning trees, ready to wring the life from whatever creature dared to enter into his lands and try to hurt his family. Frantically his eyes scanned the scene but there was no one there except Aearen, who promptly threw himself upon his betrothed husband and clung tight, his distraught words too distorted by his hysterical state to be intelligible.

"Legolas! Legolas, are you well? What has happened? Can you speak, beloved?" entreated Elrond, quickly and carefully exploring the trembling body with shaking hands. His heart leaped in his chest for Aearen was wet and sticky and he feared the worst, yet the silvan did not flinch or cry out in pain. Confused and warily hopeful, Elrond pried the strangling arms from around his neck and gently held Legolas out far enough to get a good look at him.

The Wood Elf was a complete mess. His hair was a wet, tangled mass of knots; clothes were soaked and caked with clumps of clay. The mud coated his face and hands as well and his bare feet were literally blue from the sticky stuff. His face was streaked with tears as the fluid ran down from his wide and sorrowful blue eyes, his distress enhanced by the fact that he was striving to control it by biting down on his quivering lower lip. The miserable whimpers escaped nonetheless and his whole body jolted with the jarring sobs. For all that, there was no blood, no bruises, no wounds of any kind.

"Oh, Nín’ódhel, everything's ruined!" he choked out and collapsed against Elrond's chest as he gave up the effort to be strong and let the sorrow engulf his troubled heart.

"Ai! Legolas, what happened? What do you mean? Is the babe well? Are you hurt?" Elrond hugged him close and slowly rocked the wailing Elf, glancing around the clearing for clues to the mystery. The notion of poison entered his mind and chilled his spirit.

"No, I'm not hurt," Legolas managed to say. "Tinu Mín is fine, too, but what does it matter? How can I take care of this child? I can't even do the simplest thing! I ruined every one and no matter how hard I try I can't get it right. What am I going to do? We..." Fresh bawling silenced further explanations as he buried his face beneath Elrond's chin and clutched even tighter to the Elven Lord's robes.

"Pots?" Elrond's brows rose to his hairline. Making ceramic pots was Legolas' most recent project, but so virulent a reaction to lack of success in this endeavour was completely our of proportion. The only conclusion was the imbalance in the silvan's body caused by the progressing gestation. This realisation sent a deluge of relief, sympathy, and love coursing through the noble Lord's blood and he smiled as he kissed the clay-clotted tresses. Once more the patient husband held his mate away in order to peer into the utterly disconsolate visage. "Beloved, I thought something terrible was happening to you. I thought you were being attacked! This is about clay pots?"

"Aye. I wanted to do it myself, but they're all ruined!"

Fresh tears threatened so Elrond drew Legolas close anew and shushed him softly, giddy with happiness to know there was no danger, no threat, no enemy lurking in the brush. He surveyed the area and noticed the overturned potter's wheel, a smoking kiln with its door agape wherein could just be spied a cracked urn, a shapeless mound of wet clay in a bucket, and numerous shattered examples of the Wood Elf's efforts to create jars of various shapes and sizes. Aearen's emotions had swept through the clearing with the fury of a hurricane.

"There now, there now. It doesn't matter if this batch is ruined; we can make more," he soothed. "Why is it so vital to make the pots yourself? There is an artisan in the city who can make whatever we require."
"I'm the life-bearer!" exclaimed Legolas as if that was the answer to everything. He lifted anguished eyes to meet Elrond's and could see the confusion on his beloved's face. With a groan he dropping his head against the sturdy Noldorin shoulder. "Of course you don't know."

"Then tell me, Aearen; I want to learn," coaxed Elrond, lifting the drooping face and wiping away a few teary smears. He sent his mate an encouraging smile.

"It's the custom among my people. A life-bearer has to be able to supply for the needs of himself and the child for the final stage of pregnancy and the first three months of life beyond the birth. I need the pots to store fruit and grain and water and other things."

"Yes, I understand but I am here, too. I will provide for you and the child," reminded Elrond, stooping to lightly kiss the clay coated lips.

"Nay, that's not the point." Legolas felt calmer now with Elrond's arms around him. Perhaps the pots could be mended. "What if something happens to you? I have to be able to keep our babe safe. I can't do that if I have no stores set aside, for I won't be able to hunt or forage during that time."

"Dear One, nothing is going to happen to me," assured Elrond. "Even should some tragedy happen, your family is coming here to help you and my family would never let you or our child go hungry."

"Oh Valar! I must have the pots made before they get here!" Legolas was becoming frantic again and tried to twist out of Elrond's grasp. "What am I to do? I can't make them; every one of them has cracked in the kiln!"

"Nay, do not become overwrought. We will solve this, Aearen. It is still some time before your kin arrive; surely we can manage to bake some jars before then."

"No, it's hopeless! There was a messenger bird this morning; they are four day's march from the ford. I wanted to prove to them, to prove to you that I will be a suitable life-bearer."

"Four days? Are you certain?" Elrond once more examined Legolas at arm's length. He was almost ready to panic himself until he saw how upset Aearen was. Logically, he should be glad for his people to arrive and had previously spoken of the event with much happiness. "Why are you so worried?"

"They will say I am not fit to bear life if I can't even make pots for preserving food," Legolas wailed, casting himself against his husband's chest, mortified to reveal his failure in domestic pursuits. "It is a family joke: the only thing I am good at is killing. I used to laugh and tell them to be glad of it for I am the best archer our House has ever produced, but it's not funny now."

"Oh, Aearen," sighed Elrond, trying hard to subdue his mirth. It wasn't really the humour of it so much as the exceeding gratitude he felt to learn that this was the main concern troubling his beloved. "They will not say anything unkind. They will just be happy to see you well and learn of the child you bear. Besides, we needn't tell them you didn't make the pots."

"They will know."

"I can help," spoke a voice behind them and the lovers jumped in surprise for they hadn't noticed the small crowd that had filtered into the clearing, lead by Glorfindel, Mithrandir, and Erestor. It was none of these who had spoken, however, but one of the folk of the city. He took a step forward, smiling kindly as he nodded to Elrond, who of course recognised him.

"Celeg'waew, I did not know you were here," said Elrond, tightening his encircling arms protectively around his distraught mate. He sent a questioning glance to the wizard, his kinsman, and
the Balrog-slayer, but they only grinned back, expressions evocative of warm and compassionate joy suffusing their comely faces.

"Aye, Hiren, I could not help but follow, for your need seemed great. As it is, I have the answer to your dilemma, Legolas," the Elf addressed the Wood Elf directly, amused to see the tear bright eyes peek out in undeniable curiosity from beneath the mass of unruly, clay-matted golden hair. It was quite obvious that the young silvan had thrown quite the tantrum in his anxious despair over failing to master the art of throwing pots. "I am a master potter, the head of my Guild. I would be glad to take on a new apprentice. It takes many years to excel in this craft, yet I am convinced that you will be an adept and attentive pupil. I will help you make at least a few simple kinds of jars before your family arrives."

Legolas' straightened up and turned to Elrond to view his reaction, finding the Lord's calm, commanding demeanour reassuring. It was obvious he trusted this offer of assistance and thus Legolas was prepared to accept the offer as guileless and the appearance of good will as genuine. He faced the Master Potter again, bestowing that beatific smile that so utterly enthralled all fortunate enough to fall under its radiant purity.

"My thanks, Hiren," he said quietly, a polite dip of his head underscoring his deference. "I will work very hard to learn your the skill."

"I've no doubt you will make us all proud," laughed the potter with a shake of his head and a twinkling wink at Elrond. "I am not lord, however, so you need not address me with such formality. Celeg'waew will do."

"So be it," nodded Legolas happily, all tears dried and every hint of sorrow banished from his heart. "You may call me Legolas, then," he added, and if he noticed the amused grins and chuckles his tone of autocratic condescension elicited from the surrounding elves, he pretended not to.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Fennas: Doorway
Badhor: Judge
Celeg'waew: Swift Wind
Dor Eden Cuil: Place of New Life
Ceryn o Cabor: frog’s balls
Tinu Mfn: our little star
maethor nín: my warrior
Pen Vallen: Golden One

NOTE: Ah, this entire sequence has been fighting me so hard! Still the culmination of this scene is not here, but this is a good place to stop. Sorry to keep dangling Thranduil's arrival, but this situation with the citizens needed to be addressed and at least partially dealt with. As you probably noticed, there was no vote! Legolas' temper tantrum put a halt to the proceedings quite soundly. Now, the next chapter will just leap over those intervening four days and permit us to FINALLY get to the good stuff. We'll find out if the people voted for or against the marriage. Oh, and there's a torrid sex scene involving the removal of all that clay from Legolas' body. I will let you know when it posts because it will probably end up in the Missing Scenes. Don't go looking now, it isn't done yet.
I hope you can see that the pregnancy is starting to have more noticeable effects on Legolas. It should also be noted that maybe he has felt rather insecure about the idea of being a male life-bearer. He is very young, remember, and has never personally known a male elf who gave birth, though he knows of males who have done so in the past. There are probably other things about facing his family that have his nerves on edge, too. And, let me say now that, although both Legolas and Elrond refer to their unborn babe as Tinu Mín: (Our Little Star), this is only a pet name and they will choose a more appropriate name for the child once he's born. It will not start with 'El'.

Finally, thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!

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"You're so terribly quiet, Aearen. What is wrong?" Elrond squeezed the shoulder beneath his hand, rubbing his thumb gently over knotted muscles that hoisted and then dropped the joint in the archer's characteristically disconsolate one-sided shrug.

"Alnad, Nín'ódhel." Legolas' tone clearly indicated the opposite, yet it was not so much distress as irritation that modulated the lilting voice.

"Nay, there is something. Tell me; have I displeased you in some way?" Elrond had a fairly good notion of the source of Legolas' discomfort but hoped to encourage his mate to confide in him willingly.

They were walking through the grounds toward Lanthir Fân for Legolas wished to bathe and that was his chosen place, his secret place. The small crowd of the curious and the concerned that had followed Elrond's headlong flight through the gardens had all been escorted back to the Last Homely House by Mithrandir and Glorfindel, leaving the lovers to sort out the business of cleaning up alone.

"No, you've done nothing wrong, beloved." Legolas hesitated, a small sigh escaping as he felt the warmth of embarrassment flood his cheeks. He sent Elrond a side-long glance and then frowned, looking down at the trampled grass beneath his feet. Could he say? It was beyond mortifying yet surely the Elf Lord realised this.

"Now then, no more of that. Tell me and we can set your heart free of this trouble." Elrond smiled as he stopped and turned to face Legolas. Gently he peeled away a lock of clay-encrusted hair that was plastered to the silvan's cheek, sticking it to the bulk of the grimy tresses behind his ears.

"Ai!" Legolas groaned, half-raising his arms in exasperation. "I am a mess! I look like an elfling who's been wallowing in a mud hole."

"Yes, there's quite a lot of clay everywhere." Elrond nodded, trying hard not to laugh but unable to keep the amusement from his voice. "A bath will cure all, Aearen."

"It isn't that. I... I threw a temper tantrum like some spoiled and wilful child!" The words exploded from his heart in a burst of self-reproach and dismay. "I caused you to think something terrible was happening and all the while it was just about pots. I can't think why I reacted that way; it just seemed so hopeless all at once. No matter how hard I tried to constrain the feeling, it only grew worse and worse.

"If that isn't bad enough, I chose this particular day at this particular time to suffer such complete loss of composure and control over my emotions. Every noble Lord of the valley and a good third of the population was here to learn of it." By the time he came to the close of this diatribe, Legolas had paced to and fro before his espoused mate a few times and now seemed poised to take flight for the trees, though truly he had no wish to be apart from Nín'ódhel. Elrond's hand reached for his to eliminate that possibility and he let himself be caught.

"Ah, Legolas, it is no cause for concern. In fact, it may be for the best," Elrond reassured.

"How can you say so? They will declare me unfit to become your mate, then you will insist that we shall wed regardless, then they will vote you from office. I can't bear for that to happen!" Legolas
could not really believe Elrond was making light of the situation. His eyes grew wide as he watched the venerable Lord shake his head, a gentle light in his cool grey eyes, his countenance suffused with abiding contentment and peace.

"Nay, I doubt that will come to pass. The hearing had progressed nearly to its conclusion before your despairing soul called out for me. Mithrandir cleared you of the enchantment charge and explained to the folk of the vale what is happening. They all know that you carry my fourth child. If anything, your outburst confirmed it for in these early stages the changes overtaking you are stressful to the body and the mind. I believe we will find the majority of both the Council and the populace favour our marriage now."

Legolas stared, uncertain what to make of this announcement, and decided chagrin over his display of irrational choler was less noteworthy than happiness over the Elven Lord's prediction of acceptance. He permitted a tentative hope to surface and closed the small gap separating them, leaning against Elrond's chest as he wrapped both arms tight around the robe-clad figure, enjoying the surge of safety and stability the contact evoked. "Truly? What do they say of Tinu Mín? Will he be accorded the proper respect his exalted lineage deserves or will they call him illegitimate, a means to force you into marriage?"

Elrond sighed, for there was no way to promise only the first outcome. "Aearen, most people here would not want to burden an innocent with such a harsh sentence, no matter what their personal prejudices might be, but there are bound to be some who refuse to embrace our union. We cannot hide the fact that our babe was conceived outside the traditional rites of bonding. Nothing can be done to change this, but I will do all I can to minimise the negative impact on Tinu Mín. I will make it plain that it is my fault alone, my foolish denial of the love that has grown between us, that forced you to take such a drastic step. Had I recognised the bond at once, none of this would have come to pass."

"Perhaps so, but I did not plan Tinu Mín's conception in order to make you wed me." Legolas straightened up and gazed into Elrond's eyes, not pleased to realise this notion was still a viable one. "Is this what you think?"

Elrond blinked and his brow furrowed, uncomfortably aware that he had just made another blunder. How could he not think it? "Legolas," he began and paused, trying to decipher what to say and what to leave out. "I know you believe our child is meant to become Galbreth reborn, yet the babe's begetting day was removed from the initial bonding by many years. I assumed this was because you were waiting for me to formally recognise the union." He stopped again, evaluating the grimly down-turned lips. Not very promising. He took a breath and continued. "Not that ten years is really so very long; I know of many courtships that lasted far longer, yet it is certainly unusual for one half of the couple to attempt creation of new life without that eternal commitment. Even after marriage, the subject of offspring is carefully and mutually considered."

"You do think it," said Legolas, "even after I told you otherwise." He felt his anger rising and with it that same old terrible ache in his chest that he'd so hoped was forever vanquished. "Elbereth, what is to be done?" he whispered forlornly, pressing his fist against the sharpening twinge over his heart.

Elrond could not very well lie to Legolas; he sincerely believed the archer's reasons were convoluted and complex, a morass of conflicting issues, among them his disappointment over Elrond's failure to make their relationship lawful and respectable. Yet, could Aearen separate this motive from the strong desire to return his brother to life? Nay, nor can he admit the unbalanced bond between us was a factor. Elrond decided that this was not the time to try and force such a realisation, but even as he opened his mouth to speak his apology and offer clarification, the sylvan shoved him hard in the chest and stepped back.
"So you agree with your sons, that I did this to claim a higher station for myself." Legolas didn't know whether to scream or dissolve into despairing tears, so he crossed his arms tight over his chest and glared.

"Nay, Aearen, I have never thought you capable of duplicity. Please, let me explain." Elrond hastened to placate him, determinedly unfolding the shielding arms, re-establishing his hold to keep Legolas fast. "I remember all you said about Galbreth but you didn't disclose why you chose that day out of all others nor why you did not speak to me of your strong desire to have this child."

"I told you why I couldn't," mourned Legolas. He didn't make any effort to get free, finding the source of his anxiety was also the only remedy for his pain. In truth, he was feeling anew the guilt for what he'd done and dearly wanted absolution. Subtly he shifted closer again. "I would have gone from here without ever telling you if it came to it; I never wanted to force you to anything you didn't really desire."

"I understand, but was it not my right to know of my fourth child? I grasp why you believed I might shun you and our babe, but I haven't. I could never renounce my own flesh and blood nor could I bear to be parted from you; I hope you accept that now." Elrond sighed and squeezed his young mate's arm tighter. "I'll never be pleased that you were so cruelly poisoned, yet I'm glad events forced the pregnancy's revelation. This is a serious undertaking and not one you can achieve alone. I cannot bear to consider what would transpire if you left me. Aearen, I might have lost you both; indeed, it is likely you would not have survived the crossing to Aman."

"Nay, I would have made it there; I'm strong enough. Yet you should have taken part in such an important decision. I'm sorry I didn't beg permission first." Legolas buried his face in the slightly sticky folds of opulent velvet as he returned to the comforting press of his mate's body against his. "I wanted to but if you had refused then how could I fulfil my vow to Námo? I couldn't take that chance. Can you forgive me?"

"Of course, beloved, set aside your remorse now and let the joy our babe gives you fill your spirit instead." Elrond smiled, his heart brimming with tender compassion as he held Legolas close. He felt a deep breath enter and leave his troubled Wood Elf and then the lean frame relaxed against him. He indulged in a gentle caress over the messy hair and down the mud-splattered back, his grin growing as he heard the softest trill in Legolas' vocal repertoire, the one that signalled his need for gentle but vigorous nurturing, waft through the air. Elrond let one hand wander lower until it was gently kneading the archer's firm round posterior.

"You haven't explained why you picked that day," he said quietly, lips pressed against a blushing ear. "Why that time instead of earlier or later? I should have asked you but instead I just fell into my old ways, concluding that what I thought must be so. Can you understand how it was in my mind? Your voice was silenced by the shame of being my bond-slave while I was behaving like an arrogant idiot. I felt you had no choice but to act in order to salvage your honour and fulfil the obligation to your deceased brother."

This gave Legolas pause for it was true, though it was evident Elrond believed the desire to remove the shame of being a bond-slave was as much a motive for the conception as his brother's rebirth. With reluctance he straightened up and put enough distance between them to watch Elrond's eyes comfortably. "Aye, some of what you say is correct, but not the part about reclaiming my honour by making a child. I would never debase the sacred gift of life by using it to gain power and prestige."

"No, I didn't mean that," interrupted Elrond sternly. "Let this subject be resolved once and for all. I do believe you felt compelled to act without my consent, but I understand why you couldn't speak of it. I am at fault, Aearen, not you. That is what I shall say to anyone crude enough to ask about the
timing of Tinu Mín's conception. Now, tell me the rest. Why did you choose the day of the fountain instead of any other?"

Legolas blinked back a sudden influx of tears, for the forceful resolve behind this declaration brought his soul to a state of almost unbearable joy. He clutched tighter to the plush fabric and sought to burrow closer to the heart that held his. "I did not want to deceive you, but the days passed and you never spoke of marriage while I could not. What I have never told you is that I have been waiting and watching for the signs since the very day of Galbreth's death. I could only hope you would honour our bond before those portents arose, yet it was not to be."

"Signs? What sort of signs, Legolas?"

"It is something from the most ancient days of my people," Legolas explained. "We had no way of understanding death when our very nature cries out against it. We have always recognised that our kin persisted in spirit even after the body was destroyed. It has also always been known that in such an unhoused state the soul is vulnerable to capture by evil shadows." Legolas shuddered. "There are tales of darkness consuming these unfortunate ones, destroying forever who they had been and what they had been. We don't like to talk of those lost so long ago. The solution seemed to be to provide a new body as quickly as possible and so it has been among the sylvans since those first days.

"When the parents are still living, no sanction is required; it is their right to recreate their child and none would dare say otherwise. If the parents are no longer alive other relatives may undertake the reincarnation, again without any need for approval from Iluvatar and the Powers. In a case like mine, where I directly caused my brother's demise, permission must be granted for my parents are hale and hearty. I was waiting to learn if my pleas would be heard and the answer favourable. I could not bear for my Ada and Nana to learn of what I had done until I could also offer the promise of returning their son to them. That I survived the attack by bonding I took as the first sign that it would be so."

"I see." Elrond found the explanation fascinating, for there was much lore here of which he had been unaware for all these long centuries of time. He smiled gently, thinking again what a wonder it was to have this unique Elf for his own, and cautiously drew Legolas from the fold of his arms so to meet his gaze, for he had something serious to say. "My lack of enthusiasm for formalising our union must have been viewed as a negative indication."

"Nay, you could not have known all this."

"True, but I could have easily remedied my ignorance by talking with you. I should have inquired about sylvan customs regarding death and rebirth; indeed, I should have asked about the customs surrounding our emergency bonding. I didn't even realise you had any living kin in Mirkwood. I was afraid; I didn't expect to fall in love with you and didn't know what to do when it happened."

"It is in the past," Legolas answered, "let us leave it there."

"As long as you have forgiven my haughty disregard, I am content to do that."

"I have." Legolas smiled. "How could I not when you've pardoned me for making life without your consent?"

Elrond smiled and freed one hand, running it lovingly, possessively, protectively over the barely detectable curve of his mate's middle. "I admit I wasn't thinking of having another child, yet I find
myself delighted to be a father again and even more pleased to know the infant's birth will ease a
terrible burden upon your soul." Elrond leaned in and kissed lips dusted with the saline residue of the
tantrum's frantic tears. It made him aware of all the times he had tasted the evidence of Legolas'
sorrows and failed to determine the cause. "Aearen, I have many regrets concerning our time
together but none of them reflect upon you. Indeed, I admire your strength and determination to hold
true to your vow. You really meant to go to Aman and raise our babe there, alone if need be. Tell me
the rest now; what signs convinced you to proceed in the face of my ongoing denial?"

Legolas was silent for a few moments, gathering both his thoughts and his courage. He didn't like
revealing these heartaches, wanting the time of tears and dread done with forever. He sighed and
shimmied back into the solace of their embrace, pressing his ear against the broad Noldorin chest
where the steady rhythm of Elrond's heart soothed him. He felt a squeeze compress his sides and the
quick pressure of lips against his crown. At last he spoke.

"There was often war between my heart and mind. When we were alone together I had no doubts of
your love for me; I could see it in your eyes, hear it in your words, and feel it in your touch just as I
do now. Yet apart from you I was accosted by so many voices telling me I was nothing to you.
Sometimes I believed them, sometimes I held true to my heart's counsel." The arms around him
tightened their hold and a rush of whispered entreaties for forgiveness washed over his ear
accompanied by soft nuzzling of his hair and neck. Legolas shivered and returned the embrace.

"Nay, be at peace. If I did not believe in your heart's commitment, I could never have created life, no
matter the promises I'd made. Whatever misgivings my thoughts have manufactured, my heart has
always been unshakeable and true, Elrond. As for the rest, the omen came as the trees slept in in the
deeps of Rhîw at this year's very beginning. A visiting star entered the sky, arising behind
Menelmacar and crossing from east to west through the heavens. For ten days the star grew brighter
and blazed with a bright banner tail. On the tenth day, it stood still, poised above the head of the
Hunter. Thereafter it decreased until I saw it no more.

"Menelmacar is the constellation under which Galbreth was conceived and the visiting star was there
then, too, according to my parents. I was forced to make a decision. Either I must ignore the rede and
deny my brother new life or proceed and defy the custom of both my people and yours. I didn't
know what to do and was afraid to confide in you.

"How could I negate my word to Galbreth and all the Valar? I cannot recall how many times I
promised to do anything asked if only he might live again. Though you had never spoken of
marriage, I believed you had come to love me, at least a little bit. I reasoned that it would be more
wrong to prove false to my vow than to fly against the mores of our people. I...I seduced you and
together we created Tinu Mín." Legolas concluded his confession and inhaled a deep breath, glad to
have it all out in the open at last.

"Be at peace," crooned Elrond, deeply moved by the turmoil his beloved Wood Elf had undergone
all alone. "You did not seduce me, or if so then it was a most welcome temptation. I saw the star, too.
Among my people it is called Gil Adonnen, for the old tales say it first appeared to herald the rebirth
of Luthien and Beren. It has come many times to our skies and returns every 1200 years. Each time I
witness its arrival I anticipate momentous events. Sometimes my expectations hold true and other
times the star just comes and goes without incident. This particular occurrence is significant indeed,
wouldn't you agree?"

Legolas pulled back, a slight frown marring his features, and studied his mate's pleased visage. "So
then, it is not Galbreth's star? My Naneth told Galbreth it was his star."

"And so it is," agreed the Elven Lord with magnanimity. "It is a very old star and must have foretold
the conception of many Elves. Why not your brother's and Tinu Mîn's?"

"Well, that is not exactly the same," complained Legolas. "I was led to believe it was only for
Galbreth. This means I misunderstood the signs. Perhaps he is not meant to be reborn now."

"Nay, don't start doubting yourself," cautioned Elrond. " Haven't you already stated the importance of
quickly ensuring a new body for the unhoused soul? The star came for your brother's conception and
returned for our babe's; that is very clear. Could you have endured another 1200 years without easing
this burden, never seeing your family?"

"No, I can't even imagine that long a time passing much less living through it with this sin weighing
upon me," Legolas averred.

Elrond stifled his chuckle over this admitted lack of comprehension regarding time from an immortal
perspective, a clear indication of just how few in number the archer's years were. Such loss was
obviously too serious a topic for mirth and more so for Legolas, else he would not still refer to his
mistake with so severe a term, but the remark did cause Elrond to wonder something else. "What of
you, Aearen? When is your Begetting Day?"

"It is the first day of Ethuil."

"Really? That is quite a coincidence," remarked the Lord of Imladris in surprise.

"How so?"

"It is my Begetting Day as well as my twin brother Elros', though he chose the Gift of Men and has
left this world long Ages past."

The lovers stared at one another, taking this in, smiling warmly for this seemed to them both, learned
Lore Master and humble warrior alike, an indication that their union was indeed ordained from the
very beginning. In silent accord they drew together and kissed, the press of lips quickly evolving into
the thrilling entanglement of tongues. Once they separated, they set forth once more, hand in hand,
heading with greater urgency toward the grotto and its misty pool.

They arrived to find all that might be required for a thorough cleansing was awaiting them, for
Erestor had expected this to be their destination and thoughtfully ordered a basket of toiletries and
another of clean garments to be carried there. Atop the hamper of clothes a soft woollen blanket lay
folded.

"Someone has anticipated our needs," remarked Elrond with a grin. He halted and took up one
basket as Legolas grasped the other and they hurried forward, laughing a little. Once within the
sheltered glade they found the falls and the chimes as peaceful as ever and there within the water a
bottle of wine lay chilling. Two glassed and a covered tray stood ready upon the bank nearby. "It
seems we are expected to celebrate."

"That can only mean there is good cause for us to do so," enthused Legolas and he gave an exultant
whoop of pure relief as he spun a quick pirouette with his basket. "The Council must have voted to
support you!" he shouted and plunked the hamper down. He snatched Elrond's away and tossed it
carelessly aside as well, catching up the noble lord's hands to twirl him round in a dance of glee.

"I believe it must be so," agreed Elrond, just as pleased and relieved. He stilled their capering feet by
pulling firmly on the fingers clasping his, drawing Legolas up sharp against him for another lingering
oral exploration. He moaned softly, a sound filled with longing, his tongue proprietary and
demanding as it curled hungrily around his mate's. Without consciously ordering them to do so, his
hands framed the sylvan's jaw and slithered appreciatively up amid the tangled hair, there to search for the sensitive tips of pointed ears. With just the faintest pressure, Elrond traced over the pinnacles, smiling as he felt a deep shiver run through the svelte body leaning into his, triumphant as a single, low, fractious wail moved through Legolas' vocal chords.

Elrond disengaged from the enticing lips in order to sample the throat from whence that unbelievably erotic sound arose, nipping and lapping at the pulse now thumping wildly beneath the supple skin. Unable to restrain a short grunt of delight as Legolas' fingers worked their way into his hair, he let his own hands do as they wished, which was to begin undressing the Wood Elf. He was impatient and hastily pulled and jerked to get the tunic off, scarcely pausing to enjoy the sight of each bit of naked flesh as it was uncovered. He wanted all of Legolas bared before him, now, ready for whatever Elrond decided to do. Abruptly he knelt, dragging the archer down to his knees also, and then pushed him back upon his elbows in the mossy turf. Elrond grabbed the waist of the leggings and in one swift yank off they came, for Legolas was wearing them loosely tied over his expanding belly.

"Ai!" he called out in surprise and that drew Elrond's attention to his face, if but for a moment. The Wood Elf was staring, all wide-eyed and open-mouthed and red-cheeked with astonishment at the speed with which this seduction was progressing. It made Elrond smile and he loomed over the prostrate form to claim another deeply satisfying kiss from the parted lips, black hair cascading down around the fair face, draping over smooth apricot flesh growing rosier by the second. Their mouths parted silently and he heard Legolas drag in a deep lungful of air. It was quickly exhaled in a forceful gasp as Elrond flicked the tip of his tongue against a ruddy, peaked nipple. He glanced up to find Legolas watching him avidly and set about teasing the enticing little nodes, lapping and sucking, nipping and tugging, back and forth between the twinned maroon points until they were wet with saliva and Legolas was trembling all over.

"Liked that, did you?" whispered Elrond smugly. He was rewarded with a verily evil grin as his sylvan archer suddenly caught him in a strangle hold and twisted him over. He lifted his eyes to find Legolas hovering above him and smiled, hands sliding up the strong sinewy arms and over shoulders made broad by wielding the bow. He let his palms slide casually down the firm pectorals and settled his thumbs over the protruding nipples, pressing in hard. Legolas grunted and his head tipped back as he pushed against the pressure, shuddering when the contact disappeared. "Well, did you?"

"Ah! You will soon discover how much I liked it," said Legolas, eyes hooded as he cast his gaze hungrily over Elrond's fully-clothed body. Rather than begin stripping away the barrier of velvet and silk, as he was sure Elrond believed he would, Legolas decided to go for the ears instead. He straddled the Elven Lord's chest and bent down, verily pouncing on the pointed tips protruding from the lengthy onyx mane. He massaged them slowly, deliberately, thoroughly and soon had Elrond moaning in appreciation. "Does this please you?" he asked with a poorly smothered giggle.

"Yes, yes," sighed Elrond, "but I would like it more if you used your delicate and sensitive lips instead of your talented and lethal fingers."

"Oh? So then I should stop what I'm doing now?" teased Legolas.

"Only if you plan to do it again with your mouth, yes," pleaded Elrond, finding his own digits inexplicably buried in the golden hair fluttering around the naked torso poised above him.

He caught his breath as Legolas shimmied forward a bit, purposely pivoting his pelvis to make his erect penis bob and duck. Elrond waited, eyes appreciatively taking in the trimly muscled chest and its ruby buds, the shallow hollow of the navel, and the jutting column of engorged flesh resting atop his stomach, mesmerised by the way everything moved in such lovely rippling waves in time with every breath the Wood Elf took. He waited for Legolas' next effort, but nothing else happened for
what suddenly seemed like an awful long time. Elrond returned his eyes to study the face above him, opening his mouth in preparation to do a bit of coaxing, and at once found his tongue captured in a commanding suction that made his thoughts evaporate.

He emitted a muffled yelp and struggled briefly to regain control of the kiss but it ended abruptly with a loud smack. Before he could respond in kind, he was nearly smothered by the archer's hot, heaving chest as Legolas at last leaned closer and took one ear between his lips, tonguing the sensitive point lavishly. Elrond whimpered into the warm skin, licking whatever was closest to his mouth, inhaling the scent of honeysuckle and clay that inundated his senses. Hands flitted about searching for sensitive zones to rub and press, one settling on the pleasing swell of Legolas' arse and the other enclosing his rigid shaft, squeezing just enough to make the younger Elf twitch in anticipation.

Legolas shifted to the other ear, managing to make his nipple align with Elrond's lips so that the tightly pointed flesh brushed them softly. As he'd hoped, the hard red bud was instantly engulfed by warm wet heat and teeth connected with exactly the right amount of bite to make the pain delicious. The hand gripping his cock started pumping in earnest. He moaned against the ear and mimicked the attention he received, sighing as he was suckled and then licked, bitten, and then kissed, squeezed and then fondled in the most delightful ways. He was quickly losing focus, too absorbed in the tantalising stimulation, and before he even realised what was happening found himself roughly cast over and tackled. He lay staring up in disbelief, not altogether displeased, into the triumphant leer of the noble Lord.

"Liked that, did you?" snickered Elrond.

"Aye," sighed Legolas, ready to yield.

The sylvan's desire to capitulate was evident and since he had him down again, Elrond decided to take him at once. He parted the long legs, hastily throwing open his robes and undoing his pants, one hand drawing out his cock as the other probed the moist heat from the sylvan's vaginal opening. He could not drag his sight from the exposed genitals between Legolas' outspread limbs: the slender penis ready, rigid, and scarlet; the scrotum pulled up tight at its base, hugging the paired glands within while revealing the dark red slit below. Elrond smeared his fingers over the slickened skin, parting the lips redolent with desire, inhaling the scent from the aroused flesh. It was a pause of mere seconds as he crouched forward, his penis twitching as its tip encountered the heat of the cavity and plunged in.

"Ah, Legolas!" he called, pumping vigorously, gripping the slender hips. He lifted his eyes to meet his mate's and finding them wide with exuberant passion laughed aloud, thrusting hard at the perfect angle. The result was most gratifying, for Legolas jerked and twisted beneath him, knees falling open to either side, hands grappling with the springy moss as his back arched and his eyes sealed shut, transformed into this decadently writhing creature by absolute pleasure.

Elrond worked to keep the degree of penetration exact, the force of each invasion precise, the length of each stroke perfect to ensure Legolas would remain in this state of elevated ecstasy. Usually it was he who succumbed to the thrill of coupling first but this time he wanted to watch as his beloved dissolved into the throes of orgasm. He shifted forward the slightest bit and steadied the quivering thighs, pressing them down, opening them wider, giving a mighty shove that raised a loud slap as their bodies connected. A plaintive, urgent cry slipped from Legolas soul and Elrond duplicated the manoeuvre.

"Elrond!" the Wood Elf called the name, a swift gasp as he tried to steady his breathing and adjust to the sublime tension building in his groin. He struggled to get his hand to co-operate and reach for his
cock, but the pounding intensity of the Noldo Lord's lusty onslaught kept disrupting such commands. Besides, he needed his hands where they were, pressed hard against the ground, keeping him from sliding roughly over the ferns and into the less comfy rocks around the pool. He managed to pry his eyelids open and focused on Elrond's eyes, staring at the glittering, avaricious craving displayed there. "Ai, saes!" he managed to huff out in an imploring rasp before a particularly potent lunge sent another cascade of blinding sparks dancing through his soul.

"I know what you want," Elrond growled, the words pitched in seductive tones that rippled through Legolas' body in a shuddering wave. "Yet I will not touch you." He had to pause for air, gulping in three huge breaths before continuing. "You don't need it, not so much as a whisper of touch shall brush your cock, Aearen. Just feel me moving in you; just feel."

Legolas whimpered, unable to reply, unable to say that he was submerged in feeling, aware of the engorged penis spearing him, pressing against the erotic core of his being, the centre of his delight, stroking him with intimate friction that warmed his heart and set his body ablaze with a frenzy of desire. It was too much and not enough. His cock tingled, frantic little spasms coursing through it every time Elrond's belly managed to drag over its seeping tip. Just once more and he would be lost to everything. Just once more and he would give in. At last it happened and Legolas let go, his seed quickly jetting free as his heart gave vent to a soft cry of gratification.

He lay shivering in the aftermath, content and spent, vaguely aware of Elrond withdrawing. He smiled, hearing the Elven Lord quietly praising him, thanking him; then the muted rustling of clothes being discarded. He felt the warmth of naked skin as his mate lay beside him, the press of lips imprinted a line from his stomach up to his chest where a wet tongue lapped at his nipples. That made him tremble anew and he sighed, opening eyes he had forgotten were closed so bright was the glory of their love. Legolas grinned into Elrond's equally beaming face. "You should do that more often."

Elrond laughed brightly, his smile composed of every ounce of love he held in his heart for this uniquely magnificent Elf. He stole a quick kiss and settled close beside his mate, propped on an elbow so to take in every nuance of satisfied, languid joy radiating from Legolas. "Then so it shall be. Besides, we're just beginning." Legolas reached up to touch his face and he leaned into the contact, finding his heart pounding with desire and adoration combined.

"I am so in love with you," whispered the Wood Elf, "that it frightens me sometimes. If anything should happen, if we can't stay together, I would…"

"Hush," admonished Elrond, making it so with another kiss, this one gentle but authoritative: Legolas must trust him to look after him and the child. "Nothing like that is going to happen, beloved."

"But Mithrandir said…"

"That I would not be sent away to war. Enough, I will not permit you to be taken from me by anyone, not even the Valar or Eru himself. Come on, you fat and lazy slug, that hair is simply too dirty for words." Elrond interrupted Legolas' fears by hoisting him up in his arms and running for the pool amid the sylvan's garbled exclamations of protest. Once at the water's edge, the Lord of Imladris leaped into the cool liquid, tucking his knees in so that they were submerged in the flow for a few seconds and came up laughing and coughing all at the same time.

"Ai! You are terrible!" scolded Legolas, grinning with delight as he held on, arms wrapped around Elrond's neck. "What now? You've left all the soap and lotions over there in the basket." He disengaged an arm to point and was turned round as Elrond followed the motion.
"Oh, so you think I should go and get the soap?" demanded the Lore Master severely.

"Yes, since you are the one who insisted on jumping into the water without it."

"So be it. Anything to please you, my love." Elrond shrugged and as he did so managed to toss Legolas out into the centre of the falling water. He was already fleeing when the splash hit him, laughing as he heard more water-logged shouts and the sound of a pursuing Wood Elf sloshing through the spray.

So it went. Elrond washed Legolas' hair thoroughly and carefully, fucking him anally after the final rinse, propping him against the rim of the pool for support. Then he had to make certain every speck of clay was cleaned from the sylvan's delicate skin, claiming some properties of the gritty mud might cause a reaction similar to the cinnamon poisoning. While he was doing that, Legolas sucked him off. Then it was Legolas' turn to wash his hair and Elrond needed no other stimulation at all to experience another orgasm, and since he was so pleased with that he wished to return the favour, devouring the Wood Elf's cock and wringing another of those warbling cries of abandon that were so rare and oh so cherished. By then Legolas was close to exhaustion and Elrond decided he needed to eat to keep up his strength, and of course they shared the bottle of wine between them. When the sun was just beginning to set, the couple were finally stretched out on the blanket, Legolas slumbering peacefully in Elrond's arms.

Elrond watched the final beams of Anor's light play among the falling drops of water, a shimmering rainbow gracing the fine veil of liquid as it sang its soporific song, and thought it would be fine to remain in the glade all night. He knew this idea would meet with Legolas' approval and so did not wake him to ask, training his gaze again upon the lanky figure cuddled beside him. He grinned and let a soft chuckle pass his lips; Legolas slept all curled up, one leg crossed around the other and one hand tucked beneath his chin. Elrond found it endearing, especially since the other leg was sandwiched between his and the other hand was flung loosely across his hip. He leaned over and kissed the elbow there, wondering if he should send for more food for later when Legolas awakened but decided against it. He would gather some berries and perhaps catch a fish or two; they would be fine.

Of course, everyone in the household would wonder why they had not returned but he hoped Erestor would have enough sense to leave them alone. No sooner had he let the notion enter his mind than the seneschal's tell-tale throat-clearing introductory cough signalled his arrival at the grotto's boundaries.

Silently Elrond cursed his kinsman and carefully disengaged from his tangled embrace of Legolas, hoping his mate would remain asleep, yet it was not to be. The sylvan stirred and blinked at him blearily, reaching for him, so Elrond kissed him and gathered him back in his arms. "I'm sorry I woke you. Erestor has arrived; let me go see what he wants and I'll be right back. We're to spend the night here, if that's well with you," he said quietly to prevent his cousin from eavesdropping. Sudden alarm pierced that thought as he wondered just how long Erestor had been there, but he let it slip away as he gazed into the dream-cast azure eyes smiling up at him.

"Aye, 'tis well with me. Hurry." murmured Legolas, lapsing almost instantly back into deep reverie.

Elrond could only watch him for a moment, unwilling to take his eyes from the sight. Every time they coupled it filled him with wonder, for Legolas gave every ounce of his soul into his mate's safekeeping, all the while opening his heart to shelter and protect Elrond's, and between them their love nurtured the bond that protected their babe. Another hesitant cough disrupted his serene contemplation and he scowled, rising and taking up the soft white robe from the basket. If not for Legolas' sake, Erestor would have had to suffer a severe and lengthy reprimand, but Elrond didn't
want any sort of hostile emanations to disturb him. He cinched the robe tight and walked carefully out into the flower-dotted meadow, prepared to confront his cousin, but Erestor's words drove the remarks from his senses.

"I am sorry to intrude, but there is something vital I need to tell you. The Wood Elves have arrived," Erestor blurted out quickly, fully cognisant of his Lord's displeasure. The effect was dramatic, for Elrond's mouth actually dropped open for a second or two.

"What?" he managed to hiss in disbelief. It took a couple more tries before he could get anything more sensible to make it past his complete shock. Then he glared. "That is not possible. Legolas himself said they are five days out. Erestor, there better be a valid reason for this interruption because I don't find such jokes funny in the least."

"It is not a jest," Erestor answered in affronted tones of wounded pride. "I would never try to prevent you from enjoying a quiet evening with your mate." His cheeks suddenly bloomed with chagrin for he had indeed done that very thing on innumerable occasions in the past. Elrond's deepening glower revealed he had not forgotten this, either. "I mean, a messenger from the Woodland Realm is waiting in your office, otherwise I would not have bothered you."

"I see." Elrond's brow puckered and he chewed his lower lip, considering this unexpected situation. "Did he say he needs to speak to me right now?"

"Well, no, but…"

"Exactly what did he say?"

"He announced that he is the herald for Legolas' family and arrived to ensure all is made ready for their imminent arrival."

"That doesn't sound so terribly urgent. Can't you make him comfortable in a nice suite of rooms, invite him to a sumptuous meal, escort him to the Hall of Fire to hear Glorfindel spin tales?"

"I … I suppose I…"

"Or perhaps Lindir could be cajoled into playing host to this messenger for the night. He is sylvan, after all, and mayhap he would like to spend time with one of his own people for a change of pace," Elrond continued, his tone thoughtful with just a touch of scathing sarcasm. For the first time, he was experiencing this situation from a point of view remarkably similar to Legolas' thoughts regarding emissaries from Gondor or Dol Amroth. "Surely there is someone, in all the mighty realm of Imladris, capable of interviewing and/or entertaining one lowly messenger from the Woodland Realm without having to bother me about it."

"I thought you would want to know," sniffed Erestor, displeased by the scornful note in his cousin's voice.

"Thank you," Elrond said with a magnanimous bow and overweening sufferance. "Please explain to this messenger that I am with Legolas and we are not to be disturbed. If he is offended by that, apologise on my behalf and tell him we will meet with him at dawn and break fast together. Ensure him that I am looking forward to greeting my beloved's kinfolk in due time and all shall be made ready according to their traditions and tastes."

"Yes, Lord Elrond," Erestor bowed in turn, careful to keep his tone, manner and every other aspect of himself absolutely formal and deferential. "If I may add, Hiren?"

"What is it now?" demanded and exasperated Elven Lord.
"This messenger announced himself as Fennas, Legolas' second cousin."

Elrond was quiet for a time, deliberating whether he should now reverse his pronouncement and wake his mate. Perhaps Legolas would wish to meet with his kinsman at once. He glanced over his shoulder toward the glen, frowning. Legolas was exhausted and needed rest, for his health and the babe's. Any kinfolk of his should be able to comprehend that simple fact and would not take umbrage at being made to wait. With that thought, Elrond nodded briskly.

"I will inform Legolas when he wakes, but tell Fennas not to expect us until dawn. As a way to honour our guest's arrival, have Mithrandir make some of those fireworks he so loves to show off. You may explain to Fennas about his cousins delicate condition if he seems to be insulted by my decision. Clear?"

"Yes, Elrond, I understand," muttered Erestor, a bit resentful to be treated like any common servant of the House but unwilling to test his kinsman's temper further. "Shall I have anything sent out for your evening repast?"

"That is most courteous of you to offer," Elrond smiled this time, feeling a little remorse for his harshness. "I would like to thank you for everything found in the glen. It was perfect."

Erestor smiled back. "Glad to hear it," he said and meant it. "He's all right, then?"

"Aye, we sorted everything out. He's very pleased to know the Council has not permanently unseated me. That was troubling him rather more than he'd admitted."

"I was going to talk to you about that; he seems to make a habit of hiding his worries for fear of adding to your burdens."

"Yes." Elrond's scowl returned, displeased to have Erestor, chief instigator of the contemptuous jests and unending obscene propositions Legolas had so long endured, take him to task for failing to alleviate his mate's anxieties. "I will be overturning that trait in the days ahead."

A chilly silence ensued and Erestor sighed, realising he'd overstepped his bounds again. It was irritating and rather hurtful, too, for the boundaries had changed so suddenly and he hadn't had a chance to adjust. Once boon companions as well as kinsmen, he and Elrond had been best friends so long that it was a shock to find himself secondary in the venerable Lord's life. Even during the marriage to Celebrian, their long-standing camaraderie had never altered, nor had there been any change during the first ten years of Legolas' residency in Imladris. Now, Elrond seemed not to understand that Erestor only had his best interests in mind. Well, perhaps it's true he has reason to doubt me. The Chief Advisor shifted uneasily and stuffed his hands into the deep pockets of his robes. Elrond remained motionless, arms crossed before him, brows arched in query, verily daring him to bring up any other news or offer any more advise.

"Well, I should return with your tidings to Fennas of the Woodland Realm," he said and gave a dip of his head in farewell. "Until tomorrow, then."

Elrond nodded and turned back to the grotto, quite pleased with himself for recognising and subduing two of Legolas' fundamental pet peeves concerning their relationship. He'd shown Erestor his place quite firmly and for the first time had put his young mate before any duty of state of demand of Lordship. He was tempted to wake Legolas and tell him about it, but that would spoil things. Humming a complacently pleased tune, the Elven Lord strutted into the sheltered glen, shed his long white robe, and settled back into the comforting contortions of Legolas' embrace, prepared to enjoy the next few hours just watching his beloved Aearen sleep, blissfully unaware that he had just made a serious error in judgement.
Puig ar Lim: Clean and Clear
Rhiw: Winter
Menelmacar: sky swordsman - the constellation Orion (the Hunter) Gîl Adonnen: Star of Rebirth
Fennas: Doorway
Tinu Mîn: our little star

NOTE: Whew! This is hard work! So much I need to cover. I guess it is pretty obvious this is going to run more than 20 chapters. I know everyone is probably groaning and gnashing their teeth, or perhaps cursing me out loud and thumping the wall in frustration. Please forgive me for that cliff-hanger! I had to stop there for now. Please believe me it will be worth it in the long run. The reason why it's taking longer now? I am still without a permanent home (as if I ever had one, but you know what I mean - four walls and a roof with a lock and a key) but at least there is a job so hopefully I will save enough to get the place soon. And it was my birthday, which I spent trying to finish this up, and this is as far as I got.

In the meantime, I have found a 24 hour Kinkos copy centre where I can pop in and type at any hour day or night, though I can't get on the internet for free there. For that, I go to my son's apartment, but he is out of town this week on spring break from school. I can still sit outside the building and pick up his signal, though, so this post is coming to you from my car on Hemlock Street in Ventura, CA. I have joined the Y so I can work out and get back in shape, which may sound like it has nothing to do with writing but I've found it has everything to do with motivation. So, I am developing a routine that I can function within and as long as my car holds up all will be well.

As it stands, I hope the chapter was good. We have one of Legolas' kin showing up ahead of the main group, something Elrond might have expected had he been thinking about that sort of thing, but he was a little distracted today. I went ahead and dealt with Legolas' reasons for deciding to have a child out of wedlock and hopefully handled his guilty conscience over it, with Elrond's help. As for the comet arising in the constellation Orion (Menelmacar) I just made that up, so don't go trying to figure out which actual comet this is supposed to be. Also, I have no idea when Elrond's conception day was and chose this at random. Forgive me these liberties; usually I try to research such details a bit more but internet is sketchy right now.

I am rather proud of Elrond these days, trying so hard to be a good mate and take care of Legolas, easing his worries and finally considering things from Legolas' perspective first. Unfortunately, his decision to make Fennas wait may backfire, but his heart was in the right place and that has to count for something. Still haven't decided if Legolas will wish to name the child after his brother or not. We'll wait and see what his Ada and Nana have to say about it all.

Finally, thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story. It is especially appreciated as I've recently had the same folks who periodically decide to rag on my stories, mainly Feud, go after Aearlinn. Makes all the fine folks reading and enjoying this along with me all the more wonderful, in my view. You guys are great and I'm having fun and so we shall continue!

© 03/31/2008 Ellen Robey (my birthday!)
"What in Arda…? Excuse me, but I must ask what you are doing here. This is a private area, sir."

Elrond's new valet was shocked and nonplussed. He had just come to lay out the Lord's garments for
the morrow only to find the foreign Wood Elf traipsing about through Elrond's bedroom. He stared,
mouth open in complete disbelief; the sylvan messenger was rooting around in his master's clothes
press. This valet, one Faelon, previously Erestor's personal secretary until the exile of Figwit, was
incensed to say the least. None were permitted to disturb Elrond's belongings; not even his children
would dare do such a thing. Now this 'guest' was casually rifling through Legolas' possessions as
well. Faelon didn't know quite what to do; nothing like this had ever happened before in all the long
years he'd served the House of Eärendil.

"I must insist that you leave at once." He employed that tone he'd learned from Lord Erestor, the one
that combined absolute courtesy, dismissive authority, and infinitely disappointed censure.

"I will when I'm satisfied," replied the Wood Elf calmly, not even sparing a glance in the servant's
direction, obviously untroubled by being caught sneaking about his host's apartment.

"Satisfied as to what, exactly?" asked Faelon, increasing the note of rebuke and adding a dark
undertone of warning. "Perhaps it is customary to invade private dwellings in your homeland, but
here in Imladris we do not…"

"That is precisely what needs clarification: the way you Lechenn folk do things here in Imladris,"
snapped the Wood Elf, slicing the intervening space with glittering green eyes that swept over the
servant with notable scorn. "I'm investigating my cousin's circumstances." He was taking a very
thorough inventory of the objects in Legolas' trinket drawer and resumed the activity, frowning and
making 'tsking' noises with his tongue. "Foolish elfling," he muttered in irritation. This was Fennas,
Legolas' second cousin, of course.

Faelon's mouth wobbled open and then pursed shut in a display of impotent fury. He had been under
the impression that this was just a messenger from Mirkwood, but there was no mistaking that
haughty, scoffing manner. Erestor may have called him a messenger but he presented and behaved
more like (indeed, he even shares the same name as) one of the valley's noble lords. Faelon
wondered briefly what it was about being called 'Fennas' that prompted such an exalted self-opinion.
Before he could think up any reply to make that would return command of the situation to him,
which had been his for all of perhaps five seconds, the Elf rounded on him.

"You are the valet for Lord Elrond and his mate, are you not?" he asked, eyeing the flummoxed
servant archly, evaluating what sort of information he might be able to get him to unwittingly reveal.
He assumed his most indignant demeanour and raised himself to his most severely unyielding and
not inconsiderable height, so to peer down his long aquiline nose at the hapless retainer.
"I am." Faelon straightened up his spine to match the rigid stance, but was woefully short by at least half a hand's width and thus it merely seemed that he was correcting himself after being caught by his betters in a momentary lapse of respectful posture.

"Then please explain to me why Legolas has absolutely no undergarments. They can hardly all be out for laundering. For what reason have you permitted my kinsman, admittedly a somewhat reckless youth, to fall into such a reprehensible practice as going around improperly clothed?" Fennas voice was sharp and blistering and his emerald eyes glared in affronted condemnation.

"I beg your pardon," said Faelon crisply and with a half bow, flushing scarlet to the roots of his long brown hair. "I have only recently been promoted to this position. The previous valet is responsible for the disgrace of which you speak and has been banished for his atrocious behaviour."

Fennas' brows rose in surprised fascination. "That punishment seems a bit severe for failing to provide clean underwear. Is Lord Elrond always so drastic in his measures?"

"What? No, certainly not! Lord Elrond is above all fair and lenient in his rulings. Oh! Oh, I see." Faelon suddenly comprehended the misunderstanding. "You have not heard of the poisoning incident that occurred here some weeks ago. Since then, Legolas is not fond of undergarments and Lord Elrond indulges his every whim. If Legolas does not choose to wear them, none can gainsay the decision," explained Faelon.

"Poisoning?" Fennas' voice boomed as he shut the trinket drawer with a smart rap. "Are you telling me someone here poisoned my cousin?" What that had to do with the dearth of small clothes he couldn't fathom, but he would find out. He advanced quickly upon Faelon and stood looming over the valet, mildly impressed when the Noldorin servant did not back down and met his eye bravely.

"Yes, I'm sorry to say that is a fact. There has been some resistance to Lord Elrond's choice for a new mate, but that is all in the past. Just yesterday, the Council voted to approve the marriage and support Lord Elrond's continued leadership of our realm. We were all surprised by the pregnancy, of course, but few would wish to impart any sort of burden upon the life-giver or the growing babe, sylvan or not."

"How gracious of you good people," sneered Fennas. He was sick at heart to have learned how low his King's youngest son had fallen and could only blame the company he'd been forced to keep. He moved back to Legolas' wardrobe and with a sweep of his hand indicated the amount of space within it. "Is there a connection between the absence of underwear and the poisoning?" he demanded.

Faelon told him; he didn't know what else to do, feeling it was the Elf's right to know as he was blood kin to Legolas. He rather wished the foreign Elf did not look like he was ready to kill something, however, but Faelon held his ground with all the dignity he could pretend to have.

"…and that is why Elrond banished the culprits, you see," he concluded. "No one in Imladris has ever done anything so cruel, at least not in my reckoning. Personally, I have always found Legolas to be inoffensive and congenial and, by all accounts, a superb warrior. He dotes on our Lord and anyone with eyes can see it; Figwit was jealous, that's the plain truth of it. I know for a fact he attempted to court Legolas and was refused." The valet was uncomfortably aware that he was babbling, and also unpleasantly cognisant of a film of sweat gathering upon his skin. Simultaneously, he dearly wished the messenger would say something while dreading what that might turn out to be. When the response came, it was surprisingly controlled if icily delivered:

"I see. Deplorable, shameful conduct! Banishment was too mild a sentence," snarled Fennas. He felt a surge of compassion for his cousin. On principle, he presented a vaguely disapproving front to Legolas in hopes of encouraging him to be more mindful of the influence his actions carried among
the folk of the woods, but that did not mean he held his young kinsman in contempt or wished him any harm. In fact, Fennas considered himself the single most important source of counsel and guidance in Legolas' life for the bulk of the family just let him do as he pleased.

"I entirely agree with you, sir," said Faelon with real feeling. He offered a conciliatory smile that was ignored.

"And what is the reason why he has so few clothes? Are they all like this?" Fennas went back on the attack, irritated by the servant's attempt to put himself on equal footing with an Elder of Greenwood, and pulled out the soft suede green tunic. He flapped it at Faelon accusingly. "These are the garments of a guardsman or a hunter. Has my cousin been relegated to the duties of a warrior to earn his keep?"

"Sir, I believe Legolas prefers that type of clothing and volunteered to serve in the patrols," Faelon replied, taking one step backwards toward the door. The foreign Elf followed.

"Why are there no formal articles here? Does Elrond refuse to have Legolas at his side during state functions? Is he ashamed of his mate because he's a Wood Elf?" Fennas was almost shouting now, his wish to gather information forgotten in the heat of his anger. This was no more than he'd expected but the evidence still set his blood boiling.

"I can't answer to that," blustered Faelon, faltering under this outraged interrogation, realising he'd said too much and all of it wrong. He wished he'd simply gone straight away and dragged Lord Erestor in to confront this foreigner. "Elrond loves Legolas completely; I have seen them together and can attest to it. As for your other concerns, I'd best let you consult with our seneschal." He backed away again, offering another half bow, and his silent prayers were answered. From out in the corridor a voice called him.

"Faelon? Have you seen our guest, Fennas of the Woodland Realm? Ah, I see you have found him." It was in fact Erestor and of course he knew he would find the visitor here because no one in the house could fail to hear the strident, unpleasant words the Elf flung through the quiet evening air. The seneschal sent the messenger a cool and cheerless smile as he stepped into the room. "Thank you, Faelon, I will escort Fennas back to the public areas of the Last Homely House."

Faelon bowed his way out as quickly as he could, shooting Erestor a grateful look that also managed to convey his regret for anything he may have said, or not said, that was in any way detrimental to his Lord or to Legolas. The Chief Advisor to the Lord of Imladris and the Elder of the Greenwood faced one another across the threshold of the bedroom door. Fennas matched Erestor's calculatingly aloof demeanour. The two opponents stood motionless and alert, appraising one another, their bodies still as their spirits circled, wolves vying for first taste of a fresh kill. Elrond's cousin stepped across the divide and spoke first.

"I regret that you find our hospitality is lacking, causing this rambling excursion into private quarters. Allow me to accompany you to the Hall of Fire, where Lindir is just getting to the best part of his recital."

"No, Lord Erestor. I've no wish to listen to more music or stories. Let me be direct; I don't waste time playing at pretty word games," Greenwood's emissary said bluntly. "Your assistance isn't necessary for I'm nearly done here. Unless, of course, you would care to answer the inquiries Elrond's valet felt inclined to side-step."

"Faelon merely hoped to practise discretion, an admirable and requisite quality for someone privy to all that is private in the relationship between Elrond and Legolas," answered Erestor smoothly, his chilly, condescending smile frozen upon his features. He'd dealt with folk like this Fennas before:
overconfident politicians so wrapped up in the notion of their own importance that they utterly failed to realise what a pompous fool they looked. "As to your queries, Faelon is correct about Lord Elrond's deep commitment to his new mate. Regarding clothing, I have noted that Legolas does not like formal garments or, indeed, affairs of state. He avoids such occasions almost passionately. Surely this is not a new characteristic?"

"Hmmm." said Fennas, frowning. "I deduce from your reluctance to answer the final question that I have hit very near the mark, even as I suspected. I warned Legolas' naneth that this would not be a respectable match for our House and so it proves. This bonding is a great tragedy for my people, and a very personal tragedy for the King and Queen." He was pleased to see that this made the snooty Noldorin noble's eyes widen just the tiniest increment and smirked unpleasantly.

"I was not aware Legolas enjoyed such distinction and favour," Erestor managed to say, taken aback by this inference of heretofore unexpected prestige. "Please, let us adjourn to the study. I am certain I can allay your fears on Legolas' behalf." He motioned to the door and stepped back to permit Fennas to exit first.

"Not aware? What did you imagine his status would be?" fumed Fennas and carried on without giving his opponent a chance to reply. "We believed him dead else we would have come for him at once, bond or no bond. Did you think his family would scorn him, disown him because of this unrecognised bond and its resultant pregnancy? Our customs forbid endorsing an unequal bonding, yet the heart cannot be denied. Even so, none would interfere unless the bond-slave made the decision to break with the bond-master and seek to cross the sea.

"Let me just tell you, Lord Erestor," Fennas pointed a long index finger at the seneschal, looking as if he wanted to jab him in the breast bone with it, "that no Wood Elf has ever been forced to take that step of self-banishment, for all bonds of extremity, from the beginning of existence, have been recognised formally. Until now, but that is no fault of Legolas'. He had no control over who came upon him that dreadful day nor over the ensuing degradation and debasement he has suffered. His relatives understand this. Humiliated, mortified, and appalled, yes, we will all suffer that, but now that the union is to be formally recognised we can embrace him, give him the guidance and comfort he so sorely requires."

"I see. Yet we sent a messenger to the Woodland Realm bearing word of his residency here. Was this news never received?" Erestor was confused and starting to experience a distinctly unpleasant, crawling-skin sort of apprehension.

"Your Noldorin courier," sneered Fennas, looking as though he wanted to spit, "brought news of the attack and the demise of all save one Elf, spared by the bond of extremity. No name was given. Would you like to hear the exact words of the letter? Indeed, you may read it for yourself; I have kept it all this time, for I never felt quite right about it and neither did my aunt."

It was not necessary for Erestor to peruse the note for he'd dictated it to Faelon all those years ago. He took the folded velum anyway, however, disbelieving he had done something so stupid as to leave off Legolas' name. Then again, until recently he'd never called Legolas by name, to his face or in reference, always using the euphemism 'The Sylvan' as if there was only one such Elf in all the world, for so it was in his world. He opened the note and glanced down the page, nodding, grimly disappointed in himself, as his words leaped out at him, stark, indifferent, and dismissive:

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'Let it be known to the inhabitants of the Woodland Realm that a party of warriors from their lands was attacked by Orcs upon the hilly plains of Eregion. All succumbed to the vile demons save one. The surviving archer is young, perhaps one or two hundred years in age, and stricken with poisoned wounds. He has only lived this long due to invoking a sylvan tradition regarding battlefield bonding.
If any of his people would care to travel to Imladris and aid him through his remaining days, such folk would be welcomed at our borders. The remains of the fallen have been cremated, the ashes buried on the hill where they perished. The few personal belongings found at the site are contained in the parcel accompanying this missive. The Lord of Imladris sends to the people of the Woodland Realm his deepest condolences on such a horrific loss.

Erestor's mouth felt dry and hot and he swallowed convulsively. He'd discounted Legolas from the start not just because he was a Wood Elf but because he looked so definitively sylvan, never wondering if he might belong to one of the Sindarin families that emigrated to Greenwood at the close of the First Age. The venerable advisor hated to admit he'd made a mistake, but there was no getting around it; there was a high probability that Legolas' people were counted among those few noble Sindarin families that journeyed east under the guidance and guardianship of Oropher. It was, after all, inevitable that intermarriage between the two branches of the Teleri tribe would occur over time; more so due to the horrific losses at the Last Alliance. These thoughts were interrupted by Fennas' insolent voice.

"Not very informative, is it? Most of the warriors on that mission were young archers between two and five hundred years, except for Galbreth, their captain, his lieutenants, and Legolas, by far the youngest with not even one hundred summers behind him yet. The journey was meant almost to be a holiday for them, a chance to escape the horrors of daily battle and strife that plague our folk. The young ones have never known a time of peace and the constant state of conflict, the need to be ever vigilant, wears upon their spirits. It was time to renew contact with the Havens and remind the humans that we still exist, and so off they went.

"I counselled Aran Thranduil against it, but he did not listen. My aunt had strong forebodings about the journey and tried to talk her sons out of going, or at least Legolas, but her husband sided with my cousins and nothing more could be done. Yet she never lost hope that Legolas was this sole survivor for none of the personal effects returned to us were his, save one small dagger. That knife was proof enough for his Adar, though, and it was such a shock for him to have lost both his sons that he fell into a decline. We thought he would fade, but his beloved wife-mate pulled him through. She never believed Legolas dead and watched daily for word from him. When years rolled by and none came, she realised the truth: if he was alive, he was bound in shame. Almost sent her into grief anew. Now he's with child and I shudder to think what her reaction will be. His Adar is not going to be easily appeased either, I assure you. Your Lord Elrond has sullied the honour of our House almost beyond recovery."

A horrifically profound silence followed this long speech, the absence of the Elder's voice creating a vacuum into which was drawn the weight of the offence so that the air was so heavy with it Erestor had difficulty breathing. His brain refused to assist him in supplying an answer to such serious charges and he could only imagine the result of his arrogance would be exile to Lindon. Why oh WHY hadn't he included Legolas' name in that confounded letter? Elrond was going to be furious. Erestor almost choked on the next breath as he gulped down a rising knot of doom and dismay, but at least the noisy hacking ended the sullen quietude.

"Fennas," he began once he could draw air for speech, "I can only offer my apologies and assurances that no slight upon your House was intended. Had we imagined for an instant that Legolas was of such high rank, my Lord would have sent word himself in his own hand revealing the situation."

Fennas eyed him sharply. "Legolas said nothing about his family?" he asked and snorted when Erestor nodded affirmation, a decided twinkle, a bright spark of devious delight, lighting his green eyes. Then he shook his head with a wry smile, though his tone when he spoke again was anything but mirthful. "Is that supposed to instil confidence in Elrond's moral perspective? You have just told
me, Lord Erestor, that your kinsman kept Legolas as his bond-slave because he didn't think he was worthy to stand by his side as an equal. I'm not surprised; when have the Lechenn ever accorded any respect for the sylvan people of the Greenwood? A humble archer from under the trees, why I imagine you thought Elrond was doing him a favour by taking him to his bed. This will hardly be a comfort to his parents."

Erestor visibly winced, but he could not deny the allegations. "I do not know what I can say in Elrond's defence, or mine, and so I will apologise again." He bowed deeply from the waist. "Elrond and I, in fact all of Imladris, are guilty of the prejudice you describe. We are learning; we no longer adhere to stereotypical descriptions of Wood Elves, due to Legolas' influence, and wish to establish a true accord with the folk of the Greenwood. I also regret that our message was so bereft of information, yet I must say that Legolas revealed no details about his people. We truly thought he had no kin left."

"Ah, but he wouldn't, would he, considering how shameful his status has been for the last ten years or so? I know him well and I can understand what was going through his mind: better to be thought dead and mourned in honour than to besmirch his House and all his relatives with his tarnished character. He is young, after all, and the weight of duty and responsibility are heavy to his spirit. Despite this fall from grace, he will come into his own in time, so let it be my solemn vow, and present the dignity and decorum his station demands."

"Of course," stuttered Erestor, stunned almost speechless even as he recalled those times when he'd felt something venerable and stately about the sylvan's aura, that sense of ancient presence so incongruous in such a young Elf. *It could also be described as the sort of condescending air the high-born adopt when confronted with lesser folk.* That Legolas might consider himself more eminent than either Elrond or Erestor would have been a ridiculous notion before this moment. Erestor recovered quickly from these worries and again indicated the study with a graceful sweep of his hand. "I do not doubt your estimation of Legolas' esteem and with your guidance he will surely shine as he grows in maturity and wisdom. If it pleases you, permit me to address your questions about his life here."

Fennas gave a short nod and entered the room with a distinctly smug and triumphant sniff. Erestor watched as he marched over to the the desk and began sorting through the documents on it without a lick of compunction. The seneschal hurried after for this bold intrusion into personal matters was unconscionable, Legolas' kinsman or not, and he was not about to allow it to go unchallenged. He gathered up the papers, none other than the latest set of architectural plans Legolas had produced for his talan, and rolled them up neatly. He was annoyed when this made the visitor laugh.

Now, as you may have already guessed, Fennas has figured out just how deep the Noldorin lords' ignorance runs. Perhaps it is a family trait or perhaps he wishes to abet his cousin's prank, but there can be no doubt that Fennas is going to stop just short of revealing who Legolas' parents are while pressing the issue of Elrond's dishonourable conduct, so to enhance the great Lord's mortification upon meeting the Sindarin ruler. It was all Fennas could do to keep from laughing himself to tears as he imagined the scene.

"My, my, quite protective of your Lord Elrond, aren't you Lord Erestor? But of course, you are his kinsman and so it is to be expected. It is right that cousins should support one another absolutely."

Fennas waved his hand at the obscured drawings. "I wonder if you have any idea what those are?"

Erestor set his lips firmly together and declined to answer, instead pulling out a chair in invitation for his guest to sit. It unnerved him even more when Fennas guffawed and settled himself in it, stretching his long legs forward and casually crossing one ankle over the other. The seneschal contained his displeasure and moved to a cabinet nearby, there procuring some of Elrond's private stock of
In silence he poured, the musical clink from the crystal decanter and the pleasant gurgle of the rich red liquid underscoring the tension he felt. Erestor decided to change his tactics, recognising that he, and Elrond more so, was now at a decided disadvantage and desperately needed all the information he could manage to squeeze out of the pretentious 'messenger'.

"Certainly they are plans for a dwelling, yet I see no other significance than that. Perhaps you might enlighten me?" he smiled, just a hint of embarrassment in the rearranged muscles, just the slightest quality of ingratiating apology in his tone. It worked. Fennas sipped his wine with a conceited little chortle, his eyes radiating how pleased he was to have shown the Noldorin official his proper place, or so it seemed to Erestor.

"I see no harm in it, as long as you are willing to do the same," he began. "Legolas is obviously attempting to prepare for the culmination of this disgraceful pregnancy. I must tell you frankly, nothing like this has ever happened in our House. EVER." He leaned forward, face taut with controlled repugnance. "There can be only one reason: he was coerced into conceiving, serving as little more than breeding stock for his illustrious bond-master," Fennas spat the words out, his temper again rising as he heard his own words, "who now wishes to legitimise his issue. It is unacceptable," he seethed, "and recompense shall have to be made."

"Recompense? Sir, be calm; I beg you. It is all a misunderstanding; the situation is not how it must look," pleaded Erestor, his countenance framed in anxious lines as he sank down dejectedly into his chair, all pretence gone. This was now a serious political issue. "Lord Elrond was unaware of the customs surrounding the kind of bond he and Legolas share, but I assure you he had no intention of bringing shame upon your House. Nor would he ever try to force anyone to bear his offspring. He didn't suspect Legolas was capable of bearing children; that took us all by surprise, I must say. Forgive me for being the one to tell you, but it was Legolas alone who made the decision to create this child. I believe it has to do with the death of his brother, Galbreth."

The name assailed Fennas with the weight of a felled oak and he visibly cringed, all the blood draining from his face as his eyes grew huge. A second later he regained his composure, though his demeanour was now subdued and sorrowful, all the snide arrogance gone. "I didn't realise… This changes things, Lord Erestor." Fennas stood abruptly, set his glass on the desk, and offered a respectful bow from the waist. "I must beg leave of your hospitality and return at once to my people. Legolas' parents must be informed of this development."

Erestor rose hastily, putting his wine aside as he followed the already retreating figure to the door. This wouldn't do; he'd learned absolutely nothing about who Legolas' people were and why his marriage would matter to the King of the Woodland Realm. "Forgive me, I had no idea this would alarm you so. Perhaps a messenger might carry the news just as well? Lord Elrond would be displeased to learn I failed to make you welcome."

"I thank you, but nay. I am Legolas' kinsman and thus Galbreth's. It is fitting for me to bear these tidings to my aunt and her mated husband. I beg you will make my apologies to Lord Elrond."

Suddenly Fennas stopped and turned to meet Erestor's gaze. "I must also beg your forgiveness, Lord Erestor, for the unseemly remarks I have made this night. I am at times somewhat protective of Legolas for he is the youngest of our House and unique in ways I am sure you have all come to understand. I did not know he had caused such sorrow, such despair…" Fennas' words trailed away, his expression stricken and his colour a sickly grey. He bowed with even stiffer formality and turned sharply on his heel, striding swiftly from the room and down the corridor.

Erestor followed, profoundly worried about this unfathomable reaction, for Elrond had never revealed to him the guilt Legolas harboured over Galbreth's loss. The Chief Advisor halted in the courtyard, watching as Fennas marched right through the gates and on down the road, until his figure
melted into the darkness. With grim foreboding, Erestor realised he would have to tell Elrond, debating whether to go now and get it over with or wait for the dawn. It was a pointless debate. The situation was too serious and too mysterious; he would have to brave another altercation. Resolute and determined, Erestor set off for Lanthir Fân to interrupt his cousin again, yet when he arrived he didn't dare enter. Above the gentle cadence of falling water he could clearly hear the deep, throaty moans; laboured, panting gasps; and rhythmic concussion of flesh on flesh so specific to the intimacies of mated couples.

He turned, meaning to slink away as silently as he'd come, but hesitated. A new sound joined Elrond's guttural groans of pleasure, a soft, contented trilling cry, halfway between the coo of a mourning dove and the whirring purr of a domestic feline; a noise Erestor had heard his cousin describe many times yet had never been able to quite imagine. The seneschal halted in spite of himself; knew he shouldn't stay; berated himself soundly for ignoring his conscience; trained every auditory nerve he possessed upon the glade in hopes of hearing that sound again. Without realising it, he shifted back over the ground he'd crossed and leaned forward toward the grotto's entrance. Amid the backdrop of cascading falls and the intermittent tinkling of the copper chimes, he could make out Elrond murmuring tender endearments as he neared his peak, but the Wood Elf was silent.

Erestor knew all about that, too; about Legolas' quiet nature and how rare it was for any outburst to accompany the sylvan's passion; how seldom he even spoke his mate's name during their coupling. The Chief Advisor agreed with his cousin's explanation for this fact: Wood Elves inhabited a dangerous world and had great need to practise stealth in all things. Besides, Elrond had once joked, they live out in the open amid the trees; if they didn't adhere to such discrete habits, everyone would know when, how, and with whom everyone else was having sex. Erestor smiled, thinking Elrond wouldn't be making anymore jests of that nature, and found he approved of that. He was brought out of his musings by the second rendition of the quavering vibration, more urgent this time, more fervent, followed by a swift mutter of Nandorin words. Elrond moaned again, the plaintive wail muted, unmistakably swallowed down his mate's throat, and then the wet pop of lips separating from a deep and hungry kiss preceded his sudden, strident words:

"Ah, Legolas! Aearen, Aearen, my beloved!"

A long-drawn, almost reluctant cry issued from the glen, grew in magnitude and volume until it drowned out the perpetual whisper of Lanthir Fân, then fell away into a series of sharp, ragged gasps.

"Nín'ódhel."

The single word announcing the Wood Elf's release was clear but hushed, the syllables brimming with ecstasy and love, imbued with a quality Erestor found hard to define, something between adoration and exaltation or perhaps a combination of the two for which there was no single word sufficient in depth to describe it. A faint hint of masculine essence perfumed the air. The seneschal was surprised to find his chest and throat tight with emotion and struggled to choke back a strong surge of melancholy, regret, and envy all enmeshed together.

He should go; if either of them detected his presence he would be mortified. Elrond would be furious, expressing his disgust in scathing denouncements followed by shunning his cousin indefinitely, perhaps for years, perhaps for centuries. Legolas would refuse to look at Erestor, avoiding his company, that haunted look of pained forbearance overtaking his features whenever he would be forced to do so. Erestor did not want that, suddenly felt terrified that it might come to pass and acknowledged for the first time how empty his life was. He didn't want to be distanced from his family, couldn't bear it. Yet he found he could not order the muscles of his legs to turn him about and carry him back to the house. He stood paralysed, rooted as much as the ancient hemlocks, craned
forward toward the sounds of exhilarated exhaustion issuing from the grotto.

A few minutes must have passed for he realised he couldn't hear their breathing anymore and Erestor wondered if they were dozing, basking in the soothing, encompassing relaxation that only stole over a body after such ardently consuming exercise. Tension he hadn't realised was present seeped from his clenched jaws and cramped fists. He inhaled and released a silent, relieved breath and uncurled his knotted fingers. His fears were foolish, based in the guilt he still felt for his interfering and lecherous behaviour toward Legolas. Elrond had forgiven him, as had his sylvan mate. He could leave now; it was all right; everything would be all right. Erestor turned away, smiling as he imagined them curled up together beside the trailing water, but had taken only a step before Elrond’s voice made him stop again.

"Have I ever told you how much I love the taste of your skin, Aearen?"

"My skin?" the response was dreamy, muffled. "Nay. Tell me."

"It's like nothing else yet conversely reminds me of things I'd long forgotten. Places from my young years before my Adar left us, before my Naneth went chasing after him. There's a sweetness to your flesh that is more delectable than any confection ever created, yet beneath it lies a sharp tang, not overpowering or bitter but almost...salty. Yes, that's it exactly, Aearen. You taste of my childhood by the shore in Sirion. Now how can that be, an Elf of the woods bearing the savour of the sea?"

"It's the sun," the sleepy words were subtly slurred. "My skin perspires here under the constant heat of Anor's rays." A pause of some seconds transpired, concluding with the unmistakably garbled vocalisation inherent to yawning. "Never this much light at home. First it made me all pink and hot and itchy, but now my skin's turned almost the colour of honey and it bothers me no more. Strange, that."

"Nay, not strange at all, simply lovely."

Elrond whispered the words and they were the last Erestor heard as the couple drifted into light reverie. The seneschal did not retreat to the house, deciding it was his responsibility to watch over them while they rested. The idea gave him a profound sense of place and purpose; he no longer felt the ache of solitude with every beat of his heart, instead aware of a new feeling of belonging to the little family hidden from sight beneath the ancient trees. He smiled, settling cross-legged amid the grassy meadow to await the dawn.

It was barely an hour before that event when Glorfindel and Lindir showed up, the singer with his harp slung over his shoulder, the Balrog-slayer bearing another tray. Erestor had seen them from quite a distance out and they'd seen him, too, but nothing was said until all three were clustered together in the dewy grass. Erestor stood up and stretched, then brushed at the back of his robes with a grimace.

"I don't suppose either of you thought to bring me something dry to put on?" he whispered. His comrades shook their heads in unison. "Why are you here?"

"Faelon explained about Fennas' bizarre behaviour and said you set off from the house hours ago. Mithrandir left almost right after you, grumbling about pig-headed Wood Elves; we're hoping he planned to catch up to the Mirkwood emissary and convince him to come back, but that has not occurred yet. What in Mordor happened?" asked Glorfindel.

"I can't say anything until I've spoken to Elrond," hissed Erestor, "but I didn't want to disturb them. Anyway, nothing could be done about it last night."
"You needn't elaborate," sneered Lindir. "It's obvious from Faelon's story that Fennas was less than pleased with what he learned regarding Legolas' place in Elrond's world. There's nothing you can do to help, that's certain. Our illustrious Lord is going to require aid from someone knowledgeable in sylvan ways."

Erestor startled to hear Lindir use exactly the same adjective to describe Elrond that Fennas had employed and wondered if the minstrel had been eavesdropping.

"We can all at the very least stand behind him and support his cause," Glorfindel admonished, his words couched in a harsh stage whisper. "Whatever mistakes he's made, Elrond is sincere in wishing to alleviate any harm Legolas has sustained because of them."

"That is indeed a fact, mellon, yet I am wondering what new trouble is stirring to bring the three of you hither to grant me that solace." The voice belonged to Elrond, who had not been sleeping very deeply and overheard their frantic whispering speech. He stood framed in the entrance to the grotto, his long white robe gleaming while his features remained shadowed beneath the shade of the trees.

"We need to talk, Elrond, in private," Erestor blurted out, twirling about to face his kinsman. "Fennas revealed some startling news about Legolas' family." Behind him, Lindir gave a scoffing snort and the seneschal stiffened.

"So, the truth is out," the minstrel chortled in complacent glee. He reached for his harp and strummed an exultant arpeggio as the others looked on in astonishment. Before anyone could question Lindir, the lovely sound drew Legolas from reverie and he shuffled into view behind Elrond, still tying the belt of the robe, his mane askew in a mass of tangled tresses hanging about his face.

"What truth?" he asked, staring at them one by one in bewilderment. "Why are you all out here?"

"I've brought food to break our fast," offered Glorfindel, smiling as he held forth the tray. "Perhaps we could discuss it as we eat?"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Lanthir Fân after breakfast ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"This is terrible. Of all the Elves in Greenwood, among the multitude of my relatives, it would be Fennas who arrives first," groaned Legolas, head buried in his hands, hunched in dejected misery upon one of the hampers at the base of his favourite hemlock tree. "Ai, Nín'ódhel! It would have been better for me to greet him appropriately. He was undoubtedly here to gather intelligence and carry it back to my Adar."

"What do you mean 'intelligence'?" demanded Elrond in consternation. This was not the response he'd expected upon revealing his efforts to make Legolas' comfort his top priority. On top of Erestor's report and Lindir's cryptic pronouncement, the Lord of Imladris was feeling exceedingly uncomfortable. He stood in front of his young mate, arms crossed before him, and despite the lack of formal garb had never looked so much the stern Elven Lord as now. "Exactly what is your Adar's position in the Woodland realm?"

"Oh, my Ada is very much respected in my homeland," he dodged the issue smoothly, neatly, "but he is not interested in knowledge regarding Imladris' affairs of state. He wants to find out about MY place here and sent Fennas to get the truth. My Nana probably nagged at him until he agreed to do it,
for Ada generally waits for me to go to him and reveal my errors or ask for advise. He says it builds soul-courage." Legolas was now up and pacing the glade in agitated dismay.

"Legolas, if I might give you a bit of counsel," Lindir began from his place in the branches above them, from which he felt much safer in the event of Elrond's inevitable explosion of outrage.

He was lightly strumming his harp, trying to fill the little grotto with soothing and gentle sounds that blended perfectly with the soft percussion of the falls, but it did not seem to be helping. Indeed, he was not able to finish his thought, for Legolas stopped beneath him and glared, hands on hips, the most commanding demand for silence ever given and all without uttering a single word. The minstrel blinked and offered a tentative smile along with a slight but decidedly deferential dip of his head; he'd not been on the receiving end of Legolas' wrath before but like everyone else had heard the rumours of his Adar's volcanic temper. Lindir wisely concluded it would be best not to press the issue of the Wood Elf's heritage at this time.

Now his interaction with Legolas was observed by all the others, and while Erestor considered himself the most canny and cunning of the lot, Glorfindel was by no means a dullard. The Balrog-slayer's brow drew tight in lines of perplexed uneasiness. The venerable warrior shifted slightly, transcribing weight to the opposite leg where he leaned against the trunk of another tree, managing to scrape the toe of his boot along an exposed root - his signature method of announcing himself, an ingrained action he was no longer conscious of making. All eyes honed in on him and he straightened up.

"Forgive me, Legolas, but there must be more you can tell us of your people. Fennas was very upset when he left. It is my duty to be prepared for every threat, you understand. Is your Adar likely to be so offended that he would take action on your behalf?"

Legolas' features contorted into that expression of contemptuous disgust that covered them whenever he had to confront another of these ridiculous assumptions about Wood Elves being barbaric and ruthless. His shoulders squared up and his back straightened, and though he was no where close to matching the mighty reborn warrior's height, Legolas managed to project an aura of authority nonetheless. "My Adar's warriors have never invaded any land or done violence to any people, not even dwarves. Nor would any of my people fall so low, retaliating for affronts by spilling blood, least of all that of our own kind." The words were frigid in their fury and Glorfindel bowed his head before the insult he had felt compelled to give.

Erestor was not deaf, however, and picked up on something important. If Legolas' father had power to lead troops into battle, he must be highly placed in Thranduil's court. He caught Elrond's eye and saw that he'd noted this as well. The Lord of Imladris parted his lips to inquire further in this vein but the seneschal's minute shake in the negative stalled him. The advisor spoke instead: "Legolas, I should tell you that Fennas was discussing his concerns quietly enough until he learned of the pregnancy. Did you not include that news in your messages home?"

"He knows? What did you tell him? What did he say?" Legolas was unable to control his distress over this and listened in growing trepidation as Erestor related the pertinent parts of his conversation with Fennas. By the time he was done, Legolas had lost the aspect of regal indignation and resumed that of frightened and grief-stricken young Elf. Instinctively, he reached out for Elrond and grabbed onto the soft fabric of his dressing gown."Ai Valar, we are doomed! Why did you tell him? What made you bring up Galbreth? It was my news to reveal to my parents, not his. Ai Valar, what else?"

Erestor was once again confused but more so remorseful to have caused Legolas so much agitation. He'd wished to deflect Legolas' notice from interest in his Adar's position, thinking to catch him off guard into revealing the truth, for it was clear he had been keeping this vital information back for
reasons that were still obscure. Erestor had not intended to induce more strife. He mumbled his profound regret and sent his kinsman a cursory glance, noting with relief that Elrond did not appear to be on the verge of throwing him out of the valley. A sigh directed his eyes to Glorfindel, whose countenance was grim but not accusing. Lindir, however, was openly hateful and Erestor didn't need to look to know the minstrel's glare was hot enough to set his robes afire.

"I'm sorry, beloved," Elrond began, upset to see Legolas so distraught and at a loss for how to fix it. "It isn't Erestor's fault but mine. I instructed him to reveal the pregnancy, thinking it best so that Fennas would understand why I refused to meet with him yesterday." He moved into the sylvan's line of sight and caught him close, wrapping a protective embrace around the shaking form. The golden head dropped against his shoulder with a groan and lean arms snaked round his waist in a breath-stealing squeeze.

"I know you meant well, but Fennas is probably the most rigidly conservative Elf in Greenwood. He's even more devoted to protocol and custom than Erestor. Plus, he's one of the Elders of my people, like the Lords here in Imladris. The Elders serve as the King's advisors and if they aren't happy, everyone else is miserable. I can't bear to think what he'll tell my Adar and Naneth." Legolas almost sobbed. This was a catastrophe of the highest magnitude and he couldn't think of any way to avert the resultant fury that would grip his parents' hearts. "To say nothing of how ashamed they'll be," he added aloud, forgetting he'd kept the preceding thoughts silent.

"What?" Elrond rubbed his mate's back consolingly. "The Elders? Legolas, I don't care who they are; I won't permit anyone to upset you like this. You've been under a tremendous burden of stress, grief, and shame for years. Fennas and these Elders will answer to me if they attempt to cause you more worries. Please, beloved, I want you to trust me to stand by you and shield you from any unpleasant judgements or remarks, whether from my people or yours."

"I do; it's just exactly the opposite of how I wanted all this to happen." He raised his head and pointed tear-bright eyes at Elrond's sombre grey ones. "If I'd had the chance to explain everything to Ada and Nana first, they'd understand and accept you. Now, they will be hurrying to get here and confront you about Tinu Mín and why we're not wed. They'll insist that you make recompense to them for the dishonour to our House."

Erestor cleared his throat. "Yes, Fennas did use that word. Can you explain what he meant?"

"I don't see how you can fail to comprehend it," drawled Lindir, "clever and learned as you are, Erestor. The House of Eärendil has dishonoured the House of … Legolas' people," he faltered, caught Legolas' wild and stricken gaze, and plucked a dissonant discord, "and will have to offer some kind of compensation."

"Yes, I figured that out on my own, but thank you so very much for explaining what would be obvious to a wose," snapped Erestor. He was weary of Lindir's unending, needling jabs and insults. "Perhaps you could expound upon what form this compensation is to take."

Lindir shrugged and alit from the branches, not a bit unnerved by the seneschal's displeasure, and absently tuned his harp. "How would I know this? I am not a citizen of the Greenwood. I have heard, however, that Aran Thranduil is fond of bright and beautiful jewels." His gaze slid to Legolas, brows arched in inquiry, to find the young archer's cheeks blossoming with colour.

"Well, yes, that's true, I suppose," Legolas muttered, "but hardly pertinent."

"Yet it is," Erestor disagreed. "Fennas said your marriage to Elrond is a 'personal tragedy for the King and Queen.' Is your father related in some way to the royal family of Mirkwood… I mean, Greenwood?" It was the question on everyone's mind by now and there was a great rise in eager
expectation as all ears awaited the answer.

Legolas frowned; this was precisely what he'd been trying to avoid revealing and now, thanks to wily Erestor, his hopes were dashed. He couldn't openly lie about it but could not concoct a way to answer that was vague enough to leave doubt. He sighed and returned his vision to Elrond's. "Yes, he is and thus so am I."

"What? Why haven't you told me this before?" Elrond almost jumped out of his skin, his voice a shrill mockery of his normal modulated timbre. He let go of Legolas and took a step backwards, suddenly feeling he didn't know the Elf standing before him.

"It was not important," shrugged Legolas weakly.

"That is absurd!" shouted Elrond. "Of course it's important."

"Why, because you would have treated me differently had you known?" demanded Legolas, hurt, angry, and guilty.

"Yes," Elrond snapped back, furious to have been deceived into believing Legolas was just any common Wood Elf. His anger dimmed as he observed the slow dissolve of Legolas' features into an expression of unbearable pain.

"Exactly. Oh, how I wish that wasn't true," he said, voice wavering under the weight of sorrow. "I didn't want to be treated like a trophy you could show off and brag about to your peers. I wanted you to love me for myself, as Legolas, not as…for my title and rank." The tears were sure to overwhelm his strained defences any moment and Legolas did not want to create a spectacle in front of these Elves. He spun and darted away, vaulting into the branches before anyone even knew what he was about. Behind him, he could hear Elrond's voice calling but refused to heed it.

TBC

~ ~ **Glossary**  ~ ~

Peth Thenid Pent: True Words Spoken
Tarlanc: stiff-necked, stubborn
Lechenn: Sindarin word for Noldor elves.
Fennas: Doorway
Tinu Mín: our little star

**NOTE:** Well, Fennas certainly brought trouble with him, didn't he? I have to say, Legolas must have thought, at least once or twice, about how Elrond would react to his Big Secret once it came out, but I've made him young and perhaps he felt justified to cause his mate a little upset. We can see from his reaction he didn't think about it too carefully, though, probably anticipating the shock and surprise and how funny that would be rather than envisioning the consequences of deliberately keeping his mate in the dark. I will elaborate more on why he kept quiet about his lineage for so long, but all the hints are there and most folks can probably see it already.

He knows he has hurt Elrond but he feels too hurt himself to do anything about it and can't face the loss of his mate's warm support and love. In his mind, he has rationalised and justified his prank for so long it is difficult to stand back and look at things from Elrond's point of view. What he needs to hear from Elrond is that knowing the truth wouldn't have changed the way Elrond feels for him one bit. Legolas is obviously still insecure about his place in Elrond's life. He's running, but where? We
shall see!

Thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!

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Chapter 22

Aearlinn - Aderthad

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ In the Deep of the Night within the Last Homely House ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Elrond didn't see Legolas again for four whole days and nights. For the totality of that segment of
time, he did not feel Aearen's call resounding in his heart, not even faintly, not the lightest tremor.
The first day, he wavered between indignant outrage over the lengthy subterfuge perpetrated by his
beloved Aearen and fretful remorse over the reasoning behind the trickery. He alternated between
wishing he'd never said he would treat Legolas differently to grousing that it was foolish of the
sylvan to imagine anything else possible and why did that mean he would consider him a mere
trophy or some sort of prize? Of course, that brought him back to the shameful acknowledgement
that this was exactly how Elrond had viewed his first mate and that there was every possibility
Legolas was right. Would he have come to love the Wood Elf if he'd known he was related to
royalty? Might he not have sent for his beloved's parents at once, comprehending the political
consequences of keeping someone of noble birth, even as dubious as that term might be when
applied to the Elves of Mirkwood, as little more than a catamite? Elrond eventually had to accept the
truth of this and with it came the idea that Legolas must have worked all this out fairly early on in his
residency.

Elrond pondered on that for most of the second day, expounding in rapturous tones about his sylvan
mate's benevolent heart. Somehow, Legolas had sensed that the Elven Lord was lonely and
miserable. For some reason, he had decided to extend his love to the stern, arrogant, prejudiced
Noldorin noble, so to break through and reach his dormant heart, awakening it to joy again. Even
Lindir found this too much and reminded Elrond that Legolas had been in dire straights and unable to
make such decisions consciously. If the commitment had been made, it was purely instinctive and
intuitive. By the time Legolas was well enough to fully comprehend his situation, he must have
found his heart as fully engaged as his spirit. Elrond thought that was even more sublime, for it could
only mean that the bond was truly meant to be and somehow Legolas' fever-ridden mind had
accepted that fate. He bemoaned his own heart's lack of grace in failing to grasp the same concept.
How much simpler it would all be now if only Elrond had received the gift of Legolas' heart with
gratitude, happiness, and a heavy golden ring instead of rejecting the notion of properly wedding the
young Elf.

The whole of the second night, Elrond wept bitter, despondent, self-pitying tears.

Dawn of the third day brought him to frantic worry. What was Legolas eating? Was he eating at all?
Where was he sleeping? Was he lying in the branches of some tree fading due to the breach in their
bond? What if he'd decided to leave and head for the Havens, intending to take ship to Aman after
all? How was Tinu Mín fairing under this troubling stress? Elrond organised search parties and had
every member of his staff and half the Guard traipsing through the wilds of Imladris, calling for
Legolas, pleading with him to come back. He sent messengers on his fastest horses racing from the
valley, some in the direction of Mithlond, some over the eastern road toward the Misty Mountains in
case Legolas had decided to go to his people. No one turned up any sign of the Wood Elf. By sundown, Elrond was convinced he was either dead or gone forever, their little babe no more, and his tears that night racked his body with grief and sorrow.

On the fourth day he refused to come out of his rooms and sat at his desk, silent and sombre, analysing the meticulous plans Legolas had drawn. He wrote a letter to Arwen and had it sent at once by messenger. He penned another note to his sons, informing them of the tragedy and bidding them return post haste. He had expected them to arrive for the hearing, but no sign of them had been seen. Finally, he called Glorfindel, Erestor, and Lindir into his office and announced his plans to leave for the Havens as soon as he'd had the chance to speak with his children. By then, it had been three days since he'd taken any food and Elrond was not looking well. Indeed, he believed he was in the first stages of fading and put aside Vilya, lest his diminishing strength sap the potent energy of the brightest Elven Ring.

His friends were horrified, of course, and did all they could to dissuade him from this plan, to no avail. They had not been sitting idly by while all this transpired but had been unable to draw Elrond from his growing despondency. Erestor had briefly captured his attention with the plan of discovering, by process of elimination, to which noble Sindarin House Legolas belonged. The idea was a good one and would have at least given Elrond a task with a goal, but it came to naught when they both had to admit that they didn't know which Sindarin aristocrats had joined Oropher's migration. They tried to recall what Elves from the battle of the Last Alliance seemed to be high-born, pure-blood Sinda and couldn't come up with any name that belonged to an Elf from Mirkwood, save for Thranduil, his two brothers, and Oropher himself. The rest were but a nameless host, poorly trained, insufficiently prepared, and ultimately expendable. This plunged Elrond into even deeper despair for it was clear Legolas had been given no reason to believe he would be valued, even had he revealed his heritage right away.

Glorfindel tried to help, too. He personally went to every place in the valley Legolas was known to haunt, even though Elrond had already done this numerous times. The Wood Elf was not in Lanthir Fân, the lily bog was bereft of his lilting songs, the little pond where the newly hatched ducklings paddled behind their mother hadn't seen him, and the stable-master reported no sign of him, even though one of his favourite mares was due to give birth soon. The Balrog-slayer was not willing to admit defeat easily, however, and organised a troop to scour the wooded highlands, instructing them to climb each and every tree. This was fruitless and Glorfindel was beginning to believe Elrond was right and Legolas was simply gone. Yet he persevered, sending out a scouting party to locate the twins and enlist their aid. He even sent word to the Rangers to be on watch for a lone sylvan Elf, but none of his efforts produced positive results.

As for Lindir, he had believed he would find Legolas very quickly by querying the trees. He discovered that Legolas considered his conduct at the impromptu breakfast meeting nothing less than betrayal. If not for Lindir's remark about Thranduil preferring his payments in gems, Erestor might not have asked that damnable question. Legolas had spread the word among the green life of Imladris: Lindir was not to be trusted and at all costs must not learn where his fellow sylvan had gone. The minstrel found out that age has nothing on rank and not a single sapling in all the realm would go against the command of a prince of the woods. The singer had to report his failure to Elrond and beg forgiveness; he'd believed it for the best for the truth to come out but never had he imagined Legolas would react this way. The Lord of the Vale granted clemency at once, saying it was none of Lindir's fault and all of his and he should have listened to his old mentor in the first place.

Nightfall of the fourth day found all the valley subdued and frightened, for gossip had spread and everyone knew that Elrond was fading.
Elrond sighed, a bare whisper of a breath that left his nostrils and faintly fluttered the edge of the most recent plan Legolas had presented to him. The Elven Lord took it up, admiring the way the supports for the floors interlocked with one another snugly around the tree's trunk without ever piercing the rugged bark. He smiled, noticing one room set aside for bathing, an elaborate contraption rigged amid the branches to make hauling water up into the tree easier. All around the perimeter of this chamber were screens for privacy and Legolas had also pencilled in a roomy copper tub. There were even shelves for towels and toiletries, cupboards for robes and dry clothes, and something that looked like a small brazier for building a fire. Next to it Legolas had written: 'needed to keep Tinu Mîn warm in the first few months.'

Those few words stung him as no others could and Elrond felt his heart constrict painfully, the weight of his loss making it sluggish and unstable. Maybe it would simply stop, for how could he sustain it in the absence of Legolas' love? Why should it matter? He would never see his fourth babe, not here in Imladris and he had promised not to sail until the future of Arda was secured from the evil influence of Sauron. If he was lucky, Legolas would make it to Aman and Elrond would meet his third son there, all grown, his own father no more than a stranger to greet with polite courtesy rather than his beloved Ada to clasp to his heart in welcoming joy. Elrond burst into tears, fisting the detailed drawings in his hands and bowing his face against them.

"Ai! Nín'ódhel, beloved, don't despair, don't fade! I'm here; I'm here."

The voice came from the balcony and Elrond's head rose instantly as he twisted in his chair to see, afraid to believe it could be possible. It was. Legolas was already moving across the short space, whole and hearty, and Elrond leaped up to meet him. They collided betwixt the open alcove and the desk, clutching each other with desperate ferocity, arms grabbing around shoulders, locking about waists, mouths seeking skin to press upon, noses rejoicing in familiar scents.

"Aearen! Praise Elbereth, you are safe and well, praise Elbereth." He hugged hard, rejoicing to feel the small mound where their child lay sleeping still there. "I thought I'd lost you both. I've been searching and searching for you. Where did you go? Please, you must forgive me for what I said; it was wrong; I was wrong. Everything had to happen just the way it has or maybe I would have sent you away before I discovered how much I love you."

"Forgive you? I am the one who deceived you, Elrond. I am here to learn if you will be merciful and take me back. I've been stubborn and foolish, nursing a hurt I caused myself," Legolas said, squeezing back, elated to receive this welcome. He'd heard the rumours of his beloved's declining health and had immediately abandoned his stubborn pride, desperate to mend Nín'ódhel's ailing spirit, ashamed to have brought his mate such serious strife. He pried Elrond's arms loose and studied him pensively, noting the darkly circled eyes, the pale, drawn face lined with tear tracks. Legolas heart quailed at the visible anguish he'd caused. He wiped away the salty smear in despondent wonder; he'd made the noble Lord break down and cry. "Are you all right, beloved? Tell me I haven't harmed you beyond repair."

"Nay, 'tis nothing now that you're here. Promise me you won't do that again, though. Whatever we must face, whether it is a misunderstanding or a quarrel, we have to work through it together. When you ran away I was powerless to do anything to correct the situation. I didn't know if you'd left for Aman or lay wasting in sorrow amid the branches somewhere." Elrond offered this gentle admonishment, smiling a little as Legolas framed his face and smothered him in adoring kisses.

"I know, you're right of course," the sylvan archer avowed through the frantic impress of his lips all over Elrond's wan face. "I behaved like a foolish elfling. I promise not to run anymore." He stopped and looked deep into his mate's eyes. "Never again, never, beloved. I have missed you so," he whispered, the heat of intense desire flooding the simple words. He leaned close, eyes drifting shut as
he did, and inhaled deeply, burying his nose in the crook of his mate's neck. "Elrond, I want you."
Legolas did not wait for a response, pressing his lips firmly against Elrond's, demanding entrance,
controlling the kiss when it was granted, wringing a surprised grunt from the Elven Lord.

Legolas kept the kissing going, retreating for air but a miniscule portion of a second or so then fusing
them together anew. His tongue was insistent, demanding, probing, and hot where it lapped against
the roof of Elrond's mouth. A fretful whine escaped him and he began backing his beloved toward
the desk, hands alternating between carding through the silky midnight strands still bound in sylvan
braids and unfastening Elrond's robes. The feel of the plaing, so distinctly Legolas' own, so singular
a sign of his claim on the Noldo Lord, roused him more and he shifted, pressing his groin and its
solid erection against Elrond's thigh, pivoting his hips to give a little shove; a low growl left his
lungs.

They reached the desk and stood rocking together, lips hungry, hands devouring, hearts
burning. Elrond's rump pressed hard against the rigid edge of the fine wood as Legolas rubbed
against him. Without warning, the sylvan suddenly bent his knees, grasped Elrond about the waist,
and hoisted him up onto the smooth, polished surface. The plans crinkled and shifted softly,
underscoring the Noldorin Lord's sudden exclamation of surprise. He hadn't time for questions for
Legolas parted his legs and slipped between them, already working loose Elrond's leggings while
concentrating on his ears with seductive licks and nibbles. "I want you." He said it in Nandorin,
unaware that he had done so, the words a hushed breath racing over the slickened cartilage, and
Elrond shivered.

"Aearen?" he met the Wood Elf's smouldering gaze, shocked by this new, domineering expression
of his mate's ardour but excited at the same time, something that doubled his surprise. He had no
desire to analyse the unfamiliar sensation, however, for Legolas was at that moment drawing his
cock from the gaping pants, fisting the rigid flesh and working it firmly, eyes glued to the maroon
head. Elrond could only watch and react, hips giving spasmodic thrusts in hopes of enhancing the
pleasure. Then Legolas stopped, climbing almost atop him, one leg spread over his thigh, hand
groping his ear, kissing him, forcing him to lie back on the hard surface. Elrond reclined on his
elbows, a groan leaving his throat as he sought to take command of the kiss, but Legolas broke from
him and stood back, grinning with that devilish twinkle darting through his eyes.

"Lift up, Nín'ódhel," he said, the syllables simple enough but the tones forming them were
compelling in a way they had never been before, packed with hungry urgency that wouldn't be
denied. He wanted this now, was ready now to make the fantasy real. "I need you bare; I need you."
He drew the leggings off slowly, kissing first one leg and then the other as the limbs were uncovered.
Quickly he resumed his place between the crux of those well-tones thighs, palming the balls in their
velvety sac, gripping the penis tight and pumping, delighting in the moans this elicited. "Want you,
Nín'ódhel, let me." His hand slid away from the tender testicles and carefully slithered beneath the
muscular rump, seeking, feeling, exploring an area he had not fully known as yet, this one zone of
pleasure still awaiting his initiation.

