A Slaying in Scarlet, A LOTR Mystery

by Gloromeien

Summary

Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not for profit.

Summary: On the eve of Aragorn’s coronation, our golden pair are charged with investigating a brutal murder at the Citadel.
Chapter 1

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present…

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Part 1

There’s an east wind coming all the same, such a wind as never blew on England yet. It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it's God's own wind none the less and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared. –His Last Bow, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1917

Minas Tirith, Year 3019, Third Age

May 1st

Twas the regal trumpeting of horns that summoned Legolas’ attention away from the still fuming ruins of Mordor in the distance, though a fell wind had blown its black, brimstone clouds over the city, casting a pall on the reconstruction. Blasts of oily rain and brumes of sooty smog had plagued them for weeks, but, as the days wore on, the mercurial sun was beginning to pierce through, spotlighting certain areas of impressive accomplishment, as if Manwe himself were shining a divine light on the industry of his most dedicated children.

Yet the weather conspicuously overshadowed the Gondorian Council’s latest exercise in pomp and circumstance, a pageant of stewards in full military regalia, vibrant multicolored banners and the peacock nobles that bore them bravely battling the elements that would tarnish their imperial luster in order to showcase their newly avowed unity. Indeed, another of their endless ceremonial gestures was imminent, the public signing and sealing of a writ to solidify their acceptance of Aragorn as King of the Reunited Kingdom of Arnor and Gondor. Not that such a heroic figure required their approval, publicly declared or otherwise. The title was his by birth, and not even these squabbling aristocrats could gainsay Mithrandir’s authority on the matter. Rather, that such meaningless theatrics were allowed to be performed was uniquely the result of Aragorn’s renowned benevolence, as well as his commitment to a peaceful and harmonious reign.

He was not abiding by long-established customs, he was courting allies.

Whether the stewards themselves were aware of this was immaterial. Most hailed from bountiful regions which, despite the last century’s omnipresent threat of invasion and overthrow, thrived still. The two most fatuous lords were Benedir, steward of Lebennin, and Nargomer, steward of Lossarnach, who had each contributed thousands of men to the war effort, indicating that a comparable number remained behind to defend their cities. The former was a region of green fields and grasslands with five streams flowing through, its fisher folk yielding great wealth from its natural resources. The flowering vales of Lossarnach belied the fief’s storied military history as masters of the battle-axe. Yet the archers of Morthond Vale could teach them much in the way of decorum, as evidenced by the grace and stoicism of their leader, Duinhir, one of the few rich nobles who did not flaunt his fortune at every opportunity (and, as such, counted as the good friend of a certain Prince of Mirkwood).

Alas, Gondor was nothing if not a kingdom of stark contrasts, thus the three secondary regions had struggled through centuries of poverty and deprivation, as well as scrambled to provide adequate
military support to their common cause. Angbor, steward of Lamedon, and Dervorin, steward of Ringlo Vale, rode courageously forth despite harrowing losses to their already meager ranks, having captained only 300 men apiece, while Carathel, steward of Anorien, was flanked by his entire company of a dozen solemn soldiers, since the sole purpose of the fief’s tiny, humble mountaintop villages was to tend the signal beacons and few could be spared when charged with so vital an office. That the gathering crowd applauded them most heartily of all warmed Legolas some, quieting his inner fears that he had been infected by Gimli’s relentless cynicism, but such were the hazards of befriending the most ornery of dwarves.

The indignant grunt that sounded from below confirmed his suspicions, though when he gazed down into that motley thatch of red, since he was rarely at an angle to read his diminutive companion’s features and thus was left to scry patterns in the tousle of his mane, he wondered if Gimli’s aggravation stemmed from the mere fact of the pageant or the arrogance of those that rode in it. Certainly if they, two of the hallowed Nine Walkers, could lend themselves to the Citadel’s devout band of masons for an afternoon, the Stewards of Gondor had more gainful employment to attend to. Gimli’s thoughts evidently tread a similar path of reasoning, if his unsparing estimation of them was any account of his opinion.

“If they truly wish to impress the unwashed masses,” he menacingly snorted. “They’d do better to mire themselves in a little sweat. No townsfolk are likely to be swayed by such frippery when their houses are a shambles and their stores smote.”

“And yet royals throughout the ages have no more exerted themselves when rallying their troops,” Legolas remarked, though a frown marred his fair features. “There is much to be said for ornament and ostentation after decades of misery, else they would be stoned instead of cheered. Methinks to them it represents order restored, the promise of future abundance and equanimity, victory over their oppressors. Still, they cannot be so trustworthy as that after Denethor, no matter how beloved Faramir, or even Aragorn, presently find themselves.”

“Much like certain elves of my acquaintance,” Gimli grumbled, in his good-natured fashion. “They should erect a podium in the central square where you are forced to display yourself daily for their amusement. *That* would rouse their spirits something fierce, to say naught of baser instincts. Nary an hour passes when someone does not inquire after your availability, Elf, as well as sing your praises like a starstruck maid. Even the masons are smitten, through tales of your fearlessness and prowess.”

“So you have complained every day and every eve for a fortnight,” Legolas retorted, giving sway to his aggravation at last. “Yet you continue to frequent me, so perhaps tis you who is secretly besotted.”

“With a spindle of silk such as you?” Gimli chuckled, betraying his fondness. “I would tear you with a touch. Give me one of these rowdy tavern wenches and a hayloft—”

“That will suffice,” Legolas censored him, having played far too frequent witness to his efforts in this regard. “Surely your libido must have been somewhat appeased during the victory celebrations. If I recall, you abandoned me at seven bells every night for a week to chase skirts and engage in… whatever debauched scenarios came to mind.”

“Aye, but without your sunny graces to lure them in,” Gimli insisted, in a rare moment of sobriety. “I would never have snared myself such fine fillies.”

“You do yourself a disservice—”

“Rather, I recognize the limitations of my race around men,” his friend countered. “The elves I have
known have generally been more adventurous and far more welcoming of such advances, with the noted exception of your prim and proper self. Legolas, you know well that I have no designs upon you, but surely *you* should partake of the nightly festivities, if only for a few impassioned hours? Even you cannot subsist on satin sheets and chamber pots, pithy luxuries when compared to a heated embrace. Or is there some faithful lovely at home? Even she cannot expect-“

“There is no one,” the archer confirmed, already exasperated with this line of discussion. “You know that well enough.” Gimli was not, despite his earlier jest, aware that elves freely engaged in relationships with both genders, nor had Legolas explained the bounds of his particular preference, which ran exclusively to males. As men and dwarves alike frowned upon such practices, there were none about to entertain him, thus he had no choice but to temper his need as best he could. “We elves do not tend to seek relief through random seductions. We cherish such acts as sacred, and relegate them to those we love. Since my love for my fellows is of an exclusively fraternal nature, I must continue to abstain.”

Though this profession was not strictly true, since he himself had trysted with a few he had not by any definition been enamored with, he would defend its veracity to the last rather than be somehow diminished in loyal Gimli’s eyes.

“So you unfailingly claim,” the dwarf remarked, unmoved by his predicament. “Yet I cry false. You have the entire city swooning, but you would sample none? I cannot countenance it, Elf. There is someone you are in pursuit of, and I will have it out of you before long. Not even one of the mythic firstborn could resist the temptation that abounds here! Yet you are, impossibly, immune to it, therefore even a clod such as I must conclude that your heart is a lonely hunter. You perpetuate this air of mystery in order to lure in the one you desire most of all.”

Legolas genuinely cackled at this, the most preposterous theory that had yet been proposed to him, for he harbored no such ambition, nor cared to bother with such distractions when there was important work to be done.

“And who is this ethereal one, pray may I ask?” he impishly inquired. “Who has entranced me so that I forgo the decadence that is – by your account – my due?”

“I have yet to discover her,” Gimli admitted, though this did nothing to cow his resolve. “But be advised that when I do, I will out-crow even those yonder blaring trumpets in confessing myself to our peers and fellows.”

“Then, my dear friend,” Legolas snickered, in a moment of pure, mischievous delight. “I cannot fail to declare the game most definitely afoot!”

* * *

He strolled meditatively through the obsidian fathoms of night, an anemic sliver of moon having lanced through the dense cloud cover to provide pithy, yet shimmering, illumination. The Citadel’s labyrinthine gardens were mired with wreckage and overgrowth, but even in the nets of ivy, carpets of underbrush, and beards of moss Legolas found a measure of solace that rubble-free city streets would never equal. Though he had to scale over the occasional toppled statue or collapsed pillar, the majority of the trees still towered over him, standing proud beside the pristine spire high above.

Despite being so worn that his limbs ached, the feeling unusual for an elf in his prime, the tranquility of the dream path eluded him. While it was not uncommon for one of his stamina to forgo a few nights of sleep, especially when he had grown accustomed to such a ritual through his lately travels, he had longed for that sweet oblivion all evening, throughout the tedious banquet he had been forced to attend and on through the later performances of traditional dances from each of Gondor’s regions.
Yet he had remained strangely unsettled by the hall’s atmosphere, having intuited some undercurrent of tension whose source he could not rightly identify. Certainly, none of the stewards, nor their myriad acolytes, were without personal agendas and, in some cases, vendettas against some of those present, but that his sense of foreboding outlived the evening’s revels was a cause of great concern to him, though he had not the foggiest notion of whom to alert, caution, or protect.

As ever, events would find occasion to play themselves out; he could only pray that those dear to him would remain safe. He harbored no particular fear for the hobbits, Gimli, or Mithrandir, but Aragorn was, as he himself oft remarked, only one man – entitled by birthright, but as easily slain as any other. Thus, when a trio of roving torches flickered behind the distant colonnade, Legolas scampered up the nearest tree and crawled along one of its sturdiest boughs, until it drooped down far enough that he might eavesdrop on the commotion unseen.

To his annoyance, it was merely Aragorn on one of his nightly tours. The king-to-be’s schedule was so cumbersome that he could only find time to assess the damage to the palace and evaluate the progress of the repairs under cover of darkness, when no one was about to interrupt him. Some of the courtiers were truly shameless, complaining of coarse sheets and humdrum meals barely a month on from the most destructive assault the city had ever borne, yet there was a perverse logic to their nagging, since those with worthier opinions were far too embroiled in good work to voice them. For a time, Legolas contemplated joining his friend, since moments of privacy between them had also been sacrificed to the cause, but then they were hardly at liberty when surrounded by guards, especially if one of their snider jests was somehow misunderstood. He was threatened enough by his alien status to avoid further provocation.

Legolas nearly tumbled off the branch when a sudden intruder cleared his throat. Swiftly recovered, he peered down at the white-cloaked figure below, then smiled in welcome. Vaulting nimbly to the ground, he landed two paces from Mithrandir, who chuckled, as he ever did, at some unknown, cosmic source of mirth.

“King Elessar bids you grant him audience,” the wizard informed him, oddly citing the name Aragorn had not yet sworn to. “He awaits you in the anteroom that adjoins his chambers.”

“Do you commonly play messenger, Gandalf?” Legolas queried, tickled by his formality. “Or have all the pages been tucked in by their mam’s at such an indecent hour?”

“A keener mind might observe,” Mithrandir pointedly replied. “That so distinguished a herald was charged with a duty of vital import, one that could be trusted to none of lesser status.”

“My friendship is far more dearly prized than even I suspected,” Legolas quipped, though his mien sobered, reminded as he was of his earlier discomfiture. “Will you enact the part of escort, as well?”

“Indeed, I shall, young imp,” the wizard confirmed, more amused than he let on by the archer’s taunts.

The pair had faced down the heathen hordes together; there was no quashing their affinity, even when in direst peril.

Legolas was too veteran a warrior not to immediately be on his guard when confronted by the heightened atmosphere within the residential wing. Though the halls echoed with voluble snores, the stillness was most deafening, for it roared with ill portent. Not a soul scurried by them as they strode towards the royal suite, yet the guard stationed at its massive oak doors had been doubled and undoubtedly the snipers were at their turret posts. If they were not so recognizable, he imagined they would have been searched, and somehow took no comfort in the fact that they avoided such an inconvenience on repute alone. Their lately heroism did not prove their intentions pure any more than
the traitors at large were forgiven by their masks of piety.

When finally he was ushered in, Legolas took small comfort in Aragorn’s resolute air. Though rare was the villain that could vanquish him, he tended to wear his burdens like a mantle when temporarily overwhelmed by dire circumstance. That he was fired with purpose bespoke the likelihood of a tidy conclusion to whatever troubles imperiled them.

“Gwador,” Aragorn fondly welcomed him, waving him into close proximity that even his painstakingly vetted guards not overhear. “Please forgive my disturbing your rest, but events have conspired of late to most resoundingly awaken us all.”

“What has occurred?” Legolas questioned directly, anxious for further information.

“Angbor of Lamedon slain in his sleeping bed,” Mithrandir somberly pronounced, in the low, rumbling tone of imminent thunder. “A most foul and unnatural murder.”

Reeling from the impact of this, Legolas could only stare, dumfounded, for long minutes after. “Do you judge the motivation political?” he finally inquired, grappling for every spare scrap of reason.

“We cannot chance that it is not,” Aragorn plainly stated. “For certes, it could very well be a private affair, a matter of jealousy or domestic revenge, or even an upstart within his camp seeking to speed his succession. Yet we cannot ignore that it is the most timely of crimes, and therefore warrants thorough investigation.”

“Discretion is key,” Mithrandir continued. “The public will have to be told, but we cannot permit what might be an innocuous incident to sow the seeds of revolt.”

“The matter is a delicate one, especially if it is an isolated occurrence,” Aragorn added. “Those charged with ferreting the villain out will have to be careful not to offend any they might have to interview.”

“They must also be completely impartial,” Mithrandir explained. “Neither revered nor reviled, as well as trusted, efficacious, of superior deductive skills, a friend to noble and fellow alike—”

“Orome grant me fortitude,” Legolas sighed, enlightened as to their ensuing request. He foisted a supplicant look upon Aragorn. “Gwador, you know well that I would dedicate myself fully to whatever service you might ask, but, truly, I am not suited to such intellectual employment. I am, as you well know, an affable sort—”

“Indeed, and that is a crucial quality,” the soon-to-be king insisted. “You are friendly with members of every fief, and your affable nature will disarm them readily. You would be a great asset to our inquiry, though be appeased, as I would not have you lead it. Instead, I hope you do not take offence when I ask that you second another, the most sage and rigorous mind in all of Elfdom, but one who tends toward an off-putting solemnity that could be ruinous when confronting a potential informant or foe. Truly, I believe you are perfectly matched, and if I know you at all, you will relish the chance to learn from so genial a master.”

“Elrohir, you mean,” Legolas guessed, duly impressed by the assignment. The brethren were an enigmatic pair he was only socially acquainted with, but who by turns fascinated and edified him, as well as most of his tribe. Occasional visitors to Mirkwood, they had won over the wary Silvans with their generosity and grace, while the Sinda valued them as allies whose import seceded any petty grievances they still harbored against the Noldor. Even after battling alongside them, Legolas could
not count them as true friends, since they were of demure and docile temperament when unarmed. “Then it truly would be my honor to serve.”

“I had assumed as much,” Mithrandir chuckled, a telltale twinkle to his eyes.

Legolas considered this an overreaction, since he was intrigued by the twins but hardly ensorcelled by their charms, which he had on good authority were not limited to their physical beauty. Rather, Elrohir was renowned for his nigh limitless font of knowledge and his thoroughbred scholarship, in addition to his military prowess. It was said that there was not a book in the Great Library at Imladris that he had not read, therefore it truly would be a novel, and exciting, experience to watch him tackle such a multifaceted problem. If he could actually be of assistance in the matter, all the better.

“I imagine time is of the essence,” Legolas remarked, eager to embark upon such an unique adventure. “What are your orders, sire?”

Aragorn laughed humbly at the title, but commanded him ably enough: “Elrohir is already at the scene. You may join him there at your leisure, as he will be about it for a while.”

“I go presently,” Legolas affirmed, then gave a wink and performed a bow.

Yet neither the kingling nor the wizard quite owned their mirth as they bid him good hunting.

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Diaphanous white curtains slashed to ribbons and spilled around the body like a garish nest, sodden with the victim’s blood. A menacing corpse, his face frozen in a grotesque contortion of features, yet with wounds so discreet, so immaculately dealt, they were not immediately perceptible even upon close observation. A chamber gored through some macabre bloodletting ritual, the walls a grimy canvass upon which the killer’s hatred had been unleashed. The sheets, the pillows, the mattress, the carpets, the floor all tainted by a crimson cascade unlike any he had witnessed before.

Even one as battle-hardy as Legolas momentarily reeled at the grisly sight before him. Who knew a man to have so much blood in him? The acrid scent of it alone reeked with obsession; no cunning mind was required to intuit that this was a crime of vengeance, of passion, of fury, though the whys and wherefores had yet to be uncovered. Though the murderer’s diseased mind screamed out at him, his meaning was yet indecipherable. Nevertheless, his was as assaulted with questions as he was by the scene before him. Could a son of Gondor truly despise one of his fellows so much? Was such rancor not to be reserved for the Shadow? Had one of Sauron’s covert minions gone apoplectic at his dark leader’s demise? Or did this fetid chamber have a simpler tale to tell, one of romantic rivalry, or birth-order undermined, or feuding families, or an unanswered tragedy?

How they were to retrace the footprints of this lethal intruder, Legolas could not fathom, since the Lamedonians were a surly, secretive lot, fiercely loyal to Aragorn but historically antagonistic towards the Council in general and the ruling Steward specifically. They had isolated themselves in a mountainous region so that they had governmental control, ignoring much of the borderline tyrannical laws Denethor and his forbears had established. Since they produced no resource of crucial value and had pruned their population down, they had been quietly indulged in this, with some lords refusing to acknowledge them as a legitimate fief. Certainly, their recent journey to Minas Tirith had been the first undertaken in centuries, such that the other stewards had not even recognized Angbor by sight when he had first arrived at court.

How could a relative stranger, of little threat to any of the major powers among the aristocracy, come to be so spectacularly slain? Legolas then understood that in order to explain these dire circumstances, he would have to acquaint himself with the man this leader and diehard patriot had
Well met, gwador,” a velvety welcome sounded from the side corner, opulent with husky and mellifluous undertones. Little wonder Elrohir preserved his opinion and stirred his troops with equal efficaciousness; his speaking voice was an unsung weapon in his considerable arsenal. “I see Estel has chosen wisely indeed, which bodes well for the early days of his reign.”

The elf-knight also tended to compile layers of meaning into even his more straightforward statements, thus displaying an economy of language enviable to those with wit enough to thoroughly comprehend him. Legolas was unsure of whether his intelligence was a suitable foil to such genial rhetoric, but reminded himself that he was there to translate Elrohir’s ideas into a practical strategy, not to duel with his insights.

“As I conveyed to him, it is my honor to second you,” the archer replied. “Though I had not properly appreciated the monument of the commission until I beheld this…”

“Unspeakably gruesome event?” Elrohir supplied, with the expected evenness of a logical mind. “Once you divorce yourself from sentiment, the villain’s method does intrigue. For instance, you have undoubtedly noted the absence of surface wounds-“

“On his front,” Legolas interjected, in a sudden burst of insight.

He was the more pleased when the elf-knight assayed an enigmatic smile, though hints of pride, relief, and approval shone through.

“Indeed,” Elrohir nodded, hopping nimbly across the few patches of floor not stained scarlet. “I waited to lift him that you might observe the scene as it was found.” Legolas followed suit on the opposing side, then they searched about for the cleanest area on which to place their hands. “Here, his braid masks a thin slice to his jugular, from which the majority of his blood was drawn. I do not think he perished immediately, but rather was kept alive to watch our artful killer adorn the room with his amateurish markings.”

“It would explain his expression,” Legolas chuckled softly, grateful when the darkling elf joined in. “Tormented thus, he would rage to the last, especially if the murderer’s villainy was long known to him and he reviled him in turn.”

“Or perhaps he railed at the message in the now-muddied inscriptions,” Elrohir proposed. “Angbor was a king’s man. If he was discovered in a chamber covered in anti-royalist rhetoric, especially with the coronation so near, his anger would be volcanic. To have toiled so long, his people deprived and his name reviled, just to see his dream of a peaceful, united kingdom under the throne’s rightful heir toppled in the wake of Mordor? It is a wonder he did not do more…”

The elf-knight paused a moment, his keen silver eyes gleaming with comprehension. He snatched up a swatch of the curtains and carefully sniffed at the crusted areas. Thankfully, Legolas cottoned to his suspicions.

“Poison?” Legolas inquired, somewhat awed by the complexity of the crime. “A paralytic?”

“Only tests will confirm it, but I believe so,” Elrohir remarked. “It is faint, but there are traces of an opiate. There is a thistle-like flower that blooms at high altitudes that some mountain-dwellers cultivate for the narcotic haze it produces when smoked. If its essence is properly distilled, it can turn venomous, much akin to the bite of the winged pythons of Harad, who paralyze their prey before consuming them.”
"A potent clue," Legolas observed. "One which might exonerate some of our prospective culprits, if we can determine how he consumed the flower."

Those mithril eyes were upon him again, such that he sensed he had survived the trials Elrohir had secretly set up for him.

"I shall consult with Elladan," the elf-knight commented. "Tis he who is the master alchemist between us." At his signal, they gently shifted the body onto its side, so that they could both examine the rather flagrant back wound. "A dagger, as I anticipated. The slice of a broadsword would not have bled over the edge."

"Nor did this," Legolas pointed out, referring to the splatter pattern on the coverlet. The thick sheet had cauterized the principal wound, thus the remaining spillage was more artful gore. "Perhaps we should consider whether all of this blood is Angbor's own. There is rather an indecent amount, especially if let from a severed jugular. He would have had to have collected it in buckets, which is a bother, though it would account for the splashing about. No matter how compliant his victim, the method is a messy one. Also, there is the matter of where Angbor was stabbed and whether the wound is mortal. He may very well have administered some sort of agent to slow his death, not necessarily to paralyze."

"Another matter for my brother to sort out," Elrohir concluded, almost gleeful with the realization of what a prize second the soon-to-be-king had awarded him. "Vital as these clues are, they do little to resolve the hornet's nest of the culprit's identity."

"Have you made much progress with his ravings?" Legolas asked, newly excited by the challenge before them.

"Would that I had the Library of Imladris at my disposal," he sighed, surprisingly daunted. "I have spent my time transcribing them, but a pattern does emerge. There are various runic symbols – of unknown origin – painted about, but otherwise it is the same word represented in three languages: Westron, Sindarin, and the last in an obscure dialect, from which the terms itself must hail, for I have never heard its like. Yet all are nonsensical. In Westron, it is 'rhace', in Sindarin, 'rhal', and the third, 'rhycl'."

Dumbfounded, Legolas could do naught but blink, relieved that he would not be expected to delve into the obscure and perplexing realm of linguistics.

"Tis unknown to me," the archer conceded. "Though I imagine we must exercise some discretion in mentioning it to potential suspects. Manwe only knows what it might mean, or represent."

"Indeed," Elrohir thoughtfully considered, as if reminding himself of this necessity. "There is a last, most troubling element to the matter at hand." He gestured towards the wardrobe, as if unwilling to name the blackguard clue. "Do note its state and makeup."

There, plunked in the middle of what could only be a bed cushion, was a charred ring. There were traces of an inscription that had been scraped off, though too uniformly for a free hand to have done so. The band had not been fashioned from silver or gold, nor mithril, copper, or any recognizable metal. Rather, it appeared to be a strenuously refined onyx, black and opaque as the crucible of Mount Doom.

"An extinguished ring of power," Legolas murmured, shocked to the core. "And our work the more righteous for it. The murderer was most certainly a minion of Sauron."

"Either he, or the victim," Elrohir ominously stated, which rattled the Mirkwood prince all the more.
He gave Legolas a moment to counsel himself, then proceeded with his initial interpretation. “Yet this resolves nothing. It could easily be a ploy to scapegoat one of his avowed enemies, thereby masking a personal vendetta.”

“We will have to go about authenticating it,” Legolas grumbled, once he’d recovered his wits. “Mithrandir will confirm our assumptions. Still, it is incomprehensible to me that someone would so blacken such a champion’s name for personal gain or out of private revenge.”

Seemingly inspired by the strength of his perspective, Elrohir vaulted back over to the dry area, then bid him do the same. Once together, he led them into the antechamber that they might quietly consult. It was only then, in the gilt amber light of an ornate candelabra that Legolas could truly focus on his companion, that he was reminded of his florid handsomeness and regal stature. The grandiosity of the crime had somehow dwarfed Elrohir’s attractiveness, though this flight of necromancy dispelled the instant they were in close quarters. No matter how genial he was, the elf-knight would ever be an impossibly dashing figure, an amalgamation of all that was beguilingly virile in men and evocatively elegant in elves. While Legolas had never entertained any fancies of seducing him – for certainly a gallant of his renown chose his dalliances with care – he never failed to be awed by his majesty, all the more compelling in its composure and humility.

“Whereas I cannot quite accept that the lords I have lately negotiated with would order such a sensational assassination with the aim of preventing Estel’s succession,” the darkling elf declared. “If any one of them is a spy under Morgoth’s sway, I am a hobbit.”

“We have our positions, then,” Legolas smirked, even more enthusiastic by the chance to verbally spar with a much-laureled opponent. “I shall argue a political motivation and you the domestic. Thus, any theory proposed will have an advocate and an antagonist.”

“Well reasoned,” Elrohir complimented, betraying some eagerness of his own. “Yet I must concede to your social abilities in the matter of how next to proceed. I will, of course, deliver my evidence to Elladan and Mithrandir, but what else? My impulse is to lock ourselves in until we have listed all the potential culprits and devised a plan of action, but…”

“That is an activity for tomorrow eve,” Legolas advised. “Once we have met with his fellows and delivered the news. I would interview a likely candidate on the subject of his past romances, personal quarrels, troubles of that nature. Until we have a better understanding of his inner circle and the workings of the fief’s governmental structure, a list would be premature. Unless you are fare more knowledgeable in this area than I?”

“I am somewhat familiar with the running of the fief,” Elrohir admitted. “But your strategy is sound. There is much to be gleaned from casual conversations, which you will undertake and I will observe.”

“Very well,” Legolas concluded, with a melancholy smile. “Now, to the blackest business of all.”

“How do you mean?” Elrohir inquired, befuddled by his comment.

“The cleaning of the chamber,” Legolas remembered to him. “Or would you have the servants spit and polish away any further clues.”

With a soft, somewhat bashful laugh, the elf-knight conceded his point, then grimaced at the thought of such a bloody undertaking. After a hearty slap on the back, the Prince of Mirkwood led the charge, having dredged out his share of spider viscera and sticky webbing in his youth. He was the more warmed by the budding affinity between them, which their shared chore could only solidify.
May 2nd

Even as the rosy fingers of dawn parted the heavy curtains that shroud the common room’s steeple windows, a blazing hearth snapped and crackled within. A bottle of potent spirits normally reserved for the dregs of evening had nearly been drained by the seven remaining Lamedonians gathered solemnly by the fireside, who paid no heed to propriety upon recently learning of their leader’s untimely demise. Alas, their collective efforts to outwit sobriety had been as successful as their campaign against the Shadow upon the Pelennor; where once they stood three hundred strong and captained by a fearsome patriot, they now ached with the knowledge that there was one more brave soldier to mourn, another stone added to their already crushing burden, as well as a nigh constant threat to their own lives at large.

As he regarded them, Elrohir forcefully repressed images of another doomful day from his own tragic history, then focused on reading their faces. Two were little more than boys; while he did not doubt their battle prowess to have kept alive thus far, he doubted they could stand accused of anything so complex as this murder plot. Another two he dismissed on the basis of comportment alone. They were obviously family men, miners whose ambitions were humble, related to quality of life for those they protected. He had heard one muttering about immigration to Anorien with a defeated air. The three others were of higher rank, lieutenants whose skill had ensured their survival. His immediate dislike of one boded well for his exoneration, since a true villain was craftier in his alliances. Yet neither was he particularly curious about the final pair. The first, Gaurobir, Angbor’s second, could not possibly have feigned the distress he had exhibited when informed of his captain’s death; the last, Heldoran, while less overtly emotional, was clearly defeated by the news. As the one learned man in the region, who acted in a mayoral capacity, seeing to the running of the town whilst Angbor dealt with judicial and military matters, the title would probably fall to him. The haunted look he presently assayed spoke of deep, unbridled insecurities; though of all of them, he was the least expressive and therefore the principal suspect, if one was to be found among them.

In the short time they had spent consoling them (by way of indirectly performing an interview), he had come to the conclusion that their culprit was not to be discovered here, though that did not make their insight into the matter any less valuable.

During a lull that festered with unspeakable anguish, extinguishing disappointment, and abject terror over what was to become of their people, the elf-knight turned his attention to Legolas, whose radiant features somehow simultaneously mirrored their grief and bolstered their resolve. Elrohir had oft had cause to note what an empathetic spirit the Mirkwood prince was, all the more admirable for how his emotionality never barred him from enacting his duty or righteously defending those in need. He was a sterling elf indeed, and so unlike his brothers, who had long been embroiled in a silent rivalry over who would secede their father. Elven custom dictated that a king could choose his heir from among any of his offspring, but Legolas had ever eschewed all traditions in his rabid search for adventure and glory. Yet in service to Mirkwood, to the greater good, never at their expense. The elf-knight would never forget the archer’s eloquent look when, one eve shortly after their arrival in Rohan, they asked him how he truly fared. Wary of confessing too much, he had demurred, but his glistening eyes had depicted the toil and heartache of the Fellowship’s struggle in that fleet instant. Regardless of any personal anxieties or sorrows, Legolas had soldiered implacably on, in fervent support of whomever of his companions required it most.

Yet Elrohir could have never guessed at the sharpness of his strategic intelligence, at his instinctive talent for problem solving. Throughout the Ring War, Legolas had so excelled at obedience that the elf-knight had entirely forgotten he had centuries of leadership to his credit, that he was renowned in Mirkwood for undertaking the tasks others cringed at or scampered from. When he had intimated that
he would be a redoubtable second, he had imagined him as a capable facilitator – which, of course,
he was. Still, Elrohir never expected to have a true investigative partner; one as intrepid, if not quite
as erudite, as he himself. No matter how dour the tableau that currently confronted him, he had not
been able to quell his excitement since their wee hours examination of the crime scene, since he
found nothing so compelling as a keen mind.

“The King vows to see your leader avenged,” Legolas softly stated. “He would stomp out every last
vestige of the villainy and hatred that have long afflicted these lands. To that end, I wonder if you
would elucidate for us some obscure aspects to Angbor’s character. He was an acquaintance, but
little more.”

“Of course,” Heldoran sighed, barely strong enough to stand, let alone counter such a reasonable
request with spite. “What would you know?”

“The most obvious motivation is political,” Legolas acknowledged. “Is there ought to be alerted to,
other than the alliances we have all witnessed, with Dervorin and Carathel, and the glaring animosity
with the other stewards?”

“They surely punished him for his loyalty,” Gaurobir declared, his anger broiling through his grief.
“Those blackguards! They simper before the king though but weeks ago they were alternatively
denyng and cursing his very existence! They have been tyrants these past years, undermining our
every advantage, until we were no better than lambs to the slaughter.”

“Were there any specifically jealous of how well your own steward protected your interests?” Elrohir
inquired, attempting to capitalize on his sentiments. “Are there incidents you can quote?”

“The few trade agreements we have left have mostly been honored,” Heldoran expounded. “They
are shrewd enough not to provide us with cause for complaint, or claims of injustice. Otherwise, their
main tactic was one of isolation. We were not invited to meetings, celebrations, to join in common
battles. We were not even called to war. It was a tardy band of rangers that invited us to support the
King. Angbor was ecstatic when he learned the news of the King’s return.”

“It is indeed tragic that he will not be party to the coronation,” Legolas sympathetically commented,
which earned him visible appeal with the mourners.

“His slaying tarnishes such a longed-for event and may overshadow the kingdom’s rejuvenation,”
Gaurobir growled. “He would be furious at that. He would have died for the King, but not this way.
Not…” He uttered a vicious curse, then leapt to his feet, slamming his armchair back in a sudden fit
of rage. “If none of you will tell of it, then I shall! A week hence, Nargomer of Lossarnach
threatened his life. They had previously quarreled on the Pelennor, during the onslaught. The
Lossarnach army was supposed to buttress our forces, since we were judged to be more adept at
archery and therefore were meant to attack the mumakil whilst they defended us. But Nargomer is a
glory-hungry fool, and they charged the mumakil instead, ruining the strategy and ultimately opening
the left flank to the heathens, as we were but three hundred men without our broadswords or javelins
drawn. Elessar himself later praised our showing, but still at the expense of citizen lives. It was
certainly not the time for politicking, and I have come to believe it was a vendetta of sorts, though I
know not the root cause.”

The two investigators nodded pensively, recording the details of his speech for later deconstruction.

“There is no dishonor in identifying a potential suspect,” Legolas confidently assured him. “Some
scapegrace is to blame for this injustice, and we will see him hang if a traitor he proves to be.”

This impacted the rest, shaking them out of their gloom.
“There was a matter of some delicacy,” Heldoran remarked. “Though I am loath to veer you towards so respectable a fief, one that has ever been a friend to us.”

“Yet a serpent in an eagle’s nest is bound to strike,” Elrohir impressed upon them. “Even the most valiant of rulers may inadvertently harbor a scoundrel. Witness the chaos in Rohan upon Gandalf’s advent there.”

“Indeed,” Legolas seconded, having been party to that near calamity.

“For a time, Prince Imrahil was our lone defender on the Council,” Heldoran begrudgingly elaborated. “Even stalwarts such as Dervorin and Calathel were too preoccupied with maintaining their status to champion us, until they found themselves similarly outnumbered before the Battle of Pelennor. How much of Imrahil’s support was related to his region’s deficiency in mineral resources, I could not rightly say, but he trusted us enough to host his third son for a year, who he hoped would find a bride among our sparse population of women, thereby fortifying our alliance. Alas, Amrothos proved too shy by far for our few, hardy maids, departing with a thorough knowledge of mining practices and not much else of use.”

“That is hardly motivation for murder,” Gaurobir chided, revealing his own dislike of his lone superior. “Imrahil’s wish is unsatisfied, so he slays the captain?”

“Alas, that is but the official slant,” Heldoran insisted, with visible reluctance. “I myself was but a young clerk at the time, so I was not privy to all the salacious details, but apparently Amrothos did not depart of his own accord. Angbor was said to have ordered him back to Belfalas and suppressed knowledge of some scandal. This could, of course, be rumor, aggrandizement, or nonsense. I cannot say. I only relate what I know, for you to accept or dismiss as need be. But I glimpsed Amrothos yestermorn. He is resident in the Citadel, is he not?”

“He is, and will bear his fair share of our scrutiny,” Legolas appeased him. “Yet I would inquire after a more delicate affair. Angbor’s marital status is unknown to us, as well as any family he might have. In the interest of challenging every assumption, we ask you, has there ever been trouble on the domestic front? It is convenient, you see, the timing of this crime. The motivation could indeed be political—“

“But it could also serve to cast suspicion on political opponents,” Heldoran guessed. “Whilst being of a far more personal nature.”

Elrohir privately noted the timeliness of this interruption, as well as the blatant intelligence of the chief counsel.

“Thankfully, there is little to avail you of,” Gaurobir contributed. “Angbor has never been wed, nor courted within the span of my memory. There are so few to choose from, I feel he thought such hunts the purview of the young. His passion was for our people. We were all his mistress, his matron, and his muse.”

“I concur,” Heldoran added, then sank back into despair.

After a pregnant moment, Legolas rose, embracing those who moved to him. He individually thanked them for their contributions, then urged them to seek him out if further inspiration struck.

“Go bravely, gwadoren,” he concluded, then fell into step with the elf-knight as they segued into the hall. They strolled along in silence, each digesting what they had learned, until they reached a crossroads of corridors and were forced to decide upon a path. “What think you? Was I thorough enough?”
“You could not have been more so and retained a modicum of tact,” Elrohir complimented. “In truth, I feel out culprit lurks elsewhere. Even Heldoran is too depressed to provoke much interest.”

“Yet I am neither convinced by their fingering Nargomer,” Legolas remarked. “If he wanted to assassinate Angbor and his ilk, he could have done so far more efficiently on the battlefield. If our villain is truly in league with the Shadow, would he not have taken advantage of the recent war?”

“It does bear consideration,” Elrohir accepted, his mien thoughtful. “Still, we will lose our advantage if we permit word of Angbor’s slaying to be spread among the stewards without being there to observe their reactions. To that end, Aragorn expects me in his study forthwith.”

“Then I will avail Amrothos and register the level of his surprise,” Legolas declared. “He has been known to frequent the archery field in the early morn. I would also mill about the soldiers, glean their impressions on the matter.”

“Then we are both charged for the day,” Elrohir smiled. “I will expect you for a late supper, that we might map out a more elaborate strategy.”

“Until evening, then,” Legolas affirmed, newly fired with purpose.

The elf-knight could not keep his gaze from trailing him down the hall, beacon of light that Legolas ever was, no matter how darkly ominous the atmosphere brewing around him.

* * *

Legolas had not realized how he longed to exert himself physically until he trod onto the archery green, quiver on his back and targets in sight. Logic and deduction were all very well, their unique form of precision as compelling as any wrought by the pristine positioning of his body’s sinuous musculature, but he doubted the coming insight into the murderer’s identity would be anywhere near as thrilling as the balletic action required to launch a volley of arrows with due accuracy in the face of a snarling foe. Though he would fell no orcs that morn, his palm prickled in anticipation of seizing his elegant bow, of making her sing that true, lethal note, a siren luring his victim to the shoals. If his desire was to be denied erotic apotheosis, then he would sate his mercenary instinct and pray that sufficed him.

Regardless, he could not entirely submit to the experience, since he was on a mission. Any therapeutic results were superfluous to the endeavor of casually interviewing Amrothos, with whom he was passing acquainted. This ambition was somewhat daunted by the fact that he considered Imrahil a friend, thus not only would he have to avoid revealing himself, he would also have to measure his questions such that they provided no offense to an inquisitive father. As soon as Imrahil and his sterling reputation became involved, any alleged guilt on his son’s part would immediately be absolved, since the Prince was perceived by the general public as the lone respectable noble among the Gondorian Council. To impeach his honor was to earn the ire of thousands.

Thus, Legolas was marginally relieved to discover that Amrothos was not about. In his stead was his elder brother Erchirion, a far more personable gentleman, as well as various other warriors of disparate allegiance. He was unsurprised to see counted among them Thorondil of Morthond Vale, the finest archer of mannish descent and the only one that rivaled his own skill. Through their lately adventures, he had not only become a dear friend, but was one of the shrewdest gossips he knew. Indeed, Legolas often relied heavily upon his opinion when expressing his own to Aragorn. He owed a goodly portion of his current reputation as ‘an elf beloved by his fellows, halflings, dwarves, and mortals alike’ to the insights he gleaned from Thorondil, who cunningly passed on pertinent information about public sentiment without requiring Legolas to betray the trust of his peers and betters. Not only would the Mirkwood prince’s talents be rigorously challenged that morn, but he
could test the news of Angbor’s slaying out on one who would likely spread whatever spin he gave it, since Thorondil was a royalist to the core.

Morthond Vale also just happened to border Lamedon, so if anyone were aware of any high-altitude scandals, it was he.

That the cacophony of their chatter silenced as soon as he approached spoke volumes. Legolas eyed them wryly, then let out an affable chuckle, unsurprised that the Citadel’s servants had already set tongues wagging. They were accustomed to Denethor’s tyranny, not Aragorn’s diligence and respect.

“Do not quiet yourselves on my account,” Legolas smirked, as he deposited his wares. “I am as curious as any to hear what aggrandizements are already being parroted about.”

“What do you know, my lord?” Thorondil asked directly, brazen even for him. “Is it true that a member of the Council has been slain in his sleep?”

The archer hoped that his eyes did not shine too brightly at this news; if they did not have a name, then all their speculation was for naught. Even diehard rumor-mongers dismissed the wildest and most melodramatic versions of such tales.

“It is,” Legolas confirmed, since they would know soon enough. The collective gasp told much of the depth of their fears that reunification would not take place, since warriors were wary of any display of emotion. The first order was to reassure them, for he would learn little from nervous nellies. “By all accounts, it has been judged a personal matter, unrelated to our concerns. Investigations are underway, but… Affairs of the heart cut far more than any political retribution.”

Thorondil’s gaze glimmered with understanding, accepting of the version he was to spread yet intrigued about Legolas’ private thoughts, which he would later share.

“It does strike one as that sort of crime,” a man he was not acquainted with commented. “Though the timing of it, of course, is unfortunate.”

“Rather, it is extremely coincidental,” another countered. “Though I suppose even councilors are led by their pricks on occasion.”

“Aren’t we all?” a third piped in. “With the exception of your ethereal self, Master Elf.”

They all descended into laughter at this, though Legolas wished he could gainsay them. His nether regions had been conspicuously dormant throughout his latest assignment, what with all the mind games and complots afoot. Indeed, his libido was very near to conceding defeat, raising a white flag until he returned to Mirkwood, or at least an elven realm. This pricked him some, but he did not permit it to deflate his mirth, not when there was another who struggled through a half-hearted laugh, his mien downcast and strained throughout their conversation.

Legolas motioned Thorondil towards a pair of targets with a keen glint and a butt of his bow, though he imagined nothing he would learn from his friend would be quite as valuable as Erchirion’s damning reaction. He could only hope that the end of his match would not be too late to order him followed. Yet all such considerations evaporated the instant he stood at the shooting line. The next few moments were a flurry of action, his body exulting in the stretch, the sighting, the incomparable release of loosing an arrow and the rush of excitement as it stabbed home. He was soon so enthralled that he added a few flourishes, somersaults, gymnastic stances, and the like. Though Thorondil fought admirably, he simply was not blessed with elven physique; still, his final score was impressive, as well as enthusiastically cheered by their spectators, who retreated to their own targets
soon after. Thus, Legolas and he could continue firing away as they bantered, for the sheer sport of it.

“What would you inquire of me?” Thorondil promptly asked, visibly rattled by the incident. “But first, are you honest in your assessment, or is there truly a threat that the King would have concealed until the culprits are hunted down.”

“We are yet uncertain,” Legolas admitted, then risked further. “I am seconding the chief investigator, an individual of genial intellect and exceptional scholarship. There appear to be motives from every side, but we have only done an initial evaluation. We are still gathering facts. What do you know of his personal affairs? Did any salient rumors trundle down from on high?”

“Now that is a tale in itself,” Thorondil baited him. “One that might imperil me if I avowed to knowing it, it is that controversial among the race of men. Though not, I hear, among elves.”

Even one so solid as Legolas raised his eyebrows at this, for it was a rare thing indeed for a man to speak of the proclivities that so impassioned him. It was rarer still for a man to be embroiled in them; his friend was correct in his assessment of the dangers involved. The black history of exile, torture, and bloody execution was enough to stifle even the most fevered of desires, and certainly it was a hazard to even be aware of one who favored the rougher sex, let alone to be fired by such urges oneself. Little wonder Angbor was so devoted to the health and prosperity of his village. Little wonder he had no family, no wife, no paramours.

Little wonder he was the victim of such a vicious murder, if someone had stumbled upon him in a moment of indiscretion. The list of suspects was thereby multiplied by a thousand, since every noble and commoner harbored this opinion, while Angbor could have revealed himself at any time, either at home or here in Minas Tirith. Neither did this resolve the matter of personal versus political, since an adversary of any kind could be responsible. Indeed, Legolas was awoken to a theory that the villain in question might have enacted a seemingly personal crime for political gain, that the murderer was using the coronation as a mask to his motivation.

Thus absorbed in conjecture, he was unconscious to Thorondil’s anxious awaiting of his reply.

“My lord?” the man pressed, unable to temper his urgency. “*Is* it true that elves are not averse to such… practices?”

Legolas blinked twice to signal his astonishment, since anything more would draw undue attention.

“Indeed, we welcome them most heartily as the natural course of things,” he benevolently explained, whilst inwardly revisiting their past interactions for signs that he might have ignored.

“All the more reason to pray that an elven realm be established here in Gondor,” Thorondil sighed, then studiously turned his focus back to the target, somewhat bashful in the wake of his indirect confession.

Legolas wanted to pursue that particular point, but regrettfully was servant to another master.

“May I ask how you came about such knowledge, if it is indeed so very secret?” he inquired, presuming much.

Thorondil flushed a vivid scarlet, but did not flinch as he severed through his previous hit.

“An advance was made,” he acknowledged. “But rebuked. He is thirty years my senior. I was hardly a-swoon.” He let out a self-depreciating chuckle with an air of disbelief. “I have never expressed such sentiments to another soul. I feel the gods may strike me where I stand.”
“If that were so, I would have perished long ago,” Legolas quipped sympathetically. Still, he would stop his tongue in case of interlopers. “But that is a conversation for a later hour.” Or so the archer dearly hoped, since he and his friend had wiled away many an eve engrossed in conversation, thus few would assume otherwise if they retired together. A bolt of direst elation sizzled through him, such that it was murder itself to veer back towards investigative matters. “Tell me, are you aware of others who may have been as encumbered as you were… or perhaps less so?”

“Nothing more than personal suspicions,” Thorondil shrugged. “His lieutenant is ridiculously fond of him, but that could be due to a paternal relationship.”

“Indeed,” Legolas concurred. “Still, it bears consideration.” He shot off one of his spinning aces, which sliced right through the straw and into the lawn behind. “Though all of this twittering may come to naught. The general assumption may prove correct: there is a viper lurking among the esteemed Council of Stewards.”

“Such a villain would certainly be easier to combat,” Thorondil commented. “At least on the battle plain of public opinion.”

“Yet that threatens those most dear to me,” Legolas remarked. “As well as the sanctity and peace we fought so long for. Regardless, justice will prevail in the end, be it poetic or political.” It was with great difficulty that the archer averted his eyes from his friend’s admiring smile. “I trust I have your allegiance in this?”

“Need it be confirmed?” Thorondil queried, though he was well aware of the severity of the issue. “I will do what I can, and report back to you.”

“See it be sooner rather than later,” Legolas commanded, the spark of flirtation hidden behind his stern demeanor. Though he judged that intimation sufficient, he could not resist a more flagrant provocation. “Indeed, I would partake of… your *insight* at your earliest convenience.”

Thorondil stifled a gleeful yelp, or so Legolas assumed, since his arrow wildly missed its mark.

“But, my lord, will you not be embroiled in your investigation until the wee hours?” he tremulously queried, still somewhat awed by this turn of events.

“I shall be,” Legolas affirmed. “But do not undercut the importance of your contribution. I will gladly forgo sleep to see this matter resolved, thus if you have a vital message to impart, you may seek me out at any hour, however ungodly.”

“As you wish,” Thorondil smirked shyly, then corralled his emotions. He straightened his posture, summoned his fortitude, thus his warrior side reemerged. “And now, shall we engage in another bout before the King requires you?”

“If you are so eager to be bested,” Legolas slyly retorted, then took incisive aim.

Yet he was left with much to contemplate when he finally retired to the barracks, to finish interrogating those assets he had among the mannish legions. None would probably prove as intriguing as that morning’s effort, though he expected the day was far from done with its revelations.

End of Part One
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not for profit.
Summary: On the eve of Aragorn’s coronation, our golden pair are charged with investigating a brutal murder at the Citadel.

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present...

A Slaying in Scarlet
A LOTR Mystery

Part 2

Because it is my desire. Is that not enough?

Watson here will tell you that I never can resist a touch of the dramatic.
- The Naval Treaty, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1894

Minas Tirith, Year 3019, Third Age

May 2nd

Twas under a sickle moon that they reconvened, one that bit into the black of the sky like the fang of a viper into a panther’s velvety pelt. Such was the perpetual unease of the elements beyond, who had yet to entirely draw the Dark Lord’s venomous influence from the wan, wounded lands that bordered Mordor, that any who walked the city streets shivered from cold even though a cindery heat emanated from the ruins. The climate in the Citadel was no better, what with hisses of murder and treachery, of a serpent among the wolves. Even the most innocuous behavior was suddenly suspect; no matter the soon-to-be King’s assurances, the stewards, captains, and their consorts were exhausted from their recent conquest of an insidious foe. The thought that they were being hunted down, that long-promised peace would be denied them, was far deadlier than any actual threat.

It was thus with immense gratitude that Legolas eyed the sumptuous meal laid before him, though how Elrohir had procured such fresh produce, meats, and bread was a mystery unto itself. A faint, increasingly docile part of him protested that these were the very indulgences that the peasants reviled the aristocracy for, but he was far too famished, after a day of military and intellectual duels, to dare complain (or abstain, for that matter). Fortunately, the elf-knight was just as depleted. Though he had been absorbed by mental exertion, neither of them had truly eaten their fill since their return from the Black Gates, their elven constitutions permitting them a measure of deprivation that aided in feeding the city’s starving citizens. That night, however, they had earned their bowl of stew, slab of cheese, portion of buttery vegetables, sour dough bun, and two (two!) selections from the fruit bowl.

By the time Legolas slurped down the last of his peach, unabashedly licking the juice from his fingers, he felt altogether slovenly with satisfaction. He glanced over at his companion – he had been
so enchanted by the flavors erupting on his tongue he had not even flicked his eyes towards Elrohir since he had sat down – tickled by how methodically he wiped a small piece of bread around the bottom of his bowl in order to suck up every last drop of broth. A spark of the elfling of old glimmered in those normally sage silver orbs, but not so much that he was divorced from the thoroughness that defined him as an adult. Legolas chuckled with genuine fondness, eager to deepen this newfound friendship of theirs. At least something good would be derived from the grisly business at hand.

He was startled out of reverie by the shifting of a massive bookcase, which opened to reveal a hidden passage. A familiar staff soon poked out, though the wise face that usually followed it was instead barricaded by a pile of gigantic, dusty tomes, ones that slowed their bearer’s already slow progress considerably. Legolas sprung up to Gandalf’s aid, easily plunking his wares onto one of the table-side chairs, to the gruff annoyance of the wizard. Yet he was somewhat appeased when Elrohir offered his own chair, his bowl refilled with a sizeable portion the archer had not know they had saved.

With a sly twinkle, Gandalf seated himself, as Elrohir concerned himself with the books.

“Do you think them adequate?” Mithrandir inquired, once the elf-knight had perused the titles.

“I dare say,” Elrohir responded. “Hopefully, I will at least uncover a further path of inquiry or an intriguing etymology.”

“He certainly possesses a flair for the dramatic,” Mithrandir commented. “Though one cannot say whether the volume at which he blared his message was meant to drown out other, more pertinent quibbles.”

“That, in essence, is our greatest conundrum,” Elrohir expounded, excitement brewing anew. “What is meant to provoke and what is there to dissimulate? Are the political ramifications meant to disguise a personally motivated crime, or vice versa? Is the murderer truly a madman – or someone driven mad by intensity of circumstance – or sane enough to shield himself with the trappings of insanity?” Legolas nodded vigorously, since his late afternoon musings had followed a similar thread. “What impressions did you glean, Mithrandir, of the murder room?”

The wizard fell into such deep thought that they soon feared he had fallen asleep. Just when the archer was considering a discreet kick to the boot under the table, he let out a blustery exhalation.

“I did not scrutinize the scene as you did, mind,” Gandalf remarked. “But the whole setting struck me as far too deliberate to be the product of a truly deranged mind. When I first set eyes on it, I felt a sense of alarm, of warning. The curtains were shred, true, but this gave clear access to the outdoors. A first floor chamber, where anyone strolling the gardens could see in. The nesting of cloth about him resembled the satins piled around a head of state when he is laid out before the public. The position of the body also supports this hypothesis, as well as the mortal wound concealed, but his blood strewn everywhere – perhaps symbolizing not only the bloodshed he wreaked, but the blood of those innocents he spilt. He is theatrical, but not carelessly so.”

“Yet he must have known that Aragorn would not permit him to be displayed thus,” Legolas countered. “The King, his acolytes, his fellow nobles, they are meant to serve as spectators to his crime, not necessarily the public, who do not frequent the Citadel. Perhaps he means for his betters to be alerted to an injustice, one he thinks they would not take note of otherwise.”

“Or one that has heretofore been successfully concealed,” Elrohir added. “There is another aspect, Mithrandir, that we would consult you on.” He produced the charred ring from a satchel tucked into his tunic, not trusting it to even the safest of strongboxes. If the wizard was stunned by its revelation,
his patrician features did not betray him. “It was on prominent display in the wardrobe. We seek confirmation as to its authenticity.”

Legolas perceived a subtle tremble when the dark ring was placed on Gandalf’s hand, since he was a being too pure to countenance even what used to be a vessel of evil. A scintillating beam of light from his staff polished the band, though there were only traces of inscription illuminated. After a thorough examination, a blinding flash returned the ring to its earlier, tarnished state.

“This is indeed one of the Nine,” Mithrandir proclaimed. “But as such, it could not have belonged to either the victim or the murderer. It is said Sauron recalled all but one prior to meeting the Host of the West, in the hopes of enslaving Aragorn and his stewards once his triumph was assured. The one in question was lost on the Pelennor when the Witch King fell. I see that its disappearance is a mystery no more.”

Legolas and Elrohir fell silent a moment, digesting this news, as well as considering the myriad ramifications of such an important clue.

“Could Angbor or one of his fellow stewards have snatched it up as insurance?” Legolas eventually asked. “Until Aragorn arrived, many expected the city to be overthrown.”

“It certainly sheds new light on Nargomer of Lossarnach’s quarrel with Angbor on the Pelennor,” Elrohir commented. “Perhaps it was not over their lack of protection. Perhaps one saw the other retrieve this from the ruins of the Witch King’s armor, and either objected or desired it for himself.”

“The former is more likely, is it not, given the state of the murder room?” Legolas theorized. “Here lies one of Sauron’s minions, a man who aspired to enslave us all.”

“Yet Nargomer was the one who prevailed that day,” Elrohir countered. “The Lamedonians were slaughtered in his wake.”

As they mulled this further complication over, Gandalf rose decisively to his feet.

“I see you have made great progress,” he concluded, then courteously bowed to each. “Keep me informed of any seismic developments, and, though I know it scarcely needs mention, do take care. If this villain is indeed in league with the Shadow, then we must smite him before he flames the fires of unrest and dissatisfaction.”

“We are so charged, Mithrandir,” Elrohir affirmed, then escorted him back to the secret passage. Once they were newly sealed within, he decanted a generous quench of wine into two ornate goblets, then set one before Legolas as he reclined back into his seat. “And what of your interview with Amrothos and your time in the barracks?”

The archer chuckled softly, assaying a wry grin.

“I fear I may not be able to argue for a political intent,” Legolas informed him. “I learned much this afternoon that promoted a more domestic scenario, and is not entirely abolished by Mithrandir’s insights.”

“Do tell,” Elrohir prompted him, avid in his interest.

“Angbor favored males,” Legolas alerted him, which earned him one of the elf-knight’s rare looks of surprise. “Indeed, Amrothos may as well. He may not have left Lamedon because he could not find a bride, but rather because their affair had come to an end. He was not at the archery field, thus I have yet to confirm any of this with him, but my source is a most reliable one, who is similarly afflicted by such elvish urges.”
“And thus is imperiled by the mere mention of this, to you or anyone,” the elf-knight nodded, weighted by the severity of the circumstances. “This does complicate matters, as well as implies different interpretations of the garishness of the chamber. If the writings do translate into a slang term for ‘lover of males’, it would explain why none of us have ever heard of it.”

“As well as the impulse to cautiously, yet dramatically, alert his superiors,” Legolas elaborated. “The mere murmur of such an accusation rains shame upon everyone involved.”

“Suggesting he is in league with the Shadow would prompt them to delve further than is normal into his personal life,” Elrohir grimly added. “Worst of all, our victim would be utterly innocent of any crime whatsoever, cut down for a preference that we both harbor.” The Mirkwood prince was only that moment enlightened to the elf-knight’s predilections, thus he struggled not to register his astonishment at so blatant a declaration. “I confess that part of me was beginning to hope that Angbor was not the righteous soul he seemed. That there was some justification, however inexcusable, for such a vile and reprehensible act being committed. Alas, he may have been even more of a martyr than we thought.”

Elrohir sighed restlessly, then shut his eyes. Legolas intuited that he was examining the problem from all sides for new evidence, for anything they might have overlooked.

“We must interview Imrahil,” the archer gently proposed. “If this in any way involves his son, he must be alerted. If the murderer does indeed know of Angbor’s affair with Amrothos, he could be in grave danger.”

“I will speak with him,” Elrohir decided, clearly troubled by this turn of events. “We have a history. He was a great friend of Imladris in his youth. I only pray Amrothos himself has a solid alibi. Tell me, are you certain there was an affair, or could these have been rebuked advances?”

Himself awake to the potential complications in such a plan, Legolas ignored his suspicions and raised some of his own.

“Only if you detail some of your history with Imrahil,” the golden elf insisted.

He received a glare for his effort, but one limned with weariness.

“We were not lovers, if that is your implication,” Elrohir explained, his indignation plain. “Merely fellow scholars. Though love between men is not frowned upon in Dol Amroth as it is in other mannish realms, at least within the palace walls. One of Imrahil’s direct ancestors was peredhel. The blood of the Noldor courses through his veins, though it has been reduced to a trickle over the centuries. When he came to Imladris, it was as escort to his sister, of whom there is no official record. She was rent from the annals of history when it was discovered she favored the fairest sex of all. By sheer happenstance, Elladan and I were in the southlands at the time of her disgrace, and heard of her plight. We helped her escape her father’s wrath, and shipped her off to Imladris, where she lived out her days far more happily than she would have as a Gondorian princess. Thus, I give credence to the notion that Amrothos is similarly blessed with elven insight into matters of the heart. I only hope he does not meet a tragic end because of it.”

“So Imrahil is sympathetic to the harboring of such desires?” Legolas asked, as curious as ought. “Would he scorn them in his own son?” Elrohir shook his head decisively, which raised a whole new set of questions. “My source, perhaps erroneously, suggested that Amrothos was sent to Lamedon to procure himself a wife. But what if that was not the case? What if he was sent there because of some previously established attraction to Angbor?”

“I will put that very query to him on the morrow,” the elf-knight confirmed. “Whereas you must
dedicate yourself to tracking Amrothos down, as he is either a suspect or in danger himself. I also think it is time we sent emissaries into the common halls, to spy on the different factions for us. We cannot, after all, be everywhere at once.”

“As to that, I have devised a most excellent solution, if I may say,” Legolas declared with pride. “These fine fellows are not only so unobtrusive as to be dismissed with facility even if they are noticed, but they can amiably excuse themselves into even the most tense of scenarios.”

“What magical fellows are these?” Elrohir bemusedly queried. “Who are invisible and yet readily seen?”

“Hobbits,” Legolas enlightened him, joining in the chuckle he emitted. “We need not explain to them elaborate details of our investigation, only that we are monitoring the favor towards Aragorn. They will do anything in service to him, are respected by some men and reviled by others. Regardless, none would dare disgrace themselves by harming the Ringbearer’s companions.”

“A genial solution indeed!” Elrohir mirthfully proclaimed, raising his goblet to the archer. “Yet do forewarn them that serious business is afoot, and not to overly imperil themselves. Perhaps you should also supply them with a list of names they are to particularly listen for. I doubt they are well enough acquainted with the locals to decipher much from it.”

“Aye, that is well reasoned,” Legolas concurred, then vented out the last of his energy in a long sigh. “Though my source is also on the scent, and will report back before long.”

While he did not expect Thorondil to summon up his courage sufficiently to visit him that night, he doubted it would be many more before he was sought out. If any had asked him but an hour before his feelings on the matter of such an entanglement, he would have confirmed his anticipation with a sly wink. Yet the thought of the potential consequences to his friend if they were discovered sobered him greatly, given that Thorondil was at mortal risk. That afternoon, tantalized by the notion of his own desire’s imminent appeasement, he had been defiant. Now, after debating the merit of Angbor’s predilections as motivation for his murder, Legolas was most astounded by his own selfishness. At the crux of his offer was the opportunity for Thorondil to revel in the experience he had so longed for, but he saw now that ignorance, in this affair, truly was bliss, so long as they were ensconced within the bounds of the Kingdom of Gondor.

To his regret, Legolas realized that he would have to refuse him, thereby depriving them both of several evenings’ leisure. The sacrifice of even the briefest respite from the daunting duties they were charged with every day was no meager concession to two who had survived war, hardship, and the slaughter of their respective peoples. Yet far more inconceivable was the notion of having such a dear friend’s blood on his hands, especially in service to his own libido.

Whether shrewd Elrohir read any of this on his poorly guarded features, he could not say, but certainly it was a piercing look that confronted him from across the table, one at times flinty, at times fierce, but ever flickering with insight.

“I trust that concludes our business,” Legolas firmly stated, suddenly longing for the haughty amusement of belittling Gimli’s cantankerous quips. “I will leave you to your mountain of tomes.”

“I’ve no ready plan to scale them this eve,” Elrohir chuckled. “Not after being sequestered in with suspects all day. I have, after all, been a warrior these many years.”

“A skulk down to the sparring yard, then?” Legolas suggested. “I’m sure there are more than a few worthy opponents lingering there, as yet another means of avoiding the contention that still reigns in the taverns and guildhalls.”
The elf-knight refrained from responding a moment, those mithril eyes even keener than before, if that were possible. When he did speak, in an even richer tone than his normally opulent voice, the effect was utterly mesmerizing.

“That was not quite the sport I had in mind,” Elrohir elucidated, with such a purring undertone that every syllable shivered across the archer’s skin. “If it would please you to stay awhile.”

Blindsided by the baldness of this proposition, Legolas reeled for long minutes after. The elf-knight patiently waited him out, intuited, as he ever did, the force of his reaction. Yet the Mirkwood prince’s frazzled head did manage to hit upon a few key observations, namely that Elrohir and he were in the same position. They were both sworn allies of the soon-to-be King, whose behavior would reflect upon the early success of his rule, thus any lovers they entertained would fall under harsh scrutiny. Their troubles were compounded when their preferences were taken into account, to say naught of their age and temperament when compared to others. While Elrohir was several millennia his elder, they were both far older than any of the men, as well as versed in elvish mores as regarded such liaisons. Both implicitly understood that any intimacy between them was relegated to the boudoir and needed not muddle up their investigation. Thoughts of dexterity and endurance further distracted him, of the darkling elf’s regal features and majestic physique. Not that there was really any question of his refusing an offer to bed the remaining Brethren Twin of Imladris, not when curiosity alone was enough to convince him.

“They did warn me of your forthrightness,” Legolas smirked, assenting with subtle flirtation. “I have always found it a commendable trait.”

“As I have ever admired adaptability,” Elrohir complimented in turn, as he rose to fetch the carafe of wine. They would, after all, later be requiring refreshment. “It is a tremendous talent to be able to open oneself to all possibilities.”

“Yet not without some evaluation,” Legolas insisted, heeding his gesture towards the bed chamber. “One does not care to appear… mentally lazy, especially before such a genial intellect as yourself.”

“Even logic has its limitations,” Elrohir softly sighed, linking their hands as he guided him through the threshold. “Though I am oft loath to admit it.”

“It has attractions, as well,” Legolas murmured, as he closed the distance between them.

* 

Even as their tongues fervently tangled and those nimble fingers raked down the length of his chest, Elrohir marveled at the boldness that had led him into such a sultry clench. Though he had undertaken his fair share of seductions, rarely had he been so blunt about his desires, even when seeking a quick, cleansing rut. Not that his present – imminent? – lover appeared to object to such mercenary tactics, given the incessant spear of his quite impressively sized member into the hollow of the elf-knight’s hip. Alas, they were still clothed, an oversight that became more glaring by the second, in light of their mutual enthusiasm.

If Legolas were not so luscious, he would have shoved him back and ripped off his raiment long before, but the archer’s hot mouth was proving an utterly decadent feast, one that tantalized all of his senses. He was relieved by the concession of his kiss, since many preferred to relegate such intimacies to the realm of romance, whereas Elrohir liked to gorge himself whilst writhing; his enjoyment, to say naught of the force of his climax, was diminished otherwise. Thankfully, Legolas seemed in all ways as voracious as he, which he would endeavor to explicitly express his gratitude for.
When finally the golden elf did indeed slink away, his shimmering eyes were almost apologetic. The flawless pearly skin that the elf-knight had so coveted was steamed scarlet with need, thus all clinging fabric had to be dispatched post haste. Elrohir all but lunged forward to aid in this worthy endeavor, but Legolas stayed him with a coy look, warning him not to intervene as he painstakingly stripped. The body that he had secretly lusted after since its lithe adolescence was suddenly bare before him, epicene yet limber, poised yet potent, deceptively lissome despite being sculpted with sinuous muscle. He nearly fell to his knees when he spied the wood-elf’s massive tusk of a shaft, ivory pale despite its galling tumescence. Before he could wrench his gaze away to attend to the increasingly urgent matter of his own raiment, Legolas charged forth and all but tore them off him, so roughly that Elrohir nearly swooned.

Yet there was not a hint of aggression in how the archer perused his own unique attributes, curious as all were as to how the meld of his elvish and mannish heritages expressed themselves through his physique. If ought, Legolas was braver than most, eagerly meshing one of his hands in the bracken that dusted his pectorals, a novelty to elves who had never lain with a man. A glance down at the matching bush above his erection caused those iridescent eyes to sparkle all the brighter, as well as his flush to deepen with beguiling arousal. Elrohir’s nipple was located soon enough, then its indelible torment commenced; so distracting was the sensation that the elf-knight did not notice he was being back towards the bed until he fell upon the coverlet, with Legolas crouching over to teethe at his purple, puckered nub.

He could not quite rally his senses enough to do ought but caress those slender shoulders, as he was woefully undone by these rudimentary pleasures, though he was far too engrossed to bother with shame. Soon, his tautly ridged navel was being laved by a clever tongue, which proceeded to assault his inner thighs, before snaking around his thickly swollen shaft. The last of Elrohir’s lucidity evaporated as Legolas treated him to a lavish suck, wringing him ragged with deft hands and inspired lips, to say naught of his gorgeously accommodating throat. The darkling elf gave full sway to sensation, racing towards the first of what he prayed would be many, many ecstatic ends that eve, rumbling out a moan as the archer swallowed him down with the sly satisfaction of a true connoisseur.

Yet this first orgasm only ignited him all the more. With an impish snicker, he tugged Legolas up beside him, then proceeded to explore that withy body with smoldering looks and a scorching touch. The wood elf visibly relished being mauled, but was soon irked at being himself denied, thus Elrohir poured himself atop him and both reveled in the peerlessly erotic charge of flesh on flesh. Their hips easily locked into a rowdy grind, their erections in riotous complement, as mercurial gazes goaded and glinted throughout. Elrohir’s ravenous tongue eventually sought out his kiss, their lips clashing along with their loins, to glorious effect. The elf-knight could not deprive himself of a grope of those pert buttocks, such that he soon bucked them into his own fondling grasp, which had Legolas chuckling into his cheek.

Abruptly, the archer shifted such that they delved into his crease; the heat in his stare requiring no interpretation. By this time, Elrohir was far too incensed to refuse him anything, especially given the trove of treasures on offer. With breakneck haste, medicinal salve was procured, generously spread, and scissored into a commendably giving channel, then, before reason could intervene, he was plunging into that molten core, so enraptured by the feel of his lover that he almost forgot to breathe. Graceful, genial Legolas was raving beneath him, begging him to thrust between ragged bursts of vulgarity, praising him with an unexpected saltiness he would savor later, as he resurrected this torrid moment during his pre-dawn ministrations. The golden elf spent with fervor, an epic spectacle of eroticism, then grappled onto his knees and commanded the elf-knight to resume, until they were both blazing with ecstasy such that they were wholly, sublimely consumed.

Collapsed into a sticky, sweaty heap in passion’s wake, Elrohir exalted in his good fortune as he
extricated himself, for never could he have predicted such an inferno would overtake them. Legolas was truly a lover beyond compare, and, however exhausted he was, temptation was rife to secure his compliance towards a second outing the following night. Indeed, if the simmering below was any confirmation, he may not be done with him yet, so incomparable a sight was that of the archer sprawled beside him.

“Verily, a tempest lurks within that feral form,” Legolas lasciviously smirked, raking his eyes down his body once again. “You are so staid, so respectful in demeanor that I never imagined… Still waters, indeed.”

“But you did imagine it,” Elrohir playfully insisted, in a mood of a tenor he himself did not recognize. “The night of our advent in Rohan, I had the distinct impression you were on the prowl. I’ve meant to mention it many times, but events always conspired…”

Legolas’ brow furrowed, but he did not appear affronted.

“Perhaps you mistook my relief for something more visceral,” he observed. “After the toil of the quest thus far, it was immensely comforting to converse with someone of like heritage and mores. My faith in our eventual triumph was at a low in the aftermath of Helm’s Deep. I required the courage of your convictions more than you knew, thus what may have been perceived as my over-enthusiasm towards your person.” His chuckled, a sure sign of how the honeyed languor added an amber tint to even the darkest memories. “Not to say that I would not have been willing, if your advances had been overt. As evidenced this eve.”

“Alas, I was then too fired with purpose,” Elrohir explained. “But now… I would right you on a matter than you may not perceive wrongly at all. If only for my own peace of mind, I would continue the tradition of my frankness in assuring you that I did not propose this interlude simply because you were the only suitor who could slake my need. If that had been the case, and I was not particularly fond of you, I would have abstained. What I mean is… I did not lay with you out of desperation, but because I highly esteem you.” He was astounded to feel himself blushing, and fought to smite the flame to his cheeks. “That is, I have always thought you quite beautiful. Not in a romantic sense, but enough to… be allured. Yet-”

“That agile tongue of yours is rather easily befuddled by such affairs,” Legolas snickered, though kindly so. He snatched up an ebony lock, twisting its silken texture through his fingers. “There are inherent complications to the circumstances we find ourselves embroiled in, to be sure. Yet we need not exchange flowery troths for our liaison, if it should continue, to be an oasis. Still, we must be cautious. I would not that Aragorn’s reign be tainted by any indulgence of ours.”

At that, the elf-knight barked out a laugh.

“The results of our inquiry are far more likely to tarnish him than anything we might get up to,” Elrohir pointed out, somewhat deflated of his earlier ardor as regarded the investigation. “If we can produce them.”

“To that end,” Legolas prompted, mischievously dealing his side a pinch. “Perhaps you should heed the call of your tomes, and I my rightful bed. No matter how glorious the past hour has been, there is yet a wily fox to hunt, and we have not yet properly caught his scent.”

“Indeed,” Elrohir sighed, as that wiry body slipped out of reach, though he was able to enjoy a few last seconds of the wood elf’s nakedness.

He felt a profound, and somewhat unnerving, sense of relief when Legolas glanced back to admire the sight of him decadently sprawled out, assaying a grin so wolfish that many of the orcs he had
felled must have glimpsed it seconds before being dispatched by his mighty bow.

“One of the legendary brethren twins, a conquest of mine,” the archer tauntingly chuckled. “I am honored to have been judged so worthy.”

“I pray you are the more honored to be invited back on the morrow,” Elrohir candidly invited him, with far more confidence than he felt. “Though of course our duty must take precedence, as well as due discretion.”

Now clothed, Legolas strode back over to the bed, then darted down to steal a sense-immolating kiss.

“Then it is your lover who bids you farewell until the wee hours,” he proclaimed. “While your intrepid partner expects to meet you at court tomorrow morn, for the official announcement.”

After downing a sip of wine, Legolas departed, leaving drowsy, sated Elrohir to wonder if the entire encounter had been nothing more than a dream.

* * *

May 3rd

No matter how many gory battlefields he had wandered, no matter how many wounded fellows he had personally attended, Elrohir still had difficulty stomaching the sharp, acrid smell that permeated most Halls of Healing. He could countenance alchemists’ stations and healers’ laboratories, but the sight of so many bandaged, limping, aching, left him bereft, their wails and whimpers cacophonous to his sensitive ears. Though he lacked no compassion for their plights, he was too scholarly to support them in the manner they deserved, interested in anatomical peculiarities more than the person that possessed them. Thus, he generally kept well away from his Adar’s surgery or his brother’s patient ward, lest his fascination with biology be once again interpreted as a callous reaction to an elf’s ailments.

Indeed, mere instants after stepping through the enormous arched entranceway, Elladan appeared at his side, typically insistent upon hastily shepherding him to his study, from where he was unlikely to undermine a patient’s morale with some regrettable anecdote from elvish medical history. In truth, Elrohir was only too glad to have an escort, since he was oddly absent-minded that morn, prone to bouts of reverie, fits of babbling, and spells of hyperactivity. The leisure of the previous night had left him thoroughly invigorated, such that he had woken before dawn, raced through half his pile of books, sprinted five times around the Citadel’s perimeter and swum laps in the royal baths, all before breaking his fast. Yet his attempts to secure an interview with Imrahil had proved fruitless, until one of his guards – more out of annoyance than ought – had confessed that the Prince had passed the night in one of the Healing Hall’s private rooms, a fact that had set Elrohir’s mind buzzing. None other than Elladan could have been his primary physician, thus detailed knowledge of his indisposition was assured, though the elf-knight had struggled to temper his suspicions until he discovered what illness afflicted his friend.

Alas, his energy level was as relentless as an unbroken colt, ready to bolt at the merest provocation. He was unsure whether this was prompted by, or a poor reaction to, the prior evening’s events, but he would thrive on whatever fuel he could if his efforts led to their assignment’s successful resolution.

As soon as they were ensconced, Elladan warily appraised him, visibly debating whether to act in the service of his patient or his foster brother. He gestured towards a bench, then plunked down beside his twin, his brow furrowed as he puzzled out just how much to reveal of his medical consultation. Unfortunately, Elrohir was in no position to refuse him should he brake a confidence, since he was
dedicated to what he perceived as a higher purpose, that of bringing one of the most nefarious villains he had ever encountered to justice. Yet he was not ignorant of the toll these last weeks had taken on his brother’s forbearance. While others had retreated to quiet corners for brief moments of respite, Elladan could be summoned back to the Halls at any moment if one of his charges weakened. After bludgeoning blackguards in the war, he had had to contend with amputating limbs, performing surgeries without laudanum, and epidemics of pestilence and infection. As indefatigable as ever, he was bearing through, but Elrohir knew he longed for a day of freedom, a decent night’s rest, and especially for the comforting arms of his mate. Thankfully, Glorfindel had been invited to join Arwen’s escort, so they would be reunited within a few months.

“I regret that I cannot permit you to interview Imrahil today,” Elladan announced, with a heavy sigh. “Some days ago, he showed signs of having contracted influenza, but he was still hale enough for me to prescribe him a draught and some rest. Typically, he thought this a cure-all, and his condition has now worsened.”

“Think you some form of distress hastened his sickness’ progress?” Elrohir inquired, though he doubted himself even as he uttered the words.

“Nay, he was poorly before any of this black business began,” his brother elaborated. “Rather, he delayed consulting me in order to attend the King yesterday. If he had been prompter, he would not have suffered so last night.”

“You know well of his stubbornness,” the elf-knight commented. “A trait not uncommon to our own clan.”

“Indeed,” Elladan snickered, relieved by his mirth. “May I ask why you seek him out? Is it simply a matter of routine, or is there cause for suspicion?”

Though he was not surprised that his twin rose to their friend’s defense, obviously intimating that he must do the same, Elrohir nonetheless chafed at the question.

“A member of his house may have motive;” he carefully explained. “I can say no more, save to spare you breath with a reminder that such interviews aim to exonerate as much as to indict. I would no more see him disgraced than be chased by a pack of wargs. Yet he may possess information vital to the collaring of the true culprit, and, besides, you are not wrong in suggesting all the members of the Council be vetted.”

“Do you still hold fast to a political motive?” Elladan asked.

“Rather, I stand by my assertion that this crime is by nature political due to the entitlement of the victim,” Elrohir elucidated. “Whether he was slain in order to discredit the King is another matter entirely, one that I fear is inextricable from however the situation resolves itself. It will be seen as an affront on Estel’s rule by those who wish to contest it, and this gives them a podium from which to spout their propaganda without worry of being beaten or exiled. It has opened a door I would prefer remained tightly shut, thus I must endeavor to bar it permanently.”

“A thorny path, indeed,” Elladan remarked, with a fond squeeze to his twin’s side. “Fortunately, I have results from my own inquiries as regards the paralytic qualities of certain Lamedonian flora. After examining the wounds and consulting with some of the local herb sellers, I can confirm that the substance used was not derived from the raurolas plant, or any other. Instead, the murderer employed the venom of a shelob.”

“A giant spider?” Elrohir exclaimed, stunned by this result. “By what possible means could any Gondorian, or any sentient being, have obtained such a toxin?”
“You might put that question to your wood-elf,” Elladan suggested. “Surely he is far better versed in the black market trade of the Easterlings and their ilk, since Mirkwood is the principal supplier. Once a shelob is slain, so long as it is not butchered, it is simple enough to slice out her salivary glands, if one is careful. The venom remains potent in perpetuity. Reputable alchemists do not stock it, but some of the less well-regarded mannish surgeons have been known to use it as an anesthetic, especially in remote locations, where every life is valued in order for the community to be sustained.”

“And you are certain the villain administered this prior to the bloodletting?” Elrohir almost vehemently questioned.

“He must have,” Elladan confirmed. “There is an agent in the venom that dilutes the blood, that the spider might feed longer. That is why it was in such abundance – it was thinned. No other known paralytic interferes with blood flow, except to distribute itself to the various nerves and muscles. Yet the specificity of the poison is deceptive, since many are aware of this option and, while not widely available, it can be obtained by anyone with purpose.”

“Is it presently sold in Minas Tirith?” Elrohir asked, though he anticipated his brother’s answer.

“I was pointed to two suppliers whilst on an errand this very morn,” Elladan grimly stated. “It does little to establish premeditation or the murderer’s place of residence. The crime could have been impulsive, or long-planned.”

“Aye, but it speaks to certain symbolism,” Elrohir reflected. “Every insight is of value, even those that do not yield what we hoped.”

“So it appears,” his twin smirked, then could not quite stifle a yawn. “Forgive me, I have not slept. Though you, muindor, look no worse for wear, despite having spent the night scouring obscure tomes and concocting charts to facilitate your reasoning, if I can be said to know you well.”

“Perhaps not as well as you assume,” Elrohir remarked, then abruptly shut his mouth.

He had been on the cusp of boasting, which was not only unbecoming but somewhat fraught with risk. He had not yet decided if he would reveal his budding liaison to Elladan – or to anyone, for that matter – since it threatened to compromise his position with the future king, as well as the integrity of his investigation. Yet his brother had caught the scent of intrigue, thus he knew there would be no escaping his taunts, whether or not he confessed himself.

“How now?” Elladan queried, eyebrow peaked in the family manner. “What mischief is this?”

Elrohir inhaled deeply, gallingly unsure of himself.

“I…” he stammered, then girded his resolve. “I lay with Legolas.” If Elladan’s mouth gaped any wider he might very well have begun to drool. “It was an impulse that I, strangely, heeded, though that is not to say I regret doing so. Rather, I feel more… balanced, I suppose. Focused. Purposeful.” He sighed heavily, his embarrassment compounded by discomfiture. He had ever been ill at ease discussing his personal affairs, even with the one who knew him best. “I dare say I was due a bit of indulgence.”

Elladan chuckled volubly, unable to repress a smirk.

“I dare say we all are,” he reminded him. “Tis rather heartening to note that even you have been inspired, or should I say your spirits rejuvenated, by our righteous victory. It has been some time, has it not?”

“You well know how long it has been,” Elrohir quietly chided, wishing he had not made mention of
his tryst to one who would altogether innocently recall to him the reason he had not permitted himself
to be intimate with another in so long. “I entirely comprehend the conditions that most likely led me
to-“

“Aye, that nimble mind of yours comprehends much,” Elladan interjected. “But my concern is ever
for your soul, muindor. Has your lately indulgence helped lift the burden of guilt some?”

“So I gather,” Elrohir reluctantly acknowledged, as he was ever riled by such introspection. The
great irony of his existence was that his keen scrutiny of others oft rendered him utterly blind to his
own spirit’s machinations. “As you are the one who keeps my conscience, I have come seeking
enlightenment.”

Elladan scoffed at this, his exasperation more a symptom of his fatigue than any annoyance with his
brother.

“Tell me, then, what prompted you to pounce on poor Legolas?” he inquired. “Other than his
availability and his glaring interest.”

“That is the very conundrum that has baffled me the morning long,” the elf-knight insisted, bemused
by his own predicament. “It was the most instinctive urge that has ever ruled me – carnal, to be sure,
but also elemental. It almost shames me to admit that I have been enjoying this investigation, given
the gravity of the affair in question, but *how* I have. Thus, I found myself at table with him,
discussing the merits of the clues we had collected. The evening was about to conclude itself, he rose
to depart, and suddenly I was desperate to have him remain. The decision to proposition him was
lightening-fast; there was no contemplation, no evaluation. Indeed, I did not even realize my own
interest in his person until I was voicing a bold solicitation. We moved into my bedchamber, and
before I could reckon with what had transpired, we were…” A wave of desire washed over him, one
that galled as much as it astonished. Thankfully, it dissipated as swiftly as it came on, that he
regained control over his senses. “What do you make of it?”

“That is hardly a question of complex motivations,” Elladan explained, his smirk broadening into a fond
smile. “The mystery of Angbor’s murder lit a spark within you, which produced an interest in other
means of fulfillment that your dedication to the cause and our pact of vengeance had long denied
you. You did not need conduct a thorough search for one who would willingly partner you in this,
since he was standing before you. Not that there was much in the way of available options here in
Minas Tirith. Still, Legolas is the finest specimen about. Did he please you?”

Elrohir huffed testily at this, never one to so betray a lover by speaking out of turn.

“By your description, a warm body would have sufficed,” the elf-knight snarked, not so irritated with
his twin as he was with his own vulnerability to such impulses.

“By yours, it was no more deliberate,” Elladan countered. “He was there, he was beautiful, thus you
partook of him. As ever, it was the ideas that excited you, the puzzle, the clues. Legolas was merely
a conduit to your communion with them.”

Simultaneously blindsided by the depth of his insight and wonderstruck by how ably he had
deciphered the enigma of his emotions, Elrohir could only gape at his brother, as affection swelled in
his chest.

“Verily, ‘dan, you are a necromancer of the spirit,” he hushly complimented, then allowed himself to
be tugged into that familiar embrace.

“The heart is not quite the labyrinth you conceive it as,” Elladan mirthfully remarked. “Though how
a genial mind such as your own is forever wandering through it, without a clue as to navigation, will ever be a mystery to me.”

The two chuckled warmly as the elf-warrior cinched his hold. No matter what trials awaited them that day, they would ever cleave to one another.

* * *

After a somewhat disquieting morn at the archery fields, during which he had learnt absolutely nothing of use and had utterly failed to locate anyone of consequence, Legolas brightened as he approached the third tier’s common square, from where the stewards, and now the king-to-be, made their public proclamations. Eager for respite from the daily slog of reconstruction, Aragorn had drawn quite a crowd, though one yet tempered by exhaustion and deprivation. He intuited his royal friend to be all too conscious of how easily his explanation of the reasons leading to Angbor’s demise could be misconstrued, but there was no question of denying his subjects knowledge of the crime, especially when a challenge to his reign was all but assured. The long years of Denethor’s tyranny and his capturing of the Host of the West placed him high in their esteem; though he now wagered on this support, it was a safe bet given how battle-hardy the city’s denizens were. Prior to the Battle of Pelennor, they might have cowered before those that sought to overthrow him. Now, they will rally around him, so long has he continually reinforced that slowly strengthening bond of trust.

Legolas, alas, had no choice but to position himself for maximum visibility, yet another means of assuaging the public’s fears. If the brave members of the Fellowship were in accordance with the soon-to-be king’s conclusions, then who other than the usual ornery lot could remonstrate against them? The aristocracy would not be so easily cowed, thus the Council would file soberly in to flank their champion, quietly praying that their horse was indeed the thoroughbred his breeders claimed. While the various reactions to the news would be fascinating from an investigative viewpoint, Legolas would be ill-positioned to observe them firsthand. Rather, so many would be looking to him that he had no choice but to school his features and to offer a straightforward gaze. Instead, the merry halflings at his feet would smile while they scrutinized; he had earlier assigned each a few key faces, though he expected little would yield curious results.

This was, after all, a formal affair.

His confidence was further bolstered when Gimli alighted at his side, rumbling with upset over the latest indignation. He had shared only a fleeting moment of explanation with his friend since he was swept up in palace intrigue, thus he hoped to derive much amusement from this long hour together, if only to distract him from Elrohir’s far too compelling presence on the dwarf’s far side. Upon waking that dawn, Legolas had rued the early years lessons that had prompted him to abandon the elf-knight’s bed, since his body had been wrought with need. No matter how graceless such an imposition would have been, for those tense seconds of arousal before he could scoot into the bathing chamber and milk himself, the onslaught of his longing had been vicious indeed. As he washed and broke fast, his thoughts were dominated by one ambition – to tryst with Elrohir again that night. The flame of his desire had been ignited into a furious blaze, one that would not easily be smote, no matter what potential dampering awaited him. As he could not conceive of their failing to pursue such a replenishing liaison, he was somewhat anxious over what would transpire that eve, whether the elf-knight would succumb to regret or to regimentation; or, worse still, to the reserve for which he was renowned. Yet discussion of their incendiary interlude would have to be relegated to the wee hours, since duty beckoned once more.

Typically, Gimli was far less tactful where such intimate details were concerned.
“I see by the shine to your cheek that your absence yestereve can at last be accounted for,” he announced to everyone within earshot, including Elrohir himself. “I thought it peculiar that you did not take to your bed at the customary hour, and prayed that it was no further black business that had kept you from retiring.”

“Does this mean you evidenced actual worry about my whereabouts?” Legolas drolly inquired, unruffled by his insinuations.

Yet he did not miss the elf-knight’s subtle cough when mention was made of the archer’s indisposition.

“Far from it,” Gimli good-naturedly grumbled. “Rather, I despaired that a lively tumble would render you even more insufferably jovial. Annoyed as I was that you so long played pious and excused yourself from early hours revelry, I have lately considered how truly irritating the alternative would be.”

“And have I yet given you cause for alarm?” Legolas asked, tongue quite firmly in cheek.

“Not so far,” Gimli sharply conceded. “But we are on a dais, not in a tavern. Thank Elbereth there is this business of yours to spare me your bragging and innuendos.”

A stab of fear pierced into his gut at such a pronouncement, which depicted him as brazen rogue.

“Tis a wonder he can get a word in edgewise,” Elrohir gallantly interjected. “You appear content enough to trumpet his affairs.”

Legolas struggled to stifle his snickers, though they were covered readily enough by Gimli’s grumbling, not daring to glance at his defender. He soon felt the stare of those quicksilver eyes, and was lured in by their sympathetic glint. Elrohir’s face was expressionless, but there was an acknowledgement and an amusement in those argent orbs that greatly relieved the archer.

“Indeed, perhaps you should rein in your assumptions,” Legolas playfully chided. “Have you not considered that I have not had the fleetest moment of liberty in which to woo this lady fair you insinuate I have seduced?”

“There need be no art to the proceedings,” Gimli grunted. “All required is that you present your pretty self before her and catch her when she swoons.”

“And give no thought to discretion?” Legolas mirthfully retorted. “Tis a wonder you’ve known any triumph at all, if that is your game.”

“I am not blessed with your glamorous airs, Elf,” Gimli sportingly countered. “As you well know, I have to grovel my way under a likely skirt.”

“Yet you seem particularly taken with Legolas,” Elrohir slyly interrupted. “Perhaps tis envy of his conquest’s gains, rather than envy of his natural charm, that pricks you.”

The Mirkwood prince pressed a tight fist to his lips, more to conceal the breadth of his smile than to suppress his laughter. A shiver snaked through him before he could quite contain himself, the thought of Elrohir’s protectiveness too delectable not to savor. It was no display of favor or soft regard, merely further proof that the elf-knight had, after all, enjoyed their revels, with perhaps a hint of indication that he would care to resume them. Regardless, Elrohir was of unimpeachable honor in not standing for a lover of his to be taunted, even fondly by a dear friend.

“Only you would infer such a misbegotten notion, bent as you are,” Gimli grumbled, though without
rancor. “You would have me kneeling before half the kingdom, by your salty quips.”

Agog at this pronouncement, Legolas was even less prepared for the barb Elrohir volleyed back.

“What need have you of kneeling, Dwarf?” the elf-knight deadpanned, his eyebrow drolly peaked. “You’d do well enough as you stand.”

To everyone’s surprise, Gimli bellowed out a hardy laugh, then clapped Elrohir on the side of his hip.

“And you are allegedly the sober one,” his diminutive friend exclaimed, such that Legolas sensed he was cultivating a newfound respect for the Son of Elrond. “Spare this beleaguered land a civil war, and I may even come to befriend you.”

Any wry response the elf-knight might have produced was drowned out by the Horns of Gondor, which announced Aragorn, flanked by Mithrandir and Faramir. Though the archer was still reeling from the discovery that Gimli did not disapprove of inter-male loving, as well as the pleasant shock of Elrohir’s incisive defense of him, he managed a warm smile for his friends, as well as for Eowyn, who these days was never far from her steward-lover’s side. When Aragorn took to the podium, he relaxed into the moment, confident that the kingling’s humility and forthrightness would convince the civilian population of his righteousness in this. Though news of such a terrible crime obviously distressed them, they were soon applauding their leader’s resolve and cheering in concordance with his encouragements. By the stern look of many, tales of local incidents that might have bearing upon the case would soon whisper their way into the ears of palace servants and guards. This heralded the commencement of the most tedious aspect of the grunt work: interviewing the storytellers, evaluating the veracity of their claims, and seeking out any who might corroborate certain key details. Legolas was under no delusion as to who would be conducting this part of the inquiry; thankfully, many would naturally gravitate to Thorondil, who would only forward information he considered reliable.

Legolas mentally urged himself to seek his friend out late that afternoon, when he would undoubtedly be primed with the latest rumors. Unfortunately, he would also have to concoct a half-decent explanation as to why Thorondil was no longer welcome in his chambers at the midnight hour, a prospect that had once excited the archer but now posed a menial threat to the liaison he hoped would keep blossoming through the coming months. Finally awake to the dangers inherent to such predilections in a Man, Legolas could not conscionably entertain him even if he were at liberty, though he would have to be cautious not to totally dash his expectations, since they would not ever be stationed at Minas Tirith and he might not even be welcomed into the elf-knight’s bedchamber a second night.

As if intuiting his very thoughts, Elrohir beckoned him over once the crowd had dispersed and the nobles milled about the front of the dais, bickering over trivialities. Gimli shot him a wary look, then stalked over to Gandalf to complain about some unperceived injustice. He felt suddenly relieved to be in Elrohir’s company again, where consideration of suspects, strategy, and hypotheses reigned supreme.

“There is much for us to discuss, come evening,” the elf-knight informed him. “Estel has requested an audience with us, but I have belayed him. On Mithrandir’s counsel, I would spare him the quibbling details and only present him with something concrete. Yet I have learned much from Elladan this morn, though nothing from Imrahil, who is indisposed.”

“So I have heard,” Legolas acknowledged, temporarily concealing the fact that his own efforts had proven fruitless. “I gather tis all the more vital that we approach Amrothos, especially now that rumors will sprout legs and skitter off, untraceable to their source. He appears to have retired from public view, thus I will dedicate myself to discovering his whereabouts.”
“Well reasoned,” Elrohir smiled, his excitement almost addictive. For a laurelled warrior and a scholarly soul, he was unmistakably in his element here, on the heels of a far less maniacal, though no more villainous, fiend. “As to my part, inspiration struck during Estel’s oration. We have not yet interviewed Faramir! He will doubtless have vital insights into the state of relations between the fiefs.”

“Quite so,” Legolas concurred, newly energized by his companion’s enthusiasm. “To the chase, then!”

“To the hunt!” Elrohir grinned, then slapped him on the shoulder.

All thought of entwined limbs and straining muscles suddenly banished from his mind, Legolas hopped gingerly off the edge of the dais, once again in pursuit of wily, elusive prey.

* 

No sooner had the Mirkwood prince clopped down the winding staircase that led to the training grounds than he was surrounded by a brutish, axe-wielding gang, who did not so much bar his way as blight out his entire view of his environment. While Legolas harbored no fear for his safety, he was somewhat awed by the gall of this bullying tactic, especially given that committing any harm to his person would rain down wave upon wave of vengeance: the first from his extremely cunning and resourceful friends, the second from his fellows among the warrior contingent, and the third from his own family—all this if he did not manage to extricate himself from his current predicament. Though they viewed him as alien and odd, it was without arrogance that he acknowledged his achievements as worthy of the public’s ire, if not actual retribution. To say naught of what his elder brothers would do to these fools once they apprehended them. Thus, he smirked with genuine affability, bolstered by the thought of how their oafish lives were numbered in days, not years.

“To what do I owe the inconvenience of this intrusion?” he queried of the one who appeared most alert, who sneered in response, then made way for his captain.

“Legolas of Mirkwood,” Nargomer of Lossannach announced himself, in his characteristically swarthy yet somewhat fey manner. “I would converse with you.”

“Then you need only continue speaking,” the archer retorted, with barely veiled menace. “Since you clearly do not possess an ounce of courtesy or grace. Though I am the fifth son of my father’s house, I assure you, I am still a prince.”

Nargomer fixed a pair of black, beady eyes upon him, though was no more intimidating than a dorm mouse to one who had stared down a Balrog.

“‘Courtesy,’” he scoffed. “A curious defense from one who has heard testimony that I permitted the uninhibited slaughter of one of my fellow stewards’ army, yet who has not bothered to interview me regarding the incident in question.”

“If there was any proof you undermined the kingdom’s sanctity,” Legolas explained, through grit teeth. “We would gladly have confronted you with it. As it stands, we pay no heed to hearsay.”

“A seed thusly sown cannot help but be nurtured by the subconscious,” Nargomer countered. “The plant that sprouts is inherently poisonous, and, if it bears fruit, it is readily feasted upon.”

“That is twice you have insulted me, with *your* insinuations,” Legolas persisted. “Hardly the deftest method of gaining my trust.”

Nargomer sourly considered this, then dismissed his guards. While this did little to promote him in
the archer’s view, in the interest of fairness he fell into step with him when invited. The steward was even less elegant in his rhetoric, stating his case without bothering to beg excuse for his callous and mulish behavior.

“I do not contest the claim that we failed to protect them,” he offhandedly explained, in the manner of hard-worn diplomats. “But it was simply that – a failure. The battle was harrowing, any can attest to that. They are poorly trained mountain-dwellers – to call them unskilled would be a generous compliment given how inept they were. Those that survived were the entirety of their few talented soldiers. In assigning my own force, I weighed the balance between those that excelled at arms and those that were expendable, such that some of my best soldiers remained to defend our cities. The men of Lamedon were no more than a casualty of war. An offer of refuge in my region was made and rejected! That is hardly a mendacious act against one who was little more than a political adversary, and a weak one at that.”

Legolas reflected upon this for a time, convinced of his sincerity no matter how he personally disliked the steward. Certainly, the solution to their case did not solely lie in any petty rivalries that might have cropped up between the members of the Council – the crime was far too impassioned for that. The Mirkwood prince did not truly believe such a pompous snot capable of caring for anyone that much, even in hatred. Still, among his warriors there might be a far more visceral soul. If he had proved anything that afternoon, it was that such a one would find shelter, and perhaps necessary shield, in his army, as well as an outlet for his vitriol.

“Be that as it may,” Legolas acknowledged. “Everyone with opportunity is suspect until exonerated, friends and foes alike. Though if you have anything of use to impart, do not hesitate to make mention of it now. All perceptions, even skewed ones, can sometimes lead down seldom trodden paths.”

Nargomer stopped to scrutinize him for a moment, his eyes bold. Though it riled Legolas to submit to such a bald appraisal, especially when he was the arbiter of the steward’s innocence, he allowed this latest indignity after reminding himself what was at stake. He would never fail to sacrifice for the greater good; it was simply not in his nature to aggress without merit, unlike the temperament of his present opponent.

“Look to Morthond Vale,” Nargomer advised him, with a sobriety that bordered on the bathetic. “We of fellow fiefs have rarely encountered the Lamedonians during our lifetimes, save at Council meetings that Angbor has been refusing to attend since the year of his appointment. Twas his predecessor who purposefully exiled himself – Angbor merely inherited his uncle’s rancor. Yet the residents of Morthond Vale are among the few who regularly traffic with Lamedon. Perhaps some are even more intimate with them – I have no knowledge of such affairs, and never particularly cared to. Though I do know that Duinhir is not as neutral as he pretends; that just because exchanges with other regions are minimized and strictly regulated does not mean they do not occur, with more fraternity than is perhaps promoted by either party. The maids of Lamedon cannot, after all, forever marry their cousins.”

“Indeed,” Legolas conceded, thoughtful in the wake of his indirect accusations. “But this also points to Anorien.”

“To be sure,” Nargomer concurred. “Though the two regions are so sparsely populated that the same problem will need be confronted in mere generations. Besides, such emigration is usually prompted by a youth who does not care for the environment he inhabits. Why seek fortune and fulfillment in a fief as desolate as your own, when there are far more prosperous areas to choose from? Regardless, I mean only to indicate that Lamedon is not as self-contained as it appears. If I were chasing down a suspect, I would first look to the victim’s family, then to his neighbors.”
Legolas nodded sagely, the only conciliatory gesture he would grant towards one who had still not offered any form of apology. Yet that was by no means a valuation of his counsel, which might prove far worthier than the rake who’d argued it.

“Your insight, my Lord, will be vetted by myself and my colleague, have no doubt,” the Mirkwood prince informed him. “And certainly, if you have else to impart, do not hesitate to approach us. But if you would attempt to do so with a minimum of hostility, we would in the future be far more amenable to entertaining your opinion.”

With that, Legolas broke from him, marching back up the steps as officiously as he could muster given how his temper flared. It was all the more urgent that he seek out Thorondil forthwith, if only to evaluate how trustworthy he still found his friend. While he could not imagine one he had grown so close to committing such a heinous act, he was not so well acquainted with the Steward of Morthond Vale, nor many of the humbler residents.

He could only pray that one of his fellows archers was not responsible, otherwise he risked the ultimate dishonor in exacting retribution upon one he considered a brother-in-arms.

End of Part Two
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not for profit.

Summary: On the eve of Aragorn’s coronation, our golden pair are charged with investigating a brutal murder at the Citadel.

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present…

A Slaying in Scarlet
A LOTR Mystery

Part 3

You do occasionally find a carrion crow among the eagles.
–The Adventures of Shoscombe Old Palace, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1927

Minas Tirith, Year 3019, Third Age

May 2nd

A thunderous knock behind the wall of his study woke Elrohir to the lateness of the hour, as if the very volumes of his library were mounting a tempestuous protest against his lately neglect. He had been so absorbed in the murky complexity of the etymological tome reclined against his bent legs that he had become mentally immersed, swimming through inky waters towards the clarity of the blank margin. Indeed, the atmosphere about him resembled the still, swarthy fathoms of the ocean deep, since a blighting brume still cloaked the city in a dank twilight.

Without the benefit of candlelight, the gradual shifting of the bookcase to reveal the hidden tunnel behind took on a surreal quality that only further disoriented him, though the severity of the pale, haggard mien that crossed the threshold was provocative enough to prod him into a formal stance, since he had been slouched into his favorite armchair. This private Aragorn was not the resolute, impervious leader of his noon hour oration, but the man himself, who Elrohir knew as a foster brother, as his former charge, as simply Estel. The burden of rule, as well as the stress of deciphering who among his new acolytes to trust, was creasing his roguish features, though by the fractious identity of his companion, the elf-knight intuited that he would not be called upon to enact the part of confessor or counsel.

Rather, Estel was beseeching his aid in enduring the first of many political compromises he would be called upon to make, which little endeared him to one who held his honor in such high esteem. Elrohir could, of course, be mistaken, and certainly he would wait to be insulted before striking back, but he was far too experienced in the constraints of diplomacy not to recognize a back-channel deal when it imposed itself upon him, especially since the wayward soul Estel shepherded was none other than Erchirion, second son of Imrahil. While he doubted the intent was to compromise his investigation, he predicted that the indisposed Prince of Dol Amroth had come to some too-early conclusions as to his youngest son’s culpability, thus he sought to pre-empt any judgment that might
rain ruin upon his noble family. That Estel was prepared to enable him in this stoked the elf-knight’s ire, though of course he would wait upon confirmation before his fury raged.

Apparently, there were some valuable lessons he had failed to properly impart to the gangly youth previously in his care, lessons he would gladly elaborate upon now.

“\n
“I would have greeted you with due courtesy if you had chosen the door,” Elrohir quipped, with a curt nod of conditional welcome. “Surely the fact of your imminent coronation does not permit you to enter a room uninvited.”

“Forgive me,” Aragorn apologized, though his air fell short of genuine penitence. “Twas my impression that you desired an interview with a member of Imrahil’s house.”

“How grand of you to personally escort him,” Elrohir shrewdly noted. “Still painted in a Ranger’s stripes, indeed.” He eyed him sharply, but Estel did not cower from his stare. The elf-knight was further annoyed by how he shroud his machinations in righteousness. “Yet I gather it is a king that will ascertain whether my questions are meretricious.”

“Rather, I would know for myself how the investigation is progressing,” Aragorn insisted. “As you do not see fit to consult with me, I endeavor to learn what is afoot in the kingdom I am about to inherit.”

The criticism struck true, though Elrohir, despite a pinch of guilt, still inwardly debated his intentions. Yet he also understood that this blow was not entirely aimed at him, but also at a certain wizard of their acquaintance. Mithrandir’s occasional obfuscations served him well enough where an as-yet-untested warrior with a hallowed destiny was concerned, but if Estel was to evolve into a sage and benevolent ruler, then he had to be able to steer his own ship’s course. Certainly, he must be politically protected, but there was a difference between claiming ignorance and actually being obtuse. Thus, Elrohir gestured them towards a pair of armchairs, assuming that Estel intended to share a private word with him afterwards.

“I suppose we immortals are not yet accustomed to treating you with due deference,” the elf-knight teasingly excused himself. “To us, you will ever be an unruly youth who did everything possible to disavow his fate.”

With a good-natured grumble, Aragorn accepted the jibe, shaking his head in typical younger-brother dismay.

“Any of us elders can be accused of such short-sightedness on occasion,” Erchirion contributed, veering towards the subject at hand. “Indeed, it is my own that I have come to confess, my Lord.” Elrohir bore his scrutiny upon him, but the prince did not flinch. “I alone among my family members have never been at ease with the elven tendencies that spike our bloodline. Mithrandir’s occasional obfuscations served him well enough where an as-yet-untested warrior with a hallowed destiny was concerned, but if Estel was to evolve into a sage and benevolent ruler, then he had to be able to steer his own ship’s course. Certainly, he must be politically protected, but there was a difference between claiming ignorance and actually being obtuse. Thus, Elrohir gestured them towards a pair of armchairs, assuming that Estel intended to share a private word with him afterwards.

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“That is all very well,” Elrohir interrupted, seriously but not without sympathy. “And most likely an honest description of his character. Certainly, it would be no trouble for me to corroborate such a tale with other denizens of your fief, which I warn you I shall do. But if you are suggesting that I forget
his potential involvement in this affair, then I am afraid you have wasted an afternoon.”

“None in our region know of his preferences,” Erchirion explained, struggling to remain calm.

“We will, of course, generalize our queries,” Elrohir elaborated. “We are not blundering clods. Besides, your entire family is under investigation, as are all the noble houses of Gondor. Yet you must understand that while they have more or less complied with our requests for interview, your youngest brother has absconded to some secret location and your Adar has thus far been indisposed. And now, here you are, offering an extremely eloquent defense of accusations that have not yet been made. It is a curious method of evading interest. If it were not so inelegant, I might be persuaded to suspect the lot of you of a conspiracy.”

“Then you have exonerated my brother?” Erchirion asked, not quite couching his vehemence.

“I would be more than pleased to do so,” Elrohir informed him. “*If* he would present himself. His evidence is crucial to our comprehension of the climate and character of Lamedon, and he was witness to events of an importance that even he might not properly understand. I cannot promise that he will never fall under suspicion, but at present we are attempting to siphon through a beach’s worth of sand for a few special pebbles. Once we have found them, we must still give them a good polish in order to ascertain their worth. The sooner we uncover them – and we will, I assure you, come into possession of them – the sooner we can proceed with grading and cataloguing. Does this satisfy you?”

“It does,” Erchirion confirmed, though he appeared the more disheartened for it.

A flash of insight suddenly erupted behind the elf-knight’s eyes, such that he was both awed by and incredulous before the revelation. He quickly formulated a question to which he already knew the response.

“Do any in your family or entourage know where your brother is?” he delicately posed, assaying his most compassionate mien.

Erchirion let out a heavy breath, his features firming into an expression of mingled aggravation, despair, and fraternal fondness.

“Alas not, my Lord,” he deflatedly replied, the stench of failure rife about him.

Elrohir nodded, then leaned over to rest his hand upon the prince’s.

“We will give our all to sparing him any dishonor or censure,” he paternally reassured him. “But we cannot save him from himself. Though, if he has run afoul of mannish norms and this is discovered, he is ever welcome at Imladris. I know that is pithy comfort where the suffering of your entire family is considered, but at least it will spare his life.”

To his astonishment, Estel snickered at this, then rested an imperial grip on the prince’s shoulder.

“Forgive my genial brother,” he urged. “A logical mind such as his finds solace in such harsh realities.” The prince laughed dryly, though he remained disconsolate. “Go relieve your father on this account, and do your all to aid the investigation. I shall visit him shortly.”

Visibly rallying himself, Erchirion rose, then bowed to them both. To Elrohir’s satisfaction, he departed through the door, having digested at least that meager part of the elf-knight’s message. Estel, however, was far less repentant, though credit was due him for having delivered a member of Imrahil’s family.
“What would you know?” Elrohir asked directly, communicating his reservations through his posture.

“The truth,” Aragorn insisted, somewhat defiantly. “Though my actions have led you to doubt my dedication.”

“Not in the least,” Elrohir answered, unclear as to whom he was attempting to assuage, his brother or himself. “Rather, I am concerned with what the truth will amount to, once discovered.”

Estel eyed him warily, his very ambivalence a concession.

“Though I will unfailingly be accused of politicking,” he argued. “Imrahil is a vital ally to my cause. If one of his sons is the culprit, need it be publicly known?”

“I fear it must,” Elrohir countered. “Since you this very day reported news of the crime to your subjects, who will now demand retribution. Tis you who have engendered such a respected House’s fall.”

“What alternative was there, if I am to earn their trust?” Aragorn remonstrated. “I only sought to out corruption-“

“In those you perceive to be your enemies,” Elrohir interjected. “Not your allies.”

“Is it a slight upon my character that I consider my allies to be my allies?!” Estel demanded, not so much enraged as overwrought. “Am I to compromise some of my oldest and dearest acquaintances in order to establish peace in our realm?”

“Do you demand this of me?” the elf-knight cleverly inquired. “Or the fates?”

Aragorn collapsed back into his seat with an exaggerated huff, then smiled bitterly at his brother.

“Both, I daresay,” he chuckled weakly, then settled into a pained smile. “How likely is it that Amrothos or someone from the House of Imrahil is to blame?”

Elrohir considered this for a long moment, debating as to how to phrase his own ambivalence.

“My instinct is as outraged as your own,” he conceded. “I will not believe, until faced with irrefutable proof, that a child of Imrahil was responsible for such a detestable act. There may, of course, be question of madness, which would both complicate the issue and resolve the question of how you explain this to the public at large. I will only be able to concretize my opinion if and when I speak to Amrothos, therefore I can only promise to be as diligent as I must if I do come to accuse him. However… There is less and less evidence that supports a political motivation for the crime, and there are, so far, only a very few who had private quarrels with Angbor. Yet the investigation is young, and the evidence we have uncovered is, to be kind, rather esoteric. Though I do swear to keep you abreast of any inconvenient developments.”

“That would do much to appease me,” Estel sighed, with palpable relief. “As would your company, on occasion. Mithrandir is wise and learned counsel, but he is not always attuned to the pulse of the city’s people. Even a king requires the stern advice of those that know him best.”

“As they believe in his valor and capabilities,” Elrohir assured him, with a fond smile. When they both rose to embrace, he found himself as eager for the warmth he would receive as that he would impart. “Now, be off with you. My second’s return is imminent, and there is much to relate between us.”
“Only if you implore your second to seek me out on the morrow for a spate of archery,” Aragorn mirthfully requested. “I fear my aim grows soft.”

“If your commission can spare him, Your Highness,” Elrohir taunted, feigning hurt at the crude gesture Estel shot in his direction as he slipped back down the hidden corridor.

As the section of library wall shifted back into position, the elf-knight felt unsettled in the wake of such untimely developments, wondering if the world would indeed ever be restored by the goodwill of those that sought to reign in the Dark Lord’s stead.

* * *

May 5th

Despite his lingering exhaustion, Legolas drifted into wakefulness some time before dawn, still slave to his wartime routine. Since lethargy yet weighted him, he watched a rosy aura pour across the ceiling, the room soon bathed in the warm orange hues of Imladris in the early morn. Twas as if he could smell the crisp mountain air that swept down into the Rivendell valley from snowy summits, the sharp, fresh scent of the pines, their spindles slick with dew, the salty spray of the cascades as they crashed into the Bruinen’s breakneck rush. He languished awhile in this blissful disorientation, his spirit yearning to discover itself ensconced in the lovely bedchamber that had been assigned him prior to the quest, with its cozy, handmade quilt and plush pillows. In times of strife on their long southbound journey, he had wondered if those accoutrements had convinced him to deft his Adar and pledge himself to the Fellowship, for he had never slept so deeply as he had in the Last Homely House, even though his very world had been at stake.

Indeed, he was soon so embroiled in his reverie that his still drowsy mind became confused as to what, precisely, was his present location. He was clearly in a bed – a feather bed, no less, not the occasionally crunchy mattresses of Mirkwood. The sheets that cocooned him, though mired in sweat, were of satiny texture, while the heavy coverlet was ridged with embroidery. His eyes were yet too bleary to properly focus on the ceiling pattern, through the stone frame of the window was formal enough that he intuited himself to be in a castle of some kind, therefore he must still be in Minas Tirith. Yet this was certainly not the spare quarters he shared with Gimli, with its severe décor and starchy cots.

His thoughts swam through the tranquil waters of his mind, evading the rapids of lucidity a while longer. For the moment, he was snug, he was content; he instinctively sensed that this was but a brief reprieve from a period of great industry, thus he should relax whilst he could. Yet soon enough there was a telltale rustle beside him, and all was explained.

Suffused with dread that he would be cast out of his one oasis from the maelstrom that was their investigation, Legolas inwardly cursed the daily drudge of sparring and interviewing that had rendered him so fatigued that he had failed to rise in the aftermath of their coupling. Each night, once their official business was concluded, he and Elrohir found each other anew, stealing through secret corridors if need be to hasten to the elf-knight’s suite. Unsurprisingly, they rarely indulged in conversation unrelated to their mutual arousal, especially given the lengthy reports both delivered over their evening meal. In truth, they were far too ravenous by such a late hour, as well as eager to wash off the grime accrued through consorting with their rogue’s gallery of suspects. Far better to be drenched in perspiration, to be basted in salve, to be splattered by a gamesome lover’s seismic eruption. Indeed, Legolas considered their silent accord one of the most winning aspects to their liaison; that they, as elves of grace and gallantry, trusted one another enough to relinquish their inhibitions, to indulge their boldest desires, to revel in the erotic power of their bodies without confinement or consequence. They did not need to discuss what was happening between them
because they both understood it perfectly well: they were engaged in a mature, gorgeously carnal relation of mutual benefit.

Yet he, lightweight that he was, had forgotten himself sufficiently that his fumble threatened ruination. If he were not so concerned with revivifying his muscles into a state of vigor that they might safely extricate him from the bed without disturbing Elrohir, he would have berated himself into a funk by now. He had infringed upon his lover’s privacy, potentially complicated – through a host of natural assumptions and suppositions – what had been a series of blessedly simple trysts. Once he had fled back to his quarters, he would have to compose a suitable apology, in the off chance that Elrohir had noted his presence before now. That necessity, of course, would begin the debate over a subject that had not required any, that had been the lone pristine and harmonious aspect of his life, he bitterly, bitterly reminded himself as he shifted ever so slightly towards the edge of the mattress.

Legolas nearly bit his tongue when a sinuous arm was cast over him, then anchored around his middle. He glanced over at his lover, who was beguilingly tousled and half-lidded, and suddenly found his nobility engaged in a vicious duel with his reluctance. Elrohir himself did little to champion the cause of righteousness when he began to grate his fingers across Legolas’ taut abdomen, thereby provoking the archer’s morning erection into expectant solidity, the dull ache of anticipation in his bollocks riling him further.