Elrond watched all this in wonder and growing enthusiasm, shifting to allow the probing fingers to
find their target, thrilling to the singular quiver that jolted through him as Legolas' long, lethal fingers
brushed upon his anus, circling slowly, pushing slightly. "I'm yours, Aearen. You needn't ask; take
me," he whispered, watching his Wood Elf in fascination as a harsh gasp fled Legolas' body, eyes
dilated and nostrils flared. He was aroused in a way Elrond had never seen and the effect left him
tingling with anticipation, the touch of the digits exploring his tightly sealed hole making his cock
twitch and his balls ache.

Still, even as deep in his passion as Legolas was, he yet had presence of mind to slow down and
prepare his mate. He had not forgotten how long it had been since Elrond had experienced this kind
of intimacy. The fingers retreated and he leaned down to share a long kiss, breaking it to rest his head on Elrond's chest, listening to the pounding heart within. "We need some oil or something. What have you got in this desk?" He lifted his head with a playful, challenging toss and smiled into Elrond's grey eyes, all dark with desire and warm with love. Now, well he knew that his beloved kept a drawer stocked with such necessities for they did not confine their amorous activities to the stately bedroom.

Elrond grinned back and rolled half-way to his side, reaching behind him to pry open the compartment. He fished around as if unable to find what they both knew was there, offering a comical expression of mock alarm that made Legolas snicker. At last he produced a small flask, holding it out to his mate as he leaned on an elbow and settled into a more comfortable position, wriggling until his arse was flush with the edge, heels propped on the surface, legs gaping wide, everything exposed. The reaction from Legolas was phenomenal. He almost choked on the trilling call that welled up in his throat, its vibrations low and sonorous like the sound a wolf makes before it howls. Bending down, he ran his tongue up the length of the Elven Lord's rigid shaft from root to crown, made a slurping little lap across the slit and then paused to lick his lips before engulfing the head of the penis. He sucked greedily as he wrapped his fist around the florid column, stroking with swift, short motions that had Elrond desperate in seconds.

"Aearen! Legolas, aye, more," he called out, wishing he could reach the swaying mass of golden hair brushing enticingly against his thighs.

Legolas stopped, panting for breath, almost overwhelmed with what was about to happen, offering the soft trill in response to Elrond's discontented plaint. A questioning glance searched his mate's face and found edgy assent. Hurriedly he removed the stopper from the bottle of oil, relaxing a bit as the cool, fresh scent of it met his nose, and poured some into his palm. Quickly coating his fingers, he pressed them to the puckered entrance, carefully easing one through the constricting muscles until the second knuckle slipped through. Elrond tensed up and squirmed though it was clear he was trying to remain relaxed and still, so Legolas resumed the manual stimulation of the erect organ to distract him. A few tentative, investigative pokes yielded nothing and he frowned, once more training inquiring eyes upon Elrond's.

"Deeper, Aearen, you're almost there," encouraged Elrond, surprised at how eager he was as he strained to allow the finger in. He smiled, hoping to instil confidence in the sylvan, and watched a glimmer of determination flash across Legolas' countenance. The next push was stronger and the finger curled inward, brushing against the small swell of the prostate, and Elrond's whole body jerked under the force of the pleasure racing through his nerves. He called out, just a lusty shout and nothing more, and so he gasped out, never realising it, lifting pleading eyes to his beloved.

"Ai Valar," whispered Legolas, awestruck by the response, and at once pressed again on the interior gland, working his finger in an out. The expression on Elrond's face was unlike any he'd ever seen there and it was so thoroughly erotic he stopped pumping the Elven Lord's shaft in order to get his loose from its confinement, for he was still fully clothed. While he worked on that problem, he withdrew the single digit and inserted two, amazed at the pressure around the fingers as he strove to spread the tight channel. The mental image of his cock replacing them nearly had him undone before he could even start and he gave an impatient growl.

Elrond responded with a wanton moan, pushing hard against the fingers inside him, head tilted back, long hair spilling over the plans. "I'm ready, Aearen, I need you now."

Legolas could not answer, overwhelmed with the need to fulfil the demand, struggling to concentrate on what he was doing, remembering at the last minute to insert a third finger just to be sure. His
leggings sagged loose around his buttocks but he couldn't delay even the short time required to get them off. Indeed, he hardly thought of it as he withdrew his oiled fingers and wrapped the slick hand around his organ, rocking into his own touch with a choked exclamation, eyes locked on the red entrance waiting for him. He hiked up his tunic out of the way to see, shuffling forward, breath held as he trained the tip of his penis on the centre of the target and pushed.

With a gasp he slid in, much easier than he would have imagined, and as soon as the anal muscles closed around him shoved hard, an exultant cry upon his lips. After that he was lost to it for some time, pivoting back and forth with wild abandon, eyes squeezed closed, hands gripping the sweaty flesh of parted thighs that framed his torso. Yet for all the glorious friction racing over every inch of his excited cock, it was not enough. With a sudden burst of energy, Legolas hooked one arm under Elrond's bent leg, gave a hop and planted one knee on the edge of the table, pulling himself half-way onto the desk and plowing deep into the thrilling resistance.

The powerful lunge caused a resounding slap as their bodies connected and Elrond cried out, twitching and reaching for his legs, struggling to pull them higher. They curled inward and met on the next thrust, exuberant grins breaking free just before they sealed their lips together and shared air for a few seconds. No more could they manage, needing to sustain respiration in order to continue the blistering pace of their love-making. Elrond was content to exhale each breath as a sultry moan; Legolas was as ever silent save for the loud rush of heaving lungs.

The Wood Elf was rapturous as he escalated toward inevitable climax, vigourous as he lunged with ever fibre of his strength against the taut constriction, proudly victorious as he claimed his mate at last, and profoundly moved by the trust and love Elrond evinced in permitting him to do so. He hadn't the wherewithal to make it last, the sensation was too glorious and he was as yet too inexperienced in the act to know how, and the delicious tension knotted his stomach, channelling all his conscious thought to the nexus where they were joined. Even so, his orgasm caught him by surprise, seizing him with a totality that he was unused to as his senses erupted into a staggering explosion of bliss, exquisite in its sweetness, rippling through muscle and cord with shocking intensity. He felt the warmth of his seed, spread by his lurching motion, and it was in that instant that Elrond came, his hoarse bellowing shout echoing through the room He bucked impulsively against Legolas' belly, the fresh semen wetting his mate's tunic and scenting the air with its acrid odour.

Legolas was truly done in and sagged in a trembling heap over Elrond, rejoicing as strong legs clamped around his waist and hands gripped his biceps to keep him from collapsing onto the floor. He tried to heave himself up and failed, laughing as Elrond rocked forward and caught him close. His softened penis slipped free and the separation was emotionally painful. The urge to have Elrond fuck him pulsed through his soul, vivid in its imagery and potent in its desire. He set both feet on the floor but they wouldn't hold him up. Elrond tried to drag him into his lap but the half-on, half-off leggings interfered. They groaned in unison and then laughed, at last sharing a long kiss as Legolas managed to get his arms threaded through the onyx mane and around his beloved's neck.

"Now do me," Legolas whispered when they parted, meeting Elrond's glazed and torrid gaze with equal heat.

Elrond didn't need to be told twice and recovery was never an obstacle for him. His features reorganised into a thoroughly lascivious grin as he stooped, grabbed Legolas just beneath his rump and lifted, slinging the compliant body over his shoulder. With quick strides he made for the bedroom and flung his eager mate upon the mattress. Legolas bounced and flopped out in a boneless sprawl, legs hanging off the edge a bit, slack genitals exposed, looking for all the world a helpless, ravaged victim. Except he was none of that, as his hectic fingers proved by making quick work of untying his tunic and drawing it open, offering pale, golden flesh and dark, maroon delights.
The Elven Lord, however, rather liked the helpless victim theme and thus, while seeming to be aiding in its removal, took hold of the tunic and used it to bind his sylvan lover's arms tight to one of the bedposts. They didn't play this game often but Legolas squirmed obligingly, arching his back as he tugged on the restraints just enough to make his pectorals flex. "Fuck me," he said.

Elrond watched, entranced for a moment, but held back, relishing the wanton vision before him. He decided to torment his mate a bit first and bent over him, reaching out to take one tight nipple between his fingers and pinch it, twisting just enough to make the Wood Elf groan and lift into the touch. He did the same to the other nipple, too, and kept doing it, first one and then the other, watching as Legolas' cock slowly started to fill again and his legs, still caught up in the leggings, thrashed about like the tail of a fish. Elrond stopped and stepped back as soon as he'd wrung a shrill cry from the archer, observing with lurid fascination the wrinkled brow, sealed eyelids, and parted lips that struggled for air. The blue eyes opened, a beseeching caste to the wide, staring orbs, but Elrond was immune to their charms.

He turned his back, casting off his robe and tunic as he did, moving to his dresser where the small walnut box rested. Inside were their newest pleasure toys and he took it up as he opened the top drawer, rummaging through the assorted undershirts until his hand came to rest on the carved oaken phallus Legolas had made for Ened Ethuil, for Elrond had not permitted this particular bit of sacred wood to be burned that night. He spun around then, cock jutting out to point at Legolas, and showed him what he had. The Wood Elf inhaled sharply and acted out a convincing struggle to get free, achieving the desired goal of making the leggings fall a bit lower so he could part his thighs and display his wet hole.

Elrond was at the bedside in a flash, setting the toys aside so to grab the powerful legs and hold them still with one hand. The other searched for and found Legolas' hidden dagger, the one he kept strapped to his calf, and presented it boldly. Without a word he sliced the leggings through the crotch, splitting the fabric in two, and tossed the knife aside. It clattered to the floor with a bright silver glint as the lamplight caught it. Elrond didn't notice, already sliding the leather off the long, lean limbs and using it to tie them, spread as far as he could get them, to the frame of the canopy overhead. Then he stood back to admire the view: Legolas at his mercy, helpless, both openings exposed and yearning to be taken. He decided he wanted to hear him say it, to beg.

"What shall I do with you? So needy, so eager. Yet, so disobedient, so foolishly reckless to try and run from me. What should I do to you Legolas?" He reached down and dipped his index finger into the slippery vaginal slit far enough to gather up the rich secretion but not deep enough to reach the internal male gland incongruously hidden within. Elrond withdrew the finger and carried it to his mouth, sucking the vital juices off with noisy delight.

A wild, keening moan racked Legolas and he arched his back, striving to pull his legs even farther apart but it was not possible. Elrond had tied them quite firmly. The finger teased him again, this time penetrating his anus and he gasped. "Ai, Nín'ódhel!" he rasped out. "Do what you will, do as you please."

"Nay," corrected Elrond, his voice hard and stern, and pulled the finger out. "You've been wilful and rebellious, abandoning your Lord without word, without care. Tell me what I should do to you."

Legolas stared, disoriented by the undertone of anger. They hadn't ever combined 'helpless victim' with 'disobedient servant' and he wondered if there was real resentment in that accusation. It made him shudder, gazing upon the naked, aroused Elf Lord, so forbidding and cold, so commanding and powerful. He licked his lips, eyes wide and fearful.

"You should punish me, Lord, for such disobedience and neglect." No sooner had he spoken than a
sharp sting accompanied a loud smack as Elrond's palm connected with the exposed underside of his thigh. He howled and jerked under the assault as several more blows landed, alternating between legs. Then fingers closed around his scrotum, tightening until it was just short of unbearable, while still the other hand maintained its relentless castigation. He trembled in rigid tension, gasping and pleading for mercy.

Elrond ignored the pleas, eyes fixed on the quivering flesh in his grip, the reddening skin beneath his hand. At last he ceased the paddling and casually reached for the phallus while Legolas had his eyes shut. Without warning, he shoved it inside the first hole, worked it in and out twice and then left it there, releasing the balls so he could stand back and take it all in. Legolas whimpered, twisting his fanny back and forth on the mattress, desperate to resume the searing friction yet unable to connect with the few remaining inches of the tool sticking out of him. "Saes!" he cried, eyes bulging and bright.

"Be still," commanded Elrond, "and perhaps I may free one of your hands and let you fuck yourself with the rod. For now, let the fulness make you ache and burn." He took up the box and opened it, drawing out the nipple clamps and their long mithril chain. He held them up, a tantalising treat, or perhaps a threat, letting the gleaming pincers sway to and fro before his mate's sight. "Would you like it if I put these on you?" he asked, smiling at the vigourous nod of affirmation the suggestion received. "Very well. Remember, you desired this, Legolas." With that warning Elrond snapped them on tight and tugged hard on the chain, barely acknowledging the gasp of breath that left the sylvan's lungs, too intent upon the erotic reaction to this stimulus as Legolas' back formed a lovely arc so high Elrond was sure he could fit his arm beneath it without touching the sweaty spine.

He kept the chain taut as he climbed up on the bed and straddled Legolas, kneeling so that he was not resting on the sylvan's stomach. Instead he reached above him and used one of the dangling ties of the destroyed leggings to secure the ring on the end of the chain to the canopy frame. He sat and Legolas cried out as his nipples were pulled harder, the flesh afire with lancing jabs of pain, frantically pushing up to relieve the agony. Elrond got off him and knelt at his side, tracing the length of the glinting chain down to its split, following one side down, down to the pulsing bud clamped between its jagged teeth. He tapped the tip of the blood red teat and Legolas screamed, a spasm rocking his body as he instinctively pulled back, gave himself another jolt of delectable anguish, then arched higher to slacken the tension. His ribs strained to give him air as his eyes rolled wildly and found Elrond's.

"Nín'ódhel?" he choked out. "Hurts?"

"What did you call me?"

"L…Lord, saes, ha naegra."

"Too much?" Elrond watched him with concern, ready to untie the ring at once if necessary, but Legolas shot him an annoyed glare; he'd broken character and interrupted the play. Elrond grinned then, a diabolically lascivious expression, and leaned over him. "Or not enough," he said and licked one of the nipples, swabbing it liberally and roughly, thrilling as Legolas cried out and struggled not to move an inch and failed. The sylvan alternately used his legs to relieve the pressure then slumped back against the punishing pull, all the while angling his body to keep Elrond's mouth on him. The Elven Lord tasted of both imprisoned nubs until they were wet and then he blew cool breath over them both to dry them. "When will you come into your milk?"

"W…What?"

"When will you be able to give milk?"
"A…About a m…month before…birth."

"That is well. When it starts, you are to keep your chest bared when in my rooms. You will give me suck at my pleasure, that I may ensure you can produce adequate nourishment for our babe when he's born. Say it."

"I…I'll give you suck of me whenever you wish, Lord. Saes, Lord, fuck me!" his voice was a hoarse cry of needy desperation.

"Like this? Are you certain? Won't that hurt more?" Elrond was already moving to the end of the bed as he spoke. He took up the oil and lubricated his cock slowly, showing Legolas what he was doing.

"Nay, Lord, nay. Take me like this. My pain for your pleasure; my pleasure if you will it."

"Ah, you remembered the correct response. That deserves a reward." So saying, Elrond plunged the engorged organ into the anal opening, mindful of the protruding end of the oak shaft embedded in his sylvan. He thrust hard and steady, watching as the motion jerked Legolas back and forth, yanking on the stretched nipples.

Legolas was crying out unceasingly, his arms struggling not to pull too hard on the tunic for fear it would tear and all his weight would be suspended by the gleaming mithril chain. He tried to take the strain with his legs but Elrond's potent lunging made it hard to do. He thought his nipples would rip free and just when it must happen, Elrond suddenly started working the wooden phallus in and out of him, ramming against his sweet spot in time with each jerk at his breasts. Bright explosions of delicious pleasure flared through the pain, mingling agony and ecstasy. His release was imminent and Elrond stopped, pulling out of him completely. Before Legolas could think what was happening, the Elven Lord had climbed beside him again, offering the thick, hot penis to his gaping lips, one finger daintily plucking the taut chain as if it was the string of a harp.

It was necessary to tilt his head forward to reach the dripping tip of the distended cock but Legolas managed to take it in nonetheless, feeling the girth of it, tasting his own bitter residue on it. He sucked hard and Elrond bucked into the vacuum, rocking back and forth and bumping into the nipple chains with each move. Legolas felt tears running down his cheeks and then Elrond pulled out and kissed him hard, slipping his hands under the arched back to lend support.

The relief was almost worse than the constant dragging and Legolas flinched, gasping into the kiss and almost gagging on the questing tongue that probed him deeply. The support vanished and his nipples were yanked hard and he screamed again, losing sight of Elrond for a moment as his eyes sealed shut against the anguish. The next sensation he knew was the slow retreat of the polished wood phallus. When it was out he held his breath not daring to open his eyes to watch what happened next. The solid effigy was inserted into his anus and left there, just as it had been left in his vaginal opening, only the portion sticking out pressed into the mattress. Legolas attempted to work his arse on it and heard Elrond catch his breath.

"Have you not had enough?" the Noldorin noble whispered seductively, the warm breath of the words somehow right at Legolas' ear now. He could only shake his head in mute denial. Soft lips closed around the inflamed nipples and again the tongue dabbed at the bruised flesh, first one, then the other. "Shall I keep on fucking you?" Teeth bit the stretched skin below the squeezing clamps. Legolas could only nod assent. "Say it."

"Fuck me slow and hard. Fuck me until you go soft."

"That," another delicate bite, "could be hours long. You want my cock so badly as that?"
"I do. I want it badly; want it in me. I need it, Lord."

Elrond acquiesced and fucked him until he fell slack, finishing in an exquisite orgasm that tore a deep roar of gratification from his chest, by which time dawn had long since come, and Legolas had come twice, dry and shaking, choking with tears and delight.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Aderthad: reunion
saes, ha naegra: please, it hurts
Tarlanc: stiff-necked, stubborn
Lechenn: Sindarin word for Noldor elves.
Fennas: Doorway
Tinu Mín: our little star

NOTE: Whew, make up sex is the best. Was anyone surprised at Legolas sudden boldness? Read on for the answers. I warned you this would be a very lengthy post, but hope it is still worthwhile.

Finally, thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!

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~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Mid-morning, the Last Homely House ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

They were in the tub; Legolas soaking in a healing soup of herbs and oils and his mate's gentle attention; Elrond perched on the rim soothingly tending the slight abuses their rather wild carnal congress had propagated upon the sylvan archer's flesh. They hadn't spoken much, just Elrond's concerned queries about the bruised nipples and Legolas' assurance that it was nothing and would be healed before noon. They were content to simply be together, the Lord of Imladris continuously sponging the medicinal liquid over Legolas' chest; the Wood Elf happy, sedate, and very pleased with himself. So much so that he failed to detect the undercurrents of doubt and confusion wafting from his mate's aura.

Legolas reclined with his head propped upon a rolled towel, eyelids lowered so that his golden lashes cast shadows on his cheeks, smiling smugly, enjoying the warm flush of delight that momentarily shot through him as Elrond treated the sore flesh. Had he not been so exhausted he would become aroused again. In fact, it crossed his mind to wonder if that's what Nín'ódhel was hoping to achieve and shifted his eyes, peeking from the corners of the drooping lids to judge if this might be true. His attitude immediately lost its contented abstraction. Elrond's posture, the tilt of his head, the way his eyes stared inward instead of hungrily devouring his mate's naked form, all this signalled trouble as surely as the darkening sky forewarned of storm.

"Elrond? Is something wrong?" he asked, sitting up and opening his eyes fully so to judge the quality of the answer.

The Elven Lord startled, not expecting to be drawn so abruptly from his internal musing. He manufactured a smile that left his eyes clouded with something Legolas couldn't define, having not seen it there before. "Nay, beloved. All is well now that you've returned to me." He caressed the damp cheek lovingly but there was something unbearably sad about the touch.

It frightened Legolas. With a swift move that sent a sluice of water rolling to the edge of the bath he caught the hand before it could retreat too far. "No, you must tell me. What is it? Was I…was our coupling…I mean, when I…" Legolas found himself stumbling all over the idea and blushed. Why should it be so hard to discuss this?

"Nay, it isn't that; it was wonderful," smiled Elrond, understanding what Legolas needed to ask. "You were magnificent, Aearen."

"And you enjoyed it?"

"Very much so." Too much. Elrond could not bar the thought from his mind and could only hope it remained hidden from Legolas.

He hadn't foreseen that Legolas' first time in control would be so masterfully, so skilfully carried out.
The previous instance, not so very long ago at all, when he'd offered his mate the opportunity to be on top, Legolas hadn't been able to follow through. Now he not only initiated the act but performed with a level of confidence that was inexplicable, even impossible. Impossible without practise, that is. The rattled Noldorin Lord couldn't prevent that idea either, for there was only one answer that made sense. Legolas would never be unfaithful; this Elrond accepted as an absolute truth more certain than the daily appearance of Anor. Thus, he could only have learned from his other mates. Somehow, someway, the twins had gotten to Legolas in the short interval of days he'd been parted from Elrond. That's where he'd gone, though where in the valley the trio had managed to hide, evading even the notice of Glorfindel, remained a mystery.

"Then what?" Legolas persisted, beyond worried and now moving swiftly toward anxious dread. Perhaps Elrond truly resented him for the deceit about his heritage. Or perhaps he's still disturbed by the separation. There was no doubt that the Elven Lord's suffering had been very real, the grip of fading tight and tenacious. He could still its traces lingering in fine lines of tension etched over Elrond's brow and beneath his eyes. Legolas had hoped their ardent coupling would burn it from his soul, but personal experience with grief refused to let him believe in this. He took a deep breath, deciding to follow the advise he'd received from his beloved's sons and face up to his mistakes and the consequences wrought by them. "Are you angry with me?"

The question took Elrond by surprise, not that Legolas would ask it but that he would have so difficult a time replying without uttering a falsehood. Yet he couldn't confront his sylvan mate, not about his sons. He couldn't bear to hear his conclusion confirmed. It was with great sorrow that he came to realise that this was exactly how Legolas must have felt on countless occasions, waiting for over ten years to learn if he was loved, fearing to discover he was merely a pleasant diversion. He sighed and rubbed at his eyes, overwhelmingly weary all at once.

"Nay, not angry so much as hurt, I think. I was in despair, thinking I'd lost you and Tinu Mín forever, and you return just as suddenly as you left." None the worse for wear; in fact, looking fit and content. "You didn't call, Aearen." Elrond didn't ask why; he knew and it was that certainty that really stung. Saying all this, he couldn't meet Legolas' eyes, fearing they'd discern all that he hoped to keep secret. Long, dripping arms wrapped about his neck and a soft cry met his ears as Legolas pulled him close.

"I know; I'm sorry. Please say you can forgive me. I should have come back sooner; I just needed time to figure out what is happening and what I'm doing," Legolas murmured these entreaties into the Elven Lord's pointed ear, holding fast, fearing to be shoved off any second.

Elrond could no more do that than he could cut off his own arm. He sighed and reciprocated the embrace, securing the lithe frame against him, hugging back hard, rubbing gentle comfort into the wet skin. At least he did come back; I remain first in his heart still. "Have you figured it out, then? Are you going to tell me about your family now?" The pause that followed this told him what the answer would be before the words were uttered and Elrond's agitation twisted a bit toward vexation.

"Nay, I want you to meet my family without any preconceived expectations. I want all of the valley to see that Wood Elves are not really so very different after all, and that goes for what is just and what is folly, both. Let my people reveal themselves as is our tradition: when they wish to be seen, only then shall it be so," Legolas continued, his voice gathering a quality of resolute finality by the time he concluded. His arms relaxed and he leaned back to see Elrond's face. "Can you accept that, Elrond?" It wasn't exactly a challenge, but it certainly bore a passing resemblance to an ultimatum.

The Lord of Imladris bridled, unused to having to bend to anyone's demands. Compromise and discourse he welcomed as long as everyone accepted that he would have the final say. That would not be the case here, plainly, and it didn't sit well upon his dignity. "It seems I have no choice," he
complained and disengaged from Legolas, standing and donning his bathing gown, back turned to
the tub and its occupant. He wanted to look and see what the sylvan's reaction was, but refrained,
heading from the chamber in silence. From the bath came the musical slosh and splash of Legolas
exiting the water but no naked, wet Elf bounded after him to plead for pardon. Elrond sat heavily at
his dressing table and began a listless attempt at grooming his hair, eyes locked on the reflection of
the bathroom door behind him. It was a minute or two before Legolas emerged, radiating wounded
discontent and disappointment from every pore.

He strode to his wardrobe and quietly withdrew his clothes, dressing without a word and quickly.
His hair he snatched into a snarled tail bound at the nape of his neck. Quiver and bow were drawn
forth; the low, leather boots were stepped into, and then out came his pack. In it he shoved an extra
set of clothes and a toiletries kit, all in grim silence. He knew Elrond had risen from the mirror and
watched him, pale and stricken, but made no move to face him until the quiver was fastened tight.
Then he turned, his stance implacable, his posture defensive, and raised his sorrowful eyes to his
mate's frightened grey ones.

"I will tell you this much: they are already here. Fennas made sure of their alarm and they rode the
horses practically to collapse to get to me with all haste. I have already been to them and tried to
explain to my Adar how things are between us, but he says only that he will make his own
judgement. That is his way. It is customary for the suitor, meaning you, to present a gift to the father
and mother. Though we are already bound, you must honour this tradition, and many more, if you
hope to gain their favour. Ask for Lindir's help that it may be suitable; I will go now to them.
Tomorrow at annûn we will arrive at your gates." He gave a brief nod, a gesture more formal and
impersonal and dismissive than anything he'd ever shown to Elrond before, and turned on his heel
for the door.

It stole Elrond's breath away and left his thoughts spinning wildly. Legolas was leaving again. He'd
just gone through the door. He was leaving to be with his family. He had been with his family, not
the twins. NOT the twins! Lindir's warning about judging Legolas harshly on account of the multiple
bond rang through his mind. He would drive Aearen away, straight to Elladan and Elrohir, if he
nursed this grudge. An unfounded grudge.

With a strangled gasp of terror Elrond bounded after him. "Wait! Aearen!" he shouted, unnecessarily
as Legolas was just beyond the door. He caught up with him on the balcony, for of course he'd
waited, of course he was standing there, bow gripped so tight his nails would surely leave dark
maroon moons in the flesh of his fist, fear and hope advancing and retreating in waves through his
eyes, as he watched Elrond dash forward. There the noble Lord halted, less than an arm's span
between them yet the distance seemed a great gulf, an abyss into which their fragile happiness might
easily to topple.

"Aye?" asked Legolas, the word soft, entreating.

"Please, I just want to say…I'm not angry, not really, not at all." I'm terrified that I'm losing you.
"Legolas, I don't want you to go!" Elrond burst out, ready to burst into hysterical tears. "I can't bear
your absence. Whatever you wish, so let it be, only don't go away now, not now, beloved, after
you've only just returned to me. You said you wouldn't; you promised." His vision blurred as the first
drops rolled over his brimming lids and he blinked to clear it. In the second they were closed, he
missed the sylvan's fleet advance and called out in joy and gratitude as he was enveloped in a
possessive, appeasing hold.

"I won't; I'm not," insisted Legolas with gentle compassion. "I will abide a time if it will ease your
heart, for in truth I am weary and want nothing more than to rest in your arms. Yet, they will have
me with them when they come to meet you; that is proper and indeed a concession, for by rights
Adar could demand I remain under his eye until the wedding. If not for the babe so it would be, but he saw how it is for me and that I need you."

This was a far more palatable way of explaining the situation and Elrond relaxed, clinging to his Wood Elf for all he was worth as sobs jolted them both. He'd been grieving in truth and this was the body's means of expelling the sickness, so that the poisonous despair might be driven from his blood.

"You need me?" Elrond asked between hiccups. "You love me still?"

"Always and forever," Legolas breathed, his body moulding itself around the taller Elf, offering support should Elrond need it. He settled innumerable kisses into the dark hair against his face.

In time Elrond quieted and they stood locked together, swaying in harmonious accord, both Elves infused with relief and awe, conscious of the fragility of their hearts' bond and thus moved anew to cherish and protect it.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Dusk, the following Day ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

It was a common enough legend among mortal kind that the stately home of Elrond Half-elven, and in fact his entire realm, was swathed in obscurity, rendered inconspicuous by some incomprehensible power, a place described at times as a variety of twilit limbo open only to the few granted such grace by the magnanimity of the First-born dwelling there. It was a place shrouded in mystery, an area many might seek and never find, if their purpose was but the glory of discovery, while those in dire need would happen upon it all at once without ever having consciously sought for the gates. Much that was known for truth in Imladris faded into myth by the haphazard re-telling of Men and Dwarves, yet no Elf, not even those from distant Mithlond, would have any trouble finding their way to the protected vale. That being said, it was still customary, even if the visitor had received formal invitation, to openly present oneself and make official petition begging leave to cross the border. The Wood Elves had not done so. They were simply present, an ominous, critical presence.

To be entirely fair, their arrival hadn't been solicited with anything like a formal appeal. Legolas had contacted his people and now they were here, all outside the normal functions particular to one state recognising another with notions of alliance and accord to be fostered. The ruler of neither realm had taken part in the prelude to the historic encounter, what must surely become as much a dialogue between nations as a meeting of in-laws to be. That it was only now as the time for the momentous event was upon him, the grounds of the estate festooned in rather more lavish fashion than that which had marked Ened Ethuil and the marriage of Denethor and Finduilas, the decorations rich in glitter and velvet, in regal colours, in mithril and gold, down to the long gilded expanse of silk carpeting the steps right to the very dirt, that the valley's revered leader considered this important point and wondered how the kinsman to the King would take such an oversight. It evoked the hope that the massive turnout, for nearly everyone, noble and common, was there, and the decorations, all arranged according to the advice of Lindir, would attest to the high honour with which the son of Eärendil held the guests.

That was really the question everyone had come to have answered: who was the more honoured party, the House of the Mariner or the fey folk of the Woodland Realm.

Elrond stood at the top of the ornate marble stairway leading from the main courtyard of the Last
Homely House to its perpetually opened front doors. They were massive doors, carved of a grey and white limestone that boasted a crazed agglomeration of shells and tubes and branching whorls, remnants of the once living stuff comprising the rock, intermingled with glittering crystals of sparite where time had permitted the mineral to grow to appreciable size. The relief work wrought upon this natural masterpiece, consisting of a stylised, interlocking border in the swan's wing motif of the Elven Lord's House, was meant to enhance and direct notice to the inherent beauty of the stone. First time visitors always remarked on the jumbled mass of ancient, broken life and wondered at it, for such things could be found only beneath the shallow coastal waters of the sea and that was far to the west of Imladris.

Elrond always let Erestor explain it, knowing his cousin enjoyed any sort of academic discussion pertaining to the days before the Awakening when Melkor wreaked havoc upon the fruition of Aulë and Ulmo's design for Arda, uplifting lands that had lain beneath the water while forcing the currents of the oceans to shift in new directions. Legolas, the Lord of Imladris suddenly realised, had never asked about the strange assortment of structures embedded in the doors and wondered if that was because he already knew or simply didn't care to find out. Or perhaps he didn't want to show himself ignorant and uneducated by asking. That was possible, in that it would be Erestor he would have been directed to query, yet Elrond didn't think this was the reason. He was convinced that it was because the Wood Elf had already seen such rock before and understood its origin.

This was a new perspective on the sylvan archer and one that would not have occurred to him as little as three months ago. It had never entered Elrond's mind, before, to wonder what Legolas did and didn't know, preferring to assume it was little, or at least substantially less than the standard comprehension of the workings of the world common to the Noldorin folk. He wondered to himself whether the altered view was due to his efforts to become more open-minded or influenced instead by the fresh information regarding Legolas' unexpected membership among the noble Sindarin clans of Doriath. He frowned; the answer wasn't flattering to him. Much as he might wish to deny it, his attitude toward his young mate had changed since this fact's revelation.

He sighed, framed in the open expanse of the doors, garbed in his richest robes, mithril circlet pressed atop the intricate braids of his beloved Aearen's House, austere in stately elegance and dignity, hands clasped before him in patient repose while his thoughts ran in circles and his heart occasionally leaped and then faltered in turns as the idea of seeing Legolas as he really was broke over him, followed by the miserable realisation that this nervous sort of excitation was exactly what his mate didn't want. Yet no matter how unpalatable the truth was, one couldn't pretend, not with Legolas. The archer knew he'd lost the battle between his personality and his position, for the time being, and had seemed resigned to overlook Elrond's intensified felicity. Elrond couldn't help the shift in demeanour any more than he could resist being curious and Legolas seemed content to accept it without a return of his initial affront.

Is that because he feels remorse for keeping me in the dark or because he is testing my character? Will this all yield some horrific, unsealable breach between us? Elbereth, I can bear no more of those!

He would know soon enough, for the day was fast closing and sunset was surely only minutes away. Even so, no sign of any Elves had been noted either by the border guards or the townsfolk. Indeed, Glorfindel's best scouts hadn't turned up any indications of where, when, or how the Mirkwood contingent had managed to cross the bounds of the realm unseen.

This proved a supreme embarrassment to the revered general, though he was not one to let it show or foist it upon others to bear on his behalf. He hadn't the canny craft of creeping so legendary among the sylvans; he could not instruct others in a skill he did not possess. Glorfindel would not take any of his elite warriors to task for failing to spot the interlopers. He would most likely, however, have
many questions for this wily Sindarin fox who'd led his folk, an untold number of warriors, assorted relatives, servants (assumed as it was now known Legolas' people were nobility), and enough horses to bear them all and the supplies such a group would require, into the heart of Imladris without stirring so much as a mote of dust in passing. Whoever Legolas' Adar was, Glorfindel already felt considerable respect for the Elf.

The Balrog-slayer stood to Elrond's left and just a step behind him, impressively dressed in his most formal uniform of maroon tunic over dove grey leggings; sword and scabbard at his side and high, black boots polished to a crisp, military sheen that would have pleased Gil-galad himself. His golden hair was simply confined as befitted a warrior, yet upon his brow was an abbreviated diadem bearing the emblem of the noonday sun, the crest of his ancient House. None would take him for anything less than what he was and his assurance of this was not vanity but forthright honesty. Glorfindel did not hold with false modesty anymore than he espoused vainglorious conceit; he would not misrepresent himself to either side of the scale and considered it a matter of honour. He was justly proud of his lineage and unwavering in his estimation of his value to Imladris; no one worth considering would hold him at fault for either view.

Thus, he was rather displeased with Legolas for holding out on his true place in the world. In Glorfindel's mind, he'd been played for a fool and it didn't set well in his craw to imagine That Wood Elf secretly laughing at him. It was a childish kind of vindication for the lack of respect the sylvan had been given, for surely that respect would have been easier to gain had Legolas revealed his antecedents long ago. Still, Glorfindel could never forget how horrible that entire first year had been and this protracted illness and agony did much to mitigate his anger. He had come to realise, from talks with Lindir, that the anguish wasn't all physical by any means nor had it ceased after the bodily wounds had finally healed. He sighed; there was much more to be regretted and pardoned for on his part than on Legolas', this he was honour-bound to acknowledge, and so in the end he came to grudging acceptance that he'd probably earned, many times over, the role of the fool.

Yet not more than Erestor. The thought gave him a little peace, glad that he had never engaged in the kind of randy gossiping and secretive craving the seneschal had indulged. Glorfindel glanced sideways at his friend, noting that the Chief Advisor appeared cool and collected; no hint of discomfort or worry clouded his inscrutable visage, no hesitant, flustered nervousness limned his aristocratic aura. It suddenly struck Glorfindel as a great incongruity that the esteemed Lord's cousin was, as Lindir had remarked, such a terrible card player. He tried to stifle a laugh and it escaped through his nose, just a little, but enough to draw Elrond's predictably rebuking glower and Erestor's equally expected arched brow and appraising stare.

Dressed with as much elegance and refinement as his kinsman, the seneschal stood shoulder to shoulder beside Elrond, the only blood kin present for the twins had not turned up and it was yet too soon for Arwen to have made it from Lorien, even given the speed with which she must have flown upon reading the dire pronouncement in her Adar's letter begging her to come. Erestor was the consummate statesman and would never betray even a brief flutter of indecision or doubt, not in public, not before visiting dignitaries, not among the nobles of Imladris, and especially not to the rank and file of the valley's general population. It was unthinkable that he would do so in the presence, or as it was just now, the absence of the Mirkwood Elves. That he felt these emotions, uncertainty and apprehension, and others more potent besides, was something he hoped to keep buried deeper than the bottom of the abyssal sea.

Erestor suppressed a sigh and took mental inventory of his status, willing himself to present only the compelling, mysterious, and intimidating persona he had long ago developed, one based on the manner and attitude of his noble patron and guardian, Maedhros. The eldest son of Feänor had seen horrors and known grief enough to destroy lesser Elves, yet his outer face never hinted of such privations of the soul. He had continued to lead his people and attempted to mitigate his sins by
compassionate warding of the twin sons of Eärendil and their orphaned cousin. It had struck Erestor early on that this demeanour of acute reserve was an important and worthy survival tactic and he'd adopted it, or at least the desire of achieving it, at once. When he'd finally mastered the attitude of being aloof yet powerful, cool yet dangerous, subtle yet misunderstood at one's peril, he couldn't really say. He had done so; that's all that mattered, and Erestor was never more glad of it than today.

It wouldn't do for anyone to find out how deep his fears ran, for he had done the most to undermine Legolas' position in Imladris. What form of penance The Sylvan's Adar would exact he could not fathom, except that it would not be pleasant, and every time he thought on it, which was constantly now that he was standing here awaiting the Elf's arrival, chills rippled through his entire being. Memories of the siege of Baradur during the Last Alliance assailed him, images of the wild ferocity of the Wood Elves, driven, some of them, to madness at the sight of loved ones cut down by Sauron's minions. They entered a state of disassociation, almost a form of Ólpathu, but a deadly one in which every instinct against killing was removed. He had seen individual warriors charge entire Platoons of Orcs, ignore the injuries as they were hacked to pieces, continuing to fight until their blood was literally spent, sacrificing themselves to avenge the death of a loved one. To have such fury directed upon him, even a lesser version of it, was not a comfortable proposition.

From the furthest edges of his peripheral vision, a sudden glint as of light reflecting off polished metal caught Erestor's eye and made him briefly flinch in spite of himself. He refused to turn his head to look, however, for he felt the blinding flash was deliberately directed upon him, for it came from the lengthening rays of the retreating sun playing over the surface of Lindir's favourite gold and mithril plated lyre. Erestor would NOT look, for that was exactly what the minstrel wanted and had worn that scandalously scanty outfit he'd sported on the night of Ened Ethuil. Obviously, the singer still carried a grudge, a preposterous notion and completely unjustified as the seneschal had not tendered him anything but the pleasure of his company and the indication that he might wish their new accord to continue and deepen.

Hah! What a fool I truly was to imagine him a fit companion for me. I am the one who should feel insulted and ill-used. Erestor did feel that way, yet a small segment of his conscience remained active, chiding that his old prejudices had come into play and Lindir's reaction was in line with the insult he'd been dealt. Erestor suppressed a sigh as Elrond exhaled one, finding his cousin's baleful eye upon him for an instant. This subdued yet continuous altercation between him and the minstrel was something Elrond would rather not have to contend with at the moment. Steeling himself, Erestor turned his head slightly and directed his gaze upon the harpist.

"Forgive me, Lindir, for intruding upon your efforts to maintain a pleasant atmosphere, but your harp is directing the sun to shine in my eyes with painful intensity. Would you mind changing your location just a bit?" asked Erestor with forced courtesy and an even less genuine smile.

Lindir laughed merrily and bowed, shifting to the other side of the veranda in a swirl of gauzy emerald cloth and golden hair. He leaned against one of the columns and tuned his lyre carefully, fingers verily itching to pluck the notes of the song he'd written for Legolas, one of many the fair archer had inspired as it turned out. The minstrel was still the only resident of Imladris, barring the trees, who knew the Wood Elf's real identity and the singer was prepared to enjoy the afternoon's revelation with considerable relish. Finally, these haughty high Elves would see something really regal, truly majestic. He gazed out upon the gathering, a considerable one for the entire household had turned out in their very best garments and a good portion of the valley's nobles had been invited to appear in the courtyard to meet the visitors.

The aristocrats had all taken pains to wear the many signs and insignia particular to their Houses and of course to display whatever decorations they might have received for valour in a time of conflict. They were glorious, but there was a distinct tinge of self-consciousness about them that proved just
how intrigued and worried they were. Lindir could verily feel it in the breeze, a palpable apprehension arising from the very breath they exhaled: would the Wood Elf turn out to be their equal in rank? If so, they were guilty of unspeakably dishonourable behaviour.

Word had mysteriously gotten around, as it always did in Imladris, and now pretty much everyone knew that Legolas was not just a simple archer from Mirkwood. Lindir had to admit he'd had a hand in that and smiled; even with the idea now flourishing that their Lord's mate was anything but common, the folk of the valley had no inkling of how far from this description Legolas was in truth. *Or rather, by birth, for he is by nature modest and unassuming in manner and that is a credit both to his character and his parents. It was this quality that so often captured the singer's admiration and respect, even more than the decidedly romantic twists and turns of his relationship with Elrond. There was no doubt that the latter had at last captured the imagination of the populace and even Elrond's peers could not pretend to be indifferent regarding their leader's quick descent into grief upon Legolas' recent disappearance.

*Everyone takes it seriously now.* Which thought made the minstrel both glad and disappointed in the folk of the Protected Vale, for it bespoke a meanness of spirit, an inability to be open to the love between the Lord and the archer until disaster threatened to remove Elrond from them. *Removing Legolas, that was never a catastrophe before, in their collective view, and yet it would be one even if Elrond was unmoved by the loss at all.* It bothered Lindir that so many still failed to equate Legolas' intrinsic value, separate from Elrond, independent of his rank and station in life. Lindir strummed a lovely introductory chord to announce a song upon the horizon and let the notes and lyrics carry him down the stairs to stroll among the gathered people.

He sang in Nandorin, having practised his native tongue diligently over the last few weeks, spending time with Legolas during which neither spoke anything else. Lindir was pleased to consider himself fluent once more, though he could not deny that his pronunciation was coloured by the lengthy years of conversing only in Sindarin. The words themselves were grand and told of the beauty and might of Tawar, the Great Wood that had sheltered the sylvan Elves since the time of the Journey. The melody carried within it the solemn dignity with which the woodland folk cloaked their revered trees and was filled with the abiding love and trust the people felt for the forest, and which the forest in turn felt for its elven inhabitants. It was a hauntingly beautiful, ethereal hymn and an ancient one, something Lindir remembered hearing as a very small child hardly old enough to climb amid the lower limbs of Region.

Everyone smiled as he passed through the crowd and Lindir delighted in the adoration of his adopted people. They still loved him, sylvan though he'd turned out to be; perhaps even loved him more for now he was something unknown and mysterious dwelling right in their midst, willing to reveal and explain the conundrum for their pleasure and entertainment. He strolled along the gentle curve where the courtyard gave way to the broad, slate-paved surface of the estate's main avenue, nodding now and then to a particular patron or two. He ambled in leisurely pace down to the gates, once again thrown open as they should always be, and gazed as he sang upon the multitude arranged in quiet expectation along either side of the hard-packed clay road beyond. Then Lindir's fingers stilled upon the strings and his voice died away to a whisper, for he thought he had heard something in the distance, something like the light, chanting carol that arose from a small, swift freshet.

His sudden cessation garnered even more notice than his talent and skill together could command, and every eye found him, then moved to find what it was he'd noticed. A tense, expectant hush filled the place for a moment and then they all heard it: the very song he'd been rendering but offered in the full, rich splendour of the people for whom it was so much more than music. It was as if they sang of their own souls; indeed, the fair voices gave freely the vivace theme of their essence, the Song of the sylvan people just as Eru must surely have meant it to be sung. Upon the next verse, piping flutes and brisk drums and brightly chiming bells joined the voices and the Song became merry and
playful. It was a greeting now instead of a prayer, announcing the arrival of Greenwood's citizens upon this happy occasion, this joyous union of their youngest and most beloved prince to the Lord of Imladris.

Just then Anor slipped below the rim of the looming cliffs, plunging the landscape into that vague, grey light that seemed almost material, startling shades masquerading as mere shadows into revealing themselves and permitting real substance to go unmarked. So it was that out of this eerie gloaming emerged the participants in a grand procession moving along the road: the Wood Elves had arrived.

In front marched a full troop of sturdy warriors, one hundred and twenty strong, four abreast, male and female, all dressed in the customary uniform conducive to warfare among the dense branches, armed with bows and long knives, the vanguard bearing four standards that lay still, obscuring the identity of the people they designated, though of course one must be that of Greenwood itself. They were singing, smiles adorning their faces, and it was impossible, unthinkable to picture them engaged in any conflict. These might as well be hunters returning to home and hearth, not merciless and fearsome killers, and there is no doubt that every resident of Imladris was relieved to see it.

Behind them were musicians, though some of the warriors had the strange, double-tubed flutes against their noses, too, and they were as elegantly, if not quite as shockingly, attired as Lindir, the style similar enough to denote it sylvan, unique enough to allow for differences wrought by the separation of time and distance since the Teleri tribes parted at the time of the Journey. These folk were even livelier and more joyful in countenance than the soldiers and instead of marching they danced and whirled in a fantastically intricate reel that somehow yet moved them forward in time to the rhythm of the rising song. There were quite a number of these frolicking minstrels, perhaps a third the number of warriors, and the display was wondrous and drew cheers and laughter and applause from the Imladrian folk lining the road.

Inside the courtyard, the nobles and the Elven Lord's household began to murmur in excitement, straining necks and going up onto tiptoes to try and see what all the fuss was about. They had little time to wonder, however, for the warriors' pace was brisk and they soon entered the courtyard, dividing to form a sort of inner wall that framed either side of the broad, silk-lined steps, effectively placing their bodies as a shield between the assembled folk and the place where their Lord would soon arrive. With smart precision and a word of order, they turned in unison and came to strict attention, all joviality gone in an instant.

It was something that Glorfindel found highly laudable and he smiled, giving a quick nod to the recognised captain of these fine troops. Something about the tall Elf struck the Balrog-slayer as familiar and he wondered if this was one of Legolas' kin. The warrior only dipped his head in equal acknowledgement, sombre and serious as befitted his station and the gravity of the situation, for it was clearly upon his shoulders that the safety of his Lord rested. A sudden thrill ran through the Balrog-slayer, for the slight motion of the soldier's head opened his eyes to the source of the similarity: the braids. It was the same pattern Legolas used, the same pattern now woven into Elrond's midnight tresses. Here then in fact was a member of the sylvan's family, but there was no more about him that marked him as nobility than one could discover in Legolas, and that was absolutely nothing. While Glorfindel pondered that, the procession advanced.

The minstrels did not roll pell mel into the midst of the courtyard but dispersed before entering the gate, some remaining to mingle with the common folks outside them, others swarming onto the porch and forming up an ensemble of more formal proportions. The gay tune ceased and all was silent for a second or two as they tuned plaintive instruments and murmured together, welcoming Lindir into their orchestra as if he'd always belonged there. When next they played, it was a gloriously stately piece, a score of measured solemnity that carried in it the pride of a nation and the dignity of its people. There could be no doubt of the tone of the music; it called for straight backs and lifted chins
and respectful, dutiful adoration; it called for recognition of some great personage. All eyes turned to
the gates as mixed within the full and sonorous notes arose the 'ohs' and 'ahs' and other inarticulate
exclamations of a stunned, appreciatively and soberly stunned, throng.

Yet when the first riders came into the semicircular arms of the warriors, they were Fennas,
Mithrandir, and a different Elf no one in Imladris knew. Just these three. Was this unknown Elf
Legolas' Adar? Every single mind wondered. He was certainly noble in appearance, as much as
Fennas if not more, wearing garb that was not the familiar robes of the Noldorin Lords nor the
abbreviated cloaks and tunics preferred by the Sindarin nobles, yet still was obviously suitable for
nothing beyond the most formal of functions. The cloth was fine, the manufacture perfection itself,
the adornment of jewels and precious metals opulent. Woodland Elf or not, here was someone
important. The trio rode forward and halted before the golden cloth, dismounting there and handing
off their mounts to waiting hostlers who darted out from somewhere and as quickly departed with the
steeds in tow. The three advanced to the first step where they bowed low to Elrond, who returned the
honour. Then the wizard spoke:

"Lord Elrond, Lord Erestor, Lord Glorfindel, permit me to introduce Galion, seneschal and Principal
Advisor to Aran Thranduil of Greenwood. Fennas you have already met." This told them straight
away that Legolas' Adar was important indeed and that Galion was not him. It also revealed the
Istar's discontent with Fennas, who had caused Legolas worries by telling news the young archer had
preferred to deliver in his own manner.

Elrond stepped forward, following Lindir's detailed instructions to the letter, and descended to the
third step from the bottom. Erestor and Glorfindel came after and halted on the fourth. "Mae
Govannen, Galion of Greenwood. Welcome to Imladris. I extend to you and all in your company the
hospitality of my House. Allow me to present to you my kinsman and your counterpart, Erestor of
Imladris, and Glorfindel of Gondolin, Master at Arms for the Valley's Guard."

"Suilad, Hiren, suilad," and that was all he said. Either there was no salutary response required by
sylvan custom or the Mirkwood seneschal was snubbing Elrond horribly.

Galion passed his critical eye over them each in turn, unabashedly weighing them against his
imagined characterisations, assimilating where the reality diverged, smiling in a manner that was
more an impression of such a facial arrangement than any actual realignment of muscles. He
managed, in spite of this, to project an aura of smug complacency as if they were all much as he'd
expected and that was rather less than impressive. A minute sigh exited his nostrils and his brows
lifted just a fraction from their normal repose as he surveyed the façade of the elegant abode; this at
least met with his approval. He turned and glanced over the collection of lords and dignitaries,
struggling to maintain their dignified posture whilst straining to see around the wall of sylvan
warriors, and smirked. With a toss of his head he sent his long mane of nutmeg coloured hair
sweeping behind him, gave a quick nod to the musicians, and faced the gates.

A bright, bold clarion of horns sounded, though no one had noticed the musicians had them, a sound
clear and beautiful and strong. It rose in grandeur and majesty and as it rose it uplifted every spirit
with it, each note of the fanfare tumbling upon the next in a manner that was not quite military yet
not frivolous or affected in any sense, and withal still expressive of jubilant glory and passion. It was
a hunter's call, enhanced and exalted beyond its initial utility, but still bearing in its soul the exultant
tension and triumph of the chase. It was noble, majestic, and regal as was the party the flourish
announced.

As the diminishing overtones drifted away upon the dusky air, Galion stepped into the center of the
courtyard. He took a deep breath and sang out as loudly as his vocal chords could manage: "Lasto!
Lasto! Lasto enni, Hir ar Hiril ar pân gwaith vaer od Imladris! Alae! Sî Thranduil Oropheron, Aran
Into the courtyard of the last Homely House rode Thranduil, King of the Wood Elves.

He sat tall upon his charger, stern and proud, straight backed and broad shouldered, a soldier first and foremost with a great broadsword belted to his fine, royal clothes. He was fair in a way only the Elves could ever be and yet there emanated from him a strength and presence that was seldom found in any but First Age survivors. That dynamic quality evoked in others a conflicting need for distance whilst yearning for his recognition, a desire to please him while simultaneously dreading to meet his eyes for fear of being found wanting and insufficient. All this he managed to inspire in a few minor beats of the heart, and this with a crown of wildflowers worn upon his brow.

Somehow, it did not seem incongruous to see it there; somehow, it was more fitting that a circlet of gold of a diadem of mithril set with gems would be. Lurking just beneath the austere surface displayed resided a nature abounding in goodwill, merriment, and fundamental generosity. Here was an Elf who loved to laugh and for whom a good joke was a precious commodity, and one had the impression that he wouldn't mind a bit if the joke was occasionally on him. Perhaps it was the sparkle lighting his vibrant blue eyes that told on him, revealing he was not above finding humour in playing upon the contradictions his manner presented, hence the flowers at such a serious meeting when he might have just as easily worn nothing on his head and still have commanded equal notice.

He was not alone, of course, and three Elves rode beside him. To his right was an elegant elleth, more traditionally dressed in clothing now recognisable to the Imladrian folk as sylvan, as beautiful as a winter night, as if the crisp clarity of the stars, the sharp sting of the frigid air, and the graceful, peaceful silence of pristine snow had somehow coalesced incarnate and taken on this exquisite form; that is the impact one felt from her at once. Thranduil was the summer and Rhûn'waew was the winter, opposites so complimentary one could not imagine the existence of one and not the other. Upon her brow and over her hair reposed an elegant mantel, a woven network of some fine silken stuff dotted with glimmering red gems and coquettish little florets of polished mithril that winked and flashed even in the failing light.

Peeking through this lovely mesh, an ornament none in the fair valley had ever imagined and soon to be copied throughout the vale by every elleth, her tresses drew as much notice as her face, for its hue was so wholly unexpected that it was shocking. Her hair was blacker than a raven's, darker than that midnight sky that somehow lived within her eyes, inkier than Elrond's. The long strands lay cool and motionless, bound beneath the wimple, yet this only gave the impression that such restraint was necessary for the purity of the colour was achieved by reflection of every shade of light possible and this energy must affect all who would look upon it fully. One just knew her hair would shimmer and dance under the rays of Anor, giving off glimpsing hints of vibrant emerald, azure, and gold.

On this Winter Queen's right hand rode another tall, golden haired male, so similar to Thranduil the relationship was guaranteed to be close. Here was no distant cousin and indeed, this was the couples' eldest grandson, taking his rightful place as heir due to the tragedy of his Adar's death: Galbreth's first born, Aras. He was grim and pensive, lacking the underlying mirth that marked his grand-sire, this no doubt a consequence of the grief that so obviously clouded the very air he breathed. It robbed him of something essential, something vital to his spirit, and it made every heart cringe in sympathy. It was clear enough he was fighting against fading and had not as yet come to a point when victory was assured. The simple band of woven gold and mithril circling his forehead might yet pass to his son, and this was the one dark note sounding through the glorious Song of this fine figure.

Now on the King's left hand rode someone we all know well, and hard pressed was he to rein in his pride and exhilaration to at last to be among his family and to present them in all their majesty and glory for everyone to see. Gone were the humble hunter's clothes of green and brown, the untidy...
tresses, and the low, soft boots. Legolas returned to his beloved a prince, dressed with the same style as his father and nephew, the cloth rich and embellished with jewels and embroidery in threads of gold. His fine flaxen hair was neatly braided in the manner particular to his House and over the precisely woven rows rested a delicate circlet of wild flowers just like his Adar's; certainly a shared jest between them meant to defray some of the nervous tension he surely felt. His bow and quiver, for these he would not ever forego, were new and much more ornate than the ones he'd made for daily use amid Imladris' Guard. He sat his horse with great dignity, his carriage and demeanour more refined and discerning than he had ever presented before, yet beneath could be detected an untenable mixture of insecurity and faith.

When at last Elrond's eyes, bulging with disbelieving amazement for all they had been asked to register, rested upon him, looked him over and then did so again, meeting his at last, questioning yet admiring, confused but pleased to find him there among these great people, Legolas could withhold his joy no longer. His face transformed into that beatific smile that fairly stole the Elven Lord's breath every time he saw it, realising it was only for him. He smiled back, beamed back, not caring for that instant what all this meant and how Legolas figured into the tableau before him. There was his beloved Aearen, more beautiful and noble and elegant and happier than he had ever imagined he could be.

Well, Glorfindel was not awestruck in love and he did not fail to comprehend the relationship presented before him. Neither did Erestor and the two shared a long look, faces equally pale, harrowed eyes mirroring each other, mouths gaping wide almost in unison before snapping shut the next instant. Their fears confirmed, each turned their troubled expressions upon their Lord and tried to get his attention, for they had each taken notice that Thranduil, Legolas, and the tall, grieving Elf all sported the identical pattern of plaiting in their hair. Now even with this fact in their possession, our worthy Imladrian nobles were not yet able to make the leap and see that Thranduil was the Elf for whom they were searching, their attention focusing instead upon the tall, woebegone ellon beside the Winter Queen. It made sense; Fennas had mentioned to Erestor how close had been the brush with fading for Legolas' father. Before they could attempt to go any further in their deductions, a unique interruption diverted them.

The warriors called out a stirring accolade in Nandorin and drew their hunting knives. One against the other they struck the flat of their blades, neighbour turning and meeting the Elf to his or her right, switching back and forth, half dance and half a sort of training kata, sounding a strangely ringing tattoo that swept through the double lines from first to last and then back again, the blades lifting higher with each pass. On and on it went, interspersed with occasional calls from the captain whereupon a change in the pattern would ensue, initiating a shift in tempo and an increase in the tone of the clashing swords, a wave of motion reverberating with the clang of metal on metal that ended with another rousing shout as every knife slid back into its sheath in perfect synchrony, every warrior in his or her proper place, still and silent and proud.

In the quietude that followed, the Elven King and the Elven Lord locked eyes, each giving and receiving due recognition, for of course they knew one another, measuring the changes since last they'd met, warily appraising each other as would any worthy opponents. There was certainly something like a spark of anger that glinted within the golden King's azure glare and this in turn prompted Elrond to conjure up his most haughty and coolly dismissive brand of bland observation, as if he were looking at some unpleasant sort of bug. Thranduil's spark ignited into a bright flare, but the Winter Queen poked her toe roughly into her husband's calf, which is the same as saying she kicked him, a threatening sort of non-glare transforming her serene expression into one if intense admonition. Well, that effectively broke the staring match and things began to move forward again.

The King dismounted and turned to aid his Lady to alight. Aras joined them but it was Legolas who stole the scene, for he could not help himself. He leaped from his charger, all decorum and dignity
cast aside, and raced for the steps, laughing as he flung himself into Elrond's open arms, sealing their smiling lips together in a passionate kiss that raised approving cheers and hoots from the warriors, an indulgent smile from Rhûn'waew, a pursing of the lips from the King, and soft laughter and muted applause from the Imladrians. He disengaged and stood back, grasping tight to Nín'ódhel's hands, smiling with mischievous delight.

"Well," he said, "it turns out I am half-Sindarin after all." Then he lowered his voice for Elrond's hearing only and leaned forward. "What did you get for my Ada? I hope it is not a jewel; he has an abundance of those."

Elrond could only gape at him in dismay, eyes slowly dragging themselves away to watch the monarch and his queen approaching, for that of course clarified things for him. It was good that Aearen held on so tight, for without the connection Elrond was sure he would have collapsed in an insensible heap upon the steps.

TBC

~ ~ **Glossary** ~ ~

Aderthad: reunion
Rhûn'waew: East Wind
Aras: deer, stag
Lasto! Lasto! Lasto enni, Hîr ar Hîril ar pân gwaith vaer od Imladris! Alae! Šî Thranduil Oropheron, Aran od Eryngalen Daer an uir! Listen! Listen, Listen to me, Lords and Ladies and all good people of Imladris! Behold! Here is Thranduil, son of Oropher, King of Greenwood the Great for eternity!

saes, ha naegra: please, it hurts
Tarlanc: stiff-necked, stubborn
Lechenn: Sindarin word for Noldor elves.
Fennas: Doorway
Tinu Mîn: our little star

**NOTE:** TADAHH! Thranduil and Co are here! Hope this works for everyone as a good stopping point. There are so many surprises in store I can't dare write much here. Just take note of that little mention of the twins and Legolas' thoughts, for they reveal the truth. OK, I'll just tell you, the twins are in the valley and they were indeed with Legolas during his sudden disappearance. That should be a fun scene to write and I hope to read, but I couldn't get to it this time around. I don't plan to start with that episode next time, though, so that interval may have to pop up as an extra or something. Got to move on!

AS always, my deepest thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!

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The King of the Woodland Realm advanced until he was within two arm spans of the steps and halted, Rhun'waew's delicate, pale fingers draped over his wrist, Aras' quiet presence surveying the scene over his shoulder. Thranduil's eyes flickered over Elrond, Erestor, and Glorfindel, amusement and hostility at war within his heart, though none observing him would ever suspect the depth of his outrage. There was no doubt at all that his youngest son had scored a tremendous psychological coup upon these upstanding and revered folk, these noble legends, these historic figures paramount in so many tales of import concerning the history of the First-born. To see them so completely flummoxed was certainly humorous, yet it was also impossible to ignore the reasons Legolas had designed the scam. This lay at the centre of a father's rancour toward those who had hurt his child, shamed him, brought him down so low that Legolas had feared to contact his family. The King's gaze transferred to his youngest son, meeting eyes filled with imploring desperation, so worried that something dreadful was going to happen, so anxious to appease, and for the moment Thranduil could do no less than let his anger go.

For the moment.

Instead, he permitted the comical aspects of this encounter to command his attention, catching Galion's eye for a swift exchange of silent mirth as the pair studied the tableau. The venerable reborn Balrog-slayer, whom the King was secretly excited to meet, Glorfindel being a childhood hero, was repeatedly tapping the Lord of the Valley on the arm, an expression adorning the Vanyarin warrior's features that could only be described as apprehensive wonder. Wily Erestor, renowned even in the remotest outposts of the Greenwood's northern boundaries as an astute and matchless statesman (excepting Galion of course), was leaning close to his kinsman, owlish eyes darting from Thranduil to his Queen to Aras to Legolas and back again, muttering in Elrond's ear, a distinctly frantic caste to his cool grey gaze while his Elvish aura spiked with raw terror every time his vision connected with the King's. Thranduil noted that and stored the insight away for later, certain the seneschal's distress must pertain to Legolas, for to his knowledge Thranduil had no history with the Lachenn statesman.

So gossip was accurate on this point, at least. Erestor must contribute personally to the compensation.

The King had to exert effort to hold back his resurgent anger and remain at peace, but he did so upon resting his sight upon Legolas once more. His youngest had suffered and Thranduil had inadvertently added to that ongoing misery when meeting his son again, spewing forth a ranting diatribe against the Elf Lord once the initial, tearfully joyful welcomes were done. The damage caused would not be easy to repair but Thranduil would succeed; he must find means to accept this Lachenn who so completely held Legolas' heart and soul. It required but a minute readjustment to shift his attention to Elrond, for Legolas was still clinging to the august ruler in a manner the strict father did not exactly approve. The lovers had not let go of one another since Legolas' undignified dismount, tearing cross the yard to embrace his intended much too intimately for public display. The Sindarin monarch's frown faded a bit as he took in Elrond's status, pleased to find the Elf so perplexed and bewildered. The mighty Lord of Imladris was absolutely stunned into dazed detachment, incapable of accepting the facts before his eyes, his normal demeanour of gracious, if rather haughty, courtesy absent. He might have been any commoner, gaping with mouth ajar at the sight of so many esteemed persons before him, all forms of protocol and ceremony forgotten.
He never asked Legolas about his people.

The thought could not be squelched and a momentary flare of rage charged the air with its intensity. How could he forgive this Lachenn the injuries still so obvious in his young son's anxious eyes? Soft pressure from Rhun'waew's grip calmed him while Aras' aura blazed in reciprocal displeasure. Thranduil breathed in a long slow breath and released it just as carefully, willing his mind to focus on the jocose elements once more.

"Elrond!" The Chief Advisor whispered but the word was audible to all except, apparently, his kinsman. Once more Erestor's sight found the Woodland King's, unable to mask the open trepidation the contact sparked.

Thranduil stifled the urge to snicker, content to wait for his host to regain some semblance of composure and offer welcome; it wasn't proper for a King to make the first greeting. He peered up at the elegant and stately domicile, surveying the refined lines and dramatic arches, the marble balconies and soaring turrets, the porticoes and verandas that made the Last Homely House so splendid. He made no effort to hide his admiration, finding the structure fittingly majestic enough for a Prince of Greenwood, and transferred his scrutiny to the occupants lining the stairs, the porch, the plaza, and the broad avenue. Slowly he passed his regal eye over them, noting carefully who was high-born and who was not, who was in Elrond's employ and who was more than simply a retainer, which among the Sindarin and Noldorin lords were awarded the most noteworthy places in the courtyard and thus must be his closest allies. Each and every one of them were nearly as frightened as Erestor, judging by the high energy emitted from their auras, and thus the King accepted as truth this portion of Fennas' report as well.

*Imladris' best and brightest have indeed shunned and denigrated my son.*

It was easier to swallow his ire over this, for the woodland monarch knew these Lords based their contemptible behaviour upon the example given by their betters. Still, they would have to pay. He smiled in benign condescension to indicate his approval of the welcome he and his people had received, purposely misrepresenting his real evaluation of such hypocrisy, giving a royal nod here and there when a former resident of Doriath was identified by the crest or seal of a familiar House. Finally he resumed his study of the more immediate scene before him, that consisting of Legolas tugging his lethargic mate by the hands, attempting to move him from the spot upon which he was frozen.

Thranduil's grin expanded as he met the Elven Lord's glazed and staring eyes. Behind him, Aras gave the smallest sniff of disdainful deprecation, a tiny sound that was not missed by Legolas, but Thranduil instantly flashed his heir a warning glare. If there was to be any displeasure expressed at this moment, it was not Aras' place to display it, not by word, deed, or countenance. Galbreth's eldest relented, but not before offering his uncle a smile that conveyed a particularly demeaning variety of scornful pity. There passed between the princes a silent moment filled with anger and resentment that coloured the cheerily decorated courtyard with ominous gloom.

It was this small indication of enmity that awakened Elrond, for Legolas became still and wary, his grip turning rigid in a defensive response of anger encumbered with humiliation and disappointment. The Lord of Imladris focused on his mate then, quickly assessing the level of stress this meeting was producing and protectively drew him close, an arm wrapping around his waist, a hand gently covering the small swell at his midsection. Aearen's eyes found his and Elrond offered a reassuring smile that renewed his vow to denounce any voice, be it sylvan, Sindarin, or Noldorin, that would speak ill of their union or their child. He gave substance to the promise and stepped boldly forward, shaking off Glorfindel's insistent nudges and scowling at Erestor's undignified loss of composure.
"Mae Govannen, Aran Thranduil. It is a great honour to my House and my lands to receive you and your people here at the Last Homely House." Elrond bowed graciously as he spoke. "Please, consider my home yours for the duration of your visit, which I pray may be long and pleasurable. May I add, it is with amazed delight that I realise here this evening the exalted lineage to which my beloved belongs. I pray the dignity of my House will prove sufficient to earn your approval and blessing." Beside him, Legolas gave an audible sigh of relief.

"Mae Govannen, Lord Elrond. I thank you for such a courteous welcome." Thranduil bowed also, though not as deeply, sending his agitated son an encouraging smile as he righted himself, pleased by the greeting. Fennas had exaggerated the case, that much was clear, for the distraught father had not missed the sudden alteration in the Noldorin Lord's manner. Elrond responded just as a proper mate should whose goal was to minimise any negative impact upon his life-mate and their unborn babe. Well, to make up for his misjudgement, Thranduil decided to do something he knew would please Legolas and shared a minute wink with his youngest before resuming the salutations.

"On behalf of the people of the Woodland Realm, I accept your hospitality. As for my blessing upon this union, my presence assures it, though that approbation is not based on consideration of your impressively diverse pedigree. In my country, titles and genealogy are less important than skill in battle and service to Tawar. My assent is given to ensure my son's health and happiness, and that of the babe he carries." He paused as a low murmur percolated through the assembled Elves, turning to appraise the mood and finding it less than tolerant. It seemed the folk of Imladris found his disregard of their Lord's elite ancestry insulting. Thranduil's brows quirked up and he rested this inquiring expression upon his host.

"Mellyn, mellyn lasto enni!" Elrond hastily moved to silence his peoples' expression of open displeasure. "Can you not see the honour done to us, to me and my kinfolk? Here stands the King of the Wood Elves, kinsman to Celeborn the Wise, an Elf connected to one of the most prestigious Houses among all elvendom. Is not the son of such an Elf worthy of the best match possible? Aye, and Legolas' hand would be much sought after had fate not sent him here. Even so, Aran Thranduil disregards that fact and places the well-being of his son and nascent grandchild foremost when considering my suit. I am indeed gratified to be recognised as the one Elf capable of securing that important goal of health and happiness."

"Well said!" exclaimed Mithrandir, who had remained silent up to now. "Surely both realms will benefit and both Houses find their ascendancy enhanced by this union," he continued and thus conferred the added blessing of the Valar by proxy.

A few nodding heads and smiling countenances among the nobles endorsed this interpretation of Thranduil's meaning while out on the road before the gates the common folk broke into open applause, adding whistles and shouts of 'Galu erin Noss Roval uin Alph ar Noss Brethil!' and 'Galu bo Legolas, Elrond, ar lín laes!'

That had Legolas smiling and his parents could not help but be pleased to see it. The royal couple shared a warm glance before Thranduil proceeded with his little gift to his son.

"Your words, Mithrandir, are not only gracious but verily prophetic. Good people of Imladris, Lord Elrond Peredhel, permit me to introduce my family. Ernil Aras od Eringalen, my first-born grandson and heir to the dominion of Tawar." The grieving Elf bowed minimally and offered no greeting, which did not seem to disturb the King as he continued. Thranduil stepped back, handing his lovely mate forward, her hand uplifted, poised upon his reverent palm so that she stood apart from him where all could see, as he proudly and loudly pronounced her name and titles for all to hear: "Hiril Arth ar Brand, Bereth od Eringalen Dhaer, Cundiell od Arth Doriath Dannen, Sell Tolothen Edonnen od Eluréd Diorion Thingolion: Rhun'waew o Noss Crebain."
A second of stunned silence gave way as a subdued exclamation of astonishment swept through the courtyard upon this grandiose introduction, followed by the excited murmur of gossiping voices passing the news from mouth to ear out beyond the gates. Not only was the Lord's mate related to royalty, Legolas was royalty, belonging to a lineage arguably as exalted as Elrond's own. If what they had just heard was true, their humble Wood Elf's Naneth, and Legolas himself, must be distant cousins to Lord Elrond. Could it be? Could Rhun'waew truly be a latter-Age product of one of the Lost Princes of Doriath, Dior's son Eluréd, twin to Elurin? Before the whispers grew into a dissonant commotion, the Woodland Queen stepped forward to offer her hand to the revered Lore-master, and all the hubbub died down.

"Kinsman, long have I wished to return and see once more the land of my birth. Elrond, I greet you as a sister and pray you will treat me as such." She was smiling, her dark eyes dancing with amusement and warmth as they took in the Elven Lord's shocked disbelief and her son's ecstatic expression.

"Bereth Rhun'waew, I am astounded by this unexpected link between my people and the folk of Greenwood!" stammered Elrond, taking her hand and bowing low beneath it as he spoke. "We never heard news of my mother's brothers surviving the fall of Doriath. Elwing believed them dead. How has this connection gone so many years without being recognised and celebrated?"

"Ah, that is a tale for later," Rhun'waew evaded the inquiry, "yet, do not call me by any title, for we are truly related by blood and by bond."

"As you say, Rhun'waew," Elrond shot his young mate a questioning glance and could not contain his own pleasure to see how delighted Legolas was to reveal this wondrous news. Unable to resist, he gathered the beaming sylvan to him, linking his arm around the slender waist, pressing a kiss against the fair cheek. "You have brought me many blessings, more than ever I could have imagined, Aearen," he said quietly.

Legolas' aura was practically brilliant as a result of this loving tribute and he made sure both his parents observed it, entwining his arm around Elrond in turn. Before anyone else could comment, however, Aras at last spoke.

"Forgive me, Lord Elrond, but what did you just call my uncle?" he demanded tersely.

"Aras," Thranduil's voice was edged in warning but it did not deter the elder prince.

"Nay, Adar, I would like to understand correctly, for it seems to me he referred to Legolas as 'My Ocean'. Is that so, Legolas? Are you Lord Elrond's means to paradise?"

"Ion!" Rhun'waew snapped, spinning to fix her grandson with a reproving glower. "This is not the time or place for such…"

"Nana Dhaer, we cannot ignore what is really going on here," Aras shot back, coming forward to stand right in front of Elrond and stare in contemptuous disgust at both him and Legolas. "They have shamed our family and everyone here knows it, no matter how great a fanfare the Noldorin Lord tries to make. It is time to discuss recompense."

"No, Aras," Legolas got between him and Elrond quickly. "We will not discuss it here and you are the one who shames us by announcing this demand in public."

"Let us not speak of disgrace or guilt upon anyone's part, for while there has been much sorrow and grief there is now great cause to rejoice," stated Rhun'waew. "Aras, the desolation your losses have caused excuses much, yet these bitter words are painful to me. Would you add to my burdens at such
The pale Sindarin prince blanched even more, the fury leaving his eyes to be replaced by remorseful repentance as he quickly bowed to his grandmother and offered his apology. "Your words are just, Nana Dhaer. I beg your leave to retire."

"That isn't necessary, Aras," said Elrond kindly. "I am sure your presence is most appreciated and I would hate for you to miss the grand banquet and soiree arranged to welcome Legolas' family."

Aras stared coldly at the Noldorin Lord before catching his Adar's threatening eye. He acquiesced with a curt dip of his chin, withdrawing to the cluster of Sindarin and sylvan folk who had in the meantime ridden through the gates and dismounted.

These additional members of the archer's extended family were all royal or noble folk and their gloriously milling presence, bedecked as they were in lush furs, rich fabrics, precious jewels, and exotic designs offered a convenient distraction from the Crowned Prince's acrimonious reminder that this was not exactly a friendly visit. Everyone in the courtyard was now aware that there was a debt owed to the Sindarin King and payment would not be defrayed for very long. It was thus much more appealing to greet and meet the visiting dignitaries, the count of which exceeded Elrond's ability to hold their names in memory as one by one they were presented by the King or Queen, depending upon which side of the family they were connected. Galbreth had been quite prolific, fathering no less than five sons and four daughters, each of whom had also married and produced several offspring. In addition, many of the Winter Queen's near relations had joined the caravan along with several descendants of Thranduil's deceased brother.

It was such a large throng that Erestor began to despair of where to put them all. His Sindarin counterpart seemed to anticipate his concerns and sidled up beside him.

"I trust you can accommodate Legolas' immediate family here in the Last Homely House. The majority of the folk wish to remain amid the woods where our people camped in days of old," said Galion, his clever eyes shimmering in both challenge and amusement.

"Of course," Erestor answered at once, wary of this haughty Elf with the cold, reptilian stare, and then hesitated a moment. "Exactly which Elves here, besides his parents and nephew, constitute Legolas' immediate family?"

Galion grinned and chuckled. "No need to worry, Erestor, it's not so huge a number. Aras' kin must be housed within, for they are suffering still from the grief that has befallen Ernil Vain. It isn't good for them to be separated. All told, the number is no more than twenty."

"That will be no inconvenience," assured Erestor smugly, "there's room enough and to spare. We have ample quarters in the barracks for the warriors if they wish it."

Galion snorted in derision. "The warriors," he said, "are not on holiday and will assume the role of guarding the encampment."

"There is no need for that," interposed Glorfindel, who had been listening keenly and found this last remark a bit offensive. "No evil thing has ever crossed the Bruinen. Your people are under no threat of danger here."

"I do not doubt the skill of your excellent guards and patrols, many of whom we passed upon our trek across the region and into the vale," stated the captain of Greenwood's troops, who had somehow arrived by his elbow unseen. He gave the legendary warrior a polite bow to counter the sting of the inferred slight and introduced himself. "Faron Thurin'aurion, one of Legolas' cousins, my
progenitor being Aran Thranduil's youngest brother. No matter how superior your forces may be, Lord Glorfindel, it is our way to establish a private area and ensure no strangers wander in unexpectedly, whosoever that might be."

"As you wish," answered the Balrog-slayer stiffly, still displeased over the implication of inferiority aimed at his Guard. It was equally unnerving to have the people of the valley referred to as strangers when these woodland Elves were the guests. He let his eye wander back to the ring of archers, finding they had dispersed somewhat, mingling amid the crowds while two smaller contingents coalesced, one collected near the King and the other shadowing the Queen as she moved through the throng. Glorfindel frowned, observing Elrond and Thranduil quietly conversing as they strolled toward the gardens, sylvan warriors flanking them left and right, and gave a discreet hand-sign to his lieutenant to assemble a comparable detachment to follow. Attending this duty produced the surprise of finding Legolas beside him the next instant.

"Lord Glorfindel, please understand this has nothing to do with any distrust of Imladris' soldiers. We are Wood Elves; it is not in our nature to tolerate outsiders easily," said the woodland Prince, offering an apologetic smile along with the statement.

Glorfindel cocked a brow at him, not yet finished feeling indignant to have been cast the buffoon, or at least one of them, in the young archer's little jest. "If you say it is so, Ernil Legolas, then I must accept it as truth."

"Ai! Do not call me that," grumped Legolas, turning red around the ears as Galion laughed merrily. "Nae! He hates his titles and dreads to be announced at formal functions," relayed the sylvan seneschal.

"Because of the Woodland Realm's policy of eschewing such honorifics?" inquired Erestor, who was sure, based on the King's pride in announcing his wife-mate's exalted ancestry, that no such policy existed.

"Nay, or at least that reason is secondary to the principal one," Galion chortled and flashed Legolas a grin.

"Galion," warned the Winter Queen and at once the irreverent advisor repressed his mirth, bowing solemnly to the noble Woodland Lady. She nodded approval and turned to Erestor. "Legolas' reticence to have his accolades pronounced is mainly due to the length of time required to get through them all, for he is the very best warrior Greenwood has and his deeds of valour rival the count of the stars."

"Naneth!" Legolas entire face was aflame by now and he glanced furtively about, noticing with chagrin that several of the nobles were hovering close enough to have overheard. The gossips would be wagging their tongues in no time and Elbereth only knew what permutations the truth might undergo.

"That I do believe," averred Glorfindel, deciding Legolas' bashfulness was a fitting medium for revenge upon That Wood Elf. "Legolas refused recognition for no less than three instances of bravery which resulted in preventing his troop from falling prey to an ambush of werewolves, ridding the human settlements surrounding Imladris of two particularly vicious trolls, and detecting a caravan of slave-traders attempting to sneak past the boundaries, hoping to harass the folk of the Angle, no doubt."

"Ah, those sound like stirring tales meant to be put to song," a new voice answered, belonging of course to our beloved minstrel, Lindir. "You must spare no detail, Glorfindel, for I am eager to
enhance the evening's recital with grand ballads of epic battles and intrepid deeds."

"Why don't you sing of the heroes who fell at Gondolin," suggested Legolas, sending his former
commander a sidelong look of menace. "For the bravery exhibited there can never be matched by
such commonplace exploits as averting a pack of werewolves or humans on the prowl."

"Nay, everyone has heard the old songs," Glorfindel denounced the idea, physically wincing merely
to hear it brought up, for he despised to have his fight against the Balrog retold, and hastily called a
truce with the Wood Elf. "Perhaps we could hear songs of Eraid laur o Dôr di 'eraidh. Lindir, maybe
the King's minstrels would consent to give a concert this evening. We could learn much about our
distant and elusive neighbours by such an endeavour."

"I will undertake to make it so," Lindir bowed, his gaze flickering over to Galion, having felt the
foreign Elf's concentrated stare. He gave a pleased simper and strummed an exultant chord upon his
harp, ever present upon his hip. "Lord Galion, perhaps you would accompany me on this quest?"

The green-eyed advisor let his sight travel salaciously over the singer's blatantly alluring form, resting
much too long on the erect and ruddy nipples pointing at him, stopping just short of licking his lips in
anticipation of their taste. He tossed his head so that his long auburn hair danced around his
shoulders. "I would be pleased to aid you in any way you might desire, but do not give me titles that
I do not possess. I am not among the Elders and certainly no Lord to you."

Lindir let his sprightly laugh fill the space, his eyelids dropping low so that he might stare
coquettishly at Galion from beneath his long golden lashes. "No Lord to me, you say? Then perhaps
I shall Lord it over you." He turned and sallied away, Thranduil's most trusted aid right behind him.

"Ai Valar," breathed Legolas, his eyes quite large and his blush going from rose to rouge.

"You and Elrond are just as bad if not worse," complained Erestor tersely, unaccountably displeased
and angry to see Lindir flirting so openly, offering such a flagrant invitation to someone he didn't
know at all.

"Legolas, surely you do not go about dressed like that?" inquired Faron, his visage going scarlet as
his eye tracked over his cousin's frame, resting on his middle before hastily tearing his sight away.

"Nay! I would never present myself in public thus," scolded Legolas, scandalised to hear his friend
could entertain such a notion even briefly. "Nor do I carry on so with my beloved, Lord Erestor."

"Oh, not quite so daring in the ways of love as you are in the ways of war?" laughed Faron and
Glorfindel joined him.

"Peace, Faron, or I will send you off to the woods and you will miss a grand party," threatened
Legolas.

"Why must you reside amid the trees at all?" asked Glorfindel. "I am certain there is ample room here
in the city for everyone to find suitable lodging for the duration of the visit."

"Nay, we prefer it this way and so it was when my parents dwelled here also," Rhun'waew
answered. "You were not here then, Lord Glorfindel, but Erestor can attest to it. None of the
Noldorin folk ever did come out to the camp, but had they tried our warriors would have stopped
them ere they found the dwellings."

"So I do recall," agreed the seneschal. "Bereth Arod, I regret that I do not remember meeting you
then, for your parents must be kinfolk to me. Had I known, better accommodations would have been
offered at once."
"Ah, that is just what they did not want, you see. Life-bearing is strenuous and all attention and energy must be devoted to the growing child. My Ada and Nana would not have wished for all the pomp and commotion that would attend such a revelation. A woodland elfling must become immersed in the spirit of Tawar in order to survive, and distractions from the so-called civilised world hinder this fusion."

"I cannot say I understand what you mean," said Glorfindel, "but I will respect your wishes and do all I can to maintain the sanctity of your enclave." He couldn't help being puzzled and curious, though, and because he was a revered and beloved legend among Elves of every kind, dared to give voice to his intrigue. "What of Legolas' child? Will this merger of faer and Tawar be attempted?"

"Of course," answered the Queen and her son in unison, their tones perfectly coloured in matching shades of vexed disbelief that something so obvious would be questioned.

"I can't claim to comprehend what such a melding encompasses, yet surely Elrond's child will be brought up in the Last Lonely House," avowed Erestor with something close to horror. "He will be educated in the Noldorin manner according to accepted Noldorin tradition as were Elrond's other elflings."

The woodland royals stared at him with that unnerving expression of extreme forbearance, the demeanour of the enlightened when encountering the provincial, the pained attitude of the disappointed parent faced with a less than astute child. Their smiles dimmed to facsimiles of goodwill, tolerance cloaking the inevitable affront such a bigoted statement must inflict.

"It wounds me," Rhun'waew began but abruptly stopped, for truly it did so and deeply, her eyes opened to what her youngest child had been forced to endure. She touched him, a gentle caress of his arm that stopped just short of taking his hand in hers.

"My son will belong to two traditions," said Legolas firmly, "and he will be comfortable with both. He will not be a Wood Elf as I am nor will he become steeped in the ways of the Noldor alone, for his sire's heritage owes more to the Teleri people than the Lechenn. He will learn what is best from each culture and flourish."

Erestor was too embarrassed to answer this, having managed once again to get his toes caught between his very teeth, and bowed solemnly, hand over his heart, intensely aware of the vigourous and disapproving contempt with which Faron's sharp eyes pinned him. This left Glorfindel to construct an apology.

"Your pardon, our folk have been isolated from each other too long. The Noldorin Elves are learning yet such deep-seated ignorance cannot be overcome quickly. I meant no offence by my inquiry and hope I may be forgiven. I could not see how this immersion of which you speak could happen, surrounded by so much that is counter to it. The people of Imladris are not known for their woodcraft and other than Legolas there is but one sylvan resident."

"Do not be concerned; perhaps we are too sensitive to the differences between us as well," said the Queen graciously, allowing her smile to gather warmth again as it slid from her distant kinsman to the esteemed re-born warrior. "In any case, many of our people will remain here until the child is old enough to proceed without fear of losing the vital connection."

Erestor's eyes grew large and his brows rose as he digested this bit of news for, if memory served him correctly, the age at which a Wood Elf was deemed old enough to risk exposure to the dangers of the wide world was five years. An unpleasantly heavy sensation of doom collected in his gut and made his stomach hurt, vivid visions of Thranduil remaining in the Last Homely House to oversee the care and instruction of Legolas' and Elrond's babe flashing through his imagination. Erestor
wondered if it might be time to organise a state visit, which he must lead of course, to Mithlond or perhaps Lothlorien.

Now as interesting as all this may be, the real reason Legolas and Rhun'waew joined Erestor and Glorfindel was to allow the two rulers a chance to speak in private. The Lord of Imladris had suddenly found himself standing next to Thranduil, both of them isolated from the crowd by a ring of sylvan warriors who stood respectfully facing away, though they would of course overhear everything the leaders might say to one another. Elrond glanced about trying to locate Legolas and spotted him with his Naneth. The woodland archer must have felt his mate's worry and turned just then, meeting Elrond's eyes with encouragement and love before turning to follow the Queen.

"The braids suit you."

Elrond's attention was thus jerked back to the volatile sovereign at his side. He found Thranduil studying him minutely, aloof and wary but lacking the fiery indications of wrath so obvious moments ago.

"Not many here would agree with me, neither among my people or yours, but it is true. You love him. I was not prepared for it, based on what Fennas said," Thranduil added.

"I'm glad you see it," Elrond began, raising a hand to touch the neat, plaited rows at his temple. "I hope I can be worthy of him, of the love he has given me and the joy he has brought into my life. I regret," he faltered then and frowned. What could he possibly say that would appease Legolas' father? Had one of his children been subjected to similar treatment, Elrond was not sure he would be able to forgive the perpetrators. "I have so many regrets," he finally sighed, resigned to be forever at odds with his law-kin, forever striving to prove his worth.

"As do I, as does Legolas," Thranduil shrugged, an expansive and dismissive gesture that surprised Elrond. "Regrets can be dealt with easily enough, for they pertain to what is in the past. I am concerned most with what is in the future for my son. Perhaps we might adjourn to a more private location and discuss these concerns."

The King of the Woodland Realm and the Lord of Imladris stared hard at one another, both more accustomed to giving orders than receiving them, neither one partial to being defied. Loathe was Elrond to submit to demands made by a guest in his home, no matter who it might be. Little patience had Thranduil for those who failed to heed his requests upon first hearing. Yet the one did wait and the other held his tongue, for one and the same reason: each wished to make things right for Legolas. As one they turned, Elrond indicating with a motion of his hand the direction they should take, and the circle of warriors reorganised and moved with them, insulating them from curious eyes and ears. The Lord of Imladris led the way through the gardens to a small conservatory attached to the house and they entered in, the soldiers taking up position outside to guard against intrusions. Once more the rulers faced off and again it was Thranduil who spoke first.

"Elrond, I understand what a surprise it is for you to find me here," he gestured with his hand to the surrounding flowers and shrubs within the green glass walls and all that lay beyond, "in your sumptuous home. No more surprised than was I to receive word of what had become of Legolas. I am grateful to have him back, no matter the circumstances, for he is dear to me. When I thought him dead, it was as if I had killed him with my own hands for I sent him away before he was ready. These are the regrets that I must set aside, for looking to the past will ensure only a future filled with more grief and sorrow."

Elrond was amazed by these revelations, having expected an explosive barrage of accusations and recriminations from the Sindarin King. Instead, he found the father much like the son, blaming himself for the outcome of the failed mission. Now that they were so close, it was easy to spot the
signs of fading only recently overcome. Once more the resemblance between father and son stood
out strongly. "I want you to know; I had no understanding of what this kind of bonding entails. I
should have married him right away but I believed it was only a temporary link. I won't pretend that I
handled this situation correctly for to do so would be a lie and an insult to Legolas and his family."

Thranduil gave a droll, dry smile. "Those are the regrets you must set aside," he said. "For Legolas
and the sake of his unborn babe we must make the effort to blind ourselves to the past."

"I agree, for Legolas' babe is my babe also and I will let nothing threaten him." Elrond could not help
elaborating the obvious, since Thranduil had so pointedly left it out.

"None would doubt your devotion as a parent, for you have already raised three children. Fennas
believes your commitment is based on the child's conception, but I can see this is not true. Yet what
you feel for Legolas was not enough to prompt you to suggest a permanent union before now." He
raised his hand to pre-empt Elrond's explanation. "I do not care to hear your reasons; they are no
mystery to me and I find discussing such realities repugnant. My desire for reassurance about the
depth of your tie to Legolas has a more serious foundation than a bruised ego or a shamed House."

Elrond blinked, again stunned by the apparent dismissal of what he'd believed would be the principal
kernel of conflict between himself and Legolas' relatives. Instead, Thranduil took it as given that
Elrond had judged his youngest son unfit for a formal union. What he wanted was understanding of
what had changed to make Legolas suddenly acceptable. "I must be frank with you and since it is
clear you perceive much then it will be easier. It is true; I would not consider marriage an option, not
even after I knew myself to be in love with him. Now, even were there no child at all I would still
wed him. It was the poisoning that opened my eyes. Before then I never considered that I might lose
him or what emptiness I must face should that come to pass. I have never known terror like that
before; I am not ashamed to admit it. Legolas is my heart and soul and nothing will part me from
him."

For a long time the two remained silent, eyes locked, as Thranduil subjected his future son-in-law to
a penetrating evaluation, demanding access to every aspect of the Noldorin Lord's spirit. At last he
seemed satisfied that their was no deception in what Elrond had spoken and sighed, breaking away
to gaze out into the grounds. "He has chosen you and you have accepted. So be it. It will not surprise
you to know this is not the life I would have wished for Legolas. He was meant for great things and
would have done much for our people. Nevertheless, I will do all I can to ensure his happiness."

"No, this is not what anyone would plan for their child, yet I know I can make him happy here.
He is happy here with me and now that we are gaining acceptance among the populace his life will
be easier." Elrond thought this a positive thing to say and wondered why the Sindarin King was
staring at him so oddly. At last Thranduil shook his head half sad, half bemused.

"You really don't know anything about the sort of bond you've forged with my son," he announced.
"Tell me, Elrond, does he seem well and strong to your eyes?"

The question took the healer by surprise and a spike of fear bloomed in his heart. Was Legolas all
right? Mentally he ran through a lengthy catalogue of quirks and habits, from the bizarre to the
mundane, that had never ceased to bewilder him. He had to admit he had no idea if any of them were
normal for sylvan Elves or not. Real alarm replaced the unfolding anxiety. "Why? What do you
mean? If something is wrong I must know at once!" he demanded, stopping short of taking the King
by the front of his tunic and shaking him, but only just.

"Peace," said Thranduil quietly, conversely worried and pleased by the reaction his cryptic words
had elicited. "It is not as bad as your heart fears, yet Legolas is not fit, not as he was before he left
Greenwood last. He is dependent upon you, upon the light of your soul, to sustain him."
"Still? It has been ten years, more even, since the attack. His recovery has been slow but consistent and I considered him fully restored." Even as he spoke the words, Elrond recognised the lie in them. The physical wounds had healed, the weakness left by the poisonous infections had subsided, but Legolas' spirit had been burdened by grief, remorse, and guilt unending. Add to that the continuous harassment from every quarter and the hidden shame of being kept as a bond-slave, and Legolas' apparent stability could only be a sham. "Ai Elbereth! He should not be with child!" Elrond turned, meaning to go and find his mate, desperately needing to have him near, to hold him, to protect him and the babe from harm. It was suddenly quite clear that he might still lose them both. Thranduil's grasp upon his arm stopped him.

"Nay! Legolas doesn't realise the danger. You mustn't reveal it to him or it will add to his burdens. Whatever happens, he will need to remain close to you. Unless you go with him, he must not leave the valley for at least here he is under the protection of the Ring of Air." There was a pause as the two considered one another cautiously, Elrond unwilling to speak of the Ring, knowing the King's thoughts concerning it, and Thranduil aware of this. He took a short breath and continued. "You have used it to heal him, so horrendous were his injuries, body and soul. I can feel it around him; its power has changed him.

"I couldn't risk losing him." Elrond was shaking his head. "How has it changed him? I will not risk losing him. We should sail; it's the only surety we can have. Even Vilya has limits. His instincts, as usual, are right. He's been talking about leaving for Aman and twice he meant to do so but could not break from me because of the bond." He broke from Thranduil and paced impatiently amid the exotic blooms.

"So he did try. He refused to answer Aras' on that point, nor would I press him on it." Thranduil's tone became harsh. "He could not survive the voyage without you beside him. The problem has gone beyond such a seemingly easy solution, however, for you can't suggest emigration without revealing why you suddenly wish to break a solemn vow made to Gil-galad and desert your people. Once you tell him, the truth will wear upon him minute by minute. How could he face the thought of putting his brother's life at risk not once but twice? Will you impose that burden of guilt upon him again? If he were strong and well, it wouldn't matter, but then again, if he were strong and well none of this would have come to pass."

"Elbereth, he believes the child is meant to provide for Galbreth's rebirth," gasped Elrond.

"Exactly so, yet he has created life while in a state unfit to nurture that life, putting himself and the child at serious disadvantage. Knowing he has done this, can his grief-laden soul bear it and still support the developing babe? I fear the answer would be no, and in losing the child we would lose Legolas as well, for his heart would truly be broken."

"Nay, this cannot be happening," Elrond refused to accept the dire prognosis. "I won't permit that. We must tell him the truth and get him to Aman with all speed."

"If you reveal this now he will not be able to encompass it," warned Thranduil. "I only informed you in order to make you understand what is required of you to see him through it. He will need your undivided attention from now until three months beyond the birth, perhaps more for he will be terribly depleted by then. Surely you have noted how thin he is. You have to choose: you can be the Lord of Imladris or Legolas' mate, but there is no energy to spare to attempt both charges."

Elrond scowled severely at the Woodland King. "I already made that choice. Legolas is my mate and he and Tinu Mîn are my only priority. I have sent for my sons to return and will gladly give over governance of the valley to them as soon as they arrive. No matter what you say, Legolas needs to understand how difficult this is going to be and we need to start for the Havens within a ten-day." He
turned to leave, intent upon finding his beloved, concerned about the impact this stressful visit must be having on him. Thranduil's voice stopped him on the threshold.

"Wait, Elrond. There is no need resign your position here and flee for Valinor. Legolas is strong; he will do all he must to ensure the babe is born healthy and whole. He will give whatever is needed and you must be willing to do the same. It is your resolve and commitment that needed clarification."

"What do you mean? He's strong enough; there's no need to fear he'll survive the pregnancy?"

"Of course not," scoffed the King. "It won't be an easy birth but he'll come through all right. You were the unknown factor in this evaluation, Elrond. I required proof of the sincerity of your devotion to my son and you have proved it to be deep and true, even to the point of abdicating your Lordship and reneging on a sacred vow. I deem you a fitting mate for my Legolas, Prince of Greenwood. Furthermore, your House and nation will make acceptable allies for the House of the Beeches and the Woodland Realm."

"What?"

"Welcome to the family," Thranduil grinned and thumped the stupefied Lord on the back. "You'll do just fine, though your resources may not be as extensive as Lord Galdor's. Still, it is more important to know Legolas' heart is in good hands. Now then, let us celebrate this union through the night with feasting and dancing and merry songs! Tomorrow we can begin negotiations on the dowry and the compensation to my House for Legolas' shameful treatment under your roof." The Sindarin ruler moved to the doors and opened them.

"What?"

Elrond watched him walk out into the gardens, his troops closing around him as he went in search of his Queen, wondering what exactly had just happened, the concepts of dowries and recompense swirling chaotically through misgivings about Legolas' health and the welfare of their child. The Lord of Imladris staggered to a bench and sat down.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Le Tobol Ista: Coming to Know You
Ernil Vain: First Prince
Galu bo Legolas, Elrond ar lín laes!: Blessings upon Legolas, Elrond and their babe!
Mellyn, mellyn lasto enni: Friends, friends, listen to me!
Hiril Arth ar Brand, Bereth od Eringalen Dhaer, Cundiell od Arth Doriath Dannen, Sell Tolothen Edonnen od Eluréd Diorion Thingolion: Rhun'waew o Noss Crebain: Her Exalted Highness, Queen of Greenwood the Great, Princess of the Lost Kingdom of Doriath, eighth-generation daughter descended from Eluréd son of Dior son of Thingol, my beloved wife, Rhun'waew of the Ravens.
Nae: Alas
Eraid Iaur o Dôr di 'eraidh: Ancient Days from the Land Beneath the Trees.
Nana Dhaer: Grandma
Ernil Vain: First Prince - heir
Rhûn'waew: East Wind
Aras: deer, stag
Lasto! Lasto! Lasto enni, Hir ar Hiril ar pân gwaith vaer odImladris! Alae! Sî Thranduil Oropherion,
Aran od Eryngalen Daer an uir! Listen! Listen, Listen to me, Lords and Ladies and all good people of Imladris! Behold! Here is Thranduil, son of Oropher, King of Greenwood the Great for eternity!

saes, ha naegra: please, it hurts
Tarlan: stiff-necked, stubborn
Lechenn: Sindarin word for Noldor elves.
Fennas: Doorway
Tinu Mín: our little star

NOTE: I think I'll stop here, folks. Round One goes to Thranduil. I decided he would be able to see the depth of the bond the two share within Elrond's eyes, as Tolkien alluded to that idea here and there. So he knows his son not only loves Elrond but is loved in return. That was perhaps a little cruel of him to suggest that Legolas and the child might both be lost in childbirth, but he has good reason to want to test Elrond. It must be hard to reconcile the love he has witnessed with the truth of Legolas' abasement. To be fair, there is real cause for concern over the pregnancy and Elrond's eyes are open to this now. He is going to take extra special care of his Wood Elf from here on out.

Hope you can all stomach this link with the Lost Sons of Dior for Legolas' Naneth. I just couldn't resist, and since we really know nothing about her I made her Elrond's distant cousin. This gives Legolas a hint of both Maiar and human genes through Dior, Elrond's grandfather. Remember, Dior's father was Beren, a human. It's all AU, mellyn, so grant me your tolerant forgiveness for diluting Legolas' ancestry this way. It is interesting to wonder if the children of Dior and Nimloth had to face the same choice Elrond and his brother, and all Elrond's children, faced. This now includes Legolas' babe, too. Seems like they would indeed have had to choose.

Now, we all know royals like to marry their cousins from time to time, so it isn't really so outrageous, and the kinship is sufficiently infiltrated by sylvan and Sindarin bloodlines to make it acceptable. At best, Elrond is Rhun'waew's eighth or ninth cousin; I'm not so good at figuring out those things, but I've put nine generations between Legolas and Eluréd, Elrond's uncle. She has more surprises in store for the Elven Lord and her young son soon.

Aras may seem insufferably cold and mean-spirited, but he feels justified in his disgust and mistrust. More on that to come, but obviously he is suffering greatly and maybe there is more going on with him than losing his Adar. We'll find out soon enough. As for Lindir, is he trying to make Erestor jealous or is he really attracted to Galion? Maybe both and that leaves Erestor in a lonely place. The seneschal just can't keep his prejudice from spilling out, can he? Let's hope he learns before he is challenged to a duel of combat over his wayward tongue.

I promise not to spend too much time on the 'extras' from Mirkwood, but I thought Legolas needed a best friend from his childhood (not really so long ago!) and so introduced Faron, a cousin close in age but older.

The idea that Thranduil attributes the changes he feels in his son to the intervention of Vilya is perhaps far-fetched. Maybe the protective Ada just can't accept the degree to which his beloved youngest child has had to depend upon the foreign Noldorin Lord. Easier to blame the changes on the Ring of Air than acknowledge the influence of Elrond. He must be torn between gratitude that the Lord of Imladris saved his son's life and anguish over how
desperate the struggle must have been, how fully merged Legolas' spirit is with Elrond's. Finally, thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story! I appreciate all the feedback and reviews very much.

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He opened the cabinet with a two-handed yank, a faintly jarring pull that popped both doors wide at once, expressive of passive impatience tending slowly toward aggravation. In disgruntled confusion Elrond peered inside; the desired scroll was not within. He had certainly put it there with care and no small amount of pride, 'there' being the new book stack constructed after the incident with Glorfindel on the afternoon of Ened Ethuil. Assured it was safe, he'd thought of it no more until tonight. He was hoping to use it as a means to deepening his understanding of Legolas' enigmatic Naneth, who had thus far successfully evaded all his inquiries, no matter how politely phrased, regarding the history of his uncles, Eluréd and Elurán.

The scroll he sought was a family heirloom, something he was sure would pique her interest, and indeed her eyes had brightened when he'd casually mentioned he had it in his possession. It should most certainly be here and no other place, yet the space boasted only the small collection of journals and letters his parents had either kept or exchanged with one another over the years.

Elrond considered sharing those but decided against it. They could hold no worth for the Winter Queen; priceless treasures though they were to him. There were not many of them and all were carefully, meticulously catalogued and cared for; none but himself, his children, and Erestor permitted to handle them. These were the only link Elrond had to his parents that was genuine, common place enough to remind him that they were real people, not just story-book legends, and had lived lives much as any other wedded couple once.

Once, though how long ago that was. What is their life like now, I wonder? Do the Valar permit them to dwell as husband and wife or must they remain the icons of hope and fortitude those of us here in Middle-earth so desperately require them to be? Did they make new children to replace Elros and me?