“Tis well you are here,” Elrohir rasped, his voice coarse with need of refreshment. “I’ll be spared the trouble of conjuring your image whilst I rid myself of my ever-at-the-ready tumescence. Have you been as troubled as I, these last dawns?”

“Unfailingly so,” Legolas murmured, stunned by his amenability. “Though there is ever a price to be paid for such-”

“Mmm,” Elrohir groggily agreed, as he spread himself atop him. Legolas’ reservations evaporated as soon as his lover burrowed his face in his neck and lashed that elegant slope with a tiger tongue. “You are even more delectable before noontime.”

“You are even more insatiable than in my dreams,” the archer teased, at the hot stab of the darkling elf’s colossal shaft into his hip.

Elrohir chuckled wryly at this, a raw, husky sound.

“So many former paramours have complained,” he amiably noted, between stealth caresses. “Tis my peredhil blood than fuels me so, a daunting alchemy of mannish relentlessness and elven endurance.”

“I would assure you that there is no question of this elf enduring,” Legolas playfully remarked. “In my enflamed opinion, we are constrained enough by our charge and our location. Sleep, I can manage without, but such glory as this? It has become… a sanctuary.”

“Indeed,” Elrohir quietly concurred, then proceeded to savage his mouth with kisses.

He interrupted the slow grind of their engorgements to slide down the length of Legolas’ wrought body, plundering clefts, curves, and ridges before storming down to conquer his ivory tower. Soon, the Mirkwood prince was being treated to a egregiously decadent suck, his sleek shaft mauled crimson by plush lips, tantalizing teeth, and a voracious tongue. Heady sparks of pleasure flared over his skin, as within a fiery surge ignited his every nerve, until his very flesh smoldered with sensation. He bucked his hips as Elrohir set even more diligently to devouring him; he cleaved into the elf-knight’s throat as those long, lissome fingers delved into his core, setting him ablaze from within and without. He roared with the incendiary might of a dragon as ecstasy scorched him through, coiling
his legs around Elrohir’s torso as if he truly had a tail to whip about. Barely was his darkling lover done with drinking him down when he was dragged up towards the pillows and summarily tossed onto his backside, that Legolas might repay him in kind.

Once they were both drunk on seed and sensuality, the Mirkwood prince collapsed at his side, then crowed out his satisfaction to the swarthy heavens above. He was ably shushed by Elrohir’s kiss, the resulting entanglement distracting them until the Gondorian horns blared out to remind them that they were not at leisure.

Legolas groaned, loath to part with the compelling weight of his lover atop him, especially given that he faced another tedious day of scratching down myriad ‘witness’ accounts to some incidental contretemps between warriors/tradesmen/citizens from opposing fiefs. If these royally legitimized gossips were to be believed, the alliance that defeated the Shadow was a hoax of epic proportions, since it appeared everyone in the kingdom reviled their neighbors and quarreled with their compatriots. With Imrahil still indisposed and Amrothos absconded to Melkor-knew-where, their investigation had most emphatically stalled. While Elrohir derived endless amusement from scouring through ancient tomes and musty dictionaries, Legolas had to contend with the over-informed public, who, subsequent to Aragorn’s announcement, all had relevant evidence to impart. Only thought of what delirium awaited him come nightfall had prevented him from assaulting some poor, unsuspecting baker during a halting monologue about the eating habits of the soldiers from Ringlo Vale.

Thus, Elrohir in every way embodied his escape, from the nagging of these nosy harpies, from the haranguing stewards and their disingenuous protests of innocence, from the suffocating fear that something untoward had occurred to Thorondil due to his request for aid, since he had not heard a whisper from his friend in four days. Even the guilt he felt in not having mentioned this to his intrepid lover was muted by said investigator’s most welcome nightly molestation, though Legolas had resolved to fess up that evening, before they rang in the fifth day of Thorondil’s absence. He could only pray that his fellow archer’s hobby of collecting rumors had not prompted some scoundrel to silence him.

“You’ve grown tense,” Elrohir commented, with his usual directness. “Have all my ministrations been for naught?”

“Hardly so,” Legolas fondly responded. “If aught, I’ve come to wonder how I survived so long without them. Gimli was quite right in accusing me of distemper. By the war’s end, I had thought myself numbed to such needs, but I appear to have been self-deceived in this.”

“I, too, became so engrossed by vengeance and valor that I forgot myself of late,” Elrohir morosely admitted. “Though the years of my absorption are numbered in centuries. This has been… a resurrection of sorts.”

Shocked by this confession, more at being privy to such intimate knowledge than at the length of his stretch of abstinence, for the Mirkwood prince could easily date the event that incited the elf-knight to distance himself from his personal cares, Legolas met those somber silver eyes with a wealth of compassion reflected in his own. Elrohir scoffed at the moment’s poignancy, then assayed a smile that spoke volumes of his present state of equanimity within.

“We’d best make haste if I am to slip back to my quarters unnoticed,” Legolas urged, which earned him a compliant nod.

“I hope it does not seem untoward to suggest that you forward some more permanent excuse for your absence to Gimli,” Elrohir pointedly proposed, before permitting him to rise. “It is a privilege to wake beside one so silken and sensuous, one I do not care to forgo for the duration of my stay here.
Unless, of course, you would prefer the option of privacy?”

“There is room enough for rumination in this suite,” Legolas backhandedly accepted, secretly thrilled. “Though you must swear to behave yourself should I profess to require a few hours’ isolation.”

“Tis far more likely that I will make such unreasonable demands,” Elrohir chuckled, his humor brightened considerably. “Still, we must be discreet, especially if we manage to conclude our investigation. The fact of our elvish blood will only go so far as a defense in such a fractious climate, and I for one would not work so hard to polish Aragorn’s armor only to inadvertently tarnish it all the more.”

“Agreed,” Legolas concurred, then sealed their compact with a kiss. Their last, alas, until evening. A far more officious atmosphere descended upon them as they rose and dressed, bedecking themselves in uniforms both found far more constraining of late. “Where may I find you this day, if I happen upon a propitious witness?”

“Prepare to be amazed,” Elrohir mercurially warned him, as he buckled his sword belt. “Imrahil has finally recovered sufficiently to receive me.”

“Progress, at long last!” Legolas mock gasped, his tone limned with sarcasm. “Do you hold any hope that he will deliver Amrothos to us?”

“That is for the gods to decide,” Elrohir sighed, though his smile had not abated. “Not to be immodest, but my interrogative talents will unearth some incidental detail that will lead us to his most troubled of sons, if the man himself does not.”

“Ah, to be a sparrow on the sill,” Legolas dreamily contemplated, then snickered at his own theatricality. “Come deliver me from the toil if you hit upon anything exceptionally salacious.”

“You have my word,” Elrohir vowed, catching up his hand as he made for the door. “It may prove daunting to do without your wit and cheer until evening. Though I would have you know, Legolas, that I esteem your partnership in this. As much as our liaison has proved richly diverting, I would not have borne myself through this grim affair without the support of such a resilient second.”

The archer gave his callused hand a tender squeeze, both excited and discomfited by the implications of his gesture.

“Everyone is sensitive and unsure in the aftermath of the Dark Lord’s conquest,” he quietly remarked. “We are charged with remaking a broken world. If we cannot rely on one another, we are lost indeed.”

They locked eyes for a pregnant moment, one he was still contemplating as he snuck down the central corridor of the guest wing, praying that he did not encounter any of his bouncy hobbit friends or his astute dwarf companion when in such spiritual disarray. Slipping past a group of servants with an artistry he had not employed since his adolescent escapades, he pressed an avid ear to his door before darting in, confident that he would be alone since no snores had resounded from within.

Twas with a mixture of relief and horror that he was startled by Thorondil, hovering in the shadows like a spooked stallion who had found shelter in the obscured hollow of a cave.

“Legolas!” he exclaimed. “Thank the Valar! I know I presumed much in venturing here, but-“

“Hush, brave one,” the Mirkwood prince soothed him, nearly suffocated by his own relief. “There is no presumption in assuring me of your safety. I feared some dark mischief had befallen you.”
“You may yet deem it so,” Thorondil forewarned, shaking his head as if baffled by his own predicament. “For I have comported myself in a manner that was by turns foolish, blind, ensorcelled, and hazardous to my own wellbeing. And yet…”

“You regret none of it?” Legolas queried, imagining that the same could oft be said of himself.

“I will regret the reprimand that is sure to come,” Thorondil insisted, though appeared unconvinced even as he did so. “It will wound me to watch your trust in me erode some.”

“I greatly doubt there is question of that,” Legolas assuaged him, inviting him to perch on the edge of his cot. If he was honest, the more his archer friend prevaricated, the more intrigued he became.

“Now, come, what is the trouble? What have you been about since we last spoke?”

Thorondil released a ragged sigh, his eyes studiously scrutinizing the stone floor. Now that the golden elf had a moment to examine him, he was the more surprised to judge him not so much distraught as merely frazzled, nervy and fidgety in the manner of those who lacked sleep, but had not been subject to physical exhaustion. For all the barely restrained chaos of his curly auburn mane, the not-quite-seamless symmetry of his raiment, and the ruddy flush of his visage, there was a distinct air of haleness to him that adorned few in the midst of such deprivation. For all his shame and self-reproof, Legolas sensed that he might burst into song as a result of the merest provocation, that there was a symphony playing within him, one which he could barely contain.

While such flagrant symptoms could lead the archer to only one conclusion, he as yet did not comprehend how this reckoned with the question of his prolonged disappearance.

“As the news of Angbor’s slaying had not truly been disseminated by the time of our leave-taking,” Thorondil commenced, still afflicted by twitches and jitters. “It was simple enough to locate Amrothos. He was drowning his sorrows at a tavern on the sixth tier, for, as I learnt from his brother, he lost a pair of dear fellows on the Morannon and has been miserable since. We knew each other little, so I cautiously insinuated myself beside him, at first conversing of the usual post-war fare. He was in obvious need of consolation, and I was happy to oblige, since his agony was so intense as to be gutting to me. We soon retired to an isolated section of the battlements, where he spoke quite freely on many subjects, including…”

“That which daily imperils you both?” Legolas prodded, unsurprised that they had discovered such common ground.

“Indeed,” Thorondil nervously confirmed. “We both confessed much of our troubles in this regard, of our fears and the challenges and… I cannot quite account for what then transpired. It was the most idiotic thing I could have done, and I would be royally embarrassed, if it had not been so… so…”

The archer was unsure whether the tremors that snaked through him were shivers or trembles.

“Indelible.”

This last was whispered so reverently that Legolas almost forgave him for endangering himself so.

“I should have seen to confronting him myself,” the Mirkwood prince sighed, with mingled fondness and bemusement.

“Perhaps,” Thorondil considered, with dedicated ambivalence. “Rather, that is what my reason tells me to believe, but of late my heart has been far more compelling.” Legolas could do naught but offer him a sympathetic smile, implicitly understanding how overwhelming such flash flood romances could be. “I have never felt anything like our passion that night. I know that does nothing to exonerate him in your view, but I will profess his innocence nonetheless. Such a giving, golden soul could never, my Lord, *never*-“
“I will be the first to champion your theory,” Legolas reassured him. “Yet it must be logically evaluated and disproved.”

“Which is why I have sought you out, on his behalf,” Thorondil explained, recovered some from his swoon. “He would be interviewed. It was ever his intent to proceed honorably. We simply… For a time, we were ruled by our overabundance of emotion.”

“You have been enclosed all this time?” Legolas inquired, fascinated by this lightening strike event in the life of his friend.

“Rather, we escaped to Osgiliath,” Thorondil elucidated. “Upon waking from the torrid fugue that had embroiled us, we… I cannot rightly explain why we fled, since we ourselves were not in our right minds. We only knew that we had to explore these newfound feelings, to revel in them for a time, before we could sober enough to plan any form of… means of concealment. You must understand, we were glowing! Any who but gazed upon us would know, and that was the most imminent danger, especially if Angbor perished because of his predilections.”

Legolas chuckled at this defense, laying a fraternal hand upon his friend’s shoulder.

“Such fuzzy logic would convince two so recently bedazzled by one another,” he remarked, with a sly smirk. “But tell me, though curiosity alone raises the question, had you ever… tangled with a male suitor before?”

His bashful smile complemented his features so well that the archer was reminded of why he himself had sought to bed him.

“My first such friend was during our military training,” Thorondil recounted. “We dared little, but we were intimate in the way of randy adolescents, stroking and sucking. But I had never… Amrothos was the one to introduce me to the ways of male coupling. Indeed, prior to his attentions, I did not even know that such… connections… were possible between males.”

“I wager his care was the more revolutionary for it,” Legolas gently teased, which earned him the blush he sought.

“Forgive me for not responding to your most generous invitation,” the man suddenly implored him. “I had every intention—“

Legolas instantly dismissed his concern.

“You would do better to apologize for worrying me sick,” the Mirkwood prince chided. “And I would be remiss if I did not urge you to remain apart for a time. If you are discovered—“

“I would not risk him,” Thorondil assured him. “Believe me, we lingered in Osgiliath that we might better bear the necessary separation. I would do anything to assure our future, to protect him from the fiend who murdered Angbor. He has much to enlighten you upon in that regard, as he shall this very day. But when you are done with him, we must away to Dol Amroth.”

“Can you be sure of safety there?” Legolas questioned, inwardly marveling at the heart’s capacity to recognize its mate. Not that either of them had much in the way of selection or potential suitors.

“The palace staff is faithful to him, and the guard has secured him before,” Thorondil replied, though visibly anxious over such a vital point. “He is not the first of his line to be so burdened, nor will he be the last.”

This reminded Legolas of that hallowed refuge Imladris, the subject of his drowsy musings that very
dawn, as well as one of her comelier denizens.

“Remain here whilst I alert Elrohir,” he cautioned his friend. “Will he have to travel far?”

“He means to surrender himself to his Adar,” Thorondil remarked, wincing at the thought of his beloved under such duress. “Though he swore to wait upon my word.”

“Then I best ferret out a trustworthy page,” he announced to his friend, poorly containing his excitement. “Do you feel confident enough to retrieve Amrothos without betraying yourselves to all and sundry?”

“Indeed I am, my Lord,” Thorondil confirmed, duly corralling his emotions. “I am capable of secrecy and due comportment when so precious a commodity as my heart is at stake.”

“Then rejoin me at Faramir’s offices,” Legolas invited him. “That you and your paramour might vent yourself of all manner of cares. Elrohir is a most compassionate soul, and, if I can intuit his designs, he will soon have persuaded Amrothos to play a minor part in this great endeavor of ours.”

“I pray it be so,” Thorondil concluded, gratefully receiving the archer’s embrace before flying off to fetch his lover.

As he watched the door shut behind his friend, Legolas considered that another had been thrown open, one he was raring to charge through.

* * *

The wry, arched, arrow-sharp eyebrow lift long perfected by scions of the House of Earendil currently punctuated the noble features of its esteemed Elf-Knight, whose glare at the page fidgeting before him was one of mingled curiosity and confusion.

“Forgive my impertinence,” Elrohir rather disingenuously apologized. “But I must task your patience once again with a request that you deliver Prince Legolas’…” He hesitated over the use of the word ‘message’. “…communication, again. You are certain that no part of it has been mangled?”

“He bade me repeat it five times to ensure my accuracy, my Lord,” the page insisted, though he was of sympathetic mien given the peculiarity of his mission that morn.

“Indeed,” Elrohir observed, assaying a look of consternation. “Proceed, if you would.”

“Prince Legolas,” the page recited, as slowly as he dared, wary of offending one of obscenely high and hallowed station. “Claims to have succeeded where Heledril did not, thus is confronted by Almarior’s choice. He begs you to think of Mirdharos, and thereby advise him, though he cautions that you may reveal the Secret of Esgaril if you are too bold.”

Spellbound by the complexity of the riddle, Elrohir stared dumbly at him for long minutes after, his agile mind racing through the labyrinthine shelves in his library of knowledge in order to decipher it. His progress was somewhat impeded by sheer excitement over the prospect of regularly exchanging coded messages. Legolas could not have enacted a more playful and affectionate gesture, to say naught of how deeply arousing he found it. Just the idea that the archer was so well-read was enough to prick his nethers; no raggedly whispered troth nor ardent declaration could have moved him more. The elf-knight wondered whether his wood-elf was even aware of what a billet-doux his challenge was, then scolded himself for receiving it so, since there was vital information that Legolas had aimed to protect by veiling it in literary allusions. Yet he had trusted that Elrohir would understand him, which bespoke an inherent understanding of the peredhel’s strengths and scholarly nature, one that he could not help but be tickled by.
He gave his head a vigorous shake, somewhat ashamed that he had mooned for so long, then centered his focus. If he was not misapprehending his colleague, Legolas had discovered Amrothos, but through an intermediary of uncertain, formerly secure, loyalty. He questioned whether it would be wise to interview the youth without his father’s presence, but thought this the only option if there was to be any sort of complicity between them. Unsaid, but hotly implied, was that Elrohir should rejoin with him forthwith, that they might settle on a course of action. This was complicated by the fact that the page had halted him in the corridor beyond Imrahil’s suite, mere instants before he was about to knock.

After a lengthy exhalation, Elrohir deliberately weighed his options. In the Prince of Dol Amroth’s favor was his legendary forthrightness; he would not be deceived by anyone, thus would demand absolute honesty from his son, no matter how grave the circumstances. He was also a warm and loving father, who Amrothos could be candid with about his problems and predilections, though whether he had been was another matter entirely. Regardless of the youth’s testimony, Imrahil would have to be consulted about any judgment or potential imprisonment, though Elrohir prayed it would not come to that. Yet he admitted to himself that his chief reservation was an emotional one. Imrahil was a dear friend, one he would not abuse in the name of duty, whatever his family troubles. As such, Elrohir would be more than fair, but he could not be seen to favor him.

He confronted the page’s expectant eyes with a keen, evaluating look.

“My thanks for your indulgence,” he conservatively offered, with a smirk calculated to draw him in. “I wonder if I could flirt with dishonor by asking another service of you, one that requires a certain… finesse.”

“I am your servant, my Lord,” the page complied, clearly intrigued.

“I would that you return to this door at four bells,” Elrohir elaborated. “And deliver the following message to the Prince of Dol Amroth; one, I promise you, that is far simpler than my fellow’s doggerel musings. That I, the Elf-Knight of Imladris, have been delayed, and beg apology. That I have found what it is he seeks, and that I await his presence in the Chief Steward’s interrogation room. But you must not strike upon his door a second before the horn. Are we agreed?”

“Most readily, my Lord,” the page concurred, visibly relieved that he did not have to learn another riddle. “You may count on my discretion in this, and any other matter of such sterling merit.”

“If so, I will commend you to the King,” Elrohir vowed, then hastened to retrace his steps.

He prayed that Amrothos did not prove a reluctant witness, since he had little more than an hour to hear his testimony before a higher authority interfered.

As he marched through the corridors as nonchalantly as he could, for everyone in the Citadel knew of their investigation and therefore his speediness would be widely reported on, Elrohir was somewhat startled by the anticipation that bubbled through his veins, both at the thought of finally interrogating their chief suspect and, if he was truthful, of seeing Legolas. Though he could not even inadvertently reference his gamesome gesture without courting disaster, he could not stop himself from reviewing the message over and again in his mind, savoring every syllable. Few he had been intimate with had ever so shrewdly provoked his intellect; indeed, he could think of none save his mentor in all things, Erestor, and even that had been more scholarly hauteur than fun with cryptograms. Rather, Elrohir inviting the Chief Counselor to share his bed had only been a part of the overall seductiveness of his elder’s wisdom and vast font of knowledge. Struggle as he had to separate his academic enthrallments from his carnal ones, the elf-knight had never been entirely capable of doing so, since to him hypotheses, rhetoric, historical anecdotes, and philosophical digressions were sublimely erotic. While most of his conquests had merely placated him in this,
Legolas was bold enough to duel with him, enticing him with the most ravishing of all pursuits, encoded messages. The most galling aspect of all this was that Elrohir was already won, that they were already embroiled in an increasingly torrid liaison. Yet Legolas sought to stir him all the same, indefatigable in his assault upon the elf-knight’s every erogenous zone, even privileging those harbored within the recesses of his genial mind.

How could he fail to respond to such bald flirtation, to the strenuous efforts of one whose competency he had so sorely misjudged?

Merciless Legolas awaited him in the corridor, gemstone eyes a-twinkle with mischief. His eagerness to pounce on their witness was poorly masked, as was his delight in Elrohir having correctly interpreted his riddle. The aura that glowed about him was of pure mercury, an impish, unstable element that the elf-knight found indecently becoming, though there were enough casual passersby as to prevent him from any overt expression of this he might momentarily entertain. He granted his lover a pointed smirk, then sobered for the task at hand. No matter how diverting were such subtle interactions, there was still a murderer to snare and silence, one that might be lurking in the chamber beyond.

“How does he appear?” Elrohir inquired, forcefully tearing his focus away from that glittering gaze.

“Well rested,” Legolas quipped, then shared with him the details of his early morning interview with Thorondil. “I do not sense that being besotted with my friend is his sole motivation in coming forth, for he is solid in his resolve. Certainly, there is his family’s censure to consider.”

“Yet?” Elrohir questioned, intuiting that he held a few, probably minor reservations.

“From what I have ascertained, he is not much of a soldier,” Legolas informed him. “Nor a royalist of renown. Some in the fiefdom’s inner circles consider him of revolutionary bent, which is marginally understandable given that none of the aristocracy accept his way of life. I wonder if he was not shipped off to Lamedon for reasons beyond Angbor’s guardianship. Perhaps he sought to permanently establish himself there.”

“It bears consideration,” Elrohir nodded approvingly. “Though I would put that particular query to him in his Adar’s presence. I would greatly like to observe Imrahil’s reaction.”

“The Prince will be joining us, then?” Legolas inquired.

“At a later hour,” the elf-knight indicated, with a wink of complicity that earned him a snicker. “I fear that my messenger will suffer some untimely delays in reaching him.”

“Then let us make haste,” Legolas prompted, ushering him into Denethor’s former study, surely the most inviolable chamber in all of Minas Tirith.

Twas a compassionate eye that Elrohir cast upon the newly lovers upon entering, for their gazes were so eloquent locked that he had not the heart to interrupt them. The tableau they presented was one of epic romance, Thorondil knelt beseechingly before Amrothos, who reverently cupped his distressed paramour’s face, all this against the brimstone view beyond the window, the charred plains of the Pelennor leading to Mordor smoldering in the distance. Whatever damning facts they sought to obscure, there was no denying the purity of the emotion between them, that the passion that currently reigned over them was as commanding as it was true. Yet sentimentality would not exonerate them where only unassailable facts and sustainable evidence could.

Elrohir felt the burden of proof most heavily from such a compelling perspective, one that stole much from his personal situation. Regardless, none of them could shun reality, thus he kicked at the door
that it might slam behind him. This more than startled the pair; it shook them as viscerally as any reckoning should.

“My Lords,” Amrothos gravely greeted them, though he did not dismiss Thorondil from his side when the archer stood to second him.

“Ernilen,” Elrohir coolly acknowledged him, strategically perching himself on the edge of the ornate desk, like a falcon hovering above its prey. “I trust you have been appraised of the circumstances that prompted this interview, the grisly slaying of Angbor, Steward of Lamedon?”

That Amrothos flinched at the victim’s mention did little to sway the elf-knight’s sympathies, no matter how genuine it appeared. While he did not truly believe the gentle soul he knew the young prince to be was likely the visionary behind such a ruthless, deranged act, he had to intimidate, if not frighten, him into revealing knowledge that he might otherwise seek to conceal about the sage, kind elder who had shared so much of himself with the awkward adolescent Amrothos had once been.

“Indeed, I have been,” their suspect replied, his face tight with grim resolve.

“Might you then explain by what fail logic you sought to evade our detection,” Elrohir unsparingly demanded. “What flight of cowardice owned you such that you did not immediately report the details of your relationship with him to the King, or at the very least to your father?”

“Ada well knows the nature of my involvement with him,” Amrothos dutifully confirmed. “It was he who suggested I sojourn in Lamedon for a time, guessing at the consequences. I have perhaps been distracted by… grief, guilt, other cares, but he has been fully aware of what transpired this whole time and has not come forward, so I hope you will put these same questions to him, as I surely shall.”

“His excuse, I dare say, will be his protection of you,” Legolas interjected. “Compounded by your untimely escape. Pray, what is yours?”

Amrothos sighed haltingly, suddenly overwhelmed by emotion.

“Alas, I have none, save my aforementioned cowardice,” he elaborated. “From the first, I rejected the theory that this was a political crime, knowing Angbor as I do. I thought myself to be a target. I feared for my life. After I learned of his slaying, I was despondent with grief. That is how Thorondil found me. As to what came after…” He could not keep his eyes from straying to his beloved, consoled by the devotion reflected in his handsome features. “I can only claim that I was not myself, that shock, sadness, and dread warped my decisions. Yet I seek now to rectify them, and to abet your investigation however I may.”

“You would do best to forward some explanation that will acquit you,” Elrohir snappishly remarked, inwardly touched though he could not then indulge in such softness. “While I accredit that you may be in danger, I have yet to be convinced that you are innocent.”

“Begin with your first encounter with Angbor,” Legolas instructed. “And do not spare any detail in your account, no matter how seemingly insignificant.”

Thorondil pulled a chair over that he might sit beside his lover, unwavering in his support. While Legolas settled himself on the window ledge, Elrohir did not care to himself relax, not when every word the youth uttered would require later scrutiny and the most offhanded aside might prove relevant.

“Even before adolescence dawned,” Amrothos solemnly began. “I knew what I was. For a time, I pretended at flirting with maids and the like, the silly games that are traditional at such an awkward
age, but when such pursuits turned serious, I abstained. By my seventeenth year, my brothers tired of chiding me and my parents must have suspected the truth, though neither party ever made mention of this. As a result, I felt wholly outcast from their graces and kept much to myself. The passing of a distant cousin prompted Lord Angbor to visit our realm. His naneth, you see, hailed from Dol Amroth, and we are kin, though not blood related. Yet his family, being an offshoot of the royal line, can claim elven heritage.” This stunned everyone in the room, but none dared interrupt his account. “Angbor, as was customary, was received at the palace and resided there for a two-month. He immediately recognized what I was, as well as how it troubled me, and sought to slowly draw me out on the subject. He became a mentor of sorts, performing the service that my Adar could not: reassuring me that I was mad, or ill, or worse; championing my need to indulge my desires; courting me with a kindness I did not believe I deserved. I reckon I need not explain what next transpired, that he taught me my bed manners, as well as provided emotional sanctuary. Yet part of his tutelage involved my declaring myself to Ada, who became rather melancholy at the news, but was little shocked. It was then that I learned that I had an aunt, and what became of her. Later, Adar interviewed Angbor, who invited me to live with him in Lamedon. At the time, it was the only choice I could conceive of enduring, and certainly I thought I was in love, then and for a few months after. When I grew mature enough to understand that emotion at that tender age is more akin to idolatry than true devotion, still I remained in Lamedon, since I did not believe there was another option available to me.”

“Was there?” Legolas bluntly asked, not quite able to resolve the matter for himself.

“Not particularly,” Amrothos smiled ambivalently. “Angbor was quite a spirited gentleman. He soon recognized that I was not content with him. The villagers, also, were beginning to doubt my claim of seeking a wife amongst the ladies there. After much debate, it was decided that I would indeed have to return to Dol Amroth. At the time, I thought this akin to imprisonment, but once settled I was surprised by how many with similar proclivities approached me. Now that so many generations have passed since the merging of our bloodline with that of the elves, I am far from alone, though discretion is still imperative. To ignore scandalous behavior that is not common knowledge is simple enough, to fail to act upon it when it is exposed is another thing entirely. If someone had sought to accuse me, I would have been exiled. I may well still be.”

“Then your break with Angbor was amicable?” Elrohir raptly inquired, his stare unrelenting. “Or so you claim?”

“Rather, he is still dear to me,” Amrothos insisted, though he kept his temper. “I may have ceased to desire him, but he never lost my respect. He gave me shelter and nurture when even my parents would have none of me. I will never fail to pay tribute to that! I would not have seen him harmed for all the world. It guts me through that some savage attacked him for what was inherited from our forefathers, what was beyond his control!” If the young prince was feigning the woebegone look that currently assailed his features, then his talent for dissimulation was expert indeed. “It galls me that I have no evidence to support my claim, since only my Adar knows the full tale of our togetherness, and even he was not privy to our final conversations. We did correspond for a time after, though we both permitted it to lag in the past few years. He became quite virulent in his political opinions and estranged himself even from loyal friends. Yet I cannot vouch for this, since I have only heard about his actions from others.”

“There are those who believe otherwise,” Elrohir sharply countered. “Who claim that you would rebel against the monarchy, that you would have your own father abolish his entitled position in favor of democratic rule.”

“That is a lie!” Amrothos protested, alight with a righteous fire. “I have declaimed rulers in the past, but villains such as Denethor and his ilk. I rode out to Minas Tirith to confront him when one of his
witch hunts unmasked some of my former lovers and they were set to hang. I could not defend them in earnest, since the charges were punishable by death and they were guilty of the crimes, as was I, thus I defamed him as a tyrant to turn the execution crowd’s favor. Ironically, most of those Denethor had arrested and imprisoned *were* innocent – only the sodomites were properly charged, in accord with established laws. Thus I defended them all, and saved those I could, though not my friends. I trust I need not elaborate upon the bitterness of that defeat. If there were any I would have murdered in his bed, it would have been that fatuous scoundrel! I would have fought tirelessly that Angbor take the throne over the likes of him!”

Before Elrohir could retort, the door was thrown open with barbarian vigor. Imrahil stormed in as if at the head of Tulkas’ demigod army, foisting infuriated, imperious eyes upon the elf-knight.

“What underhanded methods are these, that a father not be summoned to his son’s defense!” the Prince of Dol Amroth all but roared, and was little tamed by Elrohir’s gesture of appeasement. “There is great dishonor in this, Son of Elrond. You tarnish your brother’s sovereignty and your father’s benevolent example-“

“Quit your blustering,” Elrohir commanded, preternatural steel in his flinty eyes. “You are drawing a crowd.” He ordered the guard to bolt the door, then proceeded. “I alerted you, did I not, to your son’s recovery. Perhaps if you had kept him here, all this would have been resolved days ago.”

“Alas, he is a man of his own merits, not a stray hound,” Imrahil grunt, barely leashed himself. “And you I formerly counted as a friend.”

“If you are so easily injured, perhaps tis best if our private acquaintance no longer muddies our duties,” the elf-knight responded, with officious snark. “As it stands, I no longer suspect your son of anything save poor judgment and a tendency towards starry-eyed flights of fancy.”

“Then we are free to depart?” Thorondil hopefully inquired, in a bid to assert his position in Amrothos’ cares.

“You are at liberty, but I would caution against escaping the city,” Elrohir formally pronounced. “We cannot defend you, nor account for your whereabouts away from our protection. Tis true that there is danger here, but it is a known quantity. I can offer no assurances that this villain will not pursue you to Dol Amroth, if indeed he has a private vendetta against you, Amrothos. And any you might be… intimate with.”

“Besides,” Legolas commented, to Thorondil. “I would continue to avail myself of your indispensable services, gwador. Though there will be less opportunity for indulgence, you will be in a rare position to forewarn your beloved of any ill will towards him, as well as abet the conclusion of our investigation.”

“Beloved? Intimate relationship? Escape to Dol Amroth?” Imrahil testily objected. “Who is this rogue and why are his opinions being deferred to in such matters as my son’s protection?!”

To his credit, Thorondil stood fast against his future bond-father’s fury, while Amrothos had the wherewithal to stand and cinch an arm around his paramour.

“Perhaps we should seek out some refreshment while tempers flare,” Legolas graciously intimated, grabbing hold of the elf-knight’s arm and veering him towards the exit. “Yet do not quit this chamber until we return. There is much to prepare and plan for, as regards your safety.”

They were shut up in an anteroom before Elrohir could protest, the Prince’s bellows voluble enough to thunder through the walls. Legolas chuckled wryly, then sought out the decanter, as a quench of
water was indeed in order. Elrohir sipped his thoughtfully as the archer did his best to make out what was being said, mostly to ensure that his friend was not unjustly banished from the chamber or some such nonsense.

The elf-knight, for his part, had been deeply moved by Amrothos’ tale, by the strife he had endured before his adolescence had even rightly begun. To feel ostracized by virtue of what was innate within was a horrible trial, especially when your sincerest urges were punishable by death. Angbor wasn’t the young prince’s bane, he was his salvation, for even Thorondil hadn’t experienced such a reversal until a few days prior. But what if someone, as yet unidentified, had not known such belated acceptance? What if their hurt and self-hatred had festered all this time, behind a mask of decency and decorum? Would such a one grow monstrous, capable of the depravity he had witnessed, especially if Angbor’s secret was revealed to him? Elrohir could not help but consider this the key to the entire conundrum, though one that did little to point him towards a likely suspect, and perhaps only evoked his own early years confusion, when he mistakenly believed he would be called upon to produce viable heirs. Indeed, perhaps the entire affair was politically motivated, while all this revelation was more or less inconsequential.

“How I do envy our novice pair their delirium,” Legolas intruded upon his reflections, though any opinion of his was most welcome. “To steal off to Osgiliath, to sequester ourselves in some abandoned chamber, where lust and luxury might reign for days. Instead, we are perpetually on the hunt, and care barely scrape together an hour for bawdy play and another for wild rutting.”

Elrohir laughed at this description, as he was meant to, though they both knew they were not quite so desperate as that, and if they were it would still be two hours of leisure most did not presently enjoy.

“It occurred to me as I attended him that we should perhaps take a lesson from their frivolity,” he considered. “Our trysts have been wonderfully diverting, but if any discovered us, we would risk everything that we seek to protect by capturing this fiend: Estel’s reputation and authority, the sanctity of the people, the integrity of the government…” Legolas looked as if he would argue against him, but could find no weakness to exploit. “I do not mean that I care to do without your warmth at present, merely that we should endeavor to be a touch more circumspect. Which means that I must, alas, resist the impulse kiss you senseless, now that we are enclosed.”

The archer purposefully discarded the censure in his statement in favor of the more felicitous implications.

“As I must, I imagine, battle mightily against the impulse to permit you to do so,” Legolas coyly smirked. “Regardless of your earlier protestations.” Elrohir chuckled bashfully, suddenly unable to meet his eyes, their bedazzling, bejeweled fathoms at full sparkle. “How can one be so unsparing towards a befuddled young swain, yet mere instants later is endearingly demure before one whose body he has repeatedly and rigorously ravaged?”

“That is a mystery for you to decipher, maltaren,” the elf-knight murmured. “As I am far too preoccupied with this Angbor affair.”

“Or stymied by the thought of all the kisses you are being denied,” Legolas taunted. “Though, of course, you can take heart in the knowledge that you can wreak them upon me at a later hour.”

“And how I shall,” Elrohir challenged, his blood so hot that he had to express his desire, even if it was relegated to sultry words. “How I will glut you with them, starving all other aspects of your person until you spend fierce whilst suckling decadent at my mouth.”

At that moment, he would have given anything to tongue away Legolas’ wolfish grin, but, as ever, he chose to restrain himself.
“There is quite the tiger stalking behind your scholar’s robes,” the Mirkwood prince observed, betraying little of his own intense arousal. “It is one of the great honors of my life to be invited to troll its jungle.”

“But what of the vast library my more owlish persona inhabits?” Elrohir quipped, seeking to diffuse the tension before he very well did claim his lover then and there. “That appears to be of interest, as well, or I have been the more deceived.”

“You have not,” Legolas beamed, pleased that his coded missive had been well received. “I am no intellect to rival your repute, but my King Adar insisted upon centuries of schooling concomitant to our military training, thus I am more or less decently versed in rudimentary works of history and literature, the former being my personal preference. Any leader of merit should be aware of the triumphs and stumbles that preceded him, or so I have always thought.”

“It was wonderfully clever,” Elrohir complimented. “Indeed, I am rather addicted to puzzles and such, so it was a treat of the highest order. Though it may have an averse effect, since I will now stray from you during the day that I might receive more.”

“I will endeavor to impress you as best I can,” Legolas nervously vowed. “Though we’d best work out a more serviceable code, as there will be instances in which I would not risk being misunderstood.”

“Well reasoned,” Elrohir concurred, sobering some at the thought, then gestured towards the door. “They have quieted.”

“We have not been summoned,” Legolas commented. “Though perhaps we should invade all the same.”

“I feel it is our charge to save them from themselves,” Elrohir sighed, with more bemusement than resignation. “If only someone would do the same for us.”

Though Legolas’ resulting laughter was mellifluous, there was no denying the jagged reef of weariness beneath the surface of his mirth, one that Elrohir inwardly acknowledged they were both cautiously steering around.

End of Part Three
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not for profit.
Summary: On the eve of Aragorn’s coronation, our golden pair are charged with investigating a brutal murder at the Citadel.

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present...

A Slaying in Scarlet
A LOTR Mystery

Part 4

Art in the blood is liable to take the strangest forms.
–The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1893

We are spies in an enemy's country.
–The Red Headed League, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1891

Minas Tirith, Year 3019, Third Age

May 8th

The incisor peaks that threatened at every moment to clamp down on the spire of the Citadel towered menacingly above as Legolas strolled along behind the perpetually bouncy hobbits, who were little bothered by the slit-knife landscape that bordered the mountain path they trod. Baskets swinging perilously close to fang-like stalagmites and dagger-sharp edges, they gingerly skipped around these hazards, scouring for the berry-laden briars hidden between, like snares of cartilage in a lion’s jaws. Given that a healthy halfling diet consisted of three times the amount normally consumed by the average man (and nearly 10 times what an elf daily required), they had been forced to forage for their own reserves of food in secret, since the provisions allotted them – equal to everyone’s rations – risked their so very precious lives. Even Frodo’s portions had been reduced since his recovery, which had communicated to his friends the dearth of the city’s resources, and even caused them to feel a modicum of guilt over their own culinary traditions. Yet it had not prevented them from surreptitiously pilfering the surrounding areas to supplement their stores, nor minimizing their excursions beyond the city gates.

Though Gimli normally escorted them on such ill-conceived ventures, upon learning of their stealth, Legolas had that day insisted on accompanying them, partly for the rejuvenating freshness of the mountain air and partly to inquire after their infiltration of the stewards’ militias. He was so impressed with the maneuvers required to exit the city unawares, he was considering a quiet word to his King Adar, once peace was restored, that they should hire themselves a hobbit crew to embark upon missions of a sensitive nature and rudimentary espionage. Gimli was still chuckling over his sly mention of this as they – or, rather, he – crouched through a low-ceilinged tunnel, which led to a small, well fortified glade, thick with mulberry briars and carpeted with nut-cocooning nettles. The
two warriors hopped their way to a long ledge cut into the rock, where they perched themselves while their charges gathered all they could not stuff into their mouths.

Feeling a master to a band of overly merry chipmunks, Legolas momentarily permitted himself to bask in the quietude that abounded at such a heights, so remote that there was nary a carrion bird’s cry to be heard. During the night, the mighty wind had veered southwards, clearing the sky of ominous cloud cover and cleansing the city streets of soot. While she was not quite back to her crystalline polish, beneath those azure fathoms and that beaming sun Minas Tirith had brightened considerably, her population lured out of doors at dawn by the blessing of a pinky aura sizzling up the horizon.

Legolas stifled a shiver as he recalled the sweetness of Elrohir’s caresses as they watched the sun rise, the sensual coupling they had enjoyed as that hallowed effigy had blazed into view. Later, he had dragged his lover out onto his easterly balcony, threadbare sarongs barely concealing their nakedness, insisting that the altitude and architecture would conspire to provide decent coverage; besides, not a soul would dare tear their eyes away from such a welcome phenomenon as Anor’s first rise above a realm free from the Shadow’s tyranny. The elf-knight had been characteristically dubious, but had endeavored to molest him all the same, wringing a muffled climax from him as a wry form of worship of the elemental majesty before them.

A glance over at Gimli suffused him with guilt over his own discretion. He had been much pondering matters of censure and secrecy of late, mostly while concocting solutions to Amrothos and Thorondil’s plight. After much debate, they had agreed to limit their encounters to once every three days, in a location either Elrohir or Legolas had arranged for, and most definitively under Dol Amrothian guard. While he and his elf-knight nightly reveled in carnal abandon, these avowed, if immature, beloveds had to wallow in isolation, hounded by the fear that some pious prig might learn of their relationship and wrench havoc for the one they adored. It was, of course, as always, a matter of appearances. A lesser prince of Dol Amroth had no cause to regularly frequent an archer of Morthond Vale, whereas he and Elrohir had the excuse of the investigation. Though it was hardly curious that two warriors from diverse backgrounds should befriend one another as a result of being allied in a war, they could not afford the faintest hint of impropriety, especially given how they mooned over one another when but separated by a few feet of space. Still, it riled Legolas something fierce that by the random fortune of birth they were not permitted to love openly, just as he seethed over the potential prejudice that kept him from confessing himself to Gimli. Elrohir’s arms were an oasis from all these cares, but even there he was all too aware of the privileges he enjoyed, privileges that his giving soul would eagerly gift to so many others.

Yet there was kingly business to attend to, and as agreeable as the dulcet morning was, he could not tarry too long at berry-picking and the like.

“My friends,” he announced, as quietly as he could, unsure of how his voice might echo. “What news of the mannish forces? Are the seeds of revolution being planted in any of the soldierly enclaves you infiltrated?”

“The denizens of Lossarnach are a capital lot,” Gimli praised, in his usual gruff manner. “They do favor a good tussle with their fellow fiefs, but such rivalry is the foundation of their society. They are bears, not vipers. They like to wrestle and to roar, but have little use for wrath.”

“You dare not claim that Nargomer is a burly brute raring for a cuddle,” Legolas dryly quipped, still bristling over how summarily he was pounced upon by the steward’s guards.

“He has grand designs,” Gimli agreed. “But his mind is not as keen as some. His methods are as laughably transparent as his ambitions. Aragorn will soon have him mastered, if Faramir does not
deal with him first. The future Steward of Ithilien keeps a close eye on him, his most trusted acolytes
never too far from the Lossarnachian stronghold.”

“Faramir must harbor other suspicions,” Legolas remarked. “I will speak with him. What of the
Anorians, Sam?”

“They are a humble folk, my Lord,” the portly hobbit replied. The archer had become exasperated
with his friend’s embrace of formal titles of late, but well understood the intimidation that prompted
him to do so. Not everyone would see the use of Legolas’ common name as a virtue of fraternity, but
rather might cite the halfling for dishonor and insubordination. Regardless, Sam had so far withstood
his fellows’ ceaseless mocking, and their titters now little aggravated such a sure and steady spirit.
“Few are acquainted with any from Lamedon, and those that are revere them for their condemnation
of Denethor.”

“As expected,” Legolas accepted. “What else? Has anyone proof of dissention?”

There was a collective shrug between the hobbits, such that the Mirkwood prince became anxious
that his trust in them had been misplaced.

“There are squabbles aplenty,” Merry finally explained. “But nothing that suggests devious intent.”

“Aye,” Pippin was quick to concur. “They are rather a surly lot. They hardly seem capable of
organizing a campaign, let alone a plot against the King.”

“There are a few wily ones in each camp,” Merry continued. “We saw enough to see them all in
irons, but not for such a grievous offense.”

“They are displeased with their present straits,” Pippin added. “But in the manner of unruly children.
They have aggression to spare and no one to wreck it upon, much as we are when unfed.”

Even Gimli had to chuckle at that estimation, having played guardian to the hobbits for the past
month.

“Besides,” Sam commented, assaying his sagest look. “Would not such a villain pretend to be the
kindest soul about, or at least the most demure? Methinks he would desist from such obvious
machinations and draw no attention to himself. If any knew of his bitterness, that mean be the end of
his efforts towards overthrow.”

“Quite right, Master Hobbit,” Gimli approved. “Though we cannot assume that the culprit is that
wise or cunning, especially when he went to such pains to draw attention to himself with his crime.”

“Indeed,” Legolas seconded. “If it is a matter of private vengeance, then he may now be satisfied, or
forlorn that his vendetta has ended. If it is a political maneuver, then his excitement could be revving,
prompting him to stumble due to over-exuberance. Yet if you report that this is not the case with
anyone, perhaps we must conclude upon a private motive. Most of the evidence we have
accumulated supports that theory.”

“There is one who…” Frodo hesitantly mentioned, with the heaviness that so ruled him of late. “I
have been trafficking with the archers of Morthond Vale, and I find them to be rather suspicious.”

“How so?” Legolas avidly questioned, reassuring the hobbit as to his willingness to doubt even those
he considered worthy beyond compare.

“Duinhir is, as you say, rather pleased with himself of late,” Frodo recounted. “One of his highest
ranking officers, Thorondil, disappeared most suddenly, and he was barely chastised when he
reappeared. If ought, Duinhir seemed glad of the reprieve, since he was able to consult with his loyals without deferring to Thorondil’s station and inviting him along. I know Thorondil is renowned for his gossiping, so this might simply be a case of them ensuring that none learn of certain governmental affairs, but their manner leads me to doubt it.”

Legolas considered this awhile, utterly chagrined over the news of Thorondil’s estrangement from his peers. From what he understood of Frodo’s testimony, Duinhir had sought to evade his lieutenant long before his excursion to Osgiliath, but it still did not bode well for his friend’s safety. Either the senior officers were plotting some mischief, or they were aware of Thorondil’s preferences and were seeking to expose him. Either way, Legolas had to intervene, though how he could do so without further complicating matters, he had no notion.

He inhaled deeply, attempting to reason the problem through as befitting Elrohir’s sterling example, but he was not the elf-knight and could not so easily distance himself from his emotions. Especially when the implied provocations were ones that could have been directed at him under different circumstances, especially since he was currently chafing under the few restrictions that had been imposed upon him.

Suddenly, Legolas saw his way free, the only way to gain even the slightest insight into which danger more readily threatened Thorondil. He would place his trust in the friends that had championed him from the first, in the fellows that had courageously marched with him to Mordor and certain death.

“My friends,” he softly inquired, weighted down by the moment’s import. “What do you know of the ways of elven courtship?”

“You mean that like pairs with like as often as not?” Merry bluntly retorted, giddy at the incendiary turn the conversation had taken.

“We have been among the elves,” Pippin coyly insisted. “At Imladris, and with Gildor’s band. We have seen what there is to see of elven relations.”

“Very well,” Legolas smirked, since the hobbits never failed to lift his spirits when they wanted. “And you are aware of the consequences of such actions in mannish society?”

“Who is not,” Sam snorted, his annoyance plain. “One only needs to partake of their attempt at theater to…” He trailed grumpily off, clearly disapproving. “They say hobbits are lesser beings, but hobbits would not judge as they do.”

“*We* do not,” Frodo underlined, his blue eyes pregnant with meaning.

In view of this, Legolas could barely corral his astonishment enough to complete his thought, but bear through he did.

“Thorondil, though a man, favors such elvish proclivities,” Legolas explained. “He absented himself because he… fell in love, and sought shelter for a time with his paramour that they might…”

“Resolve themselves to a course of action?” Pippin completed, with feigned innocence.

“Indeed,” Legolas concurred. “So I would know of you, Frodo, do you think Duinhir and his acolytes may have become enlightened as to his controversial preferences and sought to collude against him.”

Frodo mulled this over for a moment, then concluded himself.
“I do not,” he responded. “On the few occasions they spoke of such things, they discussed them with such contempt that I do not think they would have bothered with a plot if they knew of his tendencies. They would have slain him forthwith, or so they oft boasted when in their cups.”

Legolas could not decide whether this more worried or relieved him.

“Do you perceive there is a threat to Thorondil, or merely a contempt of him?” he pursued.

“Is he not as flattered for his so-called prowess in the lesser of the battle arts as you, Elf?” Gimli teasingly snarked. “If so, his fellows are probably as jealous as they are proud.”

“If he is accomplished as well as beloved,” Pippin opined. “There are reasons aplenty for him to run afoul of his supposed loyals, none of which need be directly related to Aragorn’s rule.”

“Especially if he traffics in information others would best have unknown,” Merry added.

“As you both well know,” Sam quipped, with a hearty chuckle.

“Whatever the cause,” Frodo assured him. “Have no fear that we will ferret it out.”

“Aye, we will concentrate all our efforts on them,” Merry mercurially concurred. “Even if it requires involving Gimli in an archery lesson!”

As the diminutive ones exchanged jeers and reproofs, Legolas considered whether the situation warranted his intervention. He would not, after all, further imperil those who had already risked so much to ensure Middle-Earth’s victory over the dark forces that assailed her. However innocuous their current appearance, they were titans to a one, and loyals that he could certainly depend upon.

“Alas, gwadoren, the time has come for a stealthier approach,” the Mirkwood prince explained. “The cause of their estrangement of Thorondil may be crucial to Aragorn’s protection, and therefore must be learned forthwith. Though I appreciate to no end the effort you have expended in this affair, and pray you will continue to abet our investigation, since the evidence you collect may very well lead us to this heinous fiend.”

The hobbits, eager to scarf down more berries, collectively shrugged.

“Tis what we do,” Sam humbly replied. “Aragorn needs us. You need us. We are here to help.”

“Tis also rather fun!” Pippin exclaimed, to the amusement, and agreement, of all his co-conspirators.

“Spying on those big lunks,” Merry excitedly agreed. “And I get accused of being a braggart!”

“Yet do nothing to overly endanger yourself, Legolas,” Frodo fondly advised him, in the kindly manner that overtook him of late. “Nor Lord Elrohir.”

“Have no concern on that account,” Gimli winked mischievously, such that the air was rife with insinuation. Astounded by the comment, Legolas was too preoccupied with gaping to properly school his reaction. After meeting his eyes, the dwarf let out a bellow of laughter, such that his derision did indeed echo through the mountains. “Look, he’s all but confirmed it!”

Legolas was the more stunned to be confronted by a chorus of snickering friends, who had apparently diverted themselves with a spot of rumor-mongering in their own right.

“Come now,” Pippin merrily chided. “Did you think we failed to note how many of those Lothlorien rakes caught your eye?”
“Or the rogues of Rohan,” Merry trilled.

“Or the virile defenders of this very city,” Sam contributed, in a rare bit of mockery.

Thankfully, Frodo abstained, or else Legolas might very well have flushed with embarrassment.

“So, are you smitten?” Gimli playfully demanded, haughty even when he was intruding upon a
friend’s personal affairs. “Or is it merely a case of taking advantage of what’s before you out of
desperation?”

As he, mid-fluster, mulled over how to respond to such a complicated, and vaguely defamatory,
utterance, Legolas was indeed relieved to discover how keen and clever his wee champions truly
were. Many underestimated their potential, but he would never do the same, since time and again
they proved to him how immeasurably worthy they were as allies, as fellow adventurers, and as the
dearest of friends.

* * *

Twas a pensive mood that afflicted Aragorn as he admired the celestial splendor of the night sky,
which glittered with stars as bright as the diamonds mined by the dwarves of Erebor. The gloom of
Mordor had finally receded back to that swarthy pit of pulchritude that the earth mother might
commence her cleansing of that bloodstained, barren terrain and the slaughtered orc legions that
served as its vile carpet. In defiance of the celebratory atmosphere that possessed most of the city’s
haggard and worn population, the nascent king could not so easily shuck away his troubles and revel
under a kaleidoscopic fireworks display, not when the peace he was fighting so hard to establish was
yet threatened by the murderous ambitions of a madman.

In four days, he would stand bold before his masters, the public, and receive his crown. They would
fete him as enthusiastically as his ancestors, but Aragorn himself aimed for servitude, not the various
forms of tyranny they have known. This burden, second only to the impossibility of what he
demanded of the immortal he would take to wife, equally awed and overwhelmed him. He felt
simultaneously fit for the challenge and woefully inept, having spent his life in solitude, among those
whose stations far seceded his own, or amongst the humblest of rural folk. As he had been trusted by
kings, lords, wizards, so would he request the trust of those who knew him little, by reputation or
personal experience, of those who valued him for the blood that fuelled his veins. Yet he would not
be judged by his hallowed heritage, but by his merits as a leader, by his achievements as a warrior,
by the excellence of the fellows he kept and by the benevolence of his actions towards his fiercest
enemies.

That last encapsulated the thought that provoked him most, on that glorious night. How would he
deal with Angbor’s slayer, once apprehended? Should he be mercenary, merciless, cutthroat, given
the heinous nature of the crime? Should he be guided by the perpetrator’s motive, that he not appear
to be avenging himself against one who would contest his rule? Or should the gravity of the affair
press him towards execution regardless of the impetus that compelled the villain to act? Whatever he
decided upon, he was overly conscious of the fact that this was the first impression he would make
upon the citizens he would court as allies. For a time, this imperial action would define all those that
came after, including the declaration of his impending nuptials and the ceremony he prayed would
follow soon after.

All this brooding over political strategy had one virtuous effect; it permitted him to relegate thoughts
of Arwen to the recesses of his mind, where they preyed most hotly upon his dreams. He could ill-
afford to contemplate his love for her beyond the confines of his bed, for it consumed him such that
he nightly burned in a wrought effigy of passion. Yet neither could he succumb to the urge to
imagine sinking into the warmth of her arms, to finally believing himself to have earned their blithe
sanctuary, otherwise he might devolve into madness.  

He would relish the fruits of his monumental achievement when the time came, and savor them mightily he would.

Indeed, he became so engrossed by visions of that impossibly sublime moment that he missed the pat of the rope that landed on the balcony floor, as well as the hiss of the intruder sliding down its length. The soft press of boot soles into the stone, however, alerted him in time to unsheathe his dagger and strike, only for his outstretched blade to be casually batted away by a flaxen figure he knew all too well had come to stir up some mischief.

“I surprised you,” Legolas declared, though in a muted tone. “Indecently out of practice, as I thought.”

“I would have gutted anyone but you,” Aragorn uselessly protested, then fondly greeted his friend. “What has you skulking about the Citadel like a common thief?”

“A spot of espionage,” Legolas wryly informed him, that telltale glint to his eyes. “One that I thought you’d perhaps care to partake in.”

“You’d have me scaling the roof of my own palace?” Aragorn sourly inquired, though in truth he was intrigued by the prospect.

“I thought the Ranger in you demanded some recreation,” Legolas shrewdly remarked, with a generous smile. “To be honest, I have wanted some for your companionship these past weeks. It galls me that the battles that embroil you are all so… governmental. Come, let us exercise ourselves a bit. You are, after all, the stealthiest blade in my acquaintance.”

“Flattery!” Aragorn exclaimed, so as not to exhibit too much emotion over his friend’s touching concern. “That is a novel approach. I trust this is related to the trouble at hand?”

“Indeed,” Legolas elaborated. “I have upon good authority that those we have both thought loyal to us may be harboring rebellious sentiments behind their masks of fealty. This may or may not pertain to the matter of Angbor’s slaying, but I would hear such treachery from their own lips before I condemn them.”

“As would I,” Aragorn sternly concurred, most displeased by this turn of events. “The times are precarious enough without me exiling those that have done me no wrong and championed my candidacy at every turn. I shall prepare myself in haste.”

Legolas followed him into his bedchamber, that he might further detail the mission while he dressed.

“There is another angle to the situation,” he commented. “Mithrandir has told you of our efforts to protect Imrahil’s third son?”

“The Prince himself expounded quite volubly upon the entire affair,” Aragorn chuckled. “Not one of our more amicable exchanges.” This received a sympathetic chuckle from the archer. “I would have you know that it is on my agenda to alter such a black tradition as persecuting those of such commonplace predilections among the elves, but it is a delicate matter that I cannot conceivably address before—“

“I require no dissertation,” Legolas smirked, amused by his once resolutely silent friend’s tendency to pontificate of late. “I only mention it because one of the reasons these potential blackguards may have of assembling in secret is that they found Thorondil out and might be targeting him. I must, alas, now tell you that it is a contingent from Morthond Vale we will be observing, no less than Duinhir
himself, as well as his closest fellows among the archers.”

Aragorn sighed heavily at this, not entirely shocked by the news.

“Gandalf has been thusly concerned on my behalf,” he responded, which Legolas thoughtfully received on his part. “Some of his greenlings have been kicking up trouble in the local taverns. Thorondil may disagree with their position on such issues, but I do not think it is a matter of who he beds. Yet neither would I hasten to brand these stirrings treachery. It is a timely action you propose, gwador.”

“Then let us to it,” Legolas prompted, tossing him a pack of climbing equipment and venturing out of doors anew.

As the King-to-be could not be seen exiting his chambers in such revelatory attire, they swiftly scaled atop the eaves, making their way around turrets and over domes until they soundlessly alighted upon the steeple roof the palace stables. Sneaking through the hay chute, they slowly climbed up into the rafters whilst the Morthond Vale cabal jovially bantered and boasted, stationing themselves in an obscure corner beside the store of grain. Once in position, they focused their eyes on the map sprawled across the floor, on which a lieutenant was pinning red and yellow markers of unknown significance. Only five others were gathered about, chatting soberly now that Duinhir had arrived, at seven a smaller group than either Aragorn or Legolas had expected. This suggested that their aim was indeed political progress, since any outright assault would require the force of their entire legion.

“Let us come to order,” the lieutenant proclaimed, then the men lined themselves around the map’s perimeter.

Duinhir strode regally across its length, armed with a pointing stick.

“Borogar has proposed that we strike first at the furthest outposts, here and here,” he detailed. “As discussed, we will break into two factions at the Rohan border, procure their guards’ armor, then fight our way back. Those posted at such altitude will be armed for the environment, which will enable us to ably dispatch the highest villages and to move swiftly from peak to peak. If we spread word of a mutiny in Rohan, the rest will be aptly prepared for us, as will their anxiety at being attacked when so poorly defended. By the time we have conquered the region, Carathel will have rode out from the capital, along with like-minded others. The paucity of our numbers will allow for a speedy retreat, then we may rejoin the war party as chartered members. Upon out return, I will endeavor to persuade the King of the region’s defenselessness. I have no doubt that, given such instigation as the vicious slaughter of innocent civilians, our fiefs will merge, and we will gain dominion over the trade routes that will seem the only available course given the strife in Rohan.”

“The one point left to reconcile,” the lieutenant warned. “Is the matter of how to absent ourselves from the city during this time. We cannot risk losing favor with the King, thus the reason for our withdrawal must be uncontestable.”

“That, my friends, is the problem that we must put our minds towards resolving this eve,” Duinhir seconded. “How do we instigate a scandal that will so affront our sensibilities that we may quit the city as a point of honor, yet giving no offense to our new sovereign.”

“To whom we must remain loyal, at all cost,” another vociferously insisted, as if any, including the two interlopers, failed to understand that the trade routes had no value without the peace Aragorn aimed to restore. “But we must avoid the scrutiny of those closest to him, especially the members of the Fellowship.”

“And Faramir,” a fourth impassively added, not the wit of the bunch. “Though he is betrothed to that
“Rohan maid.”

“Perhaps there is some manner of reaping the benefit of this trouble over Angbor,” an epicene archer considered. “If we identified the culprit as someone whose actions deeply offend us, then we can escape to save face.”

“Thorondil is already involved in the investigation,” the lieutenant reminded his captain. “What if he were abetting the authorities in order to disguise his own guilt?”

“But what reason would he have for perpetrating such a crime?” Duinhir asked of them, though not without some approval of the tactic.

“He is renown for his military accomplishments and loved by many,” one of the others commented. “His fall would be a calamitous one, but we must concoct evidence enough to convince the elven lords and his highness.”

“I will hear no more of this,” Aragorn seethed, subtly gesturing that they should depart before he wrecked furious vengeance upon them. When they were well away from the stables, perched on the mithril ring that encircled the base of the spire, he let out a string of curses Legolas would have been quite tickled by if what inspired them was not so horrid. “I have half a mind to allow this fell plot to unfold, that we might snare them in the acting of their own deceit.”

“They target Thorondil, as I feared,” Legolas dully stated, somber with regret at having failed to usher his friend off to Imladris when he had the chance. “Though thankfully not for the reasons assumed. Yet if they are scouring for a way to defame him, his circumstances are more than ripe for plunder. Worse still, we cannot entirely dismiss him as a suspect.”

“I can,” Aragorn imperiously declared, with a flare of righteous fury. “As I shall trump these greedy upstarts at their own game. I only wish I did not have to maintain the pretence of friendship until I can spring *my* trap.”

“The poor fools,” Legolas mused, though without an ounce of true compassion. “They know not what their crude ambitions have wrought.”

“They will only see the error of their ways when they are clamped in irons,” Aragorn growled. “I have encountered their sort afore. And to think we considered them the most virtuous of all!”

This last struck at the very center of Legolas’ lately consternation, since he too jeopardized his friend’s good opinion of him by entangling himself in an affair the king-to-be would likely disapprove of. Even at such a vantage, he suddenly felt dwarfed by his environment, by his predicament, by the daunting responsibility of living up to not only a leader’s, but an entire kingdom’s, expectations. As he gazed up into the uncharted fathoms of the universe, he recognized that the only way to avoid further debasing his honor was for his behavior to comply with the strictest definition of valor.

“Perhaps there is some consolation in their loyalty to your cause,” Legolas observed. “If not the mores you seek to instill. They would not claim your crown.”

“Nay,” Aragorn let out a dry, bitter laugh. “They would be as wolves in lamb’s wool, yet still at my leash. But I would not be master to such fiends. I would not be blinded to the abuse suffered by my own people! I am not so naïve as to believe men suddenly reformed of all their avarice and contempt. I know how they have scrounged for what little of value they still own. But if our quality of life is to improve, if we are all to reap the bounty of peace and prosperity, then those few that cannot be saved must be made examples of. Is that sufficient proof of my ruthless Ranger ways, gwador? That I will
hold a miserly few accountable for the crimes of all?”

“So long as they are guilty,” Legolas remarked. “Then who am I, who is anyone to suggest that you impose no sense of justice on the land?”

“And this murderer of ours,” Aragorn continued his interrogation, aching to relieve some of the burden of rule by confiding in his friend. “What shall we do with him, once he is apprehended?”

“Alas, I must play the diplomat and reserve judgment,” the archer insisted. “I would learn what prompted him before I condemn him to the trial of public opinion and the cries for his execution.”

“Well reasoned,” the kingling accepted with a heavy sigh, little eased by the airing his most private thoughts since such grave decisions were still before him.

Legolas waited for the night’s serenity to envelop them before he chanced further courting the Ranger’s anger.

“Yet all this debate over the insidiousness of the Shadow’s infection of the common man compels me to confess a stumble of my own,” Legolas stated as evenly as he could, not wanting to depend on any fraternal sympathies absolving him before his fault was known. “One that, if you knew me as my Mirkwood fellows do, seems all too predictable, but hopefully one that will not permanently tarnish your good opinion of me.”

“What madness is this?” Aragorn inquired, more bemused than rattled by his insinuations. “What could you, most reliable of elves, have possibly done that rivals Duinhir’s betrayal?”

“Nothing so unconscionable as that, I assure you!” Legolas exclaimed, wary of being misunderstood. “Though you have placed a level of trust in me that… upon reflection, I may not be respecting as I should. What I mean is…”

“Whatever the trouble,” Aragorn reassured him. “I can hardly think it so dire as all this prevaricating portends.”

The king-to-be chuckled fondly, but Legolas did not share in his mirth. Instead, he steeled his resolve, since he was compounding the injury by not admitting it in a timely manner.

“I should not offer any excuses,” he quietly began. “And yet I must. I have been lonely – as we all have, I know. But to be in such close quarters with such a genial and, frankly, magnificent creature as your foster brother… It was simply beyond my forbearance to endure. Besides, it was he who first… Though the blame lies just as much with me. I should have mounted a protest, but he has proved irresistible, especially given the heinous nature of our investigation-“ Had he paused his babbling to compose himself a moment, he might have noted the affectionate smirk that presently adorned Aragorn’s patrician features. “I swear to you, we have not for a second neglected our duty. We have relegated our affair to the wee hours, when all assume us to be strategizing…”

“How fitting,” the Ranger murmured, a blossom of hope burgeoning in his chest.

The archer nattered on for several seconds before staring baldly at him.

“Fitting?” he queried, as if of a lion with a carcass in its jaws.

“You are well suited,” Aragorn nonchalantly conceded, then gave the matter fuller consideration. “The notion had never occurred to me before, but now that it is before me, I think Arwen would approve, and that is the highest blessing any couple could aim to receive.”
“‘Couple?’” Legolas stammered, stunned by this turn of events. “Nay, we are not—”

“You should think on it,” Aragorn advised him, then proceeded to gather up his rope. “As I said, you are suited, and it would greatly please your families. Even your Adar would approve of such a match, methinks.”

“I fear you did not mark the essence of my message,” Legolas persisted. “We are not romantically involved, merely enjoying a platonic liaison. More crucially, whilst we are charged with a royal investigation.”

“By Yvanna’s loins!” Aragorn exclaimed in mock astonishment. “Surely you must be so lust-addled that you cannot possibly be counted upon to deliver the true culprit!”

At this, Legolas scoffed, himself marginally offended by his friend’s lack of sobriety on the issue. “Tis you who will be smarting when a scandal erupts,” he warned him.

“Then you’d best be discreet,” Aragorn urged him, in a gently taunting tone. “Verily, you are acquiring a taste for melodrama, gwador. It must be your association with Gimli.” His spirit lightened by this news, he let out a cleansing breath, then clapped Legolas on the shoulder. “If ought, I envy you such leisure, however brief your nightly indulgence. What I would not give to have Arwen’s arms to retire to each eve. My sole point of counsel is to tread softly with my brother. He harbors wounds so deep that they may not entirely heal until he lands in the Blessed Realm. But if you can soothe them even for a short time, who I am to scold you?”

The impact of his words upon the Mirkwood prince was clearly a profound one, though neither cared to descend into maudlin sentimentality.

“I am honored by your faith in us,” Legolas responded. “Though I should never have doubted it.”

“In such uncertain times,” Aragorn sighed. “When everything and everyone is in some way corruptible, one can only cleave to those he most depends on and pray misfortune does not befall them. Yet hope has not abandoned these lands, as it did not forsake us at the Black Gates. I aim to inspire it in everyone, even those who inspire me.”

The kingling was the more relieved when they shared a hearty smile.

“That was quite the regal pronouncement,” Legolas wryly remarked, as they prepared to scale back down to his chambers. “Perhaps the sovereign *has* finally conquered the Ranger.”

“Rather, the Ranger understands the pretensions required to enforce the moral code that has always guided him,” Aragorn deftly countered.

“May your subjects embrace it readily,” Legolas commented, as much to the city below as to the loyal friend beside him.

* * *

Elrohir peered down the endless stretch of corridor as if the chiaroscuro pattern of torchlight and shadow could foretell future events. Not a soul - nor phantom, nor rodent, nor rodent specter – was to be glimpsed for long minutes, thus he scuttled back into the confines of his study to continue his wait. He glared menacingly at the musty tomes that had made such poor company these hours past, expending little effort towards luring his attention away from the breakneck race of thoughts through rarely trod areas of his mind, where his anxiety, his intemperance, and his emotionality were corralled. Indeed, the only activity that had decently preoccupied him had been his inner
chastisement over his lately behavior, akin to that of a mother hen. Yet no matter how ruffled his feathers, no amount of clucking produced Legolas, nor another note detailing his late night adventures, which had concluded, the write would assure, safely.

Elrohir was unaccustomed to such flights of fanciful worry over a warrior beyond capable of defending himself, especially when said warrior was decidedly not in imminent danger. Though, much to his chagrin, he appeared incapable of curbing this impulse, that did not prevent him from being suffused with hand-shaking aggravation over the depth of his own foolishness. Anger in general was a far more palatable alternative than an expression of what he truly felt: spirit-guttering, resolve-daunting dread that something untoward would transpire, with him powerless to intercede. He had never before appreciated how he aspired to complete and unilateral control over his personal relations until that moment of abject vulnerability, though, if you probed him on the morrow, he would most definitely deny that he had even so much as quivered with trepidation. Regardless, he had to somehow harness himself, to focus on productivity, before Legolas returned to discover him a shuddering, simpering puddle of an elf.

Alas, struggle as he did to exorcise the archer from his thoughts, every scrap of parchment on his desk, every seat that surrounded it, every step of floor from there to his bedchamber screamed of his partner, of the heart they had both contributed to their investigation, of the heat that blazed between them when intimately enclosed. Unable to counsel himself a moment longer, Elrohir dug out the square of vellum that had been delivered to him early that evening, then meticulously – even somewhat maniacally – scrutinized its contents for any further insight into what Legolas was about. He derived not even a twinge of enjoyment from the fact that it had been crafted into a word jumble, the key to which had been molded into the wax seal, a device that had equally delighted and aroused him but hours before. After twice reconsidering his methodology, he concluded that it had been correctly deciphered, then he collapsed back into his armchair, sick with frustration at Legolas’ impulsiveness, at his own impotence, but most of all his own sense of helplessness regarding both the circumstances and his deplorable reaction to them.

Just as he was too long contemplating a rash maneuver, he was alerted to the creak of his balcony door, then a feather-light footfall crossing his bedroom. Before he could reach for his dagger, a telltale tap sounded on the doorframe, then the Mirkwood prince himself slipped in, his cheeks pricked with rose and his flaxen mane windblown. Twas a conspiratorial smile he shone at the elf-knight, one Elrohir might have smacked off his fair features if that would not have exposed too much about his present state of mind. Instead, he concentrated on reining in his rage and his relief, judging both too laughably theatrical, as well as revelatory, as responses.

“I bring fell tidings,” Legolas announced, whilst pouring himself a generous goblet of wine. Elrohir declined his offer of a remedial drought, not trusting himself when sober, let alone when fuelled by drink. “Our fellows from Morthond Vale are no longer so. They are plotting to overthrow the Anorians to fill their coffers and manipulate their position at court.”

Elrohir’s astonishment temporarily muted his irritation at having been abandoned to his research that the archer might pursue the first promising lead in days.

“Is Thorondil party to this?” he shrewdly inquired.

“Nay, he is their pawn,” Legolas elaborated. “Their jealousy over his achievements has estranged them. They search for some manner of using him as a scapegoat, and his present circumstances are only too eager to supply them. Aragorn is aware of all, and means to ensnare them, but we – or rather I – must see to Thorondil. I fear I must be even stricter with his allowance of intimate moments with Amrothos until this black business is settled. I also question whether to permit him to continue his inquiries on our behalf, but I feel we must, if only to keep his reputation among the other factions
The gaze he foist upon Elrohir was an expectant one, all officiousness and deference. The elf-knight, however, felt trapped between his need to demand a more thorough explanation of the archer’s reasons for not consulting him and the exigencies of his duty as a detective in service not only to the case, but also to the king that commissioned him. Characteristically, he chose the latter, no matter how his emotions railed against further repression.

“You are correct in your decisions regarding Thorondil,” Elrohir opined. “To shepherd him away but days before his fellows are accused of treachery is a glaring example of favoritism, especially if Amrothos slinks off, as well. We cannot know if one of the archers suspects his proclivities, but has refrained from voicing it until now out of loyalty and thus will not fail to do so when his own freedom is restricted. Yet, before proceeding to a plan of action, would you care to relate how you came about this insight? And how is Estel already alerted to their machinations?”

“In interviewing Frodo this morn, I learned of their odd behavior of late,” Legolas explained, plunking himself up on the desk at a proximity that discomfited the elf-knight, since he could slide onto his lap with the slightest of ease. “Twas little trouble to uncover the site of their secret meet and sneak in to observe them. I rather innocently thought Aragorn’s mood would be bettered if he participated in a spate of intrigue, and I know none stealthier than he, so I invited him along. Thankfully so, since I no longer bear the burden of convincing him of their betrayal with only my own observations as evidence. Yet I fear their plot has no true bearing on our investigation, which we must pursue just as relentlessly as afore.” The archer finished the last of his wine, then glanced about the study. “Have you uncovered anything of note?”

“Nothing on par with treachery and royal deceit,” Elrohir commented, barely shutting the lid on his hot boiling resentment, which his mind had cooked up to evaporate his disappointment. “With the coronation but days away, we must redouble our efforts, towards investigation but also towards the protection of potential victims. This means nightly curfews for the king and the stewards, as well as nightly guard duty for us both. Mithrandir, armed with my guidelines, is vetting the palace forces for those of unimpeachable loyalty to abet us in this monumental endeavor. For my part, I will re-interview all our suspects, both viable and discarded, scouring for any nugget of information they might have neglected to mention. Unless you can propose some other tactic, I think we have no choice but to be vigilant and await Aragorn’s moment of glory.”

“Tis faith in your keen, genial mind that rules my own,” Legolas smiled, with a warmth that seemed an affront to the angst churning within the elf-knight. “Other than keeping abreast of Aragorn’s plan to topple Morthond Vale, I am yours to command.”

Though his tenor hinted at mounting desire and rang with sincere affection, these sentiments hit a discordant note within the darkling elf, who had fought so mightily against his own all evening that he was insulted by how casually Legolas expressed his. Indeed, it riled him that the archer saw no slight in his choice to slip the elf-knight a quick note before gallivanting off with Estel. Yet his self-restraint was about to be strained even further, by a confession that would prove as untimely as it was poorly improvised.

“Then we’d best retire for the night,” Elrohir briskly concluded, as he rose from his seat. He had to force as much distance as he could from Legolas if he was to refuse the advances that his treacherous body craved. “We’ll have little enough opportunity for rest in the days to come.”

“And even fewer occasions for intimacy,” the Mirkwood prince soberly concurred. “Yet there is one further matter I would confer with you about, one that may… Alas, I fear it will incur your
displeasure. Though I swear to you it was done in the interest of our sanctity as lovers and our honor as servants to the crown.”

Mildly intrigued, but with his baser instincts far more motivated towards gathering further proof of Legolas’ misbehavior, Elrohir found himself compelled to dismiss his reason’s urgent warnings that he was in no mood to be provoked and to demand full knowledge of how he had been betrayed.

“I can hardly deny you contrition, if it is sought,” he implacably replied, feeling a pillar of righteousness as he stood tall before his lover.

For there was no doubt that it was as a lover that Legolas was addressing him, given the gentility of his tone and his unnatural hesitation.

“Ever since our conversation in the wake of our interview with Amrothos,” the archer explained. “I have felt… Well, somewhat chastened by your comment that Aragorn would disapprove of our liaison. I do not like to think that any action of mine, especially one of indulgence, would infuriate or endanger so noble a friend. I came to feel that, as one sworn to him, as one in all ways loyal to him, it was my… I will not say duty, since this is a personal affair, but certainly I owed him the truth on a fraternal level. Thus, after our espionage this eve—“

“You disclosed the nature of our private relationship to Estel?” Elrohir demanded, concomitantly shamed and horrified that the archer had acted so boldly. “*Without* first consulting me?”

“It was not a matter of great deliberation,” Legolas attempted to salvage the situation, despite the hardness that had overtaken the elf-knight’s features, rendering his skin as solid as alabaster. “The impulse was triggered by the hobbits’ teasing this morn, and our discussion of Thorondil’s proclivities, and how I felt… It did not seem just that they knew about the irregular desires of a relative stranger but they were not aware of those of one of their closest friends. As it happened, they were fully aware of the interests I harbor, and then Gimli taunted that I was likely enjoying a flirtation with you, and then… The entire conversation simply spiraled beyond my control. I had thought to catch you during the afternoon, but I was at pains to discover the location of the archers’ secret meeting, and… None of this excuses the fact that I did not come to you before speaking with Aragorn, for which I beg your forgiveness. We were there, on the rooftops, in the lone secluded conversation we have been permitted in months, and I knew the opportunity would pass if I did not take advantage of the moment. I hope it is of some consolation that he does not care one whit what we are about and he believes Arwen would approve, though I know not why she is the arbiter—“

“Enough,” Elrohir curtly interjected, his fury so repressed that there was an icy chill to his tone. “You have presumed a great deal of me, yet offered pithy consolation for any distress you might have caused. Perhaps it is your way to go about trumpeting our affair to all and sundry, but I aim only for discretion. However it relieves me that Estel maturely places no restrictions upon us, I would have learned as much from his own lips. I am dishonored in that I did not broach the subject with him myself, and that you have done so in my stead compounds my disgrace.”

The elf-knight immediately perceived the hurt in his eyes, but did nothing to diminish the intensity of his stare, nimbly stepped out of his reach when Legolas rose to placate him with a supplicating touch.

“I am deservingly berated,” the Mirkwood prince cautiously agreed. “I acted inconsiderately, and I am sorry for it. Anything that I can do to regain your trust, I will zealously perform. But I do not regret securing Aragorn’s approval, as the thought of deceiving him burdened me such that I might not have been able to pursue our liaison if it had continued in secret.”

“Privacy is not secrecy,” Elrohir coolly stated, barely leashing in the rampage of his tempestuously rearing emotions. He drew upon every lesson of his warrior training to confront this, perhaps the
wiliest foe that had ever challenged him. “Nor am I so enslaved to our relations that I can conceive of no end to them. Indeed, at this moment, I am far more loath to invite you into my bedchamber, since I have no notion of who or how many might learn of what transpires within. When the cost is my foster brother’s crown, or the lives of those currently under my protection, I deem the price for a few moments of diversion far too high.”

Though Legolas’ stricken look nearly shattered him, he held fast to his resolve, knowing that if he did not cut him now, he might be mortally stabbed later. Yet he had to turn away as the archer battled through his shock, since even one so tightly coiled as the elf-knight could not stand to watch his lover unravel before his eyes. Legolas, however, was of hardy Sinda stock, of tyrannical Oropher’s line, thus he rallied his senses long enough to endure their final moments together.

“Then I fear I can do little else but apologize anew,” the Mirkwood prince responded. “You have my solemn vow that I will engage in no more talk of our affair, or… Or seek you out in ought but a professional capacity.”

Unable to bear another second of the tension, indeed fervently ignoring the sensation that, in rebuffing Legolas, he had perverted something pure within himself, Elrohir veered the conversation down a more formal path.

“Very well,” he quietly accepted, suddenly conflicted about everything that had transpired that night, but unable to express this. “Mithrandir expects us at five bells on the morrow to strategize guard posts and divide shifts. See that you conclude your business by then.”

“I shall,” Legolas dutifully acknowledged, though his woebegone features told a far different tale.

Elrohir nodded regally, then escaped into his bedroom before his ache could consume him. He awaited the clank of the closing outer door before racing into the bathing chamber to void himself of bile.

End of Part Four
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not for profit.
Summary: On the eve of Aragorn’s coronation, our golden pair are charged with investigating a brutal murder at the Citadel.

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present…

A Slaying in Scarlet
A LOTR Mystery

Part 5

Work is the best antidote to sorrow.

My dear Watson, there we come into those realms of conjecture where the most logical mind may be at fault.
–The Adventure of the Empty House, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1903

Minas Tirith, Year 3019, Third Age

May 11th

Twas a misty spring morn that found Legolas sprawled across the moss-cushioned length of a toppled pillar, gazing up through the filmy web of brume at the blooming trees above. Every so often, a sprinkle of pinky petals would be shook off by the breeze, then float down to the verdant lawn like feathers swept out of a cluttered nest by a tidy matron bird. The opalescent sun hung in the sky as if from a celestial diadem, regal in her pallid, gemstone luster and crowned by diaphanous ripples of cloud, reminiscent of his Naneth’s white-gold hair. Yet it was the abundant fecundity of the gardens that had lured him to his early hours berth: the cascades of ivy that poured down every stone surface, the lush foundation of grass that invaded even the pebbled paths, the flowers burgeoning and the branches budding into a barely contained wilderness at the center of the Citadel.

Only in this fertile sanctuary had the Mirkwood prince been able to find due rest after his unceremonious eviction from the elf-knight’s bed and graces. That he slept only marginally well even here revealed much of the intensity of his brief relation with the Son of Elrond, at least to him, who had heretofore regarded the affair as both casual and consuming. He had not realized to what point he had become enthralled until Elrohir’s brute – and utterly deserved – dismissal. Legolas had resisted the impulse to interpret too much from these unwieldy emotions, given the duress they were still under and the duty that so preoccupied them both. There were a hundred reasons why his vulnerable sensibilities might lead him astray or make much ado about a minor liaison, though only one that dictated he reevaluate the manner in which he aimed to eventually reconcile with Elrohir. The archer was not one to strike prematurely, in battle or in affairs of the heart, especially when the consequences had the potential to so collapse the plans they were already constructing for their post-war lives.
Nevertheless, he unfailingly took note of the minutiae of his past few days: how he momentarily struggled to motivate himself to chase down the source of some random rustle when on patrol, how his mirth was less easily roused than afore, how a wood-elf as enamored of the outdoors as he found less solace in the palace gardens than in the arms of the redoubtable elf-knight. While certain anecdotal evidence hinted towards the seed of attraction between them growing roots, Legolas was not at all certain he wanted to nurture such a plant to fruition, though he was undeterred by the fell season that presently estranged them. Both Aragorn and his instincts had warned him of Elrohir’s wounds, thus he took no offense at his lately aloofness. Indeed, though their recent interactions had been brief, Legolas sensed that the elf-knight had already begun to regret being so severe, as well as allowing himself to be ruled by the emotionality he so deplored. The archer, for his part, considered their contretemps but minor friction between two who had admittedly been forced into nigh constant togetherness. If he had not irritated Elrohir’s defenses, then the elf-knight would have before long aggravated him. They were warriors, after all.

Rather, the question that dominated his thoughts of late was how thoroughly he wished to be reconciled with Elrohir. He maturely recognized the impasse that circumstances had presented him with. Sometime in the future, preferably before the coronation, he could either make peace with Elrohir and thereby entertain his favors anew, or simply barter a compact of lifelong friendship. The decision was as crucial as any that had ever confronted him. If he cared to pursue something more involved, this was the moment to press his case, to woo rather than seduce. If he meant to later break with the elf-knight, then the only honorable option was to conclude their affair and endeavor to regain his trust as a boon companion. To demand both a torrid aftermath to Elrohir’s anger and a peaceable end to their liaison was tantamount to exploitation, as well as greedy, callous, and cruel. Legolas would never tarnish something as priceless and coveted as the Son of Elrond’s love by teasing it out then rejecting it. While he had only the faintest intuition that a similar confusion had flamed the fires of Elrohir’s anger, and certainly there was no promise of this being so, he was painfully aware that this was also his only chance to discover if anything so meaningful could be ignited between them. Regardless, Legolas could only gamble on his own surety, his own conviction, his own effluent feeling, which at present did not quite course through him with the unbidden fervor he had expected of his first true experience of devotion.

With a sigh, he rolled onto his side, wondering if those storied moments of blindsiding clarity did indeed afflict one, or if it was a question of gradually accruing affinity, which rather lacked poetry. He had occasionally been awed by instances of epic grandeur on the battlefield, thus the bards could not have so totally been deceiving their many listeners, starry-eyed or no. Though Legolas hardly considered himself so fanciful, he did aspire to the romance they so compellingly sung of, if in a more realistic form. Obviously, he was unimpressed by the pastoral settings and lofty speeches of the more insipid ballads, but some had an integrity that had rung true to him at various moments of intimacy, including particular interludes with Elrohir. To his own mind, he had never genuinely loved, nor had he ever seriously courted a suitor; as such he was rather baffled as to what indicators should be signaling both within and without him. Yet he was confident that those instances of poetic and private confluence were some clue as to what he should be striving toward.

Like any investigator of repute, and following Elrohir’s sterling example, he would hunt these down until he had amassed enough evidence as to conclude upon his own besotting.

The blare of the horns alerted him to the lateness of the hour, since on the eve of the coronation there was to be only cursory rest for those on who the king’s protection depended. By twilight, he would be back at his patrol post, senses alert to the mildest fanning of a leaf by the wind, but at present he was required in Faramir’s interrogation chamber for a debrief with his favorite wizard. Upon receiving his summons the previous night, Legolas had already guessed at Gandalf’s intent in assembling he and Elrohir for a conference. The question of whether or not to continue the investigation after the morrow’s ceremony was one they had all been inwardly considering for some
time, especially given that they had no principal suspect and no established motive. Barring a villainous interruption of the coronation, the argument that promoted political unrest dwindled before the dawn of King Elessar’s reign. Mischief could still be wreaked, of course, but no future murder could unseat the kingdom’s rightful sovereign, unless the fiend succeeded in slaying Aragorn himself. His friend aspired to be a benevolent ruler, but he was servant to the discord of the times. If his stewards were being slaughtered, then they would be mercilessly avenged.

If a private matter this proved to be, their only impetus for pursuing the culprit then became the King’s vow to his subjects that one would be apprehended. Yet would they think on Angbor when drunk on the euphoria of the times? Would they fixate on his murder if no threat upon their status and livelihoods could be proved? Likely not. Certainly, none of the investigators would be proud of failure, but this was a minor defeat when compared to so many of the battles they had waged, the many they had yet to rush into. Chief in his mind was thought of Elrohir, the one his instinct predicted would not be able to concede the chase, though events would soon conspire to engross him: Arwen’s advent, the royal wedding, Theoden’s funeral escort, his duties to Imladris. The investigation would recede until it was little more than a diversion he undertook in the aftermath of the war.

From somewhere uncharted within him, Legolas was suddenly infused by the sensation that it should not be so. Angbor’s slaying should not be so patly resolved, such mendacity should not be dismissed, one as genial as Elrohir should not be blackened by such a glaring mark on his record of chivalry. No matter what transpired in their conference, *he* would take up the sword on the Steward of Lamedon’s behalf, on the King’s behalf, even on the elf-knight’s behalf, if need be. He would not permit this measly cinder of the Shadow’s wrath to smoke forevermore, not when it was within his power to stamp it out.

As he approached the interrogation room, he spied Elrohir, then cursed quietly at the muddied emotions his perhaps former lover roused in him. By the forlorn tenor of elf-knight’s gaze out a slender window, he was similarly deflated by the notion that the investigation would not continue beyond the morrow. Those adamantine eyes, when foist upon him, were abashedly eloquent, seeing in the archer a faithful ally and a valiant second, but also something more distressing, more ambivalent, than Elrohir yet dared admit to himself. In that look, Legolas observed that condemnation was slowly giving way to contrition – not in that the Mirkwood prince had behaved admirably, but in that the elf-knight had been too severe in his judgment of him, that he had not been as compassionate towards a fellow under duress as he could have been, that he had perhaps permitted old injuries to unduly influence his conduct towards not only a colleague, but a lover. Though Legolas was as yet unresolved as to the manner of their reconciliation, his spirit was buoyed by the fact that there would, in time, be one, that he could eventually earn Elrohir’s forgiveness.

When he fell into step with the elf-knight, he felt secure in their togetherness, that, whatever the outcome of this meeting, they were both committed to unofficially continuing their efforts to exact retribution for Angbor’s murder. That connection would be food enough to long sustain their friendship, even if there was no more replete a meal in their future.

Yet, as a shiver tingled down his spine, Legolas wondered anew if he could truly do without Elrohir’s favors, if he could stand to end their liaison on such a flat note, if there was not more linking his soul flame to that of this ravaged, magnificent creature than the fulsome flicker of his desire.

* * *

May 12th
Elrohir surveyed the ecstatic chaos below him with a hawkish eye, his keen glare and his mercenary pose dully distancing any who might dare to lure him into the fray. King Elessar’s court was a hive of activity, with the royal banquet hall swarmed with flitting revelers, the throne room buzzing with the barbs of snide aristocrats, and the archway between a veritable honey pot of commotion as sweat-sticky dancers flirted openly with flower-faced noble youths. Their newly crowned sovereign sat tall and proud, the ornament that encircled his shaggy head dwarfed by the regal opulence of his bearing, by the breadth of his fur-lined shoulders and the blunt cut of his jaw, by the gray elvish wisdom that accented his cerulean eyes, the lone remnant of their forefather, Elros.

As he admired the man who had been both brother and apprentice to him, Elrohir considered his uncle’s sacrifice almost worth the pain it had caused his father, though as a twin himself he would never truly concede the righteousness of Elros’ refusal of immortality. Indeed, that very morn he had sworn a long-neglected oath of his own, pledging formal allegiance to elfkind in the presence of his brother and Mithrandir (though he rather thought his decision blessed by the wizard’s other guise, Olorin of the Maiar). While Elladan had concretized his elvishness upon his binding to Glorfindel, Elrohir had felt himself too weighted by grief to reconcile himself to a particular fate, though he had not, as many had accused him, then harbored a death wish. Rather, he had recognized himself to be consumed by the need for vengeance, as well as an eviscerating agony, one he had only recovered from in the days following the Shadow’s conquest.

If his heart could be said to have entirely healed, a quibble he would have disputed but a week before, but one that he now embraced as part of the journey towards mental equanimity. Solidifying his future as an elf had mightily strengthened his spirit, the transformative effects of which he could already feel evolving within, yet, as evidence by his lately treatment of Legolas, there was much still to emotionally resolve, much to remedy in his conduct towards those who sought intimate knowledge of him (beyond the physical), though he was undaunted by this challenge. Rather, the failure that even at that moment blanketed his mirth like a shroud was a more practical defeat, one that proved intolerable to a scholar of his intellect, to a detective of his skill.

His misconduct was justifiable, if unconscionable, but his ineptitude was not.

Worse still was Mithrandir’s wholly comprehensible insistence that they no longer pursue the case due to insufficient evidence. Elrohir had been hugely ashamed when forced to concur that they had uncovered nothing of significance beyond Angbor being a lover of men and the treachery of the Morthond Vale cabal, neither of which they could connect to the murder itself. Indeed, their only success had been in matchmaking, since he had rarely witnessed greater devotion than between Thorondil and Amrothos. While Elrohir looked forward to deepening his acquaintance of them when they (most certainly) emigrated to Imladris, he had hardly agreed to investigate the crime in order to expand his social circle. Though everyone around him – Legolas included – celebrated anew the triumph of the good in the form of the reunification of the Kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor, Elrohir could only stew over the unanswered injustice of the Steward of Lamedon’s slaying.

Earlier that afternoon, whilst presiding over the vote that had led to Elessar appointing Heldoran as Angbor’s successor, the elf-knight had suffered both the accusatory stares of the remnants of the Lamedonian forces and his own bout of nausea over his inability to provide them with a villain to lynch. How he wished he could now cavort with his fellows, he could forget his troubles awhile in light of the incredible victory of the mannish king’s return, but he was not of such resilient temperament. Instead, every pair of brown eyes that confronted him recalled the despairing gazes of that handful of soldiers, the sole army that the Shadow nearly crushed from existence. They now have a king, but no captain; an emblem, but no idol. No justice, which sickened Elrohir such that he nearly retired to his chambers.

He was startled out of his depression by a firm grip on his shoulder, then he found himself elbow to
elbow with the hero of the hour. Having slipped away to divest himself of cloak and scepter, since most of his guests were by now far too intoxicated to mark his state of dress, Estel stole a moment’s respite beside his foster brother by the rail of the throne room’s upper tier, which housed his formal raiment and his personal office. Indeed, he appeared quite content to be purely Estel for a short while, with one of the elves he was most fond of, not Elessar, scion of the House of Telcontar, nor Aragorn the former Ranger, nor any of the aliases that had disguised him through the years. It was the name his mother had favored, the one Arwen purred when they were entangled, the one his brother mentors ever employed, even when they were most angered with him. He was now beholden to many, but precious only to a select few, who had helped him fulfill his destiny at horrific cost to themselves. Yet it was not the specter of that particular grief that presently haunted the elf-knight, but a far more devious phantom, that of his own incapacity.

“You glow with renewed incandescence,” Estel pointedly noted. “But relegate yourself to an obscure corner of the hall and shun company. Dare I guess at what brought on this brood?”

“My innate surliness,” Elrohir dryly noted, exhausted by the pageantry and frippery below. Estel chuckled softly, then essayed a kind smile.

“Forgive my inattentiveness this morn,” he earnestly apologized. “There was not a moment I could courteously excuse myself from.”

“Tis of no matter,” Elrohir dismissed, suddenly glad of the company and the conversation. “I swore an oath, received a blessing, and felt a queerness. There was, alas, no parting of the skies nor flaming beam of light. Though my metamorphosis rages on within. It is somewhat… disorienting.”

“Are you unwell?” Estel questioned, alarmed by his comments.

“I am not myself,” Elrohir hushly admitted. “But I am not ill. I…”

As if by their own accord, his eagle eyes targeted Legolas, who was embroiled in the usual game of one-upmanship with Gimli, Merry, and Pippin. He had thankfully divested himself of the elegant silver tunic that had so mesmerized the elf-knight throughout the coronation rite, though the form-fitting, exceptionally becoming aquamarine garment that had replaced it only further enhanced his ethereal countenance, despite its lack of jeweled beading and intricate embroidery. The loose, gossamer waves of his hair were even lovelier when slightly messed, as the elf-knight remembered only too well from the paltry few morns he had awoken to the sight of them spilled across his pillow. An ache, of such ferocity and imperiousness that he could not chance unleashing it, began to slam into the iron gates of his resolve, but his insecurity and his confusion, as ever, abetted his standing fast against it. He was more grateful for Estel’s subsequent interruption than he could express, since he was on the verge of confessing some malformed, abortive truth, one that just might be the ruin of him.

“I hear tell that you received a…rather timely correspondence, earlier in the day,” the King inquired, though he was worried by his brother’s obvious inner distress.

“Indeed,” Elrohir replied, patting his hidden pockets for the note in question. “I must have mislaid it. Regardless, it is the summons you have so hotly expected. Elladan and I will ride out on the morrow, to fetch your impish bride.”

He himself brightened some at Estel’s resulting elation, for he well knew that the only thing missing this glorious day was his cherished Arwen’s attendance.

“You must blaze a path across the lands,” the king urged him. “Scorch the very earth if you must! I
“You need not,” Elrohir insisted, with a snicker of approval. “Loneliness and I are mates of old.”

“Aye, but yours has absconded of late,” Estel shrewdly remarked, indefatigable in his quest to relieve the elf-knight’s burdened heart. “Evacuated by the most estimable soul that has ever served as my second. Though rumor has it you do not aim to keep him.”

“Rumor!?” Elrohir demanded, infuriated by the notion that he was being gossiped about.

“Hobbit intuition,” Estel assuaged him. “Naught more, though their talent for divining is not to be discounted.”

“So it appears,” Elrohir sighed, unsure if he wished to throttle or ravish his fair swain for permitting the situation to explode as it had. “They have been a boon to your concerns, if not especially to our investigation.”

“That wretched lot,” Estel harrumphed, his own temper piqued by the mention of the Morthond Vale cabal. “It will give me great satisfaction to topple them, though I will oddly feel far more secure when Angbor’s murderer is apprehended. Traitors I know I can defeat, but such a fiend… I suppose, to my feeble mortal mind, jealousy and avarice are understandable, as the capacity for such misbehavior resides in all men. But the artful cruelty that villain is capable of is evil in its crudest form. It threatens us all; not only peace and prosperity, but our perception of ourselves as essentially motivated by goodness. I would blight such heathens from this land, just as I will hunt down every last sniveling orc and see them slain.”

Elrohir demurely digested this speech, wondering where he dared not hope at its purpose.

“Yet the investigation has concluded,” he commented as calmly as he could, the elemental fission of his evolving spirit proving to be a potent alchemy indeed. “We have failed, and been dismissed.”

“The gods may deem a mere man unworthy of further influence,” Elessar insisted, for surely sweet Estel would never speak so boldly. “But as I am their servant, I am his King, and I will not have his sacrifice dismissed. It galls me to entitle that ferret in place of a lion! Angbor would have relished this day, would have thrilled at our alliance. If the only means of tribute available to me is to bring his killer to justice, then I will have the villain’s head on a stake!” The King growled under his breath in an effort to relax himself, then a wry smile twisted his lips as he remembered the company he kept. “That is, if you are still inclined to pursue the matter…”

“You rogue,” Elrohir chuckled, though he would have rather shouted his compliance to the rafters. “Despite my suspicion that your sole intent is to reinvigorate my waning spirit, I am, of course, as raring for the hunt as ere before. Though there is the small complication of my imminent absence.”

“That you’d best resolve with your rapscallion colleague,” Estel cleverly insinuated, with a look utterly redolent with mischief. “Preferably before he drinks himself insensible.”

With that, he strolled off to rejoin Faramir and Elladan at the table of honor.

Thus abandoned to his angst, Elrohir could barely contemplate the thought of resuming the investigation in light of the need to steal Legolas away for a private conference. What might transpire when they were enclosed dominated his mind, both his excitement and his reservations racing unchecked through his all too revivified body. On the one hand, there were enough details to confirm that they would be preoccupied the night long. On the other, his changing body’s tendency towards mercurial responses might tempt him into indulgence, especially given the lustful fever that had
overcome him at the commencement of their affair, when he was not undergoing a molecular metamorphosis. Regardless, there was no ignoring the call to duty, nor the emergency of the circumstances. He would just have to trust in Legolas’ forbearance, if not his own.

Elrohir prayed he would not have to endure the indignity of pleading with the archer for temperance, but also that Legolas was still irritated enough that he would rebuke any and all of his misguided advances. Yet he vowed to himself that he would forward an apology before the night was through, while somehow forgoing a thorough examination of what prompted him to behave so coldly.

When his mithril eyes again sought out Legolas’ flaxen majesty, Elrohir was astonished to meet with an ambivalent, yet provocatively intimate, iridescent gaze. As if the Mirkwood prince was privy to his very thoughts, Legolas politely excused himself, then departed his circle of friends to mingle with the crowd. This rudimentary subterfuge resulted in him alighting on the second floor moments later, having scaled the back stairs in order to avoid detection. Fighting desperately to mask his unsteadiness, Elrohir wandered away from the rail, newly assaulted by that lucid, penetrative stare when he veered around.

“You summoned,” Legolas quipped, deftly slicing through the tension with a verbal slit knife.

“I did,” Elrohir confirmed, relieved when his enigmatic feelings receded and his intrepid energies charged to the fore. “The game is newly afoot.”

“What news!” Legolas exclaimed, as they shared in a delightfully conspiratorial grin. “The King, I trust, is our new sponsor?”

“Indeed,” Elrohir informed him. “Come, there is much to discuss.”

With that, they trotted off down the corridor together, fuelled by the natural curiosity and pluck common to champions of their kind.

* 

As thick, silken swaths of ebony hair fell away from the engraved silver circlet with the grace of a lady doffing her slippers, Legolas stood captivated by the blue-black sheen of the dark locks, by the memory of their velvety texture slinking across his inner thigh, by how they flattered the porcelain pallor of the regal features they adorned. When Elrohir combed out the few tangles with his long, sword-callused fingers – the brusque, inconsequential gesture of a male oft nagged about his appearance – the archer’s entire pelt of skin tingled in anticipation of what was not to come, whilst his distracted mind conjured images of sensual abandon, a pool of satiny strands on his chest, the fervent clutch of his buttocks, a bristly lash across his abdomen, a careful cup of his bollocks.

Apparently, Elrohir had only to divest himself of the trinkets of entitlement to undo him. His covetous body needed not even wait upon the elf-knight’s bareness, which may prove imminent, since he had been relentlessly tugging at his abnormally high collar throughout their short walk from the banquet hall to his study.

Once enclosed, Elrohir had promptly fled to his bedchamber to shed his circlet, though Legolas prayed this discomfort would not see the replacement of his sleek, gorgeous tunic, which imbued his rather foreboding physique with an allure of sublime comfort and luxury. The color of rich, savory wine, the suede garment was so expertly cut that it required minimal ornamentation, only a few shards of obsidian to elongate the lines. Coupled with a pair of burgundy breeches, Elrohir seemed to be costumed in the guise of a righteous avenger, his costume stained with the blood of those he sought justice for. Armed with the renewed support of the monarchy, his noble features shone with righteous intent, thus rendering them all the more bedazzling to one who had once been the object of
their unilateral focus. Not for the first time that night, Legolas felt himself at the mercy of the inconstant and mercurial fates, who delighted in setting a resplendent feast before him only to warn that sampling a single bite was to court dishonor.

Though his resolve weakened even as his desire flared, the Mirkwood prince’s emotions as regarded the elf-knight were no more reconciled than before the reinstatement of their royal duty. Yet he was beginning to reconsider, perhaps in light of the beyond compelling temptation before him, whether he need truly remain steadfast in his vow of abstinence. The brethren would, after all, depart on the morrow, assuring them both a long month in which to dissec their most private impressions of their erstwhile lover. Indulging in one last tryst would hardly decide the manner; rather, it was as likely to deflate as it was to thrill. There would be little likelihood of mental aggrandizement if he had more recent knowledge of the swain that so befuddled him, whereas if he deprived himself now, he would be only the more needful when Elrohir returned, especially during the sweep and seduction of a wedding. Still, he recognized these as beggar’s arguments; he had been obsessed with the elf-knight from the moment he stepped into position beside his twin on the concourse, mesmerized by his beauty and yearning for a quiet word.

Even as he prepared to surrender to the inevitable, Legolas wondered whether his ambitions would be dashed by Elrohir’s tyrannical reserve. Perhaps, regardless of his personal feelings, he would ever be a pretender to the throne.

Before he could give this insight due consideration, Elrohir began to sway where he stood, then swiftly staggered out of view. Without a second thought, Legolas chased after him, only to discover him battling with the window latch, his trembling hands impeding his progress. The archer promptly intervened, catching the darkling elf to him even as he attacked the lock, though he was careful not to cinch Elrohir in too tightly, since he was obviously in urgent need of some air. After a few replenishing gulps, the elf-knight felt affable enough to spare a chuckle at his predicament, fortunately not betraying a hint of embarrassment.

“Are you well, Elrohir?” Legolas unfailingly asked, nevertheless concerned over his friend’s sudden spell.

“Tis no maidenly swoon, I assure you,” the elf-knight smirked, righted by the freshness of the wind. “But rather a burdensome combination of lack of sleep, overexertion, and a… a life change.”

“How now?” Legolas inquired, though somewhat bemused by his description.

“I am becoming an Elf,” Elrohir elucidated, tracing the scar that the archer had not noticed bisected his palm. “Though Elladan swore to elfkind long ago, I have rather selfishly delayed my choice until… Well, no longer. The rite was performed this very morn, and as it involves a small measure of physical transformation, I am, as you observe, a wee bit tipsy.”

“Intensified, no doubt, by the duress of the past few days,” Legolas commented, mostly to mask his astonishment. “We can adjourn until the morrow if you are poorly.”

“Nay, I am well enough,” Elrohir insisted, his color already improved. “Yet I would propose that we pack up our effects and repair to an open-aired location. Perhaps the gardens? I suddenly feel rather painfully enclosed.”

“Soon you will be distracted by the song of the forest,” Legolas gamely teased. “Scampering up trees for shelter and slumbering in rose arbors.”

“Has dallying with you infected me with some sort of Silvan curse?” Elrohir taunted in return. “Will I spout silver hair and enslave myself to the earth mother, as well?”
“One can only hope,” Legolas mischievously concluded, with a fond squeeze that he belatedly realized must have only compounded the elf-knight’s dizziness. “Bedeck yourself in something less enveloping whilst I collect our things.”

Twas as he stuffed their packs with books and scrolls that the uniqueness of this opportunity dawned upon him, the chance to edify Elrohir’s senses as no lover before. Though he had initially been intimidated by the thought of such a profound metamorphosis transpiring within his friend, his carnal aspirations unilaterally defeated by the prospect of upsetting this preternatural process, he now considered how cosmically rapturous the elf-knight’s pleasure might be if they were to couple whilst he was in such an ambiguous state. This married all too well to an earlier complot of his, one he had hatched when they were still regularly intimate. Certainly they both deserved the leisure implied by an extremely brief absence from the city. The rarity of the circumstances readily secured his own compliance, since he relished a spot of improvisation, so lacking in his life of late. Whether Elrohir would deign to trust him when beleaguered by a queerness and still smarting from his earlier imposition of will was another question entirely, yet one that he immediately recognized as worthy of risk, since it would give answer to one of his chief doubts about their suitability, that he was too emotionally impulsive for the conservative elf-knight.

“Even I am less confounded by the decision of what to do without,” Elrohir smirked as he slid into the room, looking far more steady in an equally comely shirt and long vest. “Do not fret over the details, I have committed my notes to memory.”

“Alas, I have not,” Legolas admitted, though he belted their packs all the same. “I thought it best to include some means of refreshment—“

“Legolas,” the elf-knight interrupted him, his eyes bright with urgency. “I… I am so sorry for what transpired between us. My testiness, I mean. For so long, the only thing keeping my head above the surface of that ever-deepening well of despair was control – over my defenses, my emotions, my comportment… I have lost so many, and the thought that I could suffer more tainted my every interaction prior to the War. During, I had mind only for the fight, for victory. To even contemplate defeat provoked me such that…”

“You need not excuse yourself,” the Mirkwood prince consoled him, aching to close the distance between them, to offer the solace of his arms. “We all had sorrows to endure, sorrows that do not evaporate with triumph. If anything, one feels more acutely what has been lost. We have shared something quite special, but also… unexpected. I was just as ill-prepared, and behaved unconscionably.”

“We are both at fault,” Elrohir somberly conceded. “But I have not yet voiced my apology, whilst you have offered many, most vocally through your loyalty to our cause these past days. I cannot think of one I have ever valued more, as an ally or as a friend. Yet I beg the most forgiveness for engendering our estrangement. Tis that comfort I have missed most.”

“As have I,” Legolas smiled, his muscles sparking with excitement over the gambit he would now likely succeed in playing out. “Indeed, I have been here attempting to suppress the impulse to repair to an even more remote location than suggested. Would you indulge me in this flight of fancy if I swear to deliver you by dawn tomorrow?”

This startled the elf-knight some, but he was nevertheless quick to assent, his heightening senses and his lately loneliness conspiring against his sober nature.

“I am rather keen to,” Elrohir confessed, though his tone was studiously neutral. “So long as we do not neglect to prepare for our prolonged separation. I would not resume our investigation by traipsing off to some languid interlude, however diverting our leisure proves.”
“You have my solemn vow,” Legolas grinned, though he could not quite mute its irascible quality. He invited his darkling one along with an outstretched hand, cherishing the tightness of that grip as soon as it twined into his own. They embarked on their adventure holding fast to one another for the first, and certainly not the last, time.

* 

The hard clack of cobblestone gave way to the dull thud of grass as their stallions sprinted through the city gates, slowing to a constant gallop across the vast expanse of the Pelennor. Though dense patches of new grown lawn covered the blood-soaked ground in places, under cover of darkness the more parched areas glowered like muddy pools, the gore-tainted soil unable to sprout a decent crop no matter how much rain enriched it.

Entranced by the swarthy sky, with lithe fronds of cloud that partially veiled the flawless opal moon and laurelled the primary constellations, Elrohir felt utterly divorced from the grit and toil of what had transpired on that battle-scarred plain, from the tragedy of those lost, from everything but the rhythm of his steed’s pounding hooves, the brush of the night air across his cheeks, the flap of those flaxen locks on the wind. He experienced an elemental synchronicity with the land, lived for himself its metamorphosis from crude rock to fertile earth while reverent before the somnolent fathoms of the sky, the great black sea of the universe beyond the realm of elven exploration. He was aware as never before of the epic grandeur of the world’s evolution, of how monumental and yet how ultimately meaningless their triumph over evil was given the cyclical nature of time, the inherent duality to their existence, the inability to escape one’s history as a people. He found himself ensorcelled by the spare nightscape, by the pearlescent beauty of his companion, by the winking, mysterious stars that seemed intimately acquainted with the longings of his heart. He felt both tranquilized and acutely alert, intoxicated and startlingly perceptive, as if he could peer through the solid, tactile surface of things into their very essence. Yet when he attempted to commune with a boulder, a bush, Legolas’ pretty white horse, the reins of his own, his focus scattered, distracted by another glowing aspect of the landscape before him, another sparkling aura in the treasure trove now open to his rapt perusal.

What by the gods was becoming of him? Elrohir broke reluctantly from his trance at the urging of his stern logician’s mind, which little tolerated such spiritual gallivanting. Discomfited by how totally this new elvish perspective had overthrown his reason and wary of having to perpetually wrestle with it, he sought sanctuary in the task at hand, in the deductive exercises that would forever define him.

“Legolas,” he implored, in a tone that revealed too much of his current vulnerability. “Speak to me of courtly matters.”

The smile that greeted this plea was too mired in concern to wholly absorb him, but it sufficed as a momentary diversion from his soul’s rhapsodic impressions of the view.

“Very well,” the archer concurred. “What evidence should I endeavor to procure whilst you are away? Where or on whom should I concentrate my efforts, and what form of surveillance should I undertake?”

Elrohir gave this due consideration, his irritation revived by the realization that they still had no primary suspect.

“Let us review each candidate’s potential for dissimulation,” he proposed. “If they are our villain, then they cannot truly be as they appear to us now. Indeed, if I was here to continue my side of our inquiries, I would delve into their personal histories for any tangible link to either our victim or to our profile of the murderer. Any care that might lead to such a connection should be pursued until the
trace is lost or an end is reached. We have explained the weaponry, the means, the method, most of the symbolism. Yet the crux of the matter is the why. Only when that is proved may we conclude upon a culprit.”

“So noted,” Legolas nodded, with explicit determination. “We might begin with the subjects of our first interview, the men of Lamedon. To my mind, there is now a question as to whether Angbor made any untoward advances to Gaurobir. How well known was the fact of his preference for men? Was it perhaps an open secret? They are a revolutionary collective. Might their judgment of those scandalously inclined be similarly so? And what of Heldoran? How eager was he, prior to the War, to usurp leadership? Was there a greater power struggle between the two than has been attested to?”

“Exceptionally well reasoned,” Elrohir complimented, his body a-tingle at the cleanliness of his logic. Corralling himself back into some semblance of composure, he soldiered on. “You might commence with learning if any other visitors from fellow fiefs intruded upon Lamedonian soil.”

“Methinks an envoy to the region is now a necessity,” Legolas pointedly remarked. “We have, after all, a bank of knowledge that consists of only a handful of fledgling warriors and a recently entitled steward. If there is gossip to be gleaned, then we cannot fail to interview the women involved. As it happens, I have hit upon the ideal candidate to lure them out: Eowyn.”

“Has she not a wedding of her own to plan?” Elrohir queried, steeling himself against the flood of torrid images this conjured in his all too susceptible imagination.

“Aye, but she is also overseeing an initiative to funnel resources to remote villages,” Legolas informed him. “No one would think anything of her personally escorting one of the caravans, nor lingering awhile to assure herself that these good works are indeed being carried out.”

“Perhaps Faramir should accompany her?” Elrohir suggested. “I am the first to champion her military capabilities, but we cannot risk that she be tricked or outnumbered. Besides, I am sure they would not object to a week of uninterrupted togetherness.”

“Likely not,” Legolas chuckled, with a huskiness that nearly unmanned him. “Still, I would not wager much on the Lamedonians’ culpability. The Steward of Lossarnach, however, I am certain is a scoundrel beyond any proof we have yet uncovered. If Morthond Vale is a bastion of corruption, then Nargomer must be in league with the remnants of the Shadow!”

The Mirkwood prince’s virulence only served to quicken the elf-knight’s blood, so aroused was he by the merest intensifying of his lover’s mood.

“Yet it has so far proved the most barren of fields of inquiry,” he reminded him. “We may not like his manner, but that does not mean he is a monster, and it is a monster we seek.”

“True enough,” Legolas sourly accepted, though Elrohir knew his conscience was far from settled. “We press on to the question of Imrahil’s involvement, as well as that of his sons. What think you?”

“My heart would exonerate Amrothos,” the darkling elf explained. “Yet my reason cannot entirely discount him. If there is one who is deceiving us, essaying an innocent’s role whilst a daemon lurks within, it is either he or Thorondil. The scene of the crime still speaks to me as the work of a lover scorned, a volcanic eruption of passion at its most vengeful and cruel. Now exorcised, they are cleansed enough to open themselves to another. But woe to that scintillating soul if they should err as Angbor did.”

“You believe one of them capable of such viciousness?” Legolas baldly questioned, though he was not so much affronted by the theory as incredulous. “They are puppies at the teat.”
“Perhaps,” Elrohir sighed, pricked by a sudden melancholy that there should be such deviousness in
the world. “The one who seeks to evade us is giving a performance, not merely for our benefit, but
for his own survival. If your life and liberty were at stake, if you faced not only execution, but
persecution and certain torture, would you not strive to appear as innocuous as possible? To suppress
even the faintest hint at your culpability? Remember, this is an act of vengeance, one that its
perpetrator would have succeed. Nargomer is a boar, a rake, and a tyrant – we suspect him because
he provokes us. Our villain would not care to do so if he preferred to keep his life. Now, given the
theatricality of his distress, the grandiosity of the mess he created, he may not be so reserved. Vanity
might impede the necessity for discretion. But in this heightened climate, he would truly have to be
seven shades of mad to expose himself so. My feeling is that his instinct is to survive, else he would
have killed himself in some spectacular fashion that Angbor would not fail to be indisposed by.”