The Elven Lord found this idea, first proffered as a malicious taunt by other elflings in Lindon, depressing and upsetting. He'd not thought of this in over two Ages and that disturbed him as much as the demeaning remark itself. It has been a stressful time. Truth be told, he'd not felt his best since his ‘talk’ with Thranduil. The promised discussion concerning the dowry and the compensation loomed but no more had been spoken concerning it since Thranduil's abstruse reference on the evening of his arrival. What was he waiting for? Was Elrond expected to bring it up? He couldn't guess, Lindir hadn't a clue, Erestor was useless, reduced to lurking in the shadows to avoid Thranduil's piercing stares, and Glorfindel, having unexpectedly formed a fast friendship with the Sindarin King, thought Elrond was over-reacting. Typically, Elrond had not broached the subject with Legolas.

The welcoming feast was now nearly a week in the past and the bulk of the sylvan Elves were ensconced somewhere in the deeps of the wild woods in the northern-most quadrant of Imladris. The Royal Family, as Thranduil and his immediate relations had come to be known, were housed in the East Wing of the Last Homely House, this being the location of the very best guest rooms in the estate. Every evening was spent with the noble moriquendi and practically every supper transformed into a party to which various members of Imladris' finest families managed to get themselves invited. During these soirees, the Noldorin nobles extended invitations of their own which many of Thranduil's people accepted. Elrond had not had much opportunity to engage his beloved Wood Elf's parents on more than a social level and he was becoming steadily more disconcerted by the discontinuity of his interactions with them.
Nay, it isn't that we've had no opportunity to foster fellowship; Legolas' family is resistant to my overtures. No matter how graciously I present myself, my efforts are repeatedly rebuffed.

Around a group of any size, Thranduil and Rhûn'waew were friendly and engaging, poking fun at the numerous small blunders made by the Wood Elves or by Elrond's folk, always blaming the disparity in customs and lauding the chance to learn of foreign ways. In private, they were quiet and reserved, watching him with discerning eyes, listening to every word intently as if they might discover some deeper meaning within them, speaking in solemn tones and minimal phrases as though to safeguard secret knowledge. As for Aras, he did not even attempt to be civil, sneering and scowling and uttering deriding guffaws and bald insults whenever he was in Elrond's presence.

Which is far too often for my taste. Grieving or not, that Elf is loathsome and I wish there was a polite way to eject him from my home.

Elrond frowned, surprised to recognise such a whiny, petulant twist to his thoughts, and tried to correct it. He has suffered a severe blow in his Adar's death. This strategy failed, for the truth was that Aras stood at the core of his discontent and the Elven Lord was convinced he was at the heart of Legolas' nervousness, also. That certainty compounded his displeasure, for instead of being carefree and happy over the long-awaited reunion with his kin, Legolas was anxious and jumpy. In fact, the sylvan archer was expending great efforts to stay out of Aras' way, to the point of enlisting Faelon as a sort of spy to learn what activities the Crowned Prince planned for the day so as to be sure to do something entirely different. Elrond didn't understand why the Royal Grandparents didn't settle the issue, but felt it would be improper for him to intervene. Yet the day was coming when he would no longer be able to hold his tongue, for the strain was taxing Legolas' reserves.

I promised myself to put Legolas' needs first. Aras can't be permitted to endanger his health.

While all these thoughts jumbled around inside his brain, Elrond stood before the cabinet poking through the bound journals and stacks of letters as if the large scroll he wanted could somehow be hiding between them. Staring at the fading spines and ribbon-bound rolls would not make it appear; with an irritated sigh he shut the doors, shutting up his dark musing at the same time, and moved to the next cupboard. He pried it open, viewed the interior with a frown, and closed the doors, once more peeved that the document was not where it belonged. It was not in the next cabinet either, or the one after that, which contained the compiled first-hand accounts from survivors of the destruction of Beleriand, just what was supposed to be in there. He went through the entire row of cupboards without success, growing more agitated by the moment.

"This is unacceptable," he grumbled aloud, his mood quickly rising from morose to murderous as he turned and strode back to the doorway. When he found who had it, he would…

"Elrond? Beloved, what is wrong?" Legolas came across the threshold and almost ran straight into the scowling Elven Lord. They reached for and caught one another for reassurance as much as to forestall the collision.

Elrond's visage transformed at once and he smiled into the sylvan archer's worried eyes. "Nay, nothing you have done," he said immediately, for there was no doubt Legolas was still concerned that he might be angry about the deception played upon him.

"Are you certain? You've been rather distracted these last few days. I realise what a shock meeting my Adar was and regret not telling you before hand," Legolas blurted out, anxiously searching the guarded eyes gazing into his.

This was not a look he liked to see and his remorse was real. He so badly needed Elrond's support right now. For all the show of gladness and goodwill upon arrival, the Wood Elves were no more
convinced this marriage was wise than the nobles of Imladris had been. Much too late, Legolas
realised setting his beloved up on such a massive scale might have conveyed the impression that he
had little respect for his intended. Indeed, Galion and Fennas think I'm out for revenge. Thus far, he'd
managed to keep this fact from Elrond, but the steward and the councillor were actively trying to
convince the other Elders to reject Elrond's suit. Should that happen, he didn't know what Elrond
might do. The possibility of a permanent rift between the realms loomed, along with the fear that he
might have to face losing his family all over again.

Elrond contemplated his mate in surprise. He seemed distracted? No wonder the Wood Elves were
always sending him such cold looks; they thought he was behaving pompous and aloof. "Is that what
your family thinks?"

Legolas' brow wrinkled in confusion. "I'm not sure they've made up their minds what to think yet," he
said cautiously. "Nana believes it's going to be all right, but Ada is still trying to understand what I
see in you and whether or not that's good for me, though he certainly doesn't deny what he sees
between us."

"I see," said Elrond, "at least I think I do. I can't seem to draw them out. Have they said anything to
you explaining their reticence?"

Legolas pondered a moment before shaking his head. "Nay, nothing specific. Aras has only nasty
things to say but Ada always silences him. Adar looks at me with a strange mix of surprise and
sorrow and asks 'so you truly love this Elf?' Every now and again he just comes over and hugs me
for no reason. Nana watches you like a fox stalking grouse but I don't think it is with animosity, at
least not like Aras'.

"I can't understand it," a light shrug punctuated his obvious quandary. "Your formal greeting was
delivered with impeccable aplomb, your gifts were tasteful and well-chosen, offered with just the
correct posture of respectful humility and pride. The rooms provided are exquisite, the hospitality
superb. There have been outings and events every day and the staff has treated every request made of
them as if it came from your own lips."

Elrond visibly relaxed and even puffed up a little bit, a faint smile breaking out through the clouds of
gloom that flitted through his sombre grey eyes.

"Things should improve once the Council of Elders approves your formal petition to join the House
of Eärendil to the House of the Beeches," Legolas surmised. "What was it you came in here to get?"

"I wanted Rhûn'waew to see the scroll of our genealogy. I have kept it safe just as it was given to
me, for I was eldest and trusted with the task, though still but a child. This came to me from my
mother, who received it from the hands of Nimloth even as she breathed her last. The document was
created by Beren and his name is there upon it in his own hand. This he did after the Valar returned
him and his beloved Luthien to life here in Middle-earth."

Legolas' face lit up with excitement. "She will be most pleased to see this," he enthused, but his smile
faltered as he read the chagrin on his husband's features. "What has happened?"

"It isn't here, as it should surely be, and I don't mind admitting that has me severely vexed. No one
should have it out of the cabinet much less this room. There is a copy in the common archives for
any who wish to study it."

"Ai! That is serious. It is unconscionable to try to steal another's history. Who would do such a
thing?" Then an idea struck Legolas. "Perhaps Erestor has borrowed it, for he has ties to your family
also."
Elrond was nodding, though his mind was stuck on what Legolas had said, wondering if the sylvan really believed one could abscond with a person's personal history by taking possession of its written account. Aearen often said things that did not entirely make sense and Elrond had always attributed this to a lack of fluency in Sindarin. Now that he knew Legolas had been very well educated and spoke at least five languages, he would need to re-evaluate everything his young mate uttered. Thranduil's dire warning rose up; was this expression indicative of some general sylvan mindset about destiny or was it one of the things that had changed about Legolas, a sign of unseen damage to the intellect?

He studied Legolas' face and form, trying to judge objectively from a healer's perspective only, but found it impossible. How could he know what was different about Aearen? Legolas had been so severely ill, so near to death for so long, that every small improvement was welcomed and encouraged. There was nothing to which he could compare this personality, this unique, inquisitive, fascinating and sometimes maddening persona.

Legolas would know. Does he sense this difference his Adar perceived? Is this part of his grief, too, that he is no longer who he was, who he was destined to be? Elrond peered intently into the fathomless blue orbs, searching for signs of regret, sorrow, disappointment, resignation; anything that would give him a clue to what might be going on in that stunningly beautiful head.

"Elrond?" Legolas blinked, the intensity of the examination making him self-conscious all of a sudden. He shifted as though to step back and suddenly the grip upon his arms tightened to painful proportions and he was drawn close to the tall Noldorin Elf Lord.

"Ai, Legolas, what have I done to you? I meant no harm, really, truly; I meant you no harm," whispered Elrond desperately, burying his fingers in the golden mane, lifting the silken strands to his nose, inhaling deeply the scent he so loved.

Unbidden, all the things a healer knew could go wrong during childbirth inundated his thoughts, things he could not bear to imagine. Why hadn't he inquired about Legolas' ability to conceive? Because I assumed he was sterile, as have been all Elves I've come across with his peculiar reproductive configuration. The great Healer; I was so sure I knew everything. Now he must face that he was entirely ignorant of sylvan physiology and could only guess at possible complications that might arise as the pregnancy progressed.

Elrond had witnessed numerous disasters among female births that robbed husband and father of wife and child all in the space of hours, though successful nativities out numbered those tragedies here in Imladris. Folk were wary and cautious about producing young and planned long in advance, making sure of their health first. Never had Elrond known any Elf in poor condition attempt life-bearing, and he was now forced to admit that Legolas was definitely not as robust as he should be. He could lose them both at any time during gestation, not knowing what signs to look for or what treatment to use to prevent it. The fear assailed him with such violent intensity that his heart skipped and thudded painfully. "Elbereth, it is too much to bear," he groaned, low and desolate.

Legolas became frightened. "Nín'ódhel," he murmured gently, "you have done no harm to me. What has made you so distraught?" The woodland archer was at a loss, attempting and failing to figure out how the theft of the genealogy scroll was related to this sudden despair. Often he had this difficulty, unable to piece together how Elrond's thoughts flowed, finding the ways of Noldorin logic convoluted and confusing. Was Elrond fearful that having lost the scroll, he might lose who he was?

Mayhap he fears to become something lesser, someone who would not be chosen to lead Imladris, someone unworthy of the son of Thranduil and Rhûn'waew. It was a strange idea, Legolas so used to the sense of superiority which clothed his beloved more closely than his finest robes. His face took
on a grim expression of inflexible determination. "Don't be concerned about what my people think; position and power are nothing to me and I would be happy anywhere as long as we are together."

Elrond's brow tightened in a series of shallow grooves as he registered this, having no concept of what prompted it or how to respond. It did make him realise how close he'd just come to revealing his new worries and their source, something he dared not do, for what if Thranduil was right? Above all, he must not give Legolas any cause for guilty despair. He tried to smile, a poor representation being the result. Drained and pensive, he huffed out a little puff of a laugh. "Forgive me, Aearen; I'm still reeling from the shock of meeting your parents. It was quite a joke, wasn't it? Poor Erestor has never been so quiet and unobtrusive. Why, your people must think him a pale reflection of the exalted reputation by which he is known far and wide."

"Aye, he's been somewhat elusive," Legolas said absently, wondering if this was the time to describe how little amusement he presently derived from the prank. "There can be no question of suitability now, can there?"

"I should think not," laughed Elrond uneasily, "not on the part of my people, at least."

Well, that was a perfect segue for exactly what was troubling Legolas, but the uncanny way Elrond brought it up made him shy from taking his cue. Instead he alluded to the other concern on the horizon. "The nobles are being so nervously polite and accommodating, inviting Ada and Nana to outings, hunts, and parties, all the while quaking deep in their souls, anxious about what their former arrogance will cost them."

"Ah yes, the compensation," Elrond's frown returned. He hadn't wanted to ask Legolas before, thinking his questions might be misconstrued as criticism of sylvan customs or complaints about the penalty to be levied. The very last thing he wanted was more cause for contention between himself and his mate, but now the topic seemed a welcome distraction. "Can you tell me what that entails?"

Legolas shook his head. "I've no idea; nothing like this has ever happened before, not in my memory at least. No bond of extremity has ever been left in that state, or if so it was kept quiet out of respect for the families of the debased Elf."

Elrond flinched at the harsh characterisation. "Elbereth, I've been such an ignorant, arrogant fool. If only I'd listened to my heart we'd be married and none of this would be an issue. Do you think your Adar's Council will accept our union?" And what will you do if they don't? Secretly, Elrond feared a permanent breech with Greenwood and if that happened, Legolas might succumb to grief. The result of that was too grim to admit, even internally.

"They will. Rest assured that nothing will stand in the way of legitimising your bond to my son," the softly lyrical voice behind them was limned with iron-willed determination. The lovers turned to find the Winter Queen regarding them in bemused indulgence from the doorway, her eyes alight upon Elrond's hand where it rested on Legolas' hind quarters. She moved forward into the room and shut the portal behind her. "We will know soon enough about the restitution demands for Thranduil has called the Council to convene this evening at Ithil's zenith. It is partly to discuss this that I have sought you out, Elrond."

"I would be grateful for any insight you could give me," Elrond dipped his head politely and relocated his fingers to a more conservative placement at the small of his beloved's back.

"Naneth, don't you think it would be best to discourage that part of the Council? All is well now and Imladris will make an excellent ally for Greenwood," suggested Legolas hopefully, following Elrond's lead and establishing a suitable distance between them.
"No." It was Elrond who spoke. "I am not willing to spare my people, or even myself, the just resolution of this grievance between our realms. It must be so, else the nobles here may mistake lenity for contempt, imagining your people hold you to blame for the disgrace wrought upon their nation."

"This is true," nodded Rhûn'waew, appraising her son carefully. It was evident to her that he was attempting to shield Elrond from the reality. His initial decision not to divulge his heritage she understood, but to have permitted his intended to continue in ignorance was petty and adolescent behaviour. Now, he couldn't find the means to admit to Elrond how damaging his ill-favoured prank had been. She sighed; here was borne out her principal complaint against Legolas marrying: he was simply too young to appreciate fully his responsibilities and obligations. What he needs is another fifty years to mature.

So she had told Thranduil when the petitions started pouring in from all over Greenwood, Lothlorien, and Mithlond. There had even been an appeal from the human King in Dale. No sooner had Legolas reached majority than rumour of his unique nature and phenomenal beauty began to spread. Rhûn'waew knew this was mainly due to her husband's justified pride in their youngest son. That, and the pressing need to secure a solid alliance with another Elven realm, not for a military treaty so much as a trade partner. Greenwood was suffering from the ever increasing predation of Shadow's servants and subsisted in a continual state of war with Dol Guldur. Keeping the warriors armed and provisioned drained the forest's resources and the entire populace endured the privations this engendered. Legolas had become the most valuable asset Thranduil possessed and he'd been effusive in broadcasting that intelligence.

Legolas was not ready; he'd never confided a romantic interest in any Elf before the fateful excursion to Mithlond. He didn't even know the real reason for the journey and his inclusion in the delegation. With the approval of the Elders, but without Legolas' knowledge, the King had accepted the formal petition from Galdor of Mithlond, and it was for this the failed mission had been arranged. The worthy Sindarin Lord had wished to acquaint himself with his unique fiancé hoping to win the youth's love, or at least his admiration and friendship. Rhûn'waew had no intention of informing Legolas of the arranged marriage. It was pointless, for here stood her elfling before her, bonded and bearing the babe of his mated spouse. And very much in love.

"I just thought it would be good diplomacy for the Elders to be generous," Legolas said. "A formal apology from the Lord of Imladris should be enough; after all the people here know nothing of sylvan ways."

"Allow your Adar to determine what is best for Greenwood and our House," Rhûn'waew advised. "There is no benefit in sealing the bark of a beetle-infested tree. It is too late; the damage has already been done." At this Legolas cringed and could not hold her gaze nor meet Elrond's. His cheeks paled and he heaved a heavy sigh. Rhûn'waew's heart ached to see her child so distraught. On top of all this, she had news to reveal that was sure to be a shock for Legolas to learn and she dreaded his reaction, and to some extent Elrond's also. It was enough to test any mother's soul and the Winter Queen drew a resigned breath.

"As I said, I will ensure nothing compromises the ratification of the proposed union. Beyond that, I feel certain your pregnancy will mitigate the worst outcome, Iest Nín, but the debt must be paid. Now, I would like to speak to both of you on another topic. Is there a private place to which we may retreat?"

"We won't be disturbed here," assured Elrond, indicating a chair beside the desk.

"Thank you, though perhaps it is Legolas who should sit," said Rhûn'waew, gracing her son with a
melancholy smile as she took the seat Elrond pulled out for her. As expected, that comment garnered all attention and the impending meeting was forgotten at once.

"Why should I sit?" asked Legolas warily, perching on the edge of the desk to appease her.

"I intended to tell you right away but then Fennas brought us your news. I was too concerned over all that and when I saw you, I could think of nothing else but your health and your babe's. You were so excited over revealing us to your beloved's people and of course Thranduil thought the joke grand, so my desire to speak with you privately was ignored. Then again, the journey was trying and my healer has warned me to be cautious. I decided to wait."

Legolas stood, alarmed, and took his mother by the hands, looking her over in apprehensive concentration. "What is wrong? Why is Gladhadithen worried about your health?" he demanded, adding: "You look fine to me. Is it a lingering weakness from grieving?"

Rhûn'waew laughed gently and pulled her child close, hugging him tight. "Ah, ionneth, I am indeed fine. Do not fret for that is not what I would have. My news is joyous."

"Then what is it?" asked Legolas impatiently, shrugging loose to see her eyes, not noticing the light of comprehension dawning on his mate's face.

"Elbereth be praised," the Elven Lord announced, "you're pregnant!"

Legolas looked back at him, annoyed. "Yes, this we all know," he said drily but then noticed Elrond's eyes tracking over his Naneth, that calculating, evaluating quality his visage assumed whenever his healing ability was required. Legolas switched back to his mother instantly, suspecting the truth, the question within his eyes as he met hers. She nodded, a bright smile overtaking her countenance. "You are?" he asked, incredulous at first and then a new realisation exploded in his mind, so obvious he was stunned it hadn't been clear to him before. A soft blush stole over his features. "Galbreth?" he asked shyly and heard Elrond's quick intake of breath as once again Rhûn'waew signalled confirmation.

"I wondered why you didn't think of this," she said softly, "when Fennas told us about your babe. I understand now, though, and it was a good thing you wanted to do, Legolas, but unnecessary. You were not the cause for his death. Anyway, I think Galbreth would prefer to be born to your Ada and me, don't you?"

Legolas nodded silently, absolutely embarrassed not to have realised his parents would choose to recreate their lost sons in their proper order, awaiting the same signs for which he had looked. He dared a glance at Elrond to see how her news would be met, for it was undeniable that Legolas had made his decision to create life without considering this at all. There was no indication of anger but that strange new expression he couldn't name was out in full, an admixture of dread and regret and hope. It made his heart pound unsteadily. "I guess Tinu Mîn is truly our child," he said.

"He was never anything else," responded Elrond sincerely, moving to gather Legolas from his mother's side, "reborn soul or not; he was always only ours, Aearen."

For all his reassuring words, Elrond was nothing less than dumbfounded, recalling all Thranduil had said to him earlier, for if Galbreth was to be born again to his natural parents, how could Legolas feel any guilt about putting his unborn brother at risk? His gaze flickered to the Queen and saw comprehension in her eyes; Rhûn'waew was aware of the test her husband had set for their son's suitor.

All a ruse; all of it.
He should be glad Legolas was well, yet the trick rankled. The silence was growing awkward and he felt Legolas' grip on his arm tighten. He met his beloved's worried gaze and saw the truth anew. Not all of it was a farce, for Legolas was seriously depleted, even as his Adar had said.

That was far more upsetting to Elrond, for while he was growing to love his youngest child, he'd had no idea of making another elfling and love for Legolas was greater still at this point. Now he was sick at heart, thinking how his pig-headed arrogance had kept him from understanding Aearen for so long. Had he known of the sylvans' peculiar notions about rebirth, Elrond might have pointed out the likelihood of the King and Queen's desire to reincarnate their eldest son. Together, he and Legolas could have faced the crushing guilt and discovered a solution that did not include a risky pregnancy.

"Garo Sîdh, garo sîdh," said Rhûn'waew serenely, the absolution meant for both her son and lawson, for she knew the mounting fears of the latter and the weighty remorse sure to inundate the former before the night was gone. "All will be well and things turn out for the best. Iest Nîn, your desire for this babe was and is so strong, I have no doubt the Valar will grant you whatever grace you need to see it through. As long as your mate is by your side, nothing untoward should occur. You are young for life-bearing, 'tis true enough, but no Elf has greater courage and fortitude than you. Yet one thing I do advise."

Legolas stared at her, his expression that of stunned confusion. One thought clouded his mind, an idea so grave that he scarcely heard his mother's comments and blurted out his bewilderment. "But, then, who is this babe if not Galbreth?" Unconsciously, his hand sought Elrond's and gripped on tightly when the familiar palm encircled his. Until this instant, he hadn't been the least bit concerned about bringing a babe into the world. Now, the idea of the child growing within him filled him with apprehension. What did he know of caring for an elfling? Nothing! I've deliberately refused to learn anything about it at all.

Rhûn'waew smiled gently and patted her son's middle. "He is new, Legolas. A new soul, called into being by the desperate love and duty weighing upon your heart. This babe is both a child of hope and a child of sorrow, Iest Nîn; an elfling wanted with fierce devotion by one parent, and yet an elfling unimagined by the other. It is undoubtedly a confusing experience for him. It is up to you and Elrond to make these things clear to him. That is why it's so important that you two…" The rest of her advice was cut off for the second time.

"Oh, Tinu Mîn," whispered Legolas, his voice stricken and tear-choked, his free hand covering his Naneth's where it lay upon the hidden child. "I didn't mean…" He couldn't complete the thought and at once another hand cloaked his as Elrond bent to kiss his cheek.

"Nae! What is this?" he murmured into a delicately pointed ear, turning Legolas to him as Rhûn'waew withdrew. "There is no cause for regrets or tears. Aearen, our child will be both healthy and happy for we are here to ensure exactly that. Indeed, what a blessed child our babe is, claiming the love and allegiance of two of elvendom's greatest realms! He shall learn sword-craft from Glorfindel of Gondolin, archery from Greenwood's finest warrior, his Ada, and diplomacy and state-craft from a King. He will be wondrous, Aearen, and we will love him dearly."

"He's right, Iest Nîn, your son will be magnificent and will play a role in the great events of his time. Fear not," his Nana added kindly. In truth the babe's future was a blur and she was deeply concerned that as yet she could not see the elfling's face in her inner heart, something she had experienced with her sons and every grandchild born thus far. This was not an omen she would report to Legolas.

Legolas inhaled deeply and settled close against Elrond's heart, somewhat appeased by his mate's glowing predictions but still fearful. He was naturally intuitive in his own right and easily picked up the undertone of uneasiness in his mother's reassurances, echoes of his own. Why it should be so he
could not define, yet knowing the life within him was not Galbreth somehow lent the babe's existence an aura of doubt. Galbreth, ordained by the Valar to return to life, must therefore be born and live again. This unknown soul, called into being by its Ada's tormented guilt, who could guess its fate? Mayhap the Powers would deem Legolas unfit to raise a child and take Tinu Mín away.

He shivered and huddled closer, a fractious wail striving to get past his lips. He was aware of his heart racing and his lungs heaving to supply air, but the sense that he had doomed his elfling to dwell in Mandos overwhelmed him.

The next instant Legolas was scooped up off his feet, his legs having given out, and borne with haste in his beloved's arms, Rhûn'waew calling for the healer behind them.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~ Siniath Chwiniol: Fantastic News
Garo sídh: Be at peace
ionneth: young son
Maeth Imvelethryn: Fight between Lovers - Lover's Quarrel
Henduin: River Child - Rhûn'waew's pet name for her husband.
Indolen: Dream of my Heart - Thranduil's pet name for his wife
ind-an-faer: heart and soul
Tolo sí: Come here
Le Tobol Ista: Coming to Know You
Gladhadithen: Little Laugh, the Queen's healer
Úan Mín: Our Monster
Sui adar, sui ion: Like father, like son
Arahen: royal child
talan chall: hidden talan
Iest Mín: Our Wish - pet name for Legolas used by his parents.
Iest Nín: My Wish
Emil Vain: First Prince
Nae: Alas
Rhûn'waew: East Wind
Aras: deer, stag
Tinu Mín: our little star

Well, I know you've waited a long time for an update. This just wasn't coming together how I wanted it to but I feel better about it now. What we see here is a look at how the couple interact in the aftermath of the Wood Elves' arrival, with a glimpse at the underlying problems in communication that have plagued them from the start. Each one hopes to protect the other from a truth they think too burdensome to bear, and in Legolas' case he fears Elrond will find reason to be angry with him. Now, he does not believe Galion and Fennas would halt the marriage, but knows they are not above the idea of avenging their prince's honour. It is this he fears and hopes to avert, but even more fears to admit to Elrond what they might be up to. Then there is Aras to consider, a real pain in the arse. Eventually we'll uncover the cause for his aversion to Legolas and Elrond, and hopefully we'll at least understand him even if we can't excuse his behaviour.

Elrond's concerns are plain enough.

Legolas' mother had surprising news which puts her son's pregnancy in a different light. Legolas, as we see now (if we didn't before) is not good at thinking through all the possibilities. Maybe he should have realised his parents would try to reincarnate his brother, once their grief was conquered, but please remember he has been alienated from his home and family and had convinced himself that he was responsible for Galbreth's death. He was fearful to face them with that fact until he could also
assure them of Galbreth's rebirth.

I know this is a terrible cliff-hanger, but the next part is already posted, so just click NEXT and your fears will be assuaged.

As always, thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!

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Elrond adjusted the cushions beneath Legolas' knees, ensuring the long legs remained elevated at a
comfortable height, then took up one slender bare foot at the ankle. Slowly he rotated the joint and
then massaged the jutting, angular bone with his thumb. Cupping the heel in one hand for support, he
ran his thumbnail down the sole; Legolas' toes curled up in response and he giggled. Elrond smiled.
"Ticklish?" he knew Legolas was and repeated the move, pressing more lightly so that this time the
entire leg twitched and a loud peal of laughter rang out from the Elf. Elrond then set to stroking the
sensitive skin mercilessly, keeping his grip on the ankle tight, grinning as Legolas floundered on the
bed and laughed until tears welled in his eyes.

"Ai! Daro!" pleaded Legolas between gasping guffaws and smiled placidly when he was instantly
obeyed. Elrond began seriously massaging his foot, the pressure pleasant and even invigorating
while somehow soothing to his jangled nerves, and he sighed. Presently, the right foot was
exchanged for the left and the skilled healer's fingers worked their magic again. Relaxing, he leaned
back into the pillows, shifting his shoulders in that motion designed to achieve the utmost comfort as
his naked frame settled deeper into the downy pile. His eyes drifted shut as his lips curved into a
slender, dreamy smile of complete contentment. This, he deemed, was precisely what he needed: the
soft comfort of the huge feather bed, cool silk caressing his skin, moonlight spilling through the open
windows, the sweet strains of elvish song drifting in from the courtyard below, and Elrond catering
to his slightest whim.

The mortifying memory of being carried almost insensible through the Last Homely House, Elrond
frantically calling his name over and over, his Naneth screeching for Thranduil and the healer, the
Hall of Fire disgorging a veritable horde of Elves from both Greenwood and Imladris, all of them
staring agog with that avid curiosity incited by tragedy, all of them either his kin, Elrond's kin, sylvan
Elders, assorted Noldorin nobles, and what surely must be every staff member in the place along
with a fair number of warriors from the barracks, retreated to the darkest corners of his mind. Legolas
would not consciously think of how relieved he was for the event to belong to the past, albeit the
very recent past, for doing so meant he would have to recall it in all its vivid, vibrant detail. If death
by embarrassment were possible, he would be in Mandos now. The only thing he'd been through
that was more humiliating happened the horrible day at the mud Spa when Finduilas and her bevy of
maiden attendants barged in on him in the midst of coating his exposed, afflicted genitals with slick,
wet clay.

That and the time Arwen appeared in my bathing spot, how or from where I still know not, and
groped me, taking my measure and girth with far too practised a hand.

Something of his discomfort over weighing the severity of these living nightmares must have shown
on his face, for Elrond stopped what he was doing, his gentle hand coming to rest on Legolas' knee.
"Pân vae, Aearen?" he asked softly, so much concern and love and devotion in the simple words that
Legolas' heart turned over. He opened his eyes to a face etched in worry and sympathy, Elrond's
grey irises as pale as water, his complexion wan, his dark brows squinched together in a most un-
lordly manner. Impulsively, Legolas reached out to him and the hand was instantly caught as Elrond
moved closer, leaning over the deadly digits to kiss them with adoring fervour.

"Aye, Im vae, Nín'ódhel."

Silence returned as Elrond resumed the massage and the couple enjoyed the comfort of this familiar
intimacy. After a time, however, Legolas decided the peace between them was filled with things that must be said. "I am not so naive as everyone thinks." The compressing fingers faltered and stopped as Elrond's eyes joined his. "That's what happened downstairs. I realised what I've done, you see, and how wrong it is, how selfish. I was so …so…"

"I don't want to hear any recriminations," interjected Elrond. "You were not in your right mind, you were grieving, you were alone with no one to consult about this. I don't even care about the reasons; don't you see?" He knew he was being sharp and stopped, willing himself to be calm. "Aearen, I do not hold you to blame for this child, nor do your parents or even that healer. Berating yourself will only increase the risk by adding to your distress."

"What of Tinu Mîn? Does he blame me for making his life so fragile, so uncertain?"

Elrond was nodding gravely and Legolas' eyes grew huge in response. "I'm sure he does; no doubt in my mind whatsoever. In fact, he's probably going to be an unholy terror of an elfling just to get back at us for it. Aye, enjoy these months of peace and serenity, for once he's born Tinu Mîn will surely become Úan Mîn." He smiled to match the growing joy on his mate's face, pleased to have alleviated Aearen's fears this way. It was then he recalled Erestor's comment about Legolas' habit of keeping things to himself. In an instant he became serious again.

"Aearen, I'm glad this is out in the open. My thoughts have been a whirlwind of conflicting emotions and notions. One minute I'm missing my family, envious of yours, the next I'm angry that I didn't know who you were, and right after that I'm overwhelmed with guilt for the reasons why you didn't share that most basic information with me. We cannot continue on this way. However hard it may be, we must learn to confide in one another. So much anguish could have been avoided had we done so earlier. Now, it is essential that we trust and depend on each other."

"Aye," Legolas sighed, a look of stoic resolve transforming his face. "I have many things I've not told you," he started, "but most of them seem petty in light of this new dilemma."

"What new dilemma?" asked a confused Elven Lord. "And what haven't you told me, Legolas?"

"Things about the Elder's Council, but that isn't important right now," he answered, waving away the ominous statement as if it was a casual reference to weather. "The problem is Tinu Mîn, of course. Above all, we must find a way to protect him. I think we should discuss whether or not to sail."

Elrond was taken aback, once more caught off-guard by the trend of Legolas' thoughts. "Very well, but I must tell you I do not favour such a plan."

"Why? You were open to the idea before your council approved our marriage. Is it because of Imladris and the promise you made to Gil-galad?"

"No, that's nothing to do with it," Elrond grimaced around the words, displeased that Legolas could still doubt him so. "It is the state of your health that concerns me. I'm not certain you could survive the crossing."

Legolas' stared. "Who has said this?"

"I am a healer, Aearen; I don't need anyone to tell me," Elrond hedged, reluctant to admit he'd discussed the topic with Thranduil behind Legolas' back. In the days since that conversation, he'd done nothing but debate the benefits versus dangers of emigrating to Valinor. Each time he did the conclusion was the same: the journey to Aman was no longer an option. He took a deep breath and spoke the words he knew would provoke an instantaneous revolt. "With the outcome so risky, I'm unwilling to sail. I will not lose you, Legolas, even if it means we must lose Tinu Mîn."
"No! My responsibility is to our babe," Legolas insisted, lifting up on his elbows to glower at his mate. "I cannot allow him to perish; if he does I will surely fade, Elrond. Can't you see what he means to me?"

"I do, but now we know this is not your deceased brother and you were not given the task of renewing his life. That being so, the Valar must have judged you blameless of his death and have blessed the conception."

"I don't care if he's Galbreth or not. I made him; he's my responsibility," Legolas interrupted.

"Wrong. WE made him and thus he is my responsibility, too," Elrond was already shaking his head and raising a hand to silence the arguments he knew were on the verge of spilling from Legolas' throat. "Don't bring up all that stuff again, Aearen, we've been over it and over it. It doesn't matter whether I knew or not; I never took the trouble to find out if you were fertile and didn't think it was necessary to discuss child-bearing. We will share responsibility, understand?"

A few seconds sped away into infinity before Legolas gave a silent nod of acquiescence. "I could make the crossing just fine as long as you are beside me," the sylvan added softly, eyes liquid in his fear for the babe.

"Ai Elbereth," sighed Elrond, suddenly leaning over to gather Legolas close against him. "You must see it as the greater risk. Consider: on the open ocean, where shall we turn if we need help? Out in the isolation of the Sundering Sea, how am I to learn the proper way to care for you, the best way to treat any complications? Who can say whether the waters and the winds will be kind or cruel? Many ships are lost to storms, Aearen, though it isn't something you would be likely to know unless you've had friends among the Faladhrim."

"The Valar would protect us, surely," said Legolas, but he had doubts about that. Truly, his greatest fear was that the Powers would punish his imprudent decision to conceive by taking the child away. Sailing to Aman would be viewed as an act of penitence, he hoped; essentially, throwing himself upon the mercy of the Lords of the West.

"They will do the same should we remain here," insisted Elrond and with a sigh gave him another tight squeeze before laying him back upon the silken sheets. He resorted to the one argument he thought would convince the Wood Elf. "Beloved, if the worst should happen, only your survival ensures our babe's return from Mandos. He's brand new and depends utterly on us. You and I must endure, no matter what happens, so to try and create him again. No one else can do it."

Legolas swallowed hard against the rising tide of grief this drew from his troubled soul, for it sounded to his ears as if Elrond was predicting their child's death, either soon or at birth. On top of his Naneth's unspoken fears, it was too much. His hands flew to cover his stomach and his knees curled in as he rolled to his side, a sob shaking his frame. "I don't want to lose him," he rasped, unable to find air, the words scarcely audible. He felt cold inside and sick. Immediately, the strong presence of his mate wrapped around his heart as Elrond lay down beside him and protectively covered both mate and unseen babe.

"You won't, Aearen, that's not what I meant. As long as we are careful and you stop letting everything fall on your shoulders, all will be well. Let me take these burdens from you, Legolas, for Tinu Mín's sake and mine. You won't lose him."

"Promise me," demanded Legolas, burrowing against the broad chest, tucking his fingers within the glossy strands of black trapped between them.

"I promise," said Elrond, kissing the mass of golden air beneath his chin, gently stroking the tense
back. "He will be fine as long as we follow the healer's advice. She said Tinu Mín is well; it is you for whom we are all apprehensive. You must cease this constant fretting." A brief nod against his chest followed and the rigid frame relaxed a bit. Elrond breathed easier as the legs straightened and Legolas snuggled in closer. Slowly he began rocking Aearen, humming a tune at random, not realising he had chosen a ballad that had never failed to soothe Arwen when she was a child.

It seemed to work for Legolas, too, and soon a deep sigh vented his lungs. He lay still in Elrond's arms, simply absorbing the encompassing love and care for several hours, though he did not sleep or enter reverie. Eventually, proximity awakened other needs as well and he stirred. "Let us go to Lanthir Fân," he whispered.

"That would be lovely, but I have something else in mind tonight. I've been ordered to make you stay in bed, remember?"

That prompted a smile as Legolas rolled out of his mate's embrace. "Aye, but you are not doing a very good job of making it enjoyable."

"Oh? Do you not like the massage technique I was using?" He sat up and regarded his beloved in mock annoyance. "Others assure me it is thoroughly restful."

"Aye, but I want something more than rest."

"Trust me, Aearen; the night has barely begun."

That elicited a little shiver that ran through every nerve of Legolas body. Their lovemaking was a balanced mixture of gentle tenderness, adventurous role-play, and impassioned lust. Since everything they did was new for Legolas, this gave Elrond a fresh perspective as well. It was clear that the ancient legend revelled in being the sophisticated, worldly mentor to an ingenuous, inexperienced neophyte.

The anxious lines across the archer's brow had all disappeared and Elrond clambered closer, bending down to press his lips against the firm stomach. With the crisis averted a second time, his soul surged with a strong protective instinct, determined to nurture mate and unborn babe to nativity.

Feeling Legolas go limp in his arms had devastated the mighty Lord and prompted a slight overreaction. Yet as embarrassed as he was to have revealed his panic so openly, never had the renowned physician been so pleased to welcome another healer into his rooms. Gone were the days when he would have scoffed at the concept of sylvan Elves having any genuine skill or understanding of the workings of the body, beyond the most obvious functions. Never again would he snicker over crude jokes about superstitious charms and obscure folk-cures, for the Queen's personal medic was efficient, intelligent, and well-versed in the rarer aspects of sylvan male anatomy, having successfully attended three such pregnancies over the course of her career. So she'd asserted in answer to his rapid interrogation as they'd raced up the graceful curve of the central staircase.

Gladhadithen had given a brisk, thorough exam, pronounced the babe unaffected by his Adar's near collapse, diagnosed Legolas as hovering too near to emotional exhaustion for his or the child's good, ordered bed rest for at least a full day, commanded Elrond to coddle and cosset his mate in such a way to ensure he remained abed, and forbidden either one to attend the stressful convocation of the Council of Elders. The portentous meeting had forthwith been postponed for the following night's Ithil Daen. Elrond considered it a suitable outcome and applauded Gladhadithen's very pleasing course of treatment. He was determined to follow it to the letter.

First, he'd arranged a cool, refreshing bath, crushing athelas leaves and casting them into the water along with aloe oil and various other invigorating herbs. There he'd let Legolas soak for an hour,
lovingly sponging the restoring fluid over his limp body. They’d spoken little during that phase, for Elrond knew how abashed Aearen was over the attention he’d called to himself. Likewise, the concerned spouse refrained from scolding his beloved over the sparing amount of nourishment he’d taken at the evening meal. Instead, Elrond concentrated on easing Legolas' emotional discomfort, humming a light tune, massaging away any lingering tension from shoulders and neck, washing the long golden tresses thoroughly. That last had required significant self-control in order to keep his personal predilection in check, but he’d managed.

After that, he’d helped Legolas out of the tub, dried him off, bundled him into a soft cotton robe, and whispered that it was time to settle into bed. This soft announcement had at last awakened a light in the archer's eyes and he’d smiled, moving into Elrond's arms even as he’d shrugged out of the damp garment. He’d not complained a bit when Elrond swept him up into his arms again and carried him to the massive bed, nor had he argued when the Elven Lord proceeded to comb out his wet hair. He'd submitted obediently to everything and this communicated the mood of his gradually awakening desire more certainly than any spoken words.

The abrupt resurgence of harrowing distress dispersed, the most chilling fears he harboured finally shared, and Legolas once again calm and receptive, Elrond responded with renewed exuberance. Continuing the massage to deepen his mate's tranquility, he relished every stroke and press of the warm, smooth flesh, appreciating Legolas with unhurried pleasure, and avidly cataloguing each indication of the Wood Elf's returning confidence.

He deemed the time right to initiate a bit of playful banter that would naturally lead to more salacious remarks, culminating in an entirely naughty dialogue as intercourse commenced. Turning his head, Elrond laid his ear against the tiny mound beneath the navel and assumed a serious demeanour as of one listening intently to something very faint and far away. He smiled at Legolas' quizzical expression over this activity, nodding as he sat up again. "Ah, he is sleeping. I'd best not do anything to disturb our little one's rest." Aearen's eyes grew hugely round and Elrond laughed, bestowing a loving pat upon the taut abdomen.

"What did you hear?" demanded Legolas, really believing his mate had been listening to their babe. 
"Can you detect his breathing? Does his heart sound strong?" He broke off abruptly as his beloved chuckled.

"Nay, he's not old enough to be making audible sounds, though his heart is surely beating. Can't you feel it?" Elrond couldn't help himself and softly petted his mate's belly again, a swirled sweep of fingertips over the subtle curve that ended in a gentle probe at the in-folded umbilical scar. Legolas in naked repose had been his private delight for over ten years and the fact that his beloved carried their infant child filled him with pride and a deep, possessive desire. He was aroused and made no effort to conceal it. Before the dawn arrived, physical exhaustion would replace the emotional weariness plaguing the Wood Elf, leaving Legolas sated and submerged in a real healing slumber. Then, when he awoke, Elrond planned to take him again, filling him with the evidence of his love. So lost was he in this musing that Aearen's reply was nearly a surprise.

"I feel his heart. It's so fast, Elrond, like a little bird's. Is that normal?"

"Aye, that is as it should be for this stage. There is much strenuous work in the making of life and it is no wonder Tinu Mín's heart is always aflutter with the effort. Your's is elevated, too; hadn't you noticed?"

Of course Elrond knew why Legolas' pulse was rising and smirked with devilish glee as his hand slithered lower and caressed the sylvan's sensitive inner thigh. The response was immediate and gratifying as Legolas' whole body twitched and his lengthy limbs parted, wantonly exposing his
hardening penis. As the slender organ filled, the scrotum pulled up tight and revealed the moist, maroon cleft below. Elrond pressed his fingers inside but didn't penetrate far, withdrawing them to trace over the testicles clustered at the root and then trail along up the length of the aroused organ, stopping to tickle the juncture where the head arose. He was rewarded with the softly trilling call as Legolas' arse shifted restlessly on the sheets.

"Ai Nín'ódhel," Legolas shivered under the touch, the feeling maddening in the most delicious manner, "the things you do to me."

Elrond grinned. "You know you like it, Aearen." With that he sidled between the wide-spread thighs and lovingly nuzzled the warm wet opening, fingers playing lightly over the tip of the rigid cock, pressing down on the tiny orifice, spreading the slippery secretion this coaxed forth. Meanwhile, his tongue flickered in and out as he lapped at the acrid fluids there, pushing his nose deep into the musky blonde curls, inhaling the heady mix of desire and herb-scented bath water. He closed his fist around the archer's erection and lightly squeezed, not really pumping but hinting that perhaps he might, and Legolas groaned, straining to press into the grip. It was enough to make Elrond's heart soar and provoked a monumental struggle to abstain from mounting his sylvan mate at once.

Instead, he satisfied his hunger by grazing from the vaginal canal up between the thighs, lightly sucking on the small glands bulging out from their thin covering of crinkly, hairless skin. Legolas was sensitive there but not so much as other places and Elrond moved on, testing the firmness of the slender shaft, nibbling and licking languidly from base to tip, where he paused to catch Aearen's eye. The sylvan was struggling for breath, blue irises almost obliterated in the yawning depths of dilated pupils, lips parted, nostrils flared, hands tangled in the sheets as if he feared to fall from the bed. Elrond took his time and looked him over well, noting the flush of rose that suffused his flesh, darkening to a rich ruby hue at the pinnacles of his ears and the engorged points where his nipples rose and fell with every laboured breath. A smile stole over the Elven Lord's face and he crawled forward, mimicking the stance he would normally assume to seal their bodies together.

He didn't lunge into motion, however, for he was still dressed in leggings and shirt, though the tunic, boots, and hose had been discarded before the bath had begun. Now Elrond remained poised above Legolas, gazing down into questioning eyes, his expression alive with the soft light of love and the consuming heat of desire. He lowered his head and kissed the parted mouth, which opened fully to his exploring tongue as a quiet moan escaped Aearen's lungs and entered his. He ended the kiss in stages, taking small samples of the hot wet interior and the pliant lips, drawing back only to lean forward again and renew the intimate communion. At last he relented, a sigh of absolute pleasure gusting over the sylvan's face, fluttering through an errant strand of hair draped across his cheek.

"How can it be that you belong to me?" whispered Elrond, giving a bemused shake of his head. He let his gaze travel over the recumbent form again, peering down between his arms and then back to the stunning mane and the blushing ears protruding from it. Elrond strained forward and caught one with his teeth, tugging the tender tip so that Legolas rippled beneath him and raised up into the sensation, breath catching, pulse throbbing so strongly it could be felt at the point of contact.

"Elrond, you torment me," he accused in tremulous tones.

"Nay, I would pleasure you, beloved," the Lord of Imladris replied. "It is time to teach you how to extend that pleasure for a longer span of time."

"Nay! You would deny me just to revel in my hunger," Legolas complained, gasping as lips suddenly surrounded his left nipple. Suction drew the tight node up as the tip of Elrond's tongue dragged across it and Legolas arched into the erotic jolt, all thought scattered. He opened his eyes, never aware that he'd shut them, and focused on the Noldorin noble just as he released the enflamed
peak. Legolas watched the nipple slip free, slick and dark, and quivered in that most divine of
disappointments, waiting and hoping for more. He met Nín'ódhell's eyes.

"I freely admit to your charge," said Elrond. "You have no idea of how glorious you are in the throes
of your passion, have you?" He offered this as his only defence and without waiting for any answer
dipped his head to the second nipple, sucking forcefully and laving his tongue over it, feeling its heat
and hardness against the fleshy muscle. Legolas arched from the mattress to increase the scintillating
pressure and Elrond closed his teeth around the node. The bite was enough to leave a mark and
wring a cry from Aearen and that sent a burst of longing straight to Elrond's cock, still painfully
restrained beneath his leather leggings. He groaned, relocating higher to lap at the neglected ear, and
contemplated what to do next. Should he retrieve their naughty toys or continue this more gentle
seduction? Suddenly aware of Legolas' hands hastening to get his pants untied, Elrond sat back and
snatched those clever fingers tightly.

"No, none of that. I'll decide when and how my clothes are to be removed," he commanded.

"Want to touch you, Nín'ódhell," pleaded Legolas. "Let me." He made to rise and was summarily
pushed back into the pillows.

His entreaty gave Elrond an idea, something he'd never done in front of Legolas, nor something
Legolas had yet done for him, either and he grinned in anticipation of the reaction it would generate.
"You must control this urge to touch me," he admonished. "Are you capable of doing so?"

"Aye. Nay, why should I? Do you not desire me to touch you?" Legolas challenged, hoping to
regain control of this encounter. He didn't reckon with his mate's determination, however, and
though it was plain that the suggestion immediately came to life in Elrond's mind, experience enabled
him to resist giving in.

"Of course I long for your touch. Ah Aearen, I have been hard since I undressed you and put you in
the tub. There are times, though, when it is necessary to manage such cravings creatively. It would
not be the first time I've yearned for you without finding satisfaction."

"What?" Legolas' eyes were wide with dismay. "When have I not…"

"I refer to those times when we have been parted one from another. Just because we were separated
does not mean I lost my appetite for you."

"Oh." Legolas knew not what to say to this. It was the first time Elrond had alluded to the physical
aspects of the days they'd spent divided. Their reunions were nothing short of spectacular after the
depredation of intimacy, Legolas as much in need, if not more so, than his older, more sophisticated
mate. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you any …"

"I'm not telling you this to censure you," Elrond explained, smiling with amusement for Legolas had
absolutely no idea where this conversation was heading. "Have you never wondered if I missed you?
Did you not miss me also? Did you feel my desire for you, even from across the leagues between us
when you retreated to your wild woods?"

"I…Yes, but what is that to do with now? We're together and I've sworn not to run off like that
again."

"Did you wonder if I sought release, even in your absence? Perhaps you imagined that as you
pleasured yourself." Elrond sat back on his heels beside Legolas, unlaced his shirt, and drew it off.
The fabric caught some of his hair and caused a fall of ebony to cascade over his chest. This he
shook back with a sweep of his hand as he cast aside the garment, meeting Legolas' obvious
appreciation with a roguish half-smile, for the archer's vision tracked his torso from nipples to navel and back before finding his face anew. "Well, did you?"

Legolas was lost for a moment, having forgotten the specific question, but then caught his breath suddenly. He couldn't tell Elrond that he hadn't needed to pleasure himself while they were parted, not this last time. He gave a hesitant nod and hoped the probing went no further than that, for before the Twins became his mates the statement was true enough. He licked his lips. "And you?"

If Elrond caught the hesitation he attributed it to the general anxiety Legolas always experienced when he thought Elrond was being critical of him. He nodded gravely and slowly, almost as slowly as he moved his hands from their resting place upon his thighs. In minute degrees they migrated up, pausing to permit one finger to trace the bulging outline at the crotch, withdrew to the sound of an expectant rumble of pleasure to come, and finally reached the waist of the leggings. He began untying the leather lacing.

"Oh yes, I've lain in this very bed longing for you, hard and needy as now, lacking your company and craving your body." He had the pants open and worked a hand inside, drawing his erection forth and holding it out proudly clasped within his fist. "A poor substitute, this, but what other choice remained? Should I deny myself, Legolas, when you are not beside me?"

I'm here; I would deny you nothing, Legolas wanted to say but only a hoarse and husky "Nay!" came out. His vision flickered swiftly up to dark eyes glittering with passion and returned to the hand and the ruddy cock it encircled. Whatever response Elrond gave, if any, was completely missed as the hand began to move.

With firm, quick strokes Elrond stroked his flesh, groaning as his eyelids fluttered low and his features took on an expression of intense concentration. His free fingers tripped lightly up his breastbone, hesitating a second as if unsure what to explore first, then raced for an ear, gently flicking and then pinching the pointed tip. Another plaintive moan left him and his hips bucked forward. He was glorious to behold, a soft sheen coating his body, enhancing the light of his elven aura, his muscles flexing in erotic time with his pumping fist as his breath raced in heavy gusts through barely opened lips. He tipped his head and massaged the other ear, letting his hair come dancing forward briefly, swaying across his belly before returning behind him.

Without realising it, Legolas grabbed his own erection and began to match his lover's pace. No sooner had he done so than Elrond pounced, tearing the offending hand away and hovering in glowering disapproval over the Wood Elf.

"Nay, none of that," he warned. "I want you to try to control your impulses. Do not touch yourself; watch and learn."

He let go and Legolas obediently buried his errant fingers in the wrinkled sheets, nodding agreement in silence. He wasn't sure he could do what was expected of him, not even if he wished it, but was willing to play this new game, determined to do his best to comply. Elrond had never failed to bring him to shattering culmination and thus far their little plays had proved most enjoyable. He wondered if there was any penalty for failing and swallowed hard as the mighty Lord resumed his vigorous masturbation.

"Good," Elrond said. He took several deep breaths, exhaling the last one in a stilted cry of urgency. "Those times when you were not here in my bed, what torment that was," he continued, pausing again to draw sufficient air. "I would close my eyes and imagine you here, naked and needy just as you are now. My hand became yours; my healer's fingers replaced by the calloused ones I so much prefer. Gripping and pulling, twisting just a little, coaxing me slowly, slowly toward my peak."

Another short pause commenced and Elrond used it to reach down with his other hand and carefully
cup his balls, increasing the pressure just a fraction until he jerked and cried out, pushing into the continuous massage.

"Ai Valar," Legolas whispered, transfixed by the display. Once more his hand seemed oblivious to conscious command and gripped his cock, working swiftly to catch up with Elrond's level of arousal. As before, though his mate had appeared lost in his intimate manipulations, the Elven Lord had been watching from beneath his lowered lashes. Moving with a speed generally reserved for combat, Elrond again pulled the disobedient fingers from their pleasurable employment and held them captive against the soft and pliant bed.

"What a wilful, undisciplined Elf you are," he growled, hovering over his prostrate mate, appraising the startled chagrin playing over Legolas' features, his heart giving a huge surge upon perceiving the glint of rising excitement in the blue eyes. Aearen was eager to play along.

Indeed, the sylvan recognised his cue and took it up with zeal. At once his chin came up in stubborn defiance and immediately initiated a struggle to get loose from the confining hold. "Release me!" he insisted between panting breaths, squirming about so effectively that he managed to brush his knee against Elrond's balls, provoking a low grunt of exquisite pain.

"Oh, you want release, do you?" snickered Elrond, getting one knee atop a lanky sylvan leg as he sought to control the thrashing Elf. He bore down upon the wrist in his grip, groaning as Legolas' free hand managed to grab a hank of his hair and gave it a sound yank.

"Yes!" fumed Legolas, managing to card his fingers through the ebony locks as Elrond jerked his head aside. "You've no right to keep me thus, toying with me, tormenting me! This time, you are the one who will be taught a lesson!" His efforts increased convincingly as he reached for and caught the huge penis bobbing between Elrond's thighs. In the split second during which the mighty Lord froze, Legolas planted a ready knee in his middle and flipped him over. They landed precariously close to the edge and paused, Elrond shuddering under the incredible sensation rippling through his cock. It was almost enough to make him give in.

Almost.

The triumphant smirk on Legolas' face was quickly transformed into lustful hunger as the archer let go and straddled his mate, leaning low to claim the garnet lips. He met resistance and relished it, pressing for control, demanding to be admitted, and exalting when the rigid jaw relaxed and let him explore. Victory! His kiss was urgent and frantic, his tongue questing thoroughly as if the experience was brand new, and he was quickly lost in the chase as he teased Elrond's tongue in a playful dance. His fingers found means to seek out sensitive ears and massage them, permitting Elrond's hands to support him at the waist, believing capitulation in the kiss signalled surrender over all. Thus, he was unprepared for his adversary's counter move.

Elrond rolled forward, keeping the kiss going the while, pulling Legolas further into his lap as he came upright, sitting with his legs splayed wide upon the mattress and the sticky heat of Aearen's hidden opening pressed against his balls. He gave a little rock that pushed their erections even closer and the sensation made them both moan. As expected, Legolas' legs immediately encircled him and locked about his waist. From this position it was not so hard for Elrond to draw his knees under him and secure a firm grip, arms tightening around the distracted Elf as he shuffled cautiously toward the foot of the bed. Once there he carefully bent forward and settled Legolas against the bed, unbending the arms entwined about his neck and within his hair, first one and then the other, gathering them together above the archer's head, holding them there securely against the foot rail.

By now the kiss had ended and they gazed at one another, breathing hard to regain strength, eyes alight with mischief as each anticipated what would come next. Legolas broke the silence.
"Release me," he demanded a second time, his voice pitched low in sultry tones, legs still locked around Elrond's waist, a wolfish challenge in the half-smile that graced his lips.

"Perhaps." Elrond kissed him, grinding into the cock pressed against his, delighting in the involuntary thrust this elicited from Legolas. He retreated from the compliant mouth and surveyed the openly submissive Elf beneath him. He would not go too far, not tonight, he decided. Legolas had indicated his desire for a more tender encounter, yet even so had joined in the game with complete abandon. Elrond's heart again surged with love and devotion. Tonight would be but an introduction in the art of prolonging pleasure; he would save the real training for another day.

Legolas unwound his legs and pressed his feet into the mattress, so to push up against Elrond and entice him into action. This provoked a loud grunt and a hard thrust against his belly but the hold on his wrists remained firm. He wriggled invitingly and let his thighs flop wide to either side, completely open to penetration whenever Elrond might choose to take him. Which he hoped would be soon. "Nín'ódhel, I want you," he complained.

It was nearly enough to undo Elrond's resolve, but he was loathe to let his mate win this little contest. Legolas was adept in seizing control of their lovemaking by employing his erotic arsenal of sensual sighs, trembling trills, pleading entreaties, searing touches, and wantonly offering access to his body. Elrond kissed him again, a languid, encompassing possession. "Good," he whispered, retreating far enough to watch Legolas' reaction. "I want you to hunger for me, to yearn for my cock. How soon you get what you want depends on how well you obey my instructions."

A crease of frustration etched itself across Legolas' brow. He'd thought the game over and truly just wanted Elrond to fuck him. "Nay, I want you now." He tried to pull his hand away in earnest, finding his mood quite abruptly slipping toward anger, and when Elrond didn't immediately let go he exploded. A wild flurry of legs accompanied a rush of Nandorin curses as Legolas planted both feet against his mate's stomach, shoved him off, and rolled from the bed all at once. He stood glaring down at the surprised Elven Lord and issued further invectives in his native tongue before spinning on his heel and fleeing for the bathing chamber. The resounding report of the slamming door echoed through the Last Homely House.

Elrond lay a second or two in stunned shock before bounding off the bed and racing to the door, which he found securely bolted from the inside. "Aearen?" he called softly, tapping tentatively. Only silence met his ears. "Please, open the door. It was all in fun; I didn't mean to anger you." There was no answer beyond an indignant snort and a short Nandorin command which translated, as far as Elrond could gather, into 'caro le glass lín'. This was followed by the sound of the pump being primed so Legolas would not have to listen anymore.

The Lord of Imladris' head dropped and he issued a heavy sigh, rubbing his face with his hand in dismay. Resigned to wait, he reinserted his lax penis inside the pants and half-heartedly tied them up, for his compelling need had vanished almost at once. Retrieving a night shirt, he flopped in dejected remorse into an armchair by the empty hearth. This was hardly the outcome he'd hoped and surely would only increase Legolas' anxiety. Yet it was completely unexpected and he could only attribute the outburst to changes wrought by the pregnancy, unable to perceive that perhaps Legolas was beginning to express his real personality rather than that of a mere bond-slave. Perhaps the bath will help calm him. He would let Aearen alone for a time and try again in an hour. After all, the Wood Elf could not remain in the tub all night.

Well of course Legolas had no intention of sitting in the bath at all. He merely wanted the rushing gurgle of the pumped water to disguise the noise of his escape. Donning the clothes removed just a couple of hours ago, uncaring that they were damp and rumpled from being tossed to the floor, he slipped out the window and hoisted himself easily up onto the roof. Lighter than a cat, he tripped
across the tiles and settled in his favourite spot above the balcony of Elrond's study. Here was an unobstructed view of the night sky and he reclined against the pitched slope to focus on the stars, there to nurse his angry and abused feelings.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Elsewhere in the Last Homely House ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Thranduil sat propped upon the bed, a huge mound of pillows stuffed behind his back, enjoying the vision of Rhûn'waew sitting naked at the dressing table, grooming her lengthy black tresses. She hummed as she drew the boar-bristle brush through the luxuriant, inky strands, the lush locks swaying, now revealing her bare back, now hiding it again, intermittently permitting a peek at the lovely curve of her rear where it rested on the bench. In the mirror, he could see the reflection of her breast as it rose and fell with every brisk motion of her arm, the dark brown nipple staring back at him, a tempting, beckoning eye. After fifty strokes, she changed hands and the other breast took over the teasing dip and bob. At the end of another fifty, Thranduil was fully hard and yet waited patiently, enjoying the display. In the mirror, he caught Rhûn'waew watching him and they shared a smile.

"Then we are agreed this tendency toward omission must be addressed?" queried the Winter Queen.

"Of course," Thranduil shrugged, lacing his fingers together to prevent them from wandering toward his throbbing crotch. "Although I think I should be the one to have a word with Legolas. You are too motherly with him." This sparked a bubble of mirth from the Winter Queen's soul, a most welcome sound in view of her frantic terror just hours ago.

"Now, Henduin, I am after all his Naneth. You will be too kingly with him. Legolas is struggling with all the changes the pregnancy forces upon his body. It isn't so uncommon for cuil cyll sain to be nervous and hide unpleasant news."

"True, but they simply must start talking to one another as equal partners in this marriage. They are reluctant to speak out for fear of wounding one another; it isn't healthy."

"I agree. The problem is more troubling than fear of causing injury. Elrond is well-versed in handling opposition, if the stories Lindir tells are true," informed Rhûn'waew. "He is completely capable of dealing effectively with Galion and Fennas' machinations as long as you and I back him. Legolas knows this; thus, his reluctance to tell his mate what kind of opposition he is likely to face has its roots in dreading Elrond's anger and ultimate rejection."

Thranduil shook his head. "It is a poor match for him; Elrond is far too old for Legolas and they will always be on uneven footing."

"Yet our son loves this ancient Noldorin Lord; you must accept this. Do not try to convince him that his heart is mistaken," warned Rhûn'waew.

"I would never undermine him so," huffed Thranduil.

"Then what would you say?"

"I don't know," he admitted after a short silence, disturbed that he had no idea how to give his youngest child marital advice. Legolas' situation was beyond the norm, and Thranduil had sensed something peculiar in the bond knitting together his son's soul, though what it was he could not identify. It troubled him and he was unwilling to openly mention it, even to Rhûn'waew. That being the case, how could he effectively counsel his son to be open and honest?

The Sindarin king sighed. "Perhaps you should handle it then. I would speak to Legolas about the
babe only to offer reassurance and support, to communicate my assurance that he will be a fine parent. I do not fault him for creating life so precariously but perhaps he doesn't know that."

Thranduil's brow creased in dismay, imagining such a thought entering the mind of his once high-spirited golden child. Between them had always been the warmest affection and the doting Adar had ever made it his goal to show Legolas this unwavering love. "To see him like this, Indolen, fairly breaks my heart. Where is our bold, bright son? He is forever looking to that glorified Peredhel for approval or reassurance or something."

"Ai Valar! He looks to Elrond with love, seeking to see love returned. And it is; even you acknowledge this. You must stop, Thranduil. We have him back; isn't that enough for you? Treating Legolas like an elfling will only cause more hurt for him and for you. How is he to make his place here if you start interfering? Let them find their own way." Rhûn'waew stood and bent over, tossing her full mane before her, the curtain of raven hair concealing her face, her nude posterior pointed at her beloved herven. She started brushing again, drawing the bristles through with long slow deliberate movements that made the muscles in her back flex and shift. As expected, this had the effect of distracting her husband from further criticism of Elrond.

"Mmmm." Thranduil made a peculiar noise, a moan of appreciation and half a sigh of complaint, for while he regretted losing sight of the shapely breasts and their erect, mahogany nipples, he found his beloved wife's legs parted just enough to allow a teasing glimpse of the dark maroon crease between them. He shifted on the bed. "I know their love is real, but to find one's in-dan-faer at such cost!"

Rhûn'waew let that pass without comment, save for a solitary shudder that made her shoulders shimmy. What could one say? They had all suffered; she had no desire for any of them to continue doing so, especially Legolas. She had a strong suspicion that healing had only been fully accomplished scant months ago and this perplexed her. It was as if a part of his mate's soul had been withheld from her son until just around the time of conception. Unwilling to add to the stress and strain, she didn't want to question either Legolas or Elrond about it, deciding to wait and watch. "What are you going to do about the compensation?" she asked suddenly, edging her legs open just a tiny bit more and bending just slightly at the knees. Silence followed her question, if the King's elevated respiration could be termed silent. "Thranduil?"

"What? Oh, the compensation," he sighed in mock irritation, loving every minute of her tantalising seduction. Still, politics was the last thing on his mind right now. "Don't know. Whatever Fennas advises, I suppose."

Rhûn'waew gave an ungracious snort, pausing in her grooming to peer at her mate around the curve of her own arse. It took a second for Thranduil to remove his stare from her nether regions and meet her eyes. "Fennas is too divided. He is torn between his strong love for Legolas and his resentment of Elrond and all these Noldorin folk. You know he blames them for his wife's death at Dagorlad."

"I am counting on that," returned Thranduil, licking his lips for his mouth was very dry. "His indecision will allow a compromise to be made. Were he adamant on the written Law, there is little I could do about it."

The Queen huffed in annoyance and resumed her brushing, the strokes more strident now. "That Law should have been rescinded Ages ago. Such a high amount would cripple Elrond's House and weaken the Realm of Imladris. Is that what we want for Legolas' new home and family?"

"Of course not." Thranduil struggled to concentrate, for Rhûn'waew's rush of anger had sent a lovely flush through her body, casting her milky skin in rubicund shades of rose. "We want him to be well cared for and loved. Fennas wants this, too, beloved. He has always had Legolas' best interests at
heart. At the same time, would you have these people's behaviour excused? They have treated Iest Mín shamefully."

"Aye." She gave her hair a particularly rough stroke. "Can you believe their obsequious behaviour? It is both sickening and insulting, for they seem to feel we will ignore the pain our child has endured under their cold bigotry." Rhûn'waew scoffed, standing tall and casting her head back so that her glorious mane arced over her in a flowing wave of iridescent black filaments. It bounced and swayed almost with independent life before settling round her in a protective cloak. She set the brush before the mirror, her body therein fully revealed, and seductively caressed her belly, letting her hand saunter down to her thigh where it rested at the crease between her leg and the small triangle of tangled pubes.

"I am not pleased but I do not want to be too severe in punishing them. Legolas and the babe must live here; no need to encourage resentment and hostility due to the redress owed," she said.

"We will be here to mitigate that," Thranduil's words were soft and dreamy as he admired his lovely wife. It was hard to focus on anything but her hands. He was attempting to will them to travel lower and explore her hidden treasures more fully. "Tolo sí Indolen."

She gave her hair a playful flick and bounded across the room, her fingers slipping into his as he pulled her onto the bed. She straddled his lap, resting atop the heat of his restrained erection, and claimed his lips in a playful kiss. At once his free hand closed lightly around her breast, thumb massaging the nipple which rose up obediently. The kiss grew in passion and their fingers used the distraction to take off on excursions of their own, seeking familiar pressure points and favourite planes of flesh to caress. Rhûn'waew relinquished Thranduil's tongue so to lean forward and lap at the tip of his ear. Of course, this put her chest within nibbling range and at once the Sindarin King's mouth closed over the erect bud he'd been teasing. For a time they were each content with the treats they'd secured, only switching between right or left at intervals, but at last Rhûn'waew groaned and pulled back.

"More," she demanded and slithered off her husband to flop on her back beside him, black tresses spilling over them both, a wide swath of ebony silk.

In a move that seemed contrary to her order, Thranduil rolled off the bed and stood gazing down upon her, eyes alight with fire and longing. Then he began to slowly undress, pealing away the layers of silk and leather, all the while watching her. He did not engage in conversation as she had, for they were both beyond the point of leisurely foreplay. Even so, he didn't rush, letting her appreciate his unveiling at a pace that just gave her time to lust over the exposed flesh before hastening to see what his hands were revealing next. In this way the Sindarin King dispensed with tunic, shirt, and undershirt, pausing then to unbraid his hair, flexing his pectorals, heart soaring under the obvious hunger in her gaze as she admired his virile physique. He refrained from brushing out the golden mane, preferring to toss his head rakishly instead so that the crimped strands fell around his shoulders and framed his face. Then Rhûn'waew made that sound, the low, throaty, trilling call that meant she was ready.

Boots, breeches, and breechcloth were discarded haphazardly and Thranduil didn't even pause to flaunt his rigid penis, climbing on the bed to pounce on her, though she did equal pouncing, meeting him halfway. They grappled, Rhûn'waew fisting her husband's erection expertly, he dipping his fingers within the wet folds of heat between her legs, mouths sealing again as they moved toward union. Then she threw herself back, yanking him down atop her, hand still holding his cock captive, and guided him in.

Thranduil gave a shout of triumphant joy, for her need of him was a greater stimulant than even her
remarkable beauty, and he set out to satisfy her urgent craving. He kept his pace steady and his penetration deep and watched her writhing and twitching and rocking against him. There was nothing so wondrous in all the world as this: that she should need him so completely and yet give herself so fully. Heart close to bursting, he leaned low to kiss her. They reached their peak together and remained conjoined, relishing the lingering pleasure of racing blood and soaring souls.

As was their custom, Thranduil and Rhûn'waew retired to the bathing chamber to wash after their joyous coupling. The Winter Queen was quite gifted in the art of massage and was bearing down on a particularly recalcitrant muscle in her husband's shoulder. He lay stretched face down upon an ample bench, limp and relaxed beneath her hands, and every now and then gave forth a long sigh that ended in a soft moan of contented exhaustion. She deemed the time ripe for continuing their discussion at the point where they'd dropped it.

"I'm worried about him, Henduin," she announced quietly.

Thranduil gave a long sigh. "Elrond is wise enough to comprehend the danger and keep Legolas healthy. After all, Elrond is robust and there's no reason he shouldn't be able to give all Legolas needs to see this through."

"Don't you think we should discuss it openly with our son? What if the worst happens and we must choose between them. Legolas will not easily forgive us for letting his babe die in order to save him."

"Why give these horrible ideas the breath of your body?" demanded Thranduil, disturbed to hear not only the words but the real anxiety in her voice. Rhûn'waew was something of a seer and he was always leery of having her announce unpleasant tidings for fear that they were in essence predictions.

"Pretending the danger doesn't exist won't make it vanish," she admonished. "He isn't a child any longer and has the right to decide this. It is my hope that realising the tentative nature of the life he holds will inspire him to be more cautious."

"We already know what he would choose, so what is the point?" Thranduil was upset now and sat straight to face his wife.

"I have not given up, that's the point," she snapped testily. "He is as stubborn as you are, which means he will continue to act as though he is in perfect health, all to spare worry for his mate and for us. By not speaking of it openly, we doom him and the child."

"I will not hear this," Thranduil rose and snatched up his robe, wrapping it around him as if to ward off the pain of her words.

"If it is hard for you, think how it must be for Elrond," admonished his wife. Rhûn'waew donned her robe and exited into the bedroom, settling on the sofa beside the empty hearth where her husband joined her.

"Aye, he stands to lose them both." Thranduil squirmed a little, regretting his first remarks to Elrond. "I confess I hadn't really considered things from his point of view before."

"Like someone else we know," remarked Rhûn'waew drily. "The time for petty, spiteful acts of vengeance is at an end. Too much is at stake. With Elrond as our ally, Legolas would have nothing left to fear. You should have seen him, so fraught with dismay over the penalty his beloved must face.

"I want you to make certain Galion and Fennas understand the dire nature of the threat. They must not punish Elrond. Henduin, now that we know his heart is true, don't you think we should extend a
true welcome to our law-son? It would mean everything to Legolas and just might prevent the tragedy we all fear."

"Beloved, Elrond Peredhel is not interested in being treated as our law-son. Valar, he's thousands of years older than me!"

"Don't exaggerate. Besides, so is Glorfindel but you have made friends with him."

"That's different," insisted Thranduil, "he and I have much in common. We are both warriors. Besides, Elrond has no sense of humour."

"Elrond is a warrior also, and everyone has a sense of humour."

"Not him. He didn't crack a smile over my crown of flowers, nor comment on Legolas'."

"He was trying to be polite. Anyway, there are other things more important you can share; for example, you and Elrond are both leaders, both fathers. Give him a chance and you may find that you like him." To this suggestion Thranduil made an inarticulate sound of incredulous disgust accompanied by a matching distortion of his features. Rhûn'waew frowned. "You must attempt this thing, Thranduil. If you don't, I tell you now that you will regret it severely. For Legolas, you will try to befriend his Noldorin mate."

The King winced but simultaneously encircled his Queen in his arms, smiling. "I hate it when you call me Thranduil in that tone. All right, for Legolas I will try."

With that the discussion ended and Thranduil, as was his custom, fetched a book, settled with his head pillowed in Rhûn'waew's lap, and listened as she read aloud. If he relented too quickly, she gave no indication she realised this and for that he was pleased. In his opinion, one of the most important aspects of a person's character was a broad sense of humour, the ability to laugh at oneself and the many little humiliations fate tended to scatter over one's path through life. Lord Elrond was far too serious for his own good, or for Legolas'.

Thranduil decided he would do them both a favour and correct this glaring deficit in an otherwise superlative personality.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~ Ithil Daen: Moon Summit
Maeth Imvelethryn: Fight between Lovers - Lover's Quarrel
cuil cyll sain: new life bearer
cuil cyll talan: life bearer talan
caro le glass lín: make your own fun
Siniath Vaer: Good News
Henduin: River Child - Rhûn'waew's pet name for her husband.
Indolen: Dream of my Heart - Thranduil's pet name for his wife
ind-an-faer: heart and soul
Tolo sí: Come here
nosta már: birth home - Quenya
Gladhadithen: Little Laugh, aka Giggle
Úan Mîn: Our Monster
Sui adar, sui ion: Like father, like son
Arahen: royal child
talan chall: hidden talan
Iest Mín: Our Wish - pet name for Legolas used by his parents.
Tarlanc: stiff-necked, stubborn
Lechenn: Sindarin word for Noldor elves.
Fennas: Doorway
Tinu Mín: our little star

Legolas just received a shock; he isn’t seriously ill though his strength is more limited than he would like to admit. With proper precautions he should be fine. The confinement is more to give the pair a chance to be alone and undisturbed than anything else. The healer can tell the strain is wearing on them both. Thranduil and Rhûn’waew have a strong relationship, at least I hope that is what comes across. These two have been through so many hardships together. They have pulled one another from grief more than once. They learned long ago to make what happiness was within their power to do, and in deciding this discovered their intent was powerful indeed. Despite his personal losses, Thranduil remains playful at heart and his wife no doubt knows this, thus she is complicit in his little schemes while retaining the position of outsider. In this way she can pose as the mediator (while really she is the instigator) in the developing friendship she hopes to inspire between Elrond and her husband. I have to admit, I am finding it almost as difficult as Thranduil to find the right spot in which he and Elrond can come to terms and emerge with true camaraderie. The next chapter has the promised meeting between Legolas and the Twins. :)

Finally, thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!

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Legolas was surprised to hear Elrond's footsteps padding barefoot across the study floor, followed by the sound of the door to the apartment opening and closing. He sat up, half inclined to follow him, curious as to why he'd left the suite of rooms. He wondered if mayhap Elrond had forced the bathroom door and learned he was no longer there, but surely he would have heard that. Besides, the Elven Lord's step had been slow and measured, giving every indication of his woebegone frame of mind but not of the panic sure to ensue should he deem his mate had run yet again, especially considering the healer's orders.

But I haven't run away.

It was an empty argument and he knew it, but stubbornly refused to face the truth. If he'd stayed, Elrond would just have tried to win him over, wooing him with soft caresses and seductive supplications couched in naughty words and sultry tones.

Would that have been so bad?

In fact, it was just what he wanted and needed, so why had he fled in such belligerent fury? Legolas' shoulders slumped; he truly did not know and this left him both frustrated and defensive. Was it so much to expect Elrond to give in to his wishes every now and then? Had he not done as much for the mighty Lord, playing his silly game when what Legolas truly desired was to be filled, spiritually and physically, achieving the union that simultaneously left him reassured, calmed, and exhilarated?

Aye, and rarely do I refuse his demands. He takes it for granted that I am his to command.

Behind this indignant complaint another thought arose, reminding him that he had not made his desires clear. Truth be told, Legolas had said nothing about his vision for the night's lovemaking strategy, simply placing himself in his mate's capable hands and letting things happen as they would. He'd assumed that Elrond understood and would reward his capitulation on the role-play as the generous concession it was, granting the thorough and vigourous coupling he so required. With a mental wince he realised he'd fallen back into his old habit, one acquired from their earliest days when he'd lost hope of ever being more than a bond-slave.

Then, the best he'd imagined receiving from Elrond was considerate attention to his carnal needs and had willingly ascribed to whatever method the Elven Lord chose to satisfy them. With his heart already smitten, Legolas had learned to make the most of his situation, slowly permitting hope to re-enter his soul as the mighty leader gave every sign that his heart was awakening, too. Yet despite the indications of a true and deep commitment, Elrond still bound his young lover to lowly subservience, with the only conclusion possible for Legolas to draw the legitimate one: he was not deemed worthy to join officially with the noble Lord. This state of affairs had altered a scant month or two ago and was only ultimately corrected with the proof of his exalted position as Greenwood's Ernil Edwen.

It was no wonder Legolas found this ingrained dependency difficult to dispel, yet he could not help but berate himself. It was just as Elladan had cautioned: he must learn to reveal his true self to his
mate or the two would never achieve the profound intimacy that was based on unreserved trust. This wise advice had been imparted on their recent encounter, when Legolas had fled from the Last Homely House in fury and despair to seek out his people, then on approach to the valley. How could that be just little more than ten day's past when it seemed so distant? Of course, the added remorse for Elrond's sudden lapse into fading had added weight to the intervening time, so that Legolas had pushed the events to the rear of his consciousness. For so heavy a burden, its legacy proved fruitless; despite the immediate alleviation of their mutual guilt and grief in a blazing firestorm of glorious sex, here they were as much at odds as ever.

It was disquieting to realise that what he now suffered was nearly as dreadful as the desolation he'd felt then. Hadn't Elladan instructed him not to avoid the next disagreement? Stay and talk, he'd urged, even if only an argument resulted, and say what he feared most to say. Legolas had really meant to follow that advice, emboldened by their counsel and their support. Yet their directives lacked information on how to do this thing they believed would strengthen his relationship with Elrond. Why, Legolas wondered, were these difficulties so notably absent when he encountered the Twins? Hoping to discover the answer, he let the memory resurface in all its graphic fullness.

Anor was just surpassing the rim of the guarding cliffs as Legolas raced from the protected seclusion of Lanthir Fân's shadows and shade. He sped over the grassy lawns, white robe flapping, and leaped the flower beds with ease, displaying more naked flesh publicly than at any time save the Day at the Spa, splashing through his lily-bog in a noisy din of displaced water, explosive sprays that splattered his anguished agitation into the air. He emerged on the other side soaked through, utterly ignorant of the growing transparency of the fine cotton fabric which clung to his lower limbs. On through the formal gardens he fled, ignoring the surprised shout from Alphdal the gardener as he cleared the rose hedge by a good quarter metre in a single, bounding vault. His heels scarcely marked the ground as he landed, propelling him in lengthening strides through the cultivated fields and orchards. One last wall of stacked river stones barred his way to the rugged fringes of the realm and he planted his hands on the top as he pushed off, heaved himself over the barricade, and disappeared from the grounds of Elrond's vast estate.

Where he was going was but a vaguely formed thought: somewhere that Elrond would never look for him. That ruled out a number of his favourite places, for as trust and love between them had grown Legolas began sharing his most secret havens one by one. The Lord of Imladris knew of his friendship with the ancient poplar tree and its stash of home-made goods and tools. He was aware of the virtually invisible signs Legolas used to mark his terrain, an instinct inborn to every Wood Elf yet distinctive from House to House, family to family. Other sylvans might learn these markers, but never would they openly divulge the knowledge as it was paramount to respect such private domains. The very worst feuds among the forest folk invariably involved trespass upon these hidden enclaves in some manner. Elrond was definitely not sylvan and no such politely deliberate ignorance would be practised by the Noldorin warriors sure to be sent out searching for him, especially since he would tell them where and for what to seek, ordering them to do exactly the opposite.

Legolas' choices were thus diminished. Lindir's Glade was out of the question; it was probably the first place the singer would go. This brought him to an abrupt halt as a heightened surge of indignant outrage over the minstrel's treachery set his heart pounding. Quickly Legolas advanced upon the nearest tree and fed it his feverish wrath, ensuring Lindir would be told nothing of his ultimate whereabouts. In return, the tree disclosed the present location of the approaching entourage of Wood Elves and suddenly he quailed to meet them. How would he explain this exodus? Thanks to Fennas, his Adar might decide to take him away and put him on a ship for Aman, by force if necessary. Or worse, he might charge into Imladris and openly challenge Elrond to account for his
actions. The resulting altercation would forever doom the two realms to bitter enmity. Legolas immediately rejected the idea of seeking his family's support, and set off again at a slower pace, contemplating the remaining spots within the valley's borders that afforded him comfort in such trying times.

The duck-pond was never an option for Erestor almost always passed the place in his daily rambles. Even the tangled fen in the wildest corner of the Rhosshîr's south western course, not so far from the foot bridge into Ereinion and in fact his point of entry into Imladris, though Legolas had no conscious memory of it, even this unlikely place had been uncovered by Glorfindel, whose powers of observation were acute and his ability to acquire new skills prodigious. He was the only non-sylvan capable of tracking a Wood Elf that Legolas had ever encountered.

(This last was a false perception on the archer's part. In fact, Glorfindel had stumbled on Legolas' hiding places twice, during previous disappearances, entirely by accident and even then had not comprehended his success. Hidden in the cover of the leaves as only a Wood Elf could be, Legolas had remained motionless as the Balrog Slayer blundered into the sites, stood staring about, called for the sylvan once or twice, and departed never realising his quarry was right above his head the whole time. That he had an uncanny knack of locating Legolas could not be denied, but as he was in general ignorant of having done so the dubious gift availed him not, and in future would bring only more misunderstanding and confusion.)

By now Legolas could hear the cheerful rush and tumble of Rhosshîr as it cut across a windswept meadow and then darted into a lively stand of chestnut, elderberry, and willows. A second time Legolas stopped, gazing across the lovely little dip in the land to the welcoming shade of the sheltered wood. On the fringes of this very grove and beside the tumbling laughter of the rambling stream were the lands deeded to the sons of Elrond. In a burst of inspired conviction he made his decision. What better place to hide, for none would think to seek him there, yet just there would he find both the seclusion he desired and the faint reassurance of his secondary mates' lingering essence.

With less anger in his step he ventured on, no longer running but hastening just the same, eager for a refreshing dip in the clear running water, the chance to wash his body and groom his hair, even if only with the aid of a resilient twig to unravel the tangles. There he would be safe from prying eyes; he could lie naked in the sun to dry, leaving the wet robe draped amid the branches where the breeze would soon make it comfortable to don again. He inhaled in relief and a diminished smile chased the downcast expression from his face. Just having selected a suitable place to shelter calmed him and made the terrible breech with Nín'ódhel less cataclysmic. They had weathered such storms before.

There he would not let his thoughts dwell too long, for underlying this slim optimism was the memory of Elrond's shocked and accusing attitude. Never had his lover been so openly hostile, never had he looked upon Legolas with such a degree of hurt and confusion within his eyes. When he had stepped away, as from an impostor suspect in character and intent, a great void grew between them, a gulf that might prove too great to bridge this time, for what if Elrond would not have him back? Legolas could not entertain that fear without his senses threatening to take flight and so he refused to let the scene back into his consciousness. Instead, he stretched his hearing and powers of scent to their limits, quite extensive by now, to ensure his chosen sanctuary was deserted and was for the third time brought up short, this time in surprise.

Just at the furthest edge of his auditory range came the ringing, rhythmic clatter of a hammer on wood. In fact, the cadence of the pattern indicated two hammers working in concert, a jolly counterpoint that did not detract from the background of nature's symphony but instead enhanced it. It was a sound of happiness, the contented clamour of hands working to build something up, that
practical expression of the desire to create inherent in all of Eru's children. Even dwarves were notable for this innate capacity to fashion a place in the world for their families. Yet here in this place, there could be only one, or rather two, sources for such a commotion: the Twin Lords must have returned to the valley after all.

Legolas was at once overwhelmed with the need to see them, to be taken into the safety of their renewed bond, succoured and soothed by their compassion and concern. Yet he hesitated; what if they wished to remain undiscovered? It was clear enough they didn't want their return to be generally known and perhaps that extended to him also, mated or not. It was not in his power to resist, however, and he found his feet moving again even as he continued the debate. It crossed his mind to wonder if they could feel his presence, if the cry of his wounded heart could reach them. That same instant the distant racket paused and Legolas held his breath, motionless on the trail. Not until the labour resumed did he exhale the stale air and set forth again, absolutely certain they knew he was near.

It didn't take long to reach them, yet as Legolas broke through the cover of brush he froze, a gasp of amazement fleeing his lungs as he beheld the quiet vale transformed. There just under the eaves of the little wood was the half finished frame of a small house. Small as compared to their father's only, for the dwelling would have two stories, the second one not only enmeshed within the overhanging limbs but actually built around and between the trunks of two sturdy willows whose rooted feet stretched down to the stream for refreshment. It was on this upper section the Twins were working; they paused and turned to watch his reaction, smiling in welcome. Elladan lifted his arm in that youthful wave of his as Elrohir leaped to the ground.

They were but half-clad, upper bodies naked and gleaming with the sweat of their efforts, long black hair bound behind them. Each had at his hip a small leather pouch to hold the tools, Elrohir's to the left side and Elladan's to the right, supported by a leather strap that bisected their chests diagonally and rested against the firm muscles, underscoring the tantalising planes of the pectorals and the sepia nipples protruding from them. Their lower bodies were clad in humble leather leggings, the simple garb hugging the contours of their masculine attributes enticingly, leaving nothing to the imagination as each reacted to the sylvan Elf's presence, the thickening organs restrained against opposite thighs but otherwise proportionally identical.

To Legolas they looked stunningly beautiful: carefree and wild, at home out in this lonely place just like any Wood Elf would be. Nothing about them remained of the fearsome and dour warrior princes who had so disdained and reviled him. Instead here stood his mates, bidding him in silent joy to come forth. Indeed, the air of the little glade was charged with excitement as if his arrival was of great import and long expected. Legolas almost ran to Elrohir and eagerly entered the open arms held out to him, pressing against the comforting vitality and warmth of the virile frame.

"Elrohir," he said, clinging tight, relishing the sticky film against his cheek as he laid his head on the younger twin's shoulder, stopping just short of lapping up the salty perspiration. "When did you return? What is this you're building?"

By this time Elladan had joined them and after his brother took the first taste of Legolas' lips, the elder son of Elrond snatched the Wood Elf close and hugged him hard, laughing as he spun him around before dipping his head for a quick kiss of his own. "It is our house," he answered. "We've been wanting to show it to you since we began building, but thought it best to wait until it was done. It will be more impressive then." He held Legolas at arm's length, taking a long look at the lithe body in its wet, half-transparent covering, and cocked a brow in question. "A new sylvan style for morning wear?"

Legolas immediately flushed scarlet, realising how dishevelled he must be and having no wish to
Elrohir came to his rescue.

"Ai Elbereth, Elladan, must you always be so rude? Let's display a little of the manners Naneth taught us and invite our mate in for a tour."

"I would like that," replied Legolas, genuinely curious. He linked arms with the twins and let them guide him to the structure, listening in growing pride and warming heart as they described how the decision to build was reached.

"We have never desired to settle in a place of our own before," Elladan began. "Our suite in Adar's house has always been ample and is private enough, as we are barely ever home for very long any way."

"Yet we were confronted with a dilemma neither of us ever expected: a secret mate apart from each other. It has never been hard to disguise our bond among the folk of the valley, for even those who suspect really don't want to know and so pretend there's nothing to discover," continued Elrohir.

"With you in our lives, everything has changed…"

"…for the better, Lúthadron."

"Aye, so much better that we do not want to have to meet with you in some inhospitable tangle of brambles in the woods…"

"…or a damp and dimly lit cave…"

"…especially as you are with child and once he's born, he will have to learn of us, too, both as his brothers and his Ada's mates."

"We don't want him thinking our secret is a shameful thing."

"Indeed, we want him to see how much we care for you and for him. Come and see!" Elladan finished gleefully and disengaged, grabbing Legolas by the hand and tugging him into a trot to the front of the house. There beneath a canvas awning was a table to which were tacked down the plans for the building and here the three stopped.

Legolas studied the diagram with interest, a smile overtaking his features and his brows uplifting in pleased surprise. He turned to favour each twin with a look of deep affection. If he interpreted the drawing correctly, they had designed this house of theirs with him foremost in mind, and the notion overwhelmed him.

Sporting matched grins of elated pride, the brothers again took his arms and led their sylvan mate inside, pausing on a long veranda, unfinished but already roofed and displaying the first hints of the decorative carvings and scrollwork the two planned to ornament the columns and eaves. The border depicted a delicate vine of morning-glory and honeysuckle blossoms.

"Our favourites," explained Elrohir, "but we've left room to add in yours, too. Have you a favourite among the flora of Greenwood?"

"Aye," Legolas replied. "There is a small white rose, a climber that often reaches the upper canopy, just five petals surrounding a flurry of golden stamen. The scent is crisp and sweet, not unlike the honeysuckle here."

"Then you must sketch it for us," nodded Elladan. With gentle pressure he led Legolas through the front door, which was not in place, and paused in the open foyer. It was as high as the whole
structure and a series of wide arches indicated where glass would be set to keep the elements out. On the unfinished wood frames of some were posed coloured paintings depicting various scenes the twins had observed in their journeys through Eriador and Lothlorien. "Those will be crafted in stained glass to fit within the arches of the upper story. We've left three for places you might like to include."

"Aye, you must paint for us those spots in Greenwood most dear to you," encouraged Elrohir, wrapping an arm around Legolas' shoulders in a quick squeeze.

Legolas could only nod, afraid to attempt speech for his throat was growing tight in the struggle to restrain his emotions. The thoughtfulness expressed was beyond anything he'd ever experienced and not something he had imagined possible from early encounters with the brothers. Not only this, but it was obvious they could feel the depth to which these ideas affected him. Beneath this joyous revelation lay a dark and festering thought: why hadn't Elrond ever displayed a like consideration? Not once in all these years had he listened when Legolas described his homeland or asked which flowers pleased him best. It was a strange and unwelcome sensation, this expanding happiness seeking to escape the quagmire of painful hurts his heart had already endured, and he wasn't sure if it could survive such suffocating sorrow.

From room to room they led him, pausing to explain the reason for this detail or that design, pointing out particulars of planned decorations and seeking his input, but never pressing for more even if he could only manage a word or two. They maintained a constant connection, their touches light and undemanding, expressive of consolation and underscored with worry, but through it all the twins' enthusiasm grew as they progressed through the lower chambers, hoping to build his anticipation, too.

At last they approached a chamber beside the kitchen which proved to be a bathroom obviously designed for their cleanliness-obsessed mate. This they presented with a bold and comic flourish, Elrohir providing an elaborate sweeping of arms as Elladan's fingers curled into a tube before his lips to mimic the fanfare of regal trumpets blown, and thus they bowed Legolas in.

This bit of buffoonery finally provoked him into a genuine smile as he inspected the deep, copper tub and its fittings, blushing and bright eyed the while. "How? When?" he asked, unable to get more out and thankfully the twins seemed fully aware of his difficulty and maintained the light-hearted mood.

"We began as soon as we left with the humans. We didn't even see Arwen over the pass, as we'd led everyone to believe we would do, turning aside to make our bargains with the folk of the Angle," said Elladan.

"This being one of, if not the, most important attributes of any proper home," Elrohir announced, "and I must say the most difficult to construct without giving away our activities. Had to bribe the blacksmith in the Angle with exorbitant amounts of coin and a case of wine from Gondor to keep him quiet."

"You've been in Imladris all this while? Through the trials of the Council and everything?" Legolas was amazed; he'd never suspected.

"Aye, but felt it best to let that get sorted out without our intervention," replied Elrohir with a shrug.

"I'm afraid your visionary insight, though impressive, is a bit precocious," drawled Elladan, fingering the lapel of the archer's robe. "It's plain enough you came with the hope of trying out the facilities, yet sadly they are not functional as yet."

"Nay, I didn't...I mean I was planning to bathe at Lanthir Fân but..." Legolas struggled to answer,
not really wanting to go into it just yet.

"No matter," soothed Elladan. "You owe us no explanations. We're just pleased to see you here."

"Aye. Ready to see the second story?" asked Elrohir.

Legolas gave a happy nod before following them to the short, turning staircase. It ended in a small square hallway from which three rooms led away, the fourth side overlooking the foyer below. With the coloured windows installed, it would be cool and bright even during the hottest summer days. The elder twin walked through the skeletal structure of the first room, a large rectangle with a chimney of river stones already defining its far wall, which matched the one in the front parlour below. This was to be the study, and he chattered away about bookcases and desks and where the furniture was to go. As he spoke, the room became real and Legolas could see it clearly in his mind, imagining the three of them relaxing before the hearth.

Elrohir pulled Legolas into the next room. "Here is to be our bedroom," he announced simply and waited as Legolas slowly walked the circumference of the space, which was partially finished and boasted a balcony that spanned the entire length on one side. He stepped onto it and noticed the view looked across the river on the southern side of the glade. The sunlight danced on the racing water and the sound of the brook was restful. He sighed, pausing to let the tranquility calm his jangled nerves. Elladan joined him at his left and Elrohir at his right and in unison each draped an arm across his shoulders.

"It is peaceful here," Legolas said. "I like it very much."

"We're glad," Elladan smiled. "We wanted it to be a surprise, but if you must know we've been arguing about that for days now."

"Aye, for how could we finish it without asking you what sort of things you would like in your home? We were chagrined to realise we didn't have any idea what colours you prefer or what style of furniture you're accustomed to in Greenwood."

"We've little use for furniture in the talans there," Legolas shrugged.

"Surely in your Adar's palace there is much luxury," remarked Elrohir dryly, chuckling as he felt Legolas startle and heard the sharp intake of breath.

"Aye, we know you are no common Wood Elf," confirmed Elladan. "We ran into the scouts last week and begged they would not reveal our presence to anyone. I must say, when sylvan's give their word, they mean it!"

"Hah! How could you doubt?" said Legolas with pride, but he was relieved. He hadn't yet thought about how to present Elladan and Elrohir to his parents. No matter what Lindir might have said about the 'natural' quality of their bond, he knew it was no common thing at all. He had no idea of what their reaction might be. Only now he wondered; had the Twins decided to build this place after learning his pedigree or before?

"It was a terrible shock," Elrohir went on. "We realise your Adar must know who put all the rumours abroad in Lothlorien, for Greenwood has many connections to the Golden Wood."

"Not the least of whom is our Miny'adar, Lord Celeborn. I understand now his defensive exhortations that we should not speak of what we could not understand."

"Only we do understand. We comprehend fully, Legolas, and will make whatever redress we can to your family."
"Short of spending time in those dreaded dungeons so famous throughout elvendom." Elladan's efforts to lighten the mood failed.

"We do not use the cells for punishing Elves," corrected Legolas testily. "So is that why you are being so accommodating?" The bitterness in his words could not be disguised, even had he wished to do so, and in this way he gave away the core of his present discontent to the brothers. He did not have to be facing them to know they were engaged in silent communication with one another and could guess the subject was his obvious flight from Elrond. He pushed out from under the weight of their arms and away from the balcony's primitive rail. He did not get far, for Elladan blocked his way even as Elrohir clutched his arm and held firm.

"Nay, you're wrong. We had already started construction before your family's identity was known to us," he said. "Look at the plans and the progress we have achieved; if you cannot believe us then let your intellect supply the necessary calculations. We have been working all these many weeks gone by."

"Legolas, did you explain ere now who is to be Adar's law-father?" Elladan's eyes flickered to his brothers for an instant and back. Legolas' silent expression of stubborn defiance was all the answer required. The elder twin sighed wearily. "Ai Elbereth! No wonder you are here, for no doubt he put on quite a display of temper."

"Aye, not something often seen. When he chooses, Adar's tongue can be sharper than Glorfindel's finest blade," added Elrohir, reaching out with his free hand and softly petting Legolas' hair. "Whatever he said, it was mostly the shock and embarrassment getting the better of him."

"Aye, you must try to forgive him, Lúthadron."

Now Legolas hung his head, shuffling back against Elrohir's chest upon which he hid his face. "He still does not know." The muffled words were faint and halting, but they heard well enough. Elladan swore and Elrohir's gasp was sharp and loud. More silence heralded another secret discussion but this time Legolas waited to learn their judgement. When it came he was so surprised he forgot both his anger and his sorrow.

"We do not agree with this," Elladan said, cautiously rubbing the slumped shoulders, "but it isn't our place to interfere between you two."

"If it is your decision to keep your Adar's identity hidden until the last, we will not reveal it. Our loyalty, though divided, must go to you, for ever have we caused you strife and will do so no longer."

"Even if that means we cause Adar to undergo a bit of discomfort."

Legolas lifted his head and gazed from one to the other, overcome for a few seconds with disbelief, but their eyes showed nothing but honest contrition mixed with mild disappointment. His lips formed a half smile and he held his hand out to Elladan. "Thank you," was all he could manage but it was enough to make the older brother grin as he clasped his fingers tightly, drawing Legolas out of his twin's arms and into his.

"Think nothing of it. We would see you restored to a gentler mood," smiled Elrohir."

Legolas smiled back and this time the silence was not filled by their private internal musings, or if it was he could not tell it. The full intensity of their admiring grey eyes raked his body from head to toe. Once again Elladan ran his finger beneath the neckline of the robe, slipping it aside a little so he could caress the clavicle from the hollow of Legolas' throat to the place where it vanished beneath the muscles of his shoulder.
“So,” he ventured, a merry twinkle in his tone, "do you know how to enchant water courses like your Adar? You must place a spell on our lovely stream so that any who stumble on us here will forget just as fast."

"It is not through Adar but through my Naneth the gift derives and I would gladly do as you ask, but it is very draining," Legolas apologised. "Perhaps after Tinu MÍn is a few months old I could try."

"Do you mean to say you could really do that?" Elladan's eyes flew wide as Elrohir laughed.

"I knew it!" crowed the younger twin. "You lose; I shall collect my bet tonight."

"You wagered on this?" demanded Legolas, unable to hide his own amusement. "What did you bet?"

"The choicest forfeit of all," snickered Elrohir, his eyes dark and filled with lusty fire. "I'm to have my brother in any way I wish."

"Ai Valar," breathed Legolas, giving Elladan's pleasing form a hungry inspection. He swallowed and blushed as he turned to Elrohir. "May I watch?"

"You can do more than that," assured the victor. "It will be a much sweeter savour if you participate in full."

"Wait, that was not part of the price," said an uneasy Elladan. "Besides, there is no proof it is really possible. Legolas could be saying this in jest, to repay us for all the times we accused him so cruelly."

"Nay, I speak the truth but mayhap I can devise another proof." Legolas frowned, thinking hard. "Was the wager that I must enchant this stream or is some other example sufficient to prove my talent?"

"The bet was only to get you to perform some type of sylvan magic."

"I can make fire without flint or iron; will that suffice?"

"Aye, it would, but surely that is taxing also," cautioned Elladan. "I will accept your word, Legolas, and declare myself the loser rather than see you deplete what faint reserves you've managed to gather round you."

"Indeed, we would rather have you exert yourself in another way," added Elrohir seductively, drawing Legolas closer for a very soft and very wet kiss upon the lips.

"Oh," the sylvan sighed, smiling as Elladan took him from Elrohir and did the same.

"There is one more room to see first," reminded Elrohir. "The very best room of all, the one we most need to know meets your approval." He retreated from the balcony and crossed to the landing once more, stepping aside to let Legolas go through first. Elladan flanked the other side of the opening, for as in the rest of the upper rooms the frame had no door. Legolas gazed from one to the other in question, for their eyes were fairly burning with the intensity of their eagerness, yet nothing would they speak. He stepped over the threshold.

It was a smaller room than the bedroom, though not by much, and yet it was vastly bigger for its design was unlike anything Legolas had ever seen. The space was not simply a chamber but an extension into the trees around which the structure was built. In and among the branches were numerous nooks and crannies, broad talans with slender bridges linking them, and graceful
spiralling steps between the limbs leading to even higher levels, just as a home amid Greenwood's canopy would do. Yet, the room was fully walled on two sides, joined at right angles to one another, creating a section much like any other chamber in the house. Thus it was not apparent from the front that this unusual room was so open and airy.

The brothers must have borrowed much from their knowledge of Lothlorien architecture and incorporated as many aspects of that style as they could, creating a hybrid home that was partly the sturdy, earth-bound dwelling of their Noldorin heritage and partly a haven within which any sylvan Elf would feel at ease. While this in itself was enough to express the importance with which they regarded Legolas' role in their private life, it was something else which at last destroyed the archer's reserve.

In that one walled section of the room the Twins had already collected several items of furniture. A cradle stood beside a comfortable rocker and behind it was a small dresser with a broad flat surface, rimmed all around with an intricately filigreed rail a hand's width high, just the correct height to prevent an active babe from wriggling off while being put into dry cloths and clothing. On the other wall was a wardrobe and atop it was a toy wooden horse, old and its colouring faded. A shelf above the dresser held a single soft toy rabbit crafted from real fur and this was brand new. Elladan and Elrohir had constructed a room for Legolas' child, a child who would not be raised solely in the Noldorin way but in accord with sylvan custom as well.

In a daze he wandered to the shelf and picked up the rabbit, stroking its downy coat and clutching it close to his heart; which of them had made this? Elrond had made nothing for their babe, save the pots he'd helped create. He turned and his knee bumped the cradle and set it to rocking, a soft chiming of little bells arising from it. He couldn't tear his eyes from the swaying crib, confused as to how the sound was made, wondering why Elrond hadn't given him such a thing or even spoken of where their babe's nursery would be, save once. He did not realise he spoke that last bitter thought aloud or that the tears were already falling. He was drifting toward collapse but even that he failed to register as strong arms caught him up and supported him, the welcome warmth of the twins sandwiching his grieving heart between them.

"Ai Valar!" Elladan breathed. "We didn't intend to bring you pain."

"Ai, Legolas, it isn't so hopeless, penneth," promised Elrohir.

"Saes, he loves you," crooned Elladan, "and you have us. We're here, Lúthadron." His lips nuzzled into the golden mane as he whispered these words, finding their way to his ear, which received a quick nip.

The bite jolted Legolas from his downward spiral; he became still and stopped breathing, staring into Elladan's face, finding the expression there so like Elrond's whenever they had fought and he wished to make things right again. Concern and longing played over the comely features and before he could turn to examine Elrohir's visage, Elladan swooped in and claimed a deep and demanding kiss. Legolas' eyes fluttered shut and after a second or two of unresponsive shock he began kissing back, seeking Elladan's tongue and drawing it deeper whenever it threatened to retreat. Fingers slipped beneath his robe again, whose Legolas couldn't tell and didn't care, and carefully pushed it from his shoulders. A chill ran down his spine as Elrohir softly lapped the nape of his neck.