They rode along in silence for some time, as Legolas chased down his path of deduction. This lull in
conversation greatly tested the elf-knight’s resolve, his lilting pulse and swoony focus luring him into
worshipful consideration of the Mirkwood prince’s charms, from the luster of his skin in the starlight
to the lean sculpt of his sinuous frame beneath that flattering tunic to the indelible strength of his
character, so steady and affable and…

“You truly are a master,” Legolas murmured, though even this low susurration, all but swallowed by
the wind, was enough to smack him out of his moony stupor. “I still fight with myself, as thinking ill
of former fellows is anathema to my personal aims, but your example has taught me that such
contention is baseless. If they are guilty, then I will curse myself for falling prey to their
machinations, and if they are ultimately proved innocent, I will never come to rue the efforts that
secured my certainty. I shall endeavor to be as ruthless as you in my inquiries, that the veritable
culprit, the remorseless murderer who conspires against all that is righteous, be brought to justice. Tis
he who is our enemy, and can be no friend of mine.”

“Quite so,” Elrohir tipsily smiled, utterly enchanted by the valiant ire of his companion, who to his
eyes shone like blast from Mithrandir’s staff against the stark indigo of the night sky. “My lovely
one.”

Perhaps it was the wryness of the archer’s smirk, perhaps it was the fondness implied by his knowing
chuckle, but the elf-knight was suddenly suffused with such a wealth of affection for his friend that
he nearly unseated himself. Yet those mercurial eyes, with their emulsifying gaze, instead spelled him
speechless.

“Can you manage the remainder of the ride?” Legolas drolly inquired, though Elrohir was far too
witless with admiration to be offended. “Or should I steal away your reins?”

“I fear I cannot account for my behavior should your hand stray in this vicinity,” he giddily
confessed, inwardly appalled by this drunken display, no matter that it was not fuelled by wine.

“Tis but a league or more to our destination,” Legolas reassured him, though the glint in his eyes
implied that he might very well chance a grab in the darkling elf’s direction. The archer tore away for
a few moments of private contemplation, enough that Elrohir be further romanced by the abounding
splendor of the night, as well as the sight of the ruins of Osgiliath approaching, until his lover had
gathered enough courage to voice a question that so lacked for controversy that the elf-knight
snickered with delight at its utterance. “Tell me, if I may so presume… What is it like, this
transformation you are undergoing?”

“Painfully bizarre,” Elrohir blurted, his mind a muddle amidst such sensory overload. “Hallucinatory.
Unhinged. In truth, I do not much care for it. I feel possessed by some impish woodland sprite, an
exuberant pixie or… a deranged fairy prince. Everything is overripe, edifying… I can only pray that
there is an anchor of self somewhere in this maelstrom of intoxication.”

“Hearken to me, if you feel adrift,” Legolas urged him, at last reaching over to entwine their hands. The connection was nowhere near as provocative as the elf-knight had expected, instead locking him on to something stable, solid. “I would not have you regret anything that might transpire between us.”

“I cannot fathom you being ought but your gallant self,” Elrohir insisted, choking back the far more elaborate, and mercilessly flowery, truth that bloomed on his tongue. “Though you must swear not to hold me to any of the drivel I may babble out, nor take to heart any of my… more florid pronouncements.”

“So long as you command me with conviction,” Legolas felicitously smirked. “I doubt I will have wit enough to decipher them.” He doled out a too inspiring squeeze before breaking away, to gesture towards the haunted majesty of the ravaged city before them. “We are here.”

Osgiliath gleamed like a mangled pewter bracelet under the moonlight, its toppled towers, shattered domes, and collapsed bridges the most elegant of eyesores. What architecture that remained standing was awesome to behold, not a stem of ivy marring the pristine surfaces of the alabaster stone and golden tiles. Even the piles of rubble resembled works of art, massive sculptures meant to evoke the misery of wartime occupation. Though long abandoned to the orc legions that had driven out her inhabitants, not a trace of the murk they oozed remained; rather, the few roads left intact were polished and welcoming, as if anxious to court the return of their faithful citizens.

While they ventured around the destruction towards a relatively intact quarter to the east, Elrohir experienced this final part of their journey like a somber dream, his increasingly elvish soul mourning every overturned plant pot, every snapped plank of wood, every trampled leaf. Yet stricken as he was, a nascent wisdom inwardly decreed that this was the natural order of things, chaos begetting beauty begetting chaos, a cycle as inescapable and eternal as the orbit of the sun. In the courtyard where they eventually alighted, a nightingale bleat such a forlorn tune that he thought he might weep, until he spied a bush of budding chrysanthemum and became enamored of the delicate white blossoms.

Suddenly, he was surrounded by wildlife, since the gravel of the riding path was lined with a dozen blooming trees, cherrywoods, yasbrinths, and gardenias, all of which were garlanded with pastel petals. In the courtyard’s center was a trickling, though decayed, fountain, a bastion of the time before. The stately home Legolas dragged him into was untouched save for the southern corner of the uppermost floor, which had avalanched into the gardens. After lissome fingers too solicitously latched onto his own, he was guided through a series of dark corridors and dusty rooms into the master’s suite, where a bed of tattered, untold decadence awaited them. As he admired its sturdy, four-poster frame, tinted the rich color of garnets, and its silken, if tousled, sheets, a surge of heat flood his veins, then suffused his skin such that he was soon rife with perspiration, though the room, due to the gaping hole in the ceiling, was somewhat chilly. He glanced over at Legolas, handsomely framed in the doorway, observing him with keen, corrupting eyes, and his groin bristled with excitement at the thought of being tamed by his white stag of a lover.

At the sight of the woodland prince so cool, so poised, in such a propitious environment, he could no longer restrain his desire. The need to be at one with the natural elements overwhelmed him, thus he began to strip, euphorically peeling off layer after layer of his cloying raiment before an unabashedly reverent audience. Once bare, he stood tall and proud, well aware of his own magnificence, of the preternatural incandescence of his skin, of the velveteen luxury of his mane, of the muscled ferocity of his frame, and of the primal charge of his colossal erection. Under Ithil’s gauzy rays, he felt reborn, a creature ruled by the flame of his elven soul, by the peerless grace of the stars that bore him,
by the yearning that his guarded heart still could not express.

When their gazes locked, Elrohir silently invited Legolas to partake of him in this rare state of delirium, that his fevered ministrations might eclipse even the eloquence within.

“Take me,” he begged, with an earnestness his well-repressed reason balked at. “Transport me.”

“I shall devour you,” Legolas promised, then stalked towards him with predatory intent.

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Legolas’ eager eyes raked along the taut contours of that impeccable frame, still inwardly disbelieving that he was being permitted to master it. Though Elrohir’s metamorphosis was as yet incomplete, there was no mistaking the subtle changes that had already refined his feral form into a lither, smoother version of his former self. Gone was the dense bracken that carpeted his pectorals and nested his phallus. Though still hirsute by elven standards, the coarse strands had been replaced by shorter, softer curlicues of hair, which shaded his skin instead of covering it. His musculature was now similarly sleek, its power rendered more compact, though his frame would ever be broad, reminiscent of Glorfindel’s stature. While Legolas assumed that his luminosity would dim some once his spirit settled, it would still glow with a pinky, nigh cherubic aura that expressed elvish vitality. Regardless of these improvements, the elf-knight remained one of the most breathtakingly beautiful males the woodland prince had ever beheld, of regal bearing and warrior might, of florid mien and sterling valor.

He charged forth to claim his lover’s kiss, incensed by the silken feel of him, by the lusciousness of his mouth and by the rough texture of his tongue. He truly did intend to devour him, to sup from his every cleft, to lave over his every curve, to steal down to areas both well mapped and long forbidden, since he may never again be given such free reign over the elf-knight’s sensual person. Elrohir emitted a languid purr as Legolas swept his hands over his glistening torso, a flush igniting in the wake of his caresses. His lips soon followed suit, eager to flatter every swath of that satiny skin, until he was kneeling with deference before his titan lover, captivated by the sight of Elrohir towering above him, sinuous and epic in his grandeur, as well as wholly owned by the sensations assaulting his body.

After marking his thigh with a too enthusiastic gnaw, Legolas rose, tauntingly licking the tip of that monumental erection as he did so. For a few, breathless moments, he broke contact, content to watch Elrohir shiver in response to his preliminary efforts, that rosy blush trailing his stare as it seared itself across the elf-knight’s immaculate person. Twitches of impatience, of rowdy, restless need afflicted his darkling lover, though his leonine will fought hard against them, undaunted even under such duress.

“Bare me,” Legolas imperiously commanded, relaxing his posture in invitation. Elrohir had sense enough to hesitate, perhaps intuiting the caveat to come, perhaps doubting his own reservoirs of forbearance. “But not a finger lands upon my flesh. If your hands so much as wisp across my skin, I will know it, and the consequences will be…severe.”

A low chuckle rumbled up his lover’s barrel chest.

“Tis hardly an effective deterrent,” Elrohir husked, so tantalized by the prospect of defiance that his entire body trembled. “If ought…”

“Chance it if you will,” Legolas warned, in a tone so nonchalant it implied menace. “Your pride must endure the consequences.”
He was thrilled when the elf-knight could not quite stifle the whimper this remark produced, one born not of intimidation but of vociferous arousal. Callused, quivering fingers set about releasing him from the constringtion of his clothes, Elrohir hovering in delectable proximity, with Legolas under no restriction at all. Once one of his arms was free, he daringly pinched one of those tight, pursed nipples, brashly thumbing the nub until his lover was forced to halt his progress, lest the bolts of sensation overwhelm him. As it was, his knees grew so weak that he nearly folded onto them, his eyes half-lidded and his chest heaving in reaction to such intense pleasure. After quickly licking his fingers, Legolas switched to his as yet unmolested side, tormenting it even more roughly.

Yet Elrohir somehow recovered himself, his breath still erratic but his desire to bare the Mirkwood prince just as fearsome as the charge jolting through his body. Soon, he was carefully undoing his laces, plucking almost daintily at the cord in order to avoid grazing an area that could easily earn him the most fiendish of all the punishments the archer had envisioned. Temptation, however, was rife, especially when that elephantine tusk was revealed, ruddy and swollen from chafing against his leather breeches. Elrohir’s tongue grew heavy at the thought of how he could soothe it, how that scalding cream would quench his lust, but a soft smack to the cheek restored his focus to the cunning, cerulean eyes that so benevolently evaluated him.

“You have done well,” Legolas judged, a mild amusement to his tone. “Clasp your hands behind your back, then kneel to claim your prize.”

His darkling lover was only too eager to obey, even going so far as to flirtatiously part his lips that he might the sooner receive the bulk of his reward. Legolas took his time petting those ebony swaths of hair before twining in a mastering hand, then veering his painfully throbbing erection towards the moist sanctuary of the elf-knight’s mouth. Elrohir dove into action before he could bid him do so, lavishing his shaft with thick laves and twists of tongue, then summarily swallowed him down. He sucked with such zealous appetite that climax threatened the archer far sooner than he had anticipated; indeed, so fast that he could not prevent himself from exploding down Elrohir’s throat. Thankfully, he was caught up by a sturdy grip when he staggered forth, his anticipation of far more salacious delicacies enough to all but instantly recover him.

Feeling rather serene in the aftermath of his orgasm, Legolas yanked Elrohir onto his feet and all but suffocated with kisses, marveling at how well his lover’s sultry tang mingled with the salt of his seed. He continued to gorge himself on the elf-knight’s plush crimson lips even after pushing him over to the bed and helping to spread him across the coverlet, too addicted to the clash of their tongues to register how glamorous he looked so tawdrily splayed, like a debauched mer creature waiting on a coral reef for his seafaring lover to spear him. Soon, Legolas was at large across the sensuous terrain of Elrohir’s skin, supping on the elegant slope of his neck, dining on the dip of his navel, feasting on the meaty ridges of his back as his prey bayed out a series of ragged moans.

Even as the peredhel’s neglected member stabbed petulantly into the mattress, Legolas possessively kneaded the taut mounds of his buttocks, then at last parted them to reveal the scarlet crevice between. Long had he dreamed of invading this stronghold of Elrohir’s sexual reserve, of savoring its primitive flavor, of plying its angry pucker, of delving into the very core of one he had long considered an idol. Though this was hardly undiscovered country, he could only be the second, perhaps the third, to have earned such favors, which only flared his desire all the more. As he slowly rubbed around the circumference of that storied passage, Elrohir clawed into the sheets and began to quake, so sensitive was the area still. Legolas cajoled him with bawdy observations, moving down to massage his bollocks before sneaking back up to stroke that fleshy valley.

Before long, he had Elrohir keening, begging he commence with every panted breath, until the archer had no recourse but to wreak a firebrand tongue upon him. The experience of communing with the elf-knight in such a primal fashion was indescribable, raw and roughshod, as sweet as it was
succulent, far more impactful than merely suckling his shaft. As his tongue delved into that relatively
virginal channel, he felt oddly privileged amidst the haze of eroticism, that he was being honored
with a treasure none truly deserved, but that he would do his utmost to be worthy of. To that end, he
soon had Elrohir writhing with whiplash abandon, deliriously unhinged by the merest lap, the lightest
swipe, until the Mirkwood prince had no recourse but to gently, generously prepare him for that most
elemental of unions, which the pulse of his own erection demanded most tyrannically.

When their readiness was assured, he slid up along Elrohir’s side, then pulled his deliciously
incensed lover up against him. He spooned tenderly around that epic frame, anchoring one of those
pillar legs over his own so as to ensure both the easiest access to his core and the greatest amount of
friction between them. The position was such that Elrohir did not have to contort himself around to
meet his eyes; a marginal shift of his torso permitted Legolas to embrace him, softing worshipful
kisses over his lips as he relished the coziness of their tangled bodies. Those shimmering mithril orbs
were at once innocent and all-knowing, touchingly confident in the archer’s ability to send him
soaring without compromising the integrity of the experience. With their gazes locked, Legolas
slowly penetrated him, the cinch of molten muscle around him such that he mouthed a silent moan.

Their coupling was far more graceful than he had expected, a sure, steady gallop of hips and limbs,
not as interested in racing towards completion as maintaining a constant, sensual course. He
attempted to imbue his every thrust with heartfelt passion, as eager to inhabit the elf-knight’s spirit as
to enflame him beyond the bounds of anything he had ever known before. All the while, he was
entranced by the bejeweled cast of those diamond eyes, luminescent with aura of Elrohir’s evolving
soul, with the eternal and ethereal light of the stars above. The ecstasy that eventually thundered
through them both was utterly transcendent, with his darkling lover succumbing to torrents of
unbridled pleasure and Legolas feeling exceptionally wanton for so endlessly riding out his orgasm,
as he had been loath to separate himself from Elrohir in any way after so indelible a consummation.

“How I wish-”

“Hush,” the elf-knight quieted him, smiling quite blissfully. “It is as it was meant to be.”

“Indeed,” Legolas concurred, duly censored by the placidity in those silver eyes. “Sleep, lirimaer,
while you can. The dawn is fast upon us.”

“Alas, we must return forthwith,” Elrohir protested, though his efforts to move proved fruitless.
“Elladan proposed to ride at full light.”

“There is time enough for a brief rest,” Legolas insisted. “You will not survive a day so depleted. Be
off, I will watch over you.”

“But you must...” he murmured, before his fatigue decided for him, luring him onto the dream path
that he might revisit the incendiary events of the past hour.

“I shall, however poorly, when you are gone,” Legolas affectionately explained to his slumbering
lover. “Though how I shall bear through my waking hours is another matter entirely.”

Upon a sigh, he reminded himself how fortunate he was, then snuggled in for his vigil. Though he
was charged with much detection work and thorough investigation over the coming month, that night had seen the solving of one of the great mysteries that had lately absorbed both his mind and his heart.

Elrohir was his mentor, his colleague, his compatriot, his friend, all of whom had earned a measure of his devotion. Yet he had become, most dearly of all, his beautiful, beloved knight, for whom his elven flame burned with the pure, hallowed love of legends.

End of Part Five
Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not for profit.

Summary: On the eve of Aragorn’s coronation, our golden pair are charged with investigating a brutal murder at the Citadel.

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present...

A Slaying in Scarlet
A LOTR Mystery

Part 6

Journeys end in lovers' meetings.
–The Adventure of the Empty House, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1903

When once your point of view is changed, the very thing which was so damning becomes a clue to the truth. –The Problem of Thor Bridge, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1922

Lothlorien, Year 3019, Third Age

May 27th

Gloriously achy and dull-witted in passion’s wake, Elladan luxuriated in the crush of his slumbering husband atop him, in the veil of gossamer mane that shroud his face, in the clutch of that adamantine grip around his lax hand. After months of rough survival predicated on the hope that the Valar had not returned their greatest champion only to claim his mate for their own, after years of errantry that stole him away from their home through every season save winter, after centuries of grueling strife that had commenced with his mother’s violation, Elladan could at last rest easy in Glorfindel’s giving embrace, secure in the knowledge that nothing save a few brief spells of adventure would part them evermore.

In the aftermath of their previous night’s sublime and incendiary loving, Glorfindel – his religiously stoic, epically noble, fearless, colossal, Balrog-slaying warrior mate – had succumbed to his emotions as never before, weeping out his heart, confessing of the night terrors that had afflicted him through Elladan’s latest absence, begging his besotted spouse to never, ever leave him. The same Glorfindel who had trained him to be so merciless towards his foes, who had insisted he accompany Elrohir on his vengeance quest, who had encouraged him to ride out after the Nine Walkers towards the most lethal battle they have ever engaged in, had drifted, swollen-eyed, into sleep’s replenishment only after Elladan had repeatedly reminded him that he was there, whole and hale, to succor him.

As he now held his somnolent husband, he was the more enamored by this proof of his monumental forbearance, of the great sacrifice he was prepared to endure not only for the sake of the elf-warrior’s honor, but the triumph of righteousness. He was especially touched in that he knew, deep within, that the reverse was not so, that he had secretly pleaded with his Adar to omit Glorfindel from the list of
likely candidates for the elvish member of the Fellowship, judging his First Age loss of life concession enough to the exacting demands of the gods. Even as he inwardly lauded his mate’s incredible strength, he did not rue his own selfishness; in truth, he never would. He may be imperfect, but so long as Glorfindel cherished him, he would not be swayed from his healer’s vow to protect all life (save those of the forces of darkness, who little deserved the breath that perpetuated their existence).

Relishing the tranquilizing warmth that radiated from his mightiest of blankets, Elladan mused upon how many morns he had awoken to far more dismal circumstances: the worn fabric of his tunic chafing under the coarse covers of his bed roll, the ground beneath him turned to mud by a night’s rain, their wood supply equally smote, their stores raided by scavenging birds, the endless gray of countless days on the march towards certain doom. Throughout, his spirit had been buoyed by frivolous amusements, by his brother’s caustic wit, by the solidarity of his companions, but mostly by the promise that that very morning would transpire, that he would one day wake under Glorfindel, sated and subdued, in a land free of the Dark Lord’s tyranny. Having earned this intimate, yet epic victory, Elladan exulted in it, but mostly he was awash with gratitude that it had indeed come to pass.

When a prideful exclamation resounded through the open window of the talan they were sequestered in, Elladan had further cause to smile, though his lips were not without a wryness to their curve. Gazing through the diaphanous curtain of rays that spilled down from blithe Anor, he spied a falcon perched on one of the sparser boughs of the tree that berthed them, then chuckled to himself. A low rumble escaped his husband, then Glorfindel crawled over to the side, intuiting, even when immersed in the shallows of a doze, that Elladan’s curiosity would soon get the better of him and he would ably throw him off. The elf-warrior was not so much intrigued as contrite; from the first canter of their horses, he had driven them relentlessly northwards, at the lash of his need to be reunited with his golden spouse. He had paid little heed to Elrohir’s peach-cheeked distraction, then or since, only addressing it when irritated at the slowness of their pace. Now that he had laid down his burdens, he owed his twin some overdue attention, especially since his obsession had not blinded him to the messages a certain bird of prey intermittently delivered, ones that Elrohir had quickly stowed away for later perusal, and which he had snickered over in the wee hours when Elladan had finally consented to a rest stop.

Neither did the medic in him fail to mark how little his brother slept, or ate, or consumed anything but the apparently comical contents of this correspondence, though an investigation into further symptoms was hardly required for him to conclude upon the likely diagnosis. Instead, he was far more eager to share in Elrohir’s excitement, since he had not seen his twin so fired by anything or anyone since their adolescence. Not that he was at all oblivious as to the source of his inspiration; rather, it was a matter of confirming his suspicions, then of teasing his brother into a fit of annoyance that would only lead to more acute mockery.

There was, after all, question of a certain archer, thus matters of precision were infinitely appropriate.

After smothering Glorfindel with kisses and whispering to him of the debauchery that would ensue upon his return, Elladan slunk into a pair of bed trousers, fetched himself a cup of water, then trundled down the winding staircase to the forest floor. Yet Elrohir was not so easily located. Only when another overly-pleased exclamation tittered through the branches of an oarberry bush did he discover the small glade the elf-knight was ensconced in. His inky braid of hair melding into the black bark of the tree stump he was propped against and the white of his shirt blending into the patch of elanor that encircled him, Elrohir spared not a glance at his picturesque surroundings. Rather, he was wholly absorbed by the scroll spread across his lap, occasionally scratching a cipher into the parchment with a ready thorn. Elladan was versed enough in the deceptions of espionage to know that the page would appear blank save for a few arcane symbols, but a splash of citrus would reveal all when the scroll was held close to candlelight. His brother, being a genius cryptographer, was keen
enough to read the changes in texture with his fingertips, thus he could decipher a message in direct sunlight. Yet this particular correspondence was doubly encoded, the message itself only legible with the precise key.

No wonder, Elladan smirked to himself upon observing his twin, the process of unraveling it was proving such excellent entertainment, as well as providing Elrohir with an mental oasis from their fraternal duties. Their journey, after all, was fraught with emotion for them both; the escort of their sister towards the union that would forever divide them a poignant charge indeed. He quietly berated himself for not being more concerned about Elrohir’s well-being, though evidently those left behind regularly thought of his plight, their efforts outranking even the sage counsel of the twin that had ever assuaged his soul’s aches and anguish. Far from jealous, Elladan was quite glad that he had been momentarily supplanted, though there were still some matters that would ever be relegated to brotherly discussions. Yet there was still question, to his capricious mind, of whether his pithy wisdoms would soon be permanently devalued, one he would not fail to put to his normally unemotional twin.

“How fares Glorfindel fair this pretty morn?” Elrohir dryly inquired, without bothering to look up. “I am surprised to find you up and about, and even more that your steps are so even.”

Apparently, Elladan was to be subject to an interrogation of his own before he was to earn back his brother’s confidence. With a knowing shake of his head, he hopped gingerly across the flower patch, then plunked down beside Elrohir’s outstretched legs.

“My doting spouse hardly sought to wound me now that I have returned to him whole,” the elf-warrior enlightened him, to which his twin offered a thoughtful nod.

“I trust your reunion blistered and blazed with sufficient amorousness?” Elrohir queried further, as impassive as when they discussed food supplies or weaponry in the field.

“Though I will ever crave my beloved’s passion and will never claim to be entirely sated,” Elladan adoringly praised. “I have, as you suspect, been rigorously loved.”

“That is well, then,” Elrohir concluded, his manner threatening earnestness. “I find a goodly measure of peace in your spiritual restoration, muindor. I know how you ached for him these last months, in addition to the toll victory took on us all.”

“And you need not feel so guilty over your own indulgences,” Elladan teased him. “Now that I am no longer without. Is that the truth of it?”

Elrohir considered this a moment, as his impossibly logical self considered all moral quandaries, then assayed an enigmatic smile.

“Perhaps,” he conditionally concurred. Before the elf-warrior could pursue the matter down his own twisty and trap-laden path, his twin pressed on with his own agenda. “Have the pair of you need of another day’s respite, or do you think we could safely depart on the morrow? Daeradar and Daernaneth will not be accompanying us, thus there is no formal need to delay, though of course an extra day of rest will benefit us all. Even Arwen is amenable.”

“Undoubtedly, since she is the only rival to your own unfailing protection of my interests,” Elladan affectionately commented. “Above and beyond either of your own.”

“I imagine Glorfindel might have a few objections to raise on that account,” Elrohir volleyed back, unable to temper the twinkle in his eyes.
“Yet Glorfindel is well served by further delay,” Elladan insisted. “Whereas any concession to our leisure would inopportune you both. Though, as you imply, Arwen is by far the more maligned in being denied both union and reunion with Estel, but, to my heart, bearing you all the sooner back to your archer is reason enough for this caring brother, thus you may instruct our party to prepare for the morrow.”

Elrohir was too adroit a foil to stumble over such an obvious impediment to his ease, yet the tension in his features betrayed him nonetheless, indicating to Elladan that perhaps these provocations were not so unwelcome, that perhaps, given how directionless his twin often felt when navigating the labyrinthine pathways of his own psyche, he required some guidance that his pride would not permit him to access. Regardless, his reply was typically terse, his manner far more reserved than that of the genially engrossed swain he had first come upon.

“Indeed, I shall,” the elf-knight confirmed. “You may skip back into your husband’s arms. I will see to any lingering details.”

“Rather, it is here that I would linger,” Elladan gamely responded. “To learn of what you were about the night of Estel’s coronation, since you appeared to all but evaporate with the twilight.”

Elrohir tacitly ignored his insinuations, muttering the same inconsequential excuse he had to explain his tardiness the morning of their departure.

“As I told you,” he underlined. “Legolas and I sequestered ourselves to review the minutiae of our investigation that he might better pursue certain avenues of inquiry during my absence. We worked to the point of exhaustion, then overslept.”

“You maintained a clear mind with your body in such an uproar?” Elladan challenged, though if this startled or aggravated his brother, his face held strong to its composure. “In the presence of your sometime lover, no less?”

“I am far more dedicated to the success of this investigation that I am to the Prince of Mirkwood,” Elrohir retorted, though the elf-warrior perceived a flicker of distress in the wake of his firm declaration.

“Perhaps,” Elladan countered, with the same ambiguousness that had earlier served his twin. “Though I do not care, as your physician and as your brother, for some of the effects both have had upon you.”

“I dare say one counterbalances the other,” Elrohir attempted to quip, though his shoulders were too rigidly locked to manage a shrug. “Besides, I am prone to scholarly obsession, as you well know.”

“Aye, but not to dishonesty,” Elladan directly accused, much to the elf-knight’s shock.

The bow of his head all but confirmed the offense, though the elf-warrior did not seek vindication, nor to suffuse his brother with the shame that presently weighed him. Elrohir sighed softly, cowed not solely before the (only imagined) immensity of his transgression, but before the complexity of the emotions that churned within him. Still, he rallied himself as best he could, warmed by the flame that had been kindled on that unforgettable night, even though he could not yet admit to himself what fuelled its fire.

“Tis true that I have wronged you, ‘dan,” he confessed. “Offending in a manner that I never thought possible. But I only… I only wanted to savor the memory awhile, before the inevitable analysis. I thought if it remained pure... Yet I see that I have nonetheless tarnished it, through omission. And certainly my efforts have not prevented me from worrying over what might… potentially has…”
developed.”

“You were reconciled, then?” Elladan clarified, his forgiveness implicit in the fondness of his tone.

“Most gallingly so,” Elrohir sighed anew, his contrite gaze finally lifting to meet his twin’s reassuring eyes. “I… I did a thing…” His face was suddenly overwhelmed by emotion, more eloquent than any that had ever alighted there. “I harbor no regrets, but I am not sure what comes after. Especially when we are beholden to so many responsibilities, in the present time and when our future plans are considered.”

“You gave yourself to him,” Elladan guessed easily enough, surprised at the level of trust his twin so readily conceded to one who, a few months prior, had been little more than an acquaintance. /Such are the ways of love,/ he reminded himself, then smiled in a manner he prayed was imbued with both hope and sympathy. “It is an act of great portent for us, but we must remember that for others, especially those who regularly submit, it is just another means of deriving pleasure from one’s lover.”

“But it can be more meaningful,” Elrohir nervously suggested, loath to voice before his twin what he had not quite reconciled himself to. “It may have been, for me.”

“Are you so unsure of Legolas?” Elladan asked, dubious even as he formed the question.

“Not of his worth,” Elrohir assured him, as well as himself. “Nor his discretion. I am certain that he bears soft feelings towards me, but is perhaps as perplexed as I about what may result from them. I cannot say that I am willing to forsake my postwar ambitions in order to pursue him; neither is he so resolved, I am sure. Yet I… I care quite deeply for him. Perhaps, in time, we could mean very much to each other, indeed. But we risk, and refuse, so much even with such a conditional commitment, especially if it comes to naught.”

Elladan pensively digested this, not envying the obstacles they faced if they were to admit to love. Still, to deny the ardor of one’s heart was the most precarious of notions, especially for elves. Yet this vulnerability was what secured him in the conclusion that Elrohir’s impulses, in this as in all things intellectual, would prove nigh clairvoyant in their acuity. Such grief as his was only overcome through the love of one’s soul mate. The very fact of his twin’s unquenchable desire, of his bodily concession to the archer, made the case for the solidity, and the eventual eternity, of their budding relation.

Regardless, he would not have either of them deny their ambitions, not when both had fought so long and so arduously to earn them.

“Perhaps you will permit me, as one long-ago confronted by this very same quandary, to advise you,” Elladan offered, chuckling at the anticipated nod of acceptance. “First, forgive this brief pontification on the nature of love. As one bound for a considerable amount of time, but who also delayed the date of his binding a mite overlong, I can claim with certain authority that love deepens over time. I now love Glorfindel far more than when I first realized my feelings, and I expect to love him even more a century from now. I thought my binding night the apotheosis of love, and many nights since, including just this past eve, but each further experience proves me wrong. In the early stages of our relationship, it was difficult, even unbearable, to think of absenting myself from Glorfindel for a prolonged period of time. Yet nothing in my experience compared to the night prior to our departure to rejoin the Fellowship. My earlier distress was but a trifle when weighed against the chance that I would perish in the war. But I rode off, with Glorfindel’s blessing, because he knew it was selfish to keep me when so much was at stake. And so will you defer to Legolas’ ambitions, and he to yours, even if you declare your love upon our return to Minas Tirith, because true devotion means sacrifice. It means recognizing what is vital to the fulfillment of one’s beloved, trusting that
they will return to you, and chancing heartbreak if they do not. Love does shackle you, but it also frees you, in ways you cannot dare to imagine. If you and Legolas commit to sustaining your relationship whilst pursuing your own ambitions, then your time together, however brief, will be all the more joyful. And when the time comes that you can no longer bear to be apart, then you will discover that certain concessions are all too easily made when there is a loving forever to ensure. Until then, give in to your emotions, and relish each graduation of feeling as you experience it. Apprenticing in the art of love is a rarely appointed position. Remember that you are among the privileged few who have been introduced to it, and cherish every lesson.”

He was pleased to note that his brother looked not only relieved, but inspired by his speech, his silver eyes shining with a preternatural light that boded well for the integrity of his emotions. Elladan was heartened by the insight that they had not appeared so twin-like in quite some time, both radiant with elvish vitality, both lustrous with renewed health, and both effulgent with affection for their respective beloveds; he burnished by an older, amber flame, Elrohir incandescent with new love. Yet none of these rivaled their devotion to one another, a timeless, elemental bond that dated from, and was immaculate as, the spark of their conception.

* * *

Minas Tirith, Year 3019, Third Age

June 3rd

Twas upon a peerless spring day that Legolas and Thorondil strolled the cobblestone streets of the third tier of Minas Tirith, in the shadow of the giant rock promontory that bisected the city. From afar, the jutting slab of mountain that supported the royal concourse resembled nothing so innocuous as a knife stuck in a wedding cake. From below, its was as intimidating as Orthanc, its sharp blade and craggy face as lethal in design as the corrugated column of that horned prison tower. Certainly those that chose to dwell within were a peculiar lot, shunning sunlight, fresh air, and, as often as not, the guards’ shrewd observation. Yet these wily denizens needed not be condemned by their place of residence, since in the aftermath of the war many of the poorest citizens fled there, those who could not finance the reconstruction of the already humble homes they had lost.

The King and his soldiers had been challenged by this aspect of the still rampant strife, as many of these deserving souls remained unaccounted for in the tally of those to be allotted a share of the common fund. While the black market dealers and criminal types preferred that the crown not invade their sanctuary, many of the innocents that had sought refuge there were now at the mercy of these scoundrels, having accrued a debt in order to feed themselves and their families. Yet even those of purest intent did not care to donate a map of the serpentine tunnels and tight alcoves to the city’s captains, since military action threatened the lives of all resident there, as there were only three possible exits, one that left you abandoned in the snowy heart of the mountain range.

Legolas, having only recently learned of the reconversion of this ancient mine, was beyond eager to investigate, especially since this meant bedecking himself in an elaborate disguise. Though he was less impressed with the dun commoner’s colors of his tunic, breeches, and boots, he thought the billowy cut and the coarse texture of his cloak outstanding, posing as he was as a Haradin trader from the inner reaches of the vast southern desert. To this end, his lustrous hair had been dyed a rich mahogany – with henna purchased for him in the very cave market they were about to visit – and his eyes were lined with the ashes of a burnt root, called kohl, to diminish their iridescence as well as to promote authenticity. Upon admiring the result in a looking glass, he had been utterly tickled by the effect, the lone tragedy of the gambit being that Elrohir was not here to partake in the subterfuge, or at the least witness his transformation.
Yet he had the elf-knight’s theories chief in mind when he invited Thorondil along as his second. If his friend evidenced a too thorough knowledge of the tunnels, or of any of their more onerous denizens, the deception that he may have been perpetrating would be found out. Though Legolas desperately hoped that all would be well in this, and certainly if Thorondil was as cunning as Elrohir’s accusations he could very well acquit himself in this venture, he was nevertheless determined to watch the archer’s every move, but most especially his interactions with the alchemist they sought, a purported vendor of spider venom. To this end, he had convinced Thorondil that only minimal disguise was required on his part, no more than a change into civilian garments and some alterations to the hood of his cloak. It was vital that he be recognized by those who knew him, but that he blend into the fray if one did not.

How Legolas would escape if his friend turned on him was another matter entirely, one he preferred not to linger on.

As it was, their conversation betrayed no alternate agenda, but rather rallied the Mirkwood prince’s sympathies. Imrahil, as well as the other Stewards, having no further business in the capital until the King’s nuptials, had returned to their fiefs a fortnight ago, thus Thorondil was aching for Amrothos as much as Legolas wanted for Elrohir. The randy couple had decided that, until the murderer was found, they should go about their affairs as normal, all the while reflecting upon where they would ultimately retire to. Amrothos was charged with evaluating the climate in Dol Amroth, while Legolas had insisted that Thorondil remain at Minas Tirith with him to abet the investigation, thereby distancing him from his nefarious fellows in Morthond Vale. Though Elessar had not yet sprung his trap upon them, the archer and his lover had been alerted to their complot, thus it had been little trouble to convince him to abandon his cottage and belongings to a village recently raided by orcs. Thorondil considered himself no worse off than any Gondorian, and somewhat more fortunate still, since his future with Amrothos was all but assured.

Legolas wished he could be as confident in his relation with Elrohir, no matter that his own heart was settled. Though he was rather glad that Thorondil and Amrothos were no longer about to abscond to the elf-knight’s bedchamber every night, interrupting his detective work in the study beyond with their ragged cries and rabid moans. Not that he spent many of his nights nose-deep in historic texts and recent clues. Rather, he preoccupied himself by devising ever more complexly coded letters to send his beloved, researching arcane encryption methods, children’s word games, and the like in order to bedazzle the keen mind that so compelled him. Despite the limitations of his resources, Elrohir’s missives were somehow even more dense and intricate than his own, their composition mimicking his efforts but their references painfully obscure. Legolas had wasted hours upon hours deciphering them, though he considered such occupation more productive than daydreaming of his darkling swain and thereby becoming all to intimate with his string hand. Elrohir aroused his mind in a way that no elf had afore, a trait more seductive than any baring of skin. Though he hungered for their kiss and craved the scorch of his touch, Legolas was just as invigorated by the prospect of sharing his ideas with him, explaining his methodology and elaborating upon his progress.

If this latest ruse proved fruitful, he may even come to astonish him, and thus be awarded such sensual bounty as he dared not dream of.

Especially when they were about to sneak around an alehouse that flanked the rock face, concealing the gated entrance behind. Any in possession of a key could infiltrate, the rules having been somewhat laxed in victory’s wake, or so his ‘informant’ had led him to believe. As he had been repeatedly reminded, Gimli had sacrificed a great deal of his dwarfish honor to obtain a copy of said passkey, after a drunken geologist had given him a tour one night, foolishly showing off both his wares and the whereabouts of the city underground to Elessar’s bosom companion. Another dwarfish attribute he would never be able to forget was Gimli’s navigational expertise, since he had memorized the major routes and drawn a basic map of the premises. Armed with this inside
knowledge, Legolas and Thorondil arrogantly strode down the main corridor, perfectly enacting the part of a Haradin trader and his local escort. To add to their mystique, they conversed in the argot known exclusively to archers, which few, if any, about would be fluent in. Thus, they could converse of matters both personal and covert without attracting undue notice.

Not that they were likely to stand out among such an eclectic and eccentric lot. Even before they segued into the cavern that housed the marketplace, every person who shuffled by them possessed an unassailable sense of individuality. From men arrayed in the body-shrouding sheathes usually sported by women of the nomadic tribes to ladies with beaded chains strung through their numerous piercings to youths attired in little more than a sarong and lacquer, Legolas had not been privy to such a multicultural assembly since the Council of Elrond. Indeed, he could not deny the attractions of the carnival atmosphere, let alone to the poorest of the poor, for though these were folk of humble means, they certainly made much of the detritus of the city.

What some considered rubble had been plastered into walls, hearths, and small huts, while shards of multicolored cloth were strung into decorative garlands. Bit of gemstones and rare metals had been crafted into signs, fashioned into exquisite mosaics, sewn onto a shawl or beaded into hair. Stray branches had been dried out, then mixes with herbs to burn as incense, while devastated flower beds had been scavenged that the stems, bulbs, and roots might be distilled into curative tonics or teas. As he perused the various stalls, Legolas began to consider that perhaps the intentions of these inventive and practical people had been misjudged, since everywhere he looked, he perceived naught but ingenuity, a sense of community, and the foundations of a thriving economy.

A tug at his arm woke him from his musing, the eyes that beseeched his own altogether mischievous of glint.

“May I tarry here awhile?” Thorondil inquired, though obviously wary of appearing distracted from his duty. “Of course I am indubitably dedicated to our pursuit of… whatever we are in pursuit of, but do you not find those fabrics rather fetching? It would perhaps enhance our disguise to shop around some, and certainly I know of a costal prince whose dark looks—”

“Very well,” Legolas consented, more amused than indisposed. “But be quick. We are here on a vital errand, and the information we seek will not be obtained by bantering with the locals.”

He followed Thorondil over to the stall, where indeed the homespun fabrics looked as luxurious as those woven on the looms of Lothlorien’s ladies. He considered that they may very well have been the result of their efforts, for even the Golden Wood had its share of theft, but he was too charmed by the place to bother questioning their origins, especially when he was tempted to purchase some himself. His companion was not blind to his contemplative expression, even going so far as to dare the insinuation Legolas suspected he had longed to make for some time.

“That regal indigo cloth is as soft as silk,” Thorondil guilelessly observed. “Perfect for a robe or a pair of bed trousers. Though the bearer would have to be of ebony hue, with skin as elegant as porcelain.”

“He would indeed,” Legolas concurred, forcing him to work harder for a confirmation. “Yet I imagine any in our acquaintance with such looks might find it odd if we purchase him a ream of fabric.”

“Not if it came from an admirer,” Thorondil remarked.

“Ambitious, are we?” Legolas demurred. “Not content with seducing the third heir of a Prince’s house? On the hunt for grander and more elusive prey? Interested in earning your immortality? Best of luck to you, meldir.”
“Tis you, gwador, who are being evasive,” Thorondil insisted, then lowered his tone to a hush. “Why do you not confide in me of your longing? It is obvious to any who know you well. Why must you suffer his absence in silence, when we share a common plight?”

Legolas chuckled mischievously, but would not concede. “Clever you are in your assumptions,” he smirked. “If only they were correct.”

“Rake,” Thorondil playfully accused. “Gainsay your desire however you will, I have myself witnessed the smolder between you.”

“Then perhaps our mutual acquaintance has yet to confide in me of his unspoken yearning,” Legolas gamely retorted, at which the archer could not help but guffaw.

“A besotted fool I may be,” Thorondil countered. “But so long as my lover is not before me, I see clearly enough.”

“Then perhaps a wager is in order,” Legolas impulsively proposed, galvanized by his ability to confuse his companion thus far. “If you are so convinced of the righteousness of your cause, purchase a ream of fabric and present it to our friend on my behalf. You are free to explain the circumstances that led to the gift or to remain mysterious. His reaction will no doubt give you your answer, though I cannot promise the closure you seek.”

“You have already revealed more than you intended,” Thorondil good-naturedly charged. “If there was any uncertainty about the state of your relation, you would never risk offense or provocation. Only if you had resolved yourselves would you be so bold. I have only to discover the essence of the resolution, either a romance or utter disinterest. As I am convinced it cannot be the latter, I have already won the day.”

Legolas laughed most heartily at his logic, then clapped him fondly on the back. “Alas, I find I must exercise more caution than I had first anticipated,” the Mirkwood prince asserted. “Loath as I am to concede to your rascally implications, I must admit that your intuition had proved acute. We are involved… though even I cannot claim to truly comprehend how deeply. Upon his return, we will be forced to solidify matters. Until then…”

“You must pine in secret, and complete his chores,” Thorondil unjustly, though not erroneously, appraised. “Very well, I will abet your aims.” He turned to the vendor and requested a ream of the indigo cloth, then fished an extra coin out of his pack. The transaction done, he stowed his purchases away, then gestured that they proceed with their mission. “Consider it a debt repaid, gwador.”

“I was hardly so generous,” Legolas objected.

“Rather, you were overly so,” Thorondil corrected. “Defending me to the King when you could not know I had no part in my fellows’ cabal, gleaning of the interests I strove to disguise and encouraging me to follow my heart, then believing in not only mine but my lover’s innocence when no one else would. Overlooking so many incriminating circumstances, seeing the truth of the man behind… I owe you far more than a bolt of cloth, my Lord.”

Though Legolas was quite moved by this estimation of his valor, he could not help but suffer a pang of guilt when he considered his motivation for inviting the archer along that day. If Thorondil himself proved guilty, then he had just played audience to a command performance. Yet Legolas preferred to remain hopeful, just as the denizens of this bizarre and spellbinding refuge betrayed a galling faith in their own capabilities, thus he gave his friend’s arm a poignant squeeze and exhibited the emotion he
felt towards the man he hoped the archer was, not the treacherous villain he could very well be.

“You owe me naught but your eternal happiness,” Legolas esteemed. “As well as the promise that you will quit this backward province and emigrate north as soon as all this madness is concluded.”

“You have my word, I shall,” Thorondil swore, with a compelling smile.

“Come, then,” Legolas urged him forth. “To the task at hand.”

They had walked the market’s length and back again before he caught sight of a band of adolescent misfits rowdily gambling before what had appeared to be a hut, but which, upon more detailed inspection, was actually a tight entranceway to dark tunnel. The few shafts of red and violet light refracted into the main hall were emblematic enough of the unusual wares flaunted by the stalls within, anything from stolen valuables that required protection to forbidden works of erotic literature to necromantic books and potions. Legolas had been supplied with a password, but he had no way of knowing whether it was still valid, for though the vendors within were a duplicitous lot, that by no means branded them fools. Thankfully, the youths were too awed by his scimitar – amusingly, a fake – to contest his worthiness to descend through the Diagonal Alley, or so they named it. He nearly snorted aloud when he discovered that the passage was not inaccurately titled, since one had to shift himself at a sideways cant in order to navigate the tunnel.

When finally they located the alchemist in question, Legolas was relieved to find his wares stored in an alcove concealed by a curtain. If his interviewee was not as forthcoming as he hoped, he would have to forcefully assert himself without betraying his disguise and drawing a crowd. At times, the difference between hearing a scuffle and witnessing it prevented intervention, since the imagination could improve upon the perception of brutality, whereas the eye was a far more practical observer. Regardless, after an awkward approach they ingratiated themselves well enough to earn a private audience behind the curtain.

The alchemist, a pale, sleek fellow with the nigh albino coloring of the men of Rhun, almost magically lit the hanging lantern, which coughed out a cloud of dust and smoke that enhanced the already mysterious atmosphere.

“Now,” he commenced, welcoming them into his confidence with a theatrical gesture of magnanimity. “What troubles have led you two noble gentlemen to seek out my assistance?”

Though Legolas had prepared a meticulously researched excuse, he nearly abandoned it in that tense, somewhat bewitching moment, concerned that such a master illusionist would ably see through his own amateur deception.

“Tragedy,” the Mirkwood prince informed him, modulating his accent to approximate a southern lilt. “We wish to perform the Cilnitor Carnath, and require the necessary supplies. We have it on good authority that you are the only vendor of the most crucial ingredient, cilinth shell powder.”

The alchemist fell silent for a time, not so much scrutinizing his guests as considering whether to entrust them with that most priceless of commodities: the truth. For Legolas knew very well that, while he indeed had a store of shell powder and the three other incidental ingredients for the spell, his supply of shelob’s venom had run out a few days before. If the alchemist recognized Thorondil as the purchaser, he would have already made a comment to this effect – though this hardly exonerated the archer, who himself employed spies aplenty. Rather, Legolas meant to learn whether the substance could be obtained anywhere else, places no vendor of worth would fail to alert him to if he cared at all for repeat business.

“The Cilnitor is a precarious rite,” the alchemist repeated, visibly stalling for time. “Any error in the
“The sorcerer is a native speaker,” Thorondil gruffly insisted, which had the desired effect of unnerving the scion of Rhun.

“Like so many,” Legolas slickly continued, capitalizing on the contrast in their temperaments. “Our friend lost dearly in the Shadow’s attack: his wife, his house, his cauldron… Have your own resources been similarly crippled?”

“Indeed,” the alchemist admitted. “I have all the necessary ingredients, save one. Rhace, my lord, has been in great demand since—”

“How now?” Legolas inquired, struggling to mute his abject shock to mere confusion. “Forgive me, I am not familiar with these local terms. You mean the… venom?”

“Aye, the rhycl,” the alchemist explained. “Though of course you are perhaps no more knowledgeable of the chemical term. Tis only that it is unwise to speak of such unlawful substances commonly. I wonder that your friend did not advise you of this when—”

“The details of our commission are not your affair,” Thorondil coldly warned him, thereby imbuing their endeavor with a mysteriousness of its own. “Tell us where more can be found, then let us conclude our purchases.”

The vendor stalled, a mite too intimidated by the archer’s demeanor. Legolas intervened before he rejected them completely; they were, after all, in his territory, and he certainly had his defenders.

“What my colleague means,” the woodland prince deftly translated. “Is that it is a matter of some urgency. The Cilnitor has been too long postponed whilst we searched for the necessary requirements. If it is not performed tonight…”

“Alas, I cannot be of further assistance in this matter,” the alchemist elucidated, a telltale quaver to his tone. “Since the war, barter with the northern realms has become impossible. Normal trade routes have been disrupted, let alone… But you must be well aware of this, my Lords. I mean only to explain that, some time ago, a necromancer purchased up all the available supply of rhycl, at a price none so impoverished as we could refuse. There is none to be had city-wide, as a result of his… I suppose some would term it generosity.”

“Then we must have it off him,” Thorondil emphasized, the hiss of his voice implying much. “Our friend is not to be denied.”

“Good sirs,” the alchemist prevaricated, visibly nervous. “We are not in the habit of inquiring after more than the necessary particulars of our customers. Our trade would be ruined if we did not practice utter and unimpeachable discretion.”

“Which, of course, is why we ourselves sought you out,” Legolas agreeably remarked, attempting to temper them both. “Still, our need is great, and our coffers full. Is there no means of contacting this gentleman? If not today, then sometime in the future? His interests may… dovetail with our own.”

Legolas proffered a bag of coins that could buy him a new, legitimate shop if he spent wisely. The vendor was too skilled a negotiator to properly react, but there was a reverence to his eyes nonetheless.

“Inquiries can be made,” he readily assented. “Though I can promise no concrete, nor timely, results.”
“Very well,” Legolas agreed, sealing their compact with a pointed nod. “When you have news, send a phial of rose water to the head groom at the stable yard. Any messenger of mine will bear a tattoo of the sun of the south on his left inner wrist. If you make haste, I will double your purse, so while you cannot guarantee timeliness, it is in your interest to serve me well.”

“I shall indeed, my Lord,” the alchemist vowed, then demurely ushered them into the alleyway.

Neither he nor Thorondil commented on their interview until they were safely out of doors, having sought out the second means of exit in order to better map the tunnels in their own minds. Long before daylight assailed them, for they were now on the fifth tier to the east of the promontory, Legolas reviewed for himself the main point of their conversation, assuring that he had understood every aspect of their transaction. He was especially proud to have learned the meaning of the elusive ‘rhylc’, though its interpretation in relation to the case would wait upon Elrohir’s return. He was even more thrilled by the thought of bragging of his coup to his darkling lover, since he had carefully laid a linguistic trap that would be sure to snare Thorondil, or any spy in his employ, if he was the killer.

The plot hinged on a subtle misapprehension. To a man of Gondor, the southern sun was the emblem of Harad, which was in keeping with Legolas’ disguise. Yet to an alchemist, the sun of the south was a slang name for the symbol of the element Adamant, an oval bracketed by two half-squares, representing the potential for radiance contained within. If Thorondil, or any eavesdropping passerby, aimed to trump him at his own game, they could easily send a messenger tattooed with the emblem of Harad. Whereas, if alerted by the phial of rose water, Legolas himself would revisit tunnels and learn if any treachery had occurred, either through inquisition or by force. Regardless, he had moneys enough to ensure that the alchemist lived on into prosperity, as he would set a guard upon him the instant he was alone.

Until then, he enjoyed the sight of his companion’s thorough pleasure at the outcome of their mission, his features luminous and his step lively. Yet he sobered when he viewed Legolas’ studious mien, reminded that there was much to be done before the murderer was unmasked.

“Surely we are closer than ere before to learning the fiend’s identity?” he queried, attempting to rally his friend.

“Perhaps so,” Legolas conditionally concurred, repeating his mantra for the day. “Our spider has spun such an intricate web, there is no measuring the tenacity of its strands. It may be anchored by many, it may be unraveled by a few precise plucks. So far, it has held much longer than any of us expected, but then we all thought the motivation would be proved political. Which it may still be, as part of a grander scheme. We are dealing with the whims of a madman, attempting to follow the logic of a diseased mind. The only predictable aspect of the crime is that it is… so unpredictable.”

“Thus the King is not in the clear,” Thorondil deducted. “There may be trouble at the wedding.”

“At the Lady Arwen’s arrival, in the interim, at the reception…” Legolas sighed, irritated that they were no closer to a solution than an hour before. “He may have thought that Angbor’s murder would bring certain issues to light, thus he made no further action before the coronation. He may be angry now, or appeased, since we know nothing of his criteria for success. If there is trouble before the ceremony, it may not be caused by him. The chaos of his mind conceals him terribly well, especially since he does appear to have some rein over it. His public face is not his private one.”

“But surely the monster will consume him in the end,” Thorondil astutely theorized.

“One would hope,” Legolas smirked. “But when is the end? Now? In ten years? At the hour of his death? Our only chance to roust him out is provocation, and for that we must know even more about his fears, his desires, and his cares.”
The archer fell quiet a moment, then eyed him wryly.

“Methinks tis Lord Elrohir’s influence that has provoked you into a most becoming transformation,” Thorondil taunted. “Tis your intellect that has bloomed, among other, most desultory emotions.”

Legolas huffed indignantly at this, then dealt him a brusque shove, inwardly cherishing their friendship for what it presently appeared to be, in these times of murder and mayhem.

* * *

June 17th

In that glorious, historic moment, the Elf-Knight of Imladris felt alive as never before, an effigy of honor and righteousness in shining mithril armor. Under the star-laden banner of their noble house, he sat bold, a sterling testament to his elvish and mannish heritages, a dedicated brother to elf-princess that would be Queen of Gondor, a lauded veteran of the Great War of their time, a hero to all who beheld him. Elrohir rode through the reconstructed gates of Minas Tirith as if he truly did embody all the fawning characteristics attributed to him by the hopeful members of the crowd amassed behind, as a testament to the success of a union between a child of Eru and Illuvatar, as an emblem of all that could be achieved in this time of peace.

With his equally gallant twin by his side, they stormed up the winding streets of the capital, escorting their too-precious sister not only to her future husband, but to fate. Yet the brethren charged into such precarious emotional territory with the same ferocity with which they raced into the thick of a bloody battle; they remained gracefully poised, unilaterally focused, and spitting fire at any who would oppose them.

As they galloped up tier after tier towards the Citadel, Elrohir was conscious only of his desire to serve his family, of the awe and relief and trepidation Arwen must be feeling in the minutes before reuniting with Estel. There was no place for selfishness where his sister’s happiness was concerned, nor for the bleak thoughts both he and his brother could not help but entertain these past weeks. Privately, they had vowed to school their behavior, to banish all melancholy, to pretend as if the stakes were no higher than in any normal marriage. This was, in essence, so. No matter how hallowed the event, Arwen and Estel’s wedding day would be fundamentally alike to any other couples’; there would be a nervous groom, a frantic bride, a stoic law-father-to-be, and much fretting all around in the moments before the ceremony’s commencement. This day could also be reduced to its most elemental aspects: a lady flying to her warrior lover’s side in the aftermath of a devastating war. For all the pomp and pageantry, for all the multicolored banners and totem-emblazoned flags, for all the ornate carriages and jewel-lined saddles, for all the capes, circlets, and crowns, there was, at heart, a deeply enamored pair, who had sacrificed much, and had been prepared to give everything, to see realized a dream that encompassed not just their relation, but the prosperity of all the peoples of Arda.

Such blithe ambition was reflected in Estel’s sage gray eyes, which evoked those of the first, long-lost King of Men, as he looked toward his future, his gaze fixed on the pristine archway through which the brethren then rode. When their eyes locked, Elrohir was reminded not only of their kinship, but of the similarity of their circumstances. Both were about to be embroiled in a long-awaited lovers’ reunion, though both were ruled by insecurity and anxiousness over how they would be received. Both were trussed up in the finery they usually scorned, feeling like unconvincing actors in some melodramatic theatrical, overly conscious of the role they were expected to play and desperate not to embarrass the one that owned their heart. Yet there were glints of newly born hope in both their eyes, that this hard-won peace would prove as bountiful as so many claimed, that they would indeed be rewarded for so many years of deprivation, that what was once deemed impossible
by their beleaguered souls would imminently transpire, an inner serenity embracing them with the fervor of their beloveds.

As Elrohir silently confirmed for his foster brother that the treasure he had sworn to deliver was but seconds behind him, he basked in the elation that erupted upon those patrician features, grateful to the gods that had guided them all towards this indelible moment of two worthy souls reunited in bliss.

The Valar only knew how moved he would be by the wedding itself, in a fortnight’s time.

At present, he and Elladan came to a halt before the palace steps, both performing an officious bow prior their dismount. Once their sister’s carriage was positioned behind them, they stationed themselves at either side of the door, which their father opened. As Estel eagerly descended into the courtyard, a lissome hand was placed in their Adar’s, then Lady Arwen emerged, ethereal as the evenstar for which she was named, but with eyes only for her errant Ranger, no matter that he was clothed as a king. An instant later, she was in his arms, giggling and cooing and whispering his name as Estel twirled her triumphantly about, himself exultant in this, the victory he had prayed to deserve. Yet there was naught in all the land more priceless than his lady’s kiss, which he hastened to claim and she to ardently bestow, an affirmation of a love both had once thought a victim of mismatched destiny.

No one among the small gathering of friends, councilors, family and servants was immune to the emotion of the scene before them. With eyes glistening and hearts swollen, they cheered in welcome, the only sound heard above their thunderous applause being Arwen’s trills of laughter.

Only then did Elrohir dare search out Legolas, half-turned to follow the royal couple into the palace, not even sparing a glance in his direction. Unable to stave off disappointment, he was startled by the press of his father’s hand into his back, but stumbled forward all the same. Berating himself for his lack of decorum, he strode forth with militaristic precision, quietly fighting back the intrusive thoughts that aimed to overthrow his composure. Legolas could very well have been struggling just as mightily as he to enact the part of effortless gallantry.

But seconds later, the tempest of yearning and wild conjecture kicked up anew when, siphoned into a huddle as they segued into a tight corridor, Elrohir felt the brush of fingertips across the knuckles of his hand, then the nimble digits that normally hugged a bowstring twined with his own. There was time only for a brief but meaningful press of palms before Legolas fell back into step with his companions, though the elf-knight reeled for long minutes after, his gaze locked on the flaxen mane before him. Hope had been revived, along with his passion for the archer, which presently ran amok through his all too helpless body. Yet no organ proved more untamable than his heart, which fluttered insipidly as his besotted mind revisited again and again their fleet contact, already speculating as to the implications.