They wanted him and he had desired this before he even entered the glade, and Legolas no longer doubted that their presence had called him there. Before he knew it they were naked, Elrohir's shaft seeking entry behind as Elladan entered him from the front, and all the while their hands and lips petted and kissed, tweaked and lapped, pinched and suckled every sensitive inch of his torso.

Somehow, Elladan dropped to his knees, hands secured at Legolas' underarms, buried to his entire
length inside the archer, and the resulting shift in posture enabled Elrohir to penetrate anally. Both brothers cried out but it was Elrohir who commanded the pace this time, lunging hard enough to drag Legolas forward and back over Elladan's cock. With a deep groan the elder twin began squatting down to his heels, pushing up again when Elrohir withdrew so that the pressure alternated between them, one fully sheathed, one sliding nearly free. As on their first coupling, Legolas could do nothing but support himself, hands clutching to Elladan's shoulders this time, powerless to aid the frantic motion, consumed with the sensation of being claimed this way. He stared at the elder brother's countenance, eyes sealed, cheeks flushed, brow furrowed and glistening with sweat as if the effort caused him too much pleasure to bear. Sensing the scrutiny, his eyes opened and met Legolas', the full force of his exultant mastery startling the archer, scattering any image of himself as the enchanter.

Elrohir's hand closed around his cock and only then did Legolas make a sound, a soft, sweet moan as his hips bucked forward. The involuntary twitch was out of synchrony with his lovers' motions but thoroughly gratifying nonetheless and they responded. Elladan lurched upwards and latched onto Legolas' neck, the effort sufficient to drive him deeper and prod the hidden gland so that the sylvan struggled to bear down upon him. Elrohir grumbled a complaint as his rhythm was momentarily broken, then resumed pumping Legolas' shaft, smearing the slippery fluid that seeped out, gently massaging the glans with his thumb, all the while straining to get as much of his penis inside the tight, constricting anus as he could. Each thrust drew a deep grunt from his lungs and a subdued slap as his groin connected with Legolas' buttocks. The archer came first and his shuddering surrender prompted Elrohir's orgasm, and only then did Elladan come.

After that, Elrohir claimed his forfeit in a highly unusual way, at least to Legolas. He commanded the sylvan to take his brother from behind while he watched, and yet when it came to it he could not remain a spectator. Whether through silent communication or long years of experience, Elrohir suddenly stretched out beside Elladan and scooted under his belly, taking the elder twin's erection between his lips and offering his to Elladan for like treatment. Legolas was overwhelmed with the sight and filled with elation when they peaked a second time. Then Elrohir wanted his forfeit paid again, and since Elladan wanted it, too, they formed a chain, Elladan in the middle, marking Legolas' shoulder as his cock again pushed deep inside the slick vaginal canal. The sylvan was near exhaustion by the time Elladan's seed coated him, the third ejaculation for both twins, and finally they were spent.

It was nearing noon and the trio had bathed in the stream. They lay side by side upon the grassy banks, Legolas between the dark haired Lords, his hands clasped by theirs as they sunned themselves, the mood one of comfortable contentment. Legolas drew and released a satisfied sigh. "I want to stay and help you finish the house," he said.

"That is well," replied Elrohir, "but your people will be within the grounds before two weeks go past. That isn't enough time. You will want to be there when they arrive at the Last Homely House."

"And you do not really mean to leave Adar alone so long," said Elladan.

"What if I do?" inquired the archer. "Would you keep me here with you?"

It was a question packed with meaning, ominous in its import, and Elladan rolled to his side to command a clearer view of Legolas' face. "We would," he conceded, "but it wouldn't work. We could never hold as much of your heart as he does."

"You would miss him before a day had passed," Elrohir pointed out, turning to his side also. "Ai, Legolas, you pine for him even now."

"Nay," he denied but it sounded so false that he flushed in shame. "Aye, but I see now that what I
"yearn for and what he yearns for are not the same."

"Is that why you ran today?" asked Elrohir.

"He said he would have treated me differently had he known who my father is."

"I'm sure he would have."

"As would we."

"Why is this so upsetting to you?"

"Because I want to be loved for who I am," he explained, "not for WHAT I am."

"Legolas, you are a prince of Greenwood." Elrohir laid a calming hand upon his cheek. "He can not love you for who you are if he doesn't even…"

"That isn't who I am!" Legolas fumed in exasperation. "It is just a title, meaningless!"

"I confess I can't understand this. Surely it would have been better for you, for everyone, had he been apprised of that one fact," remarked Elladan.

"Why should my identity affect how he treats me, if his heart is true?" demanded Legolas. "First he can't love me because I am too lowly and now he won't love me because I'm too exalted. It isn't fair! I love HIM not his title or his pedigree. I love Nin'ódhel, who sets the tiny legs of little hurt puppies and sends aid to the humans in need nearby. I love the Elf who sends messengers to remind Elrond not to forget Erestor's begetting day because he hasn't any other family left on Arda, save me and Elrond. I love the Elf who has cherished his lost brother's progeny through countless generations, the Elf who forgave the ones who drove his parents to the Sea, the one who makes certain all the human children in the Angle can read and write, who has never turned away a single soul that came to him in want. That is who I love and he loved me better when I was just Aearen."

The Twins remained silent throughout this tirade, stunned to hear so many complaints from the generally reserved sylvan and uncertain how to respond. So it seemed to Legolas, who reflected that he must look foolish and childish. In addition, maybe they didn't want to hear him list the many examples of compassion and tenderness that had turned his heart in their Adar's direction so long ago, for they were rivals, even if unwilling ones. "I'm sorry; I shouldn't have said anything." He sat up. "I will go and find somewhere else to…"

"No, you will not run from us, too," said Elladan, sitting up and reclaiming the hand that had escaped from his. "And there is no reason to apologise; you're words have done no wrong to us or to Adar."

"Indeed, they honour him, perhaps more than he deserves," added Elrohir. "Yet even if that is true, let us correct one point at least."

"What do you mean?"

"I believe he does know who you are, Legolas. Maybe he hasn't shown it, but his heart would not have warmed so fully if he didn't love all that he has discovered about you," explained Elladan.

"Indeed, just as you have a roster of qualities you admire in him, so he has an itemised inventory of traits and foibles only found in you, and only in you does he love them." Elrohir smiled at Legolas' expression, his emotions so obviously warring between hope and disbelief.
"How can you know this? You have not been here often to see us together," he said.

"We read his journal," offered Elladan bluntly.

Legolas' jaw dropped. "You read his private diary? Why?"

Elrohir shrugged uneasily and averted his eyes. "We wanted to know if there was anything in there about you."

"There is," Elladan answered the question before Legolas could ask it. "It is a very poignant account, scattered through the years, of how he succumbed to your charms. In the middle of relating how this or that problem was resolved, he quite suddenly breaks off and begins describing the way the sunlight seems dull unless it is playing in your hair or some such thing."

"Aye, and there is an entire section spent detailing the way you make your weapons, filled with appreciation for both the artistry and the speed with which you can create these things."

"There is?" A faint smile grew in Legolas' eyes.

"With sketches of you."

"Some of them highly imaginative, for I doubt you work arrowheads while naked and aroused."

"Or do you?"

"Nay! He drew that?"

"Aye, but sometimes it is nothing so elaborate. Here and there along the margins he writes your name, nothing more, but it is not there for nothing."

"Legolas, you must speak of these issues that lie hidden in your heart. Nothing is solved by parting in anger," Elladan chided mildly, raising the fingers in his hand to his lips to soften the censure even more.

"Are you telling me to leave?" demanded Legolas, something almost like fear in his voice.

"No, you needn't go until you're ready," soothed Elrohir. "You are always welcome here whenever you wish."

"Just do not remain apart too long," urged Elladan. "I speak from experience; it is the most horrible torture to be divided from one's soul-mate."

"Do as your heart bids you and no other advise will you require," concluded Elrohir and there the matter dropped.

Legolas had stayed only until the next morning, when the desire to see his family and attempt to explain the news Fennas had carried superseded all other concerns. Once he'd learned the depth of his beloved's grief, he returned at once to the Last Homely House and the conclusion of that reunion we have already learned.

Perched on the balcony roof beneath the rising crescent moon, the memory of Elrond's despair, weeping in misery over the talan plans, twisted Legolas' heart. All at once, he just wanted to be back in Nín'ódhel's arms, the ridiculous altercation forgiven and forgotten. He sent out the soundless call
to bring his mate back to him, already sliding toward the balcony, planning to have Elrond find him naked and ready, just where they'd left off. He halted as footsteps rang along the corridor, accompanied by voices, and suddenly the door opened to admit the uninvited guests. The archer's brows rose in shock, recognising Aras' distinctively imperious tones.

"As I told, there are four separate drawings, no less," he was saying and stopped as the ruffling sound of papers being lifted arose. "Not surprising, really, considering his interest in Legolas is so base."

"Yet it makes no sense," another spoke: Fennas. "The Noldo Lord treats Legolas' well; I have seen them together when they did not know they were observed. Besides, that was genuine fear in his eyes tonight."

"It is puzzling," Galion joined the conversation. "Legolas seems to want us to ignore all the signs of his mate's derogatory behaviour, yet it is equally plain that he still suffers."

"Well, we must make a decision soon," a fourth voice said, "Yet I've no wish to add more to your uncle's burdens, Ernil Aras. I am thinking we should wait and ask the reason for this oversight before judging the Lord of Imladris."

"No, that is unwise," argued Aras. "Legolas will simply convince Miny'adar to dismiss this obvious proof of continuing disdain for our family's honour. He is too young and immature to think of anyone but himself. I fear for any child under his care and were the babe's origin and lineage not so stained I would move to adopt him immediately upon birth."

At this Legolas, already on his feet, would have leaped through the ceiling if possible, so furious was he to hear this charge presented in his own house, in his very rooms, by his beloved brother's eldest son. He reached the eaves of the balcony just as the unmistakable sound of racing feet reached his ears. Elrond, responding to the soul-call, was hurrying to his beloved Aearen. A rattling and clinking noise accompanied his approach along with a second set of feet, and soon the voice belonging to them spoke.

"Hiren, saes, let me get ahead of you to open the door," urged Faelon.

A cacophonous clatter came fast upon the completion of these words, preceding the abrupt bursting open of the door as Elrond entered, his valet just behind him frantically trying to restore balance to a decanter of wine, two glasses, two plates, assorted fruits, and a dish of candied rose buds sliding precariously close to the edge of the tray precipitously thrust into his hands. Legolas swung down through the open archway into the study at the same moment and for an instant the couples' eyes met, each one communicating simultaneous hopes for reconciliation and apologies for the disagreement that had parted them. Then Elrond realised that his study was filled with Wood Elves, all of them staring in obvious shock from him to Legolas and back, among them the much aggrieved Aras. Another glance at Aearen confirmed that the company was neither invited nor welcomed by his mate, and that was more than enough to set Elrond's anger surging. He moved to Legolas' side and wrapped a possessive arm about his shoulders.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" he demanded, brows contracting into a disapproving scowl as his sight marked each Elf before coming to rest upon Greenwood's heir. "These are our private quarters and we were not expecting guests."

"He seeks to poison the Council of Elders against us," spat Legolas, pointing to Aras.
"I do no such thing," sneered Aras. "I am here to gather evidence, nothing more. How it is interpreted is not in my control."

"Evidence that you would steal from my private apartment?" inquired Elrond. "That hardly seems an appropriate means of building your case."

"We are no thieves," stated Galion. "There is nothing private about this place, either. It is not concealed or guarded in any way and the portal is unlocked. How can you display such umbrage? Is this not part of the Last Homely House?"

"Aye, and did you not bid us welcome, naming your home ours for as long as we wished?" Aras said pompously. "Or were those merely polite words meant to appease your 'less wise, more dangerous' kin from across the mountains?"

"Aras, this is Imladris and the customs are different here," stated Legolas, coming forward to see what these important Elves were up to. His face paled at once, for there upon the desk rested the drawings he'd made of the talan for his seclusion. The observant advisors did not miss his chagrined reaction and shared frowning looks of knowing disapproval. Legolas tried to collect himself and carried on with his admonishment. "In this country, a closed doorway means admittance must be requested from the owner of the rooms, whether the door is locked or not."

"Did you request entry, Ernil Aras?" asked Elrond coldly.

"Peace, Hîr Elrond," pleaded Fennas, hands uplifted in entreaty. He had no wish to bring about a setback that might threaten Legolas or the babe and he could see this was Elrond's fear as well. "We did not intend to trespass or to cause harm. Truly, we thought you had retreated to the quiet glade beside the falls."

"It is unlawful all the same, whether you thought we were here or not," sighed Legolas. "Now go and leave us in peace."

"Is our offence greater than your Noldorin lover's?" snapped Aras. "In Greenwood, a bonded couple are to be formally wed, especially if they hope for offspring. Did your bond-master petition Aran Thranduil for marriage rights?"

Legolas advanced a pace toward his nephew, face livid in fury, hands curled into fists. "He didn't know who to ask," he insisted, "but had he known he would have done so at once."

"Enough," Elrond ordered tersely, re-securing his hold on Legolas and drawing him back against his chest. "I don't care who you lot are, no one shall taunt my beloved before my very face. Leave at once!" he pointed to the open door, configuring his countenance in his most impressively forbidding glower possible. The ancient Wood Elves tensed nervously, uncertain of their rights under the Law in Imladris, but Aras would not be dismissed so quickly.

"We will gladly go if you would deign to answer one question. Why haven't you approved any of Legolas' designs for the talan chall?" he blurted out abruptly, hoping to take Elrond by surprise. It was obvious he'd succeeded by the uplifting of the Noldorin Lord's dark eyebrows.

"Approved? What can you mean? Anything Legolas wishes is automatically approved." Elrond had no idea what they were talking about, of course, because once again Legolas had neglected to explain and he hadn't thought to ask.
Fennas and Galion shared uncertain glances before the Elder addressed Legolas. "Didn't you tell him he has to choose?" he asked in exasperation. As their young prince gave an abbreviated shake of the head in negation, accompanied by a rapid bloom of colour, the assembled advisors broke out in assorted groans and sighs of incredulous and long-suffering irritation while Aras gave a mocking bark of a laugh.

"Of course he didn't tell him. That is his defence to everything: Elrond doesn't know our customs," he scoffed.

"It is the truth!" insisted Legolas.

"Manwë's wind, Arahen, what prevented you from explaining this?" fumed Fennas. "Don't you see what trouble this sort of misunderstanding could cause? Lord Elrond, you have my deepest apologies," he added, offering a sweeping bow to the very floor.

"I never meant for anyone else to be involved; we would have sorted it all out between us. Privately," Legolas defended himself, leaning back more deeply into Elrond's embrace.

"Tell me what this is about," insisted Elrond, not caring who answered.

"It is a sign of respect and love for the sire of the unborn child to approve the life-bearer's plans for the talan chall," explained Galion patiently. "This shows the trust the sire places in the life-bearer to care for and protect their elfling. It is symbolic of the strength of the bond between them."

"I'm sorry, Nín'ódhel, I didn't mean to put you in this position," whispered Legolas woefully.

"This is preposterous," laughed Aras. "I do not believe this play-acting."

"Fortunately, your opinion is meaningless here in Imladris," snapped Elrond. "Ernil Aras, if you call Legolas a liar again I'll have you thrashed, publicly. Or perhaps Thranduil would prefer to see it himself. Little do I know him, but I know how much he loves his son. You've done nothing but berate and belittle Aëaren since arriving in my country and no more will I stand." He met the gaze of each of the other sylvan's, silencing their discontented murmuring over his threat against Greenwood's heir. "Little better will any of you fare. Were you my councillors I would consider your actions treasonous for introducing more contention at a time when your prince has been ordered to rest."

"That was not our intent," insisted Galion, but he could not hide his anxiety over his King's reaction to their interference at such a trying time.

"Yet it is the outcome realised and for that you will answer, all of you. As for the plans…"

"Not that it is any of their business, or even my Adar's," Legolas interrupted, "but my intention was to combine the tradition of my people with the tradition here in Imladris, which is that the parents design their new home jointly with input from each partner." He stood tall and stared straight at Fennas. "Go and put that in your bloody report."

"Such insolence does not help your case," rebuked Fennas. "Our purpose is to determine the degree to which Elrond and his people have deliberately debased you and our House."

"And whether he intends to persist in such disrespect," Aras chimed in. "We deserve to have our grievances redressed."
"Even so, this is not the place for such deliberations and the grievance I now hold against you will be set against those, for the very health and well-being of an innocent babe, and his suffering life-bearer, is at stake. For shame!" Elrond admonished, truly shocked that these ancient Elves would allow the King's heir to lead them so deeply astray. His words made the gaggle of Elders quite uncomfortable for they knew he was right. Though they had not wished it, their actions were indeed hurtful. Even Galion wisely kept his lips sealed and dropped his haughty gaze to the floor.

"Lord Elrond, your claim is just and we do not take it lightly. Our primary desire is for Legolas and the babe to remain healthy," said Fennas.

"Yet there is still the matter of compensation," Aras added, unable to relinquish his pride or admit his fault.

"I can't pretend to understand what this compensation entails, nor do I particularly care," Elrond's voice brimmed with restrained wrath. "Imladris will not offer resistance to this custom nor will I balk at its amount. We are fully prepared to make amends for the inhospitable way Legolas has been treated before now. Only one concern is important to me. Let me make that plane to you all: it is for Tinu Mín to be born, healthy and strong, and for Legolas to recover quickly and completely. If any of you do even the smallest thing to upset him in any way, be it by word or by action or by expression, I will have you escorted to the borders under general and permanent banishment." This forceful remonstrance left even regal Aras quiet and subdued, for it was clear that the Elven Lord was not making an idle threat.

While the Elders were exchanging furtive and silent expressions of dismay, Elrond strode over to the desk and shuffled amid the plans. Quickly he located the one with the little brazier and the tremendous bathing apparatus and smiled, carrying it back and holding it forth to Legolas.

"I like this one, Aearen," he said quietly. "See, this is what warms my heart." He was pointing to the pencilled words near the brazier. "Your every thought in designing this has been with our babe's comfort and safety foremost, indeed each of the plans is a fine example of your unselfish nature." He bent to kiss the blushing cheek and met shining blue eyes with the unspoken promise of durable, indefatigable devotion. "Yet this is the only plan in which you gave some small thought to comforts for yourself. For me, that is just as important, for I want everything about this experience to be pleasing and as easy for you as I can make it. We will build this one, yes?"

"Aye," whispered Legolas, close to tears as he gathered the design to his heart. He flashed Aras a triumphant grin and turned to strut away to the bedroom, listening as Elrond ordered the intruders one last time to leave. The bizarre debacle concluded with the comfortably heavy scrape and thud as the bolt slid home on the study door.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Adab ar Rhosshîr: House beside the Rustling Stream
Lúthadron: Enchanter, the twins' pet name for Legolas
Einiór Govadiol: Elder Meeting
Rhosshîr: Rustling Stream
FIXED A BUNCH OF TYPOS! OK this is a good stopping point. I can only say again that I wish I had been able to get this all organised and together sooner, but I hope the wait was worth it. I am moving on to the actual sylvan ceremony that will formalise the couples' bond and bypassing the Noldorin one, for that would be a simple and private exchange of rings with only Mithrandir and a handful of those closest to the lovers present to witness the event. We can all figure out who would be there. Next time we get together here, Arwen will have returned to Imladris, nobody having thought to send a second message telling her her Adar was NOT fading after all. Her reaction to the pregnancy, which she knows of by now, too, as I'm sure Celeborn and Galadriel told her, will be examined. And of course, the Twins have yet to face Thranduil and Co. I haven't forgotten Lindir and Erestor's ongoing contention, nor Galion's interest in the minstrel. Aras final 'putting in place' is still in the future also. I promise to send him packing back to Greenwood before the birth.

Hope everyone was both surprised and pleased by the Twins' little house beside the stream. I know it makes Elrond look bad, but remember he has a realm to run and Legolas to deal with daily, while his sons are free to think and dream and plan the future without anything to intervene. How Elrond learns of their new house is sure to be interesting, and maybe some have guessed, as I left a hint in this chapter. I am pretty much decided on the babe's name now, and those who've read other stories of mine will just have to forgive me for recycling one. (It is not Cuthenin, that one is just for Legolas.) Elvish names that sound good to my inner, American ear are difficult to construct. With that said, if anyone has a really fantastic Elvish name, I'm willing to listen. Finally, thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!
Erestor skulked down the servants' stairs, creeping from shadow to shadow, sneaking amid the spectral gloom that lurked in the corners of the narrow, sparsely lit steps at the back of the Last Homely House in the pre-dawn day. He prowled, unshod, through hushed, deserted corridors, keenly aware of the faint creak and shift of tiny grains of dust and grit beneath his feet, acutely cognisant of the percussive thumping of his jittery heart, exceedingly alert to the sound of his own lungs drawing and releasing each breath. If he could hear these things, he reasoned, others could do the same. At an intersection with an adjoining hall he paused and peered cautiously around the corner, darting across the opening quickly once certain the way was clear.

He strained his senses to their limits, seeking any sign that his movement was being monitored by the visiting royal Wood Elves or their ever-vigilant elite Guard. With every second that elapsed into history, he expected Galion or Faron or Fennas to pop out of some doorway or around the next corner, demanding to know where he was slinking off to. He had the impression they thought he meant to surreptitiously leave Imladris. A preposterous notion, though admittedly he had considered it, for he would not desert his kinsman at such a difficult juncture. Step by step he advanced, hopes lifting as he crept ever closer to the kitchen and its outer door to freedom. If he could escape the house, he could relax and enjoy his morning constitutional amid the all but deserted grounds, for he had discovered, or rather Legolas had assured him, that King Thranduil loved the twilight and not the dawn. Even if Erestor should encounter any sylvan archers, they would not interfere with his activities. Several times he had spotted them trailing him as he went about his daily duties, taking note of his whereabouts and movements but nothing more.

Finally he reached the lengthy gallery spanning the backside of the Hall of Fire. At the end of this expanse was the kitchen. Erestor pressed on.

Manwë's Wind, I would swear this bloody hallway gets longer every time I traverse it. The seneschal griped, eyeing with suspicion the interminable passage that linked the pantry and scullery to the chef's domain, briefly contemplating whether it might be possible for sylvan magic to achieve just such an end so to confound him.

Yet Elrond's erstwhile cousin was nothing if not tenacious, and while he deeply dreaded any personal confrontation with any of Legolas' kin, outside of the safety of public gatherings and parties and meals where he was reasonably certain he would not be subjected to any violence, he was determined not to become a prisoner in his own home. Doggedly, or perhaps mousedly, Erestor stole across the last remaining metre of polished oak flooring to the vestibule of the generously stocked larders of the vast estate, pausing there to draw a deeper breath and exhale some of the pent anxiety.

"Aur Maur, Hîren." Cheerfully sardonic, this greeting rang out in the still and empty air, and even though the steward recognised that the voice generating it belonged to Meribel, the cook, he startled anyway. His reaction prompted a snickery giggle as Elrond's chef peered at him from around the door jam. "It is perfectly safe; you and I are the only Elves here."

"Minuial Galu an le," replied Erestor, his expression stern as he sauntered into the kitchen. "Of
course it is safe; we live in the heart of the most protected of all the elven realms. Nevertheless, are we truly the only souls about?" He glanced with furtive nonchalance past Meribel's shoulders into the depths of the tremendous room.

"We are," she replied. "Do you want to break your fast now or wait until you return from your walk and dine with the household?"

"Do Elrond and Legolas plan to attend?"

"Faelon thinks not and bade me prepare a tray, yet he hasn't spoken to Elrond as yet."

"Then I will stop and take the meal with Glorfindel on my way back." Erestor made for the back door, his step lighter and more confident than before, snatching up a couple of flaky pastries on his way.

"Then would you mind carrying a basket out to Alphdal? He is busy with some sort of special project and if I know him, as I surely do, he will forego every meal until it's completed to his satisfaction." The cook held out the wicker container with a congenial smile.

Erestor peered at her in dumbfounded aggravation and stupefied affront. He was not about to go roaming through the gardens acting as a personal waiter to one of the groundskeepers, even if he was the Head Groundskeeper and a bona fide hero of the Feanorion Wars. He drew himself up stiffly; this is what came of giving in to his terror of the woodland King: he'd lost the respect of the staff. "I am certain I must have misheard you, Meribel." He poured every iota of caustic disdain his voice could produce into the words. "Surely you are not suggesting that Lord Elrond's closest kinsman and Chief Advisor traipse about the gardens in search of Alphdal the gardener?"

"No?" The cook's downcast expression mirrored the surprised disappointment in her tone.

"No." The steward's subdued sneer projected the haughty disgust warranted by this normally worthy servant's blatant insubordination.

"Ah." She heaved a sepulchre sigh and gave a circumspect shake of her head to underscore the undeniable aura of pessimism contained in the single syllable. She set the basket on the long wooden table with care and resumed her preparations of the morning repast, every aspect of face and form clearly communicating her belief that Lord Erestor's refusal was a mistake of dire proportions.

Erestor scowled. "What?"

"Why I'm sure I don't know, Hîren," said the cook with exactly the correct emphasis on courteous deference.

"Yes you do. What is so important about Alphdal and this secret project of his?" Erestor loomed over her with all the weight of his noble lineage and customary arrogance.

"Well, I just chanced to hear, accidentally you understand," Meribel relented quite readily to his authority, leaning closer and lowering her voice, though they were quite alone.

"Of course, of course. Go on."

"The Royal Couple brought over seeds and sprouts and saplings from their woods, so to let Legolas grow a small replica of the world he's left behind. Planting all these specimens is a daunting task and
yet none may aid Alphdal, for it is to be a surprise for Our Sylvan. Legolas would notice if many Elves began suddenly working with the gardener, so Alphdal has decided to do it all himself."

The seneschal stared at her, uncertain what this had to do with him, as surely it must for there was no mistaking the prophesy of doom contained in her abbreviated 'Ah'. She stared back silently, a benignly inscrutable smile adorning her features. "Meribel, why is it important for me to know this?" he demanded.

"Lord Erestor, it would surely please Legolas if you were to assist Alphdal. I can just imagine the joy on his face when he learns of the gift! Of course, if he is grateful and happy then his parents will be elated. Naturally, they would be most eager to express their gratitude to everyone who helped bring Gladgalen Dithen to life."

"Ah." Erestor's brows shot up; this was an unexpected turn of fortune. He gazed at the smiling chef with a mixture of appreciation and suspicion; there was no reason for Meribel to do him a good turn, and offering this means of earning the Royal Family's approbation definitely qualified as a favour of the highest order. Not that it mattered; whatever she wanted he would have to grant, for now he knew about the gift and to refuse to help must surely be viewed as another insult to Legolas, should his advanced knowledge ever come to light. His eyes narrowed; the cook had him well and truly cornered. In silence they struck their bargain and Erestor snatched the loaded basket from the table with a grim snarl. "The estate is huge; where exactly is the gardener."

"In the foothills near the northern bend," she answered sweetly, patting his arm. "I've included a bite or two for you also."

Now Erestor was beyond furious; she was sending him perilously close to the Wood Elves' secret enclave amid the wilds of Imladris where the cliff walls reared up steeply towards Hithaeglir. It was a long trek out and while he did not mind being gone from the estate most of the day, thus avoiding Thranduil, he was now in danger of encountering the rest of Legolas' extended family. _I'll be captured and held prisoner. They have probably already unearthed some dismal pit of a gaol or discovered some foetid cave, there to keep me until Thranduil deigns to pass judgement._ That fear he kept to himself.

"So be it. When I return, we shall have a conversation, you and I, about your future standing within the House of Eärendil."

"As you say, Hîren," she lilted, never losing her smile.

In fact it grew brighter and Erestor wondered exactly what she hoped to achieve. Peering right and left as he leaned through the open door, he stepped outside and strode with a sense of urgency through the kitchen gardens, hastening lest he be seen from one of the many balconies. Swiftly he angled through the barracks and training fields, nodding to the assembling warriors, traversing the grounds so that he would reach the untamed heights through the lush, rolling meadows where Elrond's horses were pastured. At least here in the wide open plains he would encounter no sylvan archers or Sindarin Elders and the seneschal relaxed, slowing his pace. He gazed about in appreciative wonder for he hadn't visited this section of the estate in quite a while, not being an avid advocate of the selective breeding of equine livestock, as his cousin was.

The bucolic setting was peaceful and soothing. The sky was brightening and the birds were beginning to tune their voices for the morning chorus; a soft breeze fanned the distant trees and the tips of the green blades billowing about his knees. A walk was a walk and he was just as pleased to stretch his legs through the rolling sea of emerald grass as among the formal beds and borders.
Erestor inhaled a deep lungful of the sweetly scented air and cast his gaze upon the scene, noting the absence of horses and wondering where they might be. It wasn't a concern of great moment, though, and he dug into the little basket, drawing forth a ripe apple to crunch along the way.

"Lord Erestor!"

The shouted call made him startle again and he dropped the apple. Erestor chided himself for being so jumpy; it was inevitable that he would be intercepted before he could get beyond the paddocks. There was always something going on that simply could not be resolved without his intervention. Sometimes Erestor felt like ignoring all the internal intrigues and complaints and problems brewing in Elrond's household. He liked being the Chief Advisor to his cousin, yet there was no denying that most of the situations were petty and trifling, a waste of his time and talent. Yet, if the staff could not come to him with their concerns they would hunt down Elrond and place these burdens at his feet instead. With Legolas' health at risk, the Lord of Imladris did not need to be bothered with these aggravating details. Now, here came the stable-master striding purposefully over the fields, emerging from a little dip in the land like a rabbit popping out of its burrow. The elf did not look happy and did not wait for an invitation to begin his story.

"Lord Erestor, this simply cannot go on. I have spoken to you about it before and nothing has changed."

"Maur-aur to you as well, Forgam," offered Erestor drily. "Remind me of your unbearable dilemma." He paused for the ellon to reach his side and blew a disgruntled sigh through his nostrils. The sun had not yet risen and difficulties were already sprouting.

"No need to be prickly, Hîren. I'll gladly wish you a good morning if you can convince me that it is one," complained the Head Groom. "He's taken the entire herd out of the east paddock again and Eru alone knows where they are. It took days to find them last time and the mares refused to follow me back."

"Ah yes, now I recall the incident. That was years ago when he was still learning our ways. If your charges are missing, he is not the culprit this time," corrected Erestor, fighting to subdue a smile as the memory played out. Four years after his arrival, his wounds healed but his heart burdened, Legolas had befriended the beasts of the estate far more readily than the Elves. He led Elrond's horses on a little excursion to a spot where there was a particularly delectable variety of clover in great abundance. Once the herd knew the way, they'd happily taken themselves there for an extended jaunt, vanishing like mist in the sun from their usual haunts. The Wood Elf could not grasp why Forgam became so incensed and eventually, at Elrond's request, had to go and ask the horses nicely to return to their normal confines.

"Of course it was him; who else would be able to speak to the horses?" argued Forgam. "He's no business interfering with my authority like this. The care and breeding of Lord Elrond's herds are my responsibility and That Sylvan warlock refuses to acknowledge it. He shouldn't be anywhere near them. He's turned all the mares wild and wilful and they refuse to heed my words now. I'll not stand for it, I tell you! He's undermined me to the point that my grooms are getting cheeky and making jokes at my expense. He's…"

"Enough," Erestor interrupted, his voice cold and his demeanour transformed from amused forbearance to rigid remonstrance. "Have you been drinking down at the Tavern on the East Road?" he demanded. "Legolas has been confined to his rooms by the sylvan healer. It is quite impossible for him to have coerced the mares into desertion."
The Stable Master's eyes grew large and he paused, carefully evaluating the stern Elf before him. It was unwise to go against Erestor, even in trivial matters, and the hapless horse-tender realised a few seconds too late that this was not a trifling issue. "I have not left the grounds, Hîren," he said with a dip of his head. "I didn't know The Sylvan was ill. I naturally assumed he…"

"He has a name," barked the seneschal, irked to hear this lowly servant slighting Legolas and being so forward about it.

"Hîren?"

"Legolas. That is his name, Forgam. You may wish to address him as Legolas Thranduilion, Emîl Edwen o Gladgalen. You are aware that Elrond's mate is royalty and shares, though distantly, in the exalted bloodlines that gave rise to my forebears as well?"

"I…"

"Furthermore, Legolas is neither a warlock, a sorcerer, a wizard, nor an enchanter of any kind. He does not work spells; Mithrandir confirmed this over a month ago and that evaluation was supported by none other than Lord Celeborn the Wise. I must ask again; have you been over indulging in home-brew?"

"Nay, Hîren! I swear to you, that weakness has been corrected. I no longer even partake of wine except on special occasions." This time Forgam bowed, distinctly aware that he had misjudged the seneschal. He'd believed Erestor's public show of support for the marriage was only that, a means to salvage his position of favour within Elrond's household.

"Then your unjust accusations and demeaning slurs are even more deplorable, for drunkenness might at least explain your poor judgement if not your lack of respect," continued Erestor, glaring in a most unpleasant manner at the now squirming Horse Master.

"Nay, Hîren, nay! I meant no disrespect to Lord Elrond or to Tha…to Legolas."

"That is clearly a lie," said Erestor in calm contempt. "If there is one thing that disgusts me it is someone who seeks to cover over errors by denying fault. You and I both know that you meant exactly what you said, both in word and in tone. Indeed, I have used the same expressions, or worse, when discussing Legolas and his place in Imladris. Pretending I never meant to cause harm does not make the harm done less dire or remove the just blame my past actions warrant. If you want to remedy your mistake and diminish the consequences to yourself, Forgam, I suggest you…"

Erestor stopped mid-sentence, suddenly hearing exactly what he was saying. How could he stand here chastising the Head Groom for seeking to escape blame when he himself was doing all in his power to avoid the vengeance of Legolas’ kin? His cheeks coloured up and he compressed his lips, disappointed in himself for such cowardice. He eyed the confused and worried servant before him, comprehending full well that Forgam would never have adopted such a hostile attitude toward Legolas but for his deliberate and continuous efforts to discredit the sylvan archer. In that instant, Erestor realised what he had to do; his example had encouraged the staff to belittle Legolas and his example must now teach them how to correct their behaviour and admit their guilt.

"Forgam, this must stop here and now. I will not tolerate any more disdainful conduct or speech around or regarding Legolas. In as much as I condoned it in the past I now denounce it utterly. I accept responsibility for permitting this deplorable atmosphere of enmity to flourish and will do my best to make amends to Legolas and his family. That is what we must all do."
"Aye, Hîren, henceforth I will remember that he is of exalted lineage and pay him the respect that is his due." Forgam bowed again.

"Nay," Erestor shook his head, remembering Legolas' despair when Elrond admitted he would have been treated better had his station been known. "We are wrong in that also. Whether he is a prince or a humble warrior, Legolas is an Elf and our kin-in-kind. From the beginning, he should have been afforded every courtesy we extend to our friends and neighbours here. Think how it would be had one of our own endured at the hands of strangers the ordeal Legolas has weathered? I would be so angry I would consider imprisonment too kind for the perpetrators of such abuses."

For a moment neither Elf spoke but their eyes met and in them each saw that the same name had come to mind: Arwen. Had she been subjected to like ill-use on the part of the folk of the Woodland Realm, there would be no bounds to the outrage and resentment every citizen in the Valley would experience on her behalf. In light of this understanding, the restraint displayed by Legolas' people proved staggering and their withdrawal from Imladrian society to the wilds a valid and justifiable reaction. Why would they wish to associate with such cold-hearted Elves?

"Nienna's tears, Hîren. What is to be done?" asked Forgam. He grimaced and winced all at the same time, twisting his hands together and dropping his eyes to the ground. "And him with child, too. Ai!"

"We must pour equal effort into righting this wrong as we contributed in its creation. Hear me, I have learned of a secret gift on which Alphdal is working. I want you to see to it his efforts are supported without Legolas learning of it. Then there is the question of what he will need for the child; we can start gathering these together and the whole of the valley's population must contribute."

"Aye, and for himself, too. Legolas will require new garments as time progresses, more comfortable furniture, softer shoes," Forgam looked up with a smile.

"True, but we mustn't forget he's a Wood Elf. What he may want is not necessarily the same as what one of our own would desire. I will seek to learn these things and you shall become my intermediary to the rest of the citizenry," Erestor was smiling too, feeling better about himself now that he had accepted his guilt and determined a means for alleviating at least in a small way some of the pain he'd caused.

"That is a commendable goal," said a voice practically right at his ear and this time both Erestor and Forgam jumped in surprise.

"Lindir!" cried the seneschal, for it was the lissome singer, harp slung upon his back and the new sun dancing in his golden hair. He was dressed in sylvan style, but not the provocatively brief attire he'd worn for Ened Ethuil. His clothes were similar to that which Legolas favoured, meant for easy movement through the close-knit branches and brambles of the forest. It was a far cry from the elegant and sumptuous fabrics and fashions he generally donned, but the effect was pleasing to Erestor's eyes nonetheless. "From where did you spring?" Erestor stared behind the minstrel but saw only the broad expanse of undulating grass flowing across the hills right to the bounds of the stables and barns. There was absolutely no cover of any kind through which the sylvan Elf could have crept.

Lindir's melodic laughter rang out. "I did not appear here magically, if that's what you're implying. I've been following you the whole time, meldir, right from the kitchen door."

Erestor stared incredulously, torn between happiness to hear Lindir refer to him with such a sweet endearment, and in such kindly tone, and disbelief that he would have been able to remain
undetected for the entire trip across the meadows.

"We sylvans do not require trees to disappear. If we do not want to be seen, we will never be noticed," the minstrel said proudly. In truth, he was wearing garments made of the singular cloth the Galadhrim were so adept in crafting. He blended entirely into the surroundings, whatever they might be, and utilising the newly acquired stalking skills Galion had taught him took care of the rest.

"Most impressive," said Erestor, smiling to encourage the pleasant mood. He shoved the basket into Forgam's arms and shooed him off to locate the Head Gardener and in mere moments was alone with the fair singer. "Had you plans for the day, other than startling me silly?"

"I was on the way to the settlement when I saw you leave the house," replied Lindir. "I've been meaning to speak with you, Erestor, but to be honest have dreaded doing so."

The seneschal's brows rose in surprise. "How so? I assure you there is no cause for such worry. I, too, have hoped to repair the friendship my callous words damaged."

"I am pleased to hear you say it," Lindir's face indeed expressed relief. "I should not have reacted to your words so severely, Erestor, and it is my hope that you will forgive me."

"Of course!" Erestor was stunned, not having expected any concession from the minstrel. "Nay, I mean that I am the one who should beg pardon of you," he amended quickly.

Lindir laughed and pulled his harp into his hands, tuning it as was his wont when things were on his mind. "You have it as long as I have yours," he said.

"Done!" agreed Erestor with genuine enthusiasm. He hadn't dreamed it would be this easy to bridge the rift between them and his smile was jubilant. Then he recalled a pertinent point and lost some of his ebullience. "What of Galion?"

"What of him?" Lindir asked sharply. "Are we to have this same disagreement? I am not yours to ask such things of me. With whom I spend my time is my own…"

"Saes! Daro, Lindir, saes!" interrupted Erestor. "That is not how I meant it. I just hoped you would say he means nothing to you. If you wish to be with him, I cannot stop you, but I stand by what I said on the dawn after Ened Ethuil, though the sentiments were expressed in such derogatory terms it's no wonder you can't recall anything else. I was trying to tell you that I hoped we could enjoy many such nights together, for time uncounted."

Lindir stared at him a long time then, trying to read the Noldorin Lord. Erestor was usually so flippant and glib, so sarcastic and snide that it was difficult to accept this unaffected and candid speech. "Time uncounted?"

"Aye," Erestor cleared his throat nervously. "I believe we make a good match, Lindir, and I intend to prove it to you. With your permission, of course." He offered a hesitant smile.

"You wish to court me?"

"Oh is that the word for it?" the seneschal offered this cheeky reply with a wide eyed grin but quickly grew serious again as the singer rolled his eyes and made to turn away. A light touch upon the arm stopped him instantly, Erestor was pleased to discover. "I want to understand you better, Lindir. I want you to understand me better. I want us to share our thoughts and be happy together. I
want to drift into Ólpathu with you at my side. If that is courting then so be it."

The minstrel was speechless for a moment or two, for this was beyond anything he'd hoped. *To think the cynical steward is a poet at heart!* "In that case, Galion means nothing to me," smiled Lindir.

"Praise Varda!" exclaimed Erestor. "When I saw you go off with him I was just sick with jealousy. I could not bear the thought of you two together as we were together."

"It never went that far," admitted Lindir, blushing both from pleasure and embarrassment. "I must tell you honestly that I was deliberately trying to incite exactly that response and teased the poor steward from Greenwood most shamelessly. He may forgive me someday, but it could be a rather long while before that dawn arrives."

Erestor gaped. "Lindir!"

"Aye, that was rather bad of me," he shrugged. "Yet there is more I would to say to you. I want to explain why the suggestion you made that night met such a violent response."

"Nay, you owe me no explanations, meldir, truly," insisted Erestor, eager to relegate the unpleasant incident to oblivion.

"You must let me speak; it's important," countered Lindir and waited until the seneschal gave a swift nod of agreement. He took a deep breath. "I have been trying to put the past behind me, as you know, and that night I described the reality of my sad life in Beleriand. All the memories were fresh and the wounds raw. The truth is you remind me keenly of Maglor."*There, I said it.* The singer heaved a deep sigh and studied the seneschal's concerned face. "That is the first time I have spoken his name in a very long time." A faint and rueful smile adorned his features as he waited for Erestor's reply.

"Ai! Mellonen, I didn't realise," Erestor reached out and settled the comforting weight of his hands on Lindir's shoulders, squeezing lightly as he observed the unexpected vulnerability collecting in the singer's pale green eyes. "I am neither musician nor crooner, after all, and the resemblance is superficial."

"Actually, you have a fine voice, when you choose to use it, which is too seldom." Lindir grew much pinker as he spoke. "And it is your demeanour that reminds me of him. You are bold and intelligent, arrogant and yet wise, aloof but passionate, learned and a powerful warrior. These are traits that defined Maglor also."

Erestor, who had always considered himself more like Maedhros in personality, was uncertain how to respond. There was no doubt that he certainly looked more like Maglor, with his dark hair and eyes, than like Feanor's eldest, who had such vibrant red tresses and emerald irises. The seneschal was convinced the physical similarities must have subconsciously attracted Lindir to him and the rest was a bonus. He sighed, not sure if he was flattered or insulted, yet speak he must for Lindir was waiting. The seneschal realised full well that a wrong choice of words now might ruin his chances with the minstrel forever. *And I want that chance, very much.* Well, he'd succeeded in befriending Legolas and he'd certainly insulted the Wood Elf in far more devastating terms.

"Lindir, you honour me for those are worthy attributes of which anyone would be proud," he started, trying desperately to recall how he'd corrected things with Legolas. *Ah yes, I used a simple, direct expression of remorse and a vow to serve him as I would Elrond and his children.* Yet Lindir was not Legolas, for all they were similar in physical form, down to their flaxen manes, sharing a
deceptive aspect of fragility which cloaked a ferocity and strength few would credit. Who would
guess that this slender, willowy ellon, so youthful in appearance, so vulnerable in mien, was a First
Age Elder who'd survived the Feanorion Wars by inflicting savage brutality upon other Elves? This
comparison triggered a startling realisation within the seneschal's mind and he gripped the singer

"What is it?" demanded Lindir, confused and mildly alarmed.

"Lindir, we are guilty of the same thing," Erestor stuttered, giving a little shake to the rigid frame
within his hands. "I have been lusting after Legolas since he arrived in Imladris and only now do I
understand it." The seneschal grinned and laughed, though it was clear Lindir was not enlightened.
"He looks like you!"

Lindir's brows crowded together in a dismayed frown. If Erestor had any romantic thoughts about
him he'd hidden them well over the passing centuries. Then again, he'd never considered the advisor
as a potential mate either. Still, he was not inclined to accept the role of substitute, though he had as
much as admitted this was Erestor's part to play. "Perhaps it isn't me you desire but Legolas. It is just
as likely that I remind you of him. In all the time we've known one another, you've never expressed
interest in me, Erestor."

"Nay, it isn't him," Erestor insisted. "I fixated on him in your absence because it seemed possible I
might be able to have him. You, on the other hand, have been unapproachable up to now. And lest
we forget, you haven't indicated any attraction to me. Yet I believe it must have been there all along,
buried in both our souls, repressed by the fear of breaking with convention."

"What do you mean?"

"How could I admit an interest in you? You're so much older. You've been my mentor and my
teacher, my surrogate father and my brother, all at once. How could I allow myself to imagine you in
any other way? And you were heart-broken; hardly able to get through life much less acknowledge
that your heart could find love elsewhere. Besides, you are too honourable to ever engage in a
romantic liaison with a minor. I was but an elfling when we met, subject to your authority more than
Círdan's or Maedhros'."

"I see," Lindir nodded, for it was indeed forbidden for a guardian and mentor to exploit such power
over their charges. He smiled hopefully. "I am not your teacher or your minder anymore, Erestor."

"No you are not," Erestor was still smiling as his eyes fastened on the minstrel's ruby lips, yet as
much as he wished to taste them he held back. He would not seek to lay claim to Lindir; thus had he
erred before and thus did Elrond continue to rile his sylvan mate. Instead, he would court Lindir
carefully, slowly, deliberately; working to gain his trust and win his wounded heart. He lifted his
gaze to the singer's. "I would very much like to kiss you now," he said, unable to conceal the thrill
saying it gave to his loins.

Lindir didn't trouble to answer with words, moving into Erestor's arms easily, slipping his around
the broad shoulders, inviting the embrace with a coy tilt of his head and a flutter of golden lashes. The
press of the seneschal's mouth against his was light and tentative at first, just a swift caress of lips, but
then they returned with greater fervour and the singer parted his, welcoming the warm invasion of
mobile flesh. They shared a lingering kiss that was filled with both promise and restraint, parting to
exhale contented breaths and meet shining eyes bright with hope. They remained close, arms in
languid lambency at hips and waists, and discussed the next step.
"I wish we could spend the morning together," Lindir began, "but I've promised to meet with Thranduil's minstrels and help plan for the wedding feast."

"The King expects to participate in organising Elrond's wedding?" Erestor was not enthusiastic about this idea.

"Aye, for it is his son's wedding, too, is it not?"

"True," Erestor nodded contritely but his joyous mood dissolved instantly. He would be put in charge of developing the ceremony for the Imladrian side and that meant he would be forced to consult with the King. "I don't suppose you could find a way to convince King Thranduil not to injure me too severely?"

"Nay, you have misjudged him and Legolas, both," retorted Lindir. "Legolas has already had a long talk with his parents and explained that all is forgiven between the two of you. Besides, sylvans do not resort to violence to solve such disputes, Erestor."

"I must accept your word on the subject," groaned Erestor. "What will happen? Has Legolas mentioned anything at all?"

"You forget, melethen, that the young prince is not pleased with me one bit. He considers my part in revealing his status a real betrayal. I have a feeling that were I a citizen of Greenwood and a subject of King Thranduil, I would be in just as much trouble as you."

"Then you concede that I am in trouble."

"Yes, but you will not be injured physically. Beyond that, I've no idea what Thranduil plans. The best advice I can give is to throw yourself on the mercy of Queen Rhûn'waew, for she is kin to you, no matter how distant the connection. If anyone can influence the King's decisions, it is she."

"I am not encouraged," mourned Erestor, at last stepping out of the singers arms, for the harp was pressing against his stomach uncomfortably.

"Do not be so pessimistic," urged Lindir. "Your plan to help Alphdal with the garden gift and your desire to gather together the things Legolas will need to see him through the pregnancy are inspired ideas. Involving all of Imladris demonstrates your intent to undo the harm you've done to her son."

"I'm glad you think so," said Erestor. "If you can assist me in learning what sort of items he might want, that would be a tremendous favour, melethen."

"It will be my pleasure," Lindir leaned in for a quick kiss, "both to gather this information and to share it with you later this evening. I'll expect you around Ithil Eriad." With that tantalising command he gathered his harp into the crook of his arm and sauntered away through the grass, strumming a new tune he was working out. Just before the dip in the land hid him from view, he glanced back with a brilliant smile for his new beaux.

Erestor stood there staring into the empty air, a silly grin on his face, until he could no longer hear the soft chords of the harp. Then he turned with a sigh and continued on his tour of the grounds.

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By mid-morning Erestor had completed his stroll through the gardens and was back at his favourite spot: the ridge overlooking the valley just above Lanthir Fân. He had to admit his thoughts were not focused after his encounter with Lindir. Normally, his morning walk enabled him to prioritise the day, mentally listing and evaluating all the tasks he needed to accomplish during the sunlit hours, internally determining what could be put off, what should have been done yesterday, and to whom these tasks needed to be delegated to see that everything proceeded as he deemed appropriate. He could not run the entire realm by himself, after all, nor oversee the smooth operation of the Last Homely House unaided. Save for matters of security, which Glorfindel handled, just about everything else fell under the Chief Advisor's authority.

_Especially now, with Elrond requiring more time away from his duties to tend to Legolas._

Yet no matter how diligently he tried to concentrate on these copious responsibilities, the seneschal found his mind wandering into contemplation of the many qualities possessed by the fair minstrel that made him so desirable as a potential mate. The colour of the grass reminded him of Lindir's eyes; the song of the birds mimicked the singer's incomparable voice; the touch of the breeze recalled to mind sweet shivers when Lindir whispered sinful suggestions in his ear. If Erestor tried to plan the night's meal he invariably found himself imagining what it would be like to offer delectable bites of confections to those supple, red lips. If he attempted to reason out the possible arguments to be posed by the Weaver's Guild regarding the use of Elven hair in creating cloth, a hotly contested issue of late, he wound up visualising the long, wheat coloured strands of the minstrel's mane, pondering the delight of its scent, its texture, its very weight as it lay strewn across his naked skin.

"Ai Valar," Erestor groaned out Legolas' favourite blasphemy and shook himself. This would never do. He could not be alone with Lindir for hours and must find a way to counter this erotic day dreaming. He propped his elbows on his knees and clutched at his head, perhaps hoping to get a grip on his run amok thoughts.

"You seem distressed, Lord Erestor," said an imperious voice right beside him.

For the fourth time that day Elrond's cousin jumped. There, seated on the rocky promontory next to him, was Thranduil, King of the Wood Elves. Erestor was completely dumbstruck as one thought after another raced through his brain. Should he stand up so he could bow low? Where in bloody Mordor had he come from? Should he offer his apology first or give the formal greeting. Seconds rushed by. If he leapt from the ledge, would the inevitable broken legs satisfy the angry Ada's desire for revenge? What finally came out of his mouth was scarcely intelligible.

"Lord...er... King Thranduil, I'm surprised. No no, I mean you're most welcome here and Legolas is lovely. Nay! He has lovely manners, yes, a credit to his parents and people." Erestor could feel sweat breaking out under his arms and his fine robes were suddenly quite itchy and uncomfortable.

"Thank you, Lord Erestor," Thranduil smiled in a peculiarly crisp and yet highly amused attitude. "Actually, Legolas is quite lovely, both physically and spiritually. Not something you would know, of course, but even as a young child he expressed the most profound compassion and sympathy for those in sorrow."

"Yes, yes, I didn't mean to imply that Legolas is unattractive in any way," Erestor stumbled through this response, his mind distracted by the increasing skin irritation developing due to the perspiration. He simply must not scratch. He tugged at the sleeves of the garment, hoping to draw the cloying cloth away from his body.

"No, of course you didn't," snorted Thranduil. "I am well aware of how fascinated you have been
with my son's outward form. That is why I'm here talking to you now. I thought you might appreciate having this conversation in private, away from eavesdropping ears and gossiping lips." The seneschal was staring at him with open dread, yanking and pulling at his clothing as if a nest of ants inhabited them. Which, in fact, was exactly the case. The King offered a mild frown of mock concern. "Is something wrong with your robes, Lord Erestor?"

"Wrong? Nay, nothing is wrong with my clothes. I just seem to feel, there appears to be some agent mixing with the...my... Ai!" The seneschal leaped to his feet, twitching and wriggling and clawing at the robes, for something had definitely just bitten his flesh in a highly sensitive area. In seconds he was cursing in the most vile manner as he danced upon the precipice, shedding clothes with inordinate speed and slapping at whatever section of the body was thus exposed. In short order he was completely nude, desperately trying to dislodge the handful of insects crawling around in his crotch. "Eru's Arse! Where did they come from? Why are they attacking me?"

"Tut, tut," admonished Thranduil, stifling a chuckle, though just barely, as he watched the Noldorin Lord's frenetic gyrations. "Such language! Must you kill the creatures, Lord Erestor? They serve a most useful purpose on Arda."

"Language? Purpose? Ulmo's Balls, they're eating me alive and you speak of sparing them?"

"Would you like them to stop?"

"Yes, I would like them to stop!" Erestor was reduced to scooping up handfuls of the gritty dirt and rubbing it thoroughly through his pubic hair in hopes the ants would cling to the particles and be removed as he brushed it away. No sooner had he uttered the exclamation than the stinging bites ceased. As if by command, every single one of the minute foes formed a file and skittered away down his legs and into the ground. He stood there naked, coated with dusty grey patches, covered with tiny wounds that burned far out of proportion to their size, and gazed down at the Sindarin monarch. Imladris' Chief Advisor was suddenly convinced that the insects had indeed acted on orders. The reason why was also clear. "I had nothing to do with the poisoning. The guilty parties were apprehended and punished."

"You had everything to do with the poisoning," snapped Thranduil, jumping to his feet, his modest amusement at Erestor's expense replaced by fury. "You oversee the entire household staff. You interact with them on a daily basis. You shared with these Elves everything private about Legolas' relationship with Elrond. Do you deny it?"

Erestor flinched for the charge was valid. "Nay."

"Nay. Lord Elrond has publicly announced his own guilt in the attack, citing his lax regard for Legolas' feelings and his failure to give him the respect that was and is his due as a primary, if silent, motivation to those who chose to denigrate and defame my son. That is in the written record of the trial and was the cause for mitigating the sentences decreed. Yet you, Lord Erestor, gave no testimony at all." The enraged father bellowed.

"No, but not because I hoped to deny culpability. Rather, I thought..."

"You thought what? That owning your guilt would deflect attention from the seriousness of the action? Perhaps you thought acknowledging how you abetted this crime would enable the loathsome Elves who did the deed to be excused?"

"Yes, something like that. Really, I never meant to exonerate myself. I assure you I hold myself fully
accountable and am resolved to do whatever I must to make amends and reverse the negative affects my spiteful behaviour produced. I am thoroughly ashamed and disgusted by my actions over the last ten years, Your Majesty, and am now dedicated to protecting Legolas and his child from any and all harm. I humbly beg your mercy and pardon and willingly accept any punishment you deem proper.” Erestor bowed low and then kept his face turned down, unwilling to meet the mighty King’s eyes. All was silent, even the sound of the falls seemed absent and he could no longer discern the chiming of the bells.

"So be it," said Thranduil quietly and smiled grimly as the Noldorin Lord’s face finally rose and the black eyes joined with his. "I consider this small humiliation sufficient. Even as angry as I am I would never want anyone to endure the kind of opprobrium my son experienced, especially not for ten years. I believe you will never forget the discomfort you feel right now and will forever recall that Legolas had to suffer such misery, or worse, for hours."

"You are most generous," Erestor bowed low again, shocked at the sudden turn of events. He had begun to truly fear he might be cast from the heights, so irate was the Sindarin King.

"Get dressed," commanded Thranduil. "You and I have much to discuss. There are specific sylvan traditions regarding formal bonding. You will aid me in guiding Elrond to a complete experience of these customs, including the practice of Charivari."

"Charivari? I've never heard this term before," Erestor said. He might not have recognised the word, but there was no misunderstanding the malignant gleam in the King's eyes. Whatever this practice involved, Elrond was unlikely to enjoy it.

"I don't think there is a Sindarin translation," said Thranduil, decidedly more relaxed as he waited for Erestor to don his clothes, noting with satisfaction that the ants' venom was causing a suitably obnoxious itching sensation that the Noldorin Lord could not ignore. Erestor was scratching and rubbing in a most undignified manner. "A lotion of camomile might ease the discomfort and lessen the spread of the rash," he remarked helpfully, smiling in pleased satisfaction at Erestor's corresponding glare. "As for the Chiavari, you could liken it to a type of hunt."

TBC

~~ Glossary ~~~

Mellyn ar Melithryn: Friends and Lovers  
Minuial Galu an le: Dawn Blessing to you  
Ithil Eriad: Moon Rise  
Gladgalen Dithen: Little Greenwood  
Siniath Edlothiad: Blossoming News  
Glân Garaf: White Wolf  
Miny'adar: Grandfather  
inuanu: female-male, an elf of dual gender  
Gladhadithen: Little Laugh, aka Giggle  
Úan Mîn: Our Monster  
Sui adar, sui ion: Like father, like son  
Arahen: royal child  
talan chall: hidden talan  
Iest Mín: Our Wish - pet name for Legolas used by his parents.  
Ernil neth: young prince
Emil Edwen
Emil Vain: First Prince - heir
Rhûn'waew: East Wind
Aras: deer, stag
Tarlanc: stiff-necked, stubborn
Lechenn: Sindarin word for Noldor elves.
Fennas: Doorway
Tinu Mín: our little star

Sorry for the semi-cliff-hanger! I will not be able to write for a few days while I drive the new (old) VW Vanagon across country to my new position as a campground host! This is the first of many, I hope. Think good thoughts to get me there; it's about 2700 miles. I'll check in as I go from town to town. If the van holds up, I should be there by Thursday 7/3/08.

If you have never seen this illustration of a harper by April Lee, take a look here: April Lee I could not resist sharing with you the picture that inspired my idea of Lindir as presented in Aearlinn. I have learned this work, and all her other wonderful creations, are copyrighted and so I cannot leave it on display here.

Hope you enjoyed this little Erestor-centred chapter. I shocked myself by deciding he would be perfect for Lindir after all, and with his obvious appreciation of Legolas' type, the singer is perfect for him. Besides, Lindir can really put Erestor in his place. As for the interaction with the 'staff' of the Last Homely House, I wanted to give him the chance to undo some of the harm he's caused. The little trick Thranduil played was well deserved, I think. Those ant bites are murderous! I speak from experience. I was once bitten to the point that I am now allergic to the venom of certain ants. Erestor's going to have a very unpleasant few hours. And does everyone catch that despite the insistence of 'no magic', we are seeing several mentions and examples of magic after all. Well, it just isn't the sort the Noldorin folk feared. The Wood Elves do not control other Elves' minds and actions, as was the complaint by the Twins and by Erestor. Well, I like my Wood Elves magical.

Don't forget to vote for the babe's name, too:)

Finally, thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!

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"This one," said Faelon, pulling the tunic forth with a flourish and a beaming smile.

It was magnificent, comprised of damasked silk the colour of nutmeg embroidered in elaborate detail at the hems of the wide, belled sleeves and all down the back right to the edge its lengthy tail, overlain by a sheer-as-mist top with just a hint of lavender tint. The front was devoid of ornament, save for a delicate tracery of silver that outlined a trailing vine down the center. He held it up for Brannon Neth's (as he'd decided to address Legolas, since the sylvan archer refused to answer to 'Ernil Daur') inspection. "See, the petals of the dahlias just compliment the golden highlights in your eyes."

Elrond looked up from his desk in the study where he was pretending to examine the favoured plan for what he secretly called nostra már while surreptitiously perusing the official decree from Greenwood's Council of Elders that detailed the amount of the dowry and its terms of delivery. The document also declared his bonding to Legolas approved, as Rhûn'waew had promised, and while that was good news he had not yet revealed it to Aearen. Elrond hoped he could address the particulars with Erestor alone, seeing no need to involve his pregnant mate in the sticky problem of getting his Council of Governing Advisors to accede to the demands of the Woodland Realm.

It wasn't that the dowry was excessive; in fact it was really not so much a dowry, by traditional definitions with which he was familiar, but a kind of trade agreement. It was complex and involved quite a number of sub-clauses and tariff-waivers and exclusive rights to market share. In short, it would demand the sort of diplomatic negotiations Erestor dearly relished and Elrond truly detested.

For all this was an unpleasantly dry bit of reading, he couldn't suppress a mild smile as he gazed at the two Elves through the open bedroom door. The chosen ensemble was exquisite and Elrond had commissioned it for Legolas himself, but he already knew the archer's opinion of it and waited for Aearen's reaction to Faelon's selection.

"Deleb! Thaur!" Legolas' features were caste in a scowl of horrific proportions and he eyed the hapless valet with extreme disapproval, obviously wondering what qualified the Elf to continue in his position if such were his recommendations regarding appropriate clothing. "Faelon, this has all these," he poked with apprehensive disgust at the sleeve of the garment, "frilly things on it. I cannot wear this to go hunting with Faron. How am I supposed to keep those fringy whatnots from tangling in my bowstring?"

"Bowstring?" Faelon's brows shot up in surprise. "Do you mean you are really going hunting? For game?"

"Of course, that is what I meant when I said Faron and I were going hunting. How else could one interpret those words? Did I lapse into Nandorin as I spoke?"

"You did say them in half-Nandorin, half-ancient Sindarin or Eldarin, beloved," remarked Elrond. "Faelon does not comprehend your dialect very well."
"If I may correct you, Hiren, I don't comprehend it at all," announced Faelon with exasperation. "Elbereth knows I am trying, Brannon Neth, but I just don't see any logic to it. I thought 'wah-lay-dee-ay ss-phhar-Oh-ben-nay' meant you and Faron were going to Lord Glorfindel's home for reasons I could not deduce from the sounds issuing from your lips."

Elrond snorted his amusement and fell to chuckling, adding a shake of his head as he gazed in wonder at Faelon. Legolas, he noted, was not amused in the least.

"Waledie spharóbene Faron means 'I'm going hunting with Faron' and Glorfindel is Sphindemalata in the Old Tongue; wherein did you hear that name within my words? Besides, why would I take Faron to his house when surely he is not there." Legolas was insulted on the mighty warrior's behalf. "No doubt he is debriefing the night patrol as we speak and preparing to venture forth to inspect the defences of the realm."

"Yes, now that you mention it that seems likely, but I thought perhaps it was something of a special occasion." Faelon put away the lovely formal tunic with regret and rooted around for one of the plain, serviceable outfits Legolas had been wont to wear when he was a member of the Patrol. "Since you are so adept in the use of so many tongues, could you not perhaps just stick to Sindarin?" His query was vaguely muffled by virtue of the fact that his head was plunged amid the garments, but that it was heard he had no doubt as a brisk stream of acidic phrases, the inflection and phonology so foreign the speech must have been Khuzdul, sliced through the room. "Or I could keep practising Nandorin," he amended. With a grimace the dark-haired ellon brought forth a tunic and leggings, uttering a wordless grunt of repugnance. "This should have been disposed of long ago, Brannon Neth; it's got gore embedded in the leather. It will never come clean."

Legolas went pale and snatched it out of Faelon's hands, shoving him aside to return the garment to its place in the back of the wardrobe. Elrond was up in a flash and rushed into the room, carefully drawing his mate away, for he'd recognised what Faelon had found well enough. Personally, he agreed with their servant, but Legolas would not endure even the mention of burning the worn and battle-stained ensemble. These were the very clothes he'd been wearing that fateful day when Elrond and his sons had come upon him just in time to salvage his life by extreme measures. Why Legolas wanted such a vile remembrance of that day, the Elven Lord had been unable to wring from the sylvan.

"He doesn't know, Aearen," whispered Elrond, gently squeezing the tense shoulders beneath his hands as he guided Legolas toward the desk. "Remain here and I'll handle it." He waited for Legolas' brusque nod and returned to Faelon, who was watching from the bed chamber with alarm.

"I didn't mean to upset him, Hiren," he offered in hushed and trembling tones, eyes huge with anxious dread. Elrond had become quite protective of his young mate and Faelon had no wish to incite his wrath. Besides, he genuinely liked Legolas, had done so long before his true heritage had been revealed, though of course he'd never indicated that for fear of being involved in all the controversy and gossip surrounding him. Faelon was still Erestor's personal secretary then and everyone knew the Chief Advisor's stand on Legolas' worth.

"Worry not; you aren't to blame," Elrond smiled kindly and turned Faelon around, herding him back to the closets. "I should have explained about those particular items of clothing. In future, you must not handle them in any manner. Act as if they do not exist and all will be well. Now, what have you for Aearen to wear today?"

Faelon sucked in a relieved breath and managed a shaky smile as he bowed his thanks. Without
further ado he retrieved a suitable leather tunic in pale fawn suede, a silk undershirt in pure white, leggings dyed a deep forest green, and the low brown boots Legolas preferred. Upon Elrond's nod of approval, he carried them over to the dressing table and laid the items out, adding a pair of silk hose to the pile. By the time this was done, Legolas was sauntering back into the room as if nothing untoward had happened and Faelon offered a tentative smile. "These should do," he remarked and was glad to see Legolas return his friendly expression.

"Perfect," said the sylvan prince. He waited for Faelon to retreat, unused, and quite unwilling, to being 'dressed'. Figwit had apparently considered him unworthy of such service and never attempted to provide assistance in choosing and donning clothing. Never having been waited on in that manner, Legolas had no idea he was being insulted and everything worked out. Younger brother Faelon, eager to do well in his new post and distance himself from his sibling's malice, had considered it his duty to treat Legolas as respectfully as he did Lord Elrond.

That first morning attending to the requirements engendered by the promotion had been something of a drama for Faelon, and the rest of the household also, because Legolas, being naked underneath it, had been highly disturbed by the valet's matter-of-fact attempts to remove his bathrobe. A voluble explosion of Nandorin curses had expressed, without any need for translation, Legolas' outrage at such forward and unsolicited advances upon his person. Well, no sylvan warrior was ever caught without a weapon of some sort and this morning was no different than any other. Right after bathing, he'd strapped on the small dagger kept hidden at his ankle (the much fabled 'boot-blade') and this knife was brought in deadly proximity to the terrified servant's throat. The resulting cacophony of shouted threats and shrieks of panic-stricken hysteria had drawn a crowd outside the apartment. Without Elrond's intervention, things might have become ugly, for Legolas had a justified suspicion of the elder Elf's household staff. The Lord of Imladris had hastened to get between them, shoving Faelon into the bathing chamber, shutting him in there, and blocking Legolas' means of entry. From that vantage he interrogated the afflicted valet, Elrond as doubtful of the ellon's intent as his mate, and the misunderstanding was unravelled. Once everything was explained properly, Legolas had offered his apologies and Faelon had pledged with profuse sincerity never to try and disrobe him again. The sylvan archer also elicited his agreement (that is to say his sworn oath on his naneth's eternal soul) never to touch Elrond's person either, neither to cloth nor undress him nor even proffer a friendly pat on the back.

Faelon doubted he would ever forget the expression on Lord Elrond's face as the august ruler struggled between smug complacence and mortified chagrin to be revealed the object of Legolas' possessive jealousy. At any rate, far from being ready to abandon his post, the novice valet was understanding and sympathetic. From then on, he restricted his aid to assembling the various components of the day's wardrobe and Legolas responded with gratitude. Between the two a friendship began to grow that gave Elrond's heart ease, for Legolas was not on familiar terms with any of the valley's young people.

So Faelon left Legolas to dress, closing the bedroom door to give Brannon Neth the privacy he craved, and entered the study, seeing that Faron had arrived. He was standing beside Elrond, listening courteously as the Noldorin Lord exhibited and bragged over the various amenities encompassed in the architectural plans his mate had drawn. They both turned on hearing the latch engage and Faron eyed Faelon with curiosity.

"Aur Maur," said the valet with a polite nod. He'd seen the two together at meals and in the Hall of Fire, but had never had cause to speak to the sylvan warrior. It wasn't his place to present himself and as Legolas hadn't offered any introduction, the pair remained strangers. It was odd; for ten years Faelon had refrained from speaking to Legolas because of the sylvan's low status, and now the valet
couldn't initiate a conversation with the young Wood Elf's cousin because his station was inferior. This was the first time Faron had come to visit Legolas in the apartment while Faelon was still in the rooms and he took the opportunity to inspect him closely. He found exactly what he expected: a rugged, proud, reserved, and rather intimidating person, the epitome of the Wood Elf stereotype. In comparison, Legolas presented as sophisticated and refined.

"Aur Maur an le." He, too, had noticed the young Noldo about the estate but did not realise Faelon was one of Lord Elrond's employees. He had not cared enough to wonder over his identity until now, finding the ellon in Legolas' rooms so early that he must be on extremely good terms with the archer. Faron could not prevent a sort of covetous regret from seizing him, thinking he had just encountered his replacement. The sylvan warrior's gaze travelled the servant's elegant clothing with a mixture of amusement and contempt. Whoever this Elf was, he was dressed more for a formal outing than a strenuous hunt through the wilds, but far be it from Faron to pass judgement. All the Noldorin folk seemed to go in for fancy vestments and robes. "Will you be joining us?" His query was met with ringing laughter.

"Accompany Brannon Neth hunting? Absolutely not!" exclaimed Faelon with high mirth. "I am more of a scholar, sir, rather than a warrior. I do not find bushwhacking through thorny thickets and strangling vines, following the spoor of some blighted hind, amusing in the least. No doubt you will both return dirty and bedraggled, exhausted, famished, and reeking of the odours particular to dead animals."

"Aye, the scent of success," Faron smiled, surprised to hear this unusual title applied to Legolas but pleased the Noldorin Elf was not coming along. "You are a scribe then." That his war-brother had anything in common with a clerk was extraordinary. Legolas was forever trying to downplay his intellectual side in hopes of convincing Aran Thranduil that he was useless as a member of the court proper. Moreover, he did not enjoy being cooped up indoors engaged in scholarly studies. Faron's smile slipped a bit, considering this new facet to his friend's personality, a side of Legolas never shared with him.

"A scribe? Nay, hardly that, although I served as Erestor's secretary for a time," Faelon replied.

At this point Elrond intervened, seeing the visitor was in the dark as to Faelon's standing within the house. "Faron, this is my valet, Faelon." When the warrior bowed and spoke politely of the pleasure of making the Elf's acquaintance, it became obvious that he was unfamiliar with the notion of a personal attendant for a Lord of high position. Elrond sighed, deciding to let Legolas explain, and resumed his feigned inspection of the diagrams, eager for them all to get on with their plans so that he could get on with consulting Erestor.

"Faelon?" The door opened and Legolas leaned out. Spotting Faron he sent his cousin a wave and a smile as the valet hurried over and the two disappeared behind the closed door. "I was thinking," said Legolas, leading him back to the wardrobe, "about the tunic you chose this morning."

"You want to wear that on a hunt? Nay, Brannon Neth, don't! It will be ruined and you haven't ever worn it. Elrond had that made just last week and I think he meant for you to…"

"Nay! I don't want to wear it now," interrupted Legolas. "Yet maybe tonight after the festivities in the Hall of Fire."

"I don't understand. You want to put on your best clothes after the dancing and singing are over?" Faelon began to worry, not wanting to offend Legolas for a third time before breakfast. He took the tunic out and held it up.
"No. I want to put on just the over-tunic," said Legolas, a faint blush stealing up to the points of his ears, wondering if Faelon would find this scandalous. He slipped his hand underneath it, admiring how it felt atop his skin and the way the soft peach colour showed through. "Just for Elrond." He dared a peek at the valet, who had remained silent for several seconds, and found him staring in open astonishment mixed with unmistakably devious delight.

Before any misunderstandings begin, let me say that Faelon is not a lecherous lout and was not imagining Legolas wearing the gossamer garment, at least not for him. His pleasure arose because Brannon Neth finally considered him dependable enough to confide such intimacies. Elrond had increasingly consulted him on whether Legolas might find a scenario romantic or insulting, and did not hide the fact that there was a stash of naughty toys kept in the top drawer of his dresser. While they both realised Faelon barely knew the archer and couldn't hope to guess his secret fantasies, it was a sign of the Elven Lord's confidence that he spoke so openly. To have won the same trust from Legolas was precisely what Faelon had been striving to achieve since accepting the position.

He met Legolas' sidelong look with a slow, approving smirk. "I think, if you do so, you will want a quartet outside on the terrace below," he said. Faelon frequently arranged for such a pleasing means to muffle Elrond's lusty groans and grunts during the couples' erotic encounters. In fact, the musicians had a standing engagement to play on the terrace right before dawn every day, unless the two spent the night in the grotto, since Legolas tended to be most amorous at that time of the morning.

His suggestion was met with a triumphant smile and a full blush as Legolas turned away to the dressing table and sat to finish braiding his hair. "Good. Leave that out, then, clear the wing of sentries, and close the second library."

"The second library? Brannon Neth, no one ever goes in that musty old room. It isn't likely to afford much in the way of comfort." Faelon's brow wrinkled in distaste, for he was often left confused about the types of activities his charges found pleasurable. "I could take some cushions and blankets and whatnot in there, I suppose."

Legolas shrugged, an enigmatic and dreamy smile adorning his comely features as he efficiently tied off the last of the fine plaits. Since the arrival of his parents, he never went from his rooms without his hair correctly finished. He rose and strolled across to the door and out, casting his eyes up and down Elrond's form in a rather wicked gaze as he entered the study.

He quite liked the way the hunting garb, which Elrond now routinely wore, emphasised the svelte strength of Nín'ódhel's well-muscled body, especially where the leather leggings moulded themselves to his calves and thighs. Elrond also left the tunic and shirt loosely tied so that a small triangle of naked skin was visible beneath the lacings. It occurred to Legolas that he would rather be engaging in a different sort of hunt altogether and in a burst of vivid images contrived the basic scenario for a new game. _Ah, I will lead him on quite the merry chase._

Elrond's left brow arched high; he knew that look and at once felt his pulse quicken. Legolas slid into his arms and kissed him, leaving no doubt as to the thoughts on his mind as he managed to press the hardness at his groin against Elrond's leg. The Elven Lord suppressed a groan but could not prevent one hand from groping his mate in a manner not exactly acceptable in public. When Legolas released a breathy warble, so soft it was more felt than heard, Elrond knew he'd gone too far and cautiously broke the kiss.

Legolas' eyes were bright and full of mischief as he leaned up so to whisper in his beloved
Nín’ódhel’s ear. "Tonight, you and I shall go hunting."

"Manwê's wind! Lord Erestor was right," Faron intoned in embarrassment, turning away at this blatant exhibition of erotic passion. "I'll wait for you outside; that is, if you still plan on coming."

The lovers parted in haste after that, Legolas' cheeks burning even as he giggled, finding Faron's choice of words rather suggestive under the circumstances. He didn't bother to comment, following Faron out to the balcony where first one and then the other leaped neatly over the side. Elrond and Faelon came to the rails and peered down as the cousins strolled away.

"Why do they always jump off the balcony?" asked Faelon, for this was something he'd wondered about since the earliest days of Legolas' residency. Then, he'd considered whether it was a trait particular to Legolas or a more general characteristic shared by sylvan people. Well, that quandary was resolved but still left him perplexed and he looked to Elrond for the answer. The Lord of Imladris just shrugged, smiling down as he watched his youthful mate striding across the lawn, checking his bowstring and adjusting his harness as he moved.

Elrond sighed, wishing he could join them but understanding how important it was for Legolas to resume this friendship with Faron. Clearly, they were the very best of friends and their easy camaraderie reminded the Elven Lord of his young years with Erestor. He and Elros and Erestor had been next to inseparable and innumerable were the pranks and mischievous plots the three had carried out. He wondered if Galbreth had formed the third in Legolas' group, but then recalled the great difference in age between Thranduil's eldest and youngest sons.

More likely some of Aras' many great-great-grandchildren are contemporary with Aearen.

The thought sparked a searing, blistering streak of brilliant awareness and Elrond forgot to breathe for a few seconds. Aras, he realised quite suddenly, had not brought along anyone close in age to Legolas. All of the heir's descendants seemed to belong to Arwen's generation, and she was more than 2600 years Legolas' senior. The Lord of Imladris was certain, as if he'd just had a glance in Galadriel's Mirror, that this fact was in some manner at the root of the elder prince's acrimony toward his nephew.

"Lord Elrond? What is wrong?" asked Faelon, having made no less than three comments about Faron to which his lord had not replied. He watched in interest as the great healer startled and looked at him in dismay as if he'd forgotten anyone else was on the balcony.

"Faelon!"

"Aye, Hiren?"

Elrond frowned. Much as he might wish it he could not pursue this enigma. "Go and fetch Lord Erestor. I need to speak with him in my office downstairs." With that he swept up the documents from the desk and hurried from the apartment, confident his valet would carry out the order at once.

Which Faelon meant to do, let none doubt it, but he had no means of knowing that the erstwhile seneschal was at that moment far from the estate, surrounded by various members of the sylvan prince's family, receiving a laboriously detailed description of the Sindarin Bonding Ritual, a thorough tutorial on courteous and mannerly behaviour among guests and participants in such a solemn ceremony, the proper sorts of gifts the two families must exchange, how many relatives Elrond was permitted in the wedding party itself, and a contrastingly vague description of the concept referred to, amid suppressed snickering and smirks, as Charivari.
Now, I know everyone recalls that Elrond left the decree regarding the dowry lying on his desk when Legolas and Faelon got into a little disagreement over the old, ragged travelling clothes. I'm sure we all can imagine he was too eager to intervene in the brewing contention to adequately hide that document before guiding his beloved Aearen out of the bedroom. And finally, knowing Legolas, we can all guess he spotted this vital manuscript almost immediately, realised what it was, and would wish nothing less than to read it through at once. Perhaps we should join him and Faron now to discover how Our Sylvan plans to achieve that.

"I can't believe you did that, Legolas." Faron's words were filled with affronted censure.

"What?"

"You know what. Ai Valar! I'm not sure I want to go on this expedition after all."

"Why? Faron, we've hardly had any time together since you arrived," Legolas halted and reached over to make his cousin face him. "I'm sorry you were shocked; I sort of forgot you were there. Don't let it spoil things, please?" There was almost a quality of desperation in his voice that couldn't be missed.

"Fine, but I don't want to end up getting devoured by a bear or a panther or something worse all because you're distracted, daydreaming about your Noldorin mate." Faron gave his cousin a playful shove, for clearly his dismay was all pretence intended to catch his childhood friend off guard. He laughed aloud at Legolas' disgusted groan. "Ai, if you could see your face! Sorry, muindoren, but you verily asked for it."

Legolas laughed too and shoved Faron back. "I suppose," he admitted, "only don't joke about that."

"About what, you're over-active libido?" Faron shot back, still laughing.

"Nay," Legolas was serious. "I meant my bond with Elrond."

Faron stopped on the path and stared at Legolas, for such insecurity was not a hallmark of his cousin's demeanour. He was used to a wilful, obstinate Elf with a tendency to behave a bit too much like a spoiled favourite son. "I wasn't going to tease you about that, but perhaps I should."

"What? Why?" Legolas could not believe his ears.

"Because I have never seen you like this, Legolas, and it bothers me. Why are you so worried about what everyone thinks all of a sudden? I would expect you to defy anyone who dared to censure your choice of a mate."

"That's just it, Faron. He wasn't my choice. I had no choice at all. I was just…taken."

"Ai! Do you think you're the first Elf to endure a bond of extremity?" said Faron, confused and uncertain how to handle a humbled and debased Elven prince. When his harsh words generated a defeated drop of his cousin's head and a listless shrug, Faron became instantly, uncomfortably distraught. "Legolas, I didn't mean that to sound so cold." He laid a hesitant hand on the prince's shoulder. "Do you not love him, then? What I just witnessed in there seemed to suggest it is so, yes?" he inquired gently, wishing more than anything that Legolas would lift his head and toss it in haughty indignation to have such a query posed.
"I do," admitted Legolas, so softly it was hard to hear the words, and when he raised his eyes to his cousin's there was something like fear shining in them. "You don't think less of me, do you?"

Now Faron was torn between anger and wrenching sorrow, for the Elf he knew would never doubt him thus and that Legolas did made it all too clear that the Elf he knew was irreparably altered. He ground out a frustrated and incoherent noise, pulling Legolas into a strong embrace, rubbing his back consolingly, startled to feel the small swell where the hidden child lay. Realisation dawned. "Muindor, I could never disparage you for that. It took great courage to fight off the grief and open your heart to this foreign Elf Lord, all for Galbreth's sake. It cannot have been easy."

Legolas sighed, much relieved to hear this, and withdrew from the comforting arms. "You have no idea," he remarked, a brisk shake of his head and a grim smile calling to mind for Faron his former, imperious self. "He was such a stuffy, arrogant old legend!"

Faron laughed. "I can imagine, for to me he still is that."

"No, no, you can't realise. He was disdainful and so lofty he thought himself level with the likes of Fingolfin. Compared to then, he is a regular, normal, fun-loving Elf such that you and I would befriend."

Faron quirked an incredulous brow. "Sounds like someone else we know," he hinted, wondering if Legolas could see himself a little better now.

"Who, Fennas? Aye, Elrond and Erestor behave much like the Elders of our folk." Legolas resumed walking, turning about and heading back toward the Last Homely House.

"Well, that is not the name I had in my thoughts, but no matter," Faron was grin in bemusement but decided not to ridicule his friend, considering the pregnancy made Legolas overly sensitive. He noted their course and frowned. "Are we not going hunting? Is there something you've forgotten?"

"We are, but I have to do something first and I'll need your help," answered Legolas. "Elrond is trying to hide the Council's decision from me and I must see it."

"Then why not just tell him so," Faron counselled.

"He's trying to protect me," explained Legolas. "No need for him to worry about my reaction to the news; I can deal with it and he need never know. Besides, if it is really terrible I might be able to mitigate the harm by talking with Fennas. I don't want the past to place too great a burden on Imladris' citizens."

"Legolas, this is not a wise course. Elrond is your mate and you should simply tell him that you want to read the decree."

"Well, shouldn't he have told me about it? He's trying to keep things from me that directly impact me and our child."

"Aye, that I won't deny, but you said he only hopes to spare you worry. It makes no sense to compound his mistake by making it yourself."

Legolas halted and confronted his friend, arms crossed over his chest in stern remonstrance. "Faron, are you with me or not?" he demanded.
"I am with you," answered the woodland archer moodily, "but I still misgive this plan. It isn't healthy for one mate to plot against the other."

"Thank you for those words of wisdom. Coming from you, who has no mate, the advice is so much more profound."

Faron merely rolled his eyes to this and followed, no doubt in his mind that the endeavour was ill-fated.

In no time the pair reached the tall cedar beside the house and scaled it to the open balcony, keeping low and skirting around the furniture as they scanned the study for Elrond's presence. Legolas grinned and slipped inside, straightening as he moved to the desk. His pleased expression transformed into one of aggravation as he shuffled through the remaining plans and papers. "It is not here," he announced. "Elrond has taken it with him."

"Well, you'll have to wait until you see him later and confront him then. Let's go, Legolas, the day advances."

"Nay, I mean to get hold of that decree. He must have taken it to his office. That can only mean he plans to have Erestor look into it." Legolas chewed his lower lip thoughtfully, trying to figure out a way to seize the document. "If I get them busy doing something else, you could steal the paper and take it to my poplar tree. Then I could follow and read it at my ease," he suggested.

"Legolas, let it go," pleaded Faron.

"I would hate to have to remind you that I am both a Prince of Greenwood and a Lord of Imladris, while you, dear cousin…"


Legolas flashed a rather smug smile and returned to the balcony, dropping to the garden below once more. Faron joined him and together they shrank into the shadows crowding beneath the shrubs and hedges and trees growing near the walls of the mansion. Legolas led them around the angled perimeter until he reached the windows of Elrond’s office. He listened keenly yet no voices issued from within. Carefully he lifted his eyes to peer above the sash and scrutinised the room. Crouching back beside Faron he shared his puzzlement. "Empty. Where can he be?"

"I know not, but is the decree there?"

"Impossible to tell from this distance though there is a substantial pile of parchments and such on the desk."

"Then let's go in and investigate. The sooner we get this over with the sooner we'll be out in the woods," insisted Faron. Having been coerced into complicity he was eager to conclude the adventure and relieved to find no witnesses to their prying and spying. At least, none so far. He followed Legolas through the window and watched as his cousin hurried to lock the door. "If we are discovered, you are to make the explanations, my Liege, and don't even think about laying the blame on my shoulders."

"What nonsense!" scoffed Legolas. "This is my home, too. No one would dare challenge my right to snoop… I mean, investigate. Or rather, visit my mate's office and…"
"Snoop," corrected Faron darkly.

The friends glared at one another a few seconds but then Legolas shrugged and turned to the desk, eagerly sorting through the accumulated papers. He paused, smiling with happy pride as his hands found the plans he and Elrond had chosen. This he shyly held forth to Faron.

At first, the warrior was inclined to grumble, for he'd already had to endure Lord Elrond's enthusiastic bragging over the abode. One look into Legolas' bashful, hopeful eyes converted him and he took the drawing with a smile. "'Tis a fine dwelling, muindor. Well done."

"Truly? I haven't shown it to Ada and Nana yet. You know I refused to pay attention when it came to instruction about the responsibilities of being a life-bearer. I need them to understand that I take this very seriously. Do you think they'll approve?"

"Of course they will! How can you doubt that? They still love you, even though this is hardly the fate they would have chosen for you." Faron felt his gut constrict, instantly remorseful upon seeing Legolas cringe at this unpleasant reminder. "Not that there's anything wrong with Lord Elrond. I mean, he's a noble and worthy Elf."

"Even if he is Noldorin and the very person responsible for Aras' bitter grief? Not to mention my utter debasement, even to the shame and embarrassment of our entire House."

"Saes, Legolas, that isn't what I said."

"But it is what you meant."

Now unbeknownst to these two life-long friends, the very Elf they were discussing was in fact no more than a stone's throw from them and quite close enough to hear every word they spoke.

Elrond, having waited as long as he could for Erestor to appear, had decided to continue his search for the missing scroll of genealogy. To whit, he was presently inside the storage closet attached to his office, a place wherein he filed away his work once it was completed, believing the notes and accounts and minutes of the various meetings and councils essential to corroboration of the ongoing history of Imladris. This compartment was less a closet than a variety of safe, one which held the Elven Lord's monetary resources as well as historical documents. It opened at either end, connecting his office of state with the small, private library that housed some of elvendom's rarest and most important works of literature, art, and history going back to the earliest days even prior to the First Age. The room was not obvious, the entrance covered over by a fine tapestry on either side and there was no reason for Legolas or Faron to give it a second look. Elrond was fairly certain his youthful mate had never ventured into the little chamber, though the Elven Lord had mentioned its existence once or twice.

Say what you will about the noble nature of the First-born, it is an established and documented trait of nearly every important leader that he incorporated a secure and obscure location to house those treasures and riches associated with his realm. Caves and caverns and vaults tended to be the prevailing methods utilised, evinced by the elaborate constructions of Nargothrond, Menegroth, Gondolin, and in present time Thranduil's underground lair. Galadriel and Celeborn were said to have eschewed the excessive accumulation of possessions, but this was a lie. Their stash was simply better hidden via the use of the magic Galadriel learned from Melian. Círdan was perhaps the only Elf Lord who really didn't care about the power associated with material objects, but I'm sure even he had a strong-room of some kind. Elrond, too, had need of such a cubby hole, but having no love for caves and no command of magic he'd invented this clever room, hiding it and its vital contents in
plain sight.

He was not the kind of Elven Lord who allotted a great deal of time for visits to the coffers of his estate. Keeping account of what came into and went out from the storage chamber was one of Erestor's many duties. Thus, if his cousin had taken the scroll, as Legolas had suggested, it made sense to think Erestor would return it to the safest place in Imladris. Elrond had entered in order to make a thorough search of the neatly organised but nonetheless packed chamber. As often happens when someone sets out to sort through a closet, he quickly became engrossed in examining and reminiscing over the various items he came across. Wood Elves being so very stealthy, he hadn't realised anyone was near until he'd heard Legolas' voice. At once he remembered the decree left on his cluttered desk and meant to storm into the room to stop them, but hearing their words induced him to linger awhile and snoop on the snoopers.

"Listen to me, muindor," Faron's voice was soft with compassion. "You cannot accept Aras' burden as your own. You have had enough to bear without that and no one would expect you to be able to heal his heart."

"Yet there can be no doubt that I am part of his grief, doubly so now as I am the one who brought about Galbreth's death."

"No, that is not true. Your parents have absolved you of that completely and Galbreth will be with us before a year's passing. Aras has no just cause for his anger toward you or Elrond. What happened all those years ago cannot be changed. I am certain Lord Elrond didn't even understand the situation; he had no knowledge of sylvans."

"It is true that he doesn't know but he is bothered by Aras' obvious hatred and wants to understand. How can I tell him that the cures he administered on the field of battle had such a deleterious effect?"

"If he asks you directly, would you refuse to enlighten him?"

There was silence as Legolas debated within himself. Finally he spoke, his words limned in uncertainty and confusion. "I don't know."

"Ai, Legolas, he is thousands of years old and does not need you to protect him from reality."

"Souls do not grow calluses, Faron," admonished Legolas. "He can feel hurt and grief as much as any Elf. You don't know all the sorrows he has borne already. How can I bring myself to give him more?"

"You underestimate his strength, nor have you taken into account the love and joy you've brought into his life. You're carrying his child, Legolas; there is no greater gift, no greater happiness."

A loud sigh punctuated that statement and then Legolas responded. "Let's not discuss it anymore. Come on, were we not going hunting today?"

"Aye, but what of the decree?"

"I don't want to think about any of that right now, Faron." Legolas could not clearly explain it, but his answer expressed a strange kind of trust with Elrond. Withholding knowledge such as he was, he no longer wished to ruin the Elven Lord's efforts to protect him from whatever truths resided within the Elders' proclamation.
"That is well," stated Faron. "I never wanted to get involved in this in the first place."

Just as when they'd entered, the sylvans' made no sound to betray their exit. Even had they done so, Elrond was too stunned to register any disturbance as he sat pondering the words he'd overheard. Perhaps it could be argued that he should have revealed his presence at once, but really, who among us could have resisted such a temptation? The desire to learn the story behind Aras' unreasonable contention proved too strong for the Elven Lord, yet in the end went unsatisfied. What was spoken raised more questions, pointing to some terrible catastrophe of which he, apparently, was the author.

Had his efforts at healing really produced some disastrous result? In vain Elrond tried to recall every herb he'd used on that dreadful day at Dagorlad. Legolas' bizarre reaction to cinnamon came at once to mind. If something similar had happened, how serious had the effect been? Sickness? Permanent impairment of the faculties? Death? Elrond shuddered and the next instant nearly shrieked as he felt the light touch of a hand on his shoulder.

He was on his feet and whirled to confront the offending person, an angry glower collecting over his forehead, lips already parting in preparation for uttering a harsh rebuke. The anger and the words both vanished from his mind as he beheld the Elf who had so successfully sneaked up on him. There, sitting cross-legged on the floor, each hand resting on a bony knee, sat an Elf, a very ancient Elf; one whom the Lord of Imladris had never seen before and certainly did not recognise.

The ellon's antiquity was heralded by his long, snow-white tresses, the steady, golden glow of his aura, and by his serene yet care-worn visage. Around his eyes and lips the fair skin was impressed with lines and creases as only those marked by extreme tragedy presented. Hardship and time together had applied their inexorable pressure, reshaping the external form as well as the heart and mind. Sorrow had wrought its wounds and left its scars, but the accumulated Ages had not left this Elf gaunt or frail or defeated. Strength and fortitude shone from eyes that were a soft, powdery blue and held within them a clarity that was almost frightening to behold. Here was an Elder who could see a soul in its entirety, every deed ever done and every thought ever harboured, good and bad, noble or base.

From such a one there could be no escape, no privacy, no hiding and yet he smiled, somehow lending the unrelenting inspection an overtone of compassionate commiseration that was rooted not in pity but in affinity and common purpose, as if he had already faced and come to terms with all these same contending facets of existence. Indeed, there was about him an attitude not of weighty and dour misery but rather a sombre sort of self-effacing humour. Whatever he might discover about a soul under his regard, it was information that would never be used in judgement or condemnation for he had already encountered like aspects within himself and had survived even that.

Beyond the mesmerising intensity of the pale blue eyes, everything else might as well go unremarked. Still, it was notable that he was wearing sylvan garb, though all his clothes were black instead of forest-hued. He kept his colourless hair bound in a manner that Elrond found inexplicably familiar, though in his current state of amazement he could not pin down the sense of recognition any more fully. Realising he was staring and his mouth was hanging open, Elrond blinked and licked his lips, trying to find words that were fitting to the occasion of encountering a strange Elf while eavesdropping on his young mate from within the confines of a secret vault. While he was seeking an alternative to 'who are you and what are you doing here' that sounded impressively imposing and yet respectful, for there was about this Elf that which commanded respect, the ellon spoke.

"Forgive me, but I could not resist viewing this. I know I should have asked first, but I am rather reclusive these days. I helped myself but as you see I am returning it safe and sound." He reached behind him, drew forth a long rolled parchment, and held it out to Elrond. "I believe this was
entrusted to your care, Master Elrond." His smile grew, watching the wide-eyed expression overtaking the noble Peredhel's features.

"Yes, but how came you to have it?" Elrond stuttered out, taking the document he had been searching for so diligently. "Where have you come from? Nay, it is obvious you arrived with Thranduil's folks, but why have you not..."

"Again I must beg forgiveness," the Elf stood and bowed deeply, his white hair sweeping the floor as he did so. "I followed your kinsman on his daily rounds and he led me here. As you might imagine, it was reconnaissance vital to the Elder's Council, of which I am Archon."

"You spied on my financial affairs? How dare you!" Elrond could not believe it. Much leeway and indulgence he'd granted to his guests, but this was too much. "I do not care what your position in Greenwood may be, such an act of deceitful subterfuge is inexcusable. Let me assure you, this will be taken up with your King. Not even the citizens of Imladris would be so bold!"

"Yet family may enter here without impunity?" queried the ancient. He stood tall, not an insignificant height, and his countenance exuded benevolence, his incisive eyes turned gentle and warm with an eager and fearful hope as they held Elrond's troubled grey ones. "Only an opportunity such as this could entice me from my quiet life beside Gladholduin: to set eyes upon you at last. I am your uncle, known to you only as Eluréd, yet that is not the name I would hear you speak, being more a title than anything else. Call me Elril instead and you will have given me much joy."

Elrond dropped the scroll in his shock and astounded wonder. "Muindor-en-Naneth?" he whispered, casting his sight over the tall Elf anew. Then he identified the source of similarity tickling the underside of his thoughts: the eyes and the hair were the same as Elwing's. "Save it lacks any colour now," he murmured aloud this curiosity.

"Aye, thellion, it has been this way since that dreadful day when Nana was cut down before my eyes. I should have died that day, would have perished for certain but the folk of Lenwë found us and rescued us, Gilorthad and me."

"Gilorthad? That is how Elurin is called?"

"Was; alas, he lives no more. We were given those names to keep our identities protected." He bent to retrieve the scroll and placed it in Elrond's hands. "Word reached the Green Elves that Maedhros was seeking the sons of Dior, for what purpose none knew but many could imagine. Our protectors believed he hoped to hold us hostage in exchange for the Silmaril with which Elwing escaped. It was at that time we were spirited across the Ered Luin and over countless leagues of wild lands. Once more we braved a fearsome range of peaks and then came upon our sylvan kin of Greenwood. With them we remained."

"I can scarcely believe this," Elrond breathed, a shake of his head accompanying the words.

Elril shrugged. "I know not what proofs I might offer. We were left with nothing of our parents, my brother and I. You must understand, we were so very young when the traumatising events occurred. Younger than you and Elros when a similar fate deflected your development. The surest way to prevent our fading was to distract us and we became immersed in our new life and forgot that once we were princes and had other names."

"Yet, there is one relic I have kept, just a small thing and not really evidence for it might have come from any one of the kindly Elves that salvaged us from a terrible doom." The ancient ellon held forth
his hand and upon its palm there appeared a small golden band, simple and unadorned without any jewel or carving. "Here is said to be the wedding band Nimloth wore upon her finger. I know not if that is true, but so my adoptive mother told me, hoping to keep my first life-giver's memory real, that I might remember something other than her throat gaping wide and pouring forth a fountain of blood upon me. If not for this ring I would have lost my mind, but with it I was able to imagine my Nana as she was before that day: happy and smiling, playing her harp for me and my brother. How the golden band flashed in the sunlight as she plucked the strings!"

He was quiet for a time, gazing down at the simple circle of golden metal, and when Elrond reached out to take it up his fingers almost closed over it in jealous protection. Then he laughed a bit and offered an apologetic smile as his nephew inspected it.

"No proof you say?" announced Elrond, eyeing his uncle askance. "You are joking, then. The inscription bears out your words, Elril." He handed the band back and watched as it somehow disappeared in the second of time it took for him to spare a look into the ancient Elda's face. Elril was nodding thoughtfully and regarding him with interest.

"If that is enough for you, so be it. Someone could have found the ring and not the children of the elleth who wore it. I could be someone hoping to take advantage of your fabled hospitality by pretending to be Eluréd. Just because the inscription says 'Dior ar Nimloth an Uir' does not mean I am the product of that eternal bond."

"Why are you saying this?" Elrond demanded, taken aback.

"Only to assure you that I have no means to prove my claim," shrugged the Elf, peering with that unsettling intensity into Elrond's face. "You must accept me on faith and the feeling in your soul. Am I Elwing's brother?"

The Elven Lord could only gape at him, overcome for a moment with anxious doubt. Yet why would this citizen of Greenwood choose to masquerade in such a manner? The words shared between Faron and Legolas rang a warning knell through his thoughts. Is this how Aras hopes to take his revenge? Then why would Elril introduce any uncertainties? Suddenly the ellon's face shifted into a bitter and frustrated scowl.

"Aras is a fool. The trouble with him is that he has never had the responsibility of leadership. So I warned his parents, for he was a spoiled eldest son, but they would not have him exposed to the dangers of the darkening woods to the south. The grudge he harbours against you is unjust," Elril expounded, yet how he knew this was the focus of the Elven Lord's thoughts he did not reveal.

"You know of this?" Elrond asked, thinking that was a stupid question yet unable to gather himself sufficiently to sound sagacious.

Elril didn't seem to notice, or didn't find it an unsuitable query. "Aye. I will tell you about it, if you ask it of me, for I confess there is likely nothing I would refuse you, be it in my power to supply it. I have many descendants and love them all, but you and yours are the only link I have to my Nana." His features transformed into a beatific smile. "You cannot know what joy I feel to see RhÅ«n'waew's youngest son linked to you. Though there are uncounted generations dividing us, I feel like his Minya'dar and have tried to fill that role, with Oropher dead so long before Legolas was conceived."

At this Elrond had to smile, yet there was sadness in his heart as well, for Aearen had not been able to share any of these vital connections with him "I'm pleased also," he managed and sighed.
"Legolas has told me so little and from the words I overheard just now he is not inclined to reveal the nature of Aras' displeasure. I wish he could confide in me," he said wistfully, a tiny edge of discontent colouring the remark.

"Aye, he's confused and fearful, unsure of himself and his place both among his people and yours," nodded Elril. "You will need to be patient with him for many years yet. I know it is difficult for you to see, but Legolas is still trying to overcome his grief and guilt. He is very young, after all is said and done, and wisdom is not an innate trait but one learned at the behest of life and fate.

"You, however, are not so young," the elder Elf's tone took on undeniable accents of admonishment. "I will not tell you what you should do, yet my opinion is that Legolas' fragile self-image would be bolstered by your confidence in his ability to handle the conditions of the Elders' decree with grace and dignity. He is of age and has been well trained in affairs of state, though he has a tendency to rebel against attending such duties. Be assured, he was raised with the knowledge that his unique physical attributes would be bartered for the betterment of his people. He was destined for an arranged marriage from the moment of birth."

Elrond's brows went up. True, he had thought the same thing, once he understood his mate's parentage was so noble, but as Legolas had never hinted at it, he'd assumed Aearen hadn't contemplated that future. Now, this notion was revealed to be insupportable. Of course he must have been aware. How had he felt about that, Elrond wondered, and had there ever been anyone for whom his youthful heart had throbbed?

"This, believe it or not, is the source of contention between him and Aras," Elril announced.

That gripped Elrond's attention immediately. "Aras!" he hissed, pronouncing the name as if it belonged to some diabolical enemy from which he longed to be delivered. "How can he hold his uncle's physical nature against him? Legolas had no power to cause such attributes to arise."

"Indeed, yet Aras is not entirely in his right mind. Sometimes, I wonder if he ever was." Elril frowned and shook his head briskly. "Nay, that is unjust. His reasoning is flawed but not unfounded. It is true enough that the majority of the royal family, as well as Greenwood's populace at large, prefers Legolas to Aras or any of his offspring. The very idea of another child to rival his seemed to drive Aras to fury."

"I'm sorry, but from a healer's perspective that does seem unstable," Elrond contradicted, doing his best to present his argument objectively. "Why would another child be a threat to him? First of all, the likelihood of Thranduil stepping down is non-existent and …"

"Saes," Elril raised his hand to halt this objection. "Greenwood has lost too many good people for me to bear hearing such a speech. We could lose Thranduil on any given day. He does not remain within the caverns of his stronghold, no matter that all his family and most of his subjects would wish it. He is part of the regular rotation of warriors. This is due to the lesser numbers we have to face an ever-increasing foe." The ancient Elf grimaced and abruptly turned, stalking out of the storage room in dark fury. "Bah! There's no need to detail our strife for you, Lord Elrond. I know Mithrandir keeps you well informed."

"I meant no disrespect, truly," Elrond followed quickly, suddenly ashamed of himself for playing the diplomat. This problem was obviously too close to the heart and soul of Greenwood to reduce it to mere political terms. Elril's hasty footsteps had led them into the private library and Elrond at once offered the agitated ancient the most comfortable chair and poured him a small glass of miruvor. His uncle accepted both and took several moments to savour the cordial and regain his composure.
"Nay," he finally sighed and sent Elrond a kinder smile. "I know you did not. Forgive me, we've had much to endure. Let me continue, for the way this works is not as you might imagine. No doubt you assume that Galbreth reborn will once more become the crowned prince upon achieving his majority. This is not the case. Aras will retain his status."

Elrond was unprepared for that titbit of knowledge and his surprise showed. "Yet even so, inheritance of power goes only to the first-born son. With Aras' place assured, his eldest male descendant would also be favoured, correct?"

"Aye, and that is exactly the problem," nodded Elril, his expression grim. "He has no such male descendant."

"None? Nay, he has numerous ellyn with him here. Some of them must be grandsons."

"Aye but they are not considered part of his bloodline." Elril announced. "His only child, a son, died at Dagarlad and left only two females as progeny. Those daughters married into various other families. None of their male offspring may ascend to the throne. According to the Law, in such a situation Legolas becomes the heir and inheritance shifts to his first-born male offspring, should it come to that."

In stunned silence Elrond attempted to assimilate this information. Even after learning Legolas' identity, he'd never contemplated that his beloved Aearen might be called upon to accept the leadership of Greenwood. Granted, the circumstances would have to be catastrophic, with not only Thranduil but Aras removed as well. His healing gift warned him that the crowned prince's grief threatened to hasten his departure from Arda. Setting aside his personal reasons for disliking Aras, the situation was anything but promising. How much longer could the suffering Elf persist before his choices reduced and he must sail or fade? Suddenly, given the Sindarin monarch's direct involvement in his realm's defence, the unthinkable became plausible. His heart quailed and he gripped the arms of his chair; Tinu Mín was also in line. The next thought he could not contain. "Legolas knows this?"

"Undoubtedly," confirmed Elril, "though it is something he aggressively refuses to discuss. It isn't that he has no love for his country or his people, but he cannot stomach any reference to losing his Ada."

"That I understand," remarked Elrond, "but not the depth of the enmity between Aras and Legolas. Is Aras incapable of fathering another son? Surely he could choose to reincarnate his first-born. Ah, unless…"

"Exactly," nodded Elril. "He is not incapable, as far as we know, but thwarted. His mate perished from grief after their son's death even as he rode in escort to take her over Sea. She is buried somewhere in Eriador that only Aras and his guard know. He should have gone on to the the Havens and sailed, for his spouse's parents migrated there long ago and only in Aman shall he meet his beloved again. But he did not choose that course."

"Instead, he returned home to invoke the ancient custom. Aras enlisted his wife-mate's sister to bear his son anew. This was no easy decision for either one, and the families, too, were distraught and aggrieved. This sister was also at Dagarlad and took wounds there as did so many. Alas, she never conceived any child with Aras, and before you ask let me say she would never deny so serious a request in that manner. If she could not stomach to bear his child, even less would she abide his touch and would have stated so, refusing his request. Nay, she was truly barren thereafter, unable to
"Then Aras begrudges Legolas' elevated position," mused Elrond. "Why did Thranduil and Rhûn'waew elect to produce another child, so to safeguard the lineage of Oropher? Couldn't one of Galbreth's remaining sons become heir, if Aras has no son to inherit the crown? Surely that ellon would be placed before Legolas in the line of ascent."

"No," Elril said simply. "Inheritance goes back to the King's other sons, if there are any. Had Legolas never been born, then Galbreth's second-eldest son would be next."

"Then Aras disparages Legolas so thoroughly based on the succession. That seems a poor reason for such strong enmity as I have witnessed."

"True. Aras is jealous of Legolas. Neither have I named the reason for which Legolas was produced. My beloved granddaughter, for so I consider Rhûn'waew, decided to create another child long after Dagorlad, as surely you understand. Your mate has seen only 76 summers." Elril smiled at Elrond's appreciation of this fact, and chuckled a bit. "Such an age difference," he teased. "She averred that her youngest son was ordained by the Powers to be, that he is vitally important to all the free peoples of Middle-earth, and stated that he would be foremost among not only the woodland folk but all Elves, no matter their race or lineage."

"Extraordinary!" Elrond breathed. "Legolas said she is deemed a seer among her people."

"So she is, and it is this that caused Aras to become so hostile. He took her words to heart; it felt like nothing less than betrayal, rejection. In his mind, Rhûn'waew had predicted his Adar's fall, and thus his as well, and seemed pleased about it. That is not so; she would never discard Galbreth, her first-born and one of the noblest Elves ever created. She loved him fiercely and Aras she adored for love of Galbreth. When he was lost to us, none grieved more deeply than she save Thranduil, unless it was Legolas himself."

"Legolas knows about this prophesy?" Elrond felt this was important.

"He does and has always dreamed it meant he would travel far amid the various Elven realms, acting as Thranduil's emissary, uniting those who had become distant under the stress of so many hardships, gathering his sundered kin-in-kind to achieve a common cause: destruction of Dol Guldur and the very Wraiths that inhabit it."

Elrond sucked in a noisy breath and nearly leaped from his seat. "He wished that?" He shook his head vehemently. "Nay, tell me Thranduil would not have permitted him to attempt such folly."

"He would not. Such was Legolas' dream, the kind of starry-eyed fantasy elflings invent and youth makes possible. To me he confided this, perhaps to Faron, but certainly to no others. In his heart of hearts, Legolas knew he was to be wed in order to obtain the kind of alliance his birth portended, and I believe I've mentioned he rebelled against this fate most strongly. What he does not know, and need now never come to understand, is that the marriage had been arranged and confirmed: he was to belong to Galdor in Mithlond. The journey that resulted in his union to you was meant to deliver him to his future husband."

All these revelations overwhelmed Elrond yet he leaned forward, hungry for more insight into his enigmatic Aearen. To think that all these complexities had moulded his beloved. In truth, many of his Wood Elf's obstinate ways, issues that had plagued and perplexed him for ten years without resolution, became more comprehensible. That he might never have met the sylvan archer gave his
soul an echoing lurch of panic, that he had come so close to driving him away, even so recently as a mere handful of days gone past, chilled his heart. Elrond resolved to do all in his power to make their life together fulfilling beyond a child's aspirations to gain renown through heroic deeds and acts of courage, sure in his soul that their love must eclipse the dramatic prophesy of the Winter Queen.

"Aras was openly pleased for Legolas to be sent away. He was weary of living in what he termed 'the slender, golden shadow'. I cannot express the foment of his rage upon the news of his Adar's death, all because Galbreth would not allow Legolas to face his new life alone." Elril sighed and finished his miruvor thoughtfully, eyeing his nephew closely. It was clear the renowned healer had for the moment forgotten about the reference to his part in Aras' animosity.

In many ways, the ancient Elf wished he could uphold Legolas' desire to keep Elrond ignorant of the truth, yet he realised this would be demeaning to the Elven Lord. It was one thing for Legolas, young, impetuous, and lacking experience, to hope to preserve his beloved from hurt and harm, yet quite another for Elril to withhold so important an aspect of the history underlying the distance between these two greatest of Elven domains. In the silence that elapsed, the two studied one another and something of an understanding passed between them. At last Elrond broke the quiet.

"There is more than this," he said. "My part in the contention hasn't yet been revealed. I find that I do ask you, uncle, for that which you might rather keep secret, that which assuredly Legolas does not want me to know."

"I hope you will make allowances for him," pleaded Elril. "His heart aches for you and he feels that is enough pain without seeing the hurt these facts must cause reflected in your eyes."

Elrond drew a sharp breath. "Did I really inflict harm to those I sought to heal?" he queried, the words uttered in a low and serious voice.

"You did, through no fault of your own," stated Elril, seating one of his strong hands upon his nephew's shoulder in commiseration and support. "It was caused by conditions none could have foreseen. Consider the long Ages the sylvan people dwelled beneath the trees of Greenwood. Even the Sindarin folk, newcomers compared to those who had resided beneath the canopy since before the rising of Ithil, have lived there long enough to acquire the resistance required if one is to survive the hazards of such a blighted land."

"You speak of the spiders?" The Elven Lord's mind was already following his uncle's reasoning and evaluating the possibility that cures in standard usage among folk west of Hithaeglir might be detrimental to sylvan physiology.

"That and the vile poisons used by the Orcs of Dol Guldur. We have developed immunity to many toxins that would fell others, yet apparently our isolation from the rest of elvendom has caused other weaknesses of which we were not aware. The potions you, and other healers also, administered as agents against these poisons left an ineradicable blight upon the survivors. Sterility."

Elrond gasped. "Nay!"

"Unfortunately, it is truth I speak. Male or female, any who were attended by the Noldorin healers became barren. The sheer numbers who fell wounded that day prohibited exclusive treatment by Greenwood's healers and surgeons. We were grateful for the aid, please know this. Even once the results became obvious, still most would not condemn those who had only hoped to give succour."

"Aras was not among those so generous," intoned Elrond, sick at heart to learn this dreadful news. "I
"It is honourable for you to say so," said Elril, "but I cannot excuse him thus. His grandparents make too many allowances and that enhanced Aras' character flaws. I still hold to my initial judgement: he has been spoiled and pampered by everyone, even more so after Dagorlad. Galbreth tried to compensate for the loss of Aras' wife and son."

"Elbereth! What a bitter tragedy this is. Were the herbs that caused it discovered?"

"Aye, eventually, but the damage is irreversible. Can you understand why Legolas did not want to reveal this to you?"

Elrond agreed in silence. Now he was torn, not knowing if he should admit to his newly acquired insight or play dumb. He sighed and shook his head. "I dread to confront him, for how shall I manage it without seeming to give censure?"

"That at least is simple," smiled Elril. "I will take the blame for the history lesson, as it really was my doing, as long as you sit down with Legolas and discuss that decree."

Elrond snorted out a self-deriding laugh. "Now I know you're really my Naneth's brother," he grinned. "She was a bargainer, too. No doubt you had this in mind from the start."

"I willingly admit it," said Elril, "though I would have made him tell you anyway."

Elrond rose and replenished the miruvor and then resumed his place, sipping thoughtfully as he contemplated the strange turn events had taken. After a time he resumed his questions. "Tell me of your brother. Did he meet his end at Dagorlad, also?"

"Nay, neither of us would go to war after what we witnessed as children, but he was gone long before that dire conflict erupted. He chose the mortal way, as did your brother. The race he fathered is strange, the folk a reclusive, distrusting lot, even as he was. Among the free peoples, they are called beornings."

The Lord of Imladris probably would have collapsed under the burden of this last revelation atop so much shocking news, had he not already been seated, and he almost dropped the glass in his hand. Not by any flight of imagination would he have arrived at this end for his long lost uncle and he could only stare, silent and grim as he listened to the tale of a grief too bitter to abide, an anger too consuming to endure for everlasting, a disgust with Elf-kind too profound to stomach remaining among the First-born. In the end, he wept for the uncle he never knew and thanked the Powers that Elros had not made his choice with such bitterness and despair.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Manadh Diorion: Ultimate Fate of Dior's Sons
Ernil Daur: Forest Prince
Brannon Neth: Young Lord
nosta mÄ;r: birth home - Quenya
Emil neth: young prince
Deleb! Thaur! Horrible! Abominable
Ai innas-en-Gond: Oh for Pete's sake!
Nirnaeth Arnoediad: Battle of Unnumbered Tears
Gladholduin: Laughing River
Elril: Bright Star
Gilorothad: Rising Star
thellion: sister-son-nephew
'Dior ar Nimloth an Uir: Dior and Nimloth Forever
Miny'adar: Grandfather
inuanu: female-male, an elf of dual gender
Iest Mín: Our Wish - pet name for Legolas used by his parents.
Rhûn'waew: East Wind
Aras: deer, stag
Fennas: Doorway
Tinu Mín: our little star

NOTE: OK folks, I don't know what you'll think of this. It's all AU, remember, and admittedly I have played havoc with the fate of the Lost Twins of Doriath. It occurred to me that the descendants of Beren and Luthien must have been given the same choice of fate as Elrond and his offspring, for Beren and Luthien were granted this right by the Powers, who returned them to live again upon Middle-earth, apparently both as mortals. Nothing is said if this is true, but I feel Dior was also offered that choice and in accepting to rule in Doriath after Thingol's death, indicated he counted himself among the Elves. Elwing's fate we know, that she chose the First-born for herself and for Eärendil. Now I say the Lost Twins, her brothers, would have to face this decision also, if they lived.

There's no indication in any of Tolkien's writing that the beornings had any Elven blood, but they were certainly strange and magical and alone among the people of Middle-earth had the ability to change shape. Only the Powers and the Maiar are described as being able to take on and put off physical form at will, and so I am reasoning that such an ability might come down through Melian, Dior's grandmother. Well it's no doubt a strange take on these characters. It isn't all sad but neither could I make it all happy.

I know I have not explained why Eluréd (Elril) never attempted to contact his nephew in Imladris, but this is enough for now. We can learn the rest when Arwen learns what has come to pass. Yes, I know by rights she should be here by now and I have left her in the background, so I will try to devote some time to her and the Twins next time.

Beyond that, this chapter finally reveals what Aras' problem with Legolas is, and as I said his antagonism is really not justified, no matter how tragic his life has been to date. Now that Elrond knows the truth, he will try to be more understanding, but his efforts will be in vain and the two will have a confrontation that results in Aras' removal from the valley for once and all. I hope the convoluted explanation of the laws governing who can become the king of Greenwood make sense. At least I hope it sounds not too unreasonable. I am guessing most folks are surprised to find out that Legolas and his babe are closer to the throne than I have led them to believe. I was not deliberately being obscure; I simply hadn't worked out the whole fiasco in my head yet. The decision was made while I wrote it out, took a number of revisions, and still this seemed the most believable scenario, to me at least. Feel free to disagree and if I made any errors in consistency please don't hesitate to point them out :)}
Last but not least, we get to see Legolas interact with real friends, both old and new, and I hope that gives everyone a warm feeling that things are going to be all right for him. He is loved and no longer isolated.

As always, my deepest thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!

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NOTE: remember as you read this chapter that italics always indicate mental thoughts and communications. That might make the latter half of the chapter easier to follow :)

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Late in the Night ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Elrond stumbled for perhaps the third time in as many hours, stifling a profane oath as he grappled with the current provocateur to inhibit his progress: an inordinately wild and rampant blackberry bramble that for some inexplicable reason was skewed across his path when elvish senses had indicated the way to be clear just about two strides back. The Lord of the Vale had long since lost patience, both furious and frustrated to be put through such trials all for the dubious privilege of attending one of King Thranduil's lavish, famous Merith Di'ylf (Fêtes Beneath the Branches). Renowned among the woodland people, both elf-kind and human, possibly known to the Beornings between the Carrock and the Gladden meres, and mayhap attended by folk from Laketown upon Long Lake in Erebor, but unimagined and unheard of in fair Imladris unless as the butt of some crude joke about savage, superstitious sylvans and their bizarre, barbaric rituals.

I haven't thought about them like that in many days. Elrond reminded himself and certainly could never picture Thranduil and elegant, majestically beautiful Rhûn'waew as primitive troglodytes.

They had tendered the invitation to the midnight gathering at the noon meal, where Elrond sat at table with his soon-to-be law parents, Galion the butler, Fennas the Elder, Erestor, Glorfindel, Lindir, and Elrıl Diorion. Of course the ancient Elf and his history had to be explained to the Imladrians and this occupied the diners' attention for a time. The famous healer was quite subdued and sorrowful through it all, weighed down by guilt over the effect his attempts to give aid had rendered among the sylvan people. Rhûn'waew noticed at once and with Elrıl openly in attendance she guessed the reason, incorrectly, but her concern was genuine. A swift glance at her husband was all the communication the couple required; Thranduil announced his plans for the night, collecting everyone's promise to attend while promising to banish the ill-feeling of his host once and for all.

That comment had prompted a few polite but uneasy chuckles from the Lord of Imladris and Elrond found it even less amusing now as he wrestled with the foliage. He broadened his stance to improve his balance and found that a vine had neatly wound about his ankle. "I have flint in my pocket," he hissed in ominous tones, tugging at the spines sunk deep in his fine silken robe. The threat produced no effect and his efforts proved futile. It did not help matters that the night was far advanced under a moonless sky and vision was sharply curtailed.

"Valar, now you are talking to the bushes." Erestor's scoffing words preceded him toward the subdued commotion of his kinsman's struggles. "If it was that simple any Elf would be able to command the trees. In your case, I'm not even sure Vilya's power would be sufficient to garner their obedience."

"Amusing, cousin, such witty and diverting repartee. Clever, erudite quips such as that are undoubtedly the reason you have such a lofty reputation as a formidable rhetorician," spat the Lord
of the Valley.

He was in no mood for jesting, having already bruised his shin on a stump that for some reason had not been perceptible to keen elvish sonar, snagged his braided hair in a branch that swooped low even though there was absolutely no breeze, causing his mithril circlet to become hopelessly crooked, and razed a tear from elbow to wrist in the sleeve of his satin tunic due to catching all his weight against the incredibly rough bark of a tree trunk whilst trying to prevent himself a nasty turn of the ankle when he'd found a great root wrapped around the toe of his boot. Now his cloak was thoroughly ensnared in the thorny stems and in vain he sought to disentangle himself.

"Fine, my sincere apologies for trying to show you the lighter side of the situation. If you would but have patience, Elrond, I could help you," commented Erestor, equally irritable for having undergone several similar episodes of floral warfare. He nonetheless trudged on toward the shadowed figure thrashing amid the undergrowth.

"Nay, Erestor, remain where you are or you'll be …" Elrond's caution came too late, for with the very next step his worthy seneschal tripped and gave a startled shout as he toppled headlong into the aggressive prickles.

Erestor's ensuing howl of agonised indignation followed and was much louder than Elrond's, being that the unfortunate advisor was now face down amid the dense brush, thorns stabbing him in numerous sensitive places. Somehow, knowing his cousin's fate was so much worse made Elrond feel so very much better. With a grim, teeth-baring grin, a blasphemous obscenity, and a mighty jerk, he yanked his cape free, rending the plush velvet fabric with a resounding rip that almost echoed in the dark and silent woods.

"These are my own lands," fumed the mighty Lore-master, directing his offended countenance to the surrounding trees. "This is Imladris, not Greenwood; there is no King here, only me, Lord Elrond Peredhel. It is unconscionable for me to be hindered from free travel within the boundaries of the realm I rule. Let me pass!"

Well, of course there was no answer; not from the trees at any rate, and not only because Elrond did not know how to communicate with them. The scruffy wilds of oak, ash, pine, and maple simply refused to acknowledge him. True, his shouted words were not comprehensible to creatures lacking ears, but green things are adept at reading mood and sensing changes in energy. The quiet woods had no difficulty understanding that their tenant (let us not forget, the valley and its trees existed long before Elrond came along and established Imladris) was displeased and wanted them to stop getting in the way. They had their instructions, however, and while it was true that Thranduil had no right to command them, Legolas certainly did. He had kindly asked his beloved lilliputian hinterland to make his family feel at home by respecting all their wishes as though he, the sylvan Lord of Imladris, had given them personally.

As far the green inhabitants of Rivendell were concerned, a Wood Elven Lord, even one by bond, who was also a Prince, albeit from a distant forest, outranked just about everyone in the valley. Thus, though Legolas knew nothing of the plot, he unwittingly laid its very foundation. The orders of the King of the Woodland Realm were being followed exactly as given: 'see to it Lord Elrond does not arrive either too quickly or too easily.'

In any case, Elrond was answered by Glorfindel, who could not suppress a light laugh at Erestor's predicament as he came abreast of his colleagues. "I dare say if you would not try to go so swiftly in the dark no mishaps would follow. What is the rush?"
"I'm not rushing," protested Elrond, lending a hand to free his cousin as he spoke, "but I see no reason to make the journey longer than it needs to be. Wandering the night through the less manicured areas of the valley's landscape is more to Legolas' taste than mine. I am eager to reach the Wood Elves' enclave."

"My thanks, mellon, and I heartily agree," added Erestor. "I would have thought they would provide us with a guide," He gave an irritated sigh, surveying the numerous rips and runs wrought upon his stately garb.

"I imagine the Wood Elves would think it offensive to offer you safe conduct through your own lands," said Lindir, passing through the brambles effortlessly. Indeed, the tangled twigs recoiled and retreated to spare his gauzy party clothes any chance to snag or tear. He stopped beside Erestor and chuckled, picking a few leaves from his hair and robes, but the sound was neither mocking nor scornful. "Meleth, you've a scratch on your cheek. Come, let me clean that up."

"It is nothing, Melethen," Erestor replied in honeyed tones as he eagerly stepped closer, "but I would be grateful for your assistance among this undergrowth. Is there no way you can let the green things know I mean no harm to the Wood Elves, that we were invited to this gala?"

Before an answer was attempted, Lindir leaned in to soothe his love with a sweet caress of lips and tongue. Glorfindel and Elrond shared an astonished look between them as these endearments and intimacies were exchanged. Just a day ago the two had been at such severe odds that if Erestor entered a room wherein Lindir happened to be, one or the other would leave it. The Balrog-slayer and the Lore-master broke into smirking grins as they returned their regard to the minstrel and the Chief Advisor.

"Aye, I'll try but my word is no match for a command from Legolas," Lindir was saying, doing his best to remedy the tattered condition of Erestor's formal clothes.

"Why would Aearen want to make me suffer so?" demanded Elrond, his amusement forgotten. "Nay, this seems more like something his kinfolk would initiate. Fennas and Aras come at once to mind."

"You're forgetting that time in the glade when I first met Legolas," reminded Lindir. "He had the trees set against you then."

"That was during a difficult period for us and we were arguing," said Elrond. "We are getting along much better these days."

This induced Erestor to emit a contentious snort. "Really? Then why haven't you told him about the Elder's decree?"

"I will as soon as he gets back from the hunt with Faron."

"When will that be?" queried Lindir. "It can't be a good idea to be parted from him very long."

"He'll be at the feast this evening," assured Elrond, "though at first he planned to be gone three days. We discussed it and I convinced him to return tonight. In truth, I think he would have done so anyway but it is better for the decision to come from me. He didn't want Faron to think of him as weak or needy. Apparently, for sylvan's it is acceptable, even commendable, to defer to one's mate over concerns such as these, so his warrior's pride was not wounded."
"Legolas likes it when you give him orders," Glorfindel snickered.

Erestor laughed aloud. "You would know. For someone living so far from the Last Homely House, you manage to arrive at particularly opportune moments."

"Not amusing," Elrond scolded. "I think we should move on. Lindir, try to reason with the trees."

The others were quiet as he stepped aside to commune with the nearest oak, but after only a very short time the minstrel gave an discouraged sigh and removed his palms from the bark. "They will not heed me," he admitted with no small shame.

"Hah! You're out of favour with our woodland prince," jibed Glorfindel, "and the trees won't hear you until you make amends. Why haven't you done so? Could it be that you've been too busy repairing your relationship with Erestor?" he teased.

"Glorfindel, that isn't any of your business," the seneschal announced, "but if you must know, I am formally courting Lindir."

"Is this true?" Elrond gasped out, grinning with real joy to hear it. He was beyond pleased to hope the relationship could become more than a casual affair.

"I am proud to confirm it." Lindir tossed his head and plucked a series of coyly inviting notes upon the strings, sending Erestor a sidelong, glancing grin.

"Congratulations, mellon vell," enthused Glorfindel, reaching over to clap a hand upon the seneschal's shoulder. "Mayhap you'll be less unbearably testy and mercurial."

"I am neither of those things," frowned Erestor. "Exacting and particular, yes, but always in control."

"Really, cousin?" Elrond's tone was rife with ribald humour. "Always in control? If so you are missing out, I assure you."

Now it was Lindir's turn to laugh heartily and Erestor was glad for the dark that hid his scarlet blush. He stuttered through an inept denial that only served to reinforce the notion and provide further amusement for his fellows. His new lover came to his defence at last.

"Nay, we are equals now in all things, are we not Melethen?" crooned Lindir, passing his fingers over the seneschal's glossy black hair instead of the harp strings.

"Aye, though I can never equal your beauty, grace, and stamina, nor am I ashamed to admit it," answered Erestor to a chorus of knowing plaudits and guffaws. Then he became serious and pulled his minstrel closer. "I have undertaken to restore a most rare, most precious, most fragile jewel among gems."

"I'm glad there's no need for me to remind you of that fact," said Elrond, "or the care to exercise in the endeavour."

"Nay, none whatsoever," Erestor smiled. Rather than being angry to receive such a warning, he pulled Lindir's fingers from his hair, raising them to his lips to press a kiss upon them. "I am honoured to be given the chance to undertake this task and swear only death could cause me to fail."

"Let us not speak of such dread consequences," Lindir shivered. "This is to be a night of revelry."
"You know something of these Merith Di'ylf?" asked Glorfindel. "I did not realise you had ever travelled to Thranduil's court. You certainly never mentioned it."

"I haven't," replied the harper, "but beyond my happy reconciliation with Erestor, other things have commanded my attention. I felt it best to stay out of Legolas' sight and mind for a time and have been among the sylvan folk quite a bit, learning of the customs regarding the binding ceremony, practising with their musicians, making friends among my distant kin. Thus, these feasts were explained in detail."

"Legolas does not hold anything against you, mellonen," assured Elrond. "He's had other worries and has forgotten all about your alleged betrayal."

"I'm glad to hear it," smiled Lindir. "I'll speak to him tomorrow and offer my humble apologies, for at last I've something to present as a token of peace and friendship."

"What is it?" asked Erestor, "and were you able to gather that list for me?"

"What list?" Elrond wanted to know. "I am pleased you two are getting along so well but if you are plotting something I want to be informed before hand. I don't want anymore surprises for the time being. In fact, I think I'd be happy not to face anything unexpected until after Tinu Mín is born."

"Valar, when are you going to come up with a name?" Erestor deftly diverted the conversation, for the purpose of the list was, he'd just remembered, supposed to be a surprise as much for Elrond as for Legolas. "You can't keep calling him 'Our Little Star' forever."

"It is a sylvan tradition," expounded Lindir. "Custom demands that the child's true names not be spoken aloud until Arad Estol. This little one is going to have quite an impressive list of titles to get through when that day comes. We'll all wish we could still just call him Tinu Mín."

"No one is to call him Tinu Mín save Legolas and me," warned Elrond.

"Well, then what name should we use?" grumbled Erestor.

"We could call him Elrondion," suggested Glorfindel.

"Or Legolasion," giggled Lindir. "Lindi-dithen has a nice ring to it."

"No, no, it has to have the 'star' element in it," Erestor joined in. "What about El'aladh? Perhaps Galadhel sounds better or Lassel would do."

"Yes, I like Galadhel. Eleryndhor isn't bad, either," agreed Lindir.

"In that case, Eldaur is easier to say," posited the Balrog-slayer.

"This is not amusing," growled Elrond. "Calling my son 'Woodland Star', 'Tree Star', or 'Leaf Star' is unacceptable. Choosing a name is a very serious business for Wood Elves."

"Oh, I can tell," snickered Glorfindel. "Such lofty names for the royal family: 'Aras', 'Galbreth', 'Legolas', and Rhûn'waew' clearly indicate the esteemed and noble linage of these folk."

"Someone whose name is based solely on the colour of his hair should not be so quick to mock
"others," stated Elrond.

"That is hardly my fault," protested the abashed warrior.

"And as for you, Erestor, yours is an appellation that can be interpreted any number of ways without ever really establishing what it means."

"It was chosen to inspire a sense of menace and mystery," countered the seneschal with haughty resentment.

"Enough," soothed Lindir before Elrond could comment unfavourably on his assumed name. "We'll just call the babe Ernilen. He is Greenwood's youngest prince, after all, and Imladris' very first."

"You're forgetting Elladan and Elrohir," Erestor prompted gently.

"Nay, I'm not. They are not princes for Elrond is no king," explained the minstrel patiently.

"Shouldn't we move on?" groaned the exasperated Lord of Imladris.

To this they all agreed and the party resumed the march. Some of Lindir's pleas must have been received, or the trees had new instructions from the Woodland King, for the path was once again amenable to easy passage, or as amenable as undomesticated scrubland can be. There were no more mishaps and before long the four Elves could discern the faint beauty of sylvan voices singing amid the trees. There was as yet no other sign of the elusive Wood Elves but the sound made them all smile and they hurried in its general direction.

Thranduil's folk had chosen that northern most location furthest from the civilised boundaries of Elrond's estate and so far away from Imladris' fair city that it was impossible to glimpse the structures and streets, not even from the tops of the tallest trees. Here, the land rose abruptly in steep cliffs as Hithaeglir loomed so close it seemed one might ascend right to the High Pass from this point. Yet the craggy highlands held within them deep ravines, defiles, and hanging valleys with vistas of serene, if somewhat austere, beauty. In these veiled dells grew the evergreens and hearty hardwoods partial to a cooler climate and in one such vale the Wood Elves made their temporary homes, for the area most resembled the forest they'd left behind. Still, one would have to know what to look for to realise the land was inhabited by anything other than wild game. The four travellers slowed, pausing on the ridge above the shadowed canyon from which the singing arose, for the way down was treacherous and lacked any recognisable path. Even Lindir was expecting guards to present themselves and escort the guests the remaining distance.

"Elo!" cried Glorfindel, pointing to the right.

The others followed his finger and there, just visible amid the shadows collected between the trunks, was a faint, shimmering light. There was no doubt this was a fire of some sort and seemed to indicate the place of the feast. No sooner had they arrived at this notion than the flames blazed high as if in welcome. Now they could make out silhouetted fingers dancing around the orange light. Singing and laughter reached their ears and the four friends shared wide grins with one another, though the dark was so deep they almost had to imagine they could see them. All at once a fair voice called from afar, asking for Lindir to hurry and join them for his harp was silent and that was not pleasing to anyone present.

"Tolel, tolel!" he laughed and bolted away toward the bonfire, leaping over stones and dodging round trees, leaving his fellows behind.
"Wait, Melethen!" implored Erestor and started after him. He could see Lindir bounding through the woods, his figure diminishing as the distance increased, and just at the moment when he must surely have reached the sylvans all the lights went out. As if it had never been, the fire was extinguished. No smoke, no scent of smouldering wood, no lingering aroma of damp, doused kindling met his senses. The seneschal stopped in his tracks and stared blindly into the dark. "Lindir?"

"What is this devilry?" Glorfindel murmured in startlement. Now that the light was gone, the woods seemed even blacker than before.

"I know not," complained Elrond. Though he realised it must be a game of some kind, he shivered. The place had gone absolutely silent yet conversely was filled with an intimidating presence, like a thousand eyes watching him and weighing his worth. He frowned and squared his shoulders; these were still his lands. "King Thranduil will not permit Lindir to come to any harm. Let us keep moving; no doubt the fire will be re-lit."

"Aye, mayhap our eager singer trampled right through it," laughed Glorfindel, but there was a forced, uneasy quality to the merry sound.

Erestor said nothing but took the lead, moving steadily toward the place he'd last seen his lover. At least, he thought he was going the right way. After a few tense minutes, however, a new spark ignited and a yellow gleam grew in an entirely different location. The fire now seemed to the south of his position and much higher up on the walls of the secluded dale. As before, the bonfire grew until the wavering, gyrating shapes of dancing Elves could be glimpsed cavorting around it and the joyful notes of harps and flutes and drums drifted through the air. Laughter and song rose and swelled and rolled across the dark expanse between him and the light, and Erestor was sure he could make out Lindir's fair voice amid the others, calling for him. With a smile he altered his course and set forth at a quicker pace.

"Valar, you gave my heart a chill, Meleth," he laughed, breaking into a run as he traversed the rugged terrain. The path didn't seem so hard to follow anymore despite the steep incline. Several shadowed and featureless heads turned at his approach and he was vaguely aware of Elrond stumbling along far behind him, begging him to slow down and wait. He saw no reason to follow that command, however, for just then he spied Lindir across the flames. Erestor raced forward and with a mighty leap cleared the last barrier of brambles, landing right beside the fire. The very instant his feet felt the ground, every tongue, every spark, every flickering ember died.

"Ai! Where is he now, Glorfindel?" called Elrond, confused and disoriented by the abrupt loss of light. He floundered to a halt and waited for his Master-at-Arms to join him.

"Elrond, over here," cried the Balrog-slayer, looking over his shoulder to the point where he thought he'd last spied his Lord. A faint rustling arose.

"Where?" Elrond shouted.

"Here! Over here!"

"I can't see you, mellon, keep talking." Slowly he started toward the disembodied voice.

"This way!" someone called and it did sound like it might be Glorfindel, though the words were surely too far away to be his and skewed off to the east this time.
"Over here, Elrond," spoke another Elf, this time much closer so that the Lord of the valley fairly whirled on his heels, hands groping the empty black air in vain.

"Glorfindel?" he yelled.

"Aye, here, mellon."

That was definitely him yet surely they could not have become separated by so much land in so short a span. When Elrond turned he could see the re-born warrior outlined against the blazing glare of another distant fire ring, arm uplifted in invitation.

"Wait there, I am on the move." He trotted quickly toward the Balrog-slayer, grimacing and picking up speed as he noticed the distance between them increasing instead of lessening. "No, Glorfindel, stand and wait for me there!" he cried, an edge of panic rippling through the syllables. The Wood Elves were systematically dividing their guests one from another, for what purpose he could not divine. Whatever that purpose was, Elrond did not want to be left alone in the darkened woods.

"Saes, daro!"

The plea was denied. Glorfindel stepped full into the light and turned to Elrond, revealing that he was not the Balrog-slayer at all but one of Legolas' Sindarin cousins. The next second, every hint of illumination disappeared and all sound ceased. Elrond froze where he was, heart pounding and lungs heaving more from dread than the night's exertions. "Glorfindel? Can you hear me, mellon?" The only reply was his own echo tripping over the cliffs in mocking parody, his fear bluntly apparent.

Elrond remained motionless staring into the endless dark. He was of course under the trees by now and not even the faint glimmer of star-shine gave him relief from the perpetual gloom. The remnant impression of colour left upon his retinas by the firelight only made it worse, distracting him from attuning to other stimuli until the last blob of garish green and yellow faded. Once it did, he was reassured; this was not nearly so dark as the cave into which he and Elros had fled when they were children trying to escape capture by the sons of Feänaro. Compared to that, this was not darkness at all and he could bear it easily. He drew and released a deep breath to calm his heart and in that same instant Aearen's call began chiming through his soul. Real relief swept away the last lingering doubts and fears. Why should he be afraid? He'd been invited to the festivities; indeed, the whole celebration was in his honour. He shook his head, hands upon his hips, and laughed aloud at his childish response to this harmless jest.

"I'm a bit beyond the age for a round of Hide and Seek," he announced to the silence. "I'm not moving a mite until I know where I'm going and how to get there."

Nothing returned and his smile slipped just a little. He couldn't feel his mate's call any longer, which was not surprising as Legolas had only sent it forth as a sign that he would soon be returning from the hunt. The revered healer had no means to send a call himself, had no way to let his beloved know this was not a pleasant situation and he really, truly wanted him there as fast as possible. Aearen had no reason to imagine, nor any way to learn, that something was wrong. Or does he? Elrond shook his head. No, Legolas could not suspect. The idea that the joke might be something else entirely would not remain in his subconscious where it had been growing and gaining weight. There was ample reason for Legolas' kin to be angry and it made sense that they might wait until the young prince was otherwise engaged before acting on it.

Which left Elrond with the unnerving little problem of figuring out what might come next. Was it a prank or was it something more? His cohorts had vanished and while he couldn't be certain surely the woodland King wouldn't permit them to be injured or forcefully detained. He wondered briefly if
they were part of the plot but discarded that idea. Lindir might go along but he couldn't imagine Erestor and Glorfindel approving such pointless and irritating subterfuge. What should he do? It wasn't in him to cower back and just wait for his adversaries to attack. Not that Thranduil's people would actually seek to hunt him down, but his senses were all on high alert. No, these were his lands; he was Lord here. He would move forward in the direction of the last fire and hope the Wood Elves would reveal themselves. As soon as he encountered one, he would insist on being taken to the King.

With a grim smile he strode forward, pleased to have a plan to follow even if it was so loosely formulated. Even on that dreadful day so long ago, he and Elros had made a plan and carried it out, waiting to ambush whoever came through the opening of the cavern. Aye, you're bold enough when you have someone to depend on. In spite of himself, Elrond drew a sharp breath and halted, heart lurching. He didn't like that voice; he didn't like the Elf who used it, and he especially didn't like remembering what had initially brought this alter-ego forth. He shook himself and started moving, determined to have action; action enough to silence that voice.

Having no clear notion of which way to go, nor any desire to stop and ponder it, his feet somehow brought him within smelling distance of one of the defunct bonfires. Elrond made for it quickly, reaching the broad ring of stones surrounding the fire pit by tripping on them and falling into the charred remains of the brief blaze. He gave an abbreviated cry but landed unharmed amid a warm, soft cloud of white fluffy ash. He pushed to hands and knees and coughed, then spat the acrid grit from his mouth, sneezing to clear the residue that sneaked up his nose. The odour was strong and spicy, almost like myrrh, and he gagged a little, scrambling to get out of the lingering fumes. No sooner had he clambered from the hole than his boot toed the smooth, cylindrical shape of a bottle. With a melodic clink it struck the stones, telling him it was not empty. Elrond bent to pick it up and found it corked, though no sealed. Clearly, the party had already started.

Mayhap we are too late and it's over. He chuckled at this thought, knowing it to be ridiculous, and decided he was thirsty enough to sample the sylvan brew. The stopper came free easily and he sniffed the contents; a pleasingly fruity aroma met his nostrils and he took a tentative sip. It was sweet mead. Too sweet, but what can they know of making mead? Still, it is better than most I've tasted. Elrond grinned and took a larger swallow, wiping his mouth upon his tattered sleeve as he moved cautiously around the clearing to see what else he might discover. He wasn't sure why, but the darkness was less inky now and he hoped to pick up the trail of at least one of his missing friends. Carefully he inched along the perimeter of the hollow, seeking any sign of the Elves who had made the fire and then so hastily doused it.

That made him curious, for the light had become extremely bright so quickly and yet just as rapidly vanished. Ever the Lore-master in search of knowledge, Elrond returned to the pit and hopped back in, raising another cloud of the fine, powdery residue. Again he choked and sneezed and this time the particles made his eyes water, but he persevered. Taking a pinch between finger and thumb, he rubbed the ash into his skin, noting the texture to be smooth and slightly oily. He touched his tongue to the smeared film to determine what manner of wood or plant had been used to produce the pyrotechnic effect, detecting a distinctly metallic quality to the substance. His brows went up; this was a type of woodcraft he had never heard of and he wondered how it came to be known among the sylvans and for what purpose they employed it. He coughed again and hurried from the cloying motes, deciding he could ponder the question just as easily while looking for clues.

Yet there was nothing more to discover. Elrond circled the glade twice, remembering to check in the limbs above his head, hoping to spot a set of gleaming elven eyes, but there was nothing to note. He stood and tried to orient himself but couldn't determine from which direction he'd entered. He shrugged and set off at random, trusting his instincts to guide him correctly. Sooner or later, he would
spot another fire, or a sylvan archer would leap from the trees to bar his way, or he would happen upon Erestor caught in another tangle of vines. His momentary panic had dissipated and left behind an almost exultant sense of certainty and fortitude. He remembered he was still holding the bottle and took another swallow from it, deciding the flavour was not bad at all, really. He began to hum as he tramped along, unconsciously sounding an old marching chant from his warrior days in Lindon.

Time passed; it had to do so for such is the way of things upon Arda, yet Elrond could not determine how much of it had transpired since he'd left the empty clearing. Had he gone along way or a short? He stopped humming, thinking he heard voices singing, and frowned when he realised it was only his echo. That meant he was close to the valley walls again. Could he have traversed the whole gorge already? Surely the Wood Elves would have stopped him before now, were that true. He was thirsty and took another drink, starting forward more slowly, watching the shadows intently for any sign of where he was or what direction he was heading. The trees began to thin and he hurried, breaking through the undergrowth into another glade. *No, not another clearing, the same one.* He'd made no progress at all, merely journeyed in a loop that deposited him back in the abandoned cove. With a weary sigh he kicked at the dirt, staying well back from the cold fire ring and its peculiar ashes.

Disconsolate and suddenly feeling tired, he sat down upon a fallen log to mull over his options. Another swallow from the bottle soothed his throat, in which the urge to cough was already growing. He gazed aimlessly around the space, trying to understand what was going on but failed to see anything that was even remotely helpful.

*See? You're incapable of seeing, even in the full light of day. You've had a sylvan prince in your keeping for ten years and more. Did you ever mark his noble mien? Nay, you saw only a humble archer to keep for your pleasure and amusement.*

Elrond startled and shook his head. "That isn't true. I didn't intend to use him." He swallowed hard and took another swig of the syrupy concoction, which for all its saccharine character possessed a substantial percentage of alcohol. Already he felt the pleasing hum as the potent drink worked into his thoughts. No answering retort sounded through his brain and he took that as a good sign, giving the bottle an appraising shake to judge the level of liquid left. *Enough to drive away the ugly thoughts.*

He'd not had to deal with this part of his mind since Celebrian left for Aman and preferred not to if at all possible. The voice was his but overprinted with the harsh inflections and abrasive observations particular to Maedhros. The eldest son of Feänaro was relentlessly critical and permitted no rationalising, no justifications. *I am Maedhros son of Feänor son of Finwë. I have sworn the Oath and by it I am bound, no matter what my heart may wish. It was my choice to make and no other's. I shall suffer whatever ends that choice called forth.* No apologies, plenty of regrets, uncounted acts of bravery, kindness, and selfless compassion, through it all Maedhros would not permit anything or anyone to negate his responsibility. He expected his wards to learn and practice the same resolve.

Elrond shuddered; he truly despised remembering that cold, soulless stare the ancient Noldorin Prince was wont to train upon him whenever he'd done something foolish or wilful or spiteful. He sipped the mead, eager to promote the sort of inebriation that would fend off such unpleasant images, and licked his lips, noting how tart the aftertaste was once the sweetness faded. He sincerely hoped he would soon be found by the Wood Elves and wondered what was taking so long; they'd prepared new fires for Erestor and Glorfindel immediately.

*They are testing you and they will learn the truth: you cannot stand alone. You always lean on the strength of others: your parents, your brother, your cousin, Lindir, Gil-galad, Glorfindel. Even...*
"No!" Elrond shouted hoarsely, leaping to his feet and turning as though the voice came from outside, taunting him from the trees instead of from inside his own mind. He stumbled over the log and almost fell over, sat down hard upon it to regain his equilibrium. Was it within or was it without? Why must he relive all this now? A mirthless chuckle rattled through his brain.

Celebrian, you used her, too.

Maybe so that you can 'see' there is no shame in admitting you need Aearen. Maybe he can feel your worry and your dread and will comfort you.

Elrond blinked; the idea stunned him. Why shouldn't he openly rely on Legolas? They were mates; they had conceived a child together; their souls were so enmeshed neither could identify where one ended and the other began. He relaxed, tension draining out of him through the soles of his boots, and he smiled. Tentatively, he rose, swallowing another mouthful of mead, and took a step forward, then another, surer, followed by a third, more confident, and finally he was striding through darkness beneath the towering bolls with as much ease as anyone unused to such activity could do.

He felt renewed; there was nothing humiliating about owning his dependence upon Aearen. Their connection was vital, enriching. He had changed for the better since the unexpected bonding. They needed each other, loved each other. Legolas would never let anything happen to him, just as he would never permit any harm to befall his young mate.

Except you didn't protect him at all. You left him open to mockery and derision, lewd jests and lascivious offers; reviled, ridiculed, and rejected. You gave your subjects permission to abuse Aearen, even to the point of poison.

For the second time Elrond gasped, clutching at the nearest trunk to prevent collapsing upon the ground, breath rushing in and out, blood pounding through his veins, dizzy and nauseated. The dull thump as the bottle hit the dirt seemed muffled and far away. He squeezed his eyes shut, not that he could perceive much with them open, but suddenly he was seized with the irrational idea that Maedhros might suddenly pop out from behind the next tree and continue the derisive tongue-lashing in person. He didn't want to see those keen grey eyes boring into his with loathing and contempt, as surely they would for that accusation was nothing less than the bald, bare truth.

Nothing happened. How long he stood there he didn't know nor even pause to wonder. His eyes cracked open and eventually he started moving again, one leaden foot plopping down unsteadily after the other, guiding himself hand over hand, tree by tree through the woods. The bolls thinned and he came upon another clearing, this one filled with a faint and fragrant haze, the remnant of yet another fire.

Why didn't I see it burning?

He'd heard no song or music either but he couldn't focus on these external stimuli due to the encompassing sorrow generated by the mental ones. He staggered toward the centre of the glade and slumped in a heap atop a flat stone. Elrond's head began to hurt and he cradled it in his hands, loosing a low moan as he stewed over the past.

He had owned his fault before now and promised, within the unrelenting censure of his conscience and before his entire governing Assembly, to make amends and proclaim his heart's true feelings, but in his heart he knew that wasn't enough. That had been too easy, too pat. It was one thing to admit the crime while surrounded by friends and family and excused by Legolas' forgiving heart, and quite another to face the ugly facts here, alone in the dark, all the trappings of rank and power obscured, every hint of deference and respect absent. The trees cared not about his lofty status or his exalted lineage.

Legolas doesn't care about that either.
The blank, vacant blackness of the night swallowed him up until he could not see himself anymore. The loss of the internal image shocked and terrified him. Elrond scrambled up to his feet and took off running, hoping his instinct would guide him back to the Last Homely House. He needed to get back to the safety of his haven where he was revered, respected, loved. If he waited, a new image would move into his mind and he did not want to acknowledge that one. Quickly! Quickly! He must return to the place where he knew who he was before…

Before you have to see yourself as you really are?

That cold, brutal, insolent voice boomed through his mind, mocking laughter in it. His voice? Elros' voice? Maedhros? Lindir? Legolas?

"Aearen! Legolas, beloved, no, please don't," Elrond sobbed out, barely coherent incapable of surprise over the tears draining from his eyes. He only knew he never wanted Legolas to see what he really was: a selfish, miserable, hopeless failure. All the pomp and grandeur, the trimmings and trappings of wealth and culture, the ostentatious show of nobility and wisdom, the brazen and unrepentant bigotry and bias, all of it was just a huge, elaborately crafted distraction, a gaudy shield behind which he could hide the truth. Everything he'd ever done or hoped to do had gone horribly, irrevocably wrong.

His foot caught on something, a root or a rock he couldn't determine, and sent him pell mell into the dirt again. This time he stayed there, openly sobbing and twitching in misery, desperate to prevent hearing these things spoken, unable to avoid listening when they were. If he hadn't convinced Elros to hide in the cave, they could've escaped. Would have escaped.

The tones were feminine now and this startled Elrond into abrupt silence, every nerve strained and every muscles taut. He lifted his head slowly, gazing about in wide-eyed dread. "Nana?" he whispered. No one answered and he exhaled a great breath of relief. If she answered, he would lose his mind; he was sure of it. He loved her but could not bear the thought of facing her again. What could he say? How could he explain?

If only he'd been stronger, Elros would have chosen the life of the First-born. Your constant need for reassurance wore him down. He was so busy comforting you that he never had means to express his own grief. He was fading; that's why he chose the Gift of Men.

The voice was masculine again; one he did not recognise. He was both grateful and terrified, for he couldn't remember the sound of his Adar's voice anymore and the idea that it might be Eärendil taking him to task so bitterly filled him with fear. At once the pair spoke together:

"We are not your parents, but are still much interested, and disappointed, in what you have become, Elrond Peredhel."

"It wasn't my fault; I was a child!" he wailed. "They left me, abandoned us. Why did they do that?"

He lifted his head and stared about him in the dark but could see nothing to indicate the source of these voices. "Who are you?"

"Is this your answer to every error, that you were orphaned?"

"Abandoned, not orphaned! It isn't the same! Ask Erestor; his parents died but they died protecting him. At least he knows they loved him!" screeched Elrond, pounding the dirt with his balled fists.
Indeed, let us speak of Erestor. Your cousin denied his own name, electing to assume a cold and arrogant manner to hide his wounded heart. You never even asked him what happened to his parents, save once. In all these years, why have you never let him talk to you? You treat him like a servant; is it any wonder he bullies everyone else?

"Nay, nay, I don't want to wound him by making him remember. He does the same for me in never bringing up the death of Gil-galad."

Of course you disappointed Gil-galad, too. Standard-bearer? That was the best rank you could attain? Aye, for Elros was the brave and bold general, not you. It was Elros who became a mighty king and fathered a race of kingly men. Say what you will of Isildur, it was Elendil who faced down Sauron, not you.

"Spare me!" Elrond groaned aloud but the faceless voices would not oblige. They must be Valar, he decided, for who else could know his hidden flaws so well?

On and on the trial went, one event after another paraded through his memory along with acidic commentary filled with loathing and contempt. Elrond permitted Orcs to overrun Eriador and Eregion and if not for a fleet of Numenoreans Sauron's forces would have hunted them all down to the very last Elf and Elf-friend. The Last Alliance? Where was his skill in diplomacy and state-craft then? Arrogant pride had made him balk at Oropher's demands. In retrospect, was it truly so terrible for the Sindarin King to expect to command his own people in battle? Would it have hurt to acknowledge him as Gil-galad's equal along with Amroth and Celeborn? How many hundreds had died because of that failure? Of course, now he knew that was not the last injury: any silvan he'd treated for poison was made sterile by his cures.

Those were not even the worst of his failings. What became of Celebrian lay at his door, also. What was he doing that was so important he failed to acknowledge her plans to go forth? No one should travel unprotected in such dangerous times. After allowing that, he permitted his sons - her sons! - to ride out and find her. What kind of weak and useless soul could condone such horror, that Elladan should have to see first what had happened to her, that she should suffer the shame of his knowing? When he had ridden through the gates bearing her broken body, Elrohir beside him, even then it was not Elrond who had moved to take so horrendous a burden from his shoulders. No, the one she loved had done so, weeping and cursing together, cursing not Sauron but Elrond. Your exalted ability for healing didn't save her. But for his love and devotion, your children's mother would have perished.

It was no surprise he would treat Legolas so poorly. No one would expect anything else but another failure. Offer you something good and pure and you manage to drop it right in the nearest pile of shit. His actions, and glaring omissions, regarding Legolas were examined in excruciating detail, not a single derogatory remark left out, every time he'd denied the simple, and infrequent, requests his mate had made meticulously analysed. He found himself rambling aloud his fear of losing Aearen to his sons, his dread that Legolas would prefer them because of the very facts being reviewed. The faceless, houseless spirits grilled him relentlessly about the twins and their part in the drama and for a few terrifying moments Elrond feared he was about to be destroyed utterly, so tangible was their wrath.

Elrond had stopped crying long ago, hours ago, days ago, years ago, centuries and Ages of time ago; who could judge accurately in such a Hell as this? He sat on the ground, knees to chest, forehead to knees, arms locked around his legs to hold them fast, rocking slowly to and fro as he relived each shameful incident from his past. An occasional shudder jolted him in place of the noisy sobs to which he'd first relented. Finally here he was in the dirt where he belonged, Elrond of Imladris, Elrond the lesser son of Eärendil, Elrond the disappointment, alone.
Sooner or later, Legolas would find him and then he would know the truth. What would he do then? Legolas would be filled with loathing and disgust. He would wish he'd never conceived a son with so poor an example of Elven dignity and honour. Why would he want such a person for Tinu Mín's father? Elrond knew he couldn't live without Aearen and he loved Tinu Mín almost as fiercely as he loved Legolas. He would fade or sail; in either case he would have failed yet again, breaking a solemn vow to stay until Sauron was defeated and his promise to never leave Legolas' side.

Legolas does not care about any of this.

"That's only because he doesn't really know. Deep in his heart, he believes I am noble and good, wise and brave. The truth will turn his heart from me and I will lose him. I will lose them both."

"You are wrong. He sees you, Elrond Peredhel. He has no choice. Foolish Elf Lord, half of the light in his soul arises in you. Possessing your soul, being possessed by your soul, no other knows you better, save Eru," said the female.

"If that is so, how can he love me? Is it all in my mind? Is this his revenge? He must hate me indeed."

"How can you have Legolas in your thoughts alongside the concept of hatred? That is an abomination; he is incapable of that emotion," the male chastised harshly.

"Do you love him so much as this, that your reason lies broken under the weight of your fear?"

"I love him, nothing more do I know for certainty. What good is reason? Reason has failed me every time. Does he…Nay, how can he. Yet tell me, for you must know; does he love me?"

"Legolas loves you, Elrond Peredhel, and maybe it is not so hard, now, for us to understand why."

"Oh, he loves me!" He almost choked on the flood of relief that swamped his heart, but quickly checked it. "Nay! Will he survive the hurt the truth must cause him? Can you tell him I didn't want him to know; I didn't want to disappoint him; didn't mean to lie. I…I liked being loved by him. I loved being loved by him. I was selfish." The tears were back but they were quiet ones now.

"Yes, you were selfish, but Legolas does not care about that either. All these things you call truth, these are things you must forget. You must burn them from your soul so that Legolas will see only one truth reflected back to him."

"What truth is bearable? There is only shame and remorse to share with him."

"Did I not say that you would need to find a means to let go of your regrets? This does not serve Legolas. The truth he needs to see in you is the love you hold in your heart for him. He is your salvation, Elrond Peredhel, and you must permit him to know this."

"I want to. How do I do that?"

"You will find the way."

"Love will guide you, but you must listen to Legolas' soul. He still has one, you know, distinct and unique from yours."
"I know this."

"Nay, you keep thinking you will remake him into something more like you. Elrond Perfected, the way you wish to be. This is the burden you have placed upon him."

"No."

"Yes. You ask his soul, torn and damaged almost beyond repair, to reflect back the image you require."

Elrond groaned miserably; it was true. A huge sigh left him and he began rocking again.

"Do you even know why he loves you?"

"Or do you imagine he has no control over that, being sylvan?"

"I assure you, it was his decision to love instead of grieve, to live instead of fade."

"Perhaps you should ask him why."

"Galbreth. It was all for Galbreth," whined Elrond bitterly as fresh tears overflowed.

"Elbereth! He is quite intractable, isn't he?"

"Annoyingly so. Galbreth was only part of it and not the main part of it. If you must know, Legolas used Galbreth to justify his feelings for you. He's very young, you see, and though he thought he knew everything about everything, his understanding is only 76 summers old."

"What are you trying to tell me? Please, does he love me or not?"

"We have already answered that. If you want to understand why he loves you and what he did to make it acceptable, in his own mind, to love you then you will need to listen to him."

"Enough. Rest. There is a celebration planned in your honour and thus we cannot start it without you."

"When you awaken, Legolas will be here and Elril will guide to the place of the feast."

In the passing of three heartbeats, Elrond was deep in a slumber such as he had not enjoyed since childhood. It was true sleep, free of dreams and doubts, images and thoughts. Of course, he was not really lost in the rocky highlands of Imladris, cast down in the dirt amid the towering firs and oaks. He was stretched out on a comfortable pallet in a sumptuous pavilion, cosseted in silk and resting of eiderdown. Fresh bows of spruce and pine carpeted the floor and formed the roof, softened the rugged terrain, lending a refreshing and restful scent to the space. From the centre pole that upheld the structure a single lantern hung and from it a single flame burned low and gave a soft, golden light to the air. Above the woven roof of evergreens, the trees swayed and sighed in the breeze, adding their lulling refrain to the pleasant melody of sylvan voices raised in song in the branches all around. Thranduil and Rhûn'waew rose and stretched, then reached for and embraced one another. Together they exited the little hut.

"You were hard on him," remarked Thranduil, eyeing his wife carefully. Of all the folk in her lineage he had been privileged to know, she was the most fey, the most incomprehensible. He waited
patiently to learn what her reply would be and grinned reflexively in answer to the smile that flashed through her eyes. Then the mirth left her and only that distant power shone through, a glimpse of puissance, as if she was connected in some direct way to Melian, or to Melian's soul, or to the Music that was Melian's soul.

"It is my soul you see, not hers," she rebuked gently, proudly. "My Music that makes Greenwood sing and the Wood Elves dance. Yes, I was hard on him. He was harder on Iest Mín. Legolas is my son and my son deserves to be seen, understood, accepted, and loved by the mate he has chosen. I will suffer no less. Elrond will manage this or I will sever their bond and join our child solely to the twins."

To this Thranduil gave no argument; indeed, he offered her a deep and respectful bow.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Aldobol Faer Charn: Uncovering a Wounded Spirit
Merith D'r'ylf (Fêtes Beneath the Branches)
Manadh Diorion: Ultimate Fate of Dior's Sons
Emil Daur: Forest Prince
Elril: Bright Star
Iest Mín: Our Wish - pet name for Legolas used by his parents.
Rhûn'waew: East Wind
Aras: deer, stag
Fennas: Doorway
Tinu Mín: our little star

NOTE: Well, I hope this wasn't entirely confusing. Probably not that chapter you were all expecting to read. I wanted very much to replay that scene from the Hobbit in which the Dwarves are captured one by one. Don't worry, nothing unpleasant as being stuffed in a sack has befallen Lindir, Erestor, or Glorfindel. We'll find out what happened to them later when we all get to attend the feast. The big party is pretty important, though none of the Imladrian citizens know this, not even Lindir who has learned much nor Erestor who has been forced into assisting Thranduil's plots and plans.

The silliness over names was of course necessary to prompt Elrond to bring it up with Legolas. That will happen later on; we've a bonding ceremony to get through first.

I hope it was clear that Elrond was rather heavily, and sneakily, drugged and that the mysterious interviewers were Thranduil and Rhûn'waew. The intoxicating and psychoactive compounds were of course in the fire and in the drink so conveniently left for him to find. So, what seemed to Elrond like voices from the past or voices of the Valar were in fact real voices, but his perception was radically altered by the drugs. The symptoms are fairly common to any number of psychoactive substances: dilation of pupils making his sight seem clearer in the dark; altered sense of time and space, hallucinations (which are not always visual but can be auditory); a sense of elation alternating with agitation and paranoia, tiredness and finally sleep.
Can we blame Legolas' parents? I can't, though it was surely gruelling for Elrond to have to bare his soul so completely. In reality, they have done him a great service, albeit solely for the benefit of their son and nascent grandson. They want Elrond to become a good mate for Legolas and forcing him to face all his demons in one night might seem extreme, but they are about to see their Iest Mín wedded to this ancient Lord. Legolas will only grow more dependent upon Elrond as the pregnancy progresses and Thranduil and Rhûn'waew want him to feel safe, secure, and loved. I have just been feeling that Elrond really got off easy. True, the worried parents do not want to make things worse for Legolas but he has really been treated badly, from their point of view.

If you were surprised that I let Elrond himself spill the beans about the twins, well what can I say? They are brave and I'm sure they would have come forward eventually, but I think it would be quite daunting to face Thranduil and tell all, then proclaim themselves converted and Legolas' staunchest supporters. We see in Rhûn'waew's closing remark that she realises the bond between her son and the twins is growing stronger, and like any good mother who wants the best for her child, she views this as an advantage. There is now an alternative should Elrond fail to meet her expectations. Can she really divide two souls so completely entwined as Legolas and Elrond's? She certainly seems to think so and her husband obviously believes she is rather more powerful than the average Wood Elf. You will just have to wait and see what she decides to do.

Now, what do you suppose Legolas' reaction to this little ploy of his parents will be? I am thinking he will not be pleased and perhaps he might have a few choice words for his well-meaning Nana and Ada. Fireworks ahead, of more than one kind. :)

Thank you to everyone who gave me feedback on the last chapter. It was very helpful and much appreciated! As always, my deepest thanks to one and all still reading and enjoying the story!

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NOTE: This chapter was initially requested by stef and seconded by Vicky and then several more folks through the Guestbook. Here is a glimpse into Legolas' earliest days in Imladris. It is combined with the concerns Arwen feels over his decision to conceive without her father's knowledge or consent, so while it is slightly out of sequence in respect to the last chapter posted, it fits in well with the timing.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ We Retreat a Bit - A Few Days before Chapter 28 ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Her hands reached deep into the dark and cluttered space, fingers groping through the garments, here touching upon cool metallic clasps and there upon fluid satin ties, navigating a forest of textures in colours dimmed by the low light, seeking, searching, sniffing, almost, as a hummingbird probes the blossoms, hunting for that one that holds the sweetest nectar. The prize Arwen sought was not so delectable but to her mind just as necessary and she explored with determined vigour as well as speed, for the room would not be so undefended for long. Her nails grazed a rough surface and a musty scent arose; a scent of death and decay. Repulsed, she could not prevent her morbid curiosity to see what her senses told her was some bizarre relic of battle. She drew forth the torn and blood-stained tunic Legolas had worn the day his brother died in battle; the day he had become Elrond's mate-by-bond.

She gasped, seeing in full light the long jagged rip across the front and the dark, dried patch that turned the leather from its initial sage to an ugly muddy hue. There were other cuts upon it, along the arms, especially the left, and one near the neckline that sported a spatter of dark drops in a random pattern that in a cruel way mimicked the delicate oak leaf embroidery with which the garment had been decorated. This one item would hold more than enough of Legolas' memories to serve her need, yet she would never choose it because it held too much. From this she could learn of the first days the Wood Elf had spent in her father's company, but the remnant horror of the battle infused the fabric and would over-shadow the emotions accompanying the new bond's formation. With a sigh she turned to replace the tunic, but before she could do so a frantic voice interrupted her.

"My Lady, please do not do that. Legolas doesn't like for anyone to handle his things, especially that specific thing; not even Lord Elrond disturbs that foul article."

Faelon was not the type of elf to wring his hands but had he been of such a nature this would be the very dilemma to prompt the action. He hovered just behind Lady Arwen's shoulder, torn between his duty and friendship to Legolas and his respect for the Evenstar. While he wavered, she shoved the garment once more to the back of the wardrobe and pulled opened the topmost inner drawer.

She had anticipated Faelon's return, having arranged for him to be sent on an errand of dubious value, and had availed herself of the short interval of time during which her father's apartment was deserted. Unbeknown to the nervous valet, she had already secured several strands of Legolas' hair from his comb upon the dresser and now required only one other article, something he carried nearly all the time, something he would have had with him when he first encountered her father. From such tokens she hoped to conjure the past and observe their unfolding relationship, learning what motives underpinned Legolas' immoral decision to conceive without his mate's knowledge or consent.
Faelon cringed as she turned and favoured him with a severe frown, unable to prevent a small step back from the vexation in that chilling stare.

"If you are troubled by my conduct then you may leave," said Arwen. "I will have answers about That Wood Elf and as no one else seems willing to divulge them, I will have to root them out myself."

Arwen was beyond anger by this point, having returned with all the speed she could coax from her horse and her guards, believing her father was on the verge of slipping away to Mandos, only to arrive at the ford and find that a great celebration was in progress. No one had thought fit to send a second messenger to intercept her entourage and relay the happy tidings: not only was her father about to formalise his relationship with Legolas, the lowly sylvan warrior was in actuality royalty. King Thranduil of the Woodland Realm had deigned to journey to Imladris, bringing all his kith and kin in tow to witness his youngest son's bonding ceremony. Were that not astounding enough, said youngest son was pregnant with Elrond's child.

Now, that last bit of shocking information had come through her grandfather just before her hasty departure from Lothlorien. He had done so, said the wise Lord, only so that she might comprehend the true seriousness of Elrond's danger, for Arwen had doubted the morbidity of her Adar's brief letter. When she'd left Imladris, Arwen had still been concerned that Legolas would suffer a broken heart because of her father's indifference to the Wood Elf's devotion. Celeborn's words erased those fears and in their place spawned the first sharp heart-pangs of jealousy and betrayal. To learn that Elrond was fully committed to Legolas and their babe, heart, mind, and soul, was one thing; to realise that Elrond hadn't shared his joyous news with his daughter was quite another. Arwen was used to being her father's favourite and the neglect stung.

"Nay, my Lady, I am not leaving," Faelon squared his shoulders and regained the ground he'd deserted seconds ago. "Legolas' peace of mind is not just my duty as his valet, but my concern as a true friend. He trusts me implicitly never to do what you are doing, or to permit anyone else such a liberty. Please stop this!"

His strong words did make Arwen falter in her ill-chosen task. A glance at the soft-spoken servant was enough to shame her and the look of disappointment and disillusionment in his sternly moulded features caused her cheeks to colour. More accustomed to Faelon's dreamy adoration and bashful compliments, she was definitely off the pedestal now. With a heavy sigh she looked at what she held in her hands and then back to the contents of the drawer. Her indiscriminate digging had left everything a cluttered mess: feathers, leaves, stones, arrowheads, blades, and scraps of leather and velum all jumbled together. Her heart sank; Legolas would surely know someone had rummaged amid his private property for there was no returning it to its previous state of order, as she hadn't bothered to take note of the contents' arrangement before starting her impulsive scavenging.

Of course I didn't; I meant for him to know.

She was not so pleased with that notion any longer and instead found her behaviour disturbing. Still, she could not bring herself to abandon her goal and hastily repressed her conscience, scanning the haphazard collection of trinkets desperately. Somewhere in this agglomeration was the key to unlocking Legolas' psyche and she would have it. Her eyes fell upon a golden broach made in the shape of an oak leaf. It was small, no larger than the pad of her thumb, but this did not prevent her from noting its refined design and the elegant craftsmanship that had produced it. That was the very thing indeed: an emblem of the Woodland Realm and, she suspected, a designation of Legolas' rank within his father's guard. He would have worn that proof of his commission with pride every day.
since its pinning upon his breast.

Yet how to snatch it up with Faelon watching her every move? In a second she made her plan, reaching for another object just beneath her hands: a small book of parchment bound in a brown suede cover, a green silk ribbon peeking out from the bottom where the sylvan had marked his place. Simultaneously, she palmed the small amulet and turned, permitting the vigilant valet to see what she held and remain blind to her purpose. Arwen had no doubt whatsoever that the small volume was a private journal; indeed, finding it had been among her hopes and reading it a goal she could achieve another day. For now, the book would serve to distract notice from the more crucial theft. She lifted her eyes to Faelon, filling their grey depths with imploring mortification, wordlessly begging him to remove the temptation from her before she committed so grave an error.

Comprehension was instantaneous and he gently removed the diary from her hands, stepping into her spot as she meekly moved aside.

"Thank you, my Lady. I have worked hard to earn Legolas' trust and friendship. If there is anything you wish to know, perhaps your father could supply the answers." As he spoke this quiet admonishment, Faelon set the drawer in order, laying the journal down in its proper spot, never noticing the absence of the oak leaf medallion, and shut the wardrobe up. Lady Arwen was clearly embarrassed by her indiscretion and he smiled to reaffirm his loyalty to her as well. "I will not say anything to Legolas. It would just upset him and that would make Elrond frantic and before you could blink the entire household would be in an uproar again."

"Again? What has been happening here?"

"It is all rather complicated, as the sylvan people have an unusual creed regarding rebirth, but I'll explain it as I understand it: Legolas believed his pregnancy was the will of the Valar, their means to giving his deceased brother Galbreth new life. However, his naneth, Queen Rhûn'waew, is also with child and of course that babe is really Galbreth, conceived on the same day as when first he'd been created. Well, Legolas became rather distraught about his decision, thinking the Valar would punish him and take the child from him. He had a spell of grieving sickness over it, according to the sylvan healer (and you mustn't repeat that to Legolas, he thinks it was just the momentary shock that made him collapse). Since then…"

"He collapsed?" Arwen inhaled in shock herself.

"Aye, but all is well. The healer said he was overcome with sorrow for 'losing' his brother again, though of course he hadn't really since the child never was Galbreth in the first place, and fraught with dread over this whole retribution of the Powers for making life without the knowledge and consent of his bond-mate. That is as serious an issue in the woodland realm as here."

"As it should be," Arwen agreed frowning as she thought about it.

Faelon's brows drew down in censure. "Perhaps so, but he really believed he was supposed to give Galbreth life anew. It has been very difficult for Legolas, my Lady, and I hope you will not judge him harshly." As he spoke he led her from the room, having finished his tidying up, and shut the door firmly behind him.

"Exigency is no excuse," Arwen preached, drawing herself up in rigid defiance to the lesser elf's impertinent remarks about her assessment of Legolas' sin. "What could possibly make him think he would be chosen to supply his brother new life? Surely, with both parents living, they would be the Valar's obvious choice. It seems more likely he used the concept to rationalise his decision. Legolas
was seeking a means to legitimise his status and knew Elrond would never permit a child of his body to undergo the stigma of bastardy."

Before Faelon could voice his outraged rebuttal to this crass statement, more intruders encroached upon the Elven Lord's suite, bursting in and denouncing her utterly.

"We thought the same, but nothing could be further from the truth." The twin Lords of Imladris spoke in unison, eyes dark with indignation as they bore into Arwen's. They ignored her surprise to find them there and continued. "You were not here when we first brought Legolas home. He was desperately ill, in terrible agony as his depleted soul tried to rebuild his health, and terrified. It is not your place to judge him."

"Elbereth! Where did you spring from?" Arwen blurted out. "Glorfindel told me he'd had neither sign nor word of you."

"That's irrelevant," Elladan waved away her comment. "We are here and that's all you need to know. As for Legolas' reasons for creating life, your lack of compassion is really shocking to me, muinthel."

"Aye. When last we spoke, it was you advising us to stop harassing him," reminded Elrohir, "yet now you can do nothing but find fault."

Arwen flushed in chagrin, for this was true, yet her brothers' change of heart was suspicious in her eyes and offered a convenient segue from her guilt. Hands on hips, she glared at Elladan accusingly. "Yes, I recall just how thoroughly you condemned Legolas for 'ensnaring' Adar with the 'black arts of sylvan wiles' and 'flagrant display of wanton charms'. Now you stand here defending his honour? What prompted this sudden reversal of hostility?"

Now it was the Twins' turn to bluster and stammer, displaying equally flustered grimaces as they silently debated how to answer this without giving away the secret bond to their father's mate. It was Elrohir who made the first attempt.

"There's no pleasing you, is there? First you admonish us for being cruel to him and now you demand an accounting of our motives for being just. You simply wish to deflect attention from your own fall from grace. Admit it, you came in here to snoop around and ferret out Legolas' secrets."

"How dare you accuse me!" Arwen's voice was fittingly shrill and replete with insulted dignity.

"Aye, she did," Faelon piped up with morbid relish, delighted to tell the Twins since he'd promised not to tell Legolas. "Went right in the bedroom and tried to take Legolas' journal. Not that it would have been of aid in her nefarious scheme, for it's a pregnancy diary. No sylvan Wood Elf would keep something as private and personal as a daily journal so readily to hand. If Legolas has anything like that, it will be hidden away among his trees and most likely penned in some obscure Nandorin dialect none of us could read."

"A pregnancy diary?" All three of Elrond's children chorused together, the contention momentarily forgotten in favour of this unexpected revelation.

"Aye. Legolas writes in it every day, including any changes he notes and adding whatever comments Elrond has as well. Usually he asks my input, too," reported Faelon smugly, pleased to be on such intimate terms with the expectant couple. "Legolas is woefully ignorant regarding his unique physiology and admitted to me he hated being a male life-bearer when he was younger. He didn't want to be accorded special treatment and dreaded the day he would be espoused to one of his
Adar's political allies, his freedom traded away for the good of his realm."

"Manwë's Breath, what a grim fate," intoned Elladan. Legolas had not relayed any of this to him or to Elrohir.

"I agree," said Faelon, "but life is not so easy in Greenwood, where even the Wood Elves have to correct themselves after calling it Mirkwood. That's why Legolas worked so hard to become a fierce warrior, hoping to convince his Adar that he was of greater value as a captain on the front lines than as a bargaining incentive. I can tell you becoming pregnant was the last thing he hoped would be in his future, so your unkind speculation is completely wrong, Arwen." He ignored her indignant exclamation and went on.

"He is as close to being terrified as I have ever seen him, excepting those early months of healing, and genuinely fears every change his body undergoes is a sign that the Valar mean to take the child back. The healer assured me his progress is normal, although due to his long illness and previous lack of support from his mate, the gestation and delivery will be taxing. It has nothing to do with judgement or punishment. To help him cope and preserve his peace of mind, she ordered him to start the diary. It's something she counsels all first-time pregnant males to do anyway."

"He's frightened?" asked Elrohir, eyes huge as he unconsciously reached for Elladan. "He never said anything."

"I think he's still unsure of how to manage things between us," Elladan remarked, gaze inward as he contemplated the situation, missing Arwen's bewildered stare. He doesn't know where the lines are: what it is proper to share with which of his mates.

"Aye, he must be very confused," murmured Elrohir. No doubt he feels he should keep worries about the child between him and the child's father. I wish it were otherwise for I would calm such fears.

"Well I know I am confused," said Arwen, "by your abrupt transformation from bitter enemy to valourous defender. You have as yet to explain how that came about. When did you learn of the pregnancy?"

"Before we left Imladris," replied Elladan tersely. "As for our change of heart, that is really due to Lindir's intervention. He explained things and made us see we were behaving like brutes."

"We've made our peace with Legolas," added Elrohir, "and it's best you do the same. The child will be born whether you approve or not and we intend to do everything possible to make his life joyful."

"Aye and we won't countenance any insults or accusations regarding Legolas' reasons. It isn't any of your business anyway," Elladan agreed.

"Not my business?" Arwen squawked. "Our Adar was tricked into creating another child he didn't want and you say it isn't right for me to demand an explanation from the perpetrator of such deceit?"

"It was not deceit," insisted Elrohir, raising his voice in frustration.

"What would you term it, then? He wasn't bound to Ada and he didn't ask if..." Arwen's strident response was cut off by Elladan.

"They were most certainly bound in every way the day we rescued Legolas," he thundered. "You
should not speak of that for which you have no knowledge."

"I have knowledge of right and wrong," Arwen shouted back.

"And what of Ada's wrongs?" Elrohir raised his voice to match his siblings.

In mere seconds the three were embroiled in a loud and heated argument which attracted the notice of most of the household and drew Erestor from his office. The seneschal came hurrying up the stairs and down the hallway, shooing the curious back to their proper activities, and entered the apartment to find Faelon watching in amazed horror as the Lord's grown children reverted to behaviour elflings generally received punishments for displaying. They were just a step away from name-calling and hair-pulling when the Chief Advisor intervened. Once he silenced them and heard Arwen's charges, Erestor sought a diplomatic solution.

"There have been errors made on both sides," he counselled. "Elrond certainly should have made Legolas his legitimate mate and Legolas should have revealed his identity and all this stuff about bringing Galbreth back to life. However, if we must assign blame then it will have to fall upon Elrond."

"What?" Arwen rounded on him. "You are his kinsman and dearest friend and yet you support The Sylvan's claims foremost?"

"I am and I do," announced Erestor. He cast his shrewd eyes upon hers, searching for her true intent, and since he had known her from infancy this was not difficult to discern. He sighed and reached for her, laying a gentle hand upon her shoulder. "Arwen, you are blinded by unwarranted fear and jealousy. The new child will not replace you in your father's heart."

Arwen flushed scarlet, first angry and then embarrassed, for upon hearing this she recognised the truth within the words. The depth of her outrage was linked to the degree to which she felt slighted. Nonetheless, she was compelled to deny it. "I am not a child, Erestor, to doubt my parents' love. The fact remains: had Legolas been honest then Elrond would have made things right between them and this desire for a child could have been discussed openly, as it should have been."

"Well, he couldn't do that," argued Faelon, "not without exposing his family to shame and ridicule. In Greenwood, his status would be considered the very lowest and he would essentially be an outcast, degraded and humiliated by the fact that his bond-mate refused to recognise him. How could he permit the ruling family to absorb such a scandal? Then there's the problem of what political repercussions might result as well."

"Do you expect me to believe Legolas had any idea of protecting Imladris from his father's wrath?" Arwen scoffed.

"Why not? You are the one who was so assured of Legolas' devotion to Adar," snapped Elladan.

"And Legolas may not prefer to engage in the affairs of state but he certainly understands them," scolded Erestor. "Besides, even if none of those reasons occurred to him, he was in no fit state, mentally or physically, to make sound judgements. That is why the burden of doing the right or the wrong thing falls to Elrond. Legolas was utterly dependent upon him for most of that first year."

"Aye, it had to be dreadful, awakening among strangers, finding himself bound to one, learning who his saviour was," continued Elrohir. "If you'd seen it, you would understand."
"Then tell me," demanded Arwen, "make me see."

Her brothers both hung their heads in dismay. "We cannot, for we left two weeks after our return here. Of the journey home we can speak, but upon crossing the borders we refused to go near him again and left within days," Elladan explained for them both.

Before Arwen could accept this proposal, yet another elf entered the room, for the gossip regarding the contention between the Lord's children had spread quicker than wild fire. Glorfindel came through the door with such precipitate haste that the ornate cut crystal handle banged against the wall of the vestibule and left an ugly, cracked dent that rained bits of plaster over the carpet.

On his heels came Mithrandir, who had encountered the intrepid warrior on his return from the Wood Elves' camp and decided to join him for dinner. Equally alarmed about the new disruption in the household, his harried gaze swept the room and its occupants, coming to rest upon the Twins.

"What is going on in here and when did you return?" he demanded, raising his hand and pointing as his brows descended in a warning glare. "There is to be no attempt to halt the pending wedding nor will I allow you to spread any more lies about Legolas' alleged magical abilities."

"Valar, we have no intention of doing either," droned Elrohir with an insolent roll of his eyes.

"Aye, it is Arwen who poses the obstacle this time," rejoined Elladan. "She believes Legolas conceived in order to force Adar to wed him. We are trying to convince her otherwise."

"Is this true?" Glorfindel turned to her in amazed disappointment. "Undomiel, how can you impugn Our Wood Elf so? Legolas only hoped to reverse the error he'd made in battle, for he believes his brother's death was his fault."

"We must explain all this to her before she meets Legolas again," stated Erestor. "I don't want him to become even more terrified of her than he already is."

"He isn't terrified of me," insisted Arwen, unable to prevent the new rush of blood to her cheeks, for of course Erestor knew what she'd done to test Legolas' loyalty even if he didn't know the details.

"Oh, but he does avoid you most zealously," Glorfindel said, appraising her with disapproving curiosity.

"It was just a misunderstanding on my part," she hastily asserted, "much less atrocious than some other people's continuously derogatory conduct toward him." As she hoped, that silenced both her father's dearest friends, as neither one had been kind to Legolas during his first years in Imladris.

"I would like to learn this history also," said the wizard, for Legolas would not confide in him nor would any of his kin share with the venerable Istar what their young prince had revealed to them of his difficulties. "Now that we are here, Glorfindel, you may add your observations to Erestor's. Tell us about Legolas' arrival in Imladris."

"That is for us to relate," said Elladan. He and Elrohir moved to the hearth and took seats, the rest of the group following their lead, and once settled he began the sorry tale, to which his brother and Glorfindel contributed their recollections as well.

Now, as to these events, we have already gleaned most of the details and so need not revisit such unpleasant incidents. Suffice it to say that Arwen listened with attention and was deeply moved by
the account given. And yet, the tale lacked any indication of Legolas' thoughts and feelings during this turbulent time in his history. To this her brothers had to admit complete ignorance, for they had never engaged in conversation with the Wood Elf so much as delivered cruel taunts, and even this level of interaction was limited, neither of them wanting to come near him because of the inevitable pull of the bond. That was not an aspect of their relationship to Legolas they wished to explicate to their sister.

Glorfindel, too, could relate little of Legolas' personal experience and hesitated to reveal the one episode he had witnessed.

"You must understand, Arwen, that he was in no condition to interact with the household. I didn't have a true conversation with him until he had been here over two years. In none of our brief encounters since then have we discussed anything of a personal nature. Can you not see how unlikely it would be for him to confide in people who looked on him with nothing but scorn and disgust?"

"I do see that," answered Arwen, "but I sense you are withholding something important. Why are you so reluctant to share this? Does it reflect disfavourably on Legolas?"

Glorfindel's features contracted in sour aggravation as he refuted that charge. "No, as with most of the memories I have of the early days, the truth only reveals how heartless people can be. I will tell you the story only because you are so certain Legolas was plotting and scheming behind Elrond's back. Nothing could be further from the reality."

With that he began his account:

Winter in the Vale bounded by the Bruinen and Hithaeglir was never severe. Snows did not settle for more than a handful of days. Temperatures did not plunge below the level comfortable to roses. The streams and lakes did not freeze over nor did bitter storms lash the land with frigid winds and icy sleet. Whatever season it might be in the rest of the world, Lord Elrond's mastery of Vilya maintained a temperate zone within Imladris. The weather varied from that of spring to that of autumn, with occasional glimpses of wintery precipitation just because such was pleasurable. Thus, once the trio of elves crossed the borders at the footbridge over the Rhossîr, the biting cold diminished.

The watch was vigilant even on this little travelled pathway into the vale and a scout hailed them with cordial deference, promising to alert the Last Homely House of its masters' return. In truth, the guards had been anxiously scanning every approach to the valley, for the Lord and his sons were much overdue and had they not arrived soon a search would have been organised. Before another hour had passed, the small party was met by Glorfindel, for the watcher had also sent word to his captain of the unexpected guest and his unfortunate condition, obviously the cause of their slow pace. Glorfindel listened attentively to the tale his Lords explained, noting that much was left out, or else altered significantly, and that a breach had opened between not only father and sons but inseparable brothers as well. That was enough to make the Balrog-slayer wary of the wounded elf and he said so.

"I wonder at these sylvan warriors' intentions, wandering so close to Imladris, a country they have not acknowledged in more centuries than I have been present, this life-time, upon Arda. Mayhap yon archer is a spy seeking access to treasures of a unique and powerful nature," cautioned Glorfindel.
Elrond's response was out of character, in his opinion, being both insulting and impassioned.

"That is absurd! Has your reason left you? Is it now a crime for one of the First-born to seek the sheltered haven of Imladris? Here is a fellow elf, wounded unto death, poisoned with that most vile and incurable toxin used by the Orcs, and you accuse him of treachery? Glorfindel, I would think you had been sampling Gandalf's pipe weed did I not know you better," sneered the mighty Lord, incensed to have the ailing elf so defamed, and unconsciously tightened his hold around the limp, unconscious form.

"Nay, it is not absurd," growled Elrohir. "You see before you the evidence of the threat we bring right inside our very borders, Glorfindel. That Wood Elf is a sorcerer, an enchanter skilled in such black arts, and he has bewitched both Elladan and Adar completely."

"That is not true!" hissed Elrond, eyes blazing as he focused upon his younger son. "I will not have such falsehoods repeated. Legolas is not responsible for what has happened here; it is a natural mechanism of survival and nothing more."

"Aye, leave me out of your assessment also, unless you come to your senses and admit that I am only expressing the compassion anyone might feel for someone in so perilous a situation," huffed Elladan. "You are the one obsessed with Legolas."

"Obsessed? Aye, that's the very word only I am not the one so ensorcelled," retorted Elrohir.

A greater clamour would have broken out save that the elf under discussion moaned and shifted in Elrond's hold, brought near consciousness by the tension in his protector's body. He sought to bring himself upright and gasped at the sharp stab of agony lancing through his side. With a low groan he collapsed back in trembling misery. "Ring," he whispered, teeth chattering over the word, and buried his nose against the warmth of the strong chest against which he leaned.

"Sîdh," crooned Elrond, gently resettling his charge in a more comfortable, or at least less torturing, position, bending close to press his cheek upon the bowed head and drop a kiss upon drooping eyelids. "We are home now and soon you will rest more easily. Here I have all the medications required to heal you fully." He had no idea if his words were understood for the sylvan elf released a shaky sigh and slipped away into oblivion again. Wasting no more time, Elrond seized this opportunity to make haste, urging his charger for speed and disappearing from the wooded hills, leaving his sons and his captain behind.

"So you see how it is for him," Elrohir spoke with such bitter acrimony that Glorfindel startled.

"I see that he is concerned for the elf," replied the Balrog-slayer, "and that is no more than I would expect, considering the bond that has been enjoined between them. Yet I find no reason to doubt Elrond's words; the effect will diminish as the sylvan heals and gains strength."

"So you say, but I tell you this is a false hope. Adar is thoroughly enchanted and will not be parted from That Wood Elf willingly," the younger twin continued with dark foreboding clouding his flashing eyes. Having no wish to hear Elladan's denouncement of his words, he too spurred his horse for home.

"What ails your brother?" asked Glorfindel, noting how fidgety Elladan suddenly became, as though he longed to race after Elrohir, except that his vision was turned in the direction of the House of Healing instead.
"He is jealous," shrugged Elladan, "for he was drawn to Legolas as well. We all were. Only because Elrohir and I fought, Adar claimed the prize."

The dark and cynical sarcasm pervading his tone chilled Glorfindel, for never had he heard the like from either of the Twin Lords. Without a second glance at him, Elladan set off for the Last Homely House, trailing the wake of Elrond. This along with all he'd heard convinced the Balrog-slayer that there was credence in the Twins' charge of sorcery. He determined to keep the stranger under close surveillance lest he prove a danger to the safety of either Elrond or his sons. Glorfindel decided to check on his progress, unexpectedly, and determine whether the injuries were also a sham of some kind.

Such was his intent, yet Glorfindel promptly forgot about the issue for many days, as a bedraggled caravan of humans arrived at the Bruinen and pleaded for asylum. Their tale of woe included the ravaging of their village by warg riders, and Glorfindel gathered forces to purge the countryside of this roving band of marauders. The Twins rode with him and while they fought together as ever, there remained between them a silence of profound proportions in as much as it was marked by their internal silence as well. The campaign stretched on as the warriors sought out the source of the enemy's provisioning, routing a handful of Southron soldiers lurking in the wasted dales around the remnants of Rhudaur. The Twins left him, restless to return to Imladris, and it was more than two months before Glorfindel arrived once more at the Last Homely House.

He was soon reminded of Imladris newest resident. The evening meal found him seated at Elrond's table, as was his habit, yet without the company of the Lord of the lands at its head, nor were his sons in attendance. Not only that, but such a cloud of gloomy malaise enveloped the few elves dining that Glorfindel wondered if some tragedy had befallen the Last Homely House in his brief absence. This very thing he asked of Erestor, for the seneschal occupied his accustomed chair to the right of the empty one usually filled by his cousin.

The Chief Advisor sent Glorfindel a condescending, pitying look for such ignorance. "Indeed, I can think of no greater scandal than that which has befallen the House of Eärendil. As the guardian appointed by the Valar to protect that noble line, you might well be concerned. Glorfindel, never before have I known you to be derelict in performance of your duty, yet now you have permitted this unseemly affair to become not only common knowledge but deeply entrenched."

"What? Erestor, do not speak in riddles. What scandal? What affair? My responsibilities are numerous and defence of Lord Elrond's lands not the least of them. If something has happened in my absence then pray tell me! Speaking of duty, is it not yours to relay such information to me at once? If this catastrophe was so serious, why did you send no messenger forth to alert me?" The Balrog-slayer rose from his chair in his upset, looming over the smirking seneschal in agitated affront.

"You knew of it before I, therefore how can I be charged with failing to properly update you," retorted Erestor. "Take your seat, mellonen; I am speaking of Legolas, Elrond's little sylvan catamite, of course."

"His what?" Glorfindel's voice rose in pitch to a screechy yowl.

"Aye, you heard me correctly. The Sylvan archer, still confined to his sickbed, has coaxed Elrond into sharing it. Your august Lord has deserted his quarters and taken over the warrior's care completely. He appears at appointed meetings and still shares the morning breakfast with me, yet the remainder of his time is spent trying to get the blighted Wood Elf to eat, so he states, and he does not return from the sick room until dawn." Erestor relayed his story, relishing the shock apparent on Glorfindel's face.
Glorfindel scowled, realising he'd permitted Erestor to bate him, again. "Just because Elrond attends the sick elf through the night does not mean he shares more than an appropriate level of comfort and tenderness. To assert that they are lovers is irresponsible. Such jokes may be taken as fact by some and that kind of gossip is best squelched by never letting it start." Glorfindel had not returned to his seat and now he stomped from the room, Erestor's mocking laughter following him out the door.

"Oh, do share whatever sight meets your eyes when you go barging in, mellon vrêg," the seneschal snickered. "I'll be in the Hall of Fire when you've satisfied your curiosity."

Glorfindel berated himself for forgetting about the injured Wood Elf now, realising Erestor was having great fun at his kinsman's expense, ridiculing the sylvan bond of extremis and Elrond's part in it. Yet he could not in good conscience have left the campaign unfinished, permitting evil-hearted Men to extend their influence over the surrounding colonies. He was glad to be home and eager to silence this ugly rumour, but a small note of warning urged him not to rule out the Twins' charges of sorcery. *I will know soon enough,* he reasoned, determined to surprise the Lord and his patient, so to ascertain the true nature of their relationship.

Long before he reached the isolated rooms, he heard Elrond's voice raised in song. That gave his heart ease and he smiled, for this was neither a love song nor a bawdy barrack's tune. The Lord of the Vale was singing of the beauty of Arda and the joy to be found in appreciation of Iluvatar's creations. No second voice joined in and this confirmed for Glorfindel that nothing untoward was taking place between Eärendil's noble scion and the lowly woodland archer. Thus, when he threw wide the door and entered, Glorfindel was flabbergasted to discover Elrond in bed with the patient, both of them naked, the scent of their erotic activity still heavy in the air.

"Elbereth!" the Balrog-slayer exclaimed, standing frozen upon the threshold, eyes enormous and glued upon the tableau. Legolas lay huddled against Elrond's chest, flushed and soaked in sweat, fingers knotted in the elder elf's ebony tresses, eyes shut and breath laboured. Elrond held him gently but securely across his lap, his face white with the shock of being caught in so compromising a position, mouth ajar and eyes frantic. "I did not know; I did not believe him," stuttered Glorfindel.

Elrond scowled, rage overcoming his embarrassment. "I can guess who sent you on this inexcusably impertinent mission," he spat, but at once altered his demeanour as Legolas gave a violent jerk and moaned, having been wakened by the caustic tone. Wide blue eyes blinked as he sought to focus on Elrond's face and the Elven Lord remoulded his features into a gentle smile.

"Nay, be at peace, all is well. I need to speak with someone but I will not be gone long. Rest and dream, Legolas, rest and dream." He carefully rolled the injured elf aside and propped him up against several pillows, but for all his care the motion elicited a spasm of pain and a hoarse cough from the patient. The agony this set off quickly sent Legolas back into fevered dreams again, and only then did Elrond turn to his unwelcome guest. Silently he retrieved a robe, clothed himself with it, and motioned Glorfindel aside to the open balcony. "Have you lost all reason?" he whispered in fury. "It is customary to knock before entering a private room."

"I was not expecting you to be cohabiting the room in this manner, else I surely would have done," explained Glorfindel.

"I am not 'cohabiting' with Legolas. This is the nature of such bonds."

"Indeed? I believed the union was not required more than once, for so you yourself expressed it. To continue can only mean you intend to keep him as a lover rather than heal him as a patient."
"That is preposterous!" Elrond raised his voice, cheeks crimson in fury and shame. "I will not be spoken to in this disrespectful manner. What I choose to do or not do is none of your concern."

"I beg to differ," Glorfindel drew himself up haughtily, unaccustomed to being taken to task in such a manner. "The warning of your sons seems true to me now, more so than your own words. This elf has you enthralled. Never have I known you to indulge such a sordid and selfish passion."

"I am not enthralled, quite the opposite. I am actively working to make him well and send him home to Mirkwood. I am a healer first and foremost, Glorfindel, and how could I turn away when he does not respond to others' care? Would you call that selfishness? Besides, the cure for this vile toxin runs in his blood. If he survives, I will be able to isolate the antidote and countless lives will be spared in future. Should I discount the value in that also?"

"Nay, yet the method of obtaining this much desired remedy seems improper. Erestor is treating it as a joke and I dread to know what the citizens are saying."

"What they are saying is irrelevant. Legolas is quite ill, as you surely could tell, and needs whatever strength I can lend. The poison is tenacious and the treatment I initially devised worked instead to make it more potent. Recovery is likely to be slow and painful for him. I for one will not begrudge him whatever comfort my presence can grant."

"Your presence is one thing, but this indecent gratification is another."

"Since when are you permitted to determine with whom I should or should not couple?" Elrond was furious and his voice rose in volume accordingly. "Are you Vala that you dare to stand before me and denounce this union as indecent? And if I should choose to keep a lover, what then? Must I interview candidates based on an approved list drawn up by you? I will have who I want when I want and for as long as I want. Legolas is secured to me by this sylvan bond and I will indulge the privileges of that bond as I see fit."

For some time they were silent, staring hard at one another: Elrond in defiance and Glorfindel in disapprobation. At last a stifled sob arose from the room behind them and together they turned to find the beleaguered warrior shakily dragging himself from the sheets, trembling with such violence Glorfindel could not understand how he was able to remain upright. Unending tears coursed down his face and a look of such empty despair filled his eyes that the Balrog-slayer gasped. Elrond ran to catch him just as his knees buckled and with tender hands lowered the suffering elf back to the bed.

"Glorfindel, if you would please fetch me some clean linens from the cupboard there I would be grateful," murmured Elrond, sending his most trusted captain a kinder look. Together they remade the bed and Elrond covered Legolas' nakedness with a light blanket, for he was drenched in perspiration wrought from his fever-ravaged body and chills ran over him in trembling waves. Through it all he'd retained consciousness, though what level of reason he possessed was debatable.

"Elrond?" he struggled to form the word, struggled to draw air, licked dry lips. Arms slid beneath him, aggravating the wound in his side and he groaned against the slicing flash of vicious heat that seared him there. Would it never end? Why must his journey to Mandos be so prolonged when Galbreth had gone so quickly? "Nen, saes," he pleaded weakly.

Glorfindel could not help but be moved by such terrible distress and fetched the water himself, suppressing his distaste as Elrond climbed into the bed and gathered the sylvan to him. Glorfindel handed over the cup and watched as his Lord offered the Wood Elf a few sips, which he could
scarcely swallow. A bout of coughing followed, intermingled with his cries of pain, and after that he begged a favour of Elrond, so softly as almost to be lost in his ragged respiration, but Glorfindel heard:

"Saes, let me die. Saes."

Stricken dumb, too shocked to comprehend whatever answer Elrond was giving, Glorfindel quietly left the room and shut the door behind him.

"That is horrible," sniffed Arwen, wiping at her eyes for the story thus far was far from pleasant hearing and she had a dreadful feeling there was much more to reveal. "How could he hope to die? Knowing he did, how could you turn against him?" she demanded of Glorfindel.

The Balrog-slayer flinched under her just query. "It is difficult for me to admit it now, for I see him so differently, but at the time I was hoping he would die. Not only was his condition dire, I was uncomfortable with your father's lecherous craving. The idea of him taking pleasure from so depleted and helpless a person was unthinkable, and so I could not stand to think of it. I took to avoiding the house."

"Valar, this narrative reveals us to be monsters," said Faelon. "I heard the rumours; I myself saw many elves approach Legolas, once he was well, and heard some make claims to bedding him, but I know now he never even considered such propositions. I regret every time I passed him with a disdainful sneer or refused to acknowledge his presence at all. He didn't deserve to be treated this way."

"Nay, he did not," agreed Arwen with a heavy sigh.

Everyone remained quiet for a time, unable to find any words sufficient to express the real horror of such circumstances. Finally Erestor sat forward and made the following comment:

"It is true we were blind and deaf to Legolas' plight, but it is also true that we had some reason to be suspicious. The most damning evidence was Elrond's behaviour, for he would fight against the bond and gave in with regret and repugnance for his 'weakness'. I believed the sylvan bond was at best unhealthy for one not of sylvan descent, and resolved to break that enchantment at any cost."

"Even though by so doing you would doom Legolas to death?" demanded Faelon, eyes staring in disbelief at the elf he had aided and assisted for so many years.

"Of course not!" growled Erestor. "I did not become concerned until the months wore on and Legolas began to heal while the bond did not diminish. Had it dissolved on its own I would have discounted the entire episode; what is one indiscretion lasting a handful of days when set against all the good my cousin has worked to achieve in his long life? Nothing!

"For Elrond to take a lover was not so horrible, especially if the affair was as short-lived as he himself proposed. An amusing anecdote we could both laugh about in years to come, nothing more, and I was genuinely happy for him to have such an outlet. When the strange hold the sylvan had on him did not lose its strength, when Elrond moved him into his apartment, then I began to seriously suspect a hidden agenda. I became determined to force Elrond to see Legolas for what I believed he
"And what did you believe him to be?" inquired Mithrandir softly.

"He could only be false, a charlatan, a miscreant who would not be welcomed in his own lands and so put to his use all those dark arts of which his kind are thought to be adept, ensnaring not just any citizen of the realm, but the very Lord of the lands himself," the Chief Advisor answered plainly. "It has ever been my responsibility to offer Elrond whatever protection my efforts may afford him. I had only his best interests in mind. Well, primarily that." Erestor paused, casting a side-long look in the Twins' direction.

"I have even made amends to King Thranduil for my callous deeds. It is now my principal concern to guard both Legolas and the unborn child from whatever person might present even the slightest threat. That means, dear Arwen, that if you don't give up your plan to demand an accounting of Legolas, I will have to ask Glorfindel to escort you from Imladris."

Arwen's lips parted to announce her outrage over such a statement but before breath could give the thoughts life, the apartment door opened once more, revealing its rightful occupants.

There framed within the arch stood Elrond, Legolas at his side, gazing in surprise upon this unexpected party in his private study. Swiftly his eyes tracked over each of his guests, resting on the Twins with a slight frown, and he drew Legolas closer to him, one arm locked possessively about the slender waist. Whatever this meeting entailed, the grim and guilty looks on everyone's faces assured that it was not a happy occasion. He shared a swift glance with his mate, to which Legolas returned a slight shrug, the couple entered, and he shut the door.

"I hope there is good cause for this unexpected visit," Elrond said.

"Aye," Mithrandir announced, rising from his seat, face crinkled convincingly into a myriad of kindly smiles. "Singly or in twos, we have all been drawn here to offer you both hearty congratulations upon the joyous announcement that the betrothal has been approved by King Thranduil's Council," the wily wizard fibbed.

"Once here, we fell to discussing some of the history that preceded that event," added Erestor, his smile ingratiating, his tone obsequious.

"I confess I was curious about Legolas' early years here," added Arwen honestly, her gaze upon him soft and filled with genuine compassion and remorse. "The others were kind enough to share their memories, for I did not want to burden Legolas by making those queries directly. I hope you can welcome me as a true sister, in spite of any previous misunderstandings between us."

Legolas' cheeks grew red and his eyes darted from her to Elrond and back, which he tried to cover with a swift bow. "There is nothing I would wish more, for I have never had a sister," he said quietly. The smile she offered warmed his heart and he returned it magnified tenfold.

Elrond favoured them all, one by one, with a dry, cynical appraisal, resting somewhat longer and with a more chilling intensity upon his sons, not fooled in the least by these half-truths, omissions, and blatant lies. Yet if Legolas was willing to overlook it then he would not press the matter, for above all he wished to keep Aearen happy and content.

"We accept your kind commendations over the decree. Now, if you would excuse us, Legolas and I must prepare for the evening meal." With those words he directed his attention to Faelon, who
jumped up and assumed his official role, escorting everyone out of the suite. That duty discharged, he was himself dismissed and the couple was left alone once more.

As for Arwen, she made her excuses to the others so that she might get on with the real purpose of her foray into Legolas' private world. Though the events recounted had explained much, she still lacked any knowledge of Legolas' true state of mind during his early days in Imladris. Having that level of understanding was crucial to her ability to decide whether he was justified in breaking one of the most important rules governing bonding between the First-born.

Erestor and Glorfindel had duties to attend and were quick to part, going each to his own domain. Elladan and Elrohir also had a different agenda and hurried away without bothering to announce their objective, though the fact that they dragged Faelon with them was enough to raise brows all around. Only the wizard doggedly remained glued to Arwen's side, matching her step for step no matter which path she took, summarily dismissing all her polite attempts to shake him off. At last she halted and faced him.

"Why are you following me, Mithrandir?"

"You know the answer, child. You mean to work a spell and intrude upon the past. I would warn you against it, for perhaps ignorance is preferred where some things are concerned."

"Nonsense! I need to understand him and this is the only way."

"Surely not. You have just made a fine effort to bridge the gap between you. Would you now endanger that détente by this trespass upon his inner-most hopes and fears?"

"He need not know of it if you remain silent."

"So you would make me your accomplice, is that how it is? Well, well, I cannot stop you, after all, and mayhap I may prevent you from doing harm, or coming to harm. I say again: sometimes knowledge such as you desire is not so pleasant once attained, yet once acquired, never can it be expunged from memory. Are you still determined to tread this path?"

"I am. I do not fear to keep Legolas' sorrows in my heart, though I am certain there are many. I need to remove the doubts from my mind, for his decision to bring a child into the world, unwanted and unclaimed, troubles me greatly."

"You misspeak, Arwen; Legolas loves and wants that child and has from the first moment the notion came upon him to conceive. Elrond, too, loves his new son and would not be happy to know the depth of your disapproval."

"Be that as it may, I will have answers. I think you might approve of my consideration in not confronting Legolas about it directly. You might acknowledge my concern for his well-being in preserving him from such a stressful conversation."

"Insolent elfling! Do not dispute with me as you would your brothers. I know well that what drives your 'discretion' is nothing to do with Legolas. You fear only the repercussions from Elrond should you upset his mate by your intrusive meddling."