By the time they reached the reception hall, Elrohir was so ashamed of his reaction that he was altogether rigid with tension, horrified by the notion that anyone, especially someone close to him, might perceive his discomfiture and interpret it as distaste for his sister’s choice of mate. Even more execrable would be if someone took offense at his behavior, such as Master Erestor, or, Manwe forbid, his Adar. As the guests spread themselves across the room, he stuck close to his father, though he could not meet his eyes, nor did he care to focus on any other’s. Though he rallied against his emotions, he felt as unhinged as on that incomparable night when Legolas swept him away to Osgiliath. Apparently, his delirium then had not solely been the fault of his body’s metamorphosis, but another symptom of his ever-worsening addiction to the charms of the woodland prince, one that, given his current straits, he could not longer consider as healthy as his brother had assured him they were.
When he finally broke from his inner musings, he discovered that Estel had completed his formal
greetings and the guests were forming a line to offer their personal congratulations. Once again
cursing his distraction, his consideration of where he should place himself was interrupted by
Elladan’s sudden grab of his arm. Steeling himself against surprise at the last second, his temper was
further riled by the impish look in his brother’s eyes, which read of his distress, and its likely cause,
too easily for Elrohir’s peace of mind.

“Come,” Elladan urged him, before he could protest. “Let us divest ourselves of armor whilst they
are preoccupied.”

Regardless of his foreboding, Elrohir was grateful for the reprieve, thus he stole away into an
antechamber with his twin, who had already sent a servant to fetch their packs. He was even more
thankful that a carafe of water and two goblets stood on a way table, since he had not been so
parched since they had traversed the Paths of the Dead. After this replenishment, Elrohir felt far
steadier, though far from truly stable. He sought diversion in casual conversation, a ploy Elladan
would see through readily enough.

“Their tenderness certainly silenced any doubts we might still harbor about the match,” he remarked
to his twin. “Not that Arwen would hear any of them. Tis yet another in series of double-edged
choices: to celebrate with consent or to be tacitly ignored for the rest of her days.”

“You are in bitter humor for one whose own ambitions have just been confirmed,” Elladan observed,
assaying a look so mercurial that the elf-knight had mind to smack it from his face, despite being too
busy recovering from his astonishment at his brother’s perspicacity.

“I know not what you mean,” Elrohir prevaricated, the words ringing false even to his own ears.

A knock at the door further rattled him, the tension in the air too rife for even a servant’s intervention.

“I will forgive that blatant untruth since it is obvious you are floundering,” Elladan playfully retorted.
“Once your fever subsides, be sure to compose a suitable act of contrition. I warn you, I expect
groveling.”

Elrohir was utterly baffled by his meaning, until the door inched open and Legolas himself slipped
inside, his furtive mien brightening considerably at the sight of his beloved. The elf-knight was
suddenly, painfully bashful, touched by his brother’s gesture and aching for a private moment with
the archer, as well as completely overwhelmed by the circumstances. Elladan soon disappeared,
chuckling all the while, then he was alone with the gorgeous, golden creature that had reigned over
his dreams and hovered in the background of his every waking thought for over a month.

“Well met, Son of Elrond,” Legolas smirked, hastening to close the distance between them, but
stopping short of an intrusion upon Elrohir’s person before he was invited forth.

“Indeed we are, Prince of Mirkwood,” he smiled outright, recovering his confidence now that he
could safely eschew formality.

Before he knew what he was about, he lunged forward, enveloping Legolas in his arms and
beseeching his kiss with fulsome, eloquent eyes. Those lips proved as succulent as he remembered,
that singular taste just as luscious, to say naught of the rough texture of his tongue and the sensuous
heat of his mouth. Legolas more than matched the strength of his hold, he bettered it, stroking his
hands down the length of his back and molding them to his taut buttocks, quietly demanding that his
possessiveness be met with tacit approval. Elrohir was only too willing to mash himself all the closer,
until they formed one colossal silhouette of tight woven limbs and dueling lips. Yet beyond these
superficialities, a compelling warmth blanketed them both, fuelled by a pair of soul flames as eager to
blaze together as those of the king and his lady beyond.

When they gently slipped apart to lock their gazes, there was no denying their mutual reverence, nor how invigorating both found their togetherness.

“Alas, we should not tarry,” Legolas sighed. “Else some maniacal councilor will grow suspicious.”

“Can you not spare a moment to detail a small part of the investigation’s lately developments?” Elrohir inquired, with a scapegrace grin.

“Incorrigible,” Legolas chuckled, then gave his brawn a mighty squeeze, delighting in the feel of his lover returned. “You know well enough we cannot delay further. Yet I dare say the subject will be proposed at a later hour, if only because Estel has vowed to remain chaste until his binding night and tis the likeliest topic of conversation to divert him from his lady’s bed.”

“So long as it does not divert me from yours,” Elrohir sharply commented. “Then I will attempt to cultivate a measure of patience.”

A bellow of laughter alerted them to an intruder, though one far from scandalized by the intimacy of their embrace. Though Elrohir shot him a withering look, Elladan was unrepentant.

“Rally yourselves,” he encouraged them. “A toast is imminent, and, if I am not mistaken, we are expected to deliver it, muindor.”

“By Elbereth’s grace,” Elrohir grumbled, grappling out of his armor as quickly as he could as Legolas set about straightening his tunic and sash.

Yet he was not above a retort of his own, stealing a sweet peck from his archer before jogging over to meet his brother, with Legolas to follow but moment after.

As they sauntered back into the reception hall, he noted that the last of the guests were seating themselves, then elegantly pursued his brother over to the banquet table. Once the party was complete, a page called the room to order, then Elrohir stood, tall and proud, beside his twin. Before turning his eyes to the royal couple, he caught a glimpse of his Adar’s gaze, which was clearly focused on him. Those keen silver orbs flicked aft to perceive Legolas belatedly settle into his seat, then shifted back to observe the flush, radiant face of his son.

That those eyes shone with elation, curiosity, and approval nearly sundered the elf-knight’s resolve, but he had only to think on everything his family had sacrificed to bring them to this moment to steady himself and sing their praises.

End of Part Six
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not for profit.
Summary: On the eve of Aragorn’s coronation, our golden pair are charged with investigating a brutal murder at the Citadel.

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present...

A Slaying in Scarlet
A LOTR Mystery

Part 7

You may have noticed how extremes call to each other, the spiritual to the animal, the cave-man to the angel.
–The Adventure of the Illustrious Client, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1924

It’s a wicked world, and when a clever man turns his brain to crime it is the worst of all.
–The Adventure of the Speckled Band, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1892

Minas Tirith, Year 3019, Third Age

June 18th

Twas upon a quiescent dawn that Elrohir tiptoed back into his bedchamber, carefully balancing a tea tray so as to minimize the clatter of the cups and kettle, a sleek black notebook tucked under his arm. After depositing his wares on the cluttered night stand, where an open jar of salve had been left to solidify in the cool night air and a long extinguished candle had toppled like an axed tree over its stand, he gently fluffed up his pillow that he might recline against it, mindful of disturbing the flaxen head buried under its brother. As he eased himself into his seat, slouching down to relieve most of the weight on his unsurprisingly cranky bottom, he marveled at the domesticity of the scene before him: a languid morning, a cozy berth, a steaming mug, a dozing lover tucked in beside.

Surely these were the spoils of peacetime, the humblest, and therefore the sweetest, of rewards for his valor.

The one incongruity was in the subject matter of the tome he wedged between his bent legs and his abdomen; not some volume of flowery verses, nor some epic tale, but the journal Legolas had kept of his efforts during the elf-knight’s absence. In short, a ledger of clues, conspiracy, and dubious motives related to the grisly murder of Angbor, Steward of Lamedon. Indeed, Elrohir had awoken so eager to delve into its pages that he had at first decamped from their bed, ever wary of engaging in work upon his place of rest (and, to be fair, sensual revelry – he did not particularly care to be reminded of bloodletting whilst they were embroiled). Yet the thought of Legolas waking to an empty place beside him, coupled with – much to his chagrin – his own need to be in fair proximity of the archer in the aftermath of another incendiary night, had lured him back into their cocoon of
warmth, though no amount of reservations would keep him from such a compelling read, especially when, now that his baser desires were sated, he was raring to take up the chase.

Despite his noblest intentions, the mere shift of his hips reminded him of how his backside came to be so abused, which further provoked a fit of introspection, a tendency he had hoped to be rid of now that Legolas and he were reunited but that apparently he was destined to suffer intermittent bouts of for the duration. Annoyed with himself, Elrohir nevertheless could not manage to divert his mind from explicit remembrances of the previous night, images and impressions from their interlude flickering at the edges of his vision even as he forced himself to focus on the page before him.

Estel, betraying a trickster streak not glimpsed since his boyhood, had deliberately kept them overlong, as if daring them to excuse themselves at an early, and therefore revelatory, hour. They had politely stayed the course, since, contrary to his foster brother’s assumptions, he had not planned on a rigorous encounter after the day’s exhausting. That they had been dismissed but minutes before the witching hour had only delayed their consulting about the case, or so Elrohir had himself believed until they were finally ensconced in his study. Upon depositing their packs and divesting themselves of weaponry, Legolas had almost casually invaded his space, dabbing flirtatious nips and suckles around the contours of his lips before catching up his hand and leading him into the bedchamber.

Therein, they had unhurriedly undressed one another, their gazes unabashedly admiring, then had fallen into a relaxed embrace, trust and devotion implicit in every press of fingertips onto a silky swath of skin. When finally they had segued into a kiss, then coiled tight upon the coverlet, it was as thorough and intimate an exploration as Elrohir had ever submitted to. He had returned to a giving, primal sanctuary that he did not care to ever quit, the friction of their bodies nowhere near as compelling as the emotion radiant upon the archer’s gilt features. They had lingered there, satisfied with playful, puckish sensualities, for a goodly while, their ambitions for the interlude little more than an abundance of caressing and a quick grind.

Yet Elrohir should have known that one so raw as he would not be tempered by even such emulsifying attentions. He should have realized, as those hands mapped the contours of his brawny frame, as he supped on that elegant slope of neck, as he petted and pawed that sinuous musculature, as that scandalous tongue laved down his torso, as their eyes met cute over and again, each look more ardent than the last, that even such opulent eroticism would not suffice, not when for weeks his spirit had secretly craved a more visceral communion. Ever since their separation, he had privately wondered whether his delirium on that exquisite night could be recreated, whether his ecstasy had been mostly fuelled by his metamorphosis or whether he had been depriving himself of the pleasures he truly favored since his adolescence.

Once again in the very crucible that had caused such a virulent fission within him, his body had yearned to be mastered, to be ruled by Legolas’ benevolent passion. When the woodland prince had begun to knead his taut buttocks, he had found himself unable to desist from purring encouragements, until his legs had been locked around that slender waist, his lover entranced and panting atop him. A pang of embarrassment queered his gut as he recalled how zealously he had begged to be possessed, how indefatigably he had resurrected Legolas’ desire for another scorching bout, until finally his lust for slow burn penetration had been slaked, though no climax could extinguish the flame in his heart.

Afterwards, they had been too tipsy to sleep, instead whispering conspiratorially into the wee hours of trifles and trivial observations. All the while, Elrohir had been dizzily enraptured by his golden swain, a feeling beyond serenity tranquilizing the oft tempestuous seas within him. He could have lain there for days, listening to Legolas’ typically astute estimations of the servants’ capabilities, regaled by irrelevant gossip about the local aristocracy and the hobbits’ lately escapades. Despite the memory of his blush-inducing lassitude, Elrohir believed that he had caught a glimpse of his future,
though whether near or far, he could not determine. He could only cherish the unspoken promise inherent to their leisure, that Legolas would endeavor to perpetuate their togetherness, that the emotion that so overwhelmed him was mutual, that something of significance was transpiring between them, something neither of them could longer ignore.

Elrohir did not require awkwardly worded troths to know that he was treasured, just as, he hoped, Legolas did not expect him to voice some chivalrous vow to understand the depth of the elf-knight’s regard. He wagered they were both comfortable with revealing themselves because of the maturity they had each exhibited thus far, a quality that had proved so elusive in their former suitors. Elrohir could never fail to respect his Mirkwood prince, nor would Legolas fall prey to the idolatry of yore. The investigation was a winning foundation, as well as a pact of solidarity that would scarcely require improvement through the ensuing years of their relation.

Twas as if they were already bound, though not solely by duty, nor only by the evidence of eloquence within. They were kindred spirits who had discovered, through a common purpose, the beauty of their partner’s soul.

As if he required further temptation, Legolas stirred, groaning meekly before tossing over the coverlet and lurching off to relieve himself. Elrohir could not possibly school his gaze when presented with such a hotly coveted sight as two plump yet firm buttocks undulating their way to the bathing chamber. He wrenched his concentration back to the text before him, marshalling his focus before the entire day was lost to carnal debauchery, which, while diverting, would suit the murderer’s intentions far too well for his liking.

There was, after all, a hero to avenge.

Thus resolved, he soon became engrossed by the journal, since the twin obsession to the wood-elven graces that so consumed him was his involvement in the case. Almost instinctively, he scribbled notes in the margins as he read, intrigued by many of Legolas’ more candid observations, by the uniqueness of his oft unmentioned perspective. He had made impressive progress by the time the archer in question collapsed at his side, then conformed to his frame in as unobtrusive a manner as he could achieve, hugging an arm around his middle to anchor himself in. When Elrohir happened to glance down at the head pillowed by his chest, he became transfixed by a gaze sublimely transparent in its affection, earnest and unguarded in a way that he could only aspire to. He pressed a solemn kiss to his lover’s brow, then curled into their embrace for a time, euphoria competing with inhibition for dominion over him.

“Have Faramir and Eowyn returned from Lamedon?” he inquired, as he shut the journal and set it aside. “I did not mark their presence yestereve.”

“They diverted to Osgiliath, to inspect the progress there,” Legolas explained, a wistful note to his voice. “The reconstruction has begun. Tis an oasis for the besotted no more.”

“Other than for the starry-eyed couple that aims to rule it,” Elrohir smirked, so as to avoid growing maudlin. He, too had hoped they might escape there for a time, once his sister was wed. “I had aspired to a detailed plan of attack, now that our suspects are reassembling in the capital, but it appears we must be prepared to improvise for the time being.”

“Yet there’s a fair amount of intrigue to report on the Lamedonian front,” Legolas informed him. “The Morthond Vale cabal has been toppled, and its members imprisoned. Though Elessar’s captains are still ferreting out the last of the unfaithful in the region itself, the population will likely be decimated by the loss, as was Lamedon by the combined forces of the Battle of the Pelennor and an orc raid on its villages last month. The King plans to merge the two regions, while the steward of the newly formed Lamedon Vale will undoubtedly hail from another fief. There is simply too much
corruption and obstinacy among both contingents for any there to forge a new path through the recent strife. Heldoran was too preoccupied by the rescue effort to protest this development in person, but everyone at court expects him to demand a private interview with the King upon his advent here. I was privileged enough to read the letter he sent in response, since anything related to Lamedon falls under our purview, and it was truly one of the most venomous writs I have ever laid eyes upon.”

“By Elbereth, you do know how to entice one of scholarly bent,” Elrohir quipped, bristling with anticipation. “Alas, I fear such geopolitical maneuvering is by the day becoming more and more irrelevant to our common purpose, especially now that so many who potentially bore witness to the more pertinent events of Angbor’s life have been slain. If only we could ourselves walk the streets of his village as it was before the war, converse with folk that served him, befriended him, worked with him, relaxed with him. The victim himself is, in a sense, the most obscure part of the mystery.”

“Indeed,” Legolas thoughtfully concurred, absently raking his fingers through the spaces between the elf-knight’s own. “Though the murderer is no less effectively concealed, given the mask he wears in his daily life. I certainly cannot imagine any of our suspects – scoundrels though many of them are – scrawling cryptic messages on chamber walls in a man’s lifeblood.”

This had the odd effect of galvanizing Elrohir, who nearly shucked Legolas off in his excitement. The archer did not miss the wince that creased his features as a result of such brash movement, though he did not dare interrupt his lover’s enthusiasm.

“To speak of disguise, I must visit this underground market,” the darkling elf animatedly announced. “There must be an alternate meaning to ‘rhycl’, for why would our villain make such a fuss about a chemical compound come murder weapon? Why boast of his use of that specific poison, in three different languages, no less?”

“I sense that you have already developed a hypothesis,” Legolas remarked, his look luminescent with fondness.

“Oh course,” Elrohir chuckled self-consciously, still unsure of himself in the face of such bald regard. “For all his madness, the killer is playing with language, which implies that the term itself has a double meaning. My suggestion… rather rudimentary, to be sure, but since he wants his message to be understood, then it cannot be so terribly complex. That is, an aspect of the murder’s design is that the punishment fit the crime. That justice be done. Angbor is slain in the manner of a spider because he *was* one – towards our killer or someone he cared for, he hunted his prey like a shelob, stalking it from the shadows, luring it to his lair, pouncing, paralyzing it, restraining it, then taunting the helpless creature until it expired from fright. Then, only then, did he strike.”

“Thus our villain became what he most despised in order to avenge himself,” Legolas extrapolated. “He doled out justice, but at what expense to his own peace of mind? He must, after all, be revolted by what he has done, be disgusted by how his actions mirror Angbor’s own even as he relishes the perverse irony inherent to his victory over him.”

“Precisely,” Elrohir murmured, inwardly reviewing the logic of their theory. “However, he need not be crippled by this repulsion. It is possible that the pleasure of having accomplished the deed fuels him still. Power is an intoxicant that can dilute slowly, especially if he gloats over what he perceives as our ineptitude. Also, he may simply have adopted another guise. In the aftermath of war, it is easy enough to justify a revolution of self. His latest role may be one in a series he has been playing all his life.”

“Which, if I may be so bold, suggests that the slayer was similarly cursed by Angbor’s sexual preferences,” Legolas deftly connected. “Why else would he have to resort to disguising his inner
cares, and from such a young age? He is adept at self-transformation because it meant survival in a hostile world. Alas, this raises the distinct possibility that Angbor mistreated or abused him in his youth.”

“Or what may have been perceived as abuse,” Elrohir underlined. “One who desires males in this environment is made to feel impotent, vile, daemonic even. The gentlest of advances could have been distorted by a mind that already loathed itself, servant to a body whose urges threatened to expose all the pestilence within. Self-hatred is, in the end, the most vicious motivator of all. If Angbor’s interest had prompted a reaction, that may have been enough to vilify him in the murderer’s eyes.”

“Which, in turn, leads us back to Thorondil,” Legolas sighed, clearly distressed by the notion that he now had even greater cause to doubt his friend. “He is the only one of our suspects who perfectly fits our profile of the killer. If it’s he, then he has won a double victory, since he in turn seduced the one who must have inspired much of his jealousy, winning for himself the prize that Angbor could not hold on to. Reformed, somewhat, from his earlier madness, under my own tutelage!”

“Legolas…” Elrohir clucked affectionately, himself upset by his lover’s visible frustration and sense of betrayal.

“Perhaps he initially planned to slay Amrothos, as well,” the Mirkwood prince bitterly pressed on. “Perhaps love does indeed conquer all, staying a villain’s hand in his moment of crisis, lighting a new path through the brimstone darkness of his mind. He could even blame his bloodlust on the war! He had not aimed to kill Angbor, but he had been so affected by the carnage and gore that he could not see his way to sanity unless—”

“Melethen,” Elrohir whispered, adoring him in that instant for all that the archer was disheartened, since his loyalty shone brighter for the tarnish that potentially marred it.

Startled into a smirk, Legolas gazed sheepishly up at him, then rested his chin in the center of the elf-knight’s chest that they might admire one another for a time.

“Forgive me,” he exhaled longly. “I have had little else to preoccupy me these past weeks, especially since I did not care to…” He gave a defeated shrug, then stole a peck from the skin beneath him.

“Tis a possibility that would render me overwrought, as well,” Elrohir assuaged, unsure from what heretofore uncharted font he drew on for his reserves of tenderness. “Yet our conjecture has proved nothing, though it has obviously tried your patience.”

“Nay, it is the thought that I am daily being deceived that aggravates me without cease,” Legolas clarified. “Though, of course, our interactions may also be completely genuine, which pricks my guilt when I remind myself of it. Neither can I avoid his company or treat him unfairly. The situation is wholly intolerable, as well as altogether impossible to navigate.”

Elrohir considered this a moment, reflecting not on the circumstances, but on his brother’s counsel that love accrued over time, through shared experience, each new chapter evolving the manner of one’s devotion. What seemed truly impossible was that, in the span of a conversation, the woodland prince could the more ingratiated himself with the elf-knight, but this had transpired all the same. He was oft accused of poorly investigating his own emotionality, but there was no failing to acknowledge this development, not in such close quarters, not after such an incendiary night, not when there was a wounded lover to console, though fortunately Elrohir had not himself wielded the blade that had lanced him.

“I am here,” he offered as encouragement, praying that this statement inspired confidence, not a
rueful snigger. “If only to attend the ritual venting of your complaints, I am here. It is one of the more arduous aspects of a criminal investigation, one not easily endured by an elf of…infinite heart, like your amiable self. I bear through by distancing myself, by my slavish devotion to logic and reason, which is perhaps why my brother oft teasingly introduces himself as my conscience. But you have not yet fallen victim to repression and severity, thus… turn to me, when you are wanting. I will bear you through.”

Their gazes locked for a goodly while, not in examination or scrutiny, but in mutual compassion. Elrohir felt simultaneously nauseous and exhilarated, unsure of what would come of such elemental alchemy, but eager beyond compare for the adventure. When Legolas’ kiss found him anew, he felt an indelible, inviolable compact was being sealed, one whose tenets would resound far beyond the white stone walls that enclosed the legendary city that threatened to permanently become a villain’s playground.

Just as he silently vowed to dedicate himself to the deciphering of the more cryptic aspects of his golden archer’s soul, so would he solve the riddle of the spider fiend’s identity before the entirety of Minas Tirith was caught in his web.

* * *

With a slow, steady expulsion of breath, Legolas sank deeper into the meditative flow of relaxation, then surrendered himself to the moment, to the stillness, to the simplicity of existence. He relinquished control to the elements, shifting his entire weight onto one grounded hand, the sole contact between his elegantly angled body and the bristly lawn. He fought to forget the muscle strain, the heat of the midday sun, the rush of blood to his head, the feathery brush of breeze that every second threatened to topple him. Instead, he held rigid as a dagger knifed into the earth, a warrior of poise, an incisive weapon, an army unto himself.

After quitting his lover’s bed, the woodland prince had hastened down to the archery field for some much-needed exercise. Afraid that his concentration would soon be as scattershot as his aim was of late, he had retreated from one sanctuary to rediscover another, this on far more primal terrain. No matter what intellectual heights he aspired to in his nascent relation with Elrohir, here was the foundation of his character, as guardian of the Great Green Wood, as scion of the House of Oropher. He had carried a quiver whilst still in swaddling clothes, he had learned to shoot before he had mastered his letters. The discipline that honed him a champion was not only the result of arduous practice and a preternatural talent, but of his espousal of the Mirath Cuthalion, the Way of the Strongbow, the ancient battle arts that promoted a regimen of balance and breathing techniques alongside military conditioning.

The gymnastic flexibility this endowed him with regularly spared him injury, as well as provided an outlet for his anxieties and his aches. After a fashion, it was the source of his affability, the even-temperedness that so impressed peers and opponents alike. There were few problems Legolas was incapable of confronting once he stretched himself into physical alignment, thus, on this dizzy headed morn subsequent to the realization of most of his lately romantic ambitions, there was only one outlet through which he could expend his ardor and refocus on his duty.

Not that he cared to wholly forget the eloquent ministrations of his gentle, giving Elrohir! Rather, the elf-knight’s encouragements were just the nourishment he required after weeks of pointless re-interviews and general inaction. While the sweet, sweet interlude of the previous night had reaffirmed their viability as a couple of means, it was Elrohir’s sage counsel that morn that had truly revivified his spirit, as well as hinted at how, in the future, they might come to thrive on their togetherness. Indeed, Legolas had departed their chambers so saturated with affection and admiration for his lover that the fear that he might blunder in his detective work had instinctively directed him
towards the training ground. Now that the heady gush that all but poured out of his heart had been
diluted back into the constant course through his veins, he was sure to more ably swim through the
day’s endeavors, rather than dive into the murky deep and be forced to tread water until twilight.

Legolas tucked his legs in, replaced his other hand, then carefully rolled himself out along the grass.
He gazed up into the endless blue of the sky, laxing his muscles and exhaling longly before shutting
his eyes in deference to the oneness that suffused him. After a prolonged moment of tranquility, he
sprung up, fantastically reinvigorated, then tossed his quiver over his shoulder that he might enjoy a
few practice rounds before hunting down more elusive game, the usual round of suspects. Yet little
did he know that within seconds they themselves would invade, seeking his counsel over what he
would later dismiss as an impertinent lovers’ quarrel.

Indeed, before he could pull back the string of his bow, his elven hearing attuned to their hushed
bickering as they stormed across the archery field, or, rather, Thorondil brusquely dragged a visibly
hobbled Amrothos towards their alleged mentor in affairs of the heart. Upon further inspection,
Legolas concluded that the hitch in the Prince of Dol Amroth’s step was not the result of another
incendiary reunion between long-separated lovers, but a spate of brutality that had bruised his cheek
and blackened an eye, to say naught of the scars his raiment concealed. Immediately alerted to the
dangers of their exposure, as well as the sensitivity of what was about to be discussed – at high
volume, he feared, by Thorondil’s incensed expression, he ushered them to the target at the greatest
distance from the stands, well out of any man’s earshot. Though they were precariously close to the
outer wall of the sixth tier, there were no guards presently posted since their tower had yet to be
rebuilt.

Legolas could not quite temper the bemusement in his grin when they finally stood before him, since
even in their distress they were adorable, every flame of their fury and indignation fired by devotion.

“My Lord,” Thorondil declared, flush with annoyance. “I-“

“My Lord,” Amrothos brashly cut in, pushing ahead of his lover. “Please forgive this untimely
interruption. We have naught of import to relate-“

“Legolas, his wits are frazzled,” Thorondil hotly insisted. “The very incident, I intend to appraise you
of directly-“

“Once that is hardly of any concern, and has no bearing upon-“

“Peace!” Legolas decreed, barely swallowing back the accompanying chuckle. “Amrothos, I dare
say your bruises are relevant enough that I might at least inquire as to where you came about them,
and, Thorondil, I warn you not to aggrandize what might have been an attack irrelevant to my
investigations out of anger towards those who aggressed a fellow who you *cannot be known to
have been intimate with*.” He foisted an imperious stare upon them, then smiled fondly. “Now,
might the victim explain himself, without interjection?”

Yet before Amrothos could part his lips to speak, a ‘ping’ echoed from on high, then a ‘whizz’
tickled the tip of Legolas’ leaf-shaped ear. As the graze of an arrow striped the back of his hand, he
shoved his friends back, the motion enough to misdirect the shot further away, though it was
presumably already wide of its target. In a flash, Legolas had his own arrow drawn, standing bold
before his companions and scanning the perimeter for the shooter’s provenance. He was located on
the battlements ably enough, archer’s intuition having calculated the trajectory, but not before raining
a volley of arrows upon them, all of which the Mirkwood prince easily deflected.

The villain, alas, dropped out of view, thus, with a barked command to his friends to take cover,
Legolas immediately gave chase, nimbly scaling up the corrugated stone wall, hoisting himself over
the ledge, then sprinting along the alley between the battlements. When he perceived that the assassin was still firing off rounds, he planted one of his own in his bow arm, the spurt of blood momentarily masking his identity. Yet the blackguard was far enough ahead of him to flee down a set of unfortunately placed stairs, racing at breakneck speed towards the promontory. After glancing through the crenels to assure no one below was injured, he somersaulted off the high landing that he might skip the stairs, then speeded off to close the distance between himself and the shooter.

Predicting that the villain would not permit himself to be slowed by the tight, coiled ramp that avoided the rock surface of the promontory, Legolas was nevertheless surprised that he accomplished a leap from atop a merlon onto the wall of the archery coliseum, quickly hopping down into the upper stands. One as agile as the woodland prince was fast upon him, his legs churning at double the scoundrel’s velocity, though this was not enough prevent him from a suddenly ascent, nor a dive off the perimeter’s edge.

Legolas was too shrewd a hunter to consider for a second that his prey had sacrificed himself. Yet he was not fool enough to risk catching a stray banner and swishing to the ground. Instead, he severed one of the construction ropes with a slit knife, then swung across to the barracks roof, sliding down a drain pipe into the assassin’s path, forcing him to divert. The blackguard promptly unsheathed his sword, slashing it to and fro to shoo away the soldiers that threatened to encircle him, then darted down a tight passage between the back wall of the tier and the stables. Rather than stealing himself a horse, he tossed his quiver into a haystack and broke into a hard run, blazing through the promontory archway towards a residential area.

Legolas followed every step of his zigzag path through the maze of avenues, but was forced to vault over enough obstacles that he could not manage to approach him, often tracing the villain’s route by the reactions of those he nearly toppled in his wake. When they broke into a square, he closed the distance between them by swinging round the column of a fountain, his maneuver so quick that he was barely damp as they charged through the crowded common room of an alehouse. The inn in question was not randomly chosen, since, after galloping up the stairs, Legolas caught sight of him blasting through a window onto a verdant slope parallel to the second storey.

The archer skid down the slick lawn with ease, briefly pausing to consider whether to unleash his bow as the scoundrel similarly weighed his options. His last ruse had been a brilliant one, but he had not thought the strategy through, since he was caught between grappling up to the seventh tier, where he would not fail to attract the notice of the palace guards, and attempting to lose Legolas in the labyrinthine streets that surrounded them. He smartly chose the latter before the Mirkwood prince was directly upon him, though his energy was clearly waning as he leapt into a cart and traveled a few blocks undetected by the tradesman at the reins. Unable to chance firing off in a populated area, Legolas could only keep pace with the contraption, until the assassin dodged down a shadowy side alley. He could not, after all, retrace his path, since there were enough good Samaritans about that he would soon be stalled by a righteous citizen and delivered to his pursuer.

Fortunately, the blackguard had not accounted for elven sight, since Legolas had no trouble tracking his progress, even spying the cul de sac before it came into the villain’s view; a tier wall easily scaled, but with a dead drop behind that no elf, let alone man, could survive. The archer even slowed to a jog while the shooter pounded and slammed into the few locked doors that lined the alley, hoping that this would fatigue the man sufficiently that a fight would not ensue. Once he noticed the defeated collapse of his shoulders, Legolas walked cautiously towards him, blades poised to strike. Nothing could have prepared him for the grim menace of the glare that then assaulted him, seconds before the assassin ran for the wall, climbing swiftly up, wavering only an instant before diving to his death.

A thunderclap of shock hit Legolas so hard that he stumbled to his knees, then scrambled up in the
villain’s wake to assure himself that he had, indeed, met his end. He perched there for a time, staring
down at the splatter of trunk and limbs below, disbelieving his own eyes. Only when the crowd
began to circle did he hasten to disperse them, lest they taint the scene.

Even the briefest thought of his earlier delirium sickened him, now cruelly aware of the stakes of the
game he and his beloved were playing.

*

Legolas hung in the corner of one of the few private rooms in the Healing Hall like a woebegone
speceter haunting the scene of his own death, unable to contribute to, and therefore powerless to abet,
the work of Imladris’ master physician, Lord Elrond himself. The feeling of impotence that afflicted
him was second only to the one that itinerantly ghosted over Amrothos’ visage, of unnatural pallor
except for the vibrant violet of his bruises. On the bed before them, Thorondil lay prone, his cheeks,
in stark contrast to those of his lover, flush with post-operative fever, though Lord Elrond had
assured them that this was a normal, even desired, response to having an arrowhead removed from
one’s shoulder. Though the longtime healer promised a full recovery, neither Legolas nor Amrothos
dared believe even him on this account, since, even with his gift of foresight, the peredhel lord could
not predict whether there would be a second attempt on their friend’s life.

If he had indeed been the assassin’s intended victim, which quite a hallowed assembly of elven and
mannish royals would endeavor to determine once Elladan completed his reconstruction of the
villain’s face.

In the meantime, there was his guilt to contend with. Though he had the consolation of Elrohir,
Glorfindel, Aragorn, and even Amrothos’ insistence that they would have done nothing different in
their own pursuits of the shooter, this little assuaged Legolas, who was not proud of his ignorance of
his friend’s plight throughout the chase, neither of permitting one who was clearly not the plot’s
mastermind to plunge to his end, sacrificing himself to protect a fiend who did not deserve such
devotion. Whether said blackguard was the murderer they sought was another matter entirely, one
that did not escape his consideration. Indeed, as he stood fast in support of the third prince of Dol
Amroth, he betrayed no hint of inner turmoil; rather, he would reckon with his angst at a later hour,
in the arms of one who would not fail to analyze him out of his funk, if such a reprieve from duty
was permitted them after such a harrowing afternoon. For the moment, there were far more urgent
conclusions to come to than those that might result from private contemplation.

Once Thorondil succumbed to slumber with Lord Elrond hovering near, he clapped a hand onto
Amrothos’ far shoulder in a gesture of solidarity. Yet there was strategy in the maneuver, as it
produced the expected wince, newly alerting his companion to the sores that still plagued him and,
hopefully, to the tale he had until then neglected to recount. With a sigh, Amrothos bowed his head,
the realization that this lately incident had only redoubled Legolas’ curiosity in the affair a weighty
one, since, or so the archer suspected, he had involved himself some mischief rightly avoided by
anyone already in the crosshairs of assassins. The notion that his meddling could have been the
catalyst for Thorondil’s injury – or, if the shooter had succeeded, the slaying of any in their party,
including Amrothos himself – had occurred to Legolas, thus he could not delay the interview, no
matter how suffused with sympathy he was. If ought else, it gave them both much-needed purpose,
as well as distraction from the doomsday scenarios their minds were conjuring.

The sombrous, hollow void of the Healing Hall beyond was testament to Elladan’s resolve in the
aftermath of the war. Those that had not perished outright from their wounds had by now either been
cured, repaired, transferred to specified care shelters, or had returned to convalesce in their abodes,
with only occasional consultations with the healer required. Though diaphanous screens cordoned
off a few patients suffering from a severe outbreak of influenza on the third tier, these were likely
slumbering at such a late hour, their bellies full of broth and their symptoms lessened by herbal tea. Elladan and Amrothos perched themselves atop a pile of cots awaiting distribution to families in need, pausing to watch the noble, poised silhouettes of legendary warriors and mercurial wizards pace about the surgery, which, though the thick white curtain were drawn, blazed with torchlight.

“My Lord… Legolas, in your esteemed opinion, am I at all responsible for this debacle?” Amrothos dourly asked, his mellifluous voice echoing through the vastness.

“No more than I, though it burns me through,” the Mirkwood prince responded, with an empty chuckle at his own expense. “Though I cannot truly judge the merit of your culpability without being appraised of your adventures evening last.”

“Indeed,” Amrothos weakly acknowledged, his manner betraying his youth. For all his inherent gravitas, the archer had to remind himself that he had not yet seen twenty years, whilst Thorondil’s next quarter century had nearly been stolen from him. Legolas had still been trapping frogs for pond races at their age, but such were the ways of elves and men. “Though I would beseech you not to avail my father of…”

“That of which he would certainly not approve?” Legolas queried, with a smirk that set the prince at ease. “I’m told he was far more troublesome in his early years, if that is any consolation.”

“Little, given his strictness now,” Amrothos remarked, then segued into the tale proper. “It seemed such a trifle when I first conceived of it. After pining away for weeks in Dol Amroth, my judgment was perhaps not as even-handed as I at the time perceived. Rather, I was desperate for any communication from my beloved, and, if this was not available, to discuss him with a sympathetic ear. After all but estranging my brothers as a result of countless retellings of our courtship, I was foisted upon a trusted cousin – though, for all his valor, he is something of a rake, and has been, in the past, a rival of sorts. He, too, is cursed with elven proclivities, but more purely so, since he enjoys maids and males. While I made shy overtures and fretted overmuch, he seduced any who struck his fancy, though covertly so. I only learned of these successes some years ago, through, ironically, Angbor, who saw him for everything he was. Regardless, he alerted me to a… a house of ill-repute in Minas Tirith that caters exclusively to those of questionable desires: sodomy, sadism, and the like. He himself is not a member of the club, since, if one survives the various trials involved in enrollment, as well as the thorough vetting that must be endured, one can only partake of fellow members – civilian romances are forbidden. He explained to me the location of this establishment and I, fool that I am, upon my return to the capital attempted to trade on my looks that I might gain entrance. The results of this effort are plain to see. Before you inquire, I did not share this insight with you or Lord Elrohir, or Thorondil, because I am little known in the city and thought to capitalize on my nobility. I was certain you would have prevented me from daring so. They employ those of lower rank, but their patrons are all rich aristocrats, the sleekness of their carriages doing little to disguise the wealth of the occupants.”

“While this information certainly is of interest,” Legolas concurred. “This impulsive streak of yours had best curtail itself if you mean to preserve your life long enough to earn Thorondil’s sacred vow. Elrohir and I appreciate your efforts to a point, but you must trust in our own wiles, which have saved us from a good deal more scrapes that you could ever manage to entangle yourself in, especially in a mannish lifetime.”

“Especially when the repercussions may prove lethal,” Amrothos morosely nodded, the slouch of his frame conveying just how penitent he was. “How can I even consider holding any claim upon him now that I have served him up to our aggressors.”

“We have not yet determined who was the intended victim,” Legolas reassured him. “There may
have been none. The attack may have been meant as a warning, but the assassin himself bungled it. There is yet no proof that your misguided espionage adventure in any way endangered Thorondil. If ought, his seconding of me and his inquiries on my behalf are far more likely to have engendered the animosity that led to such measures. Whilst you are busy roasting yourself with guilt, save a spot on the spit for me.”

"*My Lord*,” Amrothos objected, though he resigned himself to a formal title that he not appear disrespectful.

“Aye, indeed,” a familiar voice chimed in, his brawny frame a black hole against the brightness emanating from the surgery. “Berate him for his obstinacy, young swain. He’s determined to bear as much of the burden for this afternoon’s outing as the assassin himself does, with even less justification.”

Even Amrothos succumbed to laughter, though he was still bashful with shame before Elrohir, whose keen gray eyes raptly examined his bruises.

“Am I required within?” Legolas queried, but the elf-knight’s focus did not waver.

“Soon enough,” Elrohir related, then broke from his concentration. “Be prepared, tis a grisly sight. No more than he deserves as a blackguard’s minion, but all the same, a wretched end to a wasted life. How does our young archer fare?”

“On the mend,” Legolas informed him, relishing his proximity and soothed by his composure.

“Inwardly preparing to be spoilt with care,” Amrothos declared, with muted pride.

“There is one boon to be drawn from this calamity,” Elrohir encouraged him. “You now have an excuse to flutter about him and insist on private audiences.”

“Poor consolation, though, when he is incapable of bearing any weight,” Legolas quipped, to the earnest amusement of all.

“I will leave you to your conjecture, my lords,” Amrothos politely excused himself, visibly anxious to return to his beloved’s beside.

“A moment, if you would, ernilen,” Elrohir requested, in a gentle tone. The young prince stood tall before him, steeling himself for the reprimand he assumed would come. “The individual who assaulted you… do you recollect anything about his appearance?”

“I saw him perfectly well,” Amrothos eagerly answered, relieved. “*Them*, rather, since there were several guards, who emerged out of the ether once the alarm was rung. Their raiment was unremarkable, allied to no house I could identify. They were burly, mercenary types – untamable brutes who served the highest bidder. I was surprised that they had managed to maintain gainful employment, but then they must be richly rewarded for their services, since to a one they wore intricate metal arm clasps and fat gemstone rings, all in funerary hues. Their boots, as well, were studded with spikes. If I had not fled into a local square, they would have had my eyes.”

“Your military instincts continue to serve you well,” Amrothos eagerly answered, relieved. “*Them*, rather, since there were several guards, who emerged out of the ether once the alarm was rung. Their raiment was unremarkable, allied to no house I could identify. They were burly, mercenary types – untamable brutes who served the highest bidder. I was surprised that they had managed to maintain gainful employment, but then they must be richly rewarded for their services, since to a one they wore intricate metal arm clasps and fat gemstone rings, all in funerary hues. Their boots, as well, were studded with spikes. If I had not fled into a local square, they would have had my eyes.”

“Your military instincts continue to serve you well, then,” Elrohir smiled fondly, the dismissal implicit in his tone. “My thanks for your pains on our account, and do refrain from interfering with our commission. You have, I believe, a lover to attend.”

“I do, my Lord,” Amrothos affirmed, then bowed in a deference that was deeply felt by all.

Those mithril eyes pursued him for a time, then locked in with Legolas’ own, softening considerably
as a tender hand cupped his cheek. There was no need to give voice to the sentiments expressed by the silver pools of his irises, nor the concern that wrinkled the porcelain skin of his brow. Legolas entwined his own lissome fingers with that doting hand, then tugged his hold down into the folds of his tunic lest anyone untoward observe the intimate gesture that he was yet loath to release himself from.

“I gather you eavesdropped upon the lion’s share of our conversation,” Legolas shrewdly questioned, which earned him a scapegrace grin.

“I happened to catch a glimpse of you as I sought out my Adar,” Elrohir smirked, then squeezed his hand. “Be thankful I did, else we would not now be armed with even more telling clues than your interview revealed.”

“How so?” Legolas inquired, fascinated as ever by the elf-knight’s methods of detection.

“The bruising on the side of his face,” Elrohir explained. “At the jaw line, there is a distinct pattern, to one with experience of such wounds. It was no bauble those guards were adorned with, but a brother ring to that placed so carefully at the crime scene.”

Legolas recovered quickly from his astonishment, his mind chasing down logical reasons for this as diligently as it pursued the assassin.

“Yet this does little to narrow the field,” Legolas considered. “The meaning of the ring’s placement is as ambiguous as ever. Is the ring now in our possession truly one of the Nine? Are there perhaps more than nine Rings of Power? Are the rings snatched from the Witch King and left at the crime scene one and the same? Was Angbor the initial bearer, or does the murderer own one as well? He obviously means to point us towards this house of ill repute, but to what end? Why does he not exact upon them the same justice he dealt Angbor, if they were all in league with the Shadow?”

“Tis true, there are many avenues now open to inquiry,” Elrohir agreed. “First, we must dedicate ourselves to answering a more pressing question: who was the target of today’s attack and who commissioned our suicidal assassin. My instinct tells me that the two may very well dovetail quite nicely, if luck is with us. Alas, we must also answer to our betters before any progress is to be made.”

“Are they very irate?” Legolas asked, mildly discomfited at the thought of those who awaited them in the surgery, though, as a Thranduilion, he had stood before far harsher tribunals.

“They are more meddlesome than ought,” Elrohir sighed, revealing his first trace of annoyance. “If there is ought we must convince them of, it is that the matter is best left in our care.”

“No pinching of buttocks, then,” Legolas mock obediently nodded, unable to restrain the imp within. “Very well.”

“Into the fray,” Elrohir urged him, in a vaguely scolding tone that was completely undermined by his own discreet fondling of the archer’s backside.

They were the picture of propriety by the time they entered the surgery, save for the remedial warmth kindling within the Mirkwood prince.

*  

A more esteemed tribunal than that which presided over the Council of Elrond awaited them in the surgery, though the Lord of Imladris himself soon slipped in to complete the tableau. Elrohir had not been permitted the quite word with his father that he had earlier sought, but that was perhaps for the
best, since there were graver matters at hand than a consideration of his level affinity with the fifth son of Thranduil Oropherion. Though Glorfindel and Erestor’s participation was nominally due to their own personal interest in the case, as was his Adar’s, in a rare bout of oversensitivity he had wondered whether they would have been quite so keen if Elladan had been his second. Regardless, the three elders of Imladris were counted among them, along with Estel, deeply aggrieved by the day’s events; Mithrandir, still mildly annoyed that they had not heeded his order to cease all investigation; and Faramir, freshly returned from Osgiliath, with a ruddy countenance that somewhat betrayed his lack of investment in the proceedings. Thankfully, Legolas had dissuaded Gimli and the hobbits from rounding out the quorum, but he did not doubt that at this very moment a glass was being pressed to one of the barred westward doors.

With studious determination, he took his place at his brother’s side, at such a distance from Legolas that they could be assumed to be allied, yet not so close that anything more could be intimated from their positions. Elladan himself was in a pensive mood, troubled by the work he had been begged to perform after so many recent medical successes, but also eager to be of service to his twin. Even though the elf-warrior looked to his spouse across the way, Elrohir viscerally felt the glare of his concern, all of his unspoken objections to the elf-knight’s poised professionalism ringing in his ears. He could guess at the main points of Elladan’s unuttered counsel easily enough; that he thought of the victim as a corpse to be examined, not as a man who had lived, that he had too neatly tucked away his enamored spirit’s reaction to learning that the object of its still timid affections had nearly been slain, that his cool objectivity was preventing him from striking to the heart of the case, since this had been, above all, a crime of passion.

While unfailingly accurate in his silent condemnation, Elrohir felt he could make show enough of roiling emotion to satisfy even his too demanding twin. He was all too aware that the assassin’s was but another needlessly wasted life, and was distressed to see Legolas haunted by the same conviction. The thought that his lately paramour could have in a fleet instant been briskly and effectively dispatched to Mandos was one he could not being himself to contemplate not out of hardness, but because it did not so much antagonize as horrify him. If he had embraced those emotions, he would have resigned his commission and immediately enforced a quarantine upon them both, which would have resolved nothing. As for the case itself, it was yet too labyrinthine to conclude on any motivation, though a surfeit of passion was as relevant an explanation as any forwarded so far. That Legolas, unlike his overly compassionate twin, accepted and even relied upon his fortitude during such crises was only another point of endearment towards the archer of whom he had grown so fond. Yet he was also painfully conscious of the fact that he was the lead investigator, that this would be his principal showcase of talent, and that, ultimately, the success or failure of their inquiries depended on the soundness of his conclusions.

Thus, he remained silent for a time, waiting for the varied assembly of personalities to publicly reveal their agendas before promoting his own.

“I trust it falls to me to call the meeting to order,” Elladan quipped, only too cognizant of the lowliness of his rank among such titans. “Apart from the fact that his last meal consisted of porridge, fruit, and milk, there is little else to report about the deceased. His death was the result of a high fall. The impact was sufficient to break, but not crush, most of his bones, with the exception of the skull, which was smashed. His garments were those of a peasant, his weaponry unexceptional, and, as to his features, they are plain enough that they do not hint at a realm or region of origin. He was, in many ways, a ghost long before this incident.”

“In essence,” Mithrandir grumbled, in a rare ill humor. “He tells us nothing of import.”

“His crime is meaningful enough,” Glorfindel countered, partially in his husband’s defense.
“Aye, but what was it he meant to achieve?” Aragorn rhetorically inquired, seeking to inspire the great minds collected around him. “Who was his intended victim?”

“If I may,” Legolas promptly interjected. “Lord Glorfindel and I earlier returned to the scene to conduct a few experiments. Our aim was mainly to ascertain if the assassin was a skilled archer, which could give an indication of who commissioned him.”

“An ambitious proposition,” Erestor conditionally complimented, clearly intending to stoke debate rather than debunk assumptions “Given that you were uncertain as to where he was aiming.”

“The results were revelatory,” Legolas continued, recognizing the Loremaster’s meddling for what it was. “When angle and wind strength were tabulated, there was no mistaking that his shots were wide of the mark. Thorondil was his intended victim.”

“But then he indeed struck true,” Elrond commented, visibly mulling over whether to voice his own opinion.

“By happenstance,” Glorfindel elucidated. “He could not fail to strike Thorondil because he was standing between Amrothos and the shooter, as if a target had been painted on his back. Also, the assassin fired off whilst attempting to evade Legolas. The stress of the moment has been known to improve aim.”

“Moreover,” Legolas pursued. “If he had intended to finish me, then why did he continue to shoot at my companions? I could not have been the one he intended to kill, else he would have pelted me with arrows at close range. I assayed several shots from his vantage and conclusively proved that, if he had hesitated the instant before release, the arrow would have missed its mark and glanced me. Since, at the time of the attack, Amrothos had just moved in to block his view of Thorondil, my archer friend must be the genuine victim.”

“It is a rather flawless scenario,” Faramir opined. “If Thorondil then moved to secure Amrothos, even a bowman of poor skill would not fail to fell him.”

“Thus we press on to why,” Aragorn more calmly stated, relieved that Legolas’ involvement in the case posed no threat to his life. “Far murkier territory, I fear.”

“The obvious conclusion,” Erestor posited. “Would be revenge of some sort. Yet, from what I comprehend, there is nothing obvious about the matter at hand.”

“Neither is there anything to be gained from pursuit of the matter,” Mithrandir gruffly insisted. “Leave it to your captains to take up the cause of civil strife, Your Highness. Faramir and his men dispatched the Morthond Vale cabal ably enough. Why persist with an investigation that only stirs up more chaos when your people are so beleaguered and there is no evidence to support any political ramifications? Let us mourn Angbor, a private tragedy, and proceed with matters vital to the kingdom’s prosperity.”

“And let a murderer scuttle back to his lair, to strike again?” Aragorn demanded. “That is not the sort of peace I swore to maintain!”

“Thorondil may very well be the murderer!” Mithrandir countered, too impassively for anyone’s comfort. “Is that not the likeliest scenario, based on the preliminary results of your investigation?”

This last was aimed at Elrohir, who, while unsurprised, was little rattled by the wizard’s bald accusation. He raised a placating hand to Legolas, who was seconds from leaping to his friend’s defense, then purposefully modulated his tone to reflect a certitude he by no means felt.
“It is,” Elrohir solidly acknowledged. “But if such evidence be proof enough for condemnation then we could all be tried and convicted of being in league with the Shadow.”

“You have permitted him to abet your investigation,” Elrond volleyed back, not to aggravate his son but, as he had in interviews during his formative years, to force him to expand upon the process of his logic. “To contribute evidence that may be tainted. To chase down sources whose testimony may not be accurately reported back to you.”

“A crucial risk,” Legolas justified. “Since they would hardly speak directly to us. Indeed, that has been the principal hurdle that we yet struggle to overcome, and there is no concrete evidence that disproves Thorondil’s value or honesty.”

Everyone, even Mithrandir, nodded in accord, their faces reflecting the frustration that both detectives had oft fallen prey to.

“Regardless of the worth of Thorondil’s contribution,” Elladan firmly stated, in a characteristic attempt to salvage everyone’s good humor. “We have strayed from the matter at hand. Who commissioned our late assassin, and does this pose a threat to the safety of all and the sanctity of the kingdom?”

As if on cue, Elrohir cleared his throat, sensing his moment had come.

“Well stated,” he complimented his twin, then ventured towards the table on which the body was displayed. “Indeed, a closer examination of the misfortunate one called upon to do another’s bidding has left a trail of breadcrumbs to the discerning eye, which, if followed, points rather conclusively towards the culprit of this regrettable incident, and perhaps, though this remains to be determined, towards a far more complex conspiracy.” Confident he had his audience’s attention, and striving to avoid the unabashed pride shining in his prescient Adar’s eyes, he proceeded. “Another clue that guides us towards an impression of his capabilities not only as an archer, but as an assassin for hire, is the state of his hands. The pattern of the calluses does indicate some experience as a bowman, but his weapon of choice is a club or a mallet, since there’s not enough wear to the index for him to be a swordsman. Another point of note on the body itself is his musculature. His legs are incredibly defined: lean, but meaty at the bone, not an ounce of fat to be found. Though his back and arms are nearly as cleanly cut, his front is peculiarly soft, especially around the abdomen. That he does not train regularly is a pedantic conclusion; what we seek is a clue as to his métier. I posit that he is a guard by trade, at high altitude, requiring him to climb up a considerable distance to his post. This theory is supported by two other clues: the long-term burn to his cheeks, which seem baked, not tinted, rose even in deathly pallor, and the method by which he attempted to evade capture. Few city dwellers could have managed to scale the edifices that he scrambled up with facility, no matter how motivated by a pursuer. Indeed, it is my opinion that he meant to vault to the lower tier – which any mountain dweller would surely be able to – when he leapt to his death. A survey of the scene confirmed this suspicion. He missed the roof of the arts guild by only a few feet. To confirm this, I dropped a sack of equal weight from the top of the wall. It landed far enough away from the assassin’s own landing site to demonstrate that he jumped out, not down, over an expanse that, quite honestly, would have inevitably led to his capture since Legolas could easily manage it. He himself must have known that he had not sufficient velocity, but thought the attempt worth the risk. Regardless, the elements of his personality are beginning to be sketched in. He was not a career assassin, though neither did he attempt to die for a cause. He was brave, perhaps volunteering for a dangerous mission when others would not. He was, unfailingly, a mountain dweller, but also one who engaged regularly with his environment. He was unused to hand-to-hand combat, and did not even attempt to wound Legolas when trapped in the alley. Yet this is not the most telling evidence of all.”
He paused a moment, perhaps out of vanity, struggling against how pleased he was that he had their undivided attention.

“Do enlighten us,” Aragorn gamely prodded, fighting to straighten his smirk.

“His weaponry,” Elrohir declared, moving over to the counter where the assassin’s possessions were displayed. “Is oft most telling of all. Those that seek to disguise themselves rarely exchange their personal weapons for others, especially when embarking upon a potentially fatal mission. If they are clever enough, they change their belts and scabbards, but our shooter, alas, did not. That said, the bow is probably not his own. It is new – there is little wear to it and it was locally made. The hilt of his dagger, though more decorative than defensive, is intricately engraved, and its sheath indubitably identifies him if you have even a basic knowledge of Gondorian folklore. The white-headed eagle against a plume of flame.”

“Anorien,” Faramir noted, not quite masking his own amazement. “He is a beacon keeper.”

“He is indeed,” Elrohir concluded. “I would hazard a guess that Carathel and his fellows are unconvinced of Thorondil’s innocence in the affairs of the Morthond Vale cabal. They sought their own justice when you dealt none, Estel.”

“And they will know what is it to incur my anger,” the King growled, never one to delay the meting out of justice. “Forthwith!”

“I will catch you up on the morrow,” Faramir excused himself to Elrohir, anxious to attend his sovereign’s debriefing of yet another troublesome steward. “As I trust our intrepid detectives have earned a brief respite from the chase.”

“Indeed they have,” Aragorn smiled conspiratorially, then thundered off.

Mithrandir performed a slight bow of the head, not so jolly after having been royally disproved, but deferent before the elf-knight nonetheless. A slightly deflated atmosphere reigned in their wake, through the investigators and their elders were by no means discouraged, merely disappointed that the morning’s incident was not more directly linked with the murder. Elladan was the first to move, briskly tidying the body away, with an eye to checking on Thorondil’s comfort.

“You’d best repair to my study if there are to be further deliberations,” the elf-warrior remarked, glancing at his husband for confirmation of his continued participation.

Elrohir promptly realized that his elders’ interest had been too readily piqued by their recent discussion; there would be no dismissing or evading their opinions now. Not that he failed to appreciate the integrity of the minds at his disposal – certainly, in appraising them of the details during their recent journey down from Lothlorien, he had himself solicited their oft sterling insights into the minutiae of the case. Still, as they filed into Elladan’s study and a carafe of wine was liberally decanted, he could not help but wonder if they found the intricacies of the murder plot as absorbing as the subtle interaction between Legolas and he.

Whilst rummaging through his brother’s desk for the leftover package of ginger biscuits he knew only too well were secreted in the false bottom of one of the drawers, he considered how intimidating the prospect of a private meet amongst their own cabal of legends might be for his erstwhile paramour, since he was surrounded by the three elves who had been major influences on Elrohir through his formative years and beyond. The elf-knight’s appetite for all things military, scholarly, governmental, and cryptic had been whet by these genial mentors. Though he himself was well accustomed to their methods of interrogation, evaluation, and assessment, Legolas had no experience of their wiles. As a result, Elrohir, upon uncovering and displaying his booty, momentarily felt
dissected by the incisive scrutiny of their stares, no less exposed that the assassin’s smatter of a corpse. He had proved himself to them in all ways but one, as a courtly, romantic swain.

That Legolas appeared not a lick discomfited by the presence of his potential law-father, law-brother-by-proxy, and the loremaster who had taught Elrohir both his bed and his book lessons, was further proof of how unflappable the archer truly was. The Mirkwood prince was even suave enough to have whispered him compliments on his performance during their transfer over from the surgery, words like ‘masterful’, ‘brilliance’, and ‘extraordinary’ only quelling the elf-knight’s pride, not his desire to be tucked away that they might strategize in their own, intimate manner. Legolas was not, thankfully, relaxed enough to perch beside him on the edge of the desk, preferring to prop a high stool by the door to discourage any interlopers from entering. In this way, they could debate their notions in physical opposition, which they found invigorated the process, as well as staved off fatigue.

Elrohir also intuited that, upon the conclusion of their deliberations, they would find Elladan collapsed onto one of the nearby cots, too exhausted to even yank the covers over his broad frame.

“Tis unfortunate that our assassin was not more propitiously motivated,” Glorfindel reopened, also with a mind to his husband’s well-being. “Though perhaps I should unofficially assign myself the duty of chasing down a potential connection between Anorien and Angbor, to free up our intrepid detectives, who undoubtedly aim to do the same.”

“All gratefully welcomed this levity, chuckling more fulsomely than they might have otherwise. Thusly revivified, the attacked the problem with greater enthusiasm.

“While such a connection cannot be discounted,” Elrohir noted. “We have recently collected some of the most propitious testimony yet.” He proceeded to detail Legolas’ encounter with Amrothos, to the amazement of all. “Our agenda is therefore set. We must learn all we can about the members who frequent this so-called house of ill repute, then somehow infiltrate its den. We also wait on a signal from the vendor in the underground. I similarly remain unconvinced that the identification of Rhycl as a chemical compound provides a satisfactory explanation for the murderer’s use of the word. As I see it, there are three obstacles before us that require a definite strategy to defeat. First, how are we to possibly gain access to what I privately call the Society of the Charred Rings, especially if they are affiliated with some fuming-cinders sect of the Dark Lord’s? Second, if the motivation for the murder was a private one – and I think we can all agree that, whatever cosmic synchronicity our villain was blessed with, his intentions were not primarily political – can we rely on the fiend paying a return visit to our vendor? And lastly, after setting the hounds down every possible back channel, how can we gain further knowledge of Rhycl when none has thus far been discovered?”

“There is also Faramir and Eowyn’s testimony to take into account,” Legolas contributed. “Though it obviously has no bearing on our present discussion.”

“Indeed,” Elrohir acknowledged, in his most professional tone, then addressed his elders. “If any of you would honor us with a more timeless perspective on these events, we would be most indebted to you.”

This last earned a snort from Erestor, who was only too aware of how the elf-knight despised being dictated to. Nevertheless, a few salient thoughts had been percolating in his subconscious for some time, thus he rose to the challenge.

“In terms of the Charred Ring Society,” he began. “I have been privately questioning whether this
place can truly be considered a house of ill-repute, especially if their principal purpose is to permit those of so-called elven tendencies to… be at peace for a few stolen hours. Certainly, the citizens of Minas Tirith might associate this establishment with dishonor and notoriety, but they also consider sodomy an offense worthy of execution. Thus, I wonder if it is a case of the Dark Lord being associated with a place where they engage in profligate activities, whereas the members themselves bear no allegiance to the Shadow and would consider such a thing reprehensible.”

“And this matter of the members bearing rings similar to the Nine?” Elrond cunningly inquired.

“Coincidence, perhaps,” Erestor elaborated. “They took to wearing charred rings and the Nine, once their power was smote, came to resemble them. Perhaps the rings were used as a deterrent of sorts, to ward people away from their business. Perhaps they aimed to convince the public that they were in league with dark forces, not necessarily the Shadow itself but sorcery and the like, to dissuade them from delving further into their affairs.”

“Well reasoned,” Elrohir complimented, astonished, as ever, by his mentor’s pristine logic. “Alas, we have no way of proving either possibility prior to our intervention. Yet a further complication is presented by the murderer himself. We still cannot know with any certainty if he himself is a member, or it was Angbor’s membership he meant to highlight. If the latter is the case, then what can we truly hope to learn from them? That he preferred males? Hardly a shock. The identity of some of his past lovers? He was rarely enough in the city – in fact, he shunned Minas Tirith for the last twenty years, and the chance of any who knew him them being availed of any recent scuttlebutt is remote indeed. We were, after all waging a war throughout his brief occupancy here.”

“We cannot say what we might learn,” Legolas countered. “The very tension within the murderer’s message to us is precisely why we must interrogate them. They would certainly be aware of any who had ever threatened them with revelation or had lately resigned as a member due to matters of conscience. Who knows? Our villain may be blackmailing one of them, or there could have been an interlude that served as a practice for the murder. If one among them was slain in his bed, I doubt they would have reported it to the authorities. His own family might not even be aware of the true manner of his death.”

“Besides,” Glorfindel emphasized. “Intimacies are never forgotten, especially when so much in terms of reputation and honor is at risk. I dare say they all remember every word ever whispered by their lovers, if only for later deployment in defense of themselves.”

“True enough,” Erestor concurred, giving the elf-knight considerable pause. “Methinks a bold strategy is required at this late stage in the game. Take advantage of your natural assets. By this I do not solely mean your respective beauty, which is renowned, but the fact that you are elves. Do not bother with elaborate subterfuge. Declare yourselves from the outset as what you are: lovers of males who seek a private refuge in which to dally freely. I’ve no doubt that the prospect of seducing either of you is tantalizing enough to lower their defenses, thus gaining you access to their private quarters.”

Elrohir met this strategy with consternation, since he could hardly appear wholly approving of such a plan before one he was informally courting. While the merits were plain, the playing out would not transpire before a more specific conversation that he by no means would embark upon before his elders. Fortunately, Legolas’ response was as well-measured as it was pointed.

“I see your reputation for slyness is earned in spades, hiren,” the archer remarked, not quite casually. “I am especially impressed by the more candid aspects of the enterprise. To embrace the spirit of such frankness, I thank you for your contribution and bid you to pray make no further mention of it.”

Though Glorfindel and Elrond snickered at this, Elrohir was hard-pressed to shoo away the fluttery
sensations that took flight in his stomach as a result of such forceful yet courteous antagonism on his account. Indeed, he felt on the verge of a full-on blush, as much out of shame as flattery. If Legolas had declared to one and all that they were enamored, he could not have been more blunt. Moreover, his instinct had enlightened the woodland prince as to the history between he and Erestor, for Elrohir could not recall ever making mention of their relation. Regardless, such an elegantly phrased warning nearly reduced him to quivers, so vulnerable was he in the early days of this emotional revolution.

Just as he more or less effectively commanded himself under control, he caught a glimpse of his Adar’s twinkling eyes. Shoving irritation aside, he aimed to refocus them on the matter at hand, though it would be as much a struggle for him as for his assembled allies.

“Indeed, there are further matters to consider,” he pronounced, with a gravity he himself barely espoused. “The vendor, for instance.”

“I fear it will require due provocation,” Elrond seriously counseled. “Once you have learned all you can from your various sources, you may have to create a circumstance under which your fiend feels compelled to strike again. For that, you must have a concrete understanding of what motivates him, what threatens him, and what frightens him.”

“Come to me when you are so resolved,” Glorfindel advised them. “I have spearheaded similar plots. It is a delicate thing to treat a mastermind like a mere mouse in a maze, but it can be done, if all precautions are heeded.”

“Until such a time, it is of secondary concern,” Legolas concluded. “As to the third point of contention, I feel further exploration of the underground may prove revelatory. Especially when your keen mind has been unleashed, Elrohir.”

“Your eagerness to behold him disguised betrays you, wood-elf,” Glorfindel quipped, to the amusement of all. “Perhaps you are only too fit a member of the Society of Charred Rings, if they are as perverse as some claim.”

“I do not mean to associate myself with rings of any sort, save one,” Legolas teasingly proclaimed. “One I hope will elude me for a short time yet, since for once the future is ripe with possibility. Still, I may bow to its blithe influence sooner than expected, when the investigation is concluded and I have a firmer sense of direction.”

In the wake of this poorly coded message, Elrohir was utterly speechless, as well as unable to rip his eyes away from those of his tricksy lover. In practical terms, he dared not, since he did not care to observe Erestor’s indignation, Glorfindel’s bemusement, or his Adar’s flinty approval. Instead, he scrambled for some means of concluding their business without appearing too eager to be away from those dear to him, not only his elders but perhaps Legolas himself, as he was pathetically unsure of how to respond to what his lover both stated and implied, though every weighted word had struck home.

“Come, the hour is late,” his father succinctly saved him. “And I believe we all grow weary. Sleep and reflection will surely sharpen us for the morrow. Ioneth, if you have need of our insight, aid, or counsel, do not shy away from soliciting us anew. Otherwise, we’d best retire before such indelible interaction is spoiled by fatigue.”

To his surprise, his Adar moved to embrace him, as Legolas graciously ushered Glorfindel and Erestor out the door. For a moment, Elrohir clung to the soothing bulk that had berthed him through so many times of strife, feeling that everything in his world, within and without, was a tumult. As ever, Elrond anchored him in, imbuing him with a touch of the strength that had twice survived the ultimate sorrow. The elf-knight was thereby reminded that his romantic fumbles were petty in
contrast, which fortified him for the duration.

As Elrond swept into the Healing Hall to assure himself that Elladan was in the arms of his faithful spouse, Elrohir opened his to the one who yet proved the greatest mystery of all, and who moved him unlike any who had come before.

End of Part 7
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the
granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not
for profit.
Summary: On the eve of Aragorn’s coronation, our golden pair are charged with
investigating a brutal murder at the Citadel.

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present…

A Slaying in Scarlet
A LOTR Mystery

Part 8

When one tries to rise above Nature one is liable to fall below it. The highest type of man may revert
to the animal if he leaves the straight road of destiny.
- The Adventure of the Empty House, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1903

Minas Tirith, Year 3019, Third Age

June 19th

No matter how involved he was in his own romantic fancies, Legolas had to divert his gaze from the
two gingery lovebirds upon the divan, since their dewy visages, flirtatious glances, and general
mutual delirium made one feel an intruder in his own foyer. Rather, his lover’s foyer, but that was
hardly germane, since he and Elrohir were behaving respectfully. Yet Faramir and Eowyn had not
managed to emerge from the heady fugue that enraptures a star-crossed pair, not since the first
moment of their acquaintance in the Halls of Healing. This, of course, somewhat deterred the
investigators from their avowed purpose, as well as thoroughly embarrassed them; neither inwardly
admitting that their minds were only too easily led down sultrier avenues when in view of such an
enamored couple.

Legolas was especially vulnerable to suggestion, given that his normally vital libido was especially
athletic that morn, requiring varied and vigorous exercise sessions. Elrohir had been only too
encouraging a trainer, pushing to conquer new feats of endurance and punishing him most sternly
when he lagged. Both had been so riled with tension as a result of the previous day’s incident and its
aftermath that there had been little art to their throes; instead, they had reverted to the marathon ruts
of their early encounters, with Elrohir in the sublime position of dominance.

Indeed, no sooner had they meandered into his study, their unofficial headquarters, than Elrohir had
pounced, pinning him against the desk and slicking him with a ready tongue before fiercely thrusting
his monumental shaft home. White-knuckled around the edges of the pristinely varnished wood,
Legolas’ ragged pants had ghosted across that polished surface whilst he was treated to a gorgeous
fuck. Elrohir had claimed him in every conceivable way, ruling his mind by blighting out any
conscious thought, controlling his body by overwhelming every nerve, and ravishing his soul
through the sheer, indomitable force of his passion. Legolas had never felt so erotically possessed; he
gave himself willfully, utterly to these brutish ministrations, thrilling at how thunderously Elrohir pounded into his core. He imagined the desk was now rank with his seed, which was perhaps why they had repaired to the foyer. Regardless, he could not recall ever feeling quite so delectably lax, so much that his darkling lover had been obliged to shepherd him to bed.

After a too-brief, dreamless sleep, he had been summoned into wakefulness by that velvety voice, the rough texture of which had also promptly revivified his arousal. Dizzy with fatigue, he had grappled over to the edge of the mattress, uninspired by the sight of Elrohir bedecked in full, though casual, uniform. In his gogginess, he had thought it a stroke of brilliance to attempt a fumbling attack upon his lover, unaware of how weak a hold the elf-knight had on the reins of his own galloping need. A few sloppy smooches had been all that was required to wild him. After Legolas had submitted to a wonderfully indecent maul, he had been shoved to his knees and summarily plowed into, with the sure, incisive efficacy of a blade scything the fertile soil of a wheat field. He had cackled with glee as he sowed his own stain into the carpet below, regressing some in his exhaustion.

He had mucked on with his own ablutions through the syrupy rush of afterglow, his blood still sugary thick by the time he had bumbled onto the sheltered balcony to break his fast. Yet found he had little taste for the saccharine buns and honeyed fruits on offer – so glazed to mask the poor quality of the flour – instead hungering for a savory slab of meat. Legolas had been transfixed by the bulge in the basket of his ebony lover’s breeches; how, when seated, the fabric constrained his two boulder bollocks and the decadent flesh column that tucked in beside them.

Faithful servant to this, the ultimate craving, he had soon fallen prostrate before a stunned Elrohir, tearing at his laces before tonguing that scarlet colossus to pulsating life, then fervently devouring it whole. He had relished indulging Elrohir far more than either of their previous entanglements, his appetite for that salty throat-full more voracious than he had realized afore. He had languished in bliss until the elf-knight had released a gritted curse, then had come the scalding spurts. Legolas had been so galvanized that he had milked him twice, completing his own trifecta of stains when he burst in his own bed trousers. Tisking wickedly, Elrohir had ordered him off to dress, dealing him an officious spank that nearly sundered the archer’s resolve.

As indeed these sensual memories now threatened to permanently pervert his focus, though he imagined no amount of double entendres and provocation would divert the intrepid elf-knight from the hunt for the predator among them, especially given how potentially revelatory was the testimony they were about to hear, from two that, regardless of their besotting, were peerless judges of character. When a pointed clearing of throat demanded their attention, the betrothed couple self-consciously woke from their entrancement, more bemused at themselves than sheepish before a pair of stoic elven warriors – most probably due to the fact that Legolas and Elrohir were making a poor show of concealing their own mutual regard, which had begun to bleed through even their most basic interactions.

Regardless, there was an errand to be concluded, and a critical one at that.

“What would you have us relate first?” Faramir questioned, seeking direction for his love-addled mind. “What knowledge do you consider most vital?”

“I suppose it would be best to commence with Angbor himself,” Legolas offered, to his colleague’s nod of agreement. “What sort of leader was he perceived to be by his people? Do they mourn his passing? Did any appear to harbor grudges against him? On a similar note, did he particularly endear himself towards one or several of them? How do they generally view him?”

“The matrons adored him,” Eowyn replied, smiling in reminiscence. “The ladies there are capable, hardy folk. He gave the deserving among them authority, permitting them ownership of industrial
prospects and trades. They characterized him as a doting uncle, quick with compliments, not terribly
disciplinary, but warm and worldly and wise. A man with few enemies, and of great benevolence.”

“A patriot, as well,” Faramir elaborated. “Devoted to the protection of their villages, to defeating the
Shadow, and to the genuine Line of Kings. His only true opponent appears to have been my father,
though I assure you I am not your culprit.”

They all chuckled amiably at this, one of the more preposterous suggestions ever mentioned before
the detectives.

“There is one peculiarity I would underline,” Eowyn remarked. “This is only an impression, but I
sensed that the elder women in particular were… aware of Angbor’s circumstances. Perhaps there
was a time when they had all attempted to court him! Regardless, their descriptions of his family life
were couched in extremely delicate phrases, implying but not. I would never have dared ask them
directly and they would never have given me an honest response. But still… I feel that they knew,
and quietly accepted, what he was.”

“There were a few oddly worded queries among the men, as well,” Faramir added. “I would venture
that it was known – that it is known – and ignored. The Lamedonians we interviewed were still
recovering from tremendous strife. They missed him deeply. Over and again, they would reference
him, that he would have seen them through such a time. That he would not have permitted an
alliance with the scoundrels in Morthond Vale. This man was beloved, and so long as he did not
parade his preferences about, so long as he made subtle advances to those he was certain of bedding
and kept such interludes private, they considered him a champion. For all his incapacity to regulate
the dirge of industry, his prowess at high-level governmental debate and his leadership of their armed
forces was enough to earn their faith.”

“So the region’s self-sufficiency rests squarely on Heldoran’s shoulders?” Elrohir inquired.

“He is the purest of bureaucrats,” Eowyn explained, her feelings towards the soon-to-be-deposed
steward thoroughly ambivalent. “Angbor would have squandered his own vision if not for Heldoran.
Indeed, there was a period when Lamedon first broke from Denethor that all was in chaos, since
Angbor was miserable at ordering business affairs. When he showed promise at a young age,
Heldoran was thereby recruited, as were many in the latter years of their adolescence. Angbor was
apparently a great believer in youthful enthusiasm and novel ideas. Some criticize him for this, since
there was no proper hierarchy in place for succession, but when your population has been so
decimated…”

“Gaurobir, then, also received one of these sudden promotions?” Legolas queried.

“Aye,” Eowyn elucidated. “Though he was only third lieutenant when they rode out to war, hardly
an inappropriate rank for a talented soldier in such a small army. Deaths expedited his promotion, of
two Angbor both valued and cherished. One was a dear childhood friend, a family man whose
middle son survives him. The other…”

That she did not complete her sentence was telling, but the detectives were unsure as to what.
Faramir intervened, prepared to broach conjecture where Eowyn was not.

“We believe he was Angbor’s current lover,” the Steward of Ithilien enlightened them. “Any of the
Lamedonians will freely tell you that their leader was stricken when Amrothos returned to Dol
Amroth, though their interpretation of this event adheres strictly to the formal explanation.
Apparently this young man, Inarthan, fulfilled many of the roles the prince had abandoned, including
that of Angbor’s confidante. Most paint their relationship in mentor-apprentice hues, but how many
apprentices could the man have had? Mark my words, they were lovers, and Angbor was in
mourning when he was slain.”

“That does vividly color the weeks prior to his murder,” Elrohir commented. “We all felt so close to defeat… There is no telling what they might have dared, or where. They easily could have been caught out by a rival, a friend who became enraged at what he perceived as a betrayal, or a potential suitor seeking to gain his own advantage with the steward.”

“As such,” Legolas countered. “It does not point directly to any specific suspect.”

“Yet it is another filter through which we might magnify our concept of the killer’s state of mind,” Elrohir observed. “The implications, however, can be debated at a later hour. Tell us more of their opinion of Amrothos. That does intrigue.”

“None spoke a word against him,” Eowyn informed them, with a shrug. “He seems to have been liked, but not particularly popular. He stirred up no controversies that we could uncover, which is rare when royalty attempts to mingle with commoners, especially those as poor as the Lamedonians. How much of their opinion was colored by Angbor’s protection, I cannot say…”

“The men held a touch less respect for him, but then he is not a warrior type,” Faramir observed. “Neither were they eager to contradict the formal explanation for his leaving Dol Amroth, so perhaps their satisfaction with the situation is questionable. Yet they were, after all, quite haggard when we interviewed them. I doubt they waste time wondering what Amrothos amounted to.”

“Indeed,” Elrohir chuckled sympathetically. “But if there had been a scandal, no amount of devastation would have obliterated it from their minds.”

“True,” Faramir conceded, with a smirk. “Now Gaurobir, he is not what I expected. Many of the remaining young ladies in the village made a point of seeking us out to report on what a rake he is. What bearing his apparently myriad dalliances have on the case, I cannot fathom, but in the interest of full disclosure, there you have it.”

“My husband-to-be is demonstrating one of the limitations of your sex,” Eowyn taunted. “If my lords will forgive me for saying so. The fact that Gaurobir is a manipulative seducer must be relevant, given how Angbor was deceived into welcoming his attacker into his bedchamber at a late hour. It is possible to flirt and to tryst at liberty without incurring the wrath of every maid you tumble – my brother but a decade ago was testament enough to this! Yet Gaurobir seems unconscious of his cruelty – or is perhaps purely disrespectful towards women, to have treated so many ladies so harshly. It could be that, in his youth, he merely lacks finesse. Still, it could be otherwise, thus we dutifully report it to you.”

“It does intrigue,” Legolas admitted, inwardly considering the matter. “Do any of his comrades harbor similar complaints?”

“None whispered in our ears,” Faramir answered. “Nor did any of the matrons relate any difficulties with him, and surely some of their daughters must have been hurt by him.”

Silence ruled as they each privately digested this insight, until Eowyn purposefully cleared her throat.

“If I may,” she commented. “There is an aspect of… feminine intuition that I would contribute.”

“We harbor no prejudices on that account,” Elrohir grinned fondly. “What would you have us know?”

“I only find it curious that none of his conquests became pregnant,” Eowyn suggested. “The ladies of every village have at one time or another endured a wolf such as he among their fold. Some of these
rogues are allergic to anything that might ensnare them, so they educate themselves about such precautions. However, most do not, and it is the natural way of the world that eventually fumbles them. Gaurobir does not strike me as... particularly learned in this regard. Yet the tales of the brutality some of these ladies submitted to…"

“He is one who can only claim pleasure with a bit of violence,” Elrohir confirmed, that she not be forced to detail her entire thought. “Another reason that he cannot form permanent attachments, unless he happens upon a lady thus inclined. I thank you for your candor, but I do not think such a type committed this crime. It is too... elegant. Still, that is based on our preliminary assumptions. Regardless, I thank you for your pains. Such things can be painful to contemplate.”

They shared a compassionate glance, then refocused themselves.

“Is there anything further we can learn to Heldoran?” Legolas asked, to conclude their discussion.

“He leads a sober life,” Faramir explained. “His parents perished at a young age, and he was made a ward of the Temple of Varda. He was raised by the Servants of Elbereth, a trio of maids who take vapors in the mountain caves and aspire to a virtuous life. Once his aptitude for mathematics and accountancy was discovered, he was apprenticed to the chief councilor, eventually graduating to the position.”

“Has he ever loved?” Elrohir inquired.

“He frequented a few ladies here and there,” Eowyn replied. “Little came of these relations, but there was no indication that they ended badly. If aught, most complained of boredom. He is courteous enough, but rather... bland.”

“Do not shrink from offering your opinion, melethen,” Faramir teased.

“Tis true that they cannot all be as captivating as you, my heart,” Eowyn volleyed back, though she could not be accused of insincerity, either. “But if one is to earn a mate, a touch of vivacity is a looked-for quality.”

They all laughed most heartily at that, the investigators as enchanted by the capricious pair as they were by one another.

“If you truly wish to observe him in his element,” Faramir proposed. “He is petitioning King Elessar this afternoon. I believe Gaurobir has been enlisted as support, since he is now captain of their meager forces.”

Legolas felt himself brighten at the prospect of observing two of their suspects in their natural environment. He glanced over at Elrohir for confirmation, and met with keen, concurring silver eyes. After some genial banter and an abundance of thanks, Faramir and Eowyn were dismissed, finally availing him of an opportunity to pounce upon Elrohir, in retribution for his previous night’s ardor.

Having smothered his elf-knight senseless with kisses and whispered salacious promises in his teardrop ear, he soldiered off to Aragorn’s court that he might be entertained by the equally bloodthirsty sport of politicking. He received another smack for his brashness, which bode exemplary well for that evening’s leisure, as well as the health of his own all-consuming relation.

* * *

King Elessar boldly stared down his petitioners, exasperated with, respectively, their petulance, their doublespeak, and their cupidity. Gondor was still in a shambles, yet these three would quibble over inanities, each willing to strangle either or both of the others in a smack-grab for the last table scraps
of power. As a result, Aragorn had lost his appetite, disgusted with their every snivel and squeak, their nigh felonious posturing, their anemic sense of morality. If these were the ingredients available to him, then he would concoct a foul tasting stew indeed, for no amount nor strength of spice could improve their collective sourness of attitude. In the aftermath of the most devastating war ever waged upon the land, they expected to feast on the spoils of victory, when there was barely a fresh morsel left for those who had contributed far more than they to the effort.

As a Ranger, he might have spit in their faces. Alas, he was a king now, and entitlement demanded more artful forms of retribution, which could not be dealt out without due preparations and careful planning. Thus, he would have to settle for a cut dismissal; though in truth he could not be rid of them quickly enough, their po faces and beady eyes enough to provoke him into rash action. While he had been crowned, his survivor’s instincts had yet to be tamed, and there was little chance of subordinating his peerless sense of righteousness.

“Be gone with you,” he gruffly commanded, to the astonishment of all, including the guards that flanked the door and Gandalf that hovered at his side.

“Majesty,” Carathel, the crudest of them, frankly beseeched him. “You have made no pronouncement.”

“I must give these matters due consideration,” Aragorn stated. “You will have my answer before the turning of the year.”

To his consternation, they failed to vacate his office.

“A point of clarification, if you would permit, Your Highness,” Heldoran inquired, the only one among them with the vaguest appreciation of courtesy.

“I have heard you,” the King declared, a finality to his tone. “Now, do as I bid, or it will reflect unfavorably upon you.”

“As you wish,” Gaurobir reluctantly accepted, for himself and on the part of two who were not quite his allies in this. “With gratitude.”

They marched solemnly into the corridor, their shoulders rigid with annoyance, uncertain as to whether they should bear the dull weight of imminent defeat.

For his part, Aragorn sighed in relief. Yet as thrilled as he was to be rid of them, there would be no prettying up the decision now before him, one that could potentially ugly his relationship with his people and tarnish the goodwill he had so far accrued. A glance at Mithrandir proved that the wizard’s eyes were bright with that telltale twinkle, the sparkle of insight that was fired by his elemental belief that, on certain occasions, only revolutionary tactics could win the day. He required no further confirmation that his mentor was in full accordance with the plan he was yet still scheming up, but then Gandalf had ever held to his steadfast faith in his judgment, else he would not have championed his bid for the crown that was his birthright.

Rarely was their mutual trust tested, though it had been the previous night in Elladan’s surgery, where the wizard had behaved with uncharacteristic imperiousness over the matter of Angbor’s slaying. Unlike many of their fellows, Aragorn had implicitly understood the reason for Mithrandir’s surliness; that the chaos caused by the investigation would further delay the King’s resolve in enacting the plan he thought vital to the kingdom’s safety and prosperity. While Aragorn still harbored some doubts, the results of that meeting and this had underlined the necessity of such an unsparing tactic, thus Gandalf’s concerns had been groundless. He only rued that the wizard had somewhat affronted Elrohir in the process. Thankfully, his foster brother was as indefatigable as he
was unaffected by such petty quarrels. If he could apprehend this villain before Aragorn’s binding
day, all would be well satisfied.

Unfortunately, he himself might inadvertently kick up further trouble for the noble elf-knight, which
was the point against this plan of his that gave him the most pause. Though it was decidedly un-
kingly to veto an effective strategy due to the constraints it would impose upon a cherished family
member, he would walk the path of honor in all his dealings, without exception. Mithrandir, with his
usual knowing confidence, had repeatedly reassured him that all would resolve itself eventually, but
Aragor was unwilling to gamble on his brother’s happiness. Rather, he had been unwilling until but
moments before – now he was too aggravated to discount the option.

Worse still, the fates apparently meant to lend a heavy hand towards encouraging him, since the very
eLF the strategy’s success hinged upon slipped into the room through a hidden passage, expecting to
discreetly observe what had been prematurely ended. With a look of bemusement rather than
surprise, Legolas strolled into view, silently seeking Aragorn’s permission to intrude. The King
welcomed him with a weak gesture, signaling his irate mood, then indicated that he take one of the
throne-side seats. Before he could dismiss him, he noted that Gandalf had already made himself
scarce, as well as discreetly ordered the guards into the hall.

Legolas snickered at his confusion, always eager to subtly mock his rare moments of awkwardness.
Absurdly, this only endeared him the more, since his elven friend was the source of an inordinate
amount of good cheer, in addition to being incomparably loyal and bountifully amiable.

“Am I late to the festivities?” the woodland prince inquired, appearing relaxed, even for one so
casual as he.

Aragorn guessed that he was late of the elf-knight’s chambers, and suffered a pang of guilt for his
trouble. That the pair were impressively matched was obvious to all who knew them well, though
only he was about to plant a not easily surmounted obstacle between them. The perils of sovereignty
were never more blatant to him than in that tense moment.

“Indeed,” the King confirmed. “I could not stand their simpering a second longer, and so banished
them from my sight.”

“Without pronouncement?” Legolas delved further, intrigued. “That will rattle them.”

“My intentions were more punitive,” Aragorn wryly admitted. “But a decent spook will do.”

The archer chuckled affably at this, impressed by his friend’s maneuvering.

“Yet do you know what you mean to do with them?” Legolas gamely asked.

“I have a notion,” the King replied. “It chances much, but with the fiefs so at odds, I see no other
way of restoring a measure of peace between them. If they are to be allied behind the purpose of
defeating the foes still at large beyond our boarders, there must be harmony, as well as a relative
amount of trust. Unity, if at all possible.”

“How do you mean to tame them of their political ambitions?” Legolas inquired. “They are
Denethor’s creatures, after all. They have learnt firsthand of tyranny and oppression.”

“By rendering them powerless,” Aragorn explained. “That is, equal. I am abolishing the Council of
Stewards. From now on, there will be one Steward of Gondor, Faramir, with dominion over the
southlands entire. He will oversee the free division of wealth and resources, establish a court at
Osgiliath to settle village quarrels, and focus on reviving our economy. I will intervene only when
necessary, while concentrating on affairs of state, foreign and trade relations, infrastructure, and military development. Dol Amroth will gain further liberty, severing certain ties to Gondor and tightening others, as befits her position as a gateway to our land. Yet there is one crucial area where I would call upon the expertise of my elvish friends, whose connection with the earth and the natural world in unrivalled in Arda entire.”

Legolas pondered this for a time, marveling at the simplicity of the concept.

“You mean to establish a colony here?” he hushly asked, perhaps intuiting what was to come.

“If you will agree to lead one,” Aragorn proposed, his muscles clenched, though he was unsure whether acceptance or refusal would impact him more. “I have come to find your companionship invaluable, though I trust I hardly need to further rhapsodize our friendship. The lands bordering Mordor, even the rubble itself, crave the immaculate attention of the elves. I know that there is much to accomplish in Mirkwood, that a piece of your heart will ever reside there, but can you truly return to being the fifth prince in a kingdom where you are perceived as a career soldier? What place is there for a hero among such humble folk? Yet a hero could lead an adventurous few into an uncharted future. One of your courage and conviction could make a garden of that scorched earth, could render that barren soil bountiful anew. You, Legolas, are an unifier. Young couples from Mirkwood and Lorien, even Imladris, would be raring to participate in such an endeavor. And, I must confess… it would pain me not to have you near, not to capitalize on the partnership that helped us complete the quest and conquer Sauron. If we all return to our respective regions… then what did we gain from our alliance?”

Pinned to his seat by these provocative questions, as well as the sterling opportunity just presented to him, Legolas was for a time speechless with astonishment. Aragorn well understood the emotions that must be roiling within him, especially those that had most recently bloomed but had not yet been given the chance to flourish. Though the archer could not help but be fuelled by his nascent love for Elrohir, the King recognized that their swaddling relationship thrived because of his brother’s unconditional support of and affection for their woodland friend, qualities that not only suggested that he would be an ideal spouse, but that he would not impede the progress of Legolas’ personal and professional ambitions.

Yet even conditional acceptance was in itself a gambit that imposed restrictions on their relation before any vows were sworn. Were they sure enough of their course to sail through any superficial impediments? Were their minds clear enough to envision a pristine image of the future? Regardless, Aragorn believed it could be done, it must be done, not only for Legolas’ benefit, but for the sanctity of all.

The Mirkwood prince exhaled longly, somewhat baffled by the richness of options before him.

“I would not refuse you,” he eventually replied. “But neither can I conclusively agree. While I have given much thought to what the future holds for me… The prospect is a tantalizing one. Does your progress as regards the sundering of the Council depend upon my answer?”

“I would prefer to announce them concomitantly,” Aragorn informed him. “That said, I can delay awhile. A week, at most.”

“Would you still found an elven colony without me?” Legolas queried, more curious than fretful about the King’s response.

“I would… attempt to,” Aragorn elaborated. “It would be a delicate thing, inviting an elf unknown to the public into a place of leadership. A few candidates for the position spring to mind, but none as ideal as the one seated before me.”
“I am honored,” Legolas smiled, the warmth radiating from his fair features. “Deeply so. If you had asked me in the weeks after the Shadow’s fall, I would not have faltered. But now… There is much to consider, much that remains unsaid between Elrohir and I. The feeling he inspires is so new, so unprecedented. We are both still creeping through the dark, hoping not to stumble. Not that our affinity is diminished when compared to my emotion for him, gwador. In truth, the thought of being apart from either of you galls me. Yet tis perhaps too soon for me to know which sacrifice I will have to make.”

“If any,” Aragorn reminded him, his own eyes luminous with fondness. “You are, after all, immortal.”

“My heart is ill convinced of it, when I think on him,” Legolas bashfully confessed. “I want everything at once, in the moments that I am not terrified out of my wits at the prospect of a permanent relation.”

“It is ever so,” the King chuckled, spiritually commiserating. “The incertitude can at times choke the troths in your very throat. And no couple has earned their eternity without some concessions, the occasional period of deprivation.”

“True enough,” Legolas sighed, fraught with indecision. “First and foremost, I must have a private word with him. There are matters pertaining to the investigation that are rather urgent, thus any personal conversation must be delayed until the morrow.”

“As I said, you are granted a week’s reflection,” Aragorn finalized, himself no more eased by the postponement. “I would only caution you about any counsel you might seek. Only Gandalf and I are so far aware of the plan.”

“I pray the fact of my discretion is not in question,” Legolas good-naturedly exclaimed, as he rose to his feet. “Have those mannish rogues rendered you utterly paranoid?”

“No whit,” the King objected, with a scapegrace grin. “Tis only that I would not have certain dwarves clamoring after me, railing in offense.”

Legolas chuckled heartily at this depiction, his humor restored.

“Perhaps you deserve a bit of grief for tempting me so,” he quipped. “I may soon become as vainglorious as your stewards.”

“I cannot fathom it be so,” Aragorn beamed, gesturing him over for a tight embrace. “Choose wisely, emilen. Not for Gondor, nor Elrohir, nor I, but for yourself.”

“I shall,” Legolas whispered, then clapped him on the back as they exchanged a poignant look.

“Back to the hunt with you!” Aragorn spiritedly commanded, then watched as his friend sauntered off.

He was reassured as to the archer’s lightness of heart when his gaze followed him out into the corridor, his line of petitioners reeling in shock at the exit of one who they had not seen enter the King’s office. Swallowing a chuckle, he waved his guards in, then braced himself for further governmental frustration.

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With an air of grim dissatisfaction, Arwen Undomiel rifled furiously through her brother’s wardrobe, briefly evaluating each successive tunic before briskly shoving it back into the shadows. She was
beginning to rue her vow not to meddle in the business of his Imladrian valet during their preparations for the journey south, since this archaic though faithful servant was far too schooled in Elrohir’s dun, monochromatic preferences to have improvised something spectacular for one who was, nominally and spiritually, a prince. She thanked the Valar their mother had forced her to apprentice with her personal seamstress, thus, if her search yielded little of worth, she could always transform some marginally promising garment into a work of sartorial splendor. She was equally relieved to have commissioned his wedding uniform prior to departure, though how and when she would convince him to submit to the necessary alterations, she had no notion.

That Elrohir was, first and foremost, slavishly devoted to his epic investigation was readily apparent to anyone – a caring sister, say – who dared creep into his study/lair; that he was secondarily consumed by his burgeoning relation with Legolas was blatant to any who observed the state of his bedchamber, which appeared to have been ravaged by a tornado the previous night. Her brother was zealously meticulous in every aspect of his affairs, thus the disarray that abounded had delighted as much as bewildered her, since in their early years Elrohir never would have permitted anyone to infiltrate his rooms unless they were pristine. That he had nonchalantly waved her off to explore his closet when she had objected to his current raiment, a muted gray tunic woefully inappropriate for that evening’s espionage mission, revealed much about his affection for the woodland prince, since he had spent most of his previous three millennia of life ignoring her advice and good opinion. Though he was presently entrenched, as usual, behind the fortress of his desk, Arwen was thrilled by even this trace evidence of his inner development; that he might, at long last, have found a worthy foil to his genius and soulful generosity.

“The hour grows late,” Elrohir declared, as he shuffled into the room, his nose still half-buried in a scroll. She emerged from the wardrobe in time to note the furrows that marred his brow when he glimpsed, as if first beholding, the travesty of the bedchamber. She was doubly enchanted by the ensuing blush. “Verily, I cannot comprehend why I must make a spectacle of myself.”

“I hardly mean to garland you in gold chains and jeweled necklaces,” Arwen insisted. “Once can be fashionable without resorting to vulgarity. The key is to compose an outfit that harmonizes with your intentions. As I comprehend it, yours are twofold: to startle the patrons and proprietors of this dubious establishment, as well as to earn their complicity. You will not achieve either in a coal gray tunic and a severe braid.”

“Yet you have neglected one of the more crucial motivating factors, sister dear,” Elladan coyly chided, reclining against the door frame like a hawk with prey in its sights. “The presence of the fair Thranduilion.”

Though Elrohir chuckled in response, he appeared already defeated by the dual influence of his siblings as he plunked himself down on the bed.

“I dare say Legolas would be the more seduced by my lack of clothing,” Elrohir offered, evidencing some of the affability for which his golden suitor was renowned. “Besides, the aim of this mission-“

“Is to intimidate, is it not?” Arwen completed, while she burrowed towards the wardrobe’s back wall. “How can you show yourself superior to these blackguards if you array yourself in the dismal hues of the wreck and rubble?”

“Be forewarned,” Elladan keenly quipped. “She will not limit herself to improving your uniform.”

“I am under no illusions as to the transformation taking place,” Elrohir sighed, then slumped onto a pile of pillows.

Yet there was not a trace of rancor to his mood, only a dulcet tranquility, as if he were laying in a
field beneath a canopy of stars, not enduring the jibes and quibbles of his siblings.

“Might one then inquire as to your planned response?” Elladan gently forwarded, a question that had also weighed upon the future queen’s mind.

When no reply was forthcoming, Arwen decided that the opportunity was ripe to prod a little herself.

“Ada is beside himself,” she pointedly commented. “If there is any question as to his approval—"

“There is no question,” Elrohir distractedly answered, his argent eyes placid as they gazed over the intricate ceiling design. “Nor resolution. We are embroiled in an investigation.”

“One that must conclude itself within a fortnight,” Arwen tactfully reminded him, turning back towards them. “A deadline that only the pair of you will wait upon. Already there is talk, in royal circles, of…” She bit her tongue, but itched to voice what she knew, especially when there was so much at stake for her ever-so-tender brother. Aragorn, she knew, would forgive her this piddling offense, but she still smarted at the thought of a minor betrayal. “Of an offer.”

Yet it was Elladan whose eyes went wide, the fear writ bold upon his heretofore staid features. Arwen then suffered an ache comparable to his own, concerned, as he was, that Elrohir would not now be fulfilled by the relationship they had both prayed would be granted him. They had oft, in times of yore, conspired on their solitary brother’s behalf, hopeful that the candidates they had selected were the result of divine inspiration. Now that the gods had finally shone upon the valiant elf-knight, was he to endure further trials to earn his devotion? The future queen could not countenance such an option, both out of love for her brother and out of awareness of the restrictions fate had imposed upon her.

Alas, Elrohir was utterly unaffected by her suggestion, his lips adorned by a blithe smile and his gaze drifting through the ether above.

“This does not trouble you?” Elladan all but demanded, visibly chagrinned.

“Well, should it?” their brother rhetorically inquired, not quite able to stifle the resulting smirk. Yet even Elrohir was not so cavalier, thus he sought to reassure them. “I have made peace with my uncertainty. Is it not the nature of love to trust unconditionally? My beloved has, through his actions, made plain that he cherishes me. That he will consider me when planning for the future. I require no more of him until such a time as he does, indeed, choose to consult me.”

Arwen and Elladan exchanged a look of astonishment, but also of cautious approval.

“Do other factors, apart from your unspoken devotion, bear consideration?” she delicately asked, sitting primly at his side. “The stunted lifespan, and admiration, of an impish sister, perhaps?”

Struck, Elrohir righted himself, his silver eyes limned with emotion. If she were not so preoccupied with her shock over how available these long-repressed feelings were, Arwen might have been afflicted in her own right.

“You would that I be near,” the elf-knight intuited, gripping her lissome hand in solidarity.

“I would that you find sanctuary,” Arwen whispered. “With someone who will weather the coming storm. I remember well how our mother’s crisis wrenched and tore your heart, such that it has only now begun to mend. If Legolas’ regard can repair that vicious wound, then I would have him guard you evermore.” She exhaled a blustery breath, still not quite reconciled with her fate, no matter how impossible the alternative. “Though, if I am honest… and perhaps a touch selfish… I would care to watch the evolution of your happiness with my own eyes. Indeed, I can think of no more riveting a
sport than bearing witness to your marital fulfillment. You deserve it so, Elrohir, and I have… *we* have longed to behold you so content.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, her brother swept her into his arms, the fervor of his hold communicating all that one of such reserved disposition was not quite confident enough to speak aloud.

“I cannot force Legolas to remain in the southlands,” he eventually explained. “Neither can I swear that we will bind within your lifetime. Our relation is far too new for any certitude in that domain. But I can vow that I will not be a stranger, confined to the libraries of Imladris until I hear the call of the sea. If you are here, then so is my heart.”

“Yet I will keep only a fitting portion,” Arwen murmured into his chest. “That you might ever feel at home in this resilient kingdom.”

Elladan joined them for a further embrace, then they bashfully dispersed, though to a one beaming with the warmth within. Yet when the throw of the lock alerted them to a nonetheless welcome intruder, Arwen shooed him off into the study, that he might, with quips and taunts, distract the Prince of Mirkwood until she had cast her spell upon his dizzy swain. Twas with a groan of defeat that Elrohir watched his twin scamper off, then dutifully submitted to her improvements, a stunning outfit having almost magically revealed itself once she delved back into his wardrobe.

Some time later, Elrohir stood majestically before her, a vision of virile elegance in his tight, violet blue tunic, black leather breeches with matching gloves, knee-high boots and ornamental weaponry. Though the sides were woven into intricate braids, his sleek ebony hair was permitted to cascade down his back, as well as spill in inky locks over his shoulders. With his florid features and noble brow, he was of mercenary beauty, his skin radiant with the glow of new love. How any could resist him, let alone the archer who had already succumbed to his charms, was a mystery far greater than any he sought to unravel, and Arwen predicted, on sartorial evidence alone, that the night would be a resounding success.

She only prayed her efforts would not be messed by some frantic pursuit of foes or raucous fight, since, to her mind, they were Legolas’ to admire, and to undo, and to revere.

* * *

The warm yellow light of a buttery moon glazed the barn-like roof of the House of the Charred Ring Guild, its eaves wide enough to obscure the alleys at its sides. From behind milky windows, a dull rhythm churned, while occasional splashes of light trickled through the cracks between the face of the building and the front entranceway. The cobblestone streets, slick with new rain, refracted just enough shimmer to illuminate the silhouettes of the guards that flanked the door, though there was also mist enough to fog Elrohir’s spyglass, further blurring his perspective. He gave a signal for their support team to deploy around the perimeter, with aim of apprehending any who might seek to flee, but made no move to extract himself from his own, marginally uncomfortable position, sandwiched between Legolas and a coarse brick wall.

The Mirkwood prince had, of course, taken advantage of being ensconced in such a shadowy nook to press in closer than propriety allowed, conforming his sinuous frame of the elf-knight’s back and tucking his head onto that sturdy peredhel shoulder, that his breath ghost down the slope of his neck. Elrohir, for his part, was only too eager to be squashed by his wityh lover, the velocity of the archer’s excited heartbeat energizing his own pulse. All the while of his surveillance, Legolas subtly flirted with him, nipping at the lobe of his ear, nudging him away from the eyepiece with a nose-rub, snaking an arm around his middle until they were tightly hugged together. The woodland elf’s intention was by no means to distract him from their night’s mission, but to steal a few affectionate
moments before their adventures, which might very well stretch out until dawn. Elrohir not only understood, but relished this attention; it imbued him with strength, it centered him, it soothed the nerves he dared not exhibit to anyone.

Besides, it was becoming increasingly impossible to stifle any and all expressions of his love for Legolas, and undoubtedly the archer felt the same. Elves, unlike their mannish cousins, thrived on their emotionality, were fired by the ethereal light of their soul flames. The merest proximity to his lover ignited a blaze within him, one that such closeness helped to shutter, that its heat might fuel him onward.

“The guards are rather bestial,” Legolas commented, those petal lips brushing across his cheek. “Perhaps we should have enlisted Glorfindel’s aid.”

“I doubt they are schooled enough to recognize him,” Elrohir responded, a smirk to his tone. “Such a blow to his honor would not bode well for our plans. He would pummel them senseless before we could convince them of aught.”

“Twill be a trial to earn their trust if they are so dim,” Legolas remarked. “Though there is a certain… commonality to the place. Methinks Amrothos improved his description somewhat, to save face.”

“I dare say such aggrandizements are their stock and trade,” Elrohir reflected. “Their reputation must be onerous enough to intimidate those that would abuse them for their proclivities, whilst also being enticing enough to those who would risk allegiance. I imagine their evaluation process weeds out as many undesirables as it does identify those that would be discreet and serviceable.”

“Still, we must be prepared to encounter a pack of wine-soaked, menacing, lusty heathens,” the archer halfheartedly quipped. “Even if they are only a band of misunderstood souls, they have been tormented by their desires and branded blackguards by their peers, though indirectly. Many will armor themselves with the tropes of villainy if only to survive, which usually results in the commission of an offense or two.”

“True enough,” Elrohir concurred, wriggling about that they might indulge in a quick, though heady, embrace. “If only they could be as fortunate as I.”

“As we,” Legolas gamely corrected, though his fair features took on a melancholy air. “It will be so, once Aragorn settles into his rule. It *must* be so.”

His conviction as enthralling as ever, the elf-knight kissed him soundly, drinking in every last drop of his loveliness before charging forth.

“Come,” he whispered, reluctant to part with that securing warmth. “Into the fray.”

Without a hint of tension, they marched bold towards the front entrance, eyeing the startled guards with cold formality. The pair shared a dubious glance, then one darted inside, obviously intelligent enough not to dare challenge the authority of two such hallowed warriors. The remaining guard did his best to bar their passage, perplexed to discover that their height matched his, whereas he would have dwarfed most men in stature. Though he was unquestionably wider, his attempts to broaden his bulk proved fruitless; he knew enough of elven dexterity not to bother with a blindsiding attack.

“State your business,” he demanded, bravely smoothing the quaver to his tone. “My Lords.”

“Might we converse with the proprietor of this establishment?” Elrohir inquired, an incisiveness to his politesse.

“He is being fetched,” the guard informed them.
“Very well,” Legolas stated agreeably, then they both swooped past their colossal friend, who proved just as deft when he zipped past them to block their access to the door.

“My Lords, I regret that you must await him out of doors,” he firmly explained, though the rigidity of his stance betrayed him. “Only chartered members may enter unescorted.”

“Might the King be permitted within?” Elrohir suavely asked. “For we investigate the premises at his command. To bar our entry is to defy him.”

At that, the guard clamped his mouth shut, then waited in stony silence for them to strike him. The elf-knight could not decide whether he was more impressed or disturbed by the force of his allegiance to those that undoubtedly would see him hang before their secrets were uncovered.

“Then perhaps you may escort us,” Legolas pointedly suggested. “As one loyal to the crown and his employer.”

The guard considered this for long minutes after, then finally admitted: “I am not a member. I have never been within.”

This confession did far more than pique Elrohir’s curiosity, its brilliance all but astounded him. Just as he was wondering where the guard’s partner had scampered off to, a knock rumbled from behind, their implacable friend shifting enough to allow two grim-faced men to exit, one hastily attired in a robe of neutral hue that blatantly concealed a far more ornate costume, if his lacquered eyes and bejeweled fingers were any indication. He was of an unexpected youth, surely no more than three decades, the calluses on his hands revealing him to be a woodworker by trade. Indeed, if Elrohir was not mistaken, he was the second son of the leader of the mason’s guild; his father was a vocal ally of the King’s and one of the captains of the reconstruction. This was no low-born miscreant, but a member of the trade class, with a humility to his bearing and a irrepressible glint of determination to his eyes.

He was also more than passing fair, of lustrous chestnut locks and delectably rosy features. Had the elf-knight not already been spoken for, he might have pledged membership.

“My Lords,” the young man worriedly greeted them. “May I risk offense by inquiring as to what brings you to our door?”

“The King’s affairs,” Legolas declared, bluntly scrutinizing him. “By what authority do you bar our way?”

“In truth, I have none,” the man admitted. “I can only pray that, as elves, it is with the compassion your race is renowned for that you regard the goings on within.”

“So sordid as that, are they?” Legolas queried, grabbing him by the arm and brusquely escorting him through the door.

The Mirkwood prince did not solely aim to alarm the proprietor with this maneuver, but to expedite their progress. If the guards were unaware of the members’ activities, any insight they gleaned from their interrogation might stir up unnecessary trouble. No matter the brashness of their demeanor, Elrohir and Legolas had agreed not to condemn any of the men of the Charred Ring unless there was irrefutable evidence of dark necromancy. Not only would it be churlish to demand their aid then arrest them for conspiracy, but there was every chance they were merely discreet, not corrupt, thus they could not in good conscience impugn their character.

Once they were safe within the rather elegant entranceway, the proprietor swiftly ushered them up to
his second floor offices, which they arrived at without glimpsing the main hall. These were
unremarkable, save for a wide velvet curtain strung along the far wall, undoubtedly veiling a set of
windows that overlooked the happenings below. Filmy candlelight spilled out the sides, though at
too acute an angle to reveal much. The melodic strumming of a lyre, however, was unmistakable, as
was the briny scent of keg wine. The young man doffed his robe; he was bedecked in a pair of tight
suede breeches, a short velveteen vest, and little else save an elaborate series of tattoos. His lithe,
muscular body was even more attractive than Elrohir had imagined; he posed with the nonchalant
grace of a carnival gymnast, his movements brief yet agile. By the doe-like quality to his gaze, he
was not a seducer, but neither was he averse to inviting others to tempt him away. He did so now,
not out of interest in the elves, but to determine how amenable they might be to an interlude. If they
were, as he assumed, sympathetic to his cause, then their conversation would be far more candid,
thus Elrohir made a show of admiring his assets. He was relieved to note that Legolas did the same,
intuiting his strategy.

“Forgive me for neglecting an introduction,” the man genuinely excused himself, though his stance
was far from relaxed. “I am Vartanar, the manager of this establishment. The members themselves
are the proprietors, and pay a fee towards its upkeep. Though we are… honored by the King’s
interest, I must confess that we are a secretive lot, engaged in activities that some consider
scandalous, some blasphemous, some… criminal. I assume that your investigation has brought you,
armed with a vague notion of our purpose in quieting ourselves here. I can only pray that you will
not condemn us for seeking refuge from the judgment of others—”

“Peace,” Elrohir tempered him, swayed by his sincerity. “We have come for several reasons, but not
to round you up like a herd of cattle, nor to cart you off to the dungeons, unless there is compelling
evidence for us to do so. Though I myself confess to being intrigued as to what you get about here, I
only ask that you give your full attention to a few questions pertaining to our investigation.”

“And to permit us a glance at your main hall,” Legolas mischievously added, in so disarming a
manner that Vartanar could not possibly think ill of him. “Do tell, is this a proper bawdy house?”

The young man chuckled softly at this, his nerves yet tightly coiled.

“It is, as I have said, a refuge,” he soberly replied. “Much like Imladris, or so I have been led to
presume. Those that assemble here do so with the aim of liberty in all things: political, artistic,
intellectual… and, yes, physical. We are to a one veterans of the war, defenders of righteousness,
only our definition of what is right and good is a touch more expansive than that of your local
Gondorian. We harbor no rogues nor scoundrels here, but men of integrity, who espouse what we
consider elven principles of respect for the natural world, equality for all, and freedom of expression.
We host a series of events each week. Our members attend those that captivate their interest, though I
will not pretend that any fail to attend our…”

When words failed him, the detectives nodded their comprehension.

“And is this such a night?” Elrohir inquired, still sifting through his statements to catch out all that the
young man did not say outright.

“By your luck, it is,” Vartanar sighed, weighted by the knowledge that he could not now prohibit
them from exploring the main salon. “If you are… thus inclined?”

Legolas could not quite stifle a snicker at that, which thankfully set the man at ease. Indeed, Vartanar
was even more appeased by the glance Elrohir shot in his lover’s direction, revelatory only in that he
could not quite filter out the blitheness of his emotions towards the woodland prince.

“Now that all has been disclosed,” he remarked, yanking his focus back to the task at hand, with
visions of a sensuous tryst in a cozy parlor playing through his mind. “Might we resolve ourselves to an interrogation?”

“How may I be of service?” Vartanar offered, still marginally guarded, given the sensitivity of the information they would no doubt inquire after.

“Both the villain we chase and his victim may have at one time been members of your order,” Elrohir elaborated, accepting the seat offered him, as did Legolas. The man retired behind his desk, fortification that would provide him with distance enough to promote honesty. “Was Angbor counted among your ranks?”

“I myself was not acquainted with him,” Vartanar responded. “But there have been whispers among some of our younger members that several of their elder lovers knew of his preference and had in the past been involved with him. This, of course, is probably aggrandizement, given the poor steward’s misfortune. In truth, his estrangement from Denethor’s court predates the foundation of this establishment, so if any of our members tangled with him, it was in private. Though, from what I understand, he did share many of the principles espoused here. Tis a pity we had not the chance to recruit him.”

“Yet someone must have believed him to be associated with you,” Legolas challenged. “A charred ring was placed by his murder bed. A ring of… dubious provenance.”

Vartanar’s ire was clearly piqued by the archer’s unvoiced implications, but he managed to swallow back his bile, ever conscious of how the outcome of this interview could affect his livelihood.

“My Lords…” he began, then growled softly, his aggravation poorly leashed. He boldly eyed the pair of them in turn, then lowered his gaze to the pristinely varnished surface of the desk, as if some insight or portent might be inscribed there. Finally, he decided himself on a course of argument. “I will speak plain. We harbor in our ranks individuals of entitlement, who would not only be dethroned, but who would lose their lives if their proclivities were ever commonly known. As a result, certain details of your investigation have been brought to my attention – the existence of this ring in particular, and also some of the history behind its recovery. Though many would charge us otherwise, we are not servants of the Dark Lord, nor would we stand for any daemon lover to marry himself to our cause. The ring at the murder site may have been burnt to resemble our own, but it is not of the same make.” He yanked off his own personal band, then presented it for Elrohir’s inspection. “As you can see, it is a bronze unique to these mountains, flecked with black streaks by the igneous rock that bakes beneath the range. Our rings are sculpted to highlight the black swatches; they have not been hot fired in the heart of a forge. Whereas the pattern on the ring in question is allegedly superficial, ours is ingrained in the design. I do not contest that the murderer may have meant to reference us, but… we are a league of our own.”

Elrohir performed a minute examination, though he immediately perceived the differences between the two rings. While the guild could very well have had their rings struck anew upon learning of the clue in question, this jarred with his concept of the murderer and his intentions. He also intimately sympathized with the very real threat to the guild’s members if their sexual preferences were found out. They gained nothing by being so exposed, and risked losing everything. Their culprit, meanwhile, could be the proverbial viper in the falcon’s nest, slithering about here, waiting to strike. Indeed, the discovery of this incredible place further expanded the elf-knight’s concept of the killer’s motivation. Perhaps he aimed not to topple the crown, but to expose the hypocrisy of those who politicked by day and perverted themselves by night. Any of the suspects allied with this house could be the blackguard they sought, but also might be caught in his crosshairs.

“Your eloquence is compelling,” Elrohir reassured the young man. “Especially since it bears up
against the hard facts of the case. Alas, this does little to exonerate any among your current membership. Only you can aid in that endeavor, by agreeing to view these sketches of our known suspects, as well as naming anyone whose intentions have, on occasion, struck you as potentially disingenuous.”

“My Lord, our members are vetted more thoroughly than the King’s honor guard,” Vartanar earnestly objected, though he nevertheless took a gander at the sketches spread before him. “There is not a single one who inspires a speck of doubt.”

“Then I trust they are all amenable to being formally interviewed,” Legolas countered, which earned him a feral snort.

“Is it truly a necessity?” Vartanar demanded. “I daresay the lion’s share of them were in this hall the very night of Angbor’s slaying!”