Arwen frowned and refused to answer, for there was nothing she could deny without speaking an outright lie. Instead, she contented herself to accept Mithrandir's supervision of the spell she hoped to work.
"I have your word that this will never be revealed to my father or to Legolas?"

"You have it, as long as this is the end of it. Once the spell disperses, I will countenance no further efforts to detract from the couple's happiness. If you have any feeling at all for them, and I know that you have it in abundance, then you will do as your brothers and work to make the child's life as carefree as it may be. And Legolas' in the bargain, not to mention your father, who has earned a certain right to a few years of light-hearted gladness."

"Then we are in agreement. We must go where Legolas' presence is strongest, but it must be a place he frequented in his earliest days here."

"That would be the healing wards," said Mithrandir, "and we cannot render the past anew unobserved there. The only other likely place is Lindir's Glade." Arwen agreed with his suggestion and together they strode away over the lawns, soon disappearing amid the tangled trees beyond the estate.

Once within the green meadow, Arwen removed from her pocket the strands of golden hair and the oak leaf medal. These she set on the ground and around them she traced three concentric rings: the innermost of petals gleaned from the abundant wild flowers, the second of wood twigs snapped from the boughs of an apple tree, and the third of stones, small and round and polished, which she chose from a velvet pouch she drew from her pockets as well. She was about to begin the words that would invoke the spell when Mithrandir stopped her and she dutifully stepped back.

Then the wizard bent low and, having left his staff in the house, traced with his fingers a twelve-pointed star in the turf. No effort did he expend and no stain of green or smudge of soil dirtied his digits, for the blades of grass simply reordered themselves, bending aside, entwining one another, or lying flat to enhance the image he desired. Once completed, this emblem emitted a light perfume and the air within the figure assumed a clarity unmatched, as if a separate light than Anor lit the space it defined. Standing again, he lifted both hands and held them over the star so that his palms overlaid the open air above the tokens stolen from the Wood Elf. In quiet majesty he spoke:

"Blessed Varda, Blessed Manwë, and all the Valar of the Blessed Lands, I call upon you for the gift of sight and the gift of oblivion. Let the first be granted unto Arwen, daughter of Elrond and Celebrian, that she may understand the will of the Valar in bringing Legolas into her father's life. Give her peace in the knowledge she receives and lend her the strength to remain steadfast and not turn away from what she will witness. Open her inner heart and link it to mine, to protect her from undo hurt and prevent her from causing hurt to the heart into which she will trespass. Make me a barrier between them and give to the sylvan prince oblivion, that Legolas may not know what transpires and lose what little trust he has in his adopted family."

With that done he cast his eyes upon her, and seeing that his words had not provoked in her either fear or remorse, he grimaced and gestured for her to take his place.

Arwen slipped off her shoes and went forward bravely, eagerly, for she could not deny the thrill this sort of magic raised in her soul. Though she could work such spells without the wizard's help, it would be imprudent to say so and earn his displeasure, for it was equally true that he could stop her with a thought. Into the centre of the circles she stepped and focused her mind upon the golden strands before her feet. She bent and retrieved the medal, pinning it to her dress. Three deep breaths she inhaled and released, storing the clean fresh air for its energy, using it to calm her thudding pulse and steady her nerves. This was always the hardest part, letting go of her own awareness, obliterating it within the depths of the Music itself.
It was a wondrous thing to peel back the boundaries between the present and the past, between one
mind and another, and experience all that had happened during a given time from the point of view
of some other person, to see their mind’s working and know their thoughts. It was like inhabiting
them, in a strange way, though the events she witnessed were only shadows long ago dimmed by
many dawns. Often she had worked such tricks with her grandmother’s aid, using her as a gateway
through which to glimpse the world of her ancestors from a first-hand perspective. All of them were
already linked to her by blood and their minds were moulded much as hers had been. Could the same
be said of Legolas?

Nay, the connection between them was tenuous at best and she wondered if she would receive
thoughts in Nandorin, which she could not comprehend, or if feeling alone was sufficiently universal
between kinds to translate for her? Was she strong enough to hold the link open long enough to
understand him? Were the tokens she’d gathered sufficient? Would the Valar, now made aware of
her intent by Mithrandir, prevent her from succeeding? All of these questions crowded her thoughts
and it took some time to clear them, emptying her mind of every distraction until her entire soul was
focused upon the centre of the twelve-pointed star. She drew and held a deep breath, blowing it back
over the space, centring herself as she touched her naked toe to the strands of hair and her fingers to
the medallion.

"Vairë, weaver of fate and recorder of every life’s journey, I call upon you to open to me a window
within time. Show me the account you have collected of Legolas’ life. Permit me to view his past as
it unfolded, from the time he arrived in Imladris until the moment he made his decision regarding my
unborn baby brother.

"All life is made of the Music and for the Music there are no mysteries. I float amid the chords of the
Music already plucked, already sung, and hearing it I will become part of it. Let me become the part
of it that was Legolas when first he came to Imladris. I will have complete comprehension of all that
passed through his thoughts, of all that passed through his heart."

Arwen waited, gathering the energy of life around her, knowing that could she exert herself
sufficiently and remain aloof to herself long enough, she would see every moment of the sylvan's
life. That was neither practical nor desirable and she had no wish for it; the recent past would do.
Ready at last, she reached out with her mind and touched the lingering Music contained within
Legolas’ golden hair. Using the gossamer filaments, she built up a transparent veil in the shape of the
archer. When the phantom was complete, she closed her eyes and stepped within it, easing it over her
as she would a garment. Once she could feel the shape clinging about her, she opened her grey eyes
and beheld the sights seen by the Wood Elf's blue ones. Feelings and thoughts soon joined them.

He awakened to soft light and the welcome caress of a cool breeze across his face, the throbbing in
his side dull and persistent but that was better than piercing and incessant. He knew that if he moved
even the smallest bit the level of discomfort would rise exponentially and so he tried not to shift,
though his muscles ached with fatigue as if strained against an impossible force, the pressure enough
to make him tremble. Then he exhaled and realised he'd been holding his breath as the boiling fury
unleashed its searing tortures, digging at his side and pulling at his chest so that he could not be still
and must try to get away from it, and yet where would he gather any strength for more than a feeble
quiver? That nearly imperceptible effort to escape was enough to ignite the greater fire which
surrounded his left leg, radiating out from a spot in his thigh just above the knee. It was too much and
he prayed fervently for an end to it, thrashing in torment against the invisible enemy hacking at his flesh so mercilessly.

Then through it a set of gentle hands reached for him, a calming voice spoke his name, a soothing presence settled beside him. Legolas regained a corner of his sanity and became still once more, trying to focus on this person, concentrating on the sensation of the hands so carefully supporting him, easing his body back into the relative comfort of supporting cushions. He knew these hands and trusted them, recognised this voice and longed to answer it, to ask what had happened to him, where he was now and when the suffering would finally end. Most of all, he wanted to see the face, or more exact, the eyes; sombre grey eyes, worried and troubled yet filled with a kind of amazed wonder whenever he managed to meet them. They held more than concern, more than compassion; within them shone the glint of the bond that united them. Legolas could not focus through the darkness and gave up the attempt, succumbing willingly to the oblivion of exhausted unconsciousness.

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He woke again, the pain grinding him up in its dreadful jaws, tossing him in a sea alive with writhing tentacles, snakes that hissed and bit and wrapped around his chest, constricting his lungs, strangling him, making his mind nothing but a railing scream of terror and despair. The voice and the hands were there and he tried to listen, tried to obey, trembling as a cool liquid, its scent acrid and bitter, trickled over his lips.

"Drink," urged the voice quietly. "This will ease the pain and aid the cure. Drink, Legolas."

He did, nearly gagging on it, and sucked in a huge breath, coughing it back out accompanied by hoarse and croaking groans that he realised, with no small shock, were generated by his own throat. Light filtered into his vision and he understood that he'd had his eyes squeezed shut against the torment. Now he blinked, desperate to clear his foggy sight and find once more those compelling eyes. He did and they were smiling, though fear and confusion were within them, too. He tried to smile back and had no idea if the expression was manifest upon his features. He parted his lips to speak, wanting to ask everything at once, but managed only one word: a name.

"Elrond." He was astounded by the sound, a faint and whispery noise that was nothing like his true voice. He sought the answer in the eyes silently: Am I alive? Are you real? Is this the punishment of Námo? Where is Galbreth? The grey eyes could not follow it all and instead the voice and the face and the hands answered.

"Yes, I am here."

"Where?"

"Just here, beside you," said the gentle voice and the comforting hands soothed across his brow. "Ah, but that isn't what you meant, is it?" Another kindly smile. "We are home, Imladris."

The potion worked quickly and Legolas' mind cleared as the level of pain decreased. He gazed intently at this elf who had undertaken to save him from death in the oldest of ways, the means of last resort. He had fully expected to die that day in the valley of the holly trees and was uncertain whether the alternative was a blessing or a curse, for now he was bound to this unknown person who was conversely known by all.
He studied the face that went with the name, an imposing and famous name, a name revered and respected throughout the entirety of Arda. Even his Adar spoke in respectful tones when he mentioned the name of Elrond. How could it be that this elf, a mighty Lord among his kin and kind, had been there at the battle, at that last moment? There had been others, yet Elrond had been the one to steal him from Námo's embrace.

"Why?" he asked, unable to prevent his distress from colouring the word.

"Why what? Why Imladris? That is easy enough; it is my home, my realm, my lands and the lands of my people. Do you understand me?"

"Aye. Nay. Why did you claim me?" This was a lot to say, for breath was precious and expending it thus exhausting. Legolas gasped to refill his lungs and this effort only caused the wound across his chest to pull sharply. He flinched, stiffening against the assault and shutting his eyes.

"Carefully, breathe slowly and deeply; try to hold the air a few seconds before exhalting." The legendary healer checked the bandage concealing the long gash to satisfy himself no bleeding was seeping through. Then he simply took hold of one of the tightly curled fists, opening it out and surrounding it with his own, offering what comfort he could until the pain ebbed.

When Legolas opened his eyes he found the serious grey ones upon him, their scrutiny honest and open, their expression almost apologetic and tinged perhaps with a sort of uneasiness the archer couldn't quite define. A resigned smile gathered about the Noldorin Lord's lips and chin and a firm squeeze compressed Legolas' fingers.

"I didn't have much choice in the matter, as I am sure you understand. The Valar must have an important use for you, Legolas, so strong was the urge to save you. I am not exactly comfortable with the quantity of light required to stabilise your spirit, but it is done and cannot be undone. I have fully recouped the loss and feel no ill effects from it."

"The Valar?" Legolas' thoughts were drifting and the effort to concentrate was taxing. What had he said of the Valar? Then a thought flared brightly and he seized upon it, eyes flying wide and his heart surging. "Is it Galbreth?"

"What?" Elrond frowned, uncertain what the sylvan was talking about. "Peace, Legolas, you should try to rest. Sleep for a time and rest."

Legolas obeyed almost at once.

"Legolas? If you can hear me open your eyes, even a little. Please, you must hear me."

He could hear, though the words were faint and distorted, recognising the voice of Elrond, and wanted to awaken, but the energy needed to do so was tremendous. Darkness weighted down his eyelids and muffled his ears, choked his lungs and pressed upon his wounds like spikes of iron. He heard the voice again and the next second a sharp blow stung his cheeks, first one and then the other. He gasped sharply and struggled to get away, but found himself caught at the shoulders, shaken roughly. At last his lips parted and he called out.
"Daro!"

He meant the command to be sharp and fierce, but his voice was meagre and strained. He pried his eyes open, desperate to find Elrond and implore him to make this person stop abusing him. At once he locked upon the cool grey depths, their expression this time filled with worry and something like aggravation.

"Praise Elbereth!" the Elven Lord breathed, allowing a grim smile to realign his features. "I feared you were slipping into a coma."

Legolas stared at him, not comprehending this term, heart filled with relief and gladness. Elrond would not let anyone harm him. He tried to gather his thoughts and memory returned; he'd been left alone in the room. How long it had seemed! An eternity of unending isolation broken only by the intermittent care of strangers. "Where were you?" he asked.

"What?" Elrond's frown deepened. "Just now do you mean? I was in council with the representatives of the guilds. The attendants sent for me, saying you were failing even as they watched." Then he turned aside and Legolas realised they were not the only ones in the room. Hovering near were two healers he recognised, though they had never offered their names. "What has happened? He was improving steadily before, yet now the healing has stalled and the wound in the leg emits an odour as of infection."

"Aye, Lord, that is why we sent for you. He was unresponsive and scarcely breathing."

"You have not answered my question," Elrond's voice rose in stern tones of disapproval. "I entrusted his care to you; is the duty too great to accomplish?"

Legolas watched the attendants and startled when one turned her gaze to him, her bright brown eyes flashing with anger.

"Yes, it is too much. He refuses food and water and fights against our care. We cannot cleanse the injuries properly and…"

"Enough, you are relieved of this task. I will assign others," Elrond said, dismissing them. When they had left, he returned his attention to Legolas. "What am I to do? They are the third pair you've run off. Legolas, you must learn to be a more co-operative patient."

"Nay, I'm not."

"How's that?" Elrond had to bend close and put his ear next to the barely moving lips. As he did, he let his hand rest amid the golden strands of hair, fingering the luxuriant tresses.

Legolas sighed. "Stay," he whispered, too tired to attempt more, and licked lips parched from thirst.

Elrond straightened and shook his head, rising to fetch some water. As he helped Legolas drink it he replied, delivering a reproving lecture to his sylvan bond-mate.

"Legolas, you must permit my staff to give you aid. If you wish to recover, as I am certain you must, then it is imperative to accept nourishment and water from their hands and permit them to tend you injuries and your body's natural functions. There is no shame in this, for you are too ill to do these things for yourself. I was hoping to see you up and about when next I came to check on you, but at this pace…"
He couldn't keep up with it; none of it made sense to him; it was too much to take in. He closed his eyes, just for a moment to rest them, but instantly the comfort of the vacant darkness beckoned. He slipped between the enveloping folds of thick, impenetrable blackness where sound and light and thought were blocked, free of pain and fear and the admonishing grey eyes.

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His pulse pounded through his temples with deafening reverberation and he could not escape the fiercely resounding thunder or the piercing jab that accented each beat, like a bolt of white-hot intensity lancing through his scull. On top of that, or perhaps because of that, he was sweltering much as if he floated in the boiling bath of a hot spring, the air heavy and difficult to draw in, equally difficult to dispel. His head must weigh more than a full cask of his Ada's wine and lifting it was impossible, though his hair ran with trickles of sweat and lay matted behind his neck, twining around his ears and under his arms. In short, his hair was seemingly alive and trying to smother him with its wet, weighty strands and he twitched his head in defiance, hoping to clear it from his face.

The action momentarily halted the pounding concussions searing his brain and in that split second he caught the sound of voices near at hand. Once discovered, he honed in on them, hoping to learn who it was and whether they were close enough to hear him if he called out, that is if the unruly hair would permit it without strangling him for his efforts. He opened his eyes; the flame had died in the amethyst lantern and the room was half-lit by the faint tracery of dawn's approach. The elves were close, perhaps on the balcony, but who? He strained to concentrate beyond the return of the incessant kettle-drum beating from temple to temple. Aye, he must hear, for one voice belonged to Elrond, to his mate; a voice he'd yearned for and missed. The other he did not recognise.

"...can see why you want to keep him, Elrond. Everyone will, for he is uncommonly lovely to behold. It is unseemly to do so, however, for his beauty does not change the fact that it is beneath your dignity to keep a sylvan consort. Surely you must recognise this."

"I find your remarks inexcusable. I am a healer first and foremost and here is an elf in dire need. How should I act? The bond was necessary."

"Why? If he must die then it is no more than other warriors have faced. Why this sylvan warrior? I tell you, your sons have spoken truth. The so-called bond is no more than a vile enchantment."

"Nay, he must NOT die! How can you hope for such a fate upon one who has never harmed you? I am appalled, Erestor, but not enthralled. There is no reason to become so excited. The bond will fade away as the elf regains his strength and rebuilds his inner light to its previous brilliance."

"Brilliance? This is but a lowly Wood Elf, Elrond, not one of the Eldar. Why should he want his previous level of light when now he has access to yours, a much loftier and purer illumination than he can have imagined exists? Can you not see how improbable such an affiliation is? Send him back to his people."

"I cannot. Surely you can tell the grave nature of his injuries and his illness. For Manwë's sake, it is not as if I plan to wed the archer."

In the dreary room, Legolas could not hold back the despairing moan that left his lungs, hearing this. He could not doubt that this was true, spoken as it was by the very voice that had held him just this
side of Mandos for how many days or months or years he could not calculate. It was all that had held
him, that and the intense grey eyes filled with curious amaze and what had seemed so much like real
feeling, real joy each time Legolas had met them. That and the lingering warmth in the touch of those
hands. That and the brief, sweet escape from agony when their bodies initially joined, the flood of
peace and contentment as their souls fused.

Had that not been real? Was all this but a dream? How long ago it seemed since Elrond had been
close enough to hear, and now what he heard proved all the former sounds to be lies. He was
nothing but a duty to be accomplished. The bond of extremity would never be recognised. Legolas
struggled against the throbbing headache and sat up, pushing himself upright in spite of the nausea
accosting his gut and the reeling dizziness scattering his thoughts. He felt the floor under his feet and
forced his legs to stand. They did, for all of two seconds, crumbling beneath him in a violent eruption
of tearing agony as the injury protested the exertion.

He never felt himself strike the floor, aware of the hands bearing him up, drawing him close and
securing him against the wildly beating heart of the Elven Lord. The voice scolded, gently, with
great trepidation, admonishing against such efforts, pleading with him not to tempt Námo so rashly.
The eyes, he had to look, though his despairing soul warned him he could not trust those eyes now,
not now. Legolas trained his gaze upon them; the grey depths were bright with fear and fretful anger
beneath the high and anxious brow. They recognised the hurt within his and a sharp breath escaped
the mighty Lord as realisation dawned. Now the voice placated and cajoled, trying to cover over the
ugly truth revealed by the overheard conversation, imploring him to forget.

Legolas found he wanted to forget. Here, in this moment, he believed what the Elven Lord asserted
for his inner heart echoed the same, and to that he would hold. Whatever Elrond said to others,
whatever he might tell himself, those eyes betrayed his soul, and that soul longed only to join with
his. Legolas exhaled a soft and trilling call of contentment as he slipped once more beyond the reach
of torment, whether physical or mental.

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"You must make the best of it that you can," urged Galbreth. "These tears avail you nothing,
muindor dithen. It will not be as bad as you imagine it and your bonding will make things good for
our people."

"I do not want to be bound. Why am I like this and you are not?" Legolas could not stop his tears;
this was a horrible fate and one he did not deserve. What honour could there be in this so-called
gift? He wished for no elflings, especially if he must nurture them within his own body.

"I don't know the answer to that," sighed Galbreth. "Nana insists your life is marked by greatness
and so the gift of dual gender must somehow be part of that. You know she sees most of what is to
come in the years ahead."

"I wish she hadn't made me," sobbed Legolas. "No one else is like this. Does everyone know?"

"Nay do not say such things! I cannot imagine life without you here. And of course no one knows.
This is personal knowledge reserved for family alone, at least for now. How could anyone know
what you did not understand for yourself?" consoled Galbreth, reaching an arm around his young
brother, wishing there was a way to appease the adolescent.
Legolas' knowledge had taken a great leap forward this day, their mother deeming him of appropriate age to understand the significance of the difference he’d long ago accepted between his body and other males. He had run to Galbreth and revealed what he’d been told, unable to hide his fears or his tears.

"You are not the only one for there have been others, though not so many remain on these shores or have chosen to bear young. It is a private matter, though, and few are aware unless the ellon chooses to make it known," continued the elder prince.

"I am going to be a warrior and rid the forest of these Orcs, Galbreth. I will serve in Ada's armies. I, also, choose not to bear any young," said Legolas, stony defiance in the wet, determined glare he showed his brother.

"So be it; that is your decision to make." Galbreth nodded sagely but his brow was drawn in lines of doubt. "Yet do not despise the gift you have received. The day may come when you are glad for the chance to be a life-bearer, to create and nurture instead of to destroy."

Legolas’ eyes opened and he searched the room for his brother, so real had been the dream. Galbreth's name escaped his lips and he felt he heard the echoes of the elf’s parting words from within the vision. For it was not a dream but a memory, and not just a memory but a genuine link between them. Galbreth had come within his thoughts during Ôlpathu, reminding Legolas of that day so long ago, and the reason could not be more clear.

Carefully he sat up, shifting in gradual increments so to minimise the strain upon his injuries. He was in the healing room, still confined to the bed, the air cast in grey obscurity for no one had arrived to light the lamps. That was well; he didn't want to see anyone until he had this sorted out. Panting from the effort and damp with sweat, Legolas rested against the headboard and shut his eyes.

The dream remained vivid in his mind and Legolas let it play out again, a strong pang of sorrow wrenching his heart to see and hear Galbreth so clearly once more, to feel again the stabilising weight of that protective arm, to know the comfort of trust so deep he could pour all his troubles into Galbreth's lap and receive back courage, wisdom, and resolve.

He would need all of that now in triple abundance, if he would do what this contact with Galbreth so plainly demanded: he must make the bond with his new mate true and bring to life that which his foolish and reckless behaviour had destroyed. Indeed, had not Elrond himself stated that the Valar preserved him for an important cause? At last the long weeks of suffering yielded the hope of a positive conclusion to this tragedy. In his youth, Legolas had found that Galbreth was more often than not correct and so it was now. He was glad at last for the unusual gift with which the Valar had blessed him and with joy submitted to his fate.

I will bind my heart to this Elven Lord and together we will bring Galbreth back.

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The light was soft and golden, flickering as if the sun danced upon the leaves of the forest in summer. He breathed in and out without more than a quick burst of convulsive anguish which faded back into the more familiar dull jab that was part and parcel now of ordinary respiration. Dared he try to move the leg? Nay! He must not disturb this welcomed respite at any cost, no matter how stiff his spine, how cramped his hips. Instead he concentrated on the light, opening his eyes wider so that he
could look upon his surroundings, no longer strange and foreign to his senses.

Unerringly his vision was drawn to the desk nearby, a simple design meant for utility and durability rather than ornament, for it was from here the illumination emanated. Before it was an equally solid chair and upon this, pouring over a long document, quill in hand, sat an elf. He was deeply involved in his reading, concentrating on whatever the words revealed, and did not realise he was the subject of scrutiny. Legolas looked him over well, from the lengthy tresses of inky black to the elegance of the fingers gripping the writing tool, and decided he was not a displeasing sight to behold.

Nor was he as he'd imagined, those few times in his short life that he'd had occasion to think about the Lord of Imladris at all. Somehow, he'd pictured a stern, ancient face, a body tall and lean and lacking the strength of a warrior in favour of the ascetic discipline of the learned elder. A coldly distant demeanour, devoid of spark or vigour, aloof and imperious: this was the personage he had conjured while reading the histories of Middle-earth in the library at home. Legolas knew all that the books had to say about Elrond Half-elven, and yet found that none of the words came close to describing this vital, dynamic person seated so near.

*Here is as fine an example of virile strength as any I have seen. Were he to spar hand-to-hand against Adar, who would be the victor, I wonder?*

Thinking this, Legolas had to smile. His situation was bad but here at least was a fanciful image to distract him from the pain. A soft snort of amusement slipped past his nostrils and at once the majestic head turned toward him. Vibrant grey eyes regarded him, the firm mouth softened into an inquiring smile so slight it was more perception than expression, arched brows lifted in question. The great Lord rose, setting aside the pen and the document quickly, gathering the flowing robes up to make his passage more rapid, and in seconds he was seated on the edge of the mattress. With gentle touches he counted Legolas' pulse and tested the sylvan's forehead for heat, all the while gazing intently at his patient.

"Elrond," Legolas said, the word more invitation than salutation.

"Your mind is clear; the fever has broken," he said at last, his touch changing from clinical probe to affectionate caress as fingers trailed down the archer's neck to rest upon the clavicle. "Do you need something for the pain?"

"Nay, I can bear it."

To this Elrond nodded, smiling at the careful pronunciation and the lilting trill of the sylvan's accent, studying him with interest, eyes tracking over the compact form appraisingly, noting the long scar that was still bright red, having only closed a day ago, yet his inspection was not without appreciation for more than the status of the healing wounds.

"I am glad to note so much improvement. You remember all we said the last time we conversed?"

"Aye. I am in Imladris, this is a suite in the House of Healing, and you are Elrond, my mate-by-bond."

"Good. Excellent." Elrond nodded approvingly, a smile lighting his features. "Now the question comes before us, then. As you are healing and growing stronger, what am I to do with you?" Of its own volition, his fingers slid along the line of the slender shoulder, revelling in the smooth warmth of the supple skin beneath them.
"Make me yours." Legolas shivered and shifted, wishing to raise himself up somewhat so to speak more easily with his companion. At once hands took hold beneath his arms and assisted, propping him against the back of the bed and stuffing cushions behind him. The covers slid down into his lap and now the hands lingered, soothing over his naked chest, tracing planes and peaks with feathery pressure that set his heart racing and sent a thrill coursing through his blood.

"You are beautiful, Legolas," sighed the Elven Lord and bent close to take a taste of lips already parted to welcome him. "I had not expected to find this experience so pleasing," he continued. "How long will it last? Ah! I will mourn the day it passes, for I have known no experience like this before. I possess you wholly, though you know me not, and it is a thrill to take such liberties as this." While he spoke, one hand delved into the thick flaxen mane as the other tested the resilience of erect nipples. "Tell me, is it as good for you?"

Legolas moaned, unable to answer, eyes bright with anticipation, watching as the skilful hands teased and toyed with him. His ears were massaged and tugged and stimulated until they burned. A tongue lapped over one and then the other and made him squirm in unbearable pleasure. Nails traced the flesh around each nipple and then pinched the rising buds hard, twisting before letting go. Blood rushed to the throbbing nodes; they ached for more even as the gifted hands retreated to revisit the ears. Legolas shut his eyes as the sensations escalated, reaching beneath the covers to fondle his penis. Elrond claimed his mouth, plunging his tongue forcefully inside, sampling every corner with commanding dominance, breaking the kiss to bend low and suck at his throat.

Lips and tongue cavorted over his heated flesh, licking and lapping across his clavicle and into the hollow where the bones defined his throat. Demure kisses wetted his nipples, the lips parted over them, sucking hard and drawing more blood to feed the over excited nerves. No sooner did the suction stop than cool breath wafted across them in tingling waves followed at once by swift, sharp nips as incisors closed and bit the ruddy titbits. Legolas' eyes opened wide to find the Elven Lord watching him with hungry lust, avidly cataloguing his every response.

The blanket was snatched away, exposing his engorged erection of which he had firm hold, stroking himself rapidly. Then Elrond abruptly stood and for a moment stared down upon the wanton display, tracking over every inch of aroused flesh before returning to lock upon Legolas' blue eyes. "Show me," he ordered and caught his breath as the sylvan instantly obeyed.

Legolas spread his legs wide, angling his hips so to expose the unique configuration of his genitalia, offering the red, wet hole which he parted with his fingers. An urgent call issued from his lungs, a trilling cry of need and want that demanded immediate answer. Elrond did not hesitate, opening his robes and his trousers, drawing forth his rigid cock, revealing the organ with which he would subdue his mate, presenting it boldly as he advanced.

In fascination Legolas watched the maroon penis filling his field of vision, growing to massive proportions as Elrond slowly approached, the head of it slick where clear dew crowned the orifice at its pinnacle. Respiration ragged and thoughts scattered, he wanted nothing but for his mate to claim him, to feel that cock burrowing inside, hard and hot, stroking him to frenzied ecstasy. He sounded the trilling call again and Elrond mounted him, penetrating him fully with a hard thrust, the smack as their bodies collided loud. An exultant cry left the Elven Lord as he pulled back for another go, hesitating long enough to favour Legolas with a triumphant leer before lunging into motion. He never once closed his eyes, peering with intense delight into Legolas' face, willing him not to look away, drinking in the fevered glaze that overtook the sylvan's sight as their passions peaked.

Legolas came first, a long shudder running through him as his eyes rolled back and his body arched
into the glorious sensation, a small amount of clear fluid spurting from his slender cock. Elrond continued to fuck him, grinning hugely as Legolas regained his senses and focused on the Noldo's face. Then he stopped mid-stroke and pulled out, standing back and stripping off his clothes. He displayed his magnificent body and Legolas eagerly took in the sight, sighing at the fine masculine physique and the still-rigid penis jutting out between the powerful legs. Elrond chuckled as he climbed back on the bed, turning Legolas onto his stomach and entering him anally.

"Ah! So good, so tight!" he groaned, redoubling his pace and pounding into the constricted cavity, hands reaching down to lift and position the compliant body, allowing him to go so deep that his balls slapped against the sylvan's rear with every thrust. He continued for some minutes, moaning in pleasure, leaning over to press kisses across the archer's straining back, and finally succumbed to his body's demands, spilling within his mate with a delirious cry of gratification.

Motion ceased and Elrond disengaged, carefully turning Legolas to him as he laid down, drawing the sylvan close against his heart, stealing another kiss from smiling lips. For a time neither stirred, content to rest and recover, secure in one another's embrace, for Legolas had wrapped himself all around Elrond. Finally the Elven Lord inhaled a deep breath and shifted, tilting Legolas' chin up to look into his eyes. He smiled and traced the stubborn chin with his thumb.

"Perhaps I shall keep you after all," he said. "I experience an unaccountable delight, Legolas, that I never thought possible through such intercourse. And what of you? Does this union grant you any peace, any happiness, or is it only need that drives you?"

"Need drives me, but I don't understand. Are the needs of the person and the person's soul separate?" Legolas asked, hoping to learn what caused this magnificent elf to rebel against their bond, for there was no doubt that Elrond reacted with remorse and something like shame when he became aroused in Legolas' presence, retreating in grim silence to relieve the condition as best he might. As far as Legolas' needs, he had been too ill up to now and today was the first day he had become aroused by his mate. His desire had surely ignited Elrond's, and had their union not been both pleasing and comforting? He could not comprehend what was wrong.

"Nay, those needs are the same when two are united in love rather than lust. What we share is not so base, surely, yet neither is it grounded in love."

"It isn't?"

"No. How can I love you or you me? We know nothing of one another, save that we are as unlike as fish to fowl."

Legolas wriggled free and sat up, gazing in fear at Elrond, for now that he comprehended the problem he dearly wished he had not asked. It could not be possible, yet so it seemed: the Lord of Imladris would reject him and cast him aside after all.

"We are both elf-kind. You cannot imagine learning enough of me to love me?"

"No more than you could acquire sufficient appreciation of me to experience that emotion. It isn't possible."

"You are wrong. I have already chosen you and love will follow in its natural course. You have chosen me as well, else you would not have claimed me on the field of battle."

"That was purely instinct," cautioned Elrond, sitting up also, worry creasing his brow. "I was
compelled, as were you. I claimed nothing, certainly not your heart. Our coupling meant nothing beyond that dire need to salvage your life."

"So for the Noldorin folk, the needs of the soul and the person are not the same. You will have the body and reject the heart it holds." His voice shook as he pronounced these words, wishing he had strength enough to quit the room and these devastating revelations. "It is my punishment, then, you so generously give with every caress. Ah! Námo could not have chosen a better one, or rather for me a more terrible one."

Alarmed, Elrond took hold of the distraught Wood Elf at the arms, squeezing his biceps and shaking just a tiny bit. Such reasoning was absurd; Legolas could not imagine himself to be in love. Certainly his people had explained the nature of the bond they shared.

"Legolas, no one is punishing you. Your heart is not mine to either claim or reject. Please, rid yourself of these thoughts for they will only hinder your recovery. It is best to let this strange link we share run its course. As time passes and it fades, you would regret sealing your heart to mine, which is not free to secure that seal."

"You are not free? Who is your mate? Does this elf know of me? Ai! I cannot bear this!" Legolas struggled to get loose but Elrond held him fast, shushing him with soothing platitudes he couldn't focus on and had no wish to hear. "I am your mate and you are mine. We are bound one to another and ever shall we be."

"Bound to me you are, but you are not my mate," answered Elrond firmly. "I see now that I was wrong to indulge the pleasurable aspects of the unusual bond. Doing so has confused your mind for you are young and had never shared the delights of the body before. For that I am deeply sorry, Legolas, I did not intend to deceive you." He rose from the bed and hastily dressed himself, refusing to meet the sylvan's woeful gaze. "I think it best to resist such temptations in future. Now that you are improving, I feel confident one of the other physicians on staff can adequately oversee the healing process."

"You are leaving now? When will you return, Elrond?" Legolas scrambled to the edge of the bed and sought to rise, but his body was exhausted and he fell back with a despairing cry. Instantly Elrond came and settled him against the pillows, covering him over and admonishing him not to be foolish, not to undo the work of so many weeks.

"Why must you go? What did I do that disturbs you? Will you not sit at the desk with your work, as always? I will speak no more of your other mate nor pose any obstacle between you. Will you not stay a while?"

Yet he would not reply to Legolas' questions, or rather he answered all when he gathered his papers and left the room, closing the door shut without a single word, not even a good bye.

Legolas stared at the barrier in shock, unable to comprehend what had just happened, refusing to accept this bitter result to his foolish desire to see the land of his mother's birth. It was meant to be a simple, pleasurable excursion, one he could not deny himself, not knowing when he might be so close to the Hidden Vale again. How could something so commonplace yield so much strife and sorrow?

Rejected by my chosen mate, I have no hope of bringing Galbreth back. I will fade: a truly horrible death. Better to have died at Galbreth's side.
He covered his face with his hands, clamping them over his mouth even as it yawned wide to emit a scream of anguished panic. He bit hard upon the flesh to stifle any recurrence, heaving great gulps of air as he sought to compose himself, glad that he had not revealed his parents' identity to anyone in Imladris. How could he admit the truth, that he had caused such havoc and destruction of life; precious life that now could not be renewed? What shame would come upon his people if they knew! Bad enough that they must mourn for Galbreth; let them not come to despise their second son for taking away the first.

No! I will not permit it. Elrond does have feelings for me; I have seen it in his eyes. He cannot reject what his heart has claimed, even if he fails to realise it yet.

This determined notion drowned out the clamouring thunder of his pounding heart and struggling lungs. Legolas sank back into the cushions, all tension leaving him as he repeated the belief like a mantra, refusing to accept defeat. There was time enough, for the signs had not manifested. Elrond's heart would be awakened long before that time and their union would become true and abiding. He needed but patience and persistence and the bond would do the rest. Silently, Legolas sent forth a call from his soul, seeking out the Elven Lord's. Finding it, he let the call cling, giving it a second pulse of his essence.

That will bring Elrond back; his spirit heard the call and must answer.

He had no notion then of how long he would have to wait for that answer.

Empty of light, the entire world was nothing but an inky pit filled to the brink with desolation and despair: the air, the ground, this place, his very heart and soul drowning in unending black oblivion. What did it matter? Dark or light, morning or evening, nothing was as it should be. Days had come and gone, how many he could not say, passing without change. Elrond remained apart from him, denying the call of his soul. Now he was too weak to send it forth any longer; the light he had managed to generate expended in the effort to reach his mate.

Nay, not my mate, of this there can be no doubt. Elrond rejects me and will let me perish rather than cleave to our bond.

A strange sound punctuated the silence and Legolas realised it was a wail of misery wrung from the depths of his heart. He sighed and another hitched and broken exhale rent the dense and lightless air. He opened his eyes, realising he had closed them while he slept, and blinked, finding he was in the sickroom still, not banished to the Black Void just yet.

Not yet, but when? Have I not suffered enough?

His vision moved to the empty desk, now neat and tidy, its clutter of parchments and scrolls removed, the ink and the quill gone. Sharp flares of agony seared him as he gazed at the empty chair before it, tucked close underneath. The desk and the chair were only that once more, stripped of the more prestigious identity conferred by the elf who had employed them.

Elrond's desk and chair once, but no more.

Better to chop them up and cast the wood into the fire, for how could they be content without their
master's attention? Legolas longed to rise and go sit upon the chair, to see the desk as Elrond had seen it all those weeks. Upon the table's polished surface wavered a thin and feeble light, a meagre incandescence radiating from a guttering flame clinging to a charred and depleted wick.

It was the lamp, its reservoir nearly empty, the oil-fed flame flaring minutely in the vagaries of the ambient currents of the circulating air. The vessel for the fuel was elegant, appearing to be a magnificent gem, swirled with violet and amber light within the planes of its prisms, the globe surrounding the single tongue of fire smooth and round and the colour of hoar frost on grass on winter's first dawn. It was mesmerising, the dance of the leaping light, and Legolas watched it avidly, for there was nothing else to hold his gaze. The room was empty but for himself and the amethyst lantern.

He was alone; the comforting voice, the gifted hands, the strengthening presence, the amazing grey eyes gone. A heavy sigh left him and a great well of sorrow arose, threatening to choke him unless he could dislodge it somehow and so he wept. He had no concept of the length of time he stared thus, no realisation of dragging his body from the bed, no memory of bashing the amethyst lamp against the desk, no sensation of pain as he seized one of the glittering shards and sliced it through his flesh.

"See? Here is a selection of books and should these displease you I have many more, hundreds. They are in Sindarin but I will read them to you, if you like. And there, the view from the balcony overlooks the gardens and often birds alight upon the railings, serenading me while I work. That is my desk just there, so I will be near should you have need of me for any reason. Whatever you wish will be provided; you have but to ask, Legolas."

Elrond spoke quietly, gently; his inflection and pitch kept soothing, calming, assuaging while beneath the dulcet tones ran a brash note of anxiety. He knelt beside the roomy chair in which he had deposited Legolas and peered into the desolate countenance, those elegant features pinched and strained with defeat and despair. The Wood Elf rarely spoke any longer, his relapse after the suicide attempts almost complete and thus his health reduced significantly. Whenever Elrond had forcibly hauled him back from death, the sylvan tried anew to end his life. After the third attempt, Elrond had resorted to drugging him, hoping an extended period of rest might rejuvenate the failing spirit.

It had helped somewhat, though the effects of the sedatives were severe and Legolas lost weight from being unable to keep food down. Elrond was forced to reduce the medications gradually, watching and waiting for any change. The Wood Elf returned to consciousness was much changed: a listless, broken being who failed to respond to questions or stimulus with more than a brief glance from dull, despairing eyes. He was fading and the fact tore at the Elven Lord's heart and soul, infusing him with a terror he could not account and guilt he could not mitigate.

That Legolas truly had bound his soul to Elrond's the lore-master no longer doubted. Arriving at the sickroom to find Legolas covered in blood, fighting weakly against a healer attempting to wrench the glassy dagger from his lacerated hand, had been more than sufficient proof. Whether he could give the elf enough of his heart to sustain him was the question. He did not want Legolas to perish and while this desire he attributed to the bond of extremity, there was a different quality to this need than during those first weeks together.

He could no longer deny that he would mourn severely should he fail to restore the Wood Elf, and
recognised the reason: so much of his soul was committed to the sylvan elf that his heart had begun to open, turning to this unlikely source of absolute acceptance and adoration as a flower opens to the rising sun. Legolas, unschooled except in the art of killing, unrefined in manners, ignorant of life beyond his gloomy, superstition-riddled forest, inexperienced in the ways of love, had been correct. The needs of the person and the person's soul were not distinct.

"We are bound together, you and I, and shall not be parted unless you wish it," Elrond said, his voice firm and sure, for this statement, this pledge of devotion and constancy, was not an empty promise but a true covenant between them. Intently he watched the abstracted eyes but Legolas' focus was through the open arches of the balcony, staring at the rustling leaves of the tree beyond the rail. Elrond sighed and stood.

The challenge now was to make this a reality for Legolas, one that he could trust. This day marked no less than the tenth month the Wood Elf had been under his care, and only today had Elrond deemed him well enough to leave the healing wards. Thus, he had escorted him here to his luxurious rooms in the Last Homely House, explaining that anything in the suite was to be treated as his own henceforth. The struggle to reach this point, figuratively and literally, had been considerable and Elrond was not deluded into thinking himself victorious. Legolas' soul was fragile, his heart a ruined and blasted mess, his physical vitality sapped. Elrond blamed himself, attributing the decline to his callous and cowardly retreat from the sylvan's impassioned plea for a deeper commitment to their unusual bond.

The suicide attempt had come close to succeeding but the physical wounds were the least of his concerns. There was a poison infecting Legolas more insidious than anything Orcs could devise, being a cancer of the heart and spirit. Elrond fought to bring him back from madness and the creeping destruction of grieving sickness and a broken heart. The Wood Elf's mind wandered in a strange state of disassociation, reliving the past, re-fighting the battle, mourning his brother and bargaining with Námo, begging forgiveness from parents far away. His only relief came when Elrond held him close and then he would sink into exhausted slumber.

When reason returned twelve days later, Legolas' first action was another attempt to destroy himself. For a second time he sliced open his veins, this time using a blade of glass from a smashed water pitcher. The opportunity had come about when once again he was deserted, the Lord of Imladris called away to confer with another healer over an elf wounded while on patrol. Fortunately, an attendant arrived in time to staunch the flow and stitch the gashes. Through that Legolas remained unconscious, having slipped into oblivion as soon as he'd done the deed.

He awoke screaming.

There sat Elrond beside him, mouthing useless words of consolation, begging for him not to fall prey to such despair. What could it matter if he died now or later? Why must he suffer this agony for so long? Was it not enough to give his life, that it must be dragged from him degree by painful degree?

All this Legolas had yelled and more, accusing Elrond of horrendous cruelty and torture, first saving him by the bonding and then pretending to accept their union only to cast him off, destroying all hope of ever repaying his debt and undoing his wrongs. He was cursed, doomed to fade and he refused to end that way, demanding a dagger be brought and that he be left alone, so that he could cut out his heart and die, since the hateful organ had brought him only humiliation and degradation. All this he shouted in Nandorin yet the meaning was clear.

Elrond silenced this raving outburst with seduction, using the bond against Legolas so that he submitted in tears and wept inconsolably in the aftermath of his release. Naturally this distressed the
mighty Lord, for before his sylvan mate had complied willingly, even eagerly. He resolved never to attempt the same until Legolas was well, for this was not like the instinctive bonding at all, not for Legolas.

Nevertheless, what had been effective before must still provide some benefit, and this was so. Their intercourse strengthened and calmed the Wood Elf and he clung to Elrond desperately, obviously frightened he would leave again. The Elven Lord fervently swore never to do so and gradually Legolas improved. A month passed and Elrond's vigilant supervision lapsed, resuming his duties as leader of the Noldorin community. For a third time Legolas tried to die, this time his action halted before he could harm himself, for the attending healer found him rummaging in the pharmacy for a poisonous agent.

The days of sedation started and this time Elrond feared to stop it. Yet, he could not keep Legolas forever sleeping and the drugs were having a debilitating effect on the archer's health. His weight dropped dangerously and Elrond began to suspect this was another plan to seek death. Accordingly, Elrond tried to reach his mate, hoping to convince him to strive for life instead, to give their strange bond another chance to finish its work and finally heal him.

"We are bound together, you and I, and shall not be parted unless you wish it."

He'd said that a hundred times if he'd said it once, and always Legolas just stared at him in blank lethargy or ignored him completely, no indication on his drained features that he understood or accepted this proposal. So many days gone by with no response, Legolas watching him without seeming to see him, hearing him without ever listening to a single syllable.

What more to do or say Elrond could not think. He'd tried singing, he'd tried reading to him, he'd talked to Legolas constantly, relating tales from his elfling years and sharing stories about Elros, revealing the personalities of Maedhros and Maglor, the sons of Feänor who had raised the sons of Eärendil.

He spoke of Lindon and Círdan and Gil-galad; he extolled his mother's beauty and mourned her nearly constant sorrow; he revealed his sadness and his guilt for failing to remember what his father looked like. He described the cities in the Grey Havens and recounted anecdotes about the citizens living there, many of whom now dwelled in Imladris. Elrond shared the horror and despair of his defeat at Eregion, his determination and hope when founding Imladris, his joy in becoming a father. In short, Elrond poured out the entirety of his soul's contents, both its laments and its victories, trusting his most deeply held secrets to this lowly sylvan archer from the woodland realm, hoping that somehow he could convince the elf to stay alive.

The breakthrough came unexpectedly, without any warning or indication that Legolas had been improving. As was his custom, Elrond had a tray brought in for dinner and chattered away about the goings on in the valley as he handed Legolas slices of fruit and buttered little bites of bread for him. The day's events included the arrival of a party of traders from Rohan bringing a large caravan of fine horses, many with coats of shimmering gold and manes as white as drifts of flowing snow. Elrond related the qualities of each one, indicating he would probably keep at least three of the larger mares as breeding stock for the estate. In the midst of this Legolas had cleared his throat, silencing the Elven Lord instantly. Elrond waited, breath suspended, eyes locked on the pensive face turned to him where blue eyes gleamed with unequivocal recognition and comprehension.

"There is a mare already in foal, and that one you should keep, for the sire is a great horse, a descendant of the ancient ones," he said, each syllable articulated with care, for the language was known to him but little used in his homeland. The last time he'd spoken Sindarin was during a visit to
Laketown and he'd practised with his Adar diligently for a week prior to ensure his accent was correct. How long ago was that? Somehow he could recall the event but not its location in time relative to now. This upset him and he clutched at the bow balanced across his lap, brow furrowing in confusion as he turned his eyes to the worried face bending near.

"When was it? Why have I forgotten?" he asked, but he reverted to his natural tongue in his distress and the elf watching failed to comprehend him.

"What is that? I'm afraid I do not speak Nandorin, Legolas, yet there is no cause for this dread I see within your eyes. Be at peace, tell me of this horse, if you can." Elrond smiled, ecstatic to have so lucid a reply, so normal a response and laid a sensitive hand over the fingers locked around the polished wood.

Legolas drew a sharp breath and unconsciously drew back from the touch upon his hand, staring at this austere and refined elf, this legend come to life, this great pin upon which so much of history was secured. Elrond Half-elven, renowned healer and lore-master. Elrond, scion of Eärendil, Herald, and veritable heir, of the High King. Elrond, Keeper of one of the Rings of Power. Elrond, Lord of Imladris. Elrond, my mate by bond. "Elrond?"

"Aye, it is only me; all is well," answered the noble elf calmly, not upset by the nervous retreat, for Legolas was not recovering either quickly or easily from the breakdown, but at last he could truly believe that he was recovering. He swallowed and offered an encouraging nod. "You were saying?"

"Was I? What?"

"About the horses from Rohan, when did you see the mare?"

"Oh, when the humans rode in." The befuddled haze cleared suddenly and Legolas peered at Elrond sharply. "One can see most of the estate from the roof of the balcony."

Elrond's heart leaped, frantic over the reason Legolas had been wandering about on the roof of the Last Homely House and how he had managed it without anyone noticing his absence from the suite. He squeezed the fingers tightly and fought the desire to give vent to his fears.

"You watched them from the roof?" he managed, a slight tremor in the tones betraying his emotion and, to his utter delight and consternation both, a twinkling gleam lit the azure depths focused on him. Was Legolas teasing him? He hadn't time to process that notion, as Legolas answered him, the words so unexpected and at once so welcome that Elrond was rendered speechless with emotion.

"We are bound together, you and I, and never shall we be parted."

"Aye, that is true. That is true, Legolas." Elrond could not get beyond that for several minutes, rising and enfolding the Wood Elf in a warm embrace, elated to feel lean arms wrap around him in turn. Finally he let go and resumed his chair, keeping hold of Legolas' hand as he sat and scooted a bit closer, all the while grinning in unabashed happiness. "You will not try to end your life again?" he asked calmly, feeling it best to risk the topic rather than minimise the seriousness of Legolas' despair.

"I will not," replied Legolas. "Galbreth was right, as is usually the case. He told me things were not as bad as they seemed to be."

"Ah," Elrond nodded, uncertain how to respond, for he knew of course that the elf was dead almost a year gone by. He wondered if this was a case of errors in speaking a foreign tongue or an
Legolas took pity on him, smiling. "Not recently, but when I was growing up he was my confidante and closest friend. His counsel remains with me, though he is gone and, Valar willing, he will return to me soon."

"I hope that is so, for I would gladly welcome the elf whose words, be they out of the past or the future, convinced you to return to me. We will find a way to remain together, won't we?"

"Aye."

And then, after so many days and weeks and months of unending talk, Elrond could find no words to say, while Legolas was content in his silence. They completed the meal and then retired to the balcony to watch the stars, only this time Elrond did not have to lead Legolas out to the chairs. At length Legolas sighed, feeling hope growing within him again, and reached for Elrond's hand.

"I was wrong to despair. I should have trusted what my heart revealed to me," he announced. "The bond is strong and only time was needed to bring it to bloom in your heart, too. We have plenty of time, have we not? And all will be accomplished long before the appointed moment arrives."

His smile was exuberant and Elrond returned it. Though the Wood Elf's meaning was somewhat obscure, the Lord of Imladris attributed that to Legolas' limited command of Sindarin vocabulary. He did not want to spoil the moment by inquiring more deeply, instead anticipating the rest of the night, for surely their joining would attain a level of intimacy they had not previously known.

It would be ten years before the import of those words became clear.

Mithrandir awkwardly patted the Evenstar's shuddering shoulders as she bawled, a miserable heap slumped in the centre of the three circles of awareness encompassed within the twelve-pointed star. He was not exactly gifted in rendering sympathetic platitudes and comforting gestures and neither, truth be told, was he sympathetic, on general principle, regarding suffering wrought by obstinate and pig-headed actions for which he had issued due warnings and cautions.

"There there," he said drily. "There there, Arwen, they are but phantoms you have seen, long past and resolved now. You might consider rejoicing over that fact instead of dissolving in misery."

Arwen sat up sharply and glared, shoving his hand away as she sniffed and wiped her running nose against the sleeve of her gown.

"I am not 'dissolved in misery', wizard, but deeply disturbed and filled with regret and remorse and guilt. I should not have pried into this; these are not the kinds of things a daughter should know about her father, or her father's mate, or indeed about anyone save her own mate," she wailed, rising to her feet and pacing about in the glade. Her visage turned a sickly shade of watery green and she groaned, leaning hastily against a tree as she clutched at her stomach, gasping against the desire to vomit as the memories, now hers as much as they were Legolas and Elrond's, flitted across her inner eye.

"So I said at the outset," reminded Gandalf, shaking his head in annoyance. As he had served as the
barrier between this spell and Legolas, he had shared everything Arwen had witnessed. "I will be having a talk with Galadriel about what she has elected to share with you. Much of what Melian revealed to her was not meant to be divulged to anyone else."

"What has that to do with anything? Did you see nothing of the past? Can you remain so removed from this situation?"

"That is exactly my point," groused the Istar. "I witnessed the same events you did yet I am not overwhelmed with the graphic details. I am capable of realising whence the Wood Elf's motives to bear life under such daunting circumstances arose. I am able to acknowledge the trials and troubles the two have endured and applaud the strength of the love between them, for it has borne all these catastrophes and continues to grow stronger. Seeing beyond the details, that is an indication of my wisdom, a valuable trait which you, my dear child, lack. Magic on the level your grandmother has revealed should never be taught to someone devoid of that essential quality, and that is what my remarks have to do with this situation."

Arwen gaped, far too wise at least to present any rebuttal to this scolding. Enduring this lecture from Mithrandir was, on consideration, much easier on the ears to the blistering denouncement she would receive from Elrond should he ever learn what she had done. Still, she could not deny that the spell had worked flawlessly and she had the answer to her questions.

Now at least she could face Legolas without resentment over the unborn babe. Clearly, he had thought these signs portending his brother's rebirth were far in the future; he had convinced himself that he and Elrond would have formalised their union according to the customs of both their respective cultures long before the time to conceive arrived. That the signs had manifested only ten years later, with Elrond still refusing to recognise their bond, had changed everything.

"You are satisfied?" asked Mithrandir, for he had been watching her closely and guessed the cause of her introspective silence.

"I am," she nodded. "I still do not approve, but I understand and cannot hold him at fault. I was hoping to learn if he ever explained and apologised to Ada, but truthfully I could not bear watching what was sure to come next."

At this Mithrandir laughed heartily, which she naturally did not appreciate. "Never fear, the hoped-for coupling did not take place, for Legolas lapsed again into distraction. It was like that for some time, it would seem: a few moments of clarity would devolve into broken despair. It was many more months before Legolas trusted your father enough to join with him, fearing to be rejected as had happened each time."

"How can you know this? Did you enhance my spell with one of your own, reading my father's memories as well as Legolas'?"

"What impertinence! Am I, Olórin, a Maia of the Order of the Istari, disciple of Manwë, subject to interrogation by one of the First-born? I think not. Besides, a long talk with your Ada is in order, child, and he will answer your concerns. As to the pregnancy, you have but to watch him with Legolas to see that there is only love for the young prince, openly and freely expressed. Nothing of bitterness over the child remains between them, if it ever did, and let us pray the days ahead are filled with sweetness and domestic bliss."

"Aye," Arwen smiled at last, for she wanted this for her father, regardless her early dismay over seeing a male Wood Elf replace her mother in Elrond's heart. "I am eager to meet Legolas' family
now. What is King Thranduil like?"

"He is much like your grandfather, save more impetuous and gallant, and perhaps more handsome, if you will excuse my bias."

The voice supplying this answer was certainly not Mithrandir's and Arwen startled badly, spinning to face the source. There at the base of a gnarled oak stood an elegant female of regal mien, hair as black as volcanic glass with eyes both clear and infinite like a winter's night. With a sinking heart Arwen saw within those flashing depths understanding and comprehension of all that had been said and done within the glade.

Thus did Arwen Undomiel, the Evenstar of Imladris, meet Rhûn'waew, Thranduil's wife-mate, Greenwood's Winter Queen, descendant of Eluréd, son of Dior, son of Luthien Tinuviel, daughter of Thingol and Melian.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Esgal Orthant: Raised Veil
Henen Vell: My Dear Child
Sell-en-lellen: daughter of my daughter
Elei Velthin: Golden Dreams
Ólpathu: Dream place
faer'fir: soul-song
Pathrol na Gail: Filling with Light - Enlightenment
Adar ar Ionath nin go'aro: Father and sons have me together.
Údobin lín faer gall, Elrond Peredhel: I uncover your shady soul, Elrond Peredhel.
Boe anim baded an Ada: I need to go to Ada.
Lindi swarn: obstinate green Elf (Nandorin)
Nín'ôdhel brui: My noisy deep elf
Elbereth nin beria dan tawarwaith vrêg: Elbereth protect me from wild sylvans
Sui Eru nin henia, gerich nín ind a faer, si an uir bán: As Eru knows me, you hold my heart and soul, now and for all eternity.
Ertho mín faer: Unite our souls
Nae: Alas
Tinu Mín: our little star

NOTE: OK, well this is a very long chapter and no doubt much of it could have been cut. On other sites, it probably will be, and on LJ it will be divided in three entries because of the limitation of characters allowed. Believe it or not, I actually did cut about 2000 words! But i trust you to skip what you feel has been covered enough in previous chapters and move on. I hope it meets everyone's expectations :)

I hope no one is surprised by Arwen's ability to do this sort of thing or her desire to find answers. Her 'gift' was introduced in the very first bonus chapter but that was so long ago that it might have been forgotten. Also, I hope it was apparent that as the timeline progressed, she was able to 'see and hear' more of her father's thoughts and feelings. This is meant to indicate his growing acceptance of the bond, his desire to share his inner heart with Legolas, even if that desire
remained subconscious for so many months.

Just to remind everyone, Legolas did explain his reasoning to Elrond and offer his apologies, (Chapter 7 and again in Chapter 18 gives a fuller explanation) and initially planned to flee to Aman rather than force his mate to take responsibility for the child. Recall that Elrond only learned of the babe because of the poisoning incident. You will find some inconsistencies, for example in Chapter 7 Elrond internally reveals that he 'lost count' of how frequently Legolas tried to end his life while in the healing wards, while here an exact number is stated. Surely Elrond's earlier thoughts were a bit exaggerated, no doubt because really thinking of the suicide attempts was so painful to do. We also see that Legolas was not opposed to their physical union until Elrond told him plainly that he would not become his mate, no matter that they were already bound. I hope this chapter makes it clearer as to why Legolas resisted intimacy later.

Technically, they had sex four times in year one: at the initial bonding in Eregion, once right after arriving in Imladris, Glorfindel showing upright after, once in joy during the early days when the poison was finally defeated, and once in despair after the second suicide attempt. At one point, (the Ened Ethuil chapter, I think) Elrond stated that he and Legolas only coupled three times their first year together, but he was not counting the initial joining. If there are other inconsistencies, I apologise. If you find any let me know and I'll try to fix them.

So I guess Arwen's magical tactics were helpful, but I do think it was telling that she had to be sneaky about it, going behind Legolas' back instead of talking to him openly and just asking. Her reasons? I think she feared further alienation from Elrond if her questions offended Legolas. She is feeling vulnerable, having been replaced first by this new young love in her Ada's life, an elf much younger than she is, and now finding he is with child, and she will truly be replaced as Elrond's favourite.

Mithrandir played it cool, didn't he, but I wonder what his real reaction was? He certainly learned a lot of details about Legolas and Elrond he didn't know before. Still, I am glad he was there as I don't think it would be good for Legolas to be touched by magic of that sort, especially being pregnant. (The strands from the 'present' Legolas, used to construct the phantom presence, were thus a link he might have followed, subconsciously, and then relived all that horrible stuff again.) Fortunately, the 'veil' Arwen created was from the time prior to the pregnancy, so the unborn child was never in danger of being exposed to Legolas' desperate attempts to end his life.

A lot happened in this chapter. The Twins have officially made their presence known. Wonder what they were doing in their father's rooms anyway. Snooping perhaps? Well, maybe that too but they did have a legitimate reason for poking around. Note that when they left they took Faelon with them. The exciting thing is that the house must be nearly finished and we know what that means :D

Faelon shows his true colours and he is all right in my book. A good friend for Legolas. And of course he revealed that our sylvan archer keeps a pregnancy diary, which the Twins are dying to get a glimpse of for certain, and we already know they are not shy about reading other peoples' diaries. So do you think Legolas would keep a 'regular' journal and hide it away somewhere, perhaps in his old tulip poplar? I have no decided if that's the sort of thing he would do, especially with so many secrets to keep. I think he would worry more about someone finding it and reading
And if Rhûn'waew knows what Arwen was doing, what is her reaction likely to be? And if she is alone in the glade, where is Thranduil and what is he up to? With his wife being so intuitive, I wonder if he has gone in search of the Twins right about now? Now if so, that is going to be a difficult meeting for him as well as for them. The bond changes everything. Where he might wish to tear them limb from limb, he cannot indulge such desires in light of Legolas' connection to them. As for them, what can they possible do to make amends? I am fairly sure this is something the brothers have been discussing in depth, so we'll see what they come up with.

I have not forgotten that we left this story on the verge of finally uniting our two heroes in a more 'legal' sense. We have some fun shenanigans courtesy of the Wood Elves, who cannot quite contain their desire to teach Elrond his place and punish him a bit for his treatment of their beloved prince. We have a talan to build in Lanthir Fân, we need to get aras out of Imladris, and then we need to go ahead and move ahead quite a bit.

Guess that's it for now. Thanks to everyone reading and to all you folks who send me such kind feedback, thoughtful well-wishes, and unending encouragement. I am indebted to you and deeply, deeply grateful. Now, I have some Xmas fics to finish, so I better get back to work :)

© 11/09/2008 Ellen Robey
Many many months have passed since last I visited this story and this is for me a very short update. You will have to forgive me for the strange flux in time we see here. It may be recalled that when last we saw Elrond and Legolas, the Lord of Imladris and his youthful mate had just undergone a gruelling and soul-wrenching experience, courtesy of Rhûn'waew and her potent magic. Let us leave the two lovers to recuperate for a short time. (I promise when we return to them interesting things will be happening) For now, there is something Thranduil needs to do and I must ask your indulgence regarding that feast. We will ignore it and I will explain what happened soon, but for now accept that this scene takes place the next morning sometime after breakfast.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Dawn after Elrond and Legolas Recover ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"I should like to have you stripped, stretched upright between those two trees, bound there hands and feet, and beaten until blood pools on the ground beneath you," Thranduil's words were low, his voice calm and nearly devoid of emotion. "I should like to cut off your ears and then castrate you. Finally, I would see you set afire and burned until your spirits cry out to Námo, though I doubt he would welcome you. Dearly do I wish to do this. It is no less than you deserve."

Frozen in dread to hear these threats so carelessly spoken, his victims stood rooted and silent, peering at him from behind the line of four flint-tipped arrows nocked, drawn, and aimed in unerring precision right at their hearts. The archers holding them under guard glared with scathing disapprobation. Surely their fingers itched to release the bolts, eagerly awaiting the King's command. Elladan and Elrohir dared not reply, communing in speechless and stoic resignation, exchanging mutual love and unending regret as each reached for the other's hand and clung tight, certain they were about to endure the very doom described.

How did he know to find us here?

That scout, of course. Why did he wait so long, that is what I would know.

We must tell him of the bond and save ourselves.

Nay, we haven't discussed that with Legolas.

Muindoren, if we are ever to have that opportunity, we must speak now!

"Yet I cannot enact this form of justice, a traditional sylvan method of dealing with traitors and those who wilfully abuse an innocent," Thranduil continued and internally smirked over the Noldorin elves' open show of relief.

For all his outward calm, his soul was flooded with almost euphoric darkness and a concomitant sense of righteousness as the words poured forth, for he had so needed to say just such things to Elrond and been forced, for love of his child, to refrain. Needed, nay, it was more that his grief and guilt and rage required, demanded expression in this direct, explicit manner lest the pent emotions sicken him truly. His minimal punishment of Erestor had merely whetted his spirit's craving for
atonement from these Noldorin malefactors and what he had planned for Elrond had been all but aborted, abbreviated into a kind of needling punishment by irritation due to his beloved wife's plea for merciful acceptance of their son's adored 'Nín'ódhel'.

"Hiren Aran (My Lord King)," Elladan bowed low, hand over his heart, "your forbearance is an indulgence we little deserve…"

"…and humbly accept with respectful and contrite hearts," finished Elrohir, copying his brother's attitude of deep obeisance, in which both remained fixed, eyes on the Sindarin King's highly polished boots.

"Hmm," Thranduil grunted in displeasure, unconvinced and unsatisfied, his yearning to make them suffer boiling just beneath the surface. "More words. Strange, is it not, the power within vocal expressions? Does it seem to you, as it does to me, that when used to convey negative or corruptive ideas, their potency becomes magnified a hundred fold? A few bilious words can forever blemish even the most pristine character, yet even a thousand times that number evoked in praise may fail to restore the damage once done.

"Flogging is too mild for such wounds are gone in a day, while imprisonment in some dank dungeon cell too severe lest you come forth blinded and insane. Spreading word of your trespass upon my son's reputation would but wound him more. I find myself desiring to cut out your tongues and have them cooked and served to your adar for luncheon. That at least would prevent any base usage of the organs in the future."

Still bent double, the twins eyes met in disbelieving horror as a bright flare of renewed fear ricocheted between them, for there was no denying the fitting nature of this suggestion. Hesitantly they righted themselves.

"Hiren, your anger is just and our guilt immeasurable," said Elladan. "If there is a remedy under Sindarin law, we are ready to receive it…"

"… regardless its severity. We stand before you cleansed of the foul degeneracy that produced those vile diatribes against Legolas, prepared to undertake any task, resigned to undergo any torment to expiate our wrongs," concluded Elrohir.

"Oh yes? What other tricks shall you perform? Can you gather up the stars and string them onto a mithril chain?" Thranduil snapped in grim sarcasm, glad to see the mighty and renowned Orc-slayers flinch and cast down their eyes again in shame.

A brief glance relayed a silent command to his captain and the warriors let their grips relax a bit, dropping the pointed shafts to belly height, disappointed to end the little play so quickly, for of course it was but a farce designed to instil fear. Wood Elves were not kin-slayers and for all their reputation for savagery, the practices Thranduil detailed were reserved for Orcs. These were archers who had fought beside Legolas and each was hungry to repay some of the insult and injury the haughty Imladrians had dealt to their comrade. They were more than pleased to play along with Thranduil. Nonetheless, discipline was paramount and almost synonymous with honour; none were willing to go against their King.

"What I see precludes it utterly and once more I find no means to vindicate my son and repay the tormentors who made his maltreatment possible." He had no difficulty spotting the flickering glimmer of Legolas' soul in their wide grey eyes and knew not whether to mourn or rejoice. Rhûn'waew believed the second bond propitious, but Thranduil was not convinced. "Ten years he
endured here, debased and despised, bereft of family, laden with guilt, wounded past the boundaries of grief and death combined, and it all comes back to you two, your father, and that scheming seneschal, Erestor."

Thranduil issued an abrupt hand-sign and instantly the bows were disarmed, arrows replaced in their quivers, the sylvans' dour scowls doubling in dark disgust as they assessed the twin sons of Elrond Half-elven. The King moved past the brothers, sneering as they jumped aside, one to the right and the other to the left, so to better examine the structure in which they had been working when he arrived. The location itself was picturesque and representative of the environment he favoured, having trees but not so many that the sunlight was dimmed, a brook just large enough to bear a musical voice, and a broad green meadow dotted with fragrant flowers. Of such type was the place of his childhood and it soothed his ragged nerves.

Fists on hips, he surveyed the façade with interest and gave a grudging nod, glancing back at his captives with a less virulent light in his keen blue eyes. The house was unique in combining the traditional architecture of their father's people with that of their maternal grandfather; a house not unlike a tree, rooted securely and safely to the ground while its upper portion opened beseechingly skyward. Thranduil had an idea of the purpose for designing an abode this way, yet would hear it from their lips, spontaneous and unsolicited even as their crude, derogatory insults had been. He motioned them to follow and advanced to the little pavilion wherein the plans were pinned down, scrutinising the drawing carefully as the Twins approached. When they were a foot away he reached out, snatched the one nearest by the hair, and yanked him close.

"Which are you?" he demanded, breath hissing over the pallid face scant centimetres from his.

"Elrohir." Said elf swallowed hard and remained as still as a stone, meeting the monarch's gaze with humility and no small amount of trepidation.

"Elrohir," repeated the angry father, imbuing the name with all the derision he could conger up in just three syllables. "Elf-knight? I think not, not based on what I know your character to be. What have you to say for yourself?"

"I… I can offer no defence," stammered Elrohir, eyes sliding to meet Elladan's to find his brother frantic, owl-eyed, and aching to come to his rescue. He forbade it with a minute shake of his head. "Please, Hîren, you need but speak and I will accept any penalty you deem appropriate." He audibly gasped out a lungful of pent air when he was suddenly released and shoved backward. He caught his breath as Elladan caught him, watching as the King zeroed in to confront his brother.

"Of course you will accept it!" thundered Thranduil, scowling fiercely ere he turned to the second twin. "That makes you Elladan, and at least that name is more fitting." His accusing finger pointed out the guilty warrior and then turned over and curled into a beckoning crook. "An elf with the tendencies of a man, so quick to judge and so quick to bury your guilt by pointing to another."

"Hîren, I too submit to your judgement." Elladan stepped aside from his twin to face the King and bowed low once more. "We know the damage we caused and would remit any price demanded to undo what we have done."

"You cannot undo it!" Thranduil roared and his guards tensed, faltering their bows anew.

"We realise this fully," averred Elrohir sincerely. "We only want to make things right."

"Right?" queried Thranduil, a lopsided smile accompanying the shake of his head. "None of this is
right nor can it be righted, not for Legolas." Suddenly he strode to his waiting warriors and conferred briefly with his captain, non other than Faron, and the four archers left the glade as silently as they had entered it. "We have need to speak privately," the King explained and returned to his caustic remonstrance, expounding on that which he would conceal from general knowledge. "Look at what has become of him. So bright was his future, so honoured would he have been, and now he is reduced to unwilling participation in this…this convoluted four-way bond!"

"You know?" Elrohir blurted out. "How?"

"Have I not eyes? Do I not know my own child's heart?" Thranduil ranted, not about to reveal how he had really come to learn of the bond. "Never, not even when he was but an elfling, has Legolas been this confused and conflicted. It is your doing! The three of you Peredhil have brought him to this state of misery and woe."

"Nay, Lord, he is happy, truly," objected Elladan boldly. "He loves Adar and Elrond returns that love."

"And what of your two? What is he to you?"

The brothers shared a quick glance, within it their determination to be completely honest no matter the consequences. Unconsciously dropping his voice low, Elladan spoke:

"He is our saviour. Through him we have healed a rift that threatened life and reason. My brother and I, we share between us a bond more akin to that of mated spouses than brothers." He paused, expecting an explosive denunciation of disgust and disdain for such a statement, but Thranduil merely motioned with his hand for Elladan to continue. "Because of what happened that day in Eregion, we became divided."

"Not understanding about the sylvan bond of extremity, I believed Elladan meant to dispense with me in favour of Legolas," Elrohir took up the tale. "I hated him. I hated both of them, and simultaneously loved my brother and desired your son. I will not deny it; I set about to ruin his chances for happiness as he had ruined mine."

"So, the truth at last. There is sylvan blood in you after all," nodded Thranduil yet failed to elaborate on his meaning. He peered from one identical face to the other. "You feel what? Gratitude? Remorse? Attraction?"

Again the brothers' eyes met. "Aye, all that," confirmed Elrohir. "I know it is not love as Adar loves him, but we respect him…"

…and have found much to appreciate. Real friendship has begun between us…"

"…and we have pledged to be true mates to him…"

"…but make no demands upon him of any kind. Whatever he needs us to be, we shall be."

"It is for him to decide how and when we are included in his life."

"We are committed to making his life as easy as we may and will defend him and the child he carries against any detractors." The brothers finished in concert and awaited their doom.

Thranduil evaluated them thoughtfully for a few moments and deemed their words sincere. Within
their eyes burned the gentle gleam of his son's light, so young it could be no other's, and recognised
the soft glow their essence had imparted to Legolas' feä. What he had thought to be evidence of
Vilya's power was instead the spark of their unique bond. *Mates, indeed.* He sighed and rubbed his
eyes, for they had unknowingly brought up a topic that was rather delicate. It was obvious the twins
hadn't a clue about this aspect of the bond. He proceeded to enlighten them.

"Ah, yes, the babe. Legolas is first of all too young to be bearing a child yet and, second, too
depleted physically to carry the infant, and third, too emotionally drained to sustain his precious
burden," Thranduil revealed, eyes flashing with both anger and fear as he counted out the obstacles
his youngest son faced. "What say you to that, Elf-man?"

"I say it is good his mate is Keeper of a powerful source of healing energy," Elladan answered
cautiously.

"Aye, Elrond will never let Legolas go now and neither will he permit the child to be lost," Elrohir
added. "They will come through it, somehow."

"Somehow," Thranduil repeated, great sadness in his voice. "You cannot know the cost. Legolas is
so much changed we hardly know him. My golden son is gone, replaced with this diminished
facsimile, more a reflection of Elrond than he is the elf I begat."

"Nay, Legolas is not diminished, Hîren, if you would but look again. He is renewed and he is
healing now. You will see more of his true persona returning as the days proceed," insisted Elrohir,
for this Lindir had assured them and they wholeheartedly needed to believe it was true.

"Did the minstrel happen to explain how that would come about?" Thranduil asked and the blank
looks returned gave the answer he expected. "Ai Valar," he muttered, turning and pacing away and
back, to and fro before the brothers and their unique house.

*What is amiss now?*

*I fear to know it. Surely Lindir would not speak falsely of something so important.*

"Hîren, I beg you to be frank for, to our minds, this hesitation bodes ill for Legolas," urged Elrohir.

"Nasan," Thranduil declared, coming to his decision at last. "I noticed the healing has only recently
become fully engaged. Why is it you withheld your light from him so long? I can think of no greater
cruelty." The King stood before them stern and reproving as he spoke, yet hopeful all the same for
within Elrohir's words was real dread and not for what was to befall them. It was for Legolas they
feared. He was answered at once, the explanation pouring out in tandem, the words limned in
apology and shame.

"Ai, Hîren, it was not from cruelty we refrained, though we see how it appears that way. We knew
nothing of bonds like this…"

"…and it was not until Lindir explained that we understood what to do."

"We thought such things forbidden, for so it is among the folk of Imladris…"

"…and could not reconcile what we felt so keenly we needed…"

"…with what we deemed the morally correct stance to maintain."
"He was solely Adar's mate, for all we knew, and we have secured our bond with him but days gone past." Identical grey eyes locked on the King's concerned face as the brothers waited to hear what their unlikely law-father would make of this.

"That at least explains much," Thranduil said, frowning, "though it does not excuse the slanders and slurs you heaped upon him, both here and abroad. Can you imagine what it was like for my wife when Celeborn took it upon himself to arrive at our door and reveal what had happened to Legolas?" He loomed close, glaring coldly at the mirrored forms cowering before him.

"Nay, Lord," they whispered, eyes cast down. Truly, they had not known for Celeborn had kept secret what he knew of Legolas' heritage.

"Out of respect for our humiliation and grief, Celeborn came to Greenwood with the news rather than trust the tale to a messenger. What Legolas has endured here in your pretty valley is a fate worse than death, by his peoples' reckoning. Sylvan ways are not like the traditions of other people and some find these beliefs too rigid. Yet it is an unfair judgement made by folk who have not looked into the face of extinction," Thranduil lectured, having come to terms with his adopted peoples' unusual characteristics and the mores accompanying them long ago.

"You are right, Hîren," the twins murmured, bowing yet again. "We cannot erase the injuries our actions caused, but we would see Legolas fully restored. Tell us what to do."

To their surprise, Thranduil smiled, albeit the expression was a grim and bitter one. "You will aid in nurturing him through this pregnancy. He is woefully unprepared and has no inkling of what drives him now, for there was no cause to inform him about the workings of so unusual a bond. Such situations are very rare even among the sylvans, for it is more common for an elf to choose death rather than accept a secondary infusion of light, even when it is freely given. Legolas did not have even that option for his soul was unclaimed when this happened."

"We did not realise any of this," the brothers spoke as one, "had we known, we would have stayed out of Adar's way."

"I know it. It does not matter now; everything has already happened." Thranduil sighed in sorrowful resignation for the plight of his son. "He is going to need you."

There was a short pause as the brothers conferred silently.

'Need us'? Is he saying what I think I heard?

*It could be anything; these are sylvan customs we're discussing.*

*Aye, let us be clear before we agitate this elf further.*

Elladan cleared his throat. "Need us how, exactly," he ventured awkwardly. "Do you mean… intimately, as mates?"

"That is to say, sexually?" added Elrohir just to be completely sure.

"Of course that is what I mean!" snapped Thranduil. "Do you think he requires cronies with whom to go hunting and fishing?"
"Nay, Lord," Elrohir's face flushed to match his brother's. "It was just unexpected. We thought to leave for a time and give him and Adar the opportunity to seal their bond."

"Aye, and Adar is very jealous of our place in Legolas' life…"

"…while Legolas is troubled. He does not know what is acceptable and proper anymore. We did not want to add to his worries."

"Have you any idea how irritating that is?" complained Thranduil in exasperation. "Stop interrupting each other!"

"Impossible," voices indistinguishable in pitch and timbre intoned the syllables together. In spite of the dire nature of their conversation, the twins could not suppress a mischievous grin.

"Fine, never mind," Thranduil shook himself a little in response to the agitation their uncanny singularity caused him. "In any case, you cannot leave him. It may be true that Elrond's ring could supply what is lacking, but I would rather this need be filled in the natural way. It is the souls of his mates he craves and anything else will have deleterious effects. You will stay and I will attempt to explain this to him, though past experience teaches me he will stubbornly refuse to hear me."

"That is well, but who is going to explain it to Elrond?" queried Elladan. "Adar is not pleased with our interaction now, which is minimal. His jealousy threatens to hinder the love the two share."

"Aye, and Legolas hides things from him of much lesser importance for fear of causing strife," Elladan elaborated. "He is not likely to be comfortable informing Elrond when he plans to seek us out. All the deception just keeps them from becoming devoted mates. If we remain, I fear the resultant tension will be much worse for them both and the child."

"Well spoken, Elrondion." Thranduil could not help smiling his approval, for Elladan's argument was exactly what he would hope his son's mate would say. The elder twin, he deemed, was more attuned to Legolas' feä. "Elril will divulge this new arrangement to Elrond," the King announced. "Your adar respects him and will not argue with such an esteemed elder among our people. One way or another, the three of you are going to do right by my son and ensure his babe not only survives but is born healthy and strong."

"We wish that, too," insisted Elrohir, "but who is Elril? We believed ourselves acquainted with all of Adar's friends and no of none among the Greenwood's folk."

"Ah, you have not met your great-uncle yet," chuckled Thranduil, smiling in genuine appreciation of the meeting, for he knew the old elf was highly displeased with the news Celeborn had shared regarding the brothers' opinions of Legolas. "He is your grandmother's brother, a twin as are you two, and the rightful heir of Dior of Doriath. Your history does not recount his life among the sylvan people, for great secrecy accompanied the adoption of the forgotten princes." Here he puffed up visibly. "My beloved queen is directly descended from Elril."

"Valar! We have missed much whilst working out here," announced Elladan, his tone filled with excitement.

"You believe our ancient kinsman can influence Ada's attitude?" Elrohir was sceptical but Thranduil waived away his doubts.

"You will understand when you meet him," he said grandly. "Now, as to custom concerning
multiple mates, this house you are building is ideally suited. Surely you two exhibit far more of that unique trait of foresight inherent in the descendants of Thingol and Melian than your Adar. Such seclusion from the general population is necessary. Even among the sylvans the needs of such a bond are not easily borne."

"That is doubly true for our people," agreed Elrohir. He hesitated until Elladan gave him a mental nudge. "If I may say, Lord, our bond with Legolas gives us great joy and what you ask is no burden to us."

"Indeed," Thranduil's eyes narrowed on hearing this. "I do not want to hear more in this vein, now or in future. Neither do I wish to interfere, but let me make it clear that my son is not to become a play thing traded between the three of you, no matter what he thinks he wants. If I learn, through whatever means, there has been this…" his features screwed up into contours of absolute abhorrence "…quadruple conjunction, there will be immediate reprisals."

"What?" the Twins blurted out, eyes wide and brows arched high.

"Your hearing is not failing nor is my faculty of speech impaired," growled the discomfited father. "He is too young and inexperienced to indulge such fantasies, having no means to judge the severity of the consequences. Furthermore, he is at the very least your equal and you will treat him as such."

"Of course," Elladan stammered, still shaken by the implications of the King's admonishment. He wants us all together?

"We would never take advantage of his youth." Elrohir knew not what else to say, for it seemed Thranduil believed he and his brother likely to encourage such an unseemly act. Ai, to that I do not think I could agree.

"Nor have we any desire to share such intimacy with our Adar," Elladan actually shuddered as he spoke the words.

"Good, then." Thranduil flashed a quick, uneasy smile and turned back to survey the house. "This house I deem a good omen. Clearly you designed it with his wishes in mind. I like the open plan and Legolas will love it."

"Aye, he does," Elrohir appended with hopeful enthusiasm. "Would you like to see the inside?"

"He knows of it?" Thranduil's smile grew. "That must have eased his fears. In some sense I wish Lindir had waited for our arrival before instructing you, for it would have been better for Legolas' parents to prepare him for the new bond. Nothing was told to him of such things for his future was set, you see, and there was no reason to suspect he would ever be subjected to such a fate as this."

The twins wisely withheld their comments on this, knowing Thranduil spoke of the practice of trading one's offspring for political or economic gain. It was not for them to judge the King, for next to the wrong they had done Legolas, his was inconsequential. With genuine pride and the desire to gain their new law-father's approval, the brothers guided him through the front door and the tour progressed. By the time they reached the nursery and Thranduil found the toys for his grandchild, he was close to tears.

"I am pleased," he said softly, "and much reassured. The bond is true. You are worthy mates for my son, yet I cannot let what you have done go unpunished. There is something you will have to bear in conjunction with the ceremony about to take place; something you will do for Legolas and his
primary mate, though mayhap in future you will benefit from it as well." Thranduil was turning
decidedly pink about the ears and his voice dropped in volume. "There are certain sylvan traditions
regarding the wedding night," he confided. "Normally his brother would handle such details, but that
is impossible."

The twins shared a surprised and eager look. "You intrigue us," said Elladan, leaning close and
lowering his voice also. "What would you have us do?"

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Acharn-en-Adar: a Father's Vengeance
Erthad Veren: Joyous Union
Esgal Orthant: Raised Veil
Henen Vell: My Dear Child
Sell-en-Iellen: daughter of my daughter
Elei Velthin: Golden Dreams
Ôlpathu: Dream place

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Thick and woolly, redolent with the warm, fecund breath of growth and life, the dark hummed and chirped, sighed and rustled, verily filled with the world it obscured. Within it chased the subdued sounds of nocturnal life, the rich aromas of earth and slumbering green things, the shadowy spectrum of greys and blacks from pale and dusky dimness to ill-defined wells of infinite sable. Night was not a thing to inspire fear but a familiar friend, a nostalgic glimpse into time long departed when the eyes of the elves knew no other landscape. In contrast, the abrupt bloom of brilliant light obscured the world as it displaced the dark, usurping mastery of the terrain and stunning into silence the quiet creepers stalking the shaded vale, both predator and prey, awakened the resting trees, and threw all of nature off balance. Unnatural light, it cast no shadows and stole perception. Beyond blinding, it was annihilating rapture. Its splendour increased until it was hotter, whiter, and more dazzling than the sun.

The only sensation akin to it in his experience was the blisteringly glorious agony that accompanied the severance of hroa and feä in the instant following Námo's summons to Mandos. Glorfindel shut his eyes against it and still the liquid radiance burned into his brain. When and where had he encountered enemies so potent and battle so terminal when none of the Shadow's creatures remaining on Arda were a match for his skill and determination? Was he not still in Imladris? Mayhap this was a nightmare. The incandescent torment slicing through his scull belied that notion. He threw his hands before his face and turned aside, crouching low and emitting a low cry of dread he was not cognisant of uttering.

"Be still; it will pass momentarily," a calm voice exhorted him as a comforting hand clasped his shoulder. "I beg forgiveness; in such a fair realm, it is easy to forget evil days and the life you lived before. This is not a burden we ought to have visited upon you, nor was it intended to be hurtful. The woodland folk are but playful and inclined to be pranksters at times."

"It wanes," groaned Glorfindel and cautiously lowered his hands, blinking at the brightly haloed form before him. The voice was familiar but he could not place it, the confusion of his senses preventing sufficient concentration to bring the name to mind. The sudden flare of the flames had taken him unawares and erupted so near he feared to discover himself immersed within the heart of the bonfire. "Who are you?"

"Elril pêd, maethor brand a beriathron o muindorion nin," (Elril speaks, noble warrior and protector of my nephew) the kindly voice replied. A careful tug propelled his captor into motion and he led the Balrog-slayer to a sheltered place not far from the raging bonfire and the rugged clearing, seating him on an incongruously opulent stool.

"Ah, that is better," sighed Glorfindel, smiling in thanks. He gazed upon the ancient countenance in curious wonder, for he still could not get over the connection between Legolas' people and Elrond's. Then he realised he was rudely staring and drew his eyes away, glancing about the clearing to watch the Wood Elves dancing and feasting all around them. The light was now that of any normal campfire, orange and yellow and shot with sparks and rising embers. "I have heard of the magic of..."
the sylvans, but this is beyond all telling. Whence comes such flame? It begins as if Anor dropped to earth and how does it vanish and appear so quickly?"

"The folk of the woods know many such tricks," chortled Elril. "It is not for me to give away our best kept secrets. Be content that the game is finished; we would have you enjoy the night and join the dance."

"My thanks, but where is my Lord your nephew, Hîr Orchal? The journey here was not exactly untroubled, for all these are Elrond's own lands. Then the tricky fire confused and separated us. Where, also, are Erestor and the minstrel?"

"Do not be troubled, mellon, we have not been harmed."

Lindir's rich voice sounded behind him and Glorfindel rose, turning to spy his friends advancing hand in hand from the opposite side of the glade. He grinned to see it and shared his joy with the ancient ellon.

"No need to confer such lofty titles upon this old head," corrected the aged heir of Dior. "I relinquished that part of my life long Ages ago."

"So you say, Hîren, yet I cannot forget that you are a living link to the heritage of Thingol and Melian that spawned the House I was sent here to serve and protect," reminded Glorfindel.

"Enough," groused Erestor. "This is a party, Glorfindel. Dispense with duty for at least the next few hours. Here, this may aid your relaxation somewhat." He held forth a goblet half-filled with an amber liquid, frowning when the mighty general leaned forward and sniffed it delicately. "Oh come, they've no wish to poison us."

"Indeed not!" laughed Elril, but he took the cup and drank first to prove the point. "The brew is unique to Greenwood and I believe other realms call it 'fey wine', though it is less that sort of vintage and more like a fluid form of ecstasy." He nodded as the Balrog-slayer finally took a small sip of the potent concoction. "Aye, small quantities are recommended for those not acclimated to its properties."

"You do not lie," Glorfindel choked out, gasping in a noisy breath that did nothing to ease his burning oesophagus. He tried to clear his throat and was grateful beyond words when Lindir pressed a cup of clear water into his hands. Two gulps lessened the sharp discomfort and he at once became aware of the warmth spreading through his body, a pleasing sense of giddy delight accompanying the sensation. "Oh, I begin to understand its benefits," he murmured happily and tasted the drink again. This time the fire was more a radiant and gentle caress that touched his very soul. "And where is the Lord of the Valley and the Prince of the Woods?" he demanded, surveying the gyrating bodies whirling about and leaping amid the soaring flames. One or two sylvans looked back in amused curiosity. "I would offer a salute to the Mariner's son and the Mariner's nephew," called Glorfindel, receiving a smattering of approving 'yeas' from the Wood Elves close by. The dual reference gave him pause. "Valar, what does that make the babe?"

"Ai! Stated like that it sounds ter'bly scandalous, Hîren," a new reveller joined them, already thoroughly under the influence of the heady wine. "Marrying one's cousins, making inbred offspring, and all that sort of thing is so…so…" but Faelon could not find sufficient words to describe the unusual relationship and for no reason at all this became highly amusing. He giggled, a high-pitched and musical expulsion of air, while an exaggerated shrug finished his sentence instead.
"Alae nae," sighed Lindir. "You have had enough of that, Faelon." He tried to take the valet's goblet but the limber ellon twirled beyond his reach. The minstrel aimed a warning finger. "Heed me well; do not let Legolas overhear such notions. There are many generations between him and Elrond and while everyone knows it, he is a little sensitive just now to any implication of impropriety about their union and their babe."

"Oh, I won't," assured Faelon, though he was a tad bewildered. "What are we talking about?"

"Never mind, mellon," laughed Erestor. "Where are Elrond and his youthful mate?"

"Ah," nodded Faelon with gravity, causing him to stagger sideways into Glorfindel, who caught him and earned for his trouble a suspicious and confused look. "I am not of that persuasion, Hir Glorfindel," he stated with great dignity as he shook free.

"What?" The Balrog-slayer stepped back hastily. "Nor am I! Faelon, you have overindulged."

"Yes?" asked the erstwhile servant, nodding sagely. "Yes, then why are you the one making unelish…unsedired…er…unwanted advanceshes?"

"I am not…oh confound it! Where is the happy couple?" Glorfindel turned again to Elril but it was the valet who answered.

"Just mind your manners, Hiren," intoned Faelon, pointing as he edged closer to Lindir. "Elrond made himself sick from too much drink and Legolas is…ahem…comforting him, over there somewhere," he waved vaguely with his wine glass beyond the trees behind them, "in a quaint little hut made of branches and twigs. Quite plush inside, though." He drank from the cup and did not seem to realise it was already empty. "Don't know why they had me bring all those fancy clothes and naughty toys and all when they're just going to be naked and stuck together the whole time anyway. Fucking like…like…Elbereth! Elrond just goes on and on and Legolas is insatiable. Nobody fucks like they do."

"Faelon!" All three of his Lord's friends exclaimed in unified shock as Elril exploded in laughter.

"Is there an antidote to this stuff?" asked Glorfindel, eyeing his cup askance.

"Who cares?" snorted Erestor, eyes gleaming in the night as he sidled next to Faelon. "Tell us more, mellon. What sort of antics do those two get up to? What sort of naughty toys does our dear Wood Elf prefer?"

"Nay, I'm no…no…my lips're sheeled…sealed lips," announced the valet with appropriate shock and dismay. "I would never tell about the great garnet balls he shoves up Legolas' arse or those mean looking clamps he snaps onto tiny lil' pink nipples," Faelon shuddered, "and the cock rings and leather cuffs and wooden phal…phal…peniseses and…"

"Valar!" Glorfindel was actually blushing and Lindir clapped a hand over the servant's mouth.

"That is not within the bounds of your station, mellon," he growled, but it was with Erestor he was more annoyed. "You should not encourage him, Meleth, for he does not know what he is saying."

"Aye, Meleth, a thoughtless relapse into behaviour I hoped never to repeat," the seneschal dropped his eyes to the ground. It was difficult to adapt, for so long he'd been accustomed to openly savouring the more salacious aspects of Elrond's relationship with Legolas.
"Meleth?" Faelon gaped, eyes agog with merriment as he looked from the minstrel to the seneschal and back. "You two are lovers? When did that happen? Ulmo's Balls, its like fox and a hare, a wolf and a hind, an eagle and a...something or other. It'll never last!" He broke into barking laughter, pointing as he staggered out of Lindir's clutches, unmindful of the furious expressions colouring the lovers' faces.

"Faelon, you've said too much," intoned the Balrog-slayer. He turned imploring eyes to Elril, the elder no longer chuckling over the lurid references to his nephew's sex-play. "Is there somewhere we can detain him? Elrond will have his hide tacked to the barracks wall for this breech of faith."

"To say nothing of what I will do to him should he repeat any of those less than conciliatory remarks regarding our relationship," seethed Erestor, un pleasingly certain which of them, himself or Lindir, was cast as the predator and which the prey in the valet's convoluted thoughts.

"Do not fear," Elril replied. "He won't recall any of this tomorrow and the repercussions of imbibing too much fey wine will punish him beyond anything you might plan. Come along, Faelon, you must be tired after all the day's duties."

"No, I've an assanashun...I mean a ronde...ronder...I'm to meet my b'loved under the elms and we'll be..."

"Yes, yes, pen dithen, we know," soothed Elril. "In fact, your beloved asked me to tell you there's been a change of plans. There's a new meeting place, much nicer and more comfortable for you both than the floor of the forest." Adroitly he corralled the drunken valet.

"Oh yes?" Faelon asked eagerly and permitted the ancient scion of Dior to lead him away. "Tha's good; I don't like the bark and leaves and splinters an' all that. She's very particular, my beloved."

"As any Lady would be," agreed Elril. "Let me guide you to the place for the paths are new here and the night is dark." He caught Erestor's eye. "Accompany me, mellon, for there is that to which we must attend, a necessity for the night's festivities." Erestor frowned but could find no way to back out of the order. He gave Lindir an apologetic kiss and followed.

Glorfindel watched them go, a shake of his head indicating his disbelief over the events as he poured out the rest of his drink on the ground.

"You surprise me, Glorfindel," remarked Lindir. "Has your second life been so sheltered that such things are unknown to you?"

"Nay, but such things are meant to be private and it demeans Lord Elrond to have talk of that kind circulating among the populace," frowned the Balrog-slayer. Then his frown deepened for he could not deny that such talk had been common enough for years and it was Legolas who suffered for it, not Elrond.

"Indeed, it is the young prince who would be mortified for these details to be known abroad," corrected Lindir, emphasising the title though he could see the guilty remorse filling his friend's eyes.

"Aye, you are right in that," another voice rejoined as its owner ambled across the glade. "Legolas is quite shy about the intimate details of his new life," continued Galion, for it was he. He enjoyed a swallow of the fey wine, eyeing Lindir with open appreciation over the rim of his cup. "Where's your Noldorin shadow, mellon?" he asked the singer.
"Erestor is near," warned Lindir, his smile gone and his manner polite but cold. "He is not my shadow but my life-long friend and companion."

"I see him not and no one as alluring as you should be left alone when the music is so tempting and the fire so bright. Come and dance with me, fair Lindir of Imladris," coaxed the red-haired Sindarin seneschal.

"I thank you for the invitation yet I must decline," Lindir said with a courtly bow. "There is an understanding between Erestor and me."

"He does not permit you to dance with anyone save himself?" Galion asked, laughing as he shook his head, circling Lindir the while. "You do not look like the kind of ellon who would permit anyone to be so controlling."

"I am not," averred the minstrel irritably, his ears growing hot. "I simply have no wish to mislead you. I am exclusive once I've made my choice, Galion."

"No signs of it," noted woodland elf, boldly reaching out to feather his fingers through the unbound golden locks. He shivered and a sigh escaped him. "How wrong it is that you never came to Greenwood, you and your fine instrument," he drawled, pointing the cup at the minstrel's harp while his eyes travelled a leisurely trail down the naked chest to the soft filmy folds of silk obscuring the singer's crotch. "How different things might have been."

"Nay, it would be the same," insisted Lindir, shifting to re-establish the distance between them. He shot Glorfindel a warning glare as the Balrog-slayer made to come to his defence. "My heart has been Erestor's for many years now."

"Really? Yon servant to the Lord and Prince attests a different truth." Galion shrugged amiably as Lindir bristled to be so delicately called a liar. "It is no matter to me when or how long, for I judge the Noldo Lord unworthy of the gift. You surely felt need to antagonise him, using me to do so."

"He said 'no', mellon," growled Glorfindel, looming tall beside Thranduil's steward, "and it would be best for you to forget the valet's drunken ramblings."

"Dance with me, Lindir; you owe me that much at least." Galion ignored the legendary hero, stepping around him to confront the minstrel directly.

"So be it," shrugged Lindir, "as long as you are clear it is only this one dance. And do not be surprised if Erestor challenges you, nor shall you attempt to harm him in any way if he does."

"You do care for him," sighed Galion. "Such a pity. We make a fairer couple, you and I, and how glad would Greenwood be to hear your voice beneath her limbs." So saying he led the singer to the bonfire.

When the dance ended another began and in fact there was not really any break between one set and another. When Erestor did not return, Lindir felt it best to remain in the clearing with Galion, for the ellon was rather insistent on getting him to adjourn to a more private local. Glorfindel stayed near, too, and Lindir felt this gave his situation the proper chaperone. With that decided, he relented to the mood of the night and let his spirit soar with the flames, relishing the freedom to dance with his people openly without censure or scorn. Not since his childhood had he been part of a fête like this and it was good to remember the times before his world disintegrated utterly.
Not knowing his beloved singer was so engaged, Erestor permitted himself to be side tracked by one of King Thranduil's aids. Having given his word to do whatever was required to ensure Legolas' bonding ceremony was perfection itself, he could not very well decline the request. The next two hours were spent helping decorate the bonding bower and when at last he returned to the glade Erestor was stunned to find Lindir in Galion's company, the two whirling about the flames in an intricate and rather suggestive set of steps.

They were well-matched, sylvan and Sinda, Lindir's golden hair mingling with the wild torrent of Galion's swirling copper strands. The King's haughty steward gazed upon his partner in open fascination, mesmerised and enthralled, fairly basking in Lindir's light. The minstrel was laughing, cheeks flushed and eyes glittering, obviously enjoying the experience. It was clear he did not know Erestor was there observing, ruling out the possibility of another attempt to incite jealousy, and the seneschal's heart plummeted into darkness.

Not even during Ened Echuil had the minstrel looked so at home, so like the other sylvans he might have come from Greenwood just days ago. It occurred to Erestor that Lindir might wish to rejoin his kin, leaving Imladris, and him, far behind. It occurred to him that Galion might understand Lindir in a way he never could. Sorrow inundated his soul and he felt as if his hoped for mate was already lost to him.

"Be not disturbed for they are only dancing," Glorfindel said quietly.

"Aye, but I have never seen Lindir so vibrant and happy," mourned Erestor. "I have never made him smile and laugh like that."

"It is the wine," offered the Balrog-slayer. "He is responding to the dance and the communion with his people, not to Galion."

"Galion is of his people for surely he has lived among the sylvans longer than Lindir himself."

"He told the steward he is exclusive to you, mellon. Do not give up on him so easily."

"I want him to be at peace, to feel joy again," whispered Erestor. "How can I even guess what inspires those emotions? Look and tell me if you have ever beheld him so light of spirit."

"I admit I cannot," stammered Glorfindel, "but that does not mean he would feel happier without you. Take heart, Erestor, and take courage. Is he worth the effort to woo or no? Maybe your feelings are the ones running shallow. Are you hoping Galion draws him away and spares you the responsibility of parting from him?"

"No!" snapped the seneschal and straightened his spine. "I am neither shallow nor cowardly, Glorfindel, and it wounds me to hear you say so. Galion only lusts after his comely face and erotic allure. I have known Lindir all my life, or nearly so. There are events he has lived through that Mirkwood butler can never hope to comprehend! Now if you will excuse me, I think it is time I learned a few sylvan dances myself."

"Spoken like the relentless, arrogant Noldo you are," encouraged Glorfindel, grinning as the seneschal disappeared in the crowd. Relieved of his duty as unofficial protector of the singer's honour and reputation, he looked about for a partner, eager to try the new steps himself, and at once caught the beguiling gaze of a fair woodland maid. Before he could summon the words to seduce
her, she verily pounced upon him, snatched up his hands, and dragged him into the fray. Glorfindel discovered that the Wood Elves did not need fey wine to conjure ecstasy.

"Nín'ódhel? Are you dreaming?" Legolas whispered against his mate's ebony hair, spooning up closer and plastering his body against the warmth of Elrond's back.

"Nay, Aearen, I am awake. I thought you were resting and had no wish to disturb your sleep," smiled Elrond, gently turning over and gathering Legolas close against his heart. After a strong squeeze, which was returned in kind, he lifted the golden head and claimed smiling lips that opened to him eagerly. Assuming Legolas was feeling amorous, as he often did upon returning from reverie and his not quite soft penis suggested, Elrond reached around and pinched the firm, round arse.

"Ai!" Legolas laughed even as he wriggled under the playful assault, relishing the sensation of Elrond's cock starting to fill and push against his. "Valar, are you not sated yet? We've coupled more this one night than in the last two days together."

"That is because you've been spending time with your friend from Greenwood, Faron. I missed you," Elrond shrugged but inspected Legolas closely, for there was a note of weariness in his tone that was not to his liking a bit. Concern at once consumed him for it did not require a healer's knowledge to detect the signs of strain and exhaustion; it was as if Aearen had expended some part of his soul's light. His heart skipped for in that instant he knew it was so and that he had been the recipient, not their nascent child. Now Elrond struggled to clarify his vague recollections of dark dreams and ghosts from his past. Before he could address these mysteries, Legolas hastened to reassure him.

"Do not worry. I am only tired; it is not serious."

"Nay, Legolas, you must tell me exactly what happened. Why are my thoughts so clouded? I have only fractured recollections of arriving in this place and I can tell you had to support me with your soul light." Elrond sat up and at once set about making a more comfortable nest for Legolas, gathering the pillows and blankets and bundling his mate amid them. He caressed the archer's covered belly and then did the same to the golden hair, gathering the errant strands and tucking them behind the ears. "Something happened, did it not?" he asked seriously, heart aching to see Legolas look upon him with such open worry and devotion, inspecting him with the same intensity to ensure the cure had been effective. "Ah, Aearen, beloved, it is I who should be caring for your soul, not the other way round. What peril so endangered me?"

"Aye, there was a little bit of trouble you ran upon, but it is over now and all is well," Legolas hoped to evade this discussion, too exhausted to endure the expected explosion of outrage should he reveal the truth of Rhûn'waew's magic. It had truly been too much; he'd never seen Elrond stripped of all his carefully constructed shields and barriers, cringing and crying and wailing for mercy, and it had hurt him to bear witness to such a horrific unmasking. A slight shiver ran over him and he had to dig deep to summon the wherewithal to conceal his distress and an unexpected surge of anger. What he had done for Elrond, his mate would never acknowledge. Still, he stifled the negative sensation and forced a cheery smile. "You are better, yes?"

"I am better than better; I feel rejuvenated," Elrond confirmed, not pleased to say so and even more unhappy about the fake expression. But how to confront him without seeming to accuse? "It must
"Aye, I feared for your soul and thought you broken. Needlessly, as it turns out, but to me it seemed so. I acted before making a thorough assessment of the situation, but I can't regret it," this last an absolute contradiction of reality. "Tinu Mín is well, just tired as am I. Besides, you will return the light I gave three-fold if not more." Legolas trailed his fingers across Elrond's shoulder, just brushing through the long black tendrils spilling over it. "Please, will you not let it pass for now? I promise to explain later, after the ceremony, but I haven't the strength to go through it again, Nín'ódhél."

"Ai! You alarm me more, Legolas. Perhaps I should send for Gladhadithen just to make sure all is well."

"Ai Valar, please no!" Legolas groaned and rolled over, burying his face in the cushions. "That will alert my parents and then everyone will find out I'm feeling a little fatigued and before you know it the whole colony will be gathered outside our private hide-away. I do not want that, much as I love my friends. Please, I just want to be alone with you." He flipped to his back and reached out for Elrond, glad when his hand was clasped at once and the mighty Lord gave no resistance to being pulled down into a soft and lingering kiss. Legolas exhaled an amorous moan and shifted his leg so to rub against warm heavy balls pressed against his thigh.

"Ah, Aearen!" whispered Elrond, breaking loose to gaze into clear blue eyes filled with smug delight. He couldn't help grinning back, a light laugh joining the quick thrust of his pelvis that made Legolas growl and buck beneath him, but the hard Noldorin shaft met with but faintly inflated resistance. This was not necessarily alarming, for often he was ready much more quickly than his youthful mate. "You know me so well, do you? So certain I will give in to your tender wiles, hmmm?" Elrond bent for anther taste of the smiling lips and invaded the sylvan's mouth with possessive abandon, showing Legolas he was not so far gone just yet and would be fully capable of commanding the course of their union.

"I know you," Legolas whispered, his face serious and his meagre desire fading as he pulled free from the devouring tongue. "I know you, Elrond Peredhel, and I love you more than life." What prompted him to utter such grave words eluded him and Legolas felt a spike of alarm course through his veins. Yet once given breath, words had a way of getting free of their creator, sometimes revealing more than might be wished.

"More than life," Elrond repeated. It was too true a statement and he felt his chest constrict. There was a level of honesty in the simple phrase the two rarely visited, for it evoked the early days when Legolas had been all too ready to forsake life and but for that capacity to love would have succeeded. Elrond sighed and smiled into the suddenly vulnerable visage peering up at him, giving the warm skin beneath his hands a long, slow caress.

"Be at peace," he pleaded softly, stroking the silken hair and traipsing the tips of his fingers against the stubborn chin. "I want no strife to ever touch you again; not even mild annoyance can I bear to see you suffer. Tell me that I can drive away that sorrow always lurking just underneath your smile, Aearen. Say that I can know you in the same way and that you will experience it just as I feel the strength of your devotion. What you have done for me, this I want, nay, I need to do for you also."

"It is already accomplished," Legolas smiled, the expression admitting the lie as he could not, for these were almost but not quite the words he'd hoped to hear. "I am content with what your soul tells me beneath and between the sounds with which your voice adorns the answer."

Elrond's brows went up, for here was another strange construction of thought of the kind particular to
Legolas and thus wholly indecipherable. Yet there was more than weariness, more than fatigue in his mate's aura. That smile revealed a wound as deep as any plaguing Legolas since their earliest days together. "Then what is it?" he asked, suddenly agitated again for there truly was a place within his beloved he could not seem to touch. "Do not hold back, Legolas, I beg you." He kissed him again, first the mouth and then along the jaw and on down the slender neck to the collar bone. He tasted heat where he'd left a deep red passion mark sometime in the night and swabbed the area with his tongue.

"Ai, Nín'ódhel, the things you do to me," Legolas whimpered and buried his hands in the inky mane cascading all around him, hunting for an ear to tease, hoping to push the level of desire higher and end this conversation, but this time Elrond drew back in spite of the trembling pleasure the contact sent racing through every nerve.

"No. Don't do that, Legolas, please. There is something you long to say or something you need me to say. No games now, no games. I want to say it, whatever it is. I want to be it, whatever you need. Can't you see? I don't know what it is, though, and I think I'll go mad if I disappoint you or hurt you or…"

"Nay, beloved, enough," soothed Legolas, a soft sigh leaving him as he drew Elrond tight against his body. "Do not be displeased with me. I know not whence this sensation comes, either. Just need you, can't explain more." He dabbed his tongue against the pulsing artery in Elrond's neck and nipped it lightly. There were things he just could not say and yet he felt that if something did not distract him, it would all spill out: despair and shame, grief and guilt, anger and anguish.

Again the Elven Lord resisted his seduction and carefully rolled them both over sideways. Soon Legolas was staring into the vibrant grey eyes, so ancient and wise, the first feature he was able to identify as solely his mate's, and at once felt fear grab at his gut. He could never speak the thought that entered his mind next or reveal the images usurping his attention, images of the Twins, their grey eyes so much the same as their father's, so much like one another, and yet completely different and unique.

Such eyes, to have envisioned the little house by the brook.

Legolas dropped his gaze from Elrond's face, colour rising to his cheeks as his heart rate doubled. If Elrond should come to understand his sons now shared this private place between them, rejection and abandonment must result.

"Aearen," Elrond called quietly, disturbed and rather hurt to feel Legolas draw back his spirit in what was undeniably dread. Yet he paused, an inkling of an idea coalescing, a fleeting glimpse that might be someone's abode in Lorien, perhaps, yet what import this held, passing through his beloved's heart just then, eluded him. After it dissipated, there gathered in his mind certainty of the cause of the fright and the withdrawal. It could only be Legolas' other mates and realising this Elrond was at once jealous and saddened. "It is as I feared from the beginning," he sighed, hugging Legolas close. "You prefer them now."

"What? Nay!" Legolas squirmed out of the tight embrace and sat up, face still crimson but eyes bright with indignation and fierce denial, but found he could not pretend. "I do not. They can never be for me what you are, Elrond," he said and to his ears the words sounded as if it was his own heart that needed convincing.

"And what is that? What am I to you?"
"Ai Valar, you are my very soul, beloved."

Silence followed this for somehow it wasn't enough and Elrond waited for more. Legolas dropped his eyes again, turning half away, drawing a deep breath before trying to continue. He could not ignore the small pinprick of resentment that needled at his soul. He was always protecting Nín'ódhel's feelings, it seemed, trying to think ahead and make sure of what he said, that everything he did was pleasing and affirmed the mighty Lord's exalted view of himself. And no matter the effort expended, ultimately he remained an afterthought in Elrond's heart.

"I don't understand," he admitted morosely, emotions too jumbled to master his tongue. "They were not here in the beginning when I was beyond despair. They know nothing about the agony I endured, the fear and the longing I felt. I reached out and you were there, only you, Nín'ódhel. You loved me; I loved you back, but you hurt me anyway. Why?"

"Nay! It was not meant to be that way; I did not know!" Elrond cried out in alarm and sat up, too, scooting closer to take hold of Legolas, fearful he might bolt from the pavilion. "I want never to cause you hurt again, Aearen, please believe me," and it was in speaking thus that Elrond understood that somehow he had done so though he could not fathom when or how, whether by word, deed, or lack of same. Tears were trailing down Aearen's lowered face and the Elf Lord felt panic rising. "Please don't despair. Tell me what I have done that I may amend it." He could not know the ugly scenes Legolas had glimpsed through the Winter Queen's soul-delving, for Legolas himself had spent great energy to shield him from remembering any part of it.

So what Legolas had meant as a means of healing and comfort turned instead to bitterness. He was unable to stop the inundating sorrow now and the words poured out in a torrent of confused anguish. He wrapped his arms around his body and sealed shut his eyes, too afraid to see Elrond's as he spoke.

"The things I need, Tinu Mín and I, they come not from you. Our safe talan in the grotto, the furnishings for it, little clothes for our babe to keep warm, provisions, those things I must have in the last days and the days following the birth," he gulped a huge and noisy lungful of air, "and now Aras takes the part abandoned by your sons, defaming me and our child and nothing is done!"

"Ai Elbereth." Elrond could but hold tight as the storm raged through his beloved Wood Elf, knowing full well that any excuse or apology just now would push bewildered sadness into enraged fury which would fuel the desire to flee. "I love you, Legolas, whatever my failings; I love you." Nothing more could he do but repeat this, quietly, firmly, devoutly, contritely as the litany of affliction went on.

"Then they came back and turned it all around and…"

"Who, my sons?"

A quick nod in assent punctuated another rending sob. "…and instead of hating me, they showed caring compassion and genuine desire. They built me a house, a perfect house with rooms for our child there and even whimsical playthings to amuse him and…"

"They built…So you mean they are here now?" Another quick head bob and a terrified glance made Elrond feel sick and still the raving continued.

"They seem to know me; how is this possible? They do things my heart has longed for before I even understand it within myself, Elrond, while you, who hold my very heart and soul, seem unable to
divine those same needs. I love you and only you…"

"I know it, Aearen, I know it; hear me?" Elrond shook him gently and caught another swift flash of frantic blue the very colour of apprehension and doom.

"...but I find them… I find… they accept me. And I need that," he fairly bellowed, crumpling up save for Elrond's steady grip upon his arms, ashamed to have to admit these things. "Need that from you, not them, but whatever I am, they no longer find me abhorrent and... and... I am sorry, Nín'ödhel," Legolas sobbed and let himself be drawn tight against the comfort of his mate's sturdy chest, buried his running nose against the warm skin and its distinct scent. "Can't hold this secret within me anymore. Please, do not hate me for needing them."

"Legolas, Legolas, nay, beloved, nay," Elrond cried out softly, fearful to give the words too much volume in case Legolas would mistake the tone for anger or censure. The Elven Lord surprised himself by realising he was not angry, not even minimally. He could only feel abiding love and great respect, for what came most to his mind was the courage required to reveal all this, the love and faith Legolas had to hang onto so desperately to make it possible. "It is all right, beloved. I will never hate you, never." He began slowly rocking and without thinking hummed the tune that had eased Aearen's heart in the past, in the early days when there was barely any of him left to even hear it. Carefully he caressed the quaking form, smoothing his palm down the drooping head, along the stooped shoulders, and over the slumped back.

"Be at peace; be at peace," he whispered. "I love you, Legolas. Without you, before you, everything about me has been false and superficial. Only in giving my soul to you has it found anything noble and good to do, anyone worthy to make it shine forth as Eru surely meant it." He felt Legolas stir and shift, winding arms about his neck and threading fingers within his hair.

"How can it be?"

Legolas' voice was so faint and small Elrond almost didn't understand the words. He shook his head and pressed a kiss upon the tangled golden strands. "I know not why; it would have been fitting for the Valar to give you to my sons alone, for all you speak of them is true. Never were they truly consumed by darkness, merely blinded for a time. Yet the fate you have drawn brought you instead to me and to them. We, the Twins and I, have not managed this well. I wonder, sometimes, if there was something more in that poison, some evil that infected us all, for a time."

Now at last Legolas turned his tear-smeared face to see Elrond, eyes wide with surprise and wet with sorrow but no longer filled with terror and guilt. "I thought this, also," he said, blinking to clear his vision and study the expressive countenance regarding him so serenely. "You are not disgusted with me?"

"No," Elrond shook his head solemnly as he answered, no mirth in his voice, no ingratiating smile plastered on his lips. This was too real, too harrowing, what Aearen had done, and he would neither diminish it with pretty words nor squander it by glossing over the revelations. Something tickled the back of his brain, a faint but insistent sense of familiarity as though in someway he had been prepared for this moment and understood instinctively how to proceed. He inhaled and bent to bestow another chaste kiss, this one on Legolas' brow. "I will remove that word from association with my dealings toward you, Legolas. I know it will take time, but you have my promise, my oath, my vow before Manwë that it shall be accomplished ere our babe is born."

"Elrond," Legolas began but could not find any more words for his heart was emptied out, drained of either protests or praises. He drew a deep and shuddering breath and simply burrowed back into the
strength and comfort that had sustained him for the last ten years.

"I know not how to tell you, Legolas," Elrond mused, stroking the flaxen strands and gathering the exhausted elf close. "There is a purpose for me now, through you and our child, and one with which I was long ago entrusted, long before ever you were conceived. I will fulfil it, properly and justly and wisely, but only because you entered my life and claimed my heart.

"Aye, though it seems to all that I was the one who took possession of you, yet we know, you and I and my sons, too, that I was the one whose spirit was captured." Then he did smile a little and gave his mate a gentle squeeze. "Glad I am for it, though I resisted so strongly, and glad I am for this terrible thing we endured, you and I, just this very night gone past. Nay, hush," he whispered, another kiss against the golden crown and another soothing stroke working its way down the naked back.

"I will not ask," he continued, "and you need not keep it secret a moment longer than you are able. When you are ready I will listen; I already know the outcome and while I cannot pretend to be easy about the sacrifice you made for me, yet I do believe it was necessary. Your soul, riven and reduced though it may be, is so much cleaner and purer than mine, Aearen, and I needed its light dearly, so dearly."

He did not speak for a long time after that, only held Legolas close and softly sang the old lullaby, breaking the song only to settle tender kisses here and there where he could reach the bare body all curled up in his lap. In time, he felt Legolas drop into light reverie and only then did he invoke the might of Vilya to send him deeper where healing could take root and spread its tendrils throughout the drained sylvan's feä.

Through all this Elrond sat and thought on all Legolas had revealed, realising how much of it was between the words and under them, and made in his heart and mind a list for himself. On it were all the things he had neglected to do for his mate and Elrond found courage not to make excuses and justify his lack of action by invoking ignorance of sylvan customs. It was a freeing and empowering action and he felt, for the first time in a very long time, good inside himself and at peace with what he must do. He finished the song and spoke to Legolas, knowing his spirit would hear him and hold the knowledge close.

"I want you to remain sleeping though I must leave you for a short time. I will not go until one of your people is here to watch over you; Faelon will find your Ada or perhaps Lindir to come. I will seek out my sons and bring them hither, Legolas, and we will settle this dilemma as best suits you. That will be our only concern, especially mine. There will be no more secrets and no more cause for you to hide your needs from me or from them.

"And I would see this house they have made for our family. I find that there is much I could learn from observing their behaviour. The wounds they dealt you may have been more public than those that arose from me, but they are lesser hurts, shallower and easier to heal, for they never held your heart as I have and you did not pour out your love upon them as you did for me.

"I tell you this that you may understand why it is easier now to forgive them and feel for them a sense of respect and appreciation. This is also why it is easier for them to throw off their pride and delve whole-heartedly into remitting those errors. I want you to understand it has nothing to do with a lessening of what you feel for me or emergence of anything unclean or improper on your part or theirs. It is simply the way of things, Legolas, nothing else, and as Eru has made it so we cannot change it or undo it, nor should we wish to.
"We will accept it, Aearen, all of us. Not with shame and suspicion, not with jealousy and resentment, but with joy and gratitude." He felt Legolas shift and used the moment to lay him gently down, covering him in the abundant blankets and bolstering him with the feather pillows. Low-lidded eyes glanced into his and he knew Aearen was listening, deep in the healing trance, and smiled, his heart and his face filled with love and admiration. "Aye, you did hear rightly. We will learn how to treasure this gift and treat it with gladness. You are the gift, Legolas, Aearen, beloved Wood Elf, my sylvan prince, our devoted mate."

He kissed the lax lips and just before he pulled back Elrond was astounded to feel the voiceless sylvan call buffeting against his heart. For the first time, he understood how important the call and response was for Legolas, realising it arose more from the need to know their souls remained entwined rather than a means of merely signalling his mate. Quickly he bent close to an ear and offered reassurance. "Fear not; I hear you; I know where you are; I cannot help but do so for you reside here within my own essence. I will not abandon you, Legolas, nor send you from me. Never. We are bound together, you and I, and shall not be parted unless you wish it."

Elrond moved carefully from the pallet and collected his clothes, finding a set of the hunting attire he preferred folded neatly on a small table. His elegant robes hung against the wall but he ignored them and moved to the curtained doorway. Before he lifted it aside, he knew Elril would be close at hand. The ancient elf looked up at once and rose with a smile from his place by the fire, barely a metre distant. Where once the Elven Lord would have been chagrined to think his confrontation with Aearen had been overheard, now he was pleased to have a witness, someone to validate the conviction of his heart. Dior's heir placed a hand on his nephew's shoulder as he passed within, shining eyes proclaiming his approval better than any words, and Elrond set about his task with firm resolve.

TBC

~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Trévreithad
Erthad Veren: Joyous Union
Esgal Oranth: Raised Veil
Henen Vell: My Dear Child
Sell-en-Iellen: daughter of my daughter
Elei Velthin: Golden Dreams
Ólpathu: Dream place
faer'fir: soul-song
Pathrol na Gail: Filling with Light - Enlightenment
Nín'ódhel brui: My noisy deep elf
Nae Alae: Alas, behold (oh dear)
Tinu Mín: our little star

NOTE: "I have not forgotten that we left this story on the verge of finally uniting our two heroes in a more 'legal' sense. We have some fun shenanigans courtesy of the Wood Elves, who cannot quite contain their desire to teach Elrond his place and punish him a bit for his treatment of their beloved prince. We have a talan to build in Lanthir Fân, we need to get
Remember when this note appeared? How about a year ago or more. Things got in between me and the story and I still have not sanctified their union or let the Wood Elves have much fun yet. I got to thinking about all the lies between Legolas and Elrond, the little lies they tell each other and themselves to keep things calm and prevent having to confront the really raw reality they share. With all Legolas has gone through, I just couldn’t see him able to maintain the secrecy and the martyrdom. He has real needs, quite serious ones, and all Elrond’s fancy verbal two-stepping will not be enough to support him in the days to come. I decided that, no matter how vehemently he has denied it to himself, Legolas really must feel some anger about what has been done to him, not just by fate but by Elrond personally. And so I found there was a breaking point, though when I wrote the chapter I had not consciously envisioned it that way.

This all hearkens back to the chapter where Rhûn'waew uses magic and drugs to force Elrond to face his own demons and admit to himself and to them that he is not the perfect elf he wants everyone to think he is. Legolas went to him, against his parents’ instructions, and intervened. If this chapter does not make it plain, he used his own very limited soul light to build a barrier between Elrond's memories and his consciousness. Afterward, realising how drained he is, Legolas begins to resent it, feeling it will never even be known much less appreciated, like so many of his tender attentions to Elrond. And the rest happens because he is really too depleted to hold back any longer.

Even then, Legolas feels guilty and ashamed and believes he has forfeited his heart's desire and sinks into despair. But his Nana was there first and left Elrond with some direct instructions imbedded in his soul. He is acting on them, but to be completely honest it is not the Winter Queen's magic making it possible, but Legolas' love and the genuine outpouring of his soul's energy into the Elven Lord. This moment will be Elrond's breakthrough, though he has claimed to have experienced this already. We all know that's one of the lies he's been telling himself and he did not truly begin to change until Legolas left him fading and went to the Twins.

Well, let me know what you think of it. Hope it is neither too dark nor too sappy, and that Faelon's loose lips were amusing. Guess that's it for now. Thanks to everyone reading and to all you folks who send me such kind feedback, thoughtful well-wishes, and unending encouragement. I am indebted to you and deeply, deeply grateful. :)

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The night was bright and clear, cool in the temperate embrace of Ethuil, moonlight spilling from a cloudless sky in which the suspended stars hovered near, dropping lower to glimmer and glint in joyful approbation. Elrond moved with ease through the rugged landscape, no longer hindered by thorn and branch, the way smoothed and the path opened before him. Seldom did the Lord of Imladris roam these wild reaches of the realm, almost never in the shadows of a starry night and all his senses were heightened. Not a soul was about save the shy nocturnal beasts who peered at him from the safety of bush and bracken, surprised and curious but not disturbed, and their presence gave the impression he was the only person for leagues around, a lone explorer in a wondrous place unseen and untouched since the Time before Time. The isolation fostered an affinity with the natural world he had not experienced since his elfling days. The thought arose that this was a distinctly sylvan thing to do and gave him a sense of kinship with his beloved Wood Elf he would have repressed just months gone past.

Though its purpose was serious and no mere jaunt across the valley, the journey was soothing; his body fell into a comfortable gate and the automatic action of walking permitted his inner vision a clarity of focus rare in the course of his busy life. It was like Ölpathu only his mind was fully alert, conscious and subconscious joined in contemplation that was both meditative and invigorating.

Suddenly he could comprehend that all of Arda was perfect, a view contrary to his normal perception of a great work spoiled almost beyond recognition, a world warped and marred to the point that its inventors abandoned it for a safe and secluded paradise. It was not so. Here was a place made solely to suit the life with which it teemed. Here was a land formed from the very Music of the Ainur, so imbued with the grace of Iluvatar that all Melkor's plotting schemes had failed to destroy it. It was a world to cherish and guard jealousy.

The Wood Elves were right after all; this was home, designed specifically for the Children of Eru, and must be held against all enemies, be they mortal or immortal, Vala or beast. How had he ever deemed the sylvan elves unimportant in the fight against the spreading Shadow? None were so fervent in their devotion to Arda.

It was a jarring revelation for presented within it were the harsh facts that for all of his life, Elrond had really been fighting over who would control Arda while the Wood Elves fought for Arda itself. The difference was both simple and profound, just like the woodland people. They fought for their world, their woods, their Tawar; their lives entwined within the sap and the soil, the water and the wind. Alone among the elves, the sylvans did not look ever to the west and long for the protected lands of the Valar across the sea, though that was changing. It made Elrond sick at heart to realise it, for nothing so pointed to the waning light of the elves than this.

Did they believe they could win this fight? The question made him halt and he looked over the moonlit landscape, knowing the answer was both irrelevant and supremely important. For the elves, the battle could neither be won nor lost. Whatever the outcome, it was the fate of the Second-born to inherit the earth and see to its future, whether that be dark and filled with pain and sorrow or radiant with hope and the exhilaration of industrious endeavours. Still, it mattered, what the Wood Elves thought, for it meant the difference between the breed's continuance in Aman and utter extinction,
the few survivors absorbed into the lineages of the Sindar and the Noldor. Yet Elrond took heart, for Legolas, surely one of the youngest among his people, had been willing to flee to the Blessed Realm to protect his babe. If his attitude was common, then perhaps the sylvan folk would likewise depart willingly when the time came to cede the lands to men.

He considered how his thoughts had travelled while his feet were moving and smiled, mildly amused at his change of attitude. Here he was worrying over whether or not their would be any sylvan elves in Aman when a few years ago he had rarely acknowledged their presence on Arda. He had Legolas to thank for this awakening and wondered anew how the sylvan archer's wounded soul had held such strength to so transform his spirit and open his eyes. He lifted those newly enlightened grey depths to the heavens, admiring the infinite expanse of the glittering night, and offered silent thanks for the gift of his uniquely admirable mate.

His resolve intensified and he resumed his trek; it was for Legolas this trip was necessary and yet, as was becoming ever more clear, what was best for Aearen was likewise beneficial to the mighty Lord. In these few hours he had grown in maturity and wisdom, reaching a point of balance and contentment with all he was and all he was meant to be, transformed from indifferent elitism to tolerant acceptance, from jealous husband to caring mate. Thus came Elrond, Lord of Imladris, to the lands he had deeded over to his sons at their majority, never imagining then to what use the humble vale would be put.

He paused, heart stirring as the liquid, languid voice of the stream called in welcome, and let the whole of the glade register within his spirit. He heard the subdued shuffle and sigh of leaves ruffling against the breeze, the whisper and rush of grass rippling under the same soft song of Arda's soul. There was both peace and anticipation here, a hopeful, happy, and hallowed caste to the place as though the trees and the water, the rocks and the flowers, moon and stars, all were now the organs with which the Powers observed his responses. He inhaled deeply and filled his lungs with the sweet night air, smiling as he exhaled and advanced into the meadow.

So be it. Let them watch

Alone and glad of it, Elrond preferred to face this test without witnesses other than those eternal ones which attended every action both of thought and deed. If he should fail here, could he return to Aearen and formally cement the bond between them? The doubt lay not in any lack of desire to succeed but in his fear to disappoint Legolas again. Where was the limit of his Wood Elf's love? He could not guess and stifled the troubling worries. His imperative now was to demonstrate the breadth and depth of his love for Aearen. Looking into his soul, Elrond could not perceive any bounds to that love and smiled.

I will not fail him.

The scene subtly changed, an alteration possible due to the casting aside of those gauges of self-importance against which he was wont to measure every situation. His eyes were clear, his mind open, filtering every detail through his devotion to Aearen as he looked upon the serene sanctuary. Across the moon-shadowed meadow he beheld the silvered silhouettes of willows whispering together, sheltering the structure he had come to see even as they presented it in just and gentle dignity, pleased to have been chosen, eager to demonstrate the perfection wrought in the melding of nature and invention. Could he help but smile?

His spirit filled with admiration and paternal pride for his sons. No less should he expect from them and immediately his heart whelmed with gratitude to have them back, the muscle straining to contain the inundation of emotion for indeed they had become strangers, dark and somewhat terrifying in
their moods and manners. They were whole again, even as he was, closer to what they had been before the tragedy of their mother's exodus. Instead of releasing the rising font of elated tears, Elrond voiced an exultant, exuberant laugh and strode forward eagerly, rejoicing anew at the gift given unto his family in placing Legolas in their path that winter's day.

The pavilion and the plans he passed without interest, going up to the threshold where the door was in place now but open wide, as though he was expected, and with a slight pause to admire the homey porch he went in. Contrary to all previous considerations about his new relationship with his sons, Elrond felt he was not meant to be barred from this house. Somehow, Elladan and Elrohir had understood innately that the four of them, soon to be five, were a family linked by a bond perhaps curious but not less sacred for that.

He moved through the tall foyer with its stained glass windows, recognising some of the scenes and marvelling over those he could not place, and passed into the room at the right. Elrond found himself in a sitting room, open and spacious, the furnishings inviting and the setting familiar, for here his sons had drawn on that which was most comfortable to memory and commodious to a sense of security. It was much like the parlour in the Last Homely House wherein countless evenings saw his family gathered before the hearth during his children's growing years, content in one another's company, sharing the simple pleasures of conversation, quiet reading, or games and silly play-acting.

In a flood of images Elrond saw juxtaposed his first family and his second: himself on the floor beside the twins as they took their first hesitant steps, then sprawled on the rug with Tinu Mín bouncing atop his belly. He recalled Arwen as a toddler perched on his back, kicking at his sides and gripping his hair like a set of reins and next enjoyed a vision of Legolas curled up cat-fashion in a chair with Tinu Mín secure against his breast. Elrohir was nearby reading, Elladan studying his Adar's last move upon a game-board. The scenes were neither incongruous nor troubling and instead sent a fresh wave of abiding love cresting through his soul.

He went and sat in one of the chairs, the one where he'd imagined Legolas to be. It would all come to pass and this would be a place of tranquillity, a refuge for them away from the bustling activity of the Last Homely House and its abundance of amiable spies. Here they could nurture the bond between them without censure or misunderstanding. Quickly he rose and toured the remaining rooms on the first floor, brows quirking high as he discovered the elaborate bathing chamber.

The second story was a bit more difficult to see, for here were the private rooms where his sons would be alone with his mate. Our mate. Elrond stood in the cosy study, unable to bring to mind any visions of himself there and while that should have made him feel insecure and awkward instead he felt a degree of acceptance he wouldn't have thought possible so soon after acknowledging his sons' claim upon Legolas. The reason was all around him, for it was just as plain that this part of the house was designed for Elladan and Elrohir alone. The room contained the understated but unmistakable stamp of their uniquely jointed personalities, examples of their taste and style abundant in the personal belongings already situated round the space. There was also an unhidden expression of unity, of this being a shared abode, a couple's haven. Here was a place for indulging that bond between them which he had always denied and silently denounced.

Many were the days the brothers would spend together in Imladris without Legolas and Tinu Mín, and rather than being disgusted Elrond found he was relieved they would have this house for both comfort and seclusion. His stringent moral code had become more relaxed of late and he could no longer condemn his sons; instead, he was subconsciously pleased over the twins' relationship. Not only were they secondary mates for Aearen, Legolas was a secondary mate for them. Elladan and Elrohir would not be plotting to steal away his beloved Wood Elf.
The bedroom he did not enter, standing on the brink of the chamber and peering in from the corridor. Here was territory he could not invade, for his own peace of mind as much as respect for the privacy of his mate. Their mate. Yet he made himself look and realise this place was here, a place where Legolas would reveal needs Elrond could not meet no matter how much he loved him. It gave him the first stab of pain his heart had known since entering the homestead, but he refused to turn from it. This ache was nothing compared to the gruelling agony Legolas had suffered in those early days, believing himself rejected and unloved. He did not want Aearen to ever feel that kind of despair again and if this was the cure then he would endure it not with bitterness but with acceptance and gratitude. He would not permit Aearen to remain broken when the missing pieces were within reach.

Shame washed through him then, thinking on how many years he had traded Legolas' health and happiness to purchase nothing but hubris and false dignity. Thus in sorrow Elrond wandered across the short space and into the child's nursery, lost in his ruminations over the dire result of his ignorance and pride, and was caught by surprise when the ceiling disappeared and the soothing presence of the tree surrounded him.

He halted and gaped in amazement, sensing the great age of the tree, like so many in Imladris whose life-span had been increased by the power of Vilya. This was like no house he had ever entered and first he smiled to think of Legolas' joy to stand in this room, but the expression faltered almost instantly for now he understood Aearen's anger. Surely the mighty Elven Lore-master had sufficient mental capacity to realise how important such a place must be. Tinu Mín was Legolas' first child and even without all the guilt accompanying his reasons for conceiving, he loved the babe more than he did Elrond, though this was not something Aearen could allow himself to consciously comprehend. It should not have come as such a shock for Elrond to know that Legolas expected him to love the babe over all else, too. Neglecting any aspect of Tinu Mín's development was probably the highest crime Elrond could commit, and he had done next to nothing to provide for their babe.

This must be remedied, not because it would please his beloved Wood Elf but for the sake of their child. What Legolas felt so did the babe, and Tinu Mín must not doubt, especially in the safe and sheltered security of Legolas' womb, that his Adar cherished him. Elrond would have far to go to supersede this room and worried if he could achieve it.

Nay, I need not match it and indeed should not attempt to. My goal is clear: the talan in the grotto must be the embodiment of my love for our little babe.

At that moment he decided that their hidden nest should be wholly sylvan in character and construction. There would be no standard furnishings such as Elrond had used in the nursery for his older children: no rocking chairs, no cupboards or closets, no cribs or cradles. Whatever the equivalent might be within the Wood Elves' culture, those items Elrond would provide. A smile crept over his features as he imagined Legolas' pleased surprise when the finished abode was revealed. The smile stretched into a grin, thinking how indignant Aearen would be to find he was barred from the grotto until construction was completed. Elrond at once thought to redesign the walled garden to make it serve as an alternate refuge for his young mate.

With that decided, he turned from the house his sons had built and headed back through the glade, his step light and filled with his eager purpose, scarcely wanting to delay his plans long enough to attend the sylvan bonding ceremony. As he walked he mused over how to gain the help he needed and at once Thranduil came to mind. He had a sylvan wife and would know exactly what was expected, what was necessary. Moreover, he was Legolas' Adar and would know what would most please his younger son. If it felt strange to enlist the Wood Elves' King as his ally, Elrond drove the sensation from his heart.
Still, he must not exclude Legolas from the preparations completely. Recalling the disaster of the ceramic pots, Elrond's heart filled with indulgent warmth and empathy for his beloved, confused, and somewhat vulnerable Wood Elf. Dawn was breaking, the sky that lovely caste of grey-tinged azure underlain with the first crimson flush of Arien's brilliant glare. He hastened his pace, breaking into an exuberant sprint, eager to complete the pending rites and publicly demonstrate his love for Legolas. Thus, he was somewhat disconcerted to find the Winter Queen in the little yurt with his beloved and Elril waiting to speak with him. For all his plans were interrupted, Elrond received with an open heart the instruction of his ancient and regal kinsman.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ A Soul-Piercing Experience ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Now, it is true Elrond had thought to meet his sons in their sheltered glade and resolve the remaining vestiges of conflict between them. For his part, the issues had vanished, the evidence in the clearing sufficient to grant him assurance that they would treat their secondary mate well but not try to steal Legolas away from him. That they did not know his new mind-set could be remedied easily at any time and gave the Elf Lord no concern. The reason the meadow in the woods and the delightful house by the stream were vacant did not worry him and never engaged his curiosity at all, yet had it he would not have been close to guessing the cause. The Twins were absent in order to keep an appointment with Aegas Mirdan and collect from him something commissioned for Legolas.

It is a testament to the superiority of their intuitive capabilities that they were hastening there prior to their unsettling meeting with Thranduil. What they chose as a gift for their mate's wedding day represented perhaps the most daring thing the two had ever done since declaring their mutual love. Their Adar's opinion of the present they could guess, but Legolas' reaction filled them with mingled trepidation and anticipation, hoping not to offend yet unable to resist the desire to see him adorned as they had envisioned on Ened Ethuil. In the fine leather jewel case on pristine white silk lay those very chains of delicate gold, the paired acorn studs, the jade-leaf ornament, and a set of small mithril rings made to be inserted through some of the most sensitive regions of an elf's body. This they had with them when Thranduil arrived shortly after breakfast and not long after Elrond's unknown visit.

Receiving the rather diffident father's instructions raised the brothers' spirits immensely and when they in turn revealed the purchase just concluded, Thranduil's jangled emotions eased considerably. He left them, first issuing a strong caution regarding Legolas' rather ragged state of health, going ahead to stand by and do whatever needed doing to manage Elrond's response to what came next. The twins set forth for the Wood Elves' compound, not as buoyant as the nature of their task might normally make them, but determined to ensure no misery tarnished Legolas' Gwedhel Aur. They arrived at the glade with the aid of Faron's direction and stalled just before entering, for their father's voice was clear to them.

"This is not what I expected," he was saying, the taint of sadness in his words. "Is there no one else here to attend this duty? This is our bonding day. What of Faron, his friend from childhood's days?"

"Legolas is not comfortable having Faron assist him in this manner," Thranduil answered calmly. "It is as you say, they are friends from their earliest memories, but there are many aspects of one's life unfit to share with a boon companion. No more would he have Faron witness the babe's birth."

"There is no other. Even were there, I would order things this way for his good and the child's, for theirs, and for yours also, though you cannot yet see it, Elrond," Rhûn'waew added with quiet authority. "Legolas has suffered greatly, this you do not deny; then give him this, a gift from you more precious than the rarest gem."
In the ensuing silence, Elladan and Elrohir cautiously came to the verge of the clearing and halted, watching through the trees at the unfolding scene, fearful to intrude yet consumed with the need to meet their father and seal the breach between them before proceeding. How to manage it defied reason; it was not possible for him to greet with joy their intrusion upon his delicate bond with Legolas, especially on this day of all days. Even so his sons stood beneath the pines hoping for his blessing. Though thousands of years of tradition and custom stood between them and reconciliation, the brothers would achieve it for the sake of their mate, their family, and themselves.

A dazzle as of sunlight on water caught their sight and guided their eyes to the source: the drape shielding the interior of the yurt was fringed in a swaying array of small, finely faceted crystals. There Legolas peered out from beneath the curtained barrier, holding it across his naked body for modesty's sake. His eyes were huge and fixed upon their Adar, but then he felt their presence and turned abruptly, a faint blush and a shy smile softening his weary features ere he ducked back inside.

*He knows why we are here, then.*

*And does not seem averse to the notion.*

The Twins shared amused and tender thoughts for Legolas was nothing but endearing when he showed his youth so plainly, purity and passion combined. They took a step and crossed into the open space.

"Aye, I wish only for him to know he is loved," Elrond finally said and sighed. Resolutions made in the quiet of a starlit meadow were somehow more difficult to sustain in the brilliant glare of the morning sun. "I will speak with him ere I go." Yet as he turned from Rhûn'waew and Thranduil he met instead his sons. It was as if all of Arda paused, breathless with both faith and fear in the tension between the three.

They gazed upon one another, lost for how to manage the situation correctly, Elrond assessing the mood and mien of his rivals, his sons wary and uncertain of their place, each desiring to do only what would best serve Legolas. That genuine emotion carried forth, easily recognised in three sets of similar grey eyes, and provided the correct position from which to begin.

Elrond realised there was more required than a mental adjustment, more than stifling a surge of jealousy. He would not only have to find means to accept that Aearen had other mates but to acknowledge them, make room for them within his concept of the bonded union. The notion that he could just push it to the back of his mind, blinding himself to those times when Legolas would be with his sons, evaporated as quickly as mist in sunlight. He had no choice but to share Legolas and now he had to do so without the shield of denial to hide his pride behind. It was galling; what person could bear so great a trespass?

No sooner had the thought engaged his ire than the visions of the five of them together as a family returned, sharp and clear, and he was comforted and strengthened. The scenes were true glances into the life awaiting them all, a time without bitterness between them. Dearly he wanted to reach that place of peaceful harmony and suddenly longed to skip over the intervening days and escape the pain inherent in the journey. He grimaced at this cowardly attitude and looked upon his sons anew. His heart lurched; their eyes betrayed the same mixture of determination and dread assailing him.

Here stood not his rivals but his sons whom he loved, Elladan and Elrohir, caught in Vairë's net only because they were good and noble, captured by the irresistible lure of sylvan magic even as was he. For him, at least there was the bounty of Legolas' overflowing adoration to make the bondage sweet.
All his sons would ever know was but a faint reflection of that splendour. A second time he felt glad that their souls were already entwined one with the other. Elrond stepped forward and tendered a dignified bow, hand over his heart, black hair sweeping the leaves.

"Elo! You have come, bound by virtue and called by the soul-song of our sylvan mate, to do for me and for him that which will please Legolas most on this day of our bonding. It thus pleases me also, and this I say to you without dissembling or falsity. You are my sons and would never do wilfully that which might give me pain, this I attest aloud. All that passed between us these last ten years is like a fog that cloaked reason and vision, but now it has cleared and we can all perceive the right path again. I leave in your care that which has been entrusted to us: the greatest treasure this world holds." So saying Elrond turned before they could reply, intent upon gaining admittance to the pavilion, but found he was anticipated.

There stood Aearen at the entrance, Elrond's robe held tight about his slender frame, the heavy drape thrust aside, clear blue eyes gleaming with the light of triumphant pride, his smile dulcet and demure. His mother had only just finished explaining how important his union with the Twins was to become and he was no small amount concerned over Nín'ódhel's reaction. What he had just observed erased all his fears and made him wish Elrond could stay and accomplish the ensuing task himself.

Seeing this ardent longing, Elrond's heart could not be checked and he crossed the distance in seconds, reaching past the barrier to cup the nape of that long, white neck and pull his beloved into a soft and fervent kiss.

"Aearen," he whispered, smiling as he withdrew and they leaned together, forehead to forehead. "Be at peace and enjoy this." He caressed the long golden hair he so loved and sealed their lips anew, filling Legolas' need for permission and acceptance completely. "We will meet for the ceremony and thereafter we shall not be parted. Besides, there is something I must attend that cannot wait either; something that I know will please you."

"A gift? What is it?" Legolas' eyes lit up and he pulled Elrond closer, hand enmeshed in the ebony locks.

"It must be secret for now," Elrond was glad to see this response even as his heart stumbled over the obvious fact that a gift was indeed called for and he had nothing. Legolas' surprise revealed just as plainly he had expected exactly that. Yet Elrond was resolved to do right and his beloved was already looking less haggard. The time spent with his sons would do much to restore the integrity of his exhausted soul. The twinge of regret that he would not be the one to instill that needed strength passed between them, but he quickly covered Aearen's lips with his and prevented any expression of remorse his beloved might feel moved to voice.

They enjoined a lingering, consuming kiss infused with frantic, desperate hunger, like a last salute between lovers parting under the pall of some long and perilous journey from which one of them might never return. The urgent embrace of voiceless tongues spoke eternal promises across the meagre barrier of flesh and bone. Souls soaring, unmindful and uncaring of the audience bearing witness, the moment distilled, the need for rites and ceremonies vanished, and the bond between them at last came to parity. They divided with reluctance and yet remained close, breath mingling and hearts racing, fingers entwined in tangled hair, clutching cloth and skin, unwilling to let go.

"I miss you already."

"I will call you to me at the appointed time."
Elrond released him and turned, without doubt the single most difficult thing he had ever done in all his long life, hastening from the glade before he changed his mind and drove everyone off so to spend his passion with Legolas again. He snatched Thranduil by the arm and dragged him along, leaving Rûn’waew to her grandfather's care. Elril escorted her away with appropriate dignity and grace, sparing the Twins a glittering appraisal and a nod of recognition in passing. In seconds the peaceful glade was empty but for the sons of Elrond and their fair enchanter.

"Luthadron," Elladan hailed and gave that silly wave.

"Elladan," Legolas smiled and his bright eyes shifted to Elrohir. "Come inside." With that he vanished behind the curtain again.

The Twins, for perhaps the first time since puberty, found themselves a bit uncertain and out of their depths. What they had just observed left them awed and breathless, for the love between Legolas and Elrond had enveloped the entire glade and set the very trees to singing; no less could their spirits do. That the two were soul-mates in every sense could not be denied and the brothers found themselves mesmerised, seeing this rare and sacred gift, one they themselves shared, but such is love that every soul imagines the experience to be unique, as it is, and yet like knows like and recognition is undeniable.

*Are we like that together?*

Their hands linked tight and no other answer was required. They shared a swift embrace, a quiet kiss, a smile, and standing brow against brow, arms draped across one another's shoulders, permitted themselves at last to be glad, genuinely and without restraint, for their father to know such happiness. Even so, uneasiness invaded their joy, for how could they imagine trespassing on such a bond? There could be no doubt that their link to Legolas was subsidiary at best, yet everyone insisted it was necessary and must be nourished. They knew it within themselves, the healing achieved through union with the sylvan prince undeniable, but beliefs ingrained from childhood are the most difficult to counter. They sighed in unison.

*He is waiting.*

*Aye, and he is watching, which I suppose is only fair.*

*Are we ready, then?*

*No! Yet we must see this done without letting his potent bond-magic drive us too far.*

*What torment! Thranduil is a cruel and heartless lord.*

*Nay, don't blame him for the love he bears his son. Would our Adar feel less rage if the situation was reversed?*

*No. Let us go in before Legolas becomes concerned and begins to doubt our intent.*

They looked to him there in the doorway of the little hut and smiled, each lifting the opposite hand, and were happy to note his bemused expression, reinforced by a slight shake of his head at them. He held the curtain aside as they neared and passed by him, letting them see the mithril chain and the swallow charm. As each bent and kissed him chastely, they could not help notice the hint of fatigue beneath his cheerful demeanour nor miss the pining beneath his veneer of welcome, nor mistake for whom he pined.
"That was beautiful, Luthadron," Elladan said, "you and Adar."

"Aye," Elrohir echoed, "never have I seen the like." The brothers were rewarded abundantly as these simple words fairly made Legolas bloom, that brilliant smile that could stop their hearts unfurling.

"It is the first time we have been this close," he confided. "Usually he holds back, but not today. I hope it becomes so commonplace I fail to notice it after time passes."

"I doubt that kind of love will ever feel commonplace," Elladan corrected, spontaneously taking Legolas up in a warm hug, overwhelmed with gentle felicity for this young elf who had suffered so much and could yet be so unaffected and open-hearted. Lean, strong arms squeezed him back and then Elrohir's quiet laugh rang free before he sandwiched Legolas between them.

"I'll not be left out," he said, failing to squelch the physical response being pressed up against the Wood Elf's rump, Elladan's cool grey eyes blazing into his, initiated.

Now it was Legolas who chuckled, feeling both growing hard and trying to hide it, a complete impossibility. He did not encourage them, however, feeling no interest in kind. Truly, his night with Nín'ódhel had drained him beyond his physical limits and much as he anticipated what would follow, he could not generate a single lurid thought. He shoved Elladan away and gave Elrohir a sympathetically reproving smirk, glancing to the tell-tale evidence of their desires. Simultaneously, each grinned and shrugged, unapologetic to be caught out in such an awkward state.

"Be at peace," said Legolas, suddenly compassionate over their discomfort. "I am grateful you agreed to fulfil this obligation; it is a tradition I'd thought to be denied. And I must say the pair of you are nearly as far-sighted as Nana. Ada said you had everything already at hand. Elril brought a set with him purchased at the last minute, but it isn't the same as having the jewels designed specifically for me."

"We meant only to present them," Elrohir was quick to state, still worried that their idea might be perceived in a negative light, considering their former attitude toward Legolas. "We wouldn't want to imply any right to adorn you thus."

"Aye, honestly we had no idea this was part of sylvan tradition," Elladan added with a shrug.

"You are prepared to see it through?" asked Legolas and somehow he knew they understood he meant not just the day's events but all of it, their commitment to him and the bond between them, their support and strength throughout the pregnancy. As he watched the brothers shared a long look filled with high hope and mild dread. They faced him and nodded in unison.

"We are," announced Elladan, reaching out a hand to squeeze Legolas' arm. "It is no burden, as we told your Adar."

"No less would we wish," Elrohir affirmed. He hesitated but a heartbeat. "Your Naneth explained to you what your Adar shared with us?"

"Aye." Legolas' answer was quiet and carried an undertone of uncertainty. He found it difficult to meet their compelling grey eyes but forced himself to do it. These were his mates and the bond would see them through the difficulties ahead. They smiled in concert, recognising his resolve.

"We will do for you whatever you require, today and every other day to follow."
"There is no other way to reverse the harm we caused."

"And considering the sort of punishment your family might have demanded, we feel not only relieved but blessed."

"Aye, thus far, what we have gained from you is more than we have given."

"We are healed and would see you whole as well. Permit us to begin balancing the debt, Luthadron."

Legolas' glowing smile sufficiently attested to the success of this speech and the gaze that tracked over them, appreciative and proud of his affect on them, pleased them very much. "Gladly do I accept your gift," he said boldly, though perhaps he felt less sure than his words might suggest, "and welcome your desire to be true mates to me."

*Am I imagining his subtle emphasis on the word 'desire'?*

No, but we mustn't burden him with our needs. This is all for him and it is time to begin.

They were not so young that they were unable to manage their physical reactions to him and, like their father, were quite capable of enduring and even relishing the juxtaposition of frustration and anticipation the next few hours would bring. In truth, the twins were more concerned about the actual piercing and had at first balked at poking needles through such delicate zones, but then each had assured the other that Elrond's careful training in the healing arts coupled with centuries of tending battlefield injuries made them more than qualified for the simple procedure. Elrohir smiled and held out the jewel case.

Legolas took and opened it eagerly, the loose robe falling open as he did. He caught his breath, seeing the unique design of the acorn studs and realising where they were meant to go, recognising the similarity of the tri-leaf pendant to his necklace. They had thought of this even then and he wondered about that. Did they find it strange for his people to so blatantly celebrate the inescapable drive that joined them together? He traced the light-weight links of the fine chains and recalled Elladan's words: they hadn't guessed the existence of the custom at all. This, then, was purely a fantasy of theirs and one they'd obviously wished to make real. The notion stirred his libido sharply despite his weariness and he found his heart thudding. He smiled, meeting each one's eyes with mischievous joy. "These are perfect," he assured them. "Elrond is going to be instantly aroused and I am going to be the most exquisitely exhausted ellon in Imladris tomorrow."

The brothers laughed lightly but discovered the image this elicited ineffective in ridding them of the mounting lust exposure to Legolas' half-revealed nakedness promoted. They glanced about the room, looking for an appropriate place to proceed. Typical of sylvan tradition, there were no tables other than those of the proper height for use when lounging on the floor amid the ample cushions and bolsters. The luxuriant feather mattress on the rug-strewn ground was draped in a soft coverlet of light green silk and jumbled full of pillows in all sizes and shapes. It was the only surface large enough upon which Legolas could recline while they accomplished their task and the brothers each extended a hand toward it in invitation.

A brief nod accompanied the return of the jewel case to Elrohir as a quick shrug sent the rich velvet robe sliding from Legolas' shoulders. It landed behind him with a hushed sigh, leaving him bare of all but the Twins' bonding necklace and the natural grace of his people. Proud and a little shy at the same time, he took the two steps required to reach the bed and settled cross-legged atop it, hands resting self-consciously atop his knees, eyes regarding them keenly while they prepared to adorn him.
as the embodiment of the bond enslaving them all.

Each had chosen a different aspect of the work. Elladan made himself busy gathering a table and setting out the tools needed: a small crystal bowl, a bottle of clear spirits, a little leather case in which several surgical needles reposed, some clean cloths, and a flask filled with miruvor. Not having any idea how much pain would accompany the procedure, he nonetheless thought it best not to use any sort of local anaesthetic, recalling Legolas' unusual sensitivity to cinnamon and considering the areas to be pierced. He and Elrohir had discussed the task frankly and he'd had to admit he couldn't jab the Wood Elf's body with anything sharp enough to draw blood. It would thus be Elladan's job to distract Legolas from what was happening and minimise the discomfort. He knelt beside him on the bed.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"I don't know." Legolas revealed and shivered, watching Elrohir pour spirits in the bowl and drop in the little acorn studs, the tri-leaf jewel, and the small mithril rings. He selected two of the needles from the case and dropped them in to soak as well.

"Don't worry," Elrohir assured, taking his place on the mattress on the other side of the naked elf, eyes wandering freely over the places he would soon be handling. His heart rate doubled and his renewed erection pressed its painful girth against his leggings. "I will be quick and Elladan will make sure the pleasure outweighs the discomfort." He couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like; whether the sudden sharp stab through the slit of Legolas' cock might enhance his orgasm. Mayhap he would experience multiple heights of ecstasy each time he was pierced. Aye, we must try for that.

These silent ruminations made Elladan's eyes widen slightly but he could not disagree and found the visions infectious. Both were eager to begin, caring little for how maddening it would be to incite their mate's passion without being able to evoke release for themselves. That was the only restriction imposed upon them. They were free to stimulate Legolas in any way they thought might please him, but he was not to reciprocate nor could they touch one another. It was as Thranduil had said: a punishment from which they would benefit in the future. If anything, they feared it would be no punishment at all.

Elladan settled one hand over Legolas' small belly. "This being the least sensitive spot, why don't we begin with the leaf ornament?" he suggested.

Legolas nodded and leaned back against Elladan's chest as the elder twin moved behind him. Even through the intervening clothing a hot, swollen penis made its presence felt against his naked arse and he shifted closer, registering Elladan's poorly repressed grunt with a mixture of regret and exultant triumph. Lips nuzzled into his hair and against his ear. A tongue darted out and briefly lapped its tip, sending a delicious shudder all the way down to his cock, no longer flaccid, and Legolas reached for it. Instantly Elladan removed the eager fingers, replacing them with his own, and tugged the filling shaft playfully.

"My job," he whispered, taking another taste of the ear and relishing the sensation of the velvety organ slowly growing rigid in his hand. He pumped, a languid, relaxed motion. Legolas' breath noticeable quickened and he abruptly turned to offer the other ear. Elladan gave his brother a minute nod as he complied.

Legolas' eyes had drifted shut under Elladan's skillful attention, but the sudden sensation of something cold and wet swabbing over his navel made them open wide. He watched Elrohir cleansing the little fold of skin then got sidetracked as Elladan's thumb expertly massaged the glans
of his cock. His sight diverted to watching the hand around his penis, flexing his pelvis to enhance
the contact, willing the thumb to repeat its erotic caress. It did and in that instant a flash of pain jolted
him, pulsing through his nerves right to the tip of his erection. As the sensation diminished he saw
the jade jewel embedded neatly in the little hollow atop his stomach. The tiny hole through which the
gold pin anchored it to his flesh tingled faintly but nothing more. He raised his eyes to Elrohir, the
question in them needing no words.

"It's beautiful," he assured, his voice bright with relief as he flicked the leaves and sent them dancing,
glad the deed was done and proud to have done it well.

Legolas grinned, pleased with the way the jewel shifted over his skin with his every breath, deciding
the sensation of weight, like that of a pebble resting on his stomach, was not irritating as he'd worried
it might be. Before he had time to imagine Elrond's reaction, fingers softly stroked across his chest,
dragging against nipples already erect; the sudden contact made him flinch. Attention instantly
diverted, he watched as the roving digits pinched one of the ruby nodes and initiated a spasm of
pleasure that rippled down to his groin where pelvis and penis rocked in spontaneous salute.

"These next," Elladan whispered behind him, "and it may take some time to prepare you for it."

So saying, he set about rhythmically squeezing and tugging, pulling and releasing the nipples, first
one then its twin. Legolas arched against him, a quick gasp announcing his excitement. Under
Elladan's touch, the tender tips grew tumid and hot, the desire to taste them unbearable, but before he
could act Elrohir beat him to it, leaning over to greedily suck at the firm, ripe flesh. In seconds the
brothers had their young mate flat on his back, feasting on the delicious tidbits, alternating left and
right in perfect harmony, Elladan still jealously controlling stimulus to the sylvan's cock while
Elrohir's fingers dived lower and dipped inside the slick cavity behind the balls.

Legolas' response was predictably sensational. Desperately he spread his thighs, inviting deeper
penetration, and moaned a soft note of needy complaint, knowing neither one of his lovers would be
able to answer his demands. He had not envisioned this frustration, believing he was too tired to
generate sufficient interest, and squirmed under the combined assault, lifting into the suction,
trembling in rapturous tremors when teeth bit down and pulled the soft, red tissue. Frantic, he
clutched at the coverlet and watched as the right nipple was stretched unbearably and then slowly
escaped from Elladan's mouth, snapping free and quivering as he gasped and panted. The next
second Elrohir swooped in and devoured it and thus they traded sides once more. The relentless fist
slapped lazily as it slid easily up and down his slickened shaft and the fingers inside dug deeper,
probing for the hidden gland. He exhaled a huge breath, nearly a sob, for the spot could not be
stroked this way.

"Please," he choked out, shuddering as they switched again. "I can't...I need to..." He couldn't go
on and abruptly all contact ceased. He peered beseechingly into identical grey eyes filled with
concern and regret.

"We can't," murmured Elladan.

"It's forbidden," added Elrohir. He met his brother's eyes. *Unless we can find something else to use
besides our cocks.*

*Aye, where is that box of toys Faelon mentioned?*

"Over there, under that blue cushion," Legolas' words were more moaned than spoken and the
Twins gaped at one another in amazement.
They decided his remarkable response to the unspoken thoughts was coincidence; their idea was not really so difficult to divine. Quickly Elladan found the collection of erotic playthings and rummaged amid the contents with interest even though what he wanted was readily evident. Grinning with salacious delight he drew out the garnets for Elrohir to see, but was at once sorry for it. In a trice Legolas was on his feet, snatched the bulbous red gems from his hands, cheeks nearly the same colour, and stuffed them inside the small wooden box he'd made to hold them. The latch shut with a sharp and censorious click as he turned away, wrapping his arms about him and trying to hide his body and his dismay.

"That is private," he said quietly and though he knew no harm was meant he felt wronged, as if they'd spied on him and Elrond for their amusement.

The silence was horrible. The brothers didn't know what to do, never having encountered this kind of problem before, and Legolas was upset without being able to explain why, even to himself. Elladan sighed and set a hand gently on his shoulder.

"Forgive me," he offered. "I wasn't thinking clearly."

"We didn't mean to pry," added Elrohir, joining them and wrapping a consoling arm about the distraught Wood Elf.

"I know; I just…I think we should leave those things alone, that's all."

Legolas knew this must sound childish but he couldn't help it. No matter how wondrous their experienced techniques made him feel, the Twins were still strangers for the most part. This was not the sort of thing he wanted them to know about him, though he knew they must anyway, and again he couldn't define his concerns. He truly did not want them inserting the phallus carved to match Elrond's penis into him, bringing him to orgasm while they watched. Yet, the idea made him shiver with undeniable craving, delicious in its dark decadence.

Unbidden his secret fantasy arose: he was on his knees bent over their prone bodies sucking them, one long cock in each fist as his mouth moved from one to the other while they strained for access. Their hands tangled in his hair as they tried to get both erections in at once, crying for him to finish them, and all the while Elrond fucked him slow and hard from behind, shoving them deeper down his throat, ramming his prostate with each thrust, all of them wailing in ecstasy as they came together. Face afire and pulse pounding, he wondered if the Twins would be disgusted by this lurid scenario or intrigued.

The incongruity over this lavish, four-way phantasm and his bashfulness over having the Twins know what he liked to do alone with Elrond was not lost on Legolas and served to confuse him even more. In vain he scolded his prudish reaction, unable to comprehend that he was ashamed of his needs and fearful of having them known, exhausted from the long night salving Elrond's anguished soul, depressed that none of his mates seemed aware of the deplorable state of his, and now he'd spoiled the piercing ritual, too. All of this turmoil was influenced strongly by his body's efforts to cope with the radical shifts in hormones imposed by the pregnancy. Suddenly terrified he might break down in tears, Legolas exhaled a forlorn groan and slumped against Elrohir, face burrowing into the midnight mane.

"Why can't it be simple?" he complained.

"Nae, few lives are simple, yet yours is indeed more complex than most," agreed Elrohir, softly
rubbing the sylvan's back. "I'm sorry we complicated things."

"It just keeps getting worse," pouted Legolas, pulling free only to go and throw himself face down on the bed. How was he supposed to juggle three mates and make them all happy? And now there's a child, too. Where am I in all this? Who will see to my happiness? The jade leaves caught on the blanket and pinched his skin and suddenly he was furious to be glorifying the bondage that had forever altered his life. He rolled back over, intending to rip the ornament out, but instead found Elladan beside him holding tight to his wrist, effectively preventing the violent act.

"I didn't mean to spoil it, Legolas, truly," he said. "It's true we've been curious about the garnets; we couldn't help it, but I should not have intruded on your privacy."

Legolas, engulfed in his misery, had quite forgotten what the catalyst of his black mood had been. Wide-eyed he stared at Elladan's stricken face, shocked back into reality. "Ai! Nay, Elladan, I'm not angry about that, not really. It's as Elrohir said, everything is just overwhelming. I feel like I'm trapped in a pit and can't climb out." He blinked, only just that instant realising this was exactly what he felt and his temper exploded with volcanic energy.

"This isn't what I wanted; I'm a warrior not a pretty little pet to amuse and delight the mighty Lords of Imladris!" He twisted out of Elladan's hold and leaped up to prowl the yurt, shoving Elrohir aside and kicking at the robe he'd discarded. He abruptly realised this was the same fury he'd unleashed upon Elrond and didn't care, deeming all his mates should partake of his wrath just as they shared his body. "I never wanted this and I don't want it now! I will unbind myself from the lot of you, so help me; there must be a way to reclaim who I was before… I am a prince among my people and I won't be reduced to… I won't be traded back and forth like a… like I don't really belong to anyone at all. And I don't want to be a life-bearer!"

The words were out before he realised it and Legolas gasped in horror, struck dumb by both the audacity required to utter such a terrible thing and the sad fact that it was nothing less than the truth. All colour drained from his face as the anger receded and he found himself peering at identical countenances replete with astonishment, dismay, and disbelief. His head dropped low in shame and self-loathing, unable to hold their boggled stares. He stumbled back to the bed and sat heavily, hands delicately covering the hidden child as if the tiny soul was already broken. Tears blurred his eyes and he shut them.

"Nay, Tinu Mîn, nay I didn't mean it, not that last, not really," he whispered and startled when two sets of arms enveloped him, two heads leaned against his, and two voices murmured in support and love.

"He knows that."

"Aye, your love is so abundant it spills over onto us."

"Who certainly don't deserve any at all."

"If you can learn to love us, how could you not love the babe?"

"Perhaps you never planned to have children, yet you want this one desperately."

"What you reject is the way all choice was stolen away from you. Everything that has happened since that day in Eregion has been forced upon you."
"Even the child you were compelled to create," said Elrohir bluntly and settled his fingers over Legolas' mouth before he could disagree. "Whatever your reason, it was not because you wanted to be a life-bearer and that is the point."

"Aye, and if anyone has the right to rail a bit against fate, you do," added Elladan and kissed his temple. "We know you would die that the child might live and if we know it he knows it all the more."

"Aye," said Legolas, his surprise evident, and looked from one to the other, wondering how they came so suddenly to be so wise.

Together Elrohir and Elladan eased Legolas into the piled up cushions, careful to keep him safely sandwiched between them, and urged him to speak of his lost hopes and broken dreams. Legolas talked for hours and they let him, never interrupting except to caress or hug him as need demanded, listening intently as he told them of who he was before that day in Eregion.

He described his life in Greenwood, his exalted reputation as the best archer under the trees, his place in the family, his role in the defence of the forest. He painted for them the scenes of dire battles he had fought and revealed the plot to topple the black spike of Dol Guldur and run the Wraiths from his woods. He introduced them to Galbreth and the close bond between them; he explained about his Nana's foresight and what her prophesy meant to him; what it ultimately meant to his father. He poured out his waking nightmare that his Adar would trade him away to a foreign land to be the mate of some foreign Lord, desired solely for the bragging rights possessing a spouse with his unique physique permitted. He revealed that he'd refused to acknowledge his natural desires when they began to arise, denying that he could want to be mated to anyone much less another male who might get him with child.

It all came to nothing and by his will had his future been stolen, his identity erased. Legolas told them what he had only explained to Elrond before and at last they understood how he'd come to be in Eregion and why he'd felt the need to make life. Even that purpose had proved false and now he was left with this convoluted mess to unravel. How could he divide up his heart and soul between three mates who were not sylvan and didn't understand the bond? How could he love three mates who, being father and sons, could never come to terms with loving him jointly? How could he be a good parent, aiding his son to grow and develop, when he didn't even know who he was anymore? How could he nurture a child to maturity when he felt as bewildered and vulnerable as any elfling would?

It was almost noon when he finished and lay quiescent between them, exhausted but lighter in spirit, glad to have finally voiced his sorrows so fully, amazed that it was to them he gave this trust. Perhaps it was because they were strangers that he was able to reveal such things; things too painful to express to his parents, too humiliating to discuss with Faron, too damning to express to Elrond. He didn't expect them to have the answers to his dilemma and was in truth glad they didn't try to solve everything with some trite phrases or quotes of ancient wisdom. They simply acknowledged and validated all he had said and in the end he was just grateful to have someone with whom to mourn the ellon he once had been and now could never be.

After a time, Elrohir stirred and spoke:

"This is not the life you chose, but it will be a good life," he said, "though not perhaps an easy one."

"And it is true you are no longer what you once were, but we love you as you are now," Elladan remarked. "As for Adar, he is too blinded by love to understand how you can grieve over what you've lost. In his eyes, you are perfect."
"Whatever fate doles out, you are not to face it alone, Luthadron," they said as one.

He sighed, realising he must be content with that promise as there was no way to alter the past. Before more could be said, noisy commotion outside the hut announced the arrival of someone who plainly did not want to go unnoticed. A slight cough preceded a brief explanation:

"Try and encourage Legolas to eat something," Elril's ancient voice reached them, filled with amused affection, "before looking in the bag." There was a pause and then he called out again, a bit farther away. "Oh, and no miruvor for him. And make him sleep, too, when you're done doing whatever it is you're doing in there." A mild snicker faded into silence as he left them then.

"I don't think he believes we can abstain until after the bonding rites," huffed Elrohir.

"How rude, to impugn our characters so baldly," muttered Elladan.

"Hir Elril is very old and knows almost everything," retorted Legolas, "but that doesn't mean he doubts your resolve. Let's see what he brought." He clambered over the Twins, presenting a tantalising display of his hind quarters as he went, and cautiously cracked the curtain over the door. "He's gone," he announced and darted out and back, "and left a basket of food and this leather bag."

The brothers joined him, one relieving him of the small satchel, the other taking the cold picnic. "Open it," demanded Legolas, pointing to the bag.

"Nay, I am inspired to obey your protector," intoned Elrohir, holding the leather sack close to keep Legolas from grabbing it away. "He might be up in the trees just waiting to report our errors to your Ada."

"We've no wish to tempt Aran Thranduil's wrath again," added Elladan. "Sit and eat first." They did so, Legolas suddenly realising he was famished and wolfing down most of the food himself, the speed with which he did so making the Twins smile.

"Now you may do the honours, Luthadron," said Elrohir and held out the mysterious bag.

Legolas snatched it up and opened it, the brothers leaning close and peering in. There was a small box similar to the jewel case the Twins had brought, but that was summarily ignored in favour of the other object. At the bottom of the sack rested a unique devise composed of smooth, supple leather with a short wooden handle at one end. The shape was unmistakable and wholly indecent. Elladan fished it out and examined it appreciatively, feeling the subtle give of the stuffed tool with interest.

"Sawdust?" he wondered, passing it into Legolas' demanding hands.

"Nay, more like fine sand," the Wood Elf disagreed, squeezing the firm phallus in his fist. The girth was perfect and the length more than sufficient. Salacious hunger transformed his features as he glanced from Elrohir to Elladan and shoved the toy back into the elder brother's grasp. "Come on, I want to try it." He was back on the bed in a second, legs wide and knees up.

The brothers were frozen in place for a moment enjoying the sight, then Elladan elbowed his brother.

"Anything in that satchel to make it slick?"

"Aye. This ancient kinsman of ours is highly resourceful."
"And infinitely wise. We must make certain to thank him."

"Enough talk," Legolas glared at them between his parted knees, "about Elril."

Elrohir retrieved the vial of oil, discarded the bag, and raced to the bed, Elladan on his heels. At first they vied for who should have the privilege of inserting the tool inside their eager mate, but since Elrohir was the one doing the piercing Elladan won by default.

With practised speed he uncorked the oil and poured some out, making sure to let Legolas watch him smooth it over every inch of the leather cock. Noting how stiff and dark the Wood Elf's penis had become, he took hold of it and stroked it a few times with his oily hand, so to camouflage the moment of penetration. When Legolas was suitably distracted, he shoved it in all the way to its handle, immensely pleased to feel the shaft in his hand quiver as a thrilling tremor racked the naked body on display. He pulled the phallus out a bit and rammed it back in, certain he was striking the hidden pleasure zone though the sylvan was as silent as usual.

"I think he likes it," snickered Elrohir. He watched a while as Elladan fucked him with the toy, relishing the way Legolas jerked and shook, hands knotted in the coverlet, sweat breaking out over his rosy skin. He swooped in and kissed the parted lips savagely and quickly for Legolas could barely breathe. Glancing back he saw Elladan sucking Legolas' cock, humming in time with his plunging hand. "Keep it up just so."

He gathered one of the needles and one of the studs from the crystal bowl, shifting along the bed to a better position. Smiling, he met Legolas' dreamy expression, openly awash in the rising tide of pleasure, and bent to resume the enjoyable task of preparing the engorged nipples for piercing, suckling and biting randomly, delighted to feel fingers entwine within his hair as a shaky cry graced the air. A whispery phrase followed it, something indecipherable in Nandorin. Elrohir's soul expanded and met his brother's, exulting over the response their attentions brought forth. Time became meaningless; after offering Legolas nothing but anguish and sorrow for so long, they became lost in the pleasure of giving him joy. Then the hand was yanking Elrohir's mane in a half-hearted kind of way and he withdrew to peer at Legolas.

"Going to come," he husked, struggling for air and trying to hold back, but Elladan knew what he was doing and there was no denying the impending release.

"Aye, come for us, Luthadron," Elrohir murmured and pushed the needle through the ruddy flesh, inserting the stud at once and screwing the end down tight.

For a second Legolas remained poised on the pinnacle of surrender, then a small abrupt grunt escaped his body. He shimmied and shook, the orgasm rippling through him in gentle swells of sweet release, keenly aware of Elladan's tongue lapping across the tingling slit and vaguely sensing the swift prick of pain through his nipple. The discomfort was minimal, not nearly as sharp as the clamps Elrond liked to use, but enough to raise the ecstasy higher, a small pulsing connection between his penis and the excited node.

Just as it began to fade another flash of heat shot through his chest and he opened his eyes wide, focusing on Elrohir's fingers as they secured the second stud. He peered down at the little chunks of golden metal glinting against the dark red buds and tentatively touched one. Immediately a sharper spasm raced through the nerves and he exhaled a decadent moan. He flopped against the downy mattress, smiling when the twins crawled alongside him, each lightly kissing one pierced nipple.

"Amazing," whispered Elladan.
"Glorious," sighed Elrohir.

"Do my ears now," demanded Legolas.

Shifting his legs against the fat phallus still inside him, he wondered if it was even possible to get hard again after so much stimulation and decided he didn't need to worry about it. He was too relaxed to care. There wasn't a hint of tension anywhere in his being and he thought it would be lovely to drift into reverie while the Twins finished the piercing, though he knew once they started on his ears he would never be able to remain so deliciously lax and languid.

The soft swipe of a warm wet tongue across the left ear-tip reinforced the truth as his heart leaped and he became acutely aware of the heavy swath of black hair tickling his skin. He reached into the satiny strands and held on. Two sets of fingers simultaneously plucked the studs through his nipples and every nerve vibrated with the same bright note of joyous delight. "Ai Valar," he whispered, opening eyes he hadn't realised he'd shut. Matched smirks and dancing grey depths met his gaze, calling forth an answering smile. "The things you do to me, Atata Îdê."

"Ah, Luthadron, only what you wish." A pet-name!

"Only what will please you." Aye, but what does it mean? And for who? That's an old tongue, indeed.

The mental image of Legolas' very young and sensuous tongue was simply more interesting than deciphering their mate's obscure language and the brothers took turns tasting the mobile red muscle, pausing at intervals to make sure he could breathe well enough to remain conscious. The scattered, pleasure-dazzled glaze beneath golden lashes assured them the treatment was appreciated. Elladan dipped his head for another helping and was surprised to find his advance rebuffed by a sharp tug on his hair. Pulling back, he faced an impatient Wood Elf, the scowl marring his fair features only half-pretence.

"The ears," reminded Legolas.

"As you command, Ernil-en-mín-Ind," Elrohir could not help laughing, liking the more assertive attitude and pleased to see fresh aspects of the sylvan's personality emerging. "Allow me to assist you, Luthadron, for this magnificent mane of vibrant gold must be restrained for a time." Though his eyes were on the yellow tresses, his hand made quick work of pulling the phallus free as Elladan sat Legolas upright, both enjoying the little shiver that ran through the naked ellon.

Then Elrohir indulged his obsession with hair for a time, combing his fingers through the shimmering strands before braiding them all together in a single long plait. Now the ears were fully exposed and shaded a deep rosy red. The brothers couldn't resist the impulse to stroke them and Legolas clutched to whatever his hands could find for support, gripping one's knee and the front of the other's tunic. Neither minded in the least, lost in the appreciation of the soft skin of the fleshy point. Silently they debated whether there was any place on the enticing form before them any softer and this at once prompted a lengthy series of comparative rubbing and touching over various sensitive spots. Legolas, unaware of the motivation for this impromptu exploration, nonetheless found he had no difficulty become aroused again. The analysis ended in a draw, Elrohir adamant that the ears possessed the softest and most velvety texture on Legolas' topography while Elladan disagreed.

"Nay, 'tis here, muindor, the very tip of this lovely erection is surely softer to the touch," so attesting, he traced his initial over the hot, slick glans, the pressure of his finger unbearably light and teasing.
"Ai, Elladan!" Legolas gasped out, watching this, and reached for the retreating hand before it could get away, pressing it to his rigid cock. "Don't stop."

Gratified to invoke such a demanding reply, Elladan fist the warm column of red flesh, stroking in short quick jolts that had Legolas twitching where he sat. While that tended to impede any possibility of the piercing continuing, it did enhance the effect of Elrohir's lips where they nibbled and sucked the Wood Elf's ears. The Twins silently agreed they were working to provoke one of the soft trills Legolas made during intimacy, a sound to which they'd been exposed only twice. They'd identified at once the state of excitement necessary to elicit the unique vocal signal and thenceforth considered it the benchmark of their prowess in pleasing the sylvan. Thus far each had succeeded in bringing it forth and competition over who would be able to repeat the experience was intense.

Legolas knew nothing of that but surely benefited the more for it. The sensations were quickly overwhelming him, though it would be long before he would climb to the heights of orgasm again. He shifted into a different state, something he had never experienced, almost a somatic version of Ôlpathu where thought and feeling perfectly merged. Unconsciously, he gave voice to an entirely new sort of song, a wordless, double note, a rising and falling sigh ringing along a continuum of pure contentment. He was utterly lost to what was happening, no longer differentiating separate actions but experiencing the twins' ravishing hands and lips as one spectacular fire of scintillating impulses coursing through his being. It was like gliding along the crest of orgasm, free to dip into the bottomless well of ecstasy while never falling. When the first ring passed through his ear, Legolas passed out.

"Ai!" the brothers cried as one, each grabbing the lax body as Legolas went limp. Carefully they laid him on his back and could not help feeling smugly self-satisfied over the expression of peaceful jubilation that remained in his open eyes. Without further ado, Elrohir inserted the remaining ring and was not surprised when this raised barely a flutter of golden lashes. Legolas was in deep reverie, no doubt enjoying a replay of recent events. There was only one more piercing to complete and the brothers looked doubtfully from the lovely mithril ring to their exhausted mate's spent penis. It was their understanding that the easiest way to accomplish this last and most delicate of the procedures was to make sure Legolas was erect and ready to pop.

Should have started there and worked upwards.

Can't be helped now. Do we wait? He is far beyond fatigue and this rest is vital.

True, but the day advances and this must be done. He can sleep until the ceremony once we're finished here.

I'm glad you're doing it. Just thinking about forcing a sharp metal needle into the slit and out through the skin makes me feel ill.

Coward. I will be quick and perhaps he won't awaken.

They both recognised this for the ridiculous notion it was and determined to minimise the stress Legolas would undergo. Elrohir retrieved the leather cock from the floor where he'd tossed it, his face contorting in disgust as he inspected it. The oily coating had formed a crusty surface to which bits of leaves, dust, dirt, and lint adhered. "I don't think this is meant to be reusable," he commented and decided to get rid of it, retrieving the bag so to carry it away later. The weight of the sack reminded him of the box inside and he dumped it out on the bed. His eyes met his brother's in wicked curiosity. "Do you suppose?"
"Yes," Elladan grinned and grabbed the little case, opening it in such haste its contents spilled into his lap. It was a beautifully faceted set of royal blue stones linked on a sturdy mithril chain, four in all in graduated sizes from the diameter of his thumb to that of a hen's egg. "There can now be no doubt that Elril is indeed our kinsman," announced Elladan, "for it becomes obvious that certain predilections run in the bloodlines."

Elrohir laughed at that and took up the pleasure balls. "These look just like the garnets; do you suppose they were made from troll guts, too?"

"Ai! Must you spoil every lovely image with a gruesome reference?" complained Elladan, but the likelihood of his brother's idea being true was high. Perhaps these gems had been made from one of Legolas' earlier kills in Greenwood. He sighed, deciding he would just have to focus on the image of Legolas being bold and brave as he fought his foe instead of imagining the Wood Elf carving out the bloody heart of the vanquished monster. He shuddered. For all the killing he did, Elladan was not proud of it and wanted no trophies to remind him of the numbers dispatched by his blade.

A hand landed on his shoulder and he looked up into Elrohir's understanding face. A moment of commiseration passed between them in which each reaffirmed the necessity of their vow and comforted one another over the strain it placed upon their hearts. Both felt immensely grateful for the peace being with Legolas gave them. He simply accepted this aspect of their existence, never questioning the validity of their quest nor pointing out its ultimate futility. Though he slumbered through this communion, Legolas was intricately bound up in it and this was a new experience for the Twins. Never before had their been another with whom to share such feelings. Carefully they stretched beside him and cuddled him close, nuzzling at his neck and placing soft kisses against his cheeks, the erotic toy forgotten. He stirred and murmured in pleased contentment but did not wake and the brothers found it difficult to disengage from this embrace of spirits.

"We must finish this," Elladan at last announced, speaking the words in grim fortitude as though the task ahead was some dire challenge set upon them by the Valar.

"True, and I don't know but that it will make it impossible to give him back to Adar after all. This gets more complicated every minute," agreed Elrohir. "I suppose its the way we were raised, but binding him in rings and chains really makes me feel my claim on him the more."

"Aye, except it is our claim and in fact it is he who has our souls on a leash. And if we need clarification on whose claim is foremost we need look no further than this little jewel here," Elladan's fingers touched on the tri-leaf ornament embedded in Legolas' navel. "This is not our child, Elrohir."

That was enough to sober them both and they sat up, gazing in mixed appreciation and disappointment at Legolas, for he might have been theirs alone had things been handled differently once not so many years ago. Yet he was beautiful and it was simply impossible to look upon him long and still remain unhappy. Together they inhaled a fortifying breath and silently agreed to commence with the final piercing, accepting their lesser place in his heart without rancour.

Elladan took up the sapphire globes and Elrohir dropped the mithril ring and another needle into the bowl of spirits. While his brother coated the largest gem with the oil, the younger twin reached up and tugged on one of the small hoops gracing the Wood Elf's ear-tip.

Legolas' twitched and his eyes blinked and just as Elladan inserted the first ball he awoke. The sensation of the hard jewel being pushed inside the tender invagination made him part his legs and groan, but then he thought about what was going in him and at once imagined the garnets. His face
flushed and he rolled to his side, kicking away Elladan's hand and reaching for the chain. The jewel came free as he dragged himself away from their grasping arms and snatched it to him. He stood, intending to unleash his fury and order them from the hut and only then did he realise the nature of the object in his clasp. He stared at the slick blue stone, mouth ajar, and then raised contrite eyes to theirs. "Oh," he said sheepishly but they were smiling.

"Come back here, naked wood sprite, and let us play with you," coaxed Elladan.

"We promise you'll enjoy it," added Elrohir.

"Another gift from Hîr Elril?" asked Legolas, returning to sit between them. He dutifully returned the toy to Elladan's waiting palm.

"Indeed. He seems determined to enhance our encounter today," Elrohir said and gave one of the earrings another tug. He exulted in the sharp gasp this forced from Legolas. "Is that good?" He did it again.

"Ai! Yes!" Legolas gaped at him. "I didn't think it would make that much difference. Do it again," They both took a ring and twisted it slightly. The feeling went straight to his cock and he whimpered. "Ai Valar, the things you do to me! Elladan, the gems, please!" Legolas reclined on his elbows and raised his knees, exposing his unique genitalia, watching in avid delight as Elladan pushed the cold, hard stone inside him. He moaned and let his head fall back, shuddering when Elrohir tweaked the pierced ear again. The second sapphire was poised for entry and followed the first, forcing it deeper.

One by one Elladan crammed them in until all four were deep inside the Wood Elf's body, the largest resting against his prostate, producing the most maddeningly erotic itch. The constant attention to his ears was enhanced as Elrohir decided to use his tongue, freeing his fingers to play with the golden studded nipples. They rose to rigid points as every nerve in Legolas' body came alive. Between his legs, his cock was filling again, growing dark and gathering the balls up tight against its root.

He jerked wildly when a cool, wet dollop of oil landed right on the head and immediately a firm hand enveloped the organ, smearing the lubrication from crown to base. He struggled to lift his head and see which one was stroking him thus but was distracted when teeth bit down on his nipples, first one and then its twin. Legolas decided he didn't need to sort out who did what and gave in to the experience, hoping to drop into that newly discovered state of Srawâ Olsol and there remain for as long as possible. What Elrohir was going to do to his cock gave him both a tremor of fear and a thrill of desire. He wanted to tell him to wait until he was riding that incredible wave, that unending tide of mounting pleasure, but couldn't gather the words or sufficient energy to speak.

He needn't have worried, for both Twins were observing his responses keenly, enthralled by the sight of him slipping away from reality into a place they could only imagine, wishing dearly to join him there. Now did the punishment of Thranduil make itself felt, for it was plain that Legolas was experiencing something that far surpassed the standard benefits sexual union was known to give. That this was a state only they had as yet been able to engender made them hard beyond their normal capacity and the ache to plunge their cocks in with the sapphires grew in accord. Legolas would not stop them from doing as they pleased, this they knew, and the temptation was great. What prevented them was the absolute trust of their mate.

Slowly Elladan pulled the mithril chain and the smallest of the gems popped free. To this Legolas barely quivered, the change almost imperceptible. Elrohir felt his pulse leap, however, and sent silent confirmation to his brother, urging him to continue.
The second sapphire slipped out and now Legolas groaned, for the largest gem dragged over his prostate at last. He strained against the gathering explosion and tried to focus on what was happening. Elrohir ceased teasing his nipples and retrieved something from the crystal bowl; Elladan stopped stroking him and held his penis up straight. The third ball was yanked from his body and the last followed swiftly, but just before it came free Elrohir pushed the needle through his cock and secured the mithril ring in place. Legolas howled, undoubtedly the loudest outcry he had ever made during sex, and shook in a paroxysm of pain and delight. Only a small trickle of clear fluid eased from the tip of his wounded shaft but the sensation was sufficient to send him reeling into oblivion.

"Valar! Almost makes me want to have you do it to me, too," murmured Elrohir, gazing in unabashed awe at the flushed, sweaty, and unarguably sated figure sprawled on the mattress.

"Nay, banish the thought, muindor. I could never keep my hands steady enough. I would damage you terribly," Elladan lay beside Legolas with a happy sigh as Elrohir put away the needles and the sapphires. He stretched out his arm to caress his slumbering mate and let his touch come to rest upon the small swell beneath which the babe grew, and there he spread his hand wide, noting how its breadth nearly spanned Legolas' abdomen. The lovely new jewel pressed into his palm and he smiled, imagining how content the child must be to know his Ada was so at peace. Then he wondered whether the little one would view his unusual parent as his mother and found the notion just a tad bit funny, considering Legolas' adamant insistence to remain a warrior first and foremost. All at once the babe's spirit, bright and pure and mirroring his mirth, was easy to detect; Elladan's heart leaped to feel it.

"Ai, Elrohir, the little one knows us," he announced in breathless joy.

"Nay, that cannot be," Elrohir declaimed as he clambered onto the bed, but willingly let his brother place his palm over the Wood Elf's naval. A warm smile transformed his features as he sensed the child and felt a small, faint glimmer touch his soul. "This is wondrous indeed," he whispered. "No longer do I doubt the King's words; our light shall nourish this little one."

"Strange, to be involved in our brother's development this way. I wonder if this is common for the sylvan folk."

"No, Thranduil said such bonds as this are rare."

"I meant whether all members of a family contribute directly to the soul-light of unborn babes."

"Perhaps it is so."

They fell quiet and rested on the bed beside their mate, each one propped up on an elbow facing the recumbent form, and bent to kiss the angelic face, sharing gleeful smiles when Legolas sighed and shifted, reaching for them even as he slept, entwining his fingers in their ebony hair. The Twins snuggled closer until they lay flush against him, one to ether side, and then Legolas settled into deeper sleep, eyes almost shut, breath deep and slow, heart-beat light and quick.

_Ah, Luthadron, could you ever love us enough to give us such a gift?_ Elladan could not help hoping but never meant to reveal his secret wish, not yet at any rate. Thus, he was stunned when Legolas stirred and blinked up into his eyes, expression serious and fully aware.

"Perhaps, some day, but I'll not make the same mistake twice. We'd all have to agree," Legolas answered. Then his eyelids closed for a few seconds as he tumbled back into the depths of healing sleep. Beside him, Elladan pillowed his head on the firm little belly and wept.
~ ~ Glossary ~ ~

Mil Ovor: Abundant Love
Gwedhel Aur: Bonding Day
Atata Ìdê: Two Hearts (primitive elvish)
Ernil-en-mín-Ind: Prince of our Hearts
Srawâ Olsol: Body Dreaming (primitive elvish)

NOTE: Finally, an update to Aearlinn. This is really long and I don't know if it should have been cut further, but obviously I am done with it. Maybe it's two chapters or three, but Elrond's awakening conscience and maturing spirit are linked with his sons' emerging roles as real mates. Hope the idea of the five of them as a family is not unsettling, though I know some will shudder a little bit over it. They must reach consensus and accord or tragedy results.

The reprise of Legolas' angry outburst seemed appropriate to me; the Twins have treated him terribly and why should he just ignore the pain that caused him? I don't think any normal person could. I have not forgotten Erestor (or Arwen). There is something in store for him no one could disagree is sufficient punishment so Legolas will no doubt be moved to pity him rather than take him to task. Poor Erestor :(

I hope everyone enjoyed the scenes with the twins and the piercing was not ugly or gruesome. I did not go into much graphic detail with it so I hope it doesn't seem superficial either. Can't tell. But this chapter is for Galad-en-Elen, who expressed the desire to see the piercing done. Thank you so very much to everyone who has given me support and kind words through what has been and continues to be a truly horrible time. Every day is a struggle right now and knowing you good people are out there in the world, wishing me well and sending me positive energy, keeps me going. Literally.

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Thranduil endured in silence the minor indignity of being dragged along by the arm at a furious pace, led away by an undeniably furious Elven Lord, guided along paths unknown toward a destination undefined. The woodland King saw no need to speak and add to the burdens afflicting his unlikely law-son and felt instead a type of kinship with Elrond he never would have imagined possible; a kinship based on factors inherent in the unusual nature of sylvan bonding instincts. Thranduil was not involved in a multiple bond, but he had rather more knowledge of such situations than his host might guess. That was not something he was ready to divulge yet nor, he considered, would Elrond be willing to listen to him just now. What must it be like, sharing one's mate with one's own sons? Thranduil was thoroughly thankful he could not imagine and would never have to really comprehend.

He spared a sidelong glance at the fuming Lord of Imladris but failed to catch Elrond's eye. The mighty lore-master was completely engulfed in his thoughts and hardly seemed to notice he still had Thranduil in tow, but the King knew this was not so. He strode along patiently, expecting a spectacular explosion of condemnations, perplexed aggravation, and anguish regrets to erupt from the Noldorin ellon's throat at any moment, yet Elrond kept it all contained. The folk of Eärendil's lineage were not given to vocal expressions of deep feeling, apparently, and Thranduil had to wonder if it was healthy to keep all that anger seething inside, boiling like a pool of magma deep beneath the earth just waiting for a chance to escape. It crossed his mind that Legolas had often borne the brunt of this buried wrath through the numerous slanders, insults, and abuses to which Elrond had for so long turned a blind eye. While Elrond was not consciously aware that he had vented his ire in this way, but that did not prevent a swift flash of rage from coursing through his veins. Some of that emotion must have transmitted through the contact where Elrond's hand gripped him so tightly and the harried hervenn vain took a small misstep and scowled, just fixing the furthest corners of his peripheral vision on the Sindarin King beside him. He released the tense muscle beneath his fingers and exhaled a disgruntled breath, thinking the King had just cause for anger, considering his youngest son was involved in such an scandalous situation. He kept moving, though, and said nothing; in fact, he increased his pace a bit.

By this time the bounds of the estate had come and gone and still Elrond stomped along the sunlit pathways. Thranduil realised they were heading for the city and issued forth his own restrained exhalation of burdened displeasure; he had no appreciation for the massive elegance of Noldorin architecture and stonework which defined the city and found the straight, slate-paved streets and their rows of houses behind gated lawns distasteful. It was all so crowded and artificial and made him feel depressed.

He had never lived in a town of any sort, enjoying the freedom and the closeness to nature all woodland elves preferred, and could not comprehend why anyone would want to try to outdo what Yavanna and Aulë had already perfected. The most beautiful of cultivated gardens could never compare to the majesty of a forest, while the magnificent abodes of stone and wood shrank to puny insignificance next to the lofty glory of the smallest mountain. It was all but a pale imitation and a false effort to pose a kind of dominion over the lands. They were now approaching the centre square where the shops were just opening up, heading for the tastefully opulent front of the jeweller's store, and finally Thranduil balked.
"Oh, we are going in there?" he asked with obvious disappointment as realisation dawned. "Mellon, your gift for Legolas cannot be found in there." He offered a smile to the exasperated countenance focused upon him and continued. "I know you want to present him with something unique and memorable to mark this special day, but he has no love for jewels." Thranduil's fingers reached for the fine mithril collar about his neck and lovingly touched the faceted blue gem set upon it: Elrond's Ant-en-Govódiel (welcoming gift) to his new law-father. "He does not share my tastes."

"No," Elrond agreed with a grimace and a shake the head. Of course he knew that, but what was he to do? Having forgot the gift he must now acquire something spectacular to assuage his mate's disappointed affront. Immediately he took himself to task; the purpose of the token was not to keep him in Legolas' good graces but to commemorate this historic day. The present should honour his hervenn and indicate the depth of his love for Legolas. Elrond eyed the King in wary speculation. It had occurred to him before that Thranduil knew more about the intricacies of sylvan bonding customs, having courted and wed a sylvan Lady, than anyone else in his immediate circle, including Lindir. That the Sindarin ruler was now included in that exclusive group of friends and family no longer gave Elrond pause to wonder and he did not hesitate to seek advice. "What did you give Rhûn'waew?"

"Nae, I was so very young the first time," confessed Thranduil, eyes twinkling as Elrond's brows rose, "that I chose something dear to my heart, never thinking of what would please her best. It was a beautiful jewel, a creamy blue-green stone carved to resemble a beetle suspended on a silver chain. This was among my most cherished possessions, a gift on my twenty-fifth begetting day from Galadhel, Celeborn's adar, who was my Ada's cousin.

"As it turns out, this was not an insult, for the bonding day gift is supposed to be a symbolic exchange between mates of something which each one's heart holds dear, an opportunity to give one another a small part of the life lived before they met. It need not be expensive or rare at all and Rhûn'waew's gift to me was a carefully preserved linen kerchief brought by her paternal forebear out of Beleriand. Her father's people came over from Ossiriand with the caravan escorting the princes of Doriath." Thranduil watched Elrond's reaction to this and waited to see what questions would arise. The elven Lord looked dumbfounded and it took a moment for him to find any words to speak.

"The first time?" he queried, recalling again the fact that Rhûn'waew was born here in Imladris after the debacle of the Last Alliance. "She was at Dagorlad, then, and perished, but her parents must also have been there. Why did they not return to Greenwood and undertake her rejuvenation beneath the trees?" He had a suspicion he knew the answer but would not dare voice it for fear of offending.

"Aye, it is the same tragic tale so many families have to tell," averred Thranduil. "Her naneth was not at Dagorlad, being disinclined to war and violence after the manner of Elril. Her adar, however, was there and between us we sought to shield her from the worst fighting. She is not one to be directed in any undertaking, as you may have guessed, and counts her bloodline fraught with nobility unsurpassed. She was ever at my father's side, even at that fateful charge. You know what happened; it was a massacre. We all became separated in the melee. When it was over, I found that she had died while her adar was mortally wounded and failing fast. He was reclaimed in the sylvan way."

"Elbereth!" exclaimed Elrond. "By whom? Is she, or he, here now?"

"Nay, she is not here," Thranduil's words became hesitant, not wishing to impart any additional worries upon his son's mate. "She and Orbelain (Day of the Powers) conceived Rhûn'waew, for Laeross' (Summer Rain) fate upon learning of the battle's horrendous conclusion was not a good one." Here Thranduil stopped and had to turn his face away, not from sorrow, though there was
plenty of that within the tale, but to hide from the gifted healer his anxious soul.

He could not tell Elrond the truth. How could he? First, it was not even his story to reveal, but second and more importantly, he had no desire to add to the difficulty his son's situation entailed. Thranduil could not explain to Elrond that Rhûn'waew's mother had come to Imladris to confront the new addition to her marriage bond, demanding she return to Greenwood and leave the care of Orbelain to her as was her right. Yet it could not be, no matter that all three might want it so, though it was clear that Orbelain did not want his new mate to part from him. Too much of his light had dimmed and he was dependent upon the lady warrior. That her own soul was just as encumbered there could be no doubt. He began to fade at once when she tried to obey the command of Laeross, the primary mate. Seeing this, Laeross was herself heartbroken and embittered. She recalled her rival to her husband's side, love for him sufficient to save him but not to remain in the triad, and left for Aman.

"Laeross was Rhûn'waew's naneth?" coaxed Elrond, eager to understand the Winter Queen's past. "What happened?"

"Nae, is it so hard to divine?" sighed Thranduil, choosing the most plausible lie and turning to face Elrond with aggrieved dismay. "The news that reached her was not correct. She believed her mate and her daughter both lost, submerged in the foul waters of the Dead Marshes. It was more than she could endure and so she hastened to the Havens. She dwells now in Aman and awaits her kin there."

It was not, after all, entirely untrue.

Elrond shuddered; this was too near his reality to take the conclusion easily. Thus might his sons have been forced to do had not Lindir intervened. Once he might have wished them to go, but now he understood what they were to Legolas and would never risk his sylvan mate, nor Tinu Mîn. Hard as it was to bear, he would not let selfishness and jealousy tear his family from him, regardless the strange permutations that word assumed when applied to the five of them. He looked to Thranduil and noted the almost apologetic caste to the bright emerald eyes. It was not a pitying expression at all but one of commiseration born of like circumstances and Elrond was suddenly very glad to have someone else who understood what he was going through. A new thought arose in conjunction with that assessment.

"Yet Rhûn'waew still claims the heritage of Laeross? Then, the warrior maid must have been in some manner kin to her?" he asked.

"Aye, you have guessed it," Thranduil confirmed. "She is Lhoss'waew (Whisper Wind), Laeross' elder sister and thus Rhûn'waew not only retained that lineage but became the heiress to the titles passed down through Elril."

"I see," breathed Elrond, astounded and relieved at the same time. Here was a situation as convoluted as his own, yet he and his sons had mastered the hardship and thus spared Legolas additional guilt and emotional strain. It was not difficult to imagine the young prince assuming responsibility for the breaking of Elrond's family had the Twins been forced to depart.

"I am sure you do," intoned Thranduil, left brow arched above a sideways smile, "and before you ask why my wife's parents did not come to take part in this celebration, let me finish the tale. Orbelain and Lhoss'waew left for Aman once their daughter was grown to maturity, knowing I was waiting for that day and would care for her thereafter. Rhûn'waew has no doubt the hurts of all three have long since been healed there in the Blessed Realm.

"No less do I believe that you fully appreciate that the topic is rather delicate," he continued.
"Legolas does not know and it is for his mother to reveal. What I have said you must not share with him, Elrond. They both face difficult days ahead as the pregnancies advance, for all Rhûn'waew tries to hide her burdens from me. Let us, as good husbands should, alleviate as much of this distress as we may."

"Agreed, on all counts," said Elrond enthusiastically and the two husbands clasped hands to signify their new alliance. The child of Elwing and Eärendil squelched his curiosity over whether or not the Winter Queen had memories of both her mothers and recalled a doubled account of her childhood days, or what she thought of the changes in Thranduil she must have seen. Ever the astute lore-master, he understood that failing to reveal her past to Legolas indicated hurts that had not yet healed. The mystical elleth, he realised with a sizzling burst of commiseration, probably felt Laeross had abandoned her. He and Rhûn'waew had more in common than Thingol's bloodline.

"Now then," Elrond returned to the subject of the moment, "as to this gift, what did you give your hervess the second time you wed her?" Just speaking this query gave his soul a wrenching jolt; Thranduil's lot could not have been easy after the war. He suddenly found his heart filled with new respect for the Sindarin King and could not help but smile at the obvious delight Thranduil took in revealing the offering he'd presented to his beloved mate.

"A grand gift, unsurpassed by her until the conception of Legolas," he boasted, preening faintly as he adjusted a ring or two and smoothed his fingertips over the sapphire gem once more. "The mantle of mesh she wears over her luxuriant hair was that gift. The article is unique to my mother's people and it was knitted by her own hands. She gave it to me and bade me present it to my daughter when the time came for her to wed, but I wanted Rhûn'waew to wear it. My Nana would understand and was gone long before the second bonding, killed in one of the many skirmishes with Orcs during the early years of the Second Age."

"Aen he gâr sîdh (May she be at peace)," Elrond murmured the traditional commemoration for those in Mandos. "The mantle is a wondrous thing indeed. Every elleth in the vale has attempted to reproduce it with varying success, even Arwen." He gave a brisk nod and fell to thinking what he possessed that would be right for Legolas on such an important day. What did he have that Legolas would find valuable and cherish? "I know not what I have that can compare. There are the letters exchanged between my parents, yet these belong not just to me but to my children as well."

"Yes, but even were that not true, those letters were not written from your parents to you, Elrond. The item needs to be of special significance to you personally," Thranduil attempted to explain.

"They are special to me," argued Elrond, frowning. "Fine, I agree that is not appropriate." In silence he pondered the problem. "The scroll of genealogy falls into the same category," he complained and sighed.

"No, no," Thranduil scolded, "you aren't thinking about this the right way at all. It should be something that belongs to you, something important."

"Well, they do belong to me and are very important," huffed the Lord of Imladris. He paused again to think and after a moment his eyes brightened. Almost immediately his features clouded over anew.

"What?" asked Thranduil. "Tell me!"

"Nay, it was a terrible idea."

"Perhaps not."
"There is an atrociously pretentious circlet Elros had made for me, but Legolas would never wear it."

"Valar! Of course he wouldn't," Thranduil frowned at his law-son, thinking Elrond was rather dull-witted when it came to gift-giving. "Is there nothing you possess that you cherish because of the person who gave it to you or the circumstances under which you acquired it?"

"I have lots of things like that," retorted Elrond and his fingers went briefly to worry the concealed jewel on his right hand. Thranduil saw and his eyes bulged.

"Absolutely not!" he barked, pointing even as Elrond hid Vilya behind his back.

"I wasn't going to!" growled the dismayed husband. "There is a dagger Círdan gave me on my coming of age." He glanced at Thranduil and noted the less than impressed expression on the comely face. "Right, I know Legolas only carries the one Galbreth gave him to mark the same event."

Silence descended once more, Elrond combing his recollections for something unique, special, and personal; Thranduil eyeing him intently as though the mere weight of his penetrating gaze would help enlighten the confused ellon.

Elrond thought of the Twins' first tiny shoes, stored away wrapped in soft silk, but cringed when he imagined giving that memento to his beloved Aearen. None of them needed reminders of the bizarre nature of the relationship between them. He had a painting Arwen had made when she was just six years old, a still life of a pot of flowers, the colours too bright and the perspective all skewed. Remembering her happy face when she presented it made him smile, but whatever was between her and Legolas turned him from it and again he frowned. An expression of intense concentration contracted his brows and compressed his lips with grim determination. There had to be something suitable. He wanted the article to have the same depth of meaning as the dagger Galbreth had given his brother.

Memories of Elros filled his mind as he contrasted the relationship he shared with his twin to Legolas' adulation of his sibling. It was a feeling the elven Lord could not reproduce, for he and Elros had been both equals and rivals, friends and foes, always one another's staunchest defenders. It was true, he supposed, that he was more the thinker and Elros more the doer, daring and bold, but rather than one compensating for the other, their separate strengths combined and complimented each other and the roles were interchanged freely and frequently. Neither viewed the other as superior, a figure to emulate. That level of deference was tendered to Maedhros and Maglor.

Beyond this, there was a bond that superseded even that of twins: the shared horror of being abandoned and orphaned, their worth measured against the pale gleam of a small, white gemstone. Everything in their world changed that day and the mark left upon them was irrevocable. Indeed, for Elros it had become his doom. That set him to reliving his childhood days with his twin beside the sea, the years before the Silmaril stole away his family and everything about his life he loved, save Elros. It was a simple, care-free life and like all children they failed to appreciate it, taking as given that the world was theirs, the seaside a vast golden ribbon laid down solely to amuse their questing minds. All at once the perfect item arose in his memory and a bright light of joy lit his grey eyes.

"What is it?" asked Thranduil eagerly, leaning forward as he caught the mood of hopeful excitement abounding in the lore-master's beaming face.

"Nay, nay," Elrond begged off. "Let it be a surprise, mellon, and permit me to prepare this on my own. Forgive me, but I must leave you and hurry home."
"Oh?" Thranduil tried hard to hide his disappointment and failed. "As you wish, Elrond." He made a rather formal half bow and was preparing to return to the woods when his law-son reached for his arm.

"There is something with which I need your help, if you would consent," Elrond said, hoping to alleviate the King's displeasure.

"What is it?"

"The new talan has not even been begun, but I know Legolas hopes to spend our bonding days within the grotto at Lanthir Fân. As you know, he would be content to sleep on the ground, but I would have him rest in comfort. Is there any way that you could arrange to build a bonding bower there?" Elrond was gladdened to see Thranduil's eyes shining with delight again and that readily cancelled the slight embarrassment he felt to ask so personal a favour. Yet he and Legolas had been together over ten years and had conceived a child; surely Thranduil knew what intimacies were shared between them.

"Of course!" he announced grandly. "I have but been awaiting your request. It is customary for the father to do this thing, but only at the insistence of the law-son. Some prefer to manage the construction personally, you see. Leave everything to me." So saying, he parted from Elrond and hastened away to fulfil his new assignment.

Elrond watched him go, smiling with real felicity and wondering why he'd failed to note the genuine warmth and child-like ebullience in Thranduil's personality, a trait shared with his younger son. Perhaps, he thought, it would not be so difficult to forge a real friendship with the Sindarin King. With the bonding bower taken care of, Elrond continued on to Aegas Mirdan's shop, for there was something he had to retrieve that he had commissioned many days ago when the council had finally ratified his new marriage. This, too, was a surprise for Legolas and one he hoped would be fitting, an heirloom to pass on to their descendants through Tinu Mîn.

Elrond was busy sorting through the contents of a storage room in the attics of the Last Homely House when Lindir found him, Thranduil having revealed where he'd last seen him. The monarch had begged the minstrel to ensure Elrond's gift would be adequate, bragged about the trust placed in him to create the perfect bonding bower, and then hinted without any subtlety at all that he would like to learn what the present could be before Legolas did. Lindir tactfully evaded making any promises and deflected the King's curiosity by wondering aloud if Thranduil had enough helpers to complete the bower before the ceremony. He smiled as the Sindarin ruler abruptly excused himself and verily raced back to the Wood Elves' enclave.

Lindir, at first frantic and upset as to the healer's reasons for abandoning the secluded woods where the bonding rites were to commence at sundown, instead was smiling and misty-eyed as he gazed upon the object Elrond held out for his inspection. This, of course, was the present the husband-to-be had forgotten to obtain prior to leaving the estate. That it was not something new designed especially for Legolas did not bother the minstrel at all. For the first time, Elrond was thinking about his life with the young prince of Greenwood in real terms and this more than made up for the make-shift quality of the present. Indeed, the humble copper box and its even humbler contents indicated Elrond's commitment better than would the most precious of jewels.
"What do you think?" Elrond asked, but he was already smiling, seeing Lindir's heartfelt emotions plainly in his pale green eyes.

"I think I'm going to cry," sniffed Lindir and suddenly hugged Elrond close. He had, after all, had the raising of the mighty Lord and could not help but be moved. "Miren Dithen has at last grown up. It is perfect, Elrond." Lindir let him go and grinned to note the sheen of pride and joy in his ward's grey eyes. "Legolas will adore you for it and this will become his most cherished possession. But do not forget the babe!"

"Ah, do not worry, I haven't. For Tinu Mín I have something unique. Come and see," Elrond led the way back to his apartment and opened the doors of his wardrobe. Shoving the robes aside, he knelt and pressed a corner of the flooring, revealing a hidden drawer beneath it. He withdrew a velvet wrapped parcel and held it out for his old mentor's inspection and approval.

Lindir took it and revealed an exquisite leather covered box, the hide dyed pure white and embossed with a new crest, an artistic compilation of the Swan's Wing of Eärendil and the Beech Leaves of Greenwood. His brows lifted as he looked up to Elrond's eager visage. "Your design?"

"Nay, Arwen's. Is it fitting, do you think? I don't want anyone to think I find the House of Oropher lacking and sought to reinvent the crest."

"Nay, this is a tribute, very much so, and none will think otherwise, especially considering the source. Arwen has not had an easy time adjusting to the changes in her family."

"Yes, I know there's tension between her and Aearen, but neither will divulge the cause. I fear it is due to feelings of hurt on her Nana's behalf and told Legolas so. I hope he will be able to accept her offering with genuine goodwill; she means it from the heart. She dearly loves her new baby brother already and tells me she has the highest respect and admiration for Legolas."

"I don't believe Legolas will hold her former attitude against her in light of this," encouraged Lindir. He opened the box and gasped aloud, for there within the subtle folds of ivory silk rested the smallest, fairest, and most delicate circlet he'd ever beheld.

It was formed of mithril but the precious stuff was wrought into long thin fibres that were then woven together in a fine, flexible braid, the design just like the plaits signifying Legolas' House. Worked within the band were the downy white feathers of a signet while the clasps holding them to the circlet were little pearls, carved to resemble tiny acorns. Lindir lifted it out carefully and the metal draped over his hand, cool and liquid against his skin. Reverently he touched the soft fluffy fronds of the feathers and laughed aloud, raising wondering eyes to Elrond. Never would he have imagined such a thing, but now that he held it neither could he conceive of anything more appropriate.

"Well? Do you think he'll approve?" demanded the expectant father impatiently.

"How could he not? This plainly exhibits what the child's place in Imladris will be. Legolas is going to be pleased beyond words and Thranduil, why, he'll puff up like a noble peacock and simultaneously feel jealous that he didn't think of it first. His respect for you, however, will gain immensely. Well done, Elrond!" Lindir enthused. br> He was about to envelope his friend in another hug when his sensitive nose caught a most unexpected and unpleasant scent. He withdrew just the smallest amount as he returned the delicate crown to its case, curbing his shock. It was not surprising that sylvan sweets from the party might disagree with Elrond's constitution and the excitement of the occasion no doubt made controlling
such bodily exhausts difficult. Politely, Lindir declined to remark on the foul aroma and handed the box over.

"I am pleased you find it suitable," Elrond said, stepping back discretely. Lindir had just released the most ghastly miasma he’d ever smelled. While not unheard of, the First-born were not normally given to such bouts of digestive gas-letting and expulsions of that nature indicated a seriously aggrieved body. Generally, only those ill from wounds or poisons generated the noxious fumes. Ever the healer, Elrond was concerned and could not remain silent. "Are you well, Lindir?"

"Of course I am well," Lindir arched a brow. "Are you?" He took another step back and mastered his desire to pinch his nostrils shut. The odour was getting stronger; he was sure of it.

"I only ask out of concern," continued Elrond. "Flatulence is not common and usually indicates a more serious underlying condition." He was used to all manner of vile displays of physical infirmity, being a healer, and while repulsed by the intensity of the odious emission, he would not desert his friend. "Have you consumed anything unusual of late?"

"Me? It is not coming from me, Elrond, and well you know it. Trying to blame someone else for the smell will not work; there are only the two of us here." Lindir could no longer suppress the need to block the foul stench and clamped his nose shut tight.

"There is no reason to feel embarrassed," soothed Elrond, finding he had to imitate his old mentor's action and shield himself from the olfactory assault. "We need to determine the cause."

"Determine the cause for what?" asked a new voice and both elves turned to find Erestor in the doorway, smiling benignly from one to the other. Seeing them both holding their noses made him laugh.

"Oh no," groaned Lindir, for the aroma was by now quite overpowering and definitely coming from his beloved seneschal.

"Can't you smell that?" asked Elrond, taking his kinsman by the arm and drawing him into the room.

"Smell what? Do you mean the delightful scent of roses clinging to Lindir's hair? Yes, I quite like that," grinned Erestor and chuckled again at their little joke. "Come now, you two, do not tease. I bathed this morning."

"Valar!" exclaimed Elrond, gagging as he was forced to retreat from Erestor to the other side of the room, where Lindir was already pressed against the wall, eyes watering from the pungent fumes permeating the air. By this point Erestor understood it was not a jest.

"It's That Sylvan's Naneth!" he hissed, backing to the open alcove of the balcony. That at least made his presence bearable. "She confronted me last night and gave me quite the interrogation. The subject of sylvan magic came up. She has cursed me!"

"Nae," mourned Lindir, "I cannot deny you deserve a real example of that power, but the timing is horrible. Did she say anything about how long the spell will last?"

"No. There wasn't any chanting or arm waving or charms applied. I had no idea until this moment that anything was amiss. Valar! I won't be able to attend the ceremony like this," Erestor complained. He was not so interested in observing the rites of bonding particular to the primitive forest folk as much as worried over the sense of mischievous anticipation which suffused every meeting he'd
attended about the event. There was something afoot and he feared Elrond was being set up for a monstrous prank of some sort, something that would reveal him as foolish and trifling to the people of the valley. "Lindir, these are your people; can't you reason with them?"

"My people? Beloved, these are Legolas' people and somehow I doubt he would be concerned with salvaging your dignity," Lindir reminded.

"Indeed," droned Elrond, "and Legolas is not to be bothered with your troubles, Erestor, especially today."

"Did I suggest such a thing?" Erestor demanded, indignant and irritated. "There must be something we can do."

"I don't know," Elrond was highly doubtful. "Perhaps Mithrandir can alleviate the stench."

"Aye, excellent idea," agreed Lindir. "I'll go find him at once, Meleth." He darted from the room, eager for personal reasons to have the spell broken. Much as he cared for Erestor, he simply could not imagine enjoying an intimate evening with the seneschal in his present state. He was half-way to the Hall of Fire when Elrond's voice halted him. The minstrel peered up to see the Lord of the Valley leaning over the banister of the stairwell. There was a sad apologetic expression in his eyes that worried Lindir tremendously. "What is it?"

"Find Arwen, mellon, and bring her as well." No more did he say, retreating to his study in grim displeasure. He knew more about his daughter's mystical abilities than she thought he did and hoped for her aid in breaking the enchantment.

Erestor was sunk into the sofa, head buried in his hands, the picture of dejected misery. Elrond felt terrible for his kinsman, yet there was a part of his heart that felt the punishment just and fitting. He went and laid a comforting hand on Erestor's shoulder, no longer afflicted by the hideous scent for it had begun to lessen as soon as Lindir left and now had vanished completely. The implications were terrible. "We'll find a means to lift it."

"Yes?" mumbled Erestor, peering up with little hope in his tear-bright eyes. "When will that be? What if it lasts ten years, Elrond? I can't abide separation from Lindir for ten years!"

"Of course you can!" snapped Elrond. "What are you saying? Do you believe Lindir will not wait for you or that you cannot remain constant? You know him as well as I; once decided his heart is stubbornly true even when that fidelity wounds his very soul."

"Yes, yes, I know," moaned Erestor, "but to have at last discovered my feelings for him and accepted them, to have them returned so fully, only to be stymied by this dratted curse! It is cruelty on a level I would not have ascribed to the fair Queen of Greenwood. We are distant kin!"

"You have no children; this is the reason you cannot understand. She is not being more cruel to you than you were to her son. Legolas is very important to her. She believes his birth was ordained by the Powers, or more likely by Eru himself. There is a tremendous number of centuries between her sons, originally; who knows what manner of signs she observed that foretold the moment had come to conceive Legolas." He fell silent, pondering about that, finding it strange that now Legolas would be the elder brother and that he and Galbreth would be contemporaries for all intents and purposes. He wondered where Aras would fit in the new family order, hoping the morose nephew would finally learn to appreciate Legolas.
"Yes, yes, I brought it on myself. That knowledge does not comfort me. I agree punishment is deserved, but to have the vile stench arise only when I am in Lindir's proximity is too harsh." Erestor looked up, realising his cousin was not paying any attention to his anguish and woe, and rose indignantly. "Don't tell me you believe all this nonsense about the Queen's child being Galbreth. It isn't possible and to burden the new child with someone else's identity is unfair, in my opinion."

"Erestor, you have no idea what you're talking about." Elrond turned, mildly annoyed at his kinsman's close-minded attitude. "Again, it is your own knowledge that is lacking. You have never been wedded to one of these Telerin folk. Celebrian was half Sindarin and even you cannot doubt her gift for reading souls. I tell you now, she informed me Arwen was destined to be born and would play a vital role in the future of Middle-earth. Are you going to gainsay me?"

"Nay," Erestor accepted his chastisement, resigned to the fact that he would receive little sympathy for his unique situation from Elrond. "You will not be so fascinated by it all should you become the focus of Rhûn'waew's wrath." Recalling that sense of devilish excitement permeating the population of Legolas' extended family, Erestor brightened a little. "If the spell cannot be lifted, you must ask Lindir not to attend the ceremony. I need to be by your side, cousin, in case something untoward occurs." He said so with perhaps more relish than respect.

"There is nothing unpleasant planned for the bonding ceremony," Faelon announced his presence by stating this opinion. He slunk into the room, his fair features contorted in a pained expression, one hand pressed against his forehead. He did not bow to his Lord nor greet his former employer with his normal formal adherence to proper protocol, but instead issued forth a low groan and collapsed in an armchair. "The woodland elves adore Legolas and will have nothing disturb his happiness, especially now that he is with child. They are all eager for the birth of the new little prince solely because he is Legolas' babe. Except Aras, of course. What a royal pain in the arse he is!"

Elrond's brows rose high; never had Faelon voiced such familiar speech with either him or Erestor. He made a swift evaluation of the ellon's rumpled appearance and detected the faintest tinge of sour wine about him. His conclusion was correct; the valet was still recovering from a night of overindulgence. "That is good to hear," he said and approached his servant with a compassionate smile. "You do not look well, Faelon."

"Nay, I am horribly ill, Hîren," moaned the valet. "I have tried so many remedies I can't remember them all, including a sickening mixture of honey and eggs Faron swears by, a shot of some clear, dwarvish liquor Glorfindel promised would fix everything but instead seared my throat so I can barely speak, and a handful of some herbs Mithrandir said ought to do the trick. Tasted like onion grass and mint leaves. All this made things worse, so I went to the kitchens and Meribel mixed me some kind of licorice concoction. That has given me frightful pains, Hîren, and I've come to beg your aid. How will I attend Brannon Neth like this? My head feels as if it will explode and my stomach rumbles and sloshes with every move I make. I've been belching out huge eruptions of vile fumes and if anyone struck a flint at such a moment I swear I'd exhale flames like any common fire-drake."

"I have a cure for all, mellon," Elrond did not conceal his amusement over the descriptive account of the symptoms. "Come along to the infirmary; I'll prepare the potions you need. Next time, be more judicious in how much fey wine you consume."

"Fear not; it will never happen again. I have been more fully punished than you realise; the after effects of the wine are the least of my woes," groaned Faelon as he struggled to rise, grateful when Erestor came and helped him up.

"How so?" the seneschal asked. "You've done nothing to harm Legolas; why would the Winter
"Queen punish you?"

"What? Nay, I have been treated with the utmost courtesy by Legolas' naneth," protested Faelon, eyeing his former boss askance. "She told me how happy she is her son has friends here in Imladris. I was not referring to anything to do with the Royal Family. It's my personal life that has suffered. I have lost all hope of ever finding lasting love, at least with Gellam. Apparently, I vomited all over her new party dress while making vulgar suggestions as to why removing it was a good idea."

"No!" exclaimed Elrond in shocked glee. "Alphdal's daughter?"

"Aye. It took me years to talk her into just joining me for tea in the courtyard and I was rather hoping the bonding ceremony might give her ideas of doing the same. With me." The lowly valet clearly felt any chance of such an outcome to be impossible.

"But, Gellam?" Erestor's words came forth coated in that mixture of incredulous awe heard when he couldn't decide between sneering disbelief or envious admiration. The Lady was beautiful and a scholar of botany specialising in viticulture. "Mellonen, Alphdal is quite protective of his daughter and most formidable. He's a survivor of Beleriand. He's fought in every war ever waged against the various evils afflicting Middle-earth. He can wield more than a garden rake."

"Indeed, and he can wield a hoe with sufficient force and accuracy to assure you never reproduce," warned Elrond. "Perhaps this is all for the best. She's Ages older than you and has never shown the least interest in an eternal bond with anyone." Faelon's audacity and courage impressed him nonetheless. He suspected, but could not prove, that Gellam was, or had been, involved with Glorfindel but the two kept the affair secret for fear of Alphdal's reaction.

By now the elves were descending the main stairway, Faelon supported between the valley's lords, when the nasty stink once more began to make its presence felt. Faelon balked, turning sharply to Erestor.

"Elbereth! Are you ill, too?" he asked. Before either lord could answer, Mithrandir, Arwen, and Lindir came into the broad hall below them.

"Alas," Mithrandir mourned. "It is far worse than you described, Lindir."

"Nay, I can't get any closer," Arwen insisted. "I'll swoon from such vapours." She tried without success to exit the house but the wizard had a firm grasp on her elbow and refused to let go, dragging her toward the stairs.

"Lindir!" From above, Elrond was attempting to get their attention while keeping hold of Faelon, who was squeaking and squirming in a most peculiar manner, trying to get loose and flee. "Go back, mellon; it's only when you are near that the odour presents itself."

"What?" the minstrel gazed upon them in horror, comprehending what this meant for him and Erestor. Their eyes locked and the couple shared a mournful moment of affirmation. Then Lindir's ire exploded. "It isn't fair!" he shouted. "All this time I've been alone, miserable and heart-broken, and now when I finally see hope for happiness it is stolen from me. I won't stand for it!" He made for the main door, which was the quickest way out of the house but which also brought him closer to his smelly paramour.

"Nay, wait," exhorted Mithrandir, pausing beside the elegant curve of the broad steps. "You must stay, Lindir, else we won't know if the spell has been broken."
"Valar, he's right," Erestor groaned. The singer halted at the foot of the stairs and looked upon his unfortunate lover. He ascended a couple of steps in Erestor's direction before the immensity of the ghastly reek halted him, nose pinched shut as he breathed through lips parted in a teeth-baring scowl. Faelon gave a particularly voluble squawk, for the aroma assaulting his senses was now beyond all endurance, particularly since his constitution was already suffering, and the valet realised he was about to regurgitate the churning contents of his stomach all over Elrond and Erestor. His horror of repeating such a vile display gave him sufficient strength to tear free of his kindly captors. He lurched to the banister, gripped it tight, leaned over, and disgorged nearly a pint of sputum so nasty it gave Erestor's disgusting emanations staunch competition for the dubious honour of most odious odour in Arda.

This stream of acidic bile, raw eggs, honey, mint, onion grass, licorice liqueur, and various gastric juices obeyed the natural laws of the universe, falling through the open space and plastering itself all over the first obstacle it encountered, this being, in fact, Arwen Undomiel, Evenstar of Imladris, Mithrandir having released her and leaped back at precisely the correct moment to ensure 1) that he was not touched by the digestive residue and 2) Arwen did not have time to make a similar adjustment in location.

By this grotesque ballet it may be inferred that at least some of the unseen but ever present Maiar working for Vairë the Weaver of Fate were not devoid of sympathy and compassion for all that Legolas had endured and were pleased to put their services at the disposal of their kinswoman, Rhûn'waew of Greenwood.

Glorfindel was resplendent, the image of epic heroism for which the Edalië of the First Age were lauded and lionised. His golden hair flowed in shining waves, tossed artfully by the light breeze, tamed by a fine fillet that gleamed across his clear brow. The modest crown was more like a beam of the sun captured and bent about his head than an object wrought by elvish hands. He wore it without haughtiness or hubris; it rested there as naturally as did his thick and vibrant tresses. In his eyes was such wisdom as only one who has walked among the Powers possesses; the clarity of the azure gaze permitted no pretencions and allowed no disguises. Before Glorfindel, one could but hope to have a soul of sufficient calibre to meet his high ideals and thus few were the elves with courage enough to hold his eyes for more than a brief glance.

He stood tall before the dais of the King and Queen of Wood Elves, garbed in armour made for him in Aman, identical to that in which he had died, created by the very smith who had crafted the original metal suit. Glorfindel only donned it at the highest of feasts and memorials, and to commemorate alone Ennyn Laer. In his gloved hands was a sword, a blade as ancient and regal as he, though this was not the one he had kept belted to his hip for all the long days of his service to Turgon. This sword was none other than the one wielded by Tuor himself, handed down to his son Eärendil who in turn passed it to his eldest son, Elrond. He held this relic across his palms as an offering and bowed his head to Thranduil.

"The might of Imladris is as the might of your own arm, Aranen. Command it and Imladris obeys. Henceforth and until the world changes, we are not merely allies nor confederates but one people. There shall be no distinction between the needs of Greenwood and the needs of Imladris. Accept the sword of Tuor as a symbol of this new accord."
"Nasan," said Thranduil quietly while Rhûn'waew gave the faintest dip of her fair face in assent. The royal couple looked fittingly imposing and regal, Thranduil in his much scarred battle armour over fine silken clothes, his Lady majestic in a gown of violet satin dotted with dark red jewels, her wondrous raven hair free of its tressure falling loose about her shoulders. She wore a diadem of pearls, Thranduil a crown of green ivy.

Glorfindel knelt and laid the sword before them. Rising, he took three steps back, bowed, and resumed his place behind and to the right of Elrond.

The Lord of Imladris sat proudly beside Aearen, the two unabashedly clasping hands, Legolas trying hard to be solemn as befitted the formality of the occasion but failing utterly. His joy kept breaking out in brilliant smiles shared with his parents, his old friends, numerous relatives, and his beloved Nín'ódhel. He even had smiles for Aras. Elrond had better success maintaining a dignified and serious countenance, except when Legolas trained one of those glorious smiles upon him and he could not hide the happiness in his heart. All who saw him who knew him before this day could not help feeling glad to note the radiance in his aura and the contentment in his eyes.

The couple were housed on a separate and smaller dais across from the King and Queen; their seats small, low stools carved from wood and covered in plush silk. Between the raised platforms the ground was covered in a tapestry of woven Morning Glory vines, the heart shaped leaves and pale blue trumpets ever-fresh and bright regardless the feet tramping over them. Indeed, it seemed more that the unusual rug had been grown in this configuration than manufactured by clever elvish hands. Over both couples and the intervening space stretched the branches of four trees, two on either side to stand as representatives of Tawar, witnesses for each pair, though it is doubtful any resident of Imladris understood it, beyond Lindir and Legolas. The trees' limbs entwined gracefully and created an artful canopy and from it the sweet and heady scent of wisteria blooms permeated the air, the grape-shaped sprigs hanging down between the boughs and twigs above the royal heads.

Dressed in simple but elegant clothes made in the sylvan style and manner, the newly-bonded pair were magnificent to behold though Elrond wore neither circlet nor crown and Legolas had only a woven ring of ivy atop his head, long tendrils of the dark green leaves trailing down behind him. Their tunics matched, silvery cloth embroidered with symbols of swans and oak leaves worked in thread of the same colour, the sleeves long and wide, the sashes binding them at the waist a deep indigo. The pants beneath were not the form-fitting leggings meant for travelling amid the branches but softer and fuller and gathered at the ankles in wide cuffs so that the ivory fabric billowed out atop their feet, which were bare. The costumes were traditional for a sylvan bonding and with his hair plaited in the braids of Legolas' House, none could claim that Elrond looked out of place or that the design was anything but appropriate.

At a separate spot stood the Councillors of Imladris, noble Lords all, many of whom had opposed Legolas' permanent addition to their Lord's life. All were dressed in formal attire: robes of heavy velvet and brocade, billowing pantaloons beneath, posh shoes, lots of jewels and medals, and a smattering of circlets here and there. In contrast with the Wood Elves, who greatly outnumbered them, they looked gaudy and even ridiculous, posed beneath the trees in all their frilly finery. There could be no doubt of their discomfort, for each of them had been invited personally by Thranduil and given a part to play in the unfolding tableau.

This segment of the ceremony was nothing less than an oral rendition of the tenets laid out in what had become known as the 'dowry document'. In it was listed in detail the compensation Thranduil expected for the honour of claiming his unique son and the price exacted for treating him so abysmally for so many years. Each Counsellor had to come forward and formally, humbly, offer that which had been demanded of them, begging the King of Greenwood to accept it. While some had
been blessed with a change of heart, others were bitter and made no effort to hide the rancour such abasement generated.

Ranged behind Elrond and Legolas were the Noldorin Lord's family. Arwen stood between her brothers and all three were dressed in their finest, graciously refined, elegant, and dashing. All three were openly pleased and focused many an indulgent and gentle glance upon their beaming Adar, though Arwen was perhaps a bit pale and peaked while the Twins' rigid stance belied an edge of strain troubling their hearts. It was not easy to watch this formal joining, but they had witnessed a far more jarring union between Elrond and Legolas before. Above all, the children of Elrond were united in their determination to permit nothing to spoil the day.

Erestor, blood kinsman to Imladris' ruler, was noticeably absent from the group. Lindir was there but his harp was silent and he watched over the rites with eyes shadowed in sorrow. Mithrandir stood beside him, hoping to alleviate the minstrel's distress, and Elril likewise chose to stand with the long-suffering singer.

Galion stepped forward from his spot beside Aras, scroll in hand, and cleared his throat. "Hîr Badhor od Imladris, Master of the Stock-keeper's Guild," he announced, sending the named elf a truly evil grin as he stepped back again.

Badhor came forth boldly, a haughty smirk upon his face, and barely dipped his head to the King and Queen of Greenwood. "It falls to me to offer to Greenwood one hundred head of the finest cattle grown in the valley, along with five bulls; fifty bred sows and five boars; fifty sheep and five rams; and fifty goats with a five bucks that the forest dwellers may have an abundant source of meat to feed them."

Thranduil's brows rose and his people murmured darkly, shaking their heads at this insult. No sylvan elf would ever keep Yavanna's creatures enslaved to be slaughtered for meat. The King waved a dismissive hand.

"The tribute is unacceptable," he said gravely. "We do not imprison animals in this manner. You would give us more beasts to compete for the limited resources available to the native wildlife living beneath the eaves. Additionally, these domesticated creatures would quickly fall prey to wolves and Orcs. The entire offering, small though it is, would be gone in one season. Render the value of the stock one hundred fold, paid either in gold or gems, your choice."

Badhor's visage clouded over with rage. He had said exactly what he'd been told to say, leaving out all the conciliatory bowing and scraping expected of him, and had thought smugly that the price exacted from his Guild paltry, the King of the Wood Elves ignorant of their wealth. Now he realised he'd been made to stand for this humiliation and a earned a fee for his foolishness to boot. His gaze flickered to Elrond; there was no reassurance there. If he expressed any dissent now he'd be banished from the valley for treason, all his holdings confiscated. With effort Badhor mastered himself and bowed.

"Let it be as you say, Hîren, yet my Guild does not have so vast a sum ready to hand. I beg leave to meet the debt in thirds, the first part now and the second and final portions paid in yearly increments."

Aras gave a rude snort of contempt though his gaze fell not on Badhor but on his uncle. Galion kicked his ankle to divert him and tendered the prince a searing glower. Aras noticed the same expression trained upon him almost universally, even among the guests from Imladris, Glorfindel most menacing among them. A covert glance at Elrond revealed a truly murderous expression raking
him and Aras decided to back down. He lowered his eyes and kept them on the ground, holding his ire for later.

Yet his displeasure with Badhor's terms was shared by many, not the least of which was Rhûn'waew. She shook her head and pierced Badhor to the core with a look of such perspicacity that he cringed. "Unacceptable," she spoke the word quietly and then simply waited, watching the noble herdsmen the while.

Badhor glanced over his shoulder at his fellow lords and found none willing to meet his eye. Incensed, he felt his face grow hot anew and was forced to abase himself again. This time he bowed low to the imposing Winter Queen. "Hîrel, I cannot produce what does not exist. My Guild does not keep riches as a King would do. Our wealth is in our herds and Mwaaaawaaa..." Badhor voice eroded suddenly into an incoherent lowing sound typical for any bovine quaduped. His eyes bulged and his heart plummeted as his hand flew to his throat. Wildly he looked around and tried again. "Mhaaawaaamoooh," came forth.

Snickers and giggles began arising among the folk of the woods. Horror transformed the features of the Noldor. When Badhor tried again and more bellowing and mooing resulted, outright laughter took over the sylvans, Legolas chuckling right along, Elrond smirking, and Thranduil not holding back a bit. Rhûn'waew's smile was cool and triumphant.

"It has come to my attention that you, Lord Badhor, were curious about the nature of sylvan magic," said she. "I thought perhaps you might like a more in depth comprehension, one you will be unlikely to forget. Rest assured, your voice will become your own as soon as you learn to speak with the dignity and grace Eru granted the First-born. The first words you utter must be a true and heartfelt apology for the harm done to me and mine. Sorrow not, let me make it plain, for yourself and your misery, but genuine contrition for evil done upon one who never even thought to cause you a moment's irritation. You are excused from Our presence."

The ellon raced from the woods amid raucous laughter as the remaining lords and ladies looked on in dire dread. They had good reason to be terrified. Each one watched Galion and his ominous scroll, waiting to hear the next name announced. The aristocratic Sindarin seneschal raised the document and grinned as the haughty Counsellors flinched as one body. "Hîr Fennas, Master of the Weaver's Guild." He purposely left out any reference to the ellon's claim to noble lineage as a cousin of Turgon.

Having seen what befell his colleague, Fennas held little hope for mercy and thus made no attempt to beseech it. He came forth with his head high and refused so much as a bob of his head in deference, sweeping the amassed sylvan contingent with a look replete in both contempt and fear. He spoke freely, abandoning the prepared speech given him by Galion.

"So this is deemed just?" he scoffed. "I was within my rights as a citizen of Imladris and an elected member of the Council to challenge the marriage of the Lord of my realm, a descendant of both Thingol and Finwë, to a lowly woodland archer. Nothing was told us of Legolas' heritage and esteem, yet for this ignorance I will be punished." He gave a careless shrug. "So be it. I would prefer to relocate to Lindon than pretend remorse I do not feel, mouthing offers of compensation and apologies to bolster the paltry eminence of this 'prince' of mixed ancestry."

A collective gasp of furious outrage vented from the Wood Elves and the warriors among them, which is to say almost every single one, reached for bows that thankfully were not present else there would have been a fourth kin-slaying. Thranduil leaped to his feet, but Aras spoke before him, raising his hand and pointing not at the objectionably rude Fennas but at his uncle.
"This is what you have brought upon us!" he raged. "Condemnation and denigration! Your stubborn and wilful nature has earned us shame and ruin!"

Elrond gave a low growl and sprang up, fists tight and face contorted in fury, brushing Legolas' hand from him where it grasped his arm to hold him fast. Behind them, the Twins started forward together, equally infuriated on their mate's behalf, but Arwen snatched at their hair and held tight, proud that they wished to intervene but deeming it their father's place to act. They came to their senses and hastily returned to their sister's side, sharing silent vows to add their own punishment later.

"I warned you about such slurs against my mate," bellowed Elrond, now nose to nose with the tall Sindarin prince, who had eagerly strode forth to meet him.

Faron and Galion had made to grab Aras and haul him back, but a silent command form Thranduil halted them. The sylvan people understood; the anxious father would have this test of his law-son proceed, and saw that it was also a test for his grandson. Their King stood grave and still, one hand resting on Rhûn'waew's shoulder, and none of the Wood elves doubted he was praying fervently for both ellyn to do the right thing.

Abandoned on the dais, Legolas stood aghast, fearing the two to come to bloodshed. No love had he for his nephew but neither could he stand and watch his beloved Nín'ôdhel give in to violence. Yet he could not make himself move and there was no question that his heart was glad to see Elrond so quickly take his part. He jumped when a hand settled on his shoulder and looked back to find Glorfindel and Elril there, come to stand with him, Imladris and Greenwood united in his favour. His attention quickly returned to the escalating contention.

"Your mate?" Aras jeered. "Legolas is your bed-mate, nothing more, and got himself with child to force this marriage. Now you would show us honour only to spare yourself and your offspring shame. What gall! After what you did to us, rendering impotent the gift of Eru to remake our lost ones, you parade your pregnant catamite before our eyes!"

"Aras, I knew nothing of the tragedy that came to pass because of my efforts to give aid," answered Elrond, "and much tolerance have I showed you in light of this sorrow. Yet you know nothing of my life with Legolas and your assessment is not only wrong, it is insulting to your uncle. Never would Legolas abuse the gift of bearing life as you describe. You will fall on your knees and beg forgiveness, retracting your harsh accusations, or depart from my lands at once!"

"I would rather kneel to Sauron!" spat Aras, glaring not at Elrond but past him to Legolas. Again he raised his damning finger and aimed it at the ellon who had stolen his place in Galbreth's heart and his peoples' esteem. "Daer Nana Rhûn'waew was wrong; you are not a blessing but a curse. Death and degradation follow in your wake and I hope you and that cross-bred bastard you carry perish before Yule!"

The sound that issued from Elrond's throat at this horrendous denouncement was almost lost in the unified cry of outrage arising from both the Wood Elves and their Imladrian counterparts. There was no more cowardly or nefarious an act than attacking an innocent, whether in word or deed, and not a single elf would come to Aras defence.

He was currently face down on the ground, his nose broken and bleeding from the force of the blow as it struck the earth, Elrond having decided it was a good time to use some of the tactics learned from Maedhros regarding defeating an opponent with bare hands and raw rage. His knees and his weight held Aras down, one planted on the prince's neck, the other between his writhing shoulders.
Just a quick adjustment and he could break that neck and cripple him for eternity. His hands had the ellon by the ears and subjected the sensitive cartilage to pressure sufficient to rip the appendages from his head should Aras persist in resisting.

"Despicable, vile betrayer!" hissed Elrond, voice barely recognisable so extreme was his wrath. "You dare defame my child and discredit my beloved? Let me hear your foul tongue again that I can summon the fury required to ensure that organ is the only one that will function from this day forth!" He pressed harder with his knees and Aras stilled beneath him.

The folk of Greenwood and Imladris stood transfixed by the ugly scene, afraid to breath, frozen in fascinated horror, both dreading to see Elrond maim the culprit and desiring it. Sylvan, Sindarin, and Noldorin, all were united in their abhorrence of Aras.

The prince's muffled cries of rage soon turned to frantic and garbled pleas for aid. None moved a muscle in his direction, not even Thranduil and Rhûn'waew, who was silently weeping. Legolas went to her, Arwen trailing him, and wrapped his arms about her.

"I am so sorry Nana," he said quietly. "I never meant for any of this to happen."

"Nay, it is wrong for you to accept the blame," said Thranduil, turning to join his wife and younger son. "Aras' unreasonable jealousy is long-lived while your change of fate is but little more than ten years old. He may choose to hold you to account for his Adar's death, but the babe had no part to play in that. The child is his blood kin and to renounce an innocent, despising him even before birth, reveals the warped and irrational nature of his anger."

"Aye, do not apologise, Legolas," Arwen added. "I did not know Galbreth, but I do not believe he would condemn you for the fate that befell your party that day. You did not place Orcs in ambush to waylay your comrades and to disobey an elder brother is fairly standard, something everyone who has one has done."

Legolas looked at her, noting her encouraging smile and no small amount surprised at her depth of knowledge. He was too distressed to give it much thought and turned to his father, the mixture of compassion and pain in the King's eyes openly revealed, before focusing anew on his mother. "Nana?"

"Be at peace, Iest nín," Rhûn'waew offered him a watery smile and wiped her tears, accepting graciously the handkerchief Arwen held forth. "I am well, but it pains me to do what I now must." She gently put Legolas from her and rose. "Leitho Aras, Ion An'wedh," she commanded, her words rich with the ancient power endowed upon her through the heritage of Melian her forebear.

Elrond could neither resist nor protest but rose at once and stepped back, blinking at her in stunned amazement, eyes travelling to Legolas. Immediately he opened his arms and Aearen fled into them, the couple forming a protective barrier of love to surround their tiny babe. "Alas, Legolas, I should have demanded his removal the day he trespassed upon our apartment. Forgive me, beloved," the aggrieved husband pleaded, the words not too low for all to hear in the sudden absence of Aras' wailing and moans.

"Nay, nay," Legolas refused the apology. "It was Aras' choice to invite your rage. Let his punishment commence." There was no pity in his voice for his nephew, though he knew what his mother was about to do.

The Winter Queen, fair descendant of Dior and Thingol through Elril, third generation
granddaughter to Melian the disciple of Yavanna, stood looking down upon her grandson in bitter regret, Aras peering at her with round eyes above fingers closed over his gushing nose. "I have not failed in my duty as your father's mother," she addressed him, "nor did he err in his obligations as your Adar. Your naneth, may she be freed from Mandos soon, did what any mother should: loved and cherished you. Whence comes this flaw in your soul, Aras?"

Not even the wind moved as all awaited the prince's answer, the Wood Elves watching him in severe concentration, willing him to do right; the Imladrians knowing not what to expect and fearing some potent magic to fall upon him; every heart hoping he would see his error and let contrition cure his ailing faer. Yet it was not to be. Aras' back stiffened and he lowered his bloody hands, fumbling for a cloth to hold against the lessening flow.

"I do not consider it a flaw to mourn my father and demand redress from his murderer," he seethed, ignoring the gasp this brutal charge elicited and the low cry from Legolas. Elrond gripped him tighter and whispered loving reassurances. "How can it be right to welcome the progeny of this illicit union as family?" Aras again jabbed the air, indicating the huddled couple. "I renounce my uncle and his child; we are not kin despite the shared blood between us. Let them stay in Imladris and never taint the sanctity of Tawar by coming to Greenwood."

"Nay, Ada!" one of Aras' daughters cried.

"Nasan," intoned Thranduil, the depth of his sorrow and distress plain for all to hear. He reached for his wife's hand and their fingers entwined. "You have spoken your own doom. The Queen of Greenwood demanded your justification and you have offered none, instead disinherit yourself from our people. It grieves me," he faltered, unable to actually speak the words, turning tearful eyes to Rhûn'waew.

"Will you banish me, then, and deny my right to be with my father when he returns to Greenwood?" demanded Aras, angry and bitter for he knew the answer.

"You have insisted upon it," growled Galion, "fool that you are. Did you expect Thranduil to disown his younger son in favour of you? Verily, not even Galbreth would do so."

"Far!" cried Thranduil, face flushed as he glowered at his loyal councillor.

"Enough indeed," sneered Aras. "So has it been since the wretched day he was born. I go of my own will, as you say, and not by your command. Yet it will not be the last you see of me, Legolas." He turned to leave, shoulders straight and head high, glancing here and there among his progeny to demand allegiance. Yet he was stalled by his grandmother's voice.

"I pray that is true," said Rhûn'waew sadly. "You are loved, Aras, and shall always be. When your heart learns to accept that love it will carry you back to your family."

Aras turned and stared at her for long minutes in silence and it was clear to all the war within his soul. How he resisted her none could guess and many thought it sad that one with so strong a song should tune it to such dark notes. The disinherited prince broke from Rhûn'waew's gaze at last and hastened from the clearing, many of his daughters and their families departing with them, yet again they were stopped. This time the voice of Elrond rang out.

"Hold! You have not heard the doom of the Lord of Imladris, the son of Eärendil, and the descendant of Turgon, High King of the Noldor and King of the realm of Gondolin." Elrond handed Legolas into the protective shield of his secondary mates, for his sons were close at hand, ready to
demand vengeance for their unborn brother as well as their fair Luthadron, seething under the sting of Aras' slurs against their noble house.

Each settled a firm hand on Legolas' shoulders and poured through this contact their support and love; it was the first time all three of Legolas' mates acted in concert on his behalf. Despite the tense and anxious atmosphere, he felt a warm glow of peace, pride, and above all safety.

"You have offended my beloved, my people, and my lands, denounced an innocent, nay, sought to curse his life and steal him from us. There is little a person may do that is more despicable," Elrond continued, his wrath held in check to spare Aearen further distress.

Aras turned and scrutinised him from crown to soles and back to meet the blazing grey eyes with contempt upon his aristocratic features. "I tremble to hear of it," his mocking words rang out.

"As you should," spoke Glorfindel dryly. His armour creaked as he shifted into a menacing stance of combat readiness only an idiot would ignore.

"Let it be known: Aras of Greenwood is banned from Imladris. You shall not cross the borders lest you be forcibly incarcerated and deported under armed guard directly to the havens. If you present yourself here, Aras, you forfeit your liberty. This is my decree," Elrond concluded and for once Aras reason asserted itself, realising his danger was acute, and he left without replying.

A collective sigh of relief wafted through the gathered crowd. Too soon.

Legolas stepped free of Elladan and Elrohir and examined the nobles of Imladris. His mouth was set and his chin lifted in that stubborn look so like his father's. Every Wood Elf knew what that expression portended and one or two grinned, eager to see the haughty lords told their real value. Their fair prince did not disappoint them.

"I am grieved that this personal family tragedy has marred a joyous occasion," he began, "yet the ceremony was already tainted by the presence of many who hold no felicity in their hearts for me nor accept my rightful place as Elrond's mate. I would share this day with only those who would share my joy. If you cannot render to me and my child the same fealty you have sworn to Elrond, then leave here. Now."

It was the first time the nobles of Imladris had been subjected to that definitive quality of 'ancient presence' Legolas brought forth from time to time. It was also the first time any of them had been in such close proximity to him for such an extended period. To say they were taken aback was less true than to say they were stricken dumb. As they tried to get their minds around the notion of being dismissed by the lowly archer, they watched as Elrond returned to his mate's side and Legolas calmly set about brushing the dust and dirt from his husband's clothing.

This broke the spell, replacing it with a scene of domestic comfort and fulfilment with which few could find fault. Many found their hearts changed, being near to Legolas and exposed at last to that specific sylvan chemistry at work to ensure his and the babe's safety. Only Fennas and one or two of Badhor's relatives chose to leave. Yet the strain of events was too great for Legolas and his mother, and the healer decided the festivities would have to be postponed for a day. Elrond escorted his husband away to the little yurt deep within the woods, Thranduil led his Winter Queen to a talan to rest, and the guests wandered away to their own abodes.

Thus did Aras ruin his uncle's bonding day and reject his family, packing up and leaving the vale at once. Yet he did not head for Greenwood but instead turned west on the long road to Mithlond, most
of his daughters and their families in tow. He had no intention of emigrating to Aman, however, nor to settle in Mithlond. Aras was not content with ruining Legolas' happy day; he wanted nothing less than to ruin his life. He decided it was high time someone informed Lord Galdor that his promised fertile sylvan male princeling had not perished after all.

TBC

Mereth-en-Gwedhel: Bonding Celebration
Ennyn Laer: Gates of Summer
Miren Dithen: My Little Jewel
Aen he gâr sídh: May she be at peace
hervenn vain: primary husband
Ant-en-Govódiel: welcoming gift
Gellam: Jubilation
Alphdal: Swan-foot
Rhûn'waew: East Wind
Aras: Stag
Laeross: Summer Rain
Loss'waew: Whisper Wind
Orbelain: Day of the Powers
Leitho Aras, Elrond Ion An'wedh: Release Aras, Elrond Son-by-law

Aearen: my ocean
Nín'ódhel: my Deep Elf

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NOTE: Ugh! Don't you just hate Aras? What a scumbag and I have the same question Rhûn'waew asked: How did he turn out to be such a creep? Well, I guess most families have their Aras in one form or another. If any are confused about Thranduil's reluctance to tell Elrond the real story about his wife's parents, remember Rhûn'waew's statement that she would sunder the bond between Elrond and their son should she deem it best. She is very powerful, as we have seen, yet I think she assumes the bond can be broken because she knows Laeross dissolved hers rather than deal with becoming in essence the secondary mate to Orbelain. Thranduil just wants to protect her, their unborn babe, Legolas, and Legolas' unborn babe. That's a lot of responsibility to bear. Whatever Rhûn'waew thinks is best he is likely to support. Hope it all makes plausible sense in some fashion. Arwen and Erestor finally received their just desserts though poor Lindir is now suffering, too. We'll see what can be done for him soon. This seemed the best place to stop for now. Hope it is satisfactory and thanks to everyone still reading along :D
Elrond leaned against the frame of the doorway, not exactly slouching but certainly a more relaxed posture than he would ever present in public. His gaze was fixed in attentive appreciation, not on the majestic landscape of his peaceful realm but inside to the graciously appointed chamber that comprised his bedroom. Clad in a soft, white cotton robe, barefoot, long ebony hair loose about him, afternoon sunlight streamed over his shoulders and burnished his pale aura with the rich golden-red rays of Anor, he stood wreathed in a radiant nimbus that perfectly portrayed the state of his soul. He could not recall ever feeling so contented, so right with life, enveloped in absolute certainty that this role was the vital one, his fate finally, fully realised and accepted with wondrous joy.

The view before him was enough to move him to exuberant song, but Elrond restrained the urge, posed there in silent admiration. The source of this incandescent heart-glow was Aearenn, of course, seated naked and cross-legged amid the catastrophe of bedclothes left rumpled and ravaged in the wake of their love-making, softly singing his soul-song. Elrond wanted to go and gather Legolas close, yet chose to remain where he was, revelling in the simple pleasure the sight afforded him.

He was smiling; how could he not? It was the gentle, protective expression his features always assumed whenever he contemplated Legolas in Ólpathu. The shape of his smile shaped in turn the conformation of his heart, reorganising the chambers, squeezing here, enlarging there, so that a sharp affliction accompanied the steady throb of the vital organ. Close to overwhelming him, replete with responsibility, sheltering love, possessive and untempered pride, the dulcet pang rose up and made breathing difficult, left the burning sensation of swallowed tears on the back of his throat. He was this amazing elf's mate, father of the babe sheltered there within that glorious form resting on the bed.

He let these ideas engulf him with all their implications intact and inhaled a deep breath, releasing it slowly as a shivery exultation touched his thoughts; how far they'd come!

Aye, the view was exalted, a true depiction of all that was best in his life, all that dwelled in the very centre of his being. The arch did not so much frame the vignette as enshrine it, searing forever in his mind this image of Legolas on their first evening back in the Last Homely House after the formal marriage ceremony.

With ten years together, they'd spent uncounted hours in these rooms, but this time was different. Everything was official now; Legolas was his. Not his bond-slave, his temporary diversion, his sylvan catamite, or any of the host of other derogatory terms with which the woodland archer had been described, but Elrond's soul-mate and an equal partner in all that life might bring them in the years ahead. Never again would anyone dare utter crude jests, lewd remarks, or make lecherous advances. None could ever surmise the Wood Elf's place in Imladris to be anything but permanent, eminent, and honourable, and while it had not been stated, his influence would be felt throughout the valley. This was already a fact and Elrond would not have it otherwise.

His smile grew as the chaotic, sombre beauty of Legolas' soul-song acquired a sweetly sentimental cadence. He believed the change was due in part to the new accord between them. Aearen was contentedly re-examining, for probably the twentieth time, the gift Elrond had presented to him in honour of their bonding day. It was this gift, the noble Lord felt, that best illustrated the change in his
relationship to Legolas. Sharing it represented Elrond's first effort to unburden his heart to his young mate, pouring out his misery for Legolas to absorb, expressing his dependency and exhibiting a level of trust he had never granted Aearen previously.

The result had done more to seal up the remaining fissures in their strained relationship than either could have imagined. Both of them were healing and the ancient lore-master knew himself to be the greater beneficiary of this renewal, finding his spirit lightened by the absence of a burden born so long he had forgotten how to see the beauty still abounding in the world around him. He could see now that this was the first gift Legolas had given him: the ability to wonder at the vast variety of Yavanna's creations, to feel genuine delight in all that was, for him, new and never seen before. The horrors Legolas had endured had not diminished this faculty but instead worked to enhance it.

Another breath came and went, invigorating Elrond's mellow heart-glow into a brighter flare of domestic harmony. Yes, everything had changed, even the room. He raised a brow and shook his head in bemusement, goggling at the new furnishings with pleasure and approval. His sons had done this, exchanging all the old, dark, heavy furniture with newly crafted pieces, painting the walls, hanging new tapestries and art, rolling out a thick, plush carpet over the floor. *Their gift to Legolas. Faelon must have abetted their efforts.* Even Arwen was implicated. The combined plotting was more important to him than the result it produced, representing acknowledgement and acceptance of Legolas' place in his life, in all their lives. They were a family now.

He had to admit, at least to himself, that he liked the room better. Against the far wall stood matching wardrobes in a pale, buttery teak-wood inlaid with a fine ribbon of mahogany. Upon the doors, the carving of the new seal Arwen had created was prominently displayed. Where Elrond's over-flowing writing desk with its perpetual reminder of duty and work had once dwelled stood twin dressing tables, one on each side of the natural alcove between the airy entries to the balcony. He and Legolas would be able to see one another's reflections in silvered glass as they prepared for the day, their personal toiletries set out neatly. Having already explored everything, he knew Legolas' stash of odds and ends was now housed in one of the drawers of his new dresser while their collection of naughty toys was stored in a drawer in Elrond's.

Thinking of which brought him to the bed, by far the best piece in the room. Elrond found the style agreed with him, though he had never given any thought to altering his sleeping accommodations. It was simple, an elegant design of sleek, slim lines instead of the heavy and overbearing construction of the old one. The head and foot were made of beautiful verdigris bronze open-work, the metal cast in the pattern of interwoven vines. The four bedposts were plain but each foot was buried in a tall pot in which a climbing rose had been planted. It was too soon for them to have grown much, but eventually the plants would encircle the narrow columns and cover the canopy, supplying the beauty of both the flowers and their scent to the room.

On first seeing it, Legolas had gasped aloud and then whooped like a child, running to fling himself on the new mattress, grinning and laughing. He sat up and pulled the sheer, leaf-green curtains round him, peering out in sultry invitation. Elrond, irked to know how much the original furniture had displeased his mate, was nonetheless glad to join him in breaking in the bed. That had been a wild, rabid romp of unbridled lust which thoroughly infused the linens with the scent of their mutual passion so that every now and again the breeze filled his nostrils with the lingering aroma, stirring his hunger with vivid memories. Legolas had drifted gently into Ôlpathu afterward, reaching for the little box that he was barely able to set aside, instantly absorbed in its contents. Thus, Elrond had this opportunity to enjoy the view and reflect on all that had so recently transpired.

The sylvan wedding ceremony had gone on for six days and was less a formal, solemn invocation of rites and vows than an irrepressible, irreverent, and rowdy festival. It seemed to the Lord of Imladris
that nearly every Wood Elf there had given three speeches a day, praised the couple, honoured the King and Queen, and even addressed the stuffy Noldorin folk with cordial welcome. Strong wine was consumed in astonishing quantities. A virtually unending banquet of delectable delicacies kept appetites appeased. Several deer were roasted over open fires and even more boars. Music and singing and stories were shared, all enmity forgotten as the celebration progressed.

The trouble over the dowry and the restitution owed Thranduil's insulted House went much more smoothly once Aras left the valley. In fact, it was dropped completely and the mood of every person in attendance, not excepting Elrond's councillors, improved once the elder prince departed. Only Rhûn'waew was melancholy over his banishment, though she had been the first to realise it would be necessary. Yet Legolas had gone to her the following morning and the two spent most of the day alone together. When mother and son rejoined the festivities, the collective mood elevated to new heights.

Legolas later revealed to Elrond that he'd reminded his mother that Galbreth would soon return and eventually take his eldest son in hand. Aras need not be her burden any more. She blamed herself, it seemed, for spoiling Aras after his mother died. As always, hearing this made Elrond wonder over Legolas' innate desire to shield his loved ones from pain and remove the weight of guilt from their souls. He could do this for everyone except himself. The Lord of Imladris shook off those darker thoughts and returned to lighter memories. Sorrow had yielded, at long last, to happiness and he refused squander a second of it.

It had at first been difficult to understand the unstructured nature of the sylvan bonding tradition, expecting to repeat the formal gathering that had been disrupted that first day, but discovered that was the only meeting in which specific terms and documents and oaths were to be presented. The public, solemn presentation of himself and Aearen as a mated couple to Greenwood's King and Queen had been all that custom required. Bonding was not something to be conferred upon them by rubrics, words, or signs but a state of being into which they had entered. Acknowledging them as a bonded pair naturally followed.

Normally, according to Lindir, the traditional preliminary courtship rituals and haggling over dowry were concluded privately between the families prior to the couple consummating this bond, but the reality was that the negotiating happened after the fact in most cases. Legolas, by virtue of his elevated status and unique physiology, was a special case, and beyond this the fate that had befallen him had initiated an entirely different set of conditions that none of his people could have predicted.

For him, the moment when he and Elrond stood before all his kin and friends, redeemed at last by the open acknowledgement of their bond, an equal before family and all the Lords and councillors of Imladris and Greenwood, hearing the stirring oath of loyalty spoken by Glorfindel; this had answered his every hope. What he wanted now, he had informed his enthusiastic mate, was a celebration, a chance to share his joy.

To this Elrond was more than glad to accede. Making Legolas smile was all he cared about now and once he understood the sylvan way, he could not find any fault with it. Their bond was deeply personal; not even the Powers could contravene a union such as this nor could any but Eru craft fate to generate such a potent connection. He and Legolas were mated one to another. That they had found love for one another within this vital confluence of souls was a source of great happiness and cause for rejoicing. He found he wanted to flaunt his high good fortune for all to see, and the party was spectacular.

Now, it might be thought that Legolas' family would prefer to see the haughty and arrogant nobles of the valley submit themselves in obeisance before Legolas and beg mercy from him. Thranduil and
Rhûn'waew certainly felt this way and were not alone in that desire, yet the dire confrontation and banishment of Aras had left their hearts wounded. That this hideous injury had been done to them before the very worst of Legolas' detractors made the altercation more traumatic. Beyond this, everyone, even the Imladrians, were attuned to the developing life present and the strain upon the life-bearers. What was best for these four governed the decision to postpone that moment of redress for another time.

There would be a second presentation of the newest, youngest Lord of Imladris to the citizens of the realm. The woodland folk anticipated this event with relish, eager to watch the tendering of oaths of fealty to their woodland prince along with pleas for Legolas' forgiveness, made all the more humiliating for the snobbish Noldor since all of the valley's populace who could get through the gates would be on hand to witness it.

A brief note sent to Elrond made him aware of this pending chastisement and he could not condemn it, asking only that Erestor be excluded from this public dishonour, given what he was already suffering. To that the Royals agreed and no further reference was made to the Day of Retribution, as Thranduil termed it in his note with bold flourishes, capitol letters, and a double underscore. Even this caused Elrond no strife and after seeing the bonding bower built in the mighty hemlocks of Lanthir Fân he could only think warmly of his unlikely law-father. It was obvious the King had discovered Legolas' blueprints and the construction represented the beginnings of the birth-talan.

The effect upon Legolas was particularly gratifying; their first night there had been, beyond doubt, the most glorious the couple had ever spent together, even counting Ened Ethuil and the day of the courtyard fountain. Legolas had vanished behind a simple screen of silk hung from the overhanging branches, emerging in nothing but the golden chains. His young mate's bonding day gift had certainly contributed to the heightened mood, so much so that Elrond only pondered in passing the piercing and his sons' role in it. He'd traced each delicate strand to its anchor point, testing the effect on Aearen by varying the tension, tugging, twisting, tweaking, and tasting the unique flavours of metal and skin as he fucked his mate as many ways as he could comfortably manage in a swaying, treetop bed-hammock.

The memory stirred Elrond's passion, but it was a languid and lazy lust; he was not yet ready to claim his mate again. He sighed soulfully, watching Legolas, pleased yet mildly incredulous over how well everything had turned out, given the dramatic circumstances swirling throughout his troubled courtship of the woodland archer. Born in disaster, indeed, verily defined by it, their union might have been doomed to end in a similarly cataclysmic tragedy and had nearly done so on many occasions. Elrond shivered. They had come through it all to the very brink of bliss, the fullness of happiness theirs to claim, and it was surely Legolas' indefatigable devotion that had secured them this future of domestic harmony.

Aye, this is bliss; he is bliss. Bliss incarnate, Aearen. "Ah, Legolas," he whispered.

Legolas glanced up, eyes meeting his across the distant depths of Ôlpathu, and smiled, features serenely resplendent. He sang, the lilting faer'lır different than it had been just a few short months ago. His grief, sorrow, and guilt had always been the dominant components of this spontaneous music, never exactly the same from cycle to cycle, but always variations on the central theme of his tortured existence, and this unwholesome element was not yet vanquished. Yet, now their child's spirit joined his, enhancing the soft, sad, ethereal vocals with a whimsical and wonderful innocence underscored in unwavering trust and love: Tinu Mîn was happy.

The lore-master's chest expanded in exuberant thanksgiving and he silently praised the Powers for his unexpected child. He loved the babe almost as much as he did Legolas and anticipated the birth
with anxious impatience, something he hid from Legolas as much as possible. Watching him with the box, he was struck by its similarity to the archer's hodgepodge collection of rocks, feathers, leaves, and pot sherds. Soon, Tinu Mín would have a stash of such oddments, too. It was the province of youth to amass such collections. Such objects were physical representations of memories and thoughts, marking moments for which words were not sufficient, for emotions so powerful they were utterly inexplicable. What was simple, he reflected, often harboured what was most complex.

The revelation of the anticipated wedding present and Elrond's explanation of what it was had clearly and absolutely stunned Legolas, rendering him dumb for several seconds after which he'd thrown himself at Elrond, locking arms about him so tightly that breathing had been impossible for several seconds. They had spent their second evening in the bonding bower reviewing the contents of the humble box, a harrowing, liberating, cathartic experience for Elrond, a gruelling, soul-rending, but empowering one for Legolas.

It was not a treasure Elrond would ever have imagined he would share with anyone, but as soon as he began revealing the details to Legolas he knew it was what his plagued and beleaguered spirit had for Ages out of time required. He had verily felt the knitting together of the frayed and eroded fabric of his soul, wounded when he was so young in years. The simple box was made of wood and clad in finely engraved tin, the design his own creation depicting a map of his and Elros' realm: the wilds surrounding the falls where the twins had been captured. It held the assorted trinkets of childhood, mementoes of happier days when the brothers played together, imagining themselves the captains of a mighty fleet about to sail to Aman or courageous heroes defending their homes and families from the minions of Shadow.

*Just trinkets, but what horrible, wonderful trinkets!*

Would Elrond ever know greater satisfaction than that accompanying his mate's reverent and gentle curiosity? Perhaps, but that night he could not envision such a thing.

They had just come from the unending celebration in the wooded glen, Legolas dressed in simple, comfortable, but lovely garments made in the sylvan style. His shirt was abbreviated, one of those embroidered sleeveless vests that ended just an inch short of his navel and the thin band of bare, baby-plump belly was daring indeed for one so modest by nature. The little dangling jewel anchored there winked and glittered and drew many eyes as he walked. He was constantly blushing, but proudly, for apparently this piercing of the body was a sylvan bonding tradition and he wanted to show off. Over this spare top he wore a pale, diaphanous, eggshell-coloured robe, also sleeveless, that enveloped him and yet revealed him, being made of sheer, gauzy fabric. The outfit was completed with silk pants dyed indigo blue, wide-legged and full, unbound at the ankle, flowing from his narrow hips and swishing about in a distinctly flirty way when he walked.

*When he danced - Ah! What a vision of alluring fecundity!*  

How could it be, Elrond wondered, that never until this party had he seen Legolas dance? Had he ever participated in any of the stately soirees which the Lord of the Valley held on special days and for honoured guests? He had not, remaining apart or simply not attending and of course the reason why was well known now. Not even on Ened Ethuil had he danced, preferring the daring demonstration of his bonfire leaping skill.

Nothing restrained his exuberance any longer. Safe within the acknowledged bond between them, Legolas was free to be himself, and Legolas loved to dance and to sing. The first dance was another sylvan tradition, a solitary expression of both possession and enthralment, Legolas whirling round his mate, blonde mane streaming, silken garments billowing, the steps bold and provocative, sensual and
deliberately enticing, now touching Elrond lightly with his fingers, next taking up a hand-hold of hair and drawing him into the motion for a kiss, blue eyes shining, cheeks flushed with both joy and desire. It left Elrond breathless and wondering how he was going to make it through the rest of the festivities without spiriting Legolas away to a more private spot.

It ended abruptly, Legolas' arms about his neck, the archer's lips devouring his while the gathered elves hooted and cheered and called out mildly lewd suggestions. They broke apart and Legolas exhibited his mate to the crowd, handing him forward much as Thranduil had presented his regal wife, and one and all bowed low before them. Elrond was overwhelmed and could only smile and laugh and then hug his Wood Elf close for a time, the two of them locked in the cosy embrace, gently swaying.

After this, everyone joined in the dance and the proud Noldorin Lord had made sure Legolas spun through every reel with him, almost giddy to realise Aearen was just as jealously ensuring no other tried to dance with Elrond, all the while making open display of the thrill in which he held this mighty legend among the First-born. It filled them both with exultation and they cavorted and capered until the musicians could play no more.

Hand in hand, then, they returned to Lanthir Fân, speaking hardly at all but smiling on one another with incandescent splendour, sharing little kisses and whispered endearments. They were weary, though, and Legolas wanted his gift, having waited this long only because he'd wanted to go dancing at his party. Elrond poured them both a cup of wine and handed over the box without any flourishes, hesitantly, almost reluctantly.

"It is beautiful," Legolas said, examining it, "and very old. Tell me." His clear, knowing eyes locked with Elrond's cautious grey ones.

"I made it when I was very young, only seven years old. I meant it to be a begetting day present for Elros, but he refused it." He broke off abruptly. Why had he said that? He had not meant to introduce such gloom into the explanation.

But the gloom is there.

But the next instant those long lethal fingers grasped his and squeezed; he looked into sorrowful eyes, more than a little bit angry on his behalf.

"Refused it? Why would Elros do that? Did you have a quarrel?"

"Oh, a terrible quarrel!" He barked out a bitter laugh and shook his head, settling closer against Aearen on the swaying bower-bed high amid the sturdy arms of the hemlocks. "Look inside."

Legolas did so, elegant fingers dipping in to withdraw a seashell: a flat, bony disk pierced in five spots arranged round the faint impression of the petals of a flower, and indeed he called out the common name of the object: Merilaer (Sea Rose). Seeing it, Elrond had paled and his smile vanished, recalling why he'd kept it, and his heart lurched at the sight of it resting there on Aearen's palm.

"Ai! I forgot this was in there. Please, choose another," Elrond instantly pleaded, face wan and eyes wide.

"Nay, this one first," Legolas insisted, seeing the shadows gather in his mate's heart. "Tell me why you kept it. Is this part of the fight?"

Looking into those blue eyes, Elrond had seen a strength and determination he had often noted before, the stubborn tenacity Legolas displayed whenever he would impose his will on the world, and well the mighty Lord knew that will would not be thwarted. And Elrond found that he wanted to
"We each had one. Really, they are common and we had many. They broke frequently during our playing and we would just get more the next time the tide receded. We pretended these were medallions of honour bestowed upon us by King Turgon for our bravery in fighting the vile demons at the gates of his palace in the last defence of Gondolin. Of course, we changed history in our games, certain that had we been there we would never have let the city fall. That day we played until luncheon and when we went home, our Nana made us put the shells away and clean up ere we ate."

"You and Elros?" Legolas asked quietly, for Elrond did not speak of his brother often and it had never before been his right to ask. "You were identical, as are your sons?"

"Yes," Elrond nodded, his forced smile subsiding into a pinched, melancholic expression. "We were much like them, both in appearance and manner, our personalities complimentary one to another, our actions synchronised without conscious awareness of it, inseparable for nearly our whole lives prior to achieving majority." His voice faltered. Did he dare speak the words? Elrond glanced into the bright azure gaze trained upon him and took courage. "We changed, you see, and I feared to leave his side for even a moment."

"Changed? How so?"

"Oh," an awkward shrug, eyes downcast, "he was consumed in sorrow and anger. He did not call himself by the name our Ada bestowed, saying he was no longer the son of Eärendil and Elwing. That's why he refused the box. He named himself Pen Awarthad, but this I would not call him for, as I reminded him, I had not abandoned him and never would. As it turned out, he abandoned me."

There, I said it.

"Nay, it was not you he turned from, Nín'ódhel, but the weight of the sorrow engulfing him." Legolas had spontaneously hugged his mate then, for of course he knew the history behind this woebegone pronouncement, as did every elf in Middle-earth and Aman.

"I understand this now, but it hurt me deeply then. We were only six years old. I could not understand why he was so certain, so angry, for I still denied that she was really gone and had left us behind." Words failed him; this was too awful to tell.

The wound had been covered over for too long to treat it now and what good could it do? Its poison had already worked its change upon him. She never returned and he had grown up without her into who he was now. Whatever he had been meant to be when he was born, that fate was beyond his grasp and irrecoverable. A sudden shock jolted his heart and he gasped sharply; Legolas had likewise been changed by an unlooked-for fate. Elrond understood better the discontent of the Wood Elves' King.

"Speak to me, Nín'ódhel," Legolas physically shook him, frowning into the serious countenance. "Let me share your sorrow as you have shared mine."

That nearly overwhelmed Elrond, for he was ruefully cognisant of how much of Legolas' suffering was his fault. That was not what Aearen meant at all and he knew that, too. The harrowing night of the disappearing fires returned to him and he recalled the calm, insistent voices exhorting him to confide everything to his mate and reveal the depth of his need for acceptance and love without qualification or reservation. Until that night, Elrond would have been appalled at the notion of showing his vulnerable inner hurts, fearing that Legolas loved the majesty and might of the Lord of
Imladris instead of frail and flawed Elrond Peredhel. Now, he saw the hypocrisy of this notion, for that fault of equating status with worth was his and never one Legolas harboured.

*I must trust him. He shares my soul and has already seen the worst of my pain. And it is his right as my mate to share this. He needs me to need him.*

So Elrond's inner heart told him and while he could not rightly determine how this understanding had come to him so suddenly and so forcefully, he believed it. In the furthest corners of his mind, he had begun to suspect his law-mother of sorcery of some kind, but had no wish to examine this notion fully. Elrond took a deep breath for courage, gave himself a brief nod, and began again:

"There we stood upon the strand, Anor high and bright, the sky a magnificent blue, the waves rippling in and wetting the dun-coloured beach; the tide had turned, hastening inland. We had followed her, abandoning our bowls at table, for news had come to her by courier. We did not know what it meant. She dropped the letter, our Ada's name upon her lips, and raced from the house.

"Elros took up the missive and we read it: a curt demand for the jewel and a threat of war and death if she refused. A cry of alarm broke from us in unison and we ran after her, instinctively going to the ocean. There she stood, moaning incoherent noises and swaying, hands clasped about the gem hanging at her throat. We thought she meant for us all to sail away, and Elros began to ask if she had a ship ready, had she prepared for this day. But I saw no boat out in the deep waters, no dingy dragged up on the beach.

"She made no answer, didn't seem to see us there. I went near and tugged on her sleeve; her face jerked to stare at me, eyes narrowed and hard. I gasped aloud as she shoved me off her. I called to her, miserable, afraid to touch her again. That was no expression I had ever seen in her eyes before. Often we had seen her consumed in sorrow and pining for our Adar; she could not hide it, but never this angry, impatient dismissal. Elros spoke a curse word, something that should have earned him a slap on the mouth, but she ignored him, too, and he came to me, wrapped his arm round my shoulders.

"There were birds everywhere, wheeling and diving in the surf for food, and even as we watched she darted to them, splashing through the waves, arms outstretched. Even as we watched, she changed form before our very eyes, lost in those soaring bodies. I stared, dumbstruck, uncomprehending. I must have cried for her then and made to follow. I don't know what was in my mind; perhaps I thought I would change form, too. Then there was Elros, snatching me by the arm, dragging me away to the dunes, and I fought him off. 'We must follow her!' I yelled at him as we struggled.

"We could not change shape as she did, he informed me. How he knew all this I have never understood, but he said the jewel had made her change and we had none. 'Then we must wait for her to return. She has gone to fetch Adar.' He slapped me, hard, when I told him this. 'Fool! She is never coming back! She has gone to Adar and took the jewel with her instead of us. We are alone now.' Those were his words, so grim, so bitter, so relentlessly true that they broke through my denial and tore my soul in twain.

"I screamed and cried and called for her. I ran into the ocean and would have begun to swim but Elros came and hauled me out, struck me again, his fist this time. He told me to stop it, to never speak her name again, never weep for her, never call him Elros again."

"Aie, Elrond!" Legolas gathered his mate close, horrified by this tale. Wisely, he had kept silent until now, permitting Elrond the distance required to look upon this event and tell of it. Now he enveloped
the noble ellon within his love and wept for the child's abandonment, seeing it all unfold as if he'd been there to witness it first-hand. "What a terrible thing to experience." He shivered; he knew something about the terror of losing a parent's loving regard, though he had not had to face it until he was fully grown. Legolas could not imagine what it must have been like for children to be rejected with such chilling finality. "You were strong together or you would not have survived that day."

"We survived it; that is true, but I don't believe strength had anything to do with it. I was shocked by Elros' cold acceptance; I still am. How did he know this? Yet instinctively I clung to him, though it sounded as though he rejected me, too. He chose to protect me but his help was grudging in part, resentful. I would have perished without him, we both knew it, and he accepted me as his burden to bear. In a way, we mirrored one another's needs: my terror allowed him to stifle his, to transform it into seething rage and disgust for me and my fear. I see it now: if he could not trust our Nana to remain with us, how could he depend upon my loyalty? He was trying to keep his heart from breaking by despising me."

"We fought that day, savagely, burdening one another with our fury and terror until a kinsman found us and divided us, taking us back to his house in the city. That was Erestor's Adar, our mother's great-uncle. We had never been apart before and it startled us into reality. We knew then we could not be parted and endure this. I escaped my minders to find Elros, such a wreck I did not notice his suffering, for to be honest I had always depended upon him. He seemed so much older all of a sudden, wiser, as though he was now grown up, a child no more. I looked to him to tell me what to do next, how we would live without her."

"He promised he would not leave me but that I must be bold and brave, like him, if this would be so. Of course I agreed to whatever he suggested and his words inflamed my heart. 'We must go and avenge our loss on these Noldorin princes,' he said, such venom and hatred in his voice I did not recognise it. 'We have no weapons,' said I and at once he struck me. 'Are you craven?' he demanded and I denied it, though I was absolutely petrified. If we tried to avenge our parents, we would be killed. 'It is because we are young that we will succeed,' he explained. 'We have our daggers. Each of us must take one of them to Mandos and the judgement of the Valar or die in the attempt.'"

"Oh, Elrond!" Legolas' cry was barely a whisper but packed with anguish and his arms tightened round his mate protectively.

Elrond paused his narration, gently stroking Aearen's back, damp cheek resting on the golden head, smiling even as he wept, recalling that dreadful day, glad at last to be able to speak of it for never had he done so before, not to Lindir, not even to Elros, who forbade it. It hurt so to speak of it, terribly, as he always knew it would, but doing so did not diminish either his dignity or his sanity. That was due to Legolas. With him, it was right to reveal this pain, this weakness, this ultimate failure. He hadn't been able to stop Elwing from leaving, hadn't succeeded in easing Elros' fury, hadn't been able to stop the horror that came next, but Legolas understood and did not condemn him. Elrond gathered that security to his heart and continued.

"We escaped our kinsman's house and fled the Havens, only to nearly run into the advancing host of Maedhros and Maglor. All our high ideals evaporated as soon as we saw them: armoured cavalry in endless ranks, banners flying, Maedhros at the head of the van, his twin brothers flanking him, majestic and lethal and unstoppable. We ducked out of sight and found shelter in a cave behind a waterfall where we often played, our hidden sanctuary. The great army passed by and we remained hidden; thus, we were spared the destruction wrought upon Siriombar.

"No sooner were they beyond sight and hearing than Elros berated me, calling me a coward unfit to be his brother, though he had run from them, too. We would have a second chance to do what was
honourable, he said. We must be ready, he told me, for they would leave once they found out the jewel was gone. They would be battle weary then, he said, and we would have our chance. We must prepare an ambush, he said, and I agreed, though in my heart I knew I could not do it. I could not use my dagger and kill these people no matter what they had done to me. Neither could he, as it proved.

"Days passed, I forget how many because I did not count them then. We waited, using up all the stores left in the place, for it was our favourite hide-out, though of course our Nana knew about it, and we kept food and clothes and bedding there. I prayed the Noldor would never come, hoped they had been destroyed by the elves in the villages or perhaps by Círdan's soldiers sailing in from Lindon. I was disappointed in this hope and fled back into the cave as soon as we head them on the road.

"Elros chased after me, scolding and scoffing and mocking and disowning me in such scathing terms that soon we were fighting again. Our noise drew them and soon we were parted, Maedhros snatching at Elros while Maglor corralled me. I was defeated immediately and hung limp in his arms, begging him shamelessly to let us go. Elros spat upon Maedhros and challenged him to single combat for the loss of our mother and the jewel. And he smiled, hearing that; Maedhros smiled."

Again Elrond stopped speaking, lost in the memory, his eyes blank as he stared upon the scene and watched it play out. He spoke without realising he did so, voice strident, tone pitched high in the range of a child's anguished tenor. "No, you will not hurt him, you will not! He is all I have left and you will not take him from me! As long as we live, there is a chance you might trade us for the jewel. Our Nana has gone to fetch Ada; they will come back for us."

"Elrond?" Legolas peered into the stormy grey eyes, concerned, yet hesitated to react too precipitately, seeing his mate coming to the climax of this rending tale. "I am here; I hear you, beloved. Go on. What happened?"

A great gusting sob heaved out of Elrond, an ancient and stagnant wind of air long trapped in his lungs, stale and bitter as the breath he had held all those aeons ago waiting to learn what fate Maedhros would decree for Elros and him. Gladly he vented it from his body now and shuddered, coming out of the fugue to look into the worried face examining his so keenly, aware of the tight embrace, the security and safety of the love within which his battered soul was now sheltered. He smiled, took up one of the archer's hands and pressed it to his lips. "Aearen," he whispered and found himself again on the verge of tears. It was a few moments more before he could finish.

"Elros, shamed by my words, refused to look at me. Lindir stepped in, bloody and bedraggled and probably half-mad, and boldly took him from Maedhros' hold. 'Only one fallen so low as you would accept challenge from a babe,' he intoned, 'but even if you would do so, I forbid it. These children you will not slay while I am breathing.' And Maedhros laughed with bitter mirth, dismissing Lindir's taunt, meeting my eyes instead, nodding his head. 'This one is wise and I will heed his counsel,' said he, pointing Elros' own dagger at me. 'I will hold these two hostage to be ransomed by the Silmaril stolen from us by Luthien and Beren.' Thus we ended up captive in the house of our enemies and Lindir became our guardian."

"Valar," Legolas swore quietly and let silence spin out for a bit as he gently rubbed Elrond's back. "What of Elros? Did he forgive you?"

"Eventually. It was many days. You must understand; his belief that he would have avenged our parents is all that kept his grief at bay, that and his anger toward me. He scorned and berated me daily, yet he would not leave my side and watched over me when exhaustion forced me to sleep. The journey north was long and arduous. I never thought about how he was managing until much, much
later. Lindir saved him, I believe, for he revealed the story of his sister's death and how he had been unable to make himself spill the blood of those who killed her.

"This you must never repeat, not even to Lindir, for we are the only ones he told of this. His survival made ours a reality, for we shared nearly the same fate. Erestor was part of it, too, for his parents were slaughtered that day before his eyes and he followed, the same desire for revenge drawing him, and Lindir took him in charge as well. The Noldorin princes didn't even notice he was part of the household for months. By then they didn't care, I suppose."

"It is dreadful!" Legolas shivered again, his appreciation for his good fortune to have both his parents quite obvious, and hugged Elrond harder.

Another huge sigh moved through the lordly elf and Elrond shifted, taking the small shell from him and holding it up to the light so that the surface became nearly transparent, revealing within it internal chambers and tiny, wing-shaped bones. Legolas caught his breath, thinking of Elwing and her bizarre transformation, her incomprehensible abandonment of her only children, so young and defenceless. "Truly, those jewels were nothing but a curse upon your people," he said. "She would not have gone from you but for that." He took the shell and laid it carefully aside.

"Aye, so I believe, too." Elrond shook his head sadly. "It is strange; though so many centuries have passed, I still long for her, grieve for her."

"I am sorry for your loss," said Legolas, wondering how to comfort his mate, bothered by something yet fearing to probe this cankerous wound too deeply. Yet he knew from personal experience that true healing required that the poison be flushed thoroughly out, all hint of toxicity removed. He hesitated a moment more, caressing the braids that marked Elrond as his own, glimpsed the sad, slate-coloured eyes, and took courage. "You must still be angry, too."

Elrond had physically flinched when he heard those words, stunned by them, and denied them immediately. "Nay, not at all. She did what she was compelled to do." He avoided his mate's eyes and tried to break from his arms, but learned he truly hadn't the will to do it.

"I know this, that you understand it now, but you were only a child then," Legolas prompted gently. "How long did you believe she would come back and claim you?" To his dismay, Elrond crumpled, reduced to morbid despair in seconds, bawling in unfathomable misery as he clutched so tight the grip was painful. The choked and muffled words were barely intelligible, but Legolas made them out:

"Nearly my whole young life. Until the Powers came. I knew then she would never come back, for she was not with them. I felt broken, finished. All those years I'd been holding onto hope and now I saw it all crumbling. And I finally understood. It was never real hope, only denial, pretence, a façade as false and futile as the promise of the stones themselves. The truth buried me, a great avalanche of misery that fell upon me and conversely left my soul utterly exposed."

"Ai, Nín'ódhel," soothed Legolas, rocking the distraught elf in his arms, stunned by the vehemence of the words but also the purity of them, for the emotions and thoughts had all been sublimated through the intervening centuries, time refining them down to their immutable essence, for though unspoken before now, here was the reality he had long since accepted. As the poison was purged Elrond's voice calmed.

"In that moment of naked agony, enlightenment assaulted me. As devastating as all this was to me and my brother, it was also thoroughly insignificant to the Powers. It was not for my woes they came
to Middle-earth or even to end the suffering of the people inhabiting it, but to confront finally their wayward, corrupt brother. This they did with nary a word to the leaders of the various elven realms, for with them were the host of the Vanyar, those favoured Caliquendi who had deserted Middle-earth with neither a regret nor an instant of self-reproach. The mightiest among us were as children before them.

"They did as they would and achieved the end they desired, which left me wondering why they had waited, why we had to suffer for their whim. I said something to this and Elros only smiled, a hand on my shoulder. 'In time, you will see the reason for it, Muindoren. Now, mayhap we can do our part unhindered, you and I, and help this world to flourish as it was meant to do.' He always had this uncanny insight while I could not perceive anything beyond my own broken heart. Now he seemed to have shed the last of his wrath and an aura of nobility clothed him. The distance between us was so immense though we were inseparable, he cool and collected, I distraught and outraged, and I had no inkling of what was coming, that boon from the Valar, that ghastly choice. He did and made his choice without hesitation.

"I was speechless. I could not comprehend that he meant to leave me. How could I go on without him? Before I could make the same choice and follow him, he forbade it, said he'd had his fill of coddling me and I was on my own now. 'Time to grow up, muindor dithen.' I thought he was mocking me, that he still hated me, and we parted with acrimony, on my part that is. Later, I realised he must have made the decision long before then; another example of that expansive foresight. He was calm and detached, but that only served to chill my soul at the time. In truth, he had matured and grown in wisdom, while I was still just an angry, frightened child.

"It became clear over the passing years that he had acted to save me. Again. He was always trying to save me from myself, from my fears. He wanted me to have the illustrious future he envisioned, but I didn't want to grow up, for that meant accepting all that had come to pass." Elrond groaned. "I lost everything. Why? What did I do to make it happen this way? Or fail to do? What were they punishing me for?"

"Nay, Nín'ódhel," Legolas crooned, relieved the worst of it was out and he could truly give aid. "You were not being punished by anyone. It was not anything you did. It was those wretched stones, beloved. It is over now and they are gone from here forever and their curse gone with them. Someday, you will see your parents again and be given the grace to forgive them. Your mother must suffer so much from guilt, knowing what came to pass because she wore that jewel. Imagine it: her own children left behind, one twin lost forever to the Gift of Men. She will need your love and forgiveness."

Elrond had drawn back, the tears gone just as fast as they had arrived, his face haggard and his eyes red, and he'd stared aghast at his mate. "I don't know if I can do that," he admitted, the fury rising suddenly to the surface. "I lost everything, Legolas, everything! My family, my home, my very identity. Elros. Why did she choose that bloody gem over her own flesh and blood? How can I ever forgive that?"

"She was not the first taken in by the lies it whispered. Feänor was the first, then his sons one by one, and through them nearly all his people. Melkor claimed all three and after immersion in his foetid halls, what hope could there be that they would ever be clean? Then Thingol fell under the spell, demanding one as the bride-price for his only child, and even Luthien would not spurn this hateful thing for which her father was murdered, but wore it on her neck until she, too, died. To Dior it went next and he did not refuse it, either, not even when war arrived on his doorstep and all his family was riven. To save that cursed stone, he gave it to Elwing to spirit away before the Noldor arrived."
"She should have dashed it from his hands!" seethed Elrond. "How could she take so vile a thing and own it?"

"Ah, beloved, don't you see? One must instead ask, how could she give it up since so many of her people had perished because of it? Truly, she felt it hers by right of the blood spilled to keep it. This is the lie whispered by these sentient gems, Elrond: jewels wrought in magic and filled with untameable light, raw and devoid of conscience or scruple, owning only the instinct to live, to live at any cost. It is easy to wish they had never been made, but they were. It is not a thing you can undo. I give to you the advise you spoke to me not so many days ago; the only choice you have is to wallow in this grief and guilt, eternally ruminating on what-ifs and might-have-beens, or to accept the truth of it for what it is: your fate. That is something you can render magnificent through noble effort even as you have done these many centuries.

"Are you not Elrond, Lord of Imladris, Keeper of Vilya, champion of all that is right and good in this world? Have you not fought the Darkness and defied the Shadow time and again? You were at Eregion and Dagorlad, were you not? Is this not Rivendell, haven for all who seek shelter and respite from the ravages of evil? You hold an important seat on the White Council and your advice is heard by wizards and ancients. All of Middle-earth turns to you for counsel. You have fathered fine children and those raised to the fullness of adulthood shine as examples of your wisdom, your dedication, and your love.

"Mourn no longer, for what you have lost is only changed instead. Your mother lives, though perhaps you will need to get to know who she is, when the time comes for you to sail home, the same for your father. Your brother is not gone from Arda, but lives on in the robust and regal people he fathered. Have you not fostered your nephews through these many generations? Will you not continue to do it, loving these men for your brother's sake, seeking in each that reassuring glimpse of Elros?"

It was a long speech and Legolas blushed, worried he had gone on a bit, for Elrond looked dazed. He shook his mate anew, gently.

"And if all that is not enough, then hear this: You are my mate and I need you. I need your strength and your wisdom. Most of all I need your love, the love of a great and giving heart that has been restrained too long for fear of new hurts. Hold back no longer, beloved Nín'ódhel."

Through all of this Elrond had simple gaped in disbelieving awe, stunned to hear this outpouring of support and encouragement, this litany of praises, exoneration of his forebears, complete validation of his entire life and his conflicted feelings, those pleasing to experience and those that tended to shrivel the soul. He must not have made himself clear, he thought, perplexed. Legolas could not love such a wretch as he. A coward. A failure. A pompous fraud.

He scrutinised those cobalt irises trained upon him and found in them only vindication and absolute adoration. He snatched the Wood Elf close, thrilled to feel the slight pressure of the growing child against his middle, laughing and crying all together. It was a little while before he could regain his composure enough to speak.

"I will not restrain my heart, Aearen. It is yours since you have rightly broken it free and opened it up. In it you may wander and I pray you will for all that remains of time. Ah, whatever I have suffered, whatever I have lost, the gift of your love balances all. I will mourn no longer." After this he had wanted his mate and Legolas had no objections. The Lord of Imladris quite forgot his sorrows for a time and when they were sated, Legolas once more retrieved the humble box.
Together they had gone through its remaining contents, Elrond able now to relate many happy events as each item was brought forth: a mithril broach with which he'd attempted, innocently, to woo an Avarin maid who worked in Maedhros' keep, he twenty-two and she nearly thirty. The lady had spurned him, Legolas was pleased to hear. An arrowhead from his first kill on the hunt; a belt buckle found on a pathway in Ossiriand, kept because he and Elros thought it looked 'Dwarvish'; an elaborate ring Maglor had given him on his twelfth begetting day, a name seal stolen from the ruins of Caranthir's palace; a tail feather from his favourite falcon; a bright; smooth green pebble for which he could not remember any reason or rhyme; a fragile bracelet of shells he made for his mother when he was five.

Elrond leaned against the arch and smiled, watching Legolas examine these simple items again, handling them one by one with love and real delight, stroking the soft fronds of the feather quill against his cheek. His faer'lir was enhanced briefly by the softest trilling coo as dreamy eyes drifted over his mate's form and then back to the box. It was enough to make Elrond's libido awaken, instantly stirring his passion, for Aearen was still naked. His brows rose and his grin turned into a leer, but he waited, enjoying the view, deciding a second prompt was in order before he pounced.

The chains had been removed but the little studs remained embedded in the ruddy flesh of distended nipples swollen from his ardent suckling. His gaze lingered there, smugly proud of the almost raw condition of the tender titbits. His eyes fell lower, hoping to find evidence of Legolas' desire, and were not disappointed. The rosy shaft was gradually filling, the bright mithril ring through its pinnacle lying heavy against the velvety glans. Elrond's heart skipped as he thought about how that came to be there and his ardour quailed a little imagining the pain accompanying the piercing. Legolas seemed unconcerned and had shrugged it off, simply pleased to see his mate so excited by the results.

The light caught in the facets of the dangling jewel at his navel and drew Elrond's gaze. He let his sight roam back over the tantalising figure, pausing to enjoy the sultry, hazy cast now suffusing the dream-struck eyes. This would be the second time Legolas indicated his wish to end Ôlpathu in carnal union and Elrond's heart was thumping with delight. He wondered what the appeal could be but not for more than a few seconds, gaze migrating to the long, elegant points of the archer's ears where each was pierced with gold along the rising rear ridge right to their blushing tips. Tweaking them had revealed extreme sensitivity and Elrond was careful not to overdo his plucking, tonguing, or lapping when the chains were attached. He rather hoped to preserve that level of responsiveness in Legolas.

The trilling call lilted through the air again and that was all the signal he needed, casting off his robe and racing to the bed in a fluid surge of motion that mimicked the rising desire in his loins. Yet it was not a domineering assault but a carefully controlled advance and he climbed up beside his mate, leaning in to cup the fair face and kiss the lips still parted in the meandering melody of dream-time. His free hand began collecting the trinkets and replacing them in the simple box, shutting the lid and drawing it away from Aearen's long-fingered, faltering hands. The kiss ended with a stronger example of the sylvan's unique expression of desire and Legolas blinked twice, focusing eyes sharp and bright and dancing upon his mate's.

"Elrond," he whispered, smiling broadly. "My wanting surpassed even my dreaming."

"Aye, beloved," Elrond agreed, gently uncrossing the crossed knees, pushing him back, and rolling atop his compliant husband. Legolas' shaft was a hot, pulsing rod pressed against his belly and he pivoted his hips to make sure the archer fully appreciated its counterpart.

Legolas growled and shivered in anticipation, parted his legs wide, and grabbed a handful of
Elrond's hair, pulling him down for a deeper, hungrier kiss, then yanking the devouring mouth off him quickly. "Slowly," he commanded, eyes blazing. "Deeply. Forcefully."

Elrond obeyed, entering the anus initially to show who was in charge, but after a few hard thrusts and a delightful plea from his mate, pulled out and repositioned himself, rising and standing beside the bed as he dragged Legolas to the edge. He lifted and spread the bent legs higher and wider so he could better observe his cock's progress as it bored into the secondary hole. A long groan sounded from his chest and he had a more difficult time maintaining the sluggish pace Aearen desired, ramming with bruising intensity against the firm buttocks with each push. Their eyes met and they shared brilliant smiles; Legolas reached for his erection and began stroking it in rhythm with Elrond's punishing thrusts.

The pace quickened, Elrond unconscious of it as his sight remained fixed on the elegant hand playing so expertly with the rosy organ, caressing and squeezing and stroking it most lovingly. Legolas sighed out a low, sweet moan with every impact and his free hand roamed his body, traipsing over ear tips and rigid, scarlet nipples. His eyes drifted half shut and he seemed lost in this combined stimulation, almost as though Elrond's cock was but another of their pleasure toys he needed for the moment; his pleasure was his alone.

The idea excited Elrond and he felt his shaft expand, his pulse pounding in his ears. He struggled to restrain the urge to let loose and pour his seed into this erotic vessel, determined to give Legolas the experience he wanted and then take him as he would for his own delight. The chains flashed into his mind along with the emeralds. His thrusts came closer together and Legolas had fallen silent, a true sign he was near his peak. The blue eyes opened and met his, alive with comprehension of what awaited, and the expression took on a devilish glint. Legolas' hand slowed and stopped completely, holding the organ out temptingly for Elrond's notice, pressing it toward him until the angle must surely be painful.

The Lord of Imladris resisted, well acquainted with his mate's ability to take control of their love-making in the blink of an eye, but it was difficult not to stare at the inviting shaft, ruddy and slick, the glans exposed and oozing. Oh, to taste that nectar. He could not, not without pulling out completely and changing his plans entirely. Still, he could not entirely ignore the offer and on the next forceful lunge grabbed it in his left hand roughly, squeezed tight, and pumped.

Legolas' fingers were caught under Elrond's relentless grip and he smiled, acknowledging defeat, relinquishing to his mate's intentions, and just let himself go. His body rocked back into the down-filled mattress with every thrust and he let the motion propel him, a bit of leaf adrift on the waves of the sea, rising and falling at the mercy of the tides. Elrond's surging passion was all-encompassing and matched his to perfection. It did not take long before he shuddered in ecstasy, his seed a spare and sluggish dribble after their previous encounter, but sufficient to fill the room with his distinct scent. He lay limp and panting, watching in dreamy delight as Elrond hastily consumed the sticky essence, lips parted in a smile he hoped would win them a kiss. It did.

Elrond, still hard and unfulfilled, drove deep between the splayed legs, his cock shoved so far inside his mate that the pressure against his root was painful, and strained forward to capture the smiling mouth. He groaned loudly, shoved his tongue firmly against the archer's palate, and thrilled to feel Legolas' answering caress. They parted, eyes locked, and came together anew, the embrace sweeter despite the lore-master's elevated state of arousal. Once more they disengaged and Elrond slid back enough to afford both a measure of comfort, but found he could not resist reaching for the golden strands, carding through it as he surveyed Legolas' status. At once he noted the signs of fatigue and wished he'd let him drift in dream longer. He soothed a hand down the lean body, carefully tweaking each studded nipple and petting the little mound where their child grew, unconsciously rocking ever
so slightly in and out.

"You are weary?" he asked quietly.

"Aye, a little," admitted Legolas. "It was a good party, though." He shifted and sighed as the gentle friction worked against his most sensitive core. "Ah, that is sweet indeed," he breathed.

"Yes?" Elrond smiled, finding this simple phrase had his desire soaring again. It required great effort to keep his pace slow, the pulses so shallow. What he had wanted before, his image of flipping Legolas over and claiming him anally from the rear, vanished. He wanted to make Legolas come once more even if there was nothing left the sylvan could contribute. He had witnessed more than one of these dry orgasms and knew there was pleasure that came close to transcendence for his mate. He wanted that for Aearen now, tonight, and fully intended to take him there more than once. Somewhere along the way, he would come, too, and maybe then they would rest a time. While this went through his mind he measured his motion in miniscule moments, watching Legolas keenly for every indication of building arousal.

His cheeks and ears were flushed, the nipples ripe and ruddy, and his respiration gusted through wispy soughs and hitched, murmured encouragement. Sluggishly his lax penis responded, filling in tiny increments, rolling back and forth across his thigh as Elrond pushed in and out. Legolas reached forward, ran his fingertips through the swaying raven locks drifting against his abdomen. The touch made Elrond grunt and a dark blush stained his face for a moment.

Legolas smiled. "Ai, Nín'ódhel, the things you do to me," he muttered, taking an inky tendril and wrapping it round his index finger. Elrond groaned and shut his eyes, clearly fighting the urge to pound against the pliant body containing him, and Legolas grinned, supplying the response his mate could not find means to utter at that particular instant. "But we both know how much it pleases me."

"Ai, Legolas!" Elrond moaned, shivering as his resolve began to waver. He struggled to ride out the cresting wave of passion building down in his belly and compromised, increasing his speed but retaining the docile pressure of each compression. Sweat stood out on his brow and his breathing became laboured and when Legolas buried both hands into his hair, it was nearly too much.

"Do not hold back, beloved," whispered Legolas. "I am close now. Let go."

The command was spoken with such profound love that Elrond could only obey, wailing as his heart leaped at the same time his body did. His cock erupted and sent his senses reeling into a euphoric dimension of exploding starlight and absolutely comforting warmth. He drifted back to normal awareness to find his knees trembling and Legolas trilling, tugging on his hair to bring him onto the bed. One look in the liquid aqua eyes told him he had succeeded in his goal and Elrond was pleased. Huffing for air, he retreated from the slippery cavity, deflated and sated. He climbed up, gathered Legolas close, and rolled to his back, sighing in contentment as Aearen's head fell against his chest.

"Ah, Legolas," he panted, reaching to raise the fair face to meet his gaze. They shared their joy silently and Legolas wriggled close enough to reach the lore-master's lips. The kiss was short as Elrond was still struggling to recover his wind.

"Nín'ódhel." Legolas pillowed his head against the broad chest anew and was prepared to let himself slip into light reverie, thinking how much better sex was now that the bond had been recognised. Life would be good henceforth. He drifted off with scenes of his child's life delighting his heart and saw himself smiling into a trusting little face much like his own. 'Ada' said the babe and raised his arms to be lifted. Legolas' spirit was soaring.
For his part, Elrond had no need for sleep and knew he would not begin Ólpathu for many days yet. He was pleased to simply hold Legolas, sensing in faint glimpses the joyous images flickering through his mate's imagination. This was new and most welcome and he stilled his own thoughts so to concentrate on catching Legolas' visions. He saw huge blue eyes and long ears their child would have to grow into and laughed quietly. Soon, it would be time to start discussing a proper name and Elrond hugged his mate close, anticipating the days to come. Again his chest expanded with infinite gratitude for the blessing of this sylvan elf who had so successfully disrupted his staid and sombre life, healed his shattered soul, and claimed his heart.

*And my sons, he healed them, too.*

The house by the brook arose in his mind and he recalled the vision he'd had of all of them together there. The mental connection proved reciprocal, for just then Legolas trilled a call filled with such joyous contentment that Elrond at last gave in to song. He sang old ballads Lindir had taught him Ages ago, sylvan songs he had loved since childhood, and found that fitting. Almost all his formative years were governed by the minstrel and even Elwing sang these same songs to him. How strange, he thought, that he had ever imagined himself a Noldorin elf. In his heart of hearts, Elrond knew, some remnant of a sylvan soul still dwelled.

Gradually, the estate grew quieter around them, the perpetual music subdued, voices muted as the night deepened, encouraging a more contemplative mood throughout the realm. Night was a time for introspection, study, and personal reflection. During Ithil's hours, many of Imladris' citizens might be found out doors star gazing or wandering the gardens in search of night bloomers and Yavanna's nocturnal creatures. Others retreated to the library for reading and study or composing works within the numerous artistic media in which the First-born were adept, be it music, verse, sculpture, or an intellectual treatise of some sort. Night in Imladris was serene and stately, especially so after the raucous gala hosted by the Wood Elves, who, if Elrond's ears could be trusted, were still making merry away in their corner of the vale.

Elrond smiled; it was good they had come. Rivendell was entirely too stuffy and staid indeed. He chuckled softly, catching a hint of chiming bells of some kind carried on the breeze. Truly, he had not had so much pure fun since his childhood by the seashore. Perhaps there was a festival coming along in a month or so and the woodland folk would host another grand fête. Or perhaps he would have Lindir arrange for it to be held here at the estate. A faint but brassy bugle rang out rudely and he grinned; these Wood Elves were irrepressible. He decided that he admired them for the determination with which they pursued happiness in the face of all they had endured. As though to affirm his appraisal, a gong sounded and the fragment of a loudly sung chorus reached him.

Why, he wondered, were the Noldorin people so prone to dourness and severity? Surely, having spent so much time in Aman, the Noldor might have learned more than science and rigid formality. Was happiness really meant to be compartmentalised into rituals and rubrics? Where had their spontaneity gone? The Wood Elves had suffered as much if not more and remained free to express themselves, as they did even now. Surely that was an entire horn section trumpeting out there under the trees tonight. Elrond reflected that he could not recall ever seeing a Noldorin elf blowing a bugle or beating a drum except in time of war. What a waste of energy and effort that was. War, he reflected, had not dampened the sylvans' spirits to any appreciable degree.

A particularly earthy razzing blared out and Elrond's eyes widened as his brows came down. That was much too loud to be coming from the north woods. He stirred but fretted over disturbing Aearen; Legolas needed rest more than anything else. Now the gongs were clanging, the horns were tooting, voices were rolling with laughter and song, the lyrics obscured by the rollicking music. Evidently, a
few of the Wood Elves had been unwilling to stop the party, or were unable due to overindulgence in strong wine, and were roaming the estate gardens. He strained to hear the words of the song but it was in Nandorin and the singers were all out of time with one another, clearly intoxicated.

He frowned; the racket was definitely growing louder by the minute and must shortly rouse Legolas from his cozy reverie. Elrond did not want that, but if he got up to order the revellers off the grounds that would have the same result. To his indignant horror, the rowdy crowd sounded as if it was coming right through his private garden. Bells jangling, cymbals crashing, horns yammering, harps twanging, and voices caterwauling announced the arrival of the throng right below their balcony and Legolas came alert instantly, a huge grin lighting up his weary features. Elrond met his eyes in confusion.

"What is all this?" he asked helplessly, glad Legolas was not upset but completely bewildered. His mate suddenly laughed aloud and then blushed bright red as he sat up and searched for his robe, grabbing and tossing Elrond's to him as he did.

"Oh, Nín'ódhel, it is a great honour they do me, and you, too," Legolas said, but there was something in his voice that bore a note of apology and Elrond did not miss it. His frown deepened.

"Legolas, what are they singing about? Why are they singing it here and now?"

"It is a wedding song for the new couple." Legolas tied the sash of his robe and took the robe from his husband's hands, holding it out for him. "Come, we must go out to them."

"Go out?" Elrond squeaked, feeding his arms through the sleeves obediently, watching as Legolas tied the sash. "Why? I will just send Faelon down to chase them off."

"Faelon is not made for chasing people off," retorted Legolas, laughing, and leaned up to settle a cajoling kiss on his mate's nose. "They will not go until we greet them. Come." He took Elrond at the hands and tugged, stepping backward toward the balcony.

As though to prove Aearen's judgement, Faelon's voice could suddenly be heard below, frantically exhorting the Wood Elves to 'please go home for the love of Yavanna' or if not then to sing a bit more softly for the sake of their prince. He was shouted down and the clamour increased. Next, Erestor's furious wrath assailed them, but for once the seneschal's imitation of Maedhros' dour demeanour failed to generate the expected terror and the revellers only laughed, called him names in Nandorin, and banged the drums and gongs and bells louder. The singers managed to get their timing in order and the words switched in mid-verse to Sindarin.

"Peniaur, man le coren?  
Alae! Peniaur gâr rodwen neth.  
Elo! Nay, Alrodwen si, si hervenn vain ah neth.  
Eddolo ah dâf ammen cenn li hervenn vain ah neth, Bain ah neth, Peniaur, neth ah bain!  
Galu an le, Peniaur, galu an le ah lín hervenn neth ah bain!

(Ancient One, what have you done?)  
(Behold! Peniaur has a young, noble virgin.)  
(Look! No virgin now, now a husband fair and young.)  
(Come out and let us see your husband fair and young.)  
(Fair and young, Ancient One, young and fair!)  
(Blessings upon you, Ancient One, blessings upon you and your husband young and fair!)
Elrond's brows rose into his hair while his cheeks burned in embarrassment. "Legolas! What is this?" He could not believe after all the celebrating that the Wood Elves would mock him. Yet, for all his irritation, he could not pretend they had neither right nor reason.

"Nay, do not be angry, Nín'ódhel; they mean no disrespect. It is just a jest; a wedding jest for a pair such as we are," grinned Legolas.

"Peniaur! Why are they calling me that except to be disrespectful? They make it sound like I stole you away from your parents in the night." Elrond fumed, breaking lose from Aearen to storm about the room, uncertain how to handle this situation.

"So you did, in a way," reminded Legolas gently. "Please see it for what it is: a means to accept what has happened."

This quiet rebuke stopped Elrond in his tracks and he turned to find Legolas smiling, the burden of his fate clear within the slender expression. At once the mighty Lord felt remorse and came back to take his mate to him, kissing him fervently and holding him close a time as the singing grew ever louder and the lyrics became more risqué. There was reference to begetting babes and with this Elrond made up his mind.

"How do we get them to stop?" he pleaded. "It is simple," announced Legolas, mirth returning to his bright eyes. "We go out to the balcony and just ask them what they want. Whatever they answer, this you must give them."

"Aearen, what are they going to ask for?" Elrond felt a spike of panic stab at his thoughts and he instinctively clutched Legolas tighter.

"Nothing so terrible," chuckled the Wood Elf. "Come on, let us go and find out."

He led Elrond outside and at once the singing stopped and loud cheering broke out as the drums and horns and gongs and harps were blown, twanged, thumped, and rung in frenzied cacophony. Elrond held up his hands and pleaded for quiet and after a little while the noise subsided. "What do you want?" he demanded. "Why have you come here to disturb Aearen's rest?"

"Oh, is he tired, Peniaur? Why is you young mate so weary tonight?" someone called out and much laughter followed.

"I am weary, indeed," attested Legolas proudly to more gleeful hilarity. "We are here, mellyn, at your demand. Tell us what you wish."

"Only to see you well," cried a voice.

"And well bedded!" shouted another and the crowd affirmed the query with merry shouts.

"As you see," smirked Legolas, "you have roused me from our bed and to it I would return. Is that good enough for you?"

Elrond gaped at this bawdy exchange but could not take affront, seeing Legolas enjoying it so fully. He caught Erestor's astonished eye and saw something he had not expected: anxious excitement. He was thinking of the day he would formalise his union to Lindir and the two old friends shared their amused chagrin to find themselves mates to wild sylvan elves. At that moment, Elrond came to appreciate the humour of the scene and decided to play along. "Aye, Aearen was sleeping, a much
needed respite, and now with your curiosity satisfied I will take him to bed again.” The roar of delight was deafening, bugles blaring, horns razzing, cymbals clanging, and whistles tweeting shrilly through the night. He turned to escort Legolas back inside but the throng protested.

"Not so fast, Peniaur!"

"What more do you want?" asked Legolas, feigning exasperation.

"Food and drink and song and dance!" they all shouted.

"We have been feasting for days!" exclaimed Elrond.

"At our expense, too!" laughed Faron, foremost in the crowd.

"Aye, but now you have your husband home and should be proud to show him off," another chastised. "Are you not pleased and proud to have so young and fair a mate, Peniaur?" This was Thranduil himself, dressed in simple hunter’s garb and clearly intoxicated.

"I am," nodded Elrond happily and shared a smile and a shrug with Legolas. "Welcome, mellynen, and come inside to the Hall of Fire. We shall make merry until dawn!"

Which is exactly what they did.

NOTE: this final scene resembles a Charivari, an old Cajun custom in some parts of Louisiana and a few other states in the south. When an older man takes to wife a young bride, the families and friends disrupt the wedding night by grabbing up pots and pans, horns, anything that makes noise, and standing outside the newlywed's window. They shout jokes and keep up the cacophony until the couple come forth and demand what they want. The crowd insists on being hosted by the new couple and an impromptu party ensues with music, dancing, and food. It goes on until dawn, or until they pass out.

TBC

Ain'twaedh: Bond Gifts
Mereth-en-Gwedhel: Bonding Celebration
Ennyn Laer: Gates of Summer
Miren Dithen: My Little Jewel
Aen he gár sídh: May she be at peace
hervenn vain: primary husband
Ant-en-Govódiel: welcoming gift
Gellam: Jubilation
Alphdal: Swan-foot
Rhûn'waew: East Wind
Aras: Stag
Laeross: Summer Rain
Loss'waew: Whisper Wind
Orbelain: Day of the Powers
Leitho Aras, Elrond Ion An'wedh: Release Aras, Elrond Son-by-law
Aearen: my ocean
Nín'ódhel: my Deep Elf

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