“They need not be the killer to yield useful information,” Elrohir calmly pointed out. “Even if they shared the most casual of relationships with him, the very nature of their own desires might have alerted them to something no other witness could testify to. I am afraid we must speak with them all, and soon.”

“My Lords, every moment spent here risks their very lives!” Vartanar erupted, his own fear livid across his grimaced features. “This is their only sanctuary, the only place where they can truly be at peace. I will not invite danger behind our doors! I will not have those I have shared indelible intimacies with threatened with violence, ignominy, and ruination!”

“We are the dogs that defend the herd from predators,” Elrohir cautioned him. “Not the wolves themselves. Would you rather leave well enough alone, and see a member of your ranks slain in a cruel, grandiose manner, perhaps in one of your very beds? He may already be among you. You may trust him like a brother. The one we seek is duplicitous beyond all rational comprehension; scheming, mendacious, ruthless. The knife is at your throat, Vartanar.”

“So it *may* be,” the man retorted, though there was no mistaking the tremor in his tone. “You have no more proof than a… a tenuous connection.”

“He surely meant to spotlight your guild with his positioning of the charred ring,” Legolas commented. “Is that not enough to spur you?”

“Perhaps he only meant to associate Angbor with the Dark Lord,” Vartanar scrambled. “Perhaps…” He heaved a voluminous sigh, visibly crushed by the weight of the circumstances. He sank back into his chair, momentarily despondent. “How would we go about it?”

Elrohir glanced meaningfully at Legolas, contemplating a scenario that might confuse the boundaries of their own relationship, but alas his lover could not decipher aught but the troubled aspect to his look. The Mirkwood prince raised an eyebrow in query, struggling to intuit the nature of Elrohir’s reservations, then waved him on. Bolstered by the innateness of his trust, the elf-knight proceeded to detail a plan.

“To my mind,” he commenced. “The surest way to discretion is if you hold an assembly this very night, then announce to them that we are petitioning to join the guild, as a couple. Explain that, due our unimpeachable status as elves and loyals to the crown, as well as the brevity of our present sojourn in the city, you would forgo the normal vetting process. We are, as you will avail them, only looking for a quiet room in which to… enjoy our last few weeks together. Instead of the normal trials, you will propose that each member interview us in turn tomorrow night, to be personally reassured as to the viability of our candidacy. At the end, you will all vote – which of course will not
come to pass once everyone understands the true reason for our inquiries. You will thus be provided
with an excuse for our infiltration this eve, which undoubtedly ruffled a few feathers, as well as
ensured that they will all return tomorrow night. If any go missing…”

“We will pay them a visit soon enough,” Legolas completed, betraying not a hint of discomfort with
this proposal.

“Precisely,” Elrohir concluded. “This will also give you a notion of whom to suspect, while the
murderer’s sights will be set on us.”

“We are well capable of bearing such a burden,” Legolas added, somewhat impishly. “Indeed, it has
been our duty from the first.”

“Yet will you not be subject to intense scrutiny if it becomes commonly known that you are
involved?” Vartanar inquired, in a show of sympathy that touched the elf-knight.

“Can your members themselves not be trusted?” Elrohir asked, with mock innocence. “Twould
perhaps be best to remind them that they are not the only ones who can court scandal. In a fortnight’s
time, we both will have quit the city. They must remain, and shoulder the consequences of any so
unadvised an action.”

“Well reasoned,” Vartanar sighed, his visage still shroud in concern. “Very well, my Lords. If you
would grant me a few moments to collect myself, I will presently announce your candidacy.”

“Send word to confirm that it is done,” Legolas instructed. “A sack of white pebbles to the stable
master, totaling the hour at which we are expected, a lone gray pebble if any would contest the plan,
or a single black pebble, to signal us that you are in immediate danger and to demand that we
intervene forthwith. We will be strolling the nearby quarter until sometime after midnight, if we are
needed.”

Elrohir was a mite perturbed by the archer’s last statement, but he quelled his worry long enough to
shake on their plans and to wish courage on Vartanar. On the office’s threshold, he glanced back at
the now beleaguered young man, praying that his tender heart would not be too abused by the night
to come. For all his remonstrations, Elrohir sensed that he was a vulnerable soul, overwhelmed by his
own instincts and his personal situation, however he had endeavored to better them. Yet he had also
perceived the flint of recognition in Vartanar’s eyes when he had gazed upon the sketches, and
wondered at what progress they might make upon the morrow.

He turned away, absently following Legolas out into the night, too embroiled in deduction to spare
much thought to the objections that the Mirkwood prince himself might be about to voice. All was
soon blighted out by the hand that slipped into his own, their fingers automatically knitting together,
as if two reunited halves of a long-estranged whole. They slowed to a meandering pace once around
the corner, content to gradually navigate the empty roads and circuitous streets that made up the
district. Elrohir could not quite temper the smile that spread across his twilight features, though he
was the more enthralled by Legolas’ pearly radiance, by the faith and the devotion shining from his
eyes.

“You have bewitched me, Son of Earendil, with your midnight graces,” the archer whispered
intently. “In such moments of serenity, I rue that I cannot parade you through the halls of the Citadel,
enacting the part of your gallant escort.”

“That would be a peculiar sort of affirmation,” Elrohir remarked, communicating his approval
through the heat of his regard. “Though one that would delight me, if it did not threaten those we
hold dear.”
“But would it?” Legolas questioned, almost rhetorically. “Perhaps that is the key to catching our killer. Perhaps we should tempt his ire by… well, not pretending, but exposing ourselves to be what repulses him the most.”

“He would instantly intuit our designs,” Elrohir countered. “He is too shrewd to be deceived by even such a genial ruse.”

“For certes,” Legolas concurred. “But it might force an error out of him. Prompt him to stumble where once he was sure-footed.”

Elrohir considered this a moment, slowly the more persuaded.

“Indeed,” he acknowledged, with a predatory gleam. “Let us reflect upon it for a time. The King, also, must be consulted with. Such controversy cannot be easily controlled. If we are to dare so, we must protect those near to us.”

“Especially those nearest and dearest of all,” Legolas murmured, tugging him in for a fleet kiss. “Now, on to your lately deductions. What wild and glamorous theories have you to regale me with during our stroll?”

“None that seem terribly urgent, given the fact that I finally have you to myself,” Elrohir confessed, tipsy in the wake of his lover’s intimate gesture. “There is not a soul about to see me spoil you with affection, nor any to eavesdrop on our hush confidences. Indeed, I find that I am far more eager to improve my knowledge of your life and experience, the stuff that courtship normally entails.”

“Surely we need not be so tedious as that,” Legolas teasingly retorted, though his eyes glowed with fondness. “Would you not rather speculate as to which of our errant royals absconds to the guild’s unctuous salon on a nightly basis?” He examined the elf-knight’s placid face for a moment, then barked out a laugh. “Manwe’s strength! You know already.”

“I have a suspicion,” Elrohir plainly stated. “One that has yet to be borne out. But that is a trifle compared to the nuggets of insight into your estimable character I aim to glean this night. Come, now, don’t be churlish. Recount me some mischief from your elfling years.”

“If I must,” Legolas good-naturedly grumbled. “Though if I am to be subject to even such a well-meaning interrogation, then you yourself best prepare to divulge a few riveting anecdotes, melethron.”

“Maltaren, am I one to cheat you out of any form of pleasure, rare or otherwise?” Elrohir chuckled, then permitted himself a wry grin when the archer sighed in defeat.

Wonderfully content, he wove an arm around his beloved’s waist and tucked into his side, thrilled when he was similarly secured to Legolas. They wandered the misty streets for some time after, the Mirkwood prince’s mellifluous voice casting a spell over the elf-knight, who grew the more enchanted with every syllable that slipped past his lips.

End of Part 8
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not for profit.
Summary: On the eve of Aragorn’s coronation, our golden pair are charged with investigating a brutal murder at the Citadel.

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present...

A Slaying in Scarlet
A LOTR Mystery

Part 9

There’s the scarlet thread of murder running through the colorless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it.
–A Study in Scarlet, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1887

Minas Tirith, Year 3019, Third Age

June 20th

“By battle’s end, we were drenched to the bone, our legs clumped with mud and grass-flecked gore,” a velvety voice murmured into the somnolent night. “The pound of the rain was such that we barely heard the thunder crashing above us, the curtains of water so blighting that we could barely view the scope of the carnage. The ground beneath us was practically a swamp, which had thankfully swallowed up the orc carcasses, for there was no thought of retuning to build a pyre and it is not our custom to abandon a war field, especially as the victors. Once we determined our bearings, we trudged along to firm ground. I was unsurprised when Elladan collapsed. I was far more unnerved by his sorrow. He ranted and railed, and sobbed such that he nearly suffocated himself. I was more miserable than he, and could provide no comfort. Instead, I slumped beside him, waiting out his agony, then helped him onto his horse and escorted him back to the village. The mayor, intuiting our exhaustion, had the good sense to steer us away from those only too eager to applaud us, sneaking us through back passageways to the inn. We were so wretched that we stripped and bathed in the stable, then unintentionally bunked in the hayloft. We were roused the following afternoon by a great commotion, though neither of us would have predicted Glorfindel’s advent. Elladan was so amazed at his beloved’s appearance that his knees gave way; fortunately, the Balrog-slayer was so relieved to find us hale and whole that he immediately scooped my brother up and bore him away into a private bedchamber. Yet my beleaguered senses were to be rattled further, since, the following morn, the pair emerged looking as pearly and giddy as adolescents, then declared themselves to be bound. If it were not for my ingrained sense of propriety, I might have neglected to congratulate them, such was my dull, gaping response to their spontaneity. Regardless, I was tremendously glad, enough to sojourn there for a month entire that the newly bound couple might exercise themselves of passion.”

Legolas basked in the aura of the elf-knight’s quiet smile, so absorbed by his tale that he failed to note the first rosy fingers of dawn reaching over the horizon. They had been tucked up on the divan
in Elrohir’s foyer since the midnight hour, each recounting the story of his life to a rapt audience of one, traipsing around the more tragic occurrence so as not to spoil the mood, which was one of warmth, openness, and palpable adoration. There had been moments of high energy whilst recalling early years adventures, raucous laughter when talk turned to elfling complots, and bouts of embarrassment when revealing major fumbles. Yet so far no question had been too frank to elaborate upon, nor opinion too controversial to confess to. If aught, they were loath to break from the sanctuary of their togetherness, from the cozy bundle of limbs, blankets, pillows, and cloaks in which they were nested. Even the flame of desire that ever kindled between them only served to fuel their interest, not consume it whole, though their late hours pleasure would undoubtedly burn the hotter for it.

At present, Legolas was far too preoccupied with knitting in certain threadbare patches of the tapestry of his beloved’s life history, that he might eventually weave his own into the pattern, permanently entwining them both.

He was also sage enough to appreciate the richness of what he had been invited to partake of, how savory and slow-cooked a delicacy Elrohir’s tale was. No one had ever been served up such a meal by the elf-knight, who tended to stew in secret, saving all for himself. Due to his own generosity of spirit, to how welcoming and nourishing Legolas’ influence had ever been, his lover had prepared him a buffet selection of the choicest anecdotes in his repertoire. Yet even one so humble as the archer recognized the dearth of meat available, how measly and cautiously portioned these cuts were. Elrohir had referred almost exclusively to happy times; if he recounted a moment of sadness, it was ever couched in the sorrow of others. The tragedies that had shaped him lurked beyond the perimeter of his tales, never daring to peek into view. In time, the Mirkwood prince knew he would be able to aim a torch in their direction, but it was simply too soon to so presume. Especially since Elrohir had already been so forthcoming, so candid and compelling within the established bounds of their conversation.

By the first light of dawn, Legolas was utterly entranced, as well as riveted by every word.

“Was your Adar scandalized by this turn of events?” he inquired, after sipping from the massive mug of tea balanced between them.

“Methinks he was far more relieved to have Elladan settled and the pair of us resident in Imladris for a decent while,” Elrohir thoughtfully replied. “Indeed, I fear he considered this an end to our vengeance quest, though that was by no means...” He trailed off, visibly reluctant to delve into such a murky era of his life.

Legolas, ever the gallant, leapt to his rescue.

“Did you not venture to Mirkwood some time later?” he attempted to clarify. “Twas your final visit before the War.”

“Indeed, we did,” Elrohir chuckled in remembrance. “The circumstances that greeted us were... rather curious. One of your brothers exhibited a feral jealousy towards us, and your Adar was confoundedly defiant. We did not feel terribly welcome, as in times past, hence we have not returned.”

“Would that I could shed some light on their comportment,” Legolas commented. “Alas, I was far too focused on proving myself worthy of a lieutenant’s rank. Though we did enjoy that one turn at archery.”

“We did,” Elrohir smirked conspiratorially, but said no more.
“Do not claim to still be affronted that we trumped you soundly,” Legolas taunted, though in truth the elf-knight’s non-committal manner baffled him. He felt his lover retreating into himself, which further provoked him. “You well agreed to the stakes of the match. You knew who opposed you.”

“I am as unruffled now as I was then,” Elrohir guardedly informed him, then shot him a pointed glance. Legolas had the distinct sense he was being evaluated, though to what end he had not the faintest notion. Finally, the elf-knight appeared to resolve himself, with another weighty chuckle. “I was far more exasperated by how you resisted first my subtle, then my overt attempts at flirtation the afternoon long. Twas only that night that I learned you were spoken for, however temporarily.”

Legolas blanched at this revelation; he would have been less startled by a slap to the face. His own memories of the encounter were too foggy to yield further insight, though how he rued the mist that kept him from a closer examination of what had transpired. Elrohir, for his part, laughed sheepishly, somewhat abashed at having baited him so, then gave his arm a consoling squeeze.

“You desired me then?” Legolas demanded, an urgency within spurring him close to discourtesy.

“You have ever been beautiful,” Elrohir shyly responded, fidgeting with discomfort. “When last I had visited, you were an elfling; pearly and cute, but betraying no signs of the… of what you would become. I do not pretend that my heart pounded and my stomach flopped at first sight of you grown, but certainly my loins… simmered some. I was tempted, fiercely tempted. Though now I am glad that we did not dally, else we might have evaded the deeper emotions that currently afflict us. I would rather have this indelible truth than the trifle that might have been.”

“Indeed,” Legolas ardently concurred, locking eyes with the one who never ceased to thrill and confound him. “I was certainly not mature enough to have appreciated your interest, no matter how superficial it was. I can scarcely believe it now, and I have survived the Ring War as a member of the hallowed Fellowship!” This earned him a glare of mock reproof, which only inspired him to further capriciousness. “Though it would be of interest to conjure up scenarios detailing what might have been. How your early years tutelage might have influenced my later relationships.”

“Ah, now we come to a far more propitious subject,” Elrohir declared, visibly relieved to have strayed from that hazardous path. “I must confess, I have been hotly intrigued by the concept of your past lovers. If I were to promise you… a sensual reward of your choosing, would you elaborate upon the elves that helped mold you into the sterling lover that presently graces my bed?”

Legolas laughed softly at his eagerness, wishing the events themselves were worthy of his interest.

“It does not gall me to speak of those who contributed barely a drop to the reservoir of what I am,” the archer casually informed him. “Though if a bribe is in the offering, I would much rather…” He perceived the grit to Elrohir’s jaw and quieted; such delicate subjects were not to be broached for anyone’s amusement. “Rather exact a similar promise, that you detail your own romantic history.”

Those piercing silver eyes blatantly scrutinized him, easily catching sight of his inept maneuver. Legolas felt even more culpable when his lover’s gaze retreated out of doors, turning towards the epic view, the battle plain beyond, the ruins of Mordor, as well as the rising sun.

“What do you mean to ask?” Elrohir himself questioned, a quiver of uncertainty unbalancing the evenness of his tone.

“It does not bear mention,” Legolas assuaged him. “I am a mercurial sort, too long spoilt by the sanctity of Mirkwood life. I have no call—”

“You have dominion,” Elrohir kindly insisted. “Over my past, my future, my heart. I have willingly
conceded much of myself, and I will gladly concede more, with time. We are enclosed, freely
confessing ourselves, and I am wholly yours. What do you mean to ask, Legolas?"

“Why you abstained for so long, prior to our liaison,” the archer plainly inquired, supremely
conscious of the moment’s import, of how it would define their relation from then on. “Why you
sought no comfort after your Naneth sailed West.”

The elf-knight shook his head, not to refute his characterization but to convey his own irresolution,
the matter not even settled in his own mind.

“Twas not as deliberate a decision as it appears in retrospect,” Elrohir murmured. “I simply… How
could I hope to find comfort with those that had never truly nurtured me? The only one who ever had
was gone; horribly, horribly violated, to which I had to bear witness and play healer. The incident
and its aftermath threw everything into chaos, most of all my desires. All I knew was that I could not
rest until the Dark Lord had been defeated, until his minions had been blighted from this middle
earth. I did not become akin to the monsters I chased because I held fast to the ideals that have
always guided me: honor, intellect, sacrifice, selflessness, wisdom. Though in all honesty, if my need
had been so pressing, I would have satisfied it. But not a sizzle quickened me in over 500 years. Not
until the night we rejoined you in Rohan, when you were valiantly repressing your terror and relief in
order to inspire others to such courage. I would have been yours that night, if you had cared to be
bold as I was some weeks later. Before that moment, there was only duty, family, the endless fight.”

“And now?” Legolas hushly asked, thoughts of the future weighing upon him.

“Duty and family, still,” Elrohir wryly admitted, instantly recovered from his moroseness. “That will
ever be. But there is a new, somewhat volatile element, one that I am still too in awe of to manage to
contain or to puzzle out: love. It galls me to allow it to overwhelm my reason, especially when there
is a murderer at large. I have not cared to yet see past the investigation, though eventually we must, if
the emotion between us is to evolve. As I pray it shall.”

“As do I,” Legolas concurred, with a fond smile. He exhaled longly, unsettled in spirit, as well as
intuiting that the debate that had raged with quiet fury within him must now become a matter of
contention between them. “Will you return to Imladris, once proper tribute has been paid to
Theoden?”

“I must, for a time,” Elrohir related, far more solid with the turn in conversation. “As I imagine you
are expected in Mirkwood.”

“Twould be best to assure that none of my brothers have deposed our father,” he quipped, not quite
masking the bitterness to his tone. “I cannot doubly insult him by first setting out on a quest without
informing him and then not bothering to visit home before I emigrate elsewhere.”

“Then you are at least decided on that,” Elrohir smirked, unsurprised that the Mirkwood held no
appeal to one who had lately conquered the world. “For which I am grateful. You are made for
adventure, and I would not have you reined in.”

“Even if they meant to saddle me, I would bolt,” Legolas commented, his nerves unsteady as he
approached the true matter of contention. “I must alert you that Aragorn has offered me a fief, an
eleven colony forested from the rubble of southernmost Ithilien.”

Elrohir was unflustered by this revelation; indeed, he was not only proud, but beamingly so.

“Then you cannot refuse him,” he insisted, bristling with excitement. “This is a chance in a thousand,
Legolas! Gondor is sorely lacking in elvish influence, and I cannot think of a more favored candidate
to ease her into the modern era, the nascent Fourth Age! For certes you deserve a year to order your affairs, but—"

"Would you rejoin me here?" Legolas asked, a telltale eloquence to his gaze. "Would you consider forsaking rule of Imladris and seconding me? Because the only future that calls to me is one by your side. I think it would be rash to blaze into a sacred bond after such a tumultuous courtship, but still I have every confidence in our forever, if we are patient, careful, and true. I would not be apart from you for years at a time; I could not be. Such sacrifices are the stuff of the Third Age, melethron. We are young and able, and if I am to lead this endeavor, I would have you share every trial and triumph with me. Else… why bother?"

Legolas was unprepared for the peals of uninhibited laughter the elf-knight emitted, though he welcomed the sound, sensuous kiss subsequently planted on his lips. He was not so immature as to mistake this for a confirmation, since many a relation had to be consulted before Elrohir could decamp from his homeland, but he sensed that his proposition had been accepted in that most cherished place of all, his beloved’s heart.

"I cannot swear that I will be granted such liberty, myself," Elrohir lucidly responded, after a brief moment of reflection. "Part of me is eager for a period of domesticity, and I am loath to quit Imladris before my Adar has sailed. But neither would I be so long without you; indeed, I do not think I could bear more than a few months at a time. I am an indefatigable sort when it comes to a proper mystery, and I have not yet unraveled you to my satisfaction."

"Nor I, you," Legolas mirthfully acknowledged. "Let us delay our respective decisions, then, but swear to making them together, along with thoughtful preparations for the future. Once the dust is settled on the investigation, we will have a clearer view of what waits beyond the horizon, as well as of our own personal ambitions."

"You have my oath, miren," Elrohir solemnly avowed, hugging him close that they might revel in the warmth of their bodies entwined. "I shall not wander."

Before Legolas could pledge himself in turn, a frantic pounding threatened to demolish the door, startling them both. The woodland prince, however, would not be deterred by some discourteous ruffian, thus he whispered his own vow into his lover’s attentive ear, then stole a fleet, compact-sealing kiss. Silently, he beseeched Elrohir’s opinion as to whether he should chase the roguish interloper away or invite him in for a tongue-lashing – one far less compelling than what the archer would later receive from his peredhel beau. The elf-knight, reclined back against a mound of pillows, merely shrugged; though curious to know the rank and identity of the one who pestered them, he was too drowsy to pursue the matter with his usual vigor.

With this in mind, Legolas wrenched open the door, ready to strike the villain behind before recognizing Nargomer, whose eyes flamed with wounded rage and whose brow was ridged with angst. Yet, upon spying the Mirkwood prince, he became a pillar of what would have passed for righteousness on any other man, poised like a battering ram to barge into the chamber if not bidden by the inhabitants.

"You have sought to roust me out like a hunted hare," Nargomer declared, a bite-less ferocity to his tone. "Well, I have come! Or will you not rest until I am paraded before the city entire, tried by the mob and executed for—"

"They will snatch you up presently, if you do not lower your voice," Elrohir remarked from behind him, suddenly alert as a result of this unexpected development. "Come in, before you wake the King."
Legolas was so involved with scrambling to decipher his meaning that he barely remembered to move aside, then followed him dully into the foyer, unsure of what was about to transpire. However, he knew well enough to stand by Elrohir, thus, after procuring the man a seat, he stationed himself between Nargomer and his beloved, angled away from obstructing their view but poised to retaliate nonetheless. As for the testy steward, he could not contain himself long enough to sit, instead flying back up to his feet and pacing busily, the better not to focus on Elrohir, whose very being appeared to insult him. After observing him for a while, the elf-knight raised an inquisitive eyebrow, but did no more to instigate a conversation. Both, Legolas sensed, were waiting for the other to erupt, yet only Nargomer hovered on the brink. Though he shackled them behind his back, the archer observed that the man’s hands were trembling, a sure sign that all was not how it seemed.

“You clods!” Nargomer finally exclaimed, appearing as haggard as he was infuriated. “You zealous, meddling, obsessive, execrable knaves! Why must you be so dogged, so damnably honorable! Have you no idea what you’ve wrought?”

“Twas not we that instigated this madness,” Elrohir reminded him. “We only seek to spare others.”

“By sacrificing lesser spirits to the seething hordes?!” the Steward demanded, his face red and swollen as a boil. “No one had managed to penetrate our ranks until the pair of you trundled up to the front door! We were secret, we were unknown, but now… You have ruined us all!”

At this accusation, Legolas fumbled for a table’s edge or sofa arm’s support, since his legs could not quite bear the weight of his astonishment. Could it truly be that all this time Nargomer was more sympathetic to their cause than he had any right to suspect?

“Hardly so,” Elrohir calmly answered, gesturing him towards his abandoned seat. “Pray, settle yourself, and we will discuss-“

“There is naught to discuss!” Nargomer blasted, his broad frame quaking from the exertion of restraining the true force of his anger. “You, in your overrated wisdom, have summoned me. Here I am! A lecher, a deceiver, and a sodomite. Do with me what you will, only leave my brothers alone.”

“Your lovers, you mean,” Elrohir skillfully provoked.

“I mean my blood!” Nargomer shouted, with bluster enough for a hundred gales. “Those that chance ruin for their pleasure, same as I. Who preen and swagger the day long to deserve a few short hours of bliss. Who have journeyed through Shadow-ravaged lands to spend one solitary night a year among those who best understand their burden, because they live it themselves. You seek to punish a killer, but you have instead exacted a piece of flesh from every member of our guild – for now we must disband, begging the gods that none of the weaker willed among us meet in secret and betray us all. So, I have come to give their testimony for them, since you would not believe poor, toothless Vartanar.” He coiled himself back into the chair, his eyes black and beady as a serpent’s, though Legolas suspected there was not much venom in him, for all his slithering around the underbelly of society. “Ask what you would.”

Elrohir nodded thoughtfully, not a whit swayed by his wild performance, but nonetheless convinced of some deeper truth.

“Have you, or any of your guild brothers, intimate knowledge of Angbor?” the elf-knight demurely inquired.

“We have not,” Nargomer stated, with overt menace.

“Do you know of any others he was entangled with?” Elrohir questioned. “If indeed you were aware
of his proclivities?"

“His preference was generally known among members of the guild,” Nargomer replied, with less rancor than before. “Though little discussed. To those loyal to Denethor, he was a traitor of the highest order. Hardly someone we would take to our beds.”

“Yet evidence placed by the murderer at the scene of the crime links him to your guild,” Elrohir retorted. “How do you account for this?”

“I cannot,” Nargomer insisted, defiant even before such a hallowed inquisitor. “I saw Angbor as little more than an impediment to my aims. He espoused values that kindled talk of revolution in the years before a war that was sure to be devastating and, as we then believed, apocalyptic. I paid his brand of lunacy as little heed as possible, especially once he quit the Council of Stewards. Personally, I reviled him. He courted attention with the merest gesture and flirted openly with those who thankfully misunderstood his intention, which was anathema to the tenets of our guild. But, in truth, we have not bothered with him for the past quarter century. In recent months, upon his arrival in Minas Tirith, we were all too occupied with the city’s defense to dally ourselves, let alone invite anyone new into the fold.”

“Still, that does not preclude him from seducing one of your members, especially when so deprived in the days before the onslaught,” Elrohir pointed out.

“If he was thinking of his prick whilst we were reinforcing the barricades,” Nargomer snarled. “Then perhaps he deserved a sound slaying.”

Legolas found he could not gainsay even such a vulgar statement, since he had felt much the same prior to the Host of the West riding out.

“Be that as it may,” Elrohir persisted. “I must ask you to provide us with an account of your own intimate encounters since your arrival in the city.”

At this, his eyes turned as flinty as stone, while a tinge of pride sharpened the cruelty of his smirk.

“There was but one,” Nargomer informed them. “Of whom you have lately made acquaintance.”

From this revelation, Legolas did reel with astonishment; he could no more imagine the pompous steward and exotic Vartanar together than Gimli coupling with a mongoose. Heightened circumstances did indeed couple strange bedfellows.

“You claim Angbor was reviled among the members of the guild,” Elrohir reiterated, which to Legolas signaled a change in course. “Had any an emotional reason, beyond imminent warfare, to despise him? A former lover scorned, perhaps? A brother abused? A friend betrayed?”

Nargomer’s mole-like visage took on a haughty air, his arrogance fearsomely returned as he divined some of the elf-knight’s intent.

“If you are still ferreting out gossip at such a late date,” he oleaginously suggested. “Then you still haven’t the faintest notion who slew the old bugger.”

Legolas was too preoccupied with staring daggers in the steward’s direction to note how Elrohir stilled, in the manner of a panther poised to pounce.

“On the contrary,” the darkling elf responded, a purring menace underlying his tone. “You yourself have sealed his fate by venturing here unannounced.”
To say that Nargomer blanched at this would be a discredit to the color white. The steward became nigh translucent with fear in the face of Elrohir’s definitive – and, Legolas was entirely certain, false – pretence that they suspected Vartanar as the killer. The archer firmed his own features in support of his lover’s gambit, one of such steel-bollocked nerve that he nearly flushed with arousal.

“You…” Nargomer stammered, suddenly as vicious as a kitten. “You cannot think…”

“I do not play at accusing a man of murder, Steward of Gondor,” Elrohir bellowed, to tremendous effect. “Nor do I give weight to the testimony of one who barges in here and berates us until we stray from our investigative path. This blindsiding tactic is the same one that earned your forces such a bullish reputation during the war, but I am a Prince of Imladris and not so easily intimidated. There is one reason and one reason alone you have gambled on such a ruse, and that is to protect the one most dear to you, your current, perhaps longtime, lover. Do not attempt to sway me with your lofty talk of found kinship among those society would estrange. You are of such ignoble character as to barter their lives in exchange for your own freedom. But Vartanar has cut deeper than any before, and he you would risk everything for, or at least appear to. Which is precisely why he has come under our scrutiny – he has no rightful alibi for the night in question, and, far worse, he has both personal and political motive to silence Angbor. His performance this evening was marginally convincing, save for three major flaws. First, he is the leader of a secretive guild that many believe to be in league with the Shadow; second, he made a poor show of disguising his anxiety when presented with a sketch of you; and third, he permitted you, one of the principal suspects in our case, to fly off to his defense. While you sit here ranting and raving against our methods, he is promptly fleeing the city.”

As inwardly aghast as he may have been, Nargomer was of strength enough to repress his emotions, intuiting that he was being manipulated, however unsure he was as to why and how. Yet that did not mean he doubted Elrohir, only that he would not inadvertently serve himself up to the one stoking the fire under the spit. Still, he was clever enough to recognize the limitations of his cognitive skills, especially when antagonized by such a master, thus the only strategy available to him was the one he swiftly espoused.

“And you would have me disavow my own heartfelt troths,” he accused the elf-knight. “Betray the one who has sheltered me all these years.”

“What we have only and ever required from you is information,” Legolas scoldingly reminded him. “If you had been courteous and compliant from the first, it would not have come to this.”

“Very well,” Nargomer sighed, not quite resolved to defeat, but daunted by the circumstances. “Angbor and I have ever been rivals, dating from our youth, long before we were ever formally entitled. Thirty years is a paltry amount of time to one of your race, but to a mortal, it is often a lifetime. The guild that Vartanar established was predated by another, far less officious group of like-desired individuals. I am the sole remaining member of that cabal in the present guild. Angbor was also a member. We both regularly accompanied our fathers to court, thus his nights of liberty were the same as mine. Since we were but a dozen hardy souls, we had soon ‘done the rounds’, in the cabal’s parlance. Our affairs were deliberately casual; any more would tempt us into dreams of a permanent relation, which was even more impossible at the time. Angbor, ever the upstart, resisted this. He became enamored with my preferred lover, a gentleman named Ecthedrior.”

“Denethor’s brother,” Legolas confirmed, to his own amazement.

“Indeed,” Nargomer nodded, a hint of despair in his features. “Angbor not only stole that fair one from me, with his witty rhetoric and his rustic charm, but he poured such nonsense in Ecthedrior’s ear that the too easily swayed youth revolted against his father and was eventually exiled. He fled to
Dol Amroth, that bastion of tolerance where the kingdom’s rules are openly flouted and no one gives a fig due to their wealth, but some of his former fellows, who he had foolishly confided in, pursued him there and put him to death. Hence there is little mention of him, in the history books or otherwise. I am not sure Faramir even knows he had an uncle. I, unfortunately, remember him all too well, and have been indiscreet in my throes.”

“Were you with Vartanar on the night of the slaying?” Elrohir inquired, moved by the tale but masking it well.

“I was not,” Nargomer answered, with the first glint of honesty they had seen all morn. “My stallion took a shard in his hoof. The surgeon could not see him until late, thus I waited through the worst of it with him. The stable master can confirm it.”

“It seems you value your horse more than your intimate relations,” Legolas quipped, to the amusement of none. Elrohir was lost in thought and Nargomer shot him a withering look, though he was hardly perturbed by either reaction. “And you are certain no other member of the guild harbors a secret connection to Angbor, or adores you enough to enact such a sadistic revenge? It could spare your lover’s life.”

“If I had been appraised of one, do you think I would have delayed in relating it to you?” Nargomer bitterly asked, no longer so desolate as resigned to his fate. “I gather this concludes our business?”

“It does,” Elrohir absently responded, his mind preoccupied with recasting the web of connections it had previously spun.

The steward foist a hard look upon him now that his senses were clear of romantic confusion.

“What shall I tell Vartanar when I find him?” he inquired, his resentment chafing his resolve. “Should I deliver him to you?”

“That is rather compliant of one that initially intended to affront,” Elrohir wryly commented, obviously not so distracted that the tense atmosphere in the room failed to impact upon him. “But, no, we do not require him. If he means to flee, or tell his father all, do everything to dissuade him. All is well.”

At this news, Nargomer grit his teeth such that Legolas feared he would either lunge at Elrohir or spit in his face. As neither option would safeguard his formerly suspect lover, the steward just managed to restrain himself, though the Mirkwood prince imagined they had not heard the last of the Lossarnachian. Until, that was, he was demoted to mayor of a ransacked village and stripped of all his governmental power. Given his brutish tactics, Legolas could not gainsay the wisdom of such a decision; indeed, he began to wonder if Angbor was the last trustworthy and virtuous steward in all of Gondor, and he was rarely one to concede to the general black opinion.

“You are dismissed,” Elrohir added, unable to straighten his smirk.

Nor did he stifle a hearty chuckle at the thunderous slam of their door. Rather, he playfully shoved into the archer’s side, then let out a sigh of satisfaction not unfamiliar to one who had savaged him with pleasure.

“We seem to have exonerated one suspect only to gain another,” Legolas observed. “Though he is not wrong in his evaluation of our current prospects for the case’s swift resolution.”

“On the contrary,” Elrohir objected. “The noose is tightening every day – or should I say the shelob in question will soon be defanged.”
“You are still convinced that our killer fancies himself a spider?” Legolas queried. “I do not doubt your intuition in this, melethron, but how are we to out such a fiend when our strongest evidence is a delusion?”

“Our lately adventures may have done the work for us,” Elrohir animatedly explained. “I am now certain that our villain meant for us to seek the Guild out, to expose the depravities that transpired within. I am equally certain that he meant to defame Angbor, that we come to see the righteousness of his act and quit our pursuit. Though he has to a point strung us along, we have failed to become his puppets. We will not expose the Guild, or Angbor’s misguided tutelage of Ecthedrior, or his liaison with Amrothos, or the duplicity of his sexual preferences. It is now vital that our plan to reveal ourselves as lovers be put into action, as it will cause the murderer to become so incensed that he stumbles into our hands.” He glanced over at the archer, whose normally pristine visage was shroud in deep thought, then hurried to elaborate upon his plan, lest Legolas prove less compliant than he had previously appeared. “Of course, we need not resort to such tactics to draw him out. I am certain we could together devise a similarly effective strategy.”

The woodland prince inhaled longly, unsure of how to elucidate his opinion.

“After listening to such tales of misery and woe, are you not compelled to think twice, Elrohir?” Legolas frankly inquired. “By proclaiming ourselves, we potentially endanger so many, as well as compound Aragorn’s problems. After hearing of Ecthedrior’s fate, I am newly versed in the vehemence and viciousness of those who oppose such practices. Angbor deserves to be avenged, but at what cost to the sanctity of Gondor?”

The elf-knight nodded sagely, affected by his astute opinion.

“Perhaps a compromise could be struck,” he suggested. “Perhaps we could discreetly reveal ourselves only to those suspect. If you think on it, we have more or less done so. Amrothos and Thorondir have both been appraised, as have Nargomer and Vartanar. We have only to dangle the implication before the Lamedonian contingent – in a manner left to interpretation, which our killer is sure to catch onto. This also removes the need to consult our betters. So long as we do not flaunt our relation, Estel maintains deniability.”

“But what if the murderer is not among those you mentioned?” Legolas asked, ever practical.

“Then we will have to conjure up another means of instigation,” Elrohir blithely replied, untroubled by this possibility. “I am sure two of our renowned wiles can stir up enough mischief when called to.”

“Indeed,” Legolas coyly concurred, his mind already embroiled in far more scarlet scenarios.

He did not protest when Elrohir drew him close, nor when they melted together, their night of confession and their early morning inquisition colluding to seduce them into a sultry tangle.

* * *

June 22nd

Beyond the chipped colonnades and the ravaged garden of the Citadel back yard stretched the pristine peaks of the Ered Nimrais, glinting like a diamond necklace with refracted light from the setting sun, while the grounds below were shroud in the purple haze of twilight. Elrond had requested chambers that looked towards the rear, since from every other room, road, and walkway the ruins of Mordor could be viewed, no longer fuming but hardly blooming with new growth. That scorched land held too many bleak memories for one who had burned many a pyre there, from great
leaders like Ereinion and Oropher to dear friends who would not be enshrined in the history books.

He had climbed to the very peak of Mount Doom, sword in hand, to scold Isildur into casting the ring into the heart of the volcano, but had not been able to overcome the Dark Lord’s necromancy. Only in that cataclysmic moment had he understood the true cost of immortality, that he had lived to see the day when his elvish half would overwhelm what remnants of mannishness remained in him, at the expense of so many lives, of another Age of strife and of deprivation. If he had chosen as his brother had, he perhaps would have founded a line of calm, rational sorts – not unlike the characters of his present children – who could have convinced their distant cousin of his better nature. Who could have solidified the alliance between Elves and Men. Who could have shepherded the disparate forces into a New Age, of peace and prosperity.

It had been foreseen that he would do so, at the time. Perhaps the calamity of his upbringing had perverted him somehow, distanced him from Elros, imbued him with the fortitude to forsake his twin brother, to survive him. Perhaps if he had known love at a younger age, his choice would have been made for him, as it had been for all of his children. Instead, the peoples of Arda had waited out another Age for their savior, another cycle of time, that Elros’ ferocity and Isildur’s greed might be diluted into Aragorn’s merciless integrity. Too late, Elrond had realized that his role was indeed that of the shepherd, not the brother-in-arms; that his charge was to educate and to nurture the infant heir to the throne of Gondor, that he be guided into fulfilling the destiny Elrond had incurred for him by not succumbing to another sort of Doom.

That Aragorn and his acolytes had succeeded was a source of great relief to him, but not one of consolation. Yet he understood that there was still one sacrifice demanded of him by the gods, a final penalty for defying them so many millennia ago: his only daughter. Thus, he had returned to the site of his world-shattering failure to celebrate the reunion of his line with that of his brother’s, but he could not find rest before windows that gazed out onto the place of his personal defeat, conquered by another.

Instead, he was at leisure to sit on his backward balcony and evaluate Arwen’s progress in revivifying the gardens, which had already received minimal attention from Legolas. This put Elrond in mind of the sole aspect of this entire experience that did offer him consolation, as well as thoroughly warmed his heart: the subtle courtship between the Prince of Mirkwood and his gallant Elrohir. Some time ago, the pair had wandered onto the green, quietly linking hands before setting off on a casual stroll down the reconstructed path, twilight obscuring their more overt affections to all but elven eyes.

From his high vantage, Elrond had continuously observed them as they meandered about the overgrowth, arms linked, bantering animatedly, occasionally pausing when they discovered an auspicious tree trunk against which to steal a lingering kiss. He was an unapologetic interloper, since he reveled in Elrohir’s good fortune, in the admirable synchronicity of the war’s end, the investigation’s commencement, and the woodland prince’s availability. While he had suspected an attraction on his son’s part since the days that preceded the Fellowship’s departure, he never would have conceived of it bearing such fruit, but such was the grace of the Valar. For all his faults and stumbles, he was presently witness to the fulfillment of two of his precious children, and the third was by no means malcontent. For all he was being asked to sacrifice as an unfaithful brother and a devoted husband, the rewards were plentiful indeed.

When the dark became such that their two silhouettes blended into the night descendant, his gaze drifted off into those distant, moonlit peaks, their white-silver shimmer reminiscent of his Celebrian’s ethereal mane. Soon he was mired in remembrances both sweet and bitter, wondering what she would make of his lately decisions, of how he’d resolved the many challenges he’d faced during their separation. She had entrusted their children to him; their sanctity, their care. Had he honored
her? Had he been vigilant enough? Would she approve of his blessing Aragorn and Arwen’s union, when she had never met the former and would be excoriated by the latter’s loss? Pathetically, he could only beg the gods for reprieve from her desolation whenever they next met. Each passing moment threatened that his own be unleashed, corroding and ferocious, but wholly unfair to his daughter.

“Ada?” came a sonorous call from below, drawing his gaze back from the mountains.

“Ioneth,” he smiled weakly down at Elrohir, his emotions too visceral to be easily dismissed. The elf-knight was without his archer escort, who had perhaps lingered in the garden to commune with the trees. “How do you fare, my brave one?”

Instead of a reply, Elrohir swiftly scaled up the ivy trellis that carpeted the outer wall, then deftly swung over the balcony rail to land at his side. His argent eyes were unsparing in their inquisition, as if Elrond were some nefarious outlaw that had recently been recaptured, but the Lord of Imladris took no offense. He well knew that his son could not suppress his instincts any better than the blush that pinked his cheeks, partially from exertion, partially from bough-shaded caresses under a sliver moon.

“I would ask the same of you,” he countered, with typical directness, then plunked himself on the end of Elrond’s chaise longue. “You appear decidedly melancholy.”

“So I am,” he amusedly confirmed, marveling how Elrohir appreciated in others moods he could not possibly identify in himself. “Not all of us are fortunate enough to have a flaxen-haired swain to skulk around the gardens with.”

Ignoring his insinuation, the elf-knight struck at the heart of the matter.

“You long for Naneth,” he sympathetically nodded. “You are not alone in this. So much has been denied her, but that she be absent during such a time! It is every mother’s triumph to see their daughter as a bride.”

“Indeed,” Elrond concurred, feeling rather maudlin. “Though a father does share in the victory. Still, whenever Arwen asks me about some inconsequential detail, I cannot help but think how Celebrian would have relished this. As her mate, I am utterly torn between my desire to be reunited with her soonest and my wish that she, above all, could be at Varda’s loom to at least witness our daughter’s wedding.”

Even as he ached for his wife, Elrond was astonished by the vivid evidence of his son’s compassion depicted on his normally stoic features, by the way Elrohir linked hands with him in quiet solidarity, intuiting that he was too riled for an embrace. If the Fifth Prince of Mirkwood had engendered such openness in his studious, conservative child then he was already a third son to him, for Elrohir had never been so comfortable with his emotions, nor so assured in his counsel.

“It is our duty to conjure her spirit, through our support of Arwen,” he poignantly remarked. “To memorize every detail that we might later translate it for her, though of course it will never be exactly as it was. But perhaps it will be less painful, if colored by our perspective. Perhaps it is the only way she could ever bear it. Perhaps she is being spared.”

“Then you posit we are meant to suffer in her stead?” Elrond inquired, a tinge of mirth to his tone.

“She has certainly suffered enough,” Elrohir firmly stated, alight with nobility. “If only I could have been there to withstand all her ills and torment—“
“Hush,” Elrond silenced him, the thought of his son being tortured no less vicious than the notion of what his wife experienced. “The Valar themselves have devised our trials. It is not our place to question their will, only to be grateful that we have the fortitude to move on. I myself have been particularly glad of your resilience of late, ioneth.”

“How so, Ada?” Elrohir queried, betraying his true character in his bafflement.

Elrond chuckled fondly, pleased that his son retained some modicum of innocence.

“Even the thickest of fathers could not fail to note the affinity between you and Legolas,” he taunted, earning the flush he sought. “I take it this investigation has yielded far more than either of you could have conceived at its outset.”

“It has,” Elrohir admitted, though appeared determined not to concede more. “Ada, we are not resolved—”

“Then perhaps you should endeavor to be,” the Lord of Imladris insisted, as gently as he could. “He is sharp and young and fair, and will not wait long on indecision. Better still, he is the only elf you have courted who rivals you in intellect, goodness, skill, and valor. He is the worthiest of matches, Elrohir. What delays you snatching him up?”

“He is not a sprightly hare that has evaded capture!” Elrohir protested, though he could not quite muster enough indignation to truly be cross. “Our futures are far from concluded upon, and until we have a better sense of what awaits us…we are exercising due caution.”

“Eternal loves ill respect caution,” Elrond retorted. “You have read enough poets to know that. But you are of a practical mind, so I will speak no more of bards and florid philosophical notions. What, in legitimate terms, do you believe stands between you and your happiness?”

The elf-knight scoffed at this, as bemused as he was irritated.

“The small matter of my duty to Imladris,” Elrohir frankly replied. “To you, my fail and grieving father.”

“Very well,” Elrond smirked, his spirits quite revitalized by their banter. “You are absolved of it. Once I have been escorted back to my humble refuge, you are free to depart or remain, at liberty to found a home there or to chase adventure in the guise of an incorrigible archer. It is with a wealth of love that I declare I would have none of you, ioneth, and pray that by the time you land upon the shores of the Blessed Realm, you will have a sunny mate at your side.”

To his credit, Elrohir was agog, his jaw hanging like an empty bucket and his eyes round as wagon wheels. He took his time collecting himself, his keen mind furiously devising every counterargument he could fathom, though Elrond would dismantle them all.

“Ada—”

“Of course, naught would content me more than to be counted among the guests at your binding rite,” Elrond smartly deflected. “But I gather there will be much industry to be seen to here in the southlands, and I cannot promise to remain in Arda until you resolve yourselves to eternity. Know that you have my blessing, that I so approve of Legolas that I dare say I champion him, and that I will do everything in my power to ensure that you are lavished with joy and happiness forevermore. As I have always done, I submit.”

“So you have,” Elrohir whispered, not trusting his voice at full volume. He indulged in a prolonged sigh, visibly rattled by emotions he as yet did not have mastery over, then strained to compose
himself. “Though perhaps, while you are still with us, you might advise me as to how I shall know
my heart is permanently and implacably resolved to such a… an irrevocable vow.”

“So that,” Elrond smiled empathetically, “is indeed one of the great mysteries of the ages.”

* * *

June 24th

A sweltering, near-solstice noon found the Elf-Knight of Imladris in rare vigor, as well as ripe with
sweat from a late morning duel with Elladan. Fearing for his sanctity of mind after being so long
sequestered in his suite of rooms, either furiously reviewing the minutiae of the case or
enthusiastically perusing the delicate areas of his lover’s person, his twin had staged an intervention
soon after his fast-breaking, which included a half-chuckled reminder that there were other forms of
exercise than sexual. To Elrohir’s dismay, Legolas had quickly concurred, citing the hitch in his step as
proof of the darkling elf’s carnal zeal. Though the archer was warned that no amount of exertion
would render him unfit in that regard, Elrohir himself perceived the benefits of a long duel on both
the mind and the body, thus he had accepted Elladan’s challenge.

Yet his caution to Legolas seemed uniquely prescient, since, after twice trouncing his brother, being
trounced by Glorfindel, and prevailing once again when they teamed up against the Balrog-slayer, he
now was beyond rabid for a rough, sensual rut; to shove his golden one down whether he sat or
stood and impale himself on the ivory column of his shaft. He craved being coiled tight with need,
Legolas flexed and limber from his efforts to unwind him, the pair of them enacting gymnastic
positions until Elrohir was unraveled by his passion. Though he was still mildly enervated by how
much he thrilled at submitting to his lover, this only served to further energize him as he barreled up
the Citadel’s front steps, then swiftly navigated its labyrinthine corridors. He only prayed he did not
have long to wait, or that Legolas would not be weighted by introspection once he emerged from the
royal office, since he was presently enclosed with Aragorn, realigning his future with that of the
Kingdom of Gondor.

Fortunately, the elf-knight’s fitness was not relegated to the vitality of his libido. As a warrior, his
physicality was by now so instinctive that he could sometimes divorce himself from the action during
a duel, that his reason might exercise itself through the routine practice of deduction. While he
parried and slashed, his mind had been preoccupied with ordering the disparate elements of the
investigation, the clues, insights, and anecdotes that did not yet complete the grander scheme of the
puzzle. By the time he had jogging up to the seventh tier from the barracks, he had a much clearer
concept of what pieces were missing, simple, almost incidental connections that they had not yet
discovered. The trouble was there were fewer and fewer avenues of inquiry available to them, yet
that revelatory moment where all the pieces fell into place eluded them still.

The gigantic, ornate doors to Elessar’s formal chambers in his sights, he slowed to a speedy stride,
too fuelled by desire to bother obeying the strictures of decorum. His hawk eyes darted around the
cylindrical reception area before he had even entered, spying only the two stony guards at post. One
of them nodded officiously, but neither moved to grant him passage; the King, therefore, was not to
be disturbed. Nerves still buzzing with anticipation, Elrohir knew he could not just hover around like
a deranged wasp, therefore he flew out to the upper level of the courtroom, from which Estel and his
close advisors could observe the commotion below, prior to descending.

From his privileged vantage, Elrohir found the vacuous hall of the Gondorian court not only empty,
but bare. Gone were the massive shields that depicted each fief’s coat of arms, judiciously placed
beneath the torch stands inlaid into the side walls, for maximum illumination. Gone was the
ostentatious décor that Denethor preferred, silver urns, thorny accents, and intimidating statues that
emphasized the power of the throne. In their stead, a warm minimalism reigned. Two ornamental hearths, shaped like voluminous cauldrons, flanked the dais, though at distance enough so as not to roast the King and Queen. An incomplete mosaic depicting the recent victory of the Host of the West covered the walls; the artist had employed shards from the rubble of their greatest cities, as well as Mordor itself, in its execution. The floor had been retiled in a regal indigo, an allusion to both kingly purple and Imladrian blue. Though Elessar’s throne had yet to be installed, Elrohir could already envision its humble, flawless design, as well as the ample comfort of its cushions.

At present, a few discreet servants were erecting a podium, likely for a royal proclamation. Others busied themselves with rearranging the position of those heavy coats of arms into a tableau behind the dais, the clear implication being that the regions of Gondor would be unified into one strong, righteous kingdom. It hardly required one of Elrohir’s keen rationality to intuit that the Stewards were now assembled before Estel, that Faramir and Legolas stood proudly behind him as he announced the dissolution of the fiefs to that garrulous and unseemly lot. They must have been stunned into silence, since there was nary a squabble to be heard at such close proximity.

What the outcome of Estel’s first gambit would be, only the fates knew. Elrohir’s excitement redoubled itself as he contemplated the grave, vengeful faces that would emerge from the King’s chambers, a hostile chorus bent on preaching dire consequences to their collective demotions. Faramir would be typically sanguine; little save Eowyn stirred his blood now that their common struggle was ended. Estel would undoubtedly be snickering behind his desk, not at his coup but at their infantile attitudes. The pure, gallant soul that was his Legolas would be the only one to evidence a twinge of sympathy for them, though hopefully that would extinguish itself at the sight of Elrohir so charged. It would, of course, be a prime opportunity to insinuate to suspects known and secret the true nature of their relation, one of which he would not fail to take full advantage. Still, on this occasion he would be the one who needed to school himself when in the presence of his lover, since he was fired enough to drop to his knees and worship one of Legolas’ most impressive assets before them all.

The elf-knight had never been one to devote himself to half-measures, though his ardor was usually of the intellectual variety.

Growing impatient, he made a game of identifying the historical events and ancient myths connected to the emblems associated with each fief, some directly related to the Steward’s personal lineage. Subsequent to entitlement, most tended to refresh the design to reflect their era of power, always maintaining a more general theme that their subjects were endeared to. With the exception of the Principality of Dol Amroth and the capital’s own totem, most were unfamiliar to him. An eagle crest here and a lion paw there harkened to the military uniforms of that region, but some had improvements that had not yet been adapted into banners, sword hilts, cufflinks, and the like.

Indeed, the coats of arms were as disparate as his group of suspects, their colors as contrasting as those nobles’ personalities, yet each was linked to the kingdom that kept them by some representation of the White Tree of Gondor. The largest and boldest of the mannish realms encompassed a truly diverse population, thus was uniquely positioned to effect actual change, especially with such an indefatigable leader at the reins. Elrohir felt a surge of hope at the thought, that they could indeed gallop headlong into a new Age of hard-won peace and prosperity abounding.

Twas a seismic crack that alerted him to the conclusion of the Stewards’ meeting with their King, those colossal doors rumbling as they were dragged apart, a rush of commotion flooding through. Thankfully, they did not disperse in haste, but pooled into the anteroom to pander and pontificate, none daring to be the first to depart, which might ignite speculation that he was displeased with this turn of events. They were all, of course, inwardly spitting like a stoked forge over their untimely demotion, but as flinty as their attitudes normally were, the Stewards were also firebrand politicians.
at heart. Some were already plotting revenge, some would segue on to slay and conquer in the realm of business, but all would eventually extort the King for their easy compliance. They were, after all, born to the aristocracy.

All except one, Elrohir was reminded as Faramir approached him, bearing a loaded satchel. Legolas, alas, hovered by the far windows, his face veiled by his luxurious mane. By the clenched look on Estel’s features, who could not be seen to look away from his former councilors, his lover was mocking the no doubt pompous protestations they had just been privy to. Elrohir barely suppressed the urge to sneak up behind Legolas and conform himself to that sleekly muscled back, though by the lone remaining Steward of Gondor’s look, his afternoon was about to be overtaken by ever more research.

“Well met, Son of Elrond,” Faramir smirked, correctly reading his expression. “Are Angbor’s private records and ledgers still of interest to you? I fear there is nothing of a personal nature inscribed here, but they still might provide you with a clue or two.”

“Indeed,” Elrohir replied, attempting to rally his own spirits. “I have been eager to peruse them.”

“I beg forgiveness for the tardiness of my delivery,” Faramir excused himself. “I did not want to chance sending them by courier, and, as you yourself might imagine, my first impulse upon return was not to unpack my traveling chest.”

The elf-knight shared in his knowing chuckle, then took the satchel from him.

“How did you fare with these ingrates?” he inquired. “Would that I could have been a dove tucked in the eaves.”

“As predicted,” Faramir informed him. “Most were outraged, some unsurprised. The least virtuous among them were the most offended, clinging to their power with a white-knuckle grip. Yet what protest could they truly mount? He is the King.”

“Was Legolas’ emigration well received?” Elrohir asked, concerned for his own future as well as his paramour’s.

“None of them are vying for the land he has earned himself,” Faramir explained. “His nomination was an afterthought, since their concerns lay elsewhere. Besides, even they aren’t foolish enough to suggest that a member of the Fellowship be unwelcome in Gondor.”

“As yet,” Elrohir quipped, then clapped the man fondly on the shoulder. “My thanks for your pains in Lamedon, gwador. Your research and insight have been invaluable.”

“Tis I who am grateful to have participated in this historic investigation,” Faramir responded. “Whose outcome, I might add, we of clear conscience all await with baited breath.”

“I will endeavor to bring this ill of Gondor’s to a swift resolution,” Elrohir concluded. “As for the rest, that is your purview, my Lord Steward.”

“At present,” Faramir slyly implied, glancing meaningfully back towards the royal chambers and the flaxen elf that lingered there.

The gesture was overt enough to draw the former Stewards’ indirect – though not particularly discreet - attentions. After Faramir meandered off to offer his condolences to his few friends among them, Elrohir seized the moment’s advantage. With the preternatural grace that was inherent to his elvish heritage, he sauntered into Estel’s office, fell in beside his exquisite beloved, then subtly linked their arms. He was soon made aware of being adorned by Legolas’ affectionate gaze, by a mirthful
glance from the seated King, and by a deathly silence from the anteroom beyond.

Perhaps it was fancy, but he thought that he could feel the air tense, that his keen elven senses could hear a fiend’s black soul seethe; that, like a shelob on the prowl, their murderer hid in plain sight, shrouded by darkness within and without, raring to strike.

* * *

After pouring a thick stream of perfumed oil along the back of one bare thigh, then down the other, Legolas rhythmically worked his hands over their taut musculature. Before him, Elrohir lay sprawled across their satiny coverlet, immaculate in his bareness and heavy with satiation, his porcelain skin glistening with sweat from their lately erotic exertions. A sleek spill of raven hair fanned over broad shoulder and across his back; a pristine column of torso led to the mountainous, meaty buttocks that the Mirkwood prince had been cleaving apart for most of their lazy afternoon. His sultry efforts had expanded the crevice between into a slender valley, the roughed and ruddy ring around the entrance to his lover’s body blooming like the lone flower on a barren terrain.

Indeed, as Legolas kneaded his way to the epicenter of the most seismic pleasure he had ever known, he lavished extra attention on that tender spot, that he might later be invited back into the molten, maddening channel within. His own loins simmered at touching Elrohir so intimately, ever prepared to be lured into another breathless tangle, but, alas, his beloved was lost to his books once more, nose-deep in one of Angbor’s journals even as his well-used body was being sensuously massaged. Legolas could be forgiven for assuming that, after thrashing and baying through paroxysms of ecstasy for the better part of the afternoon, his lover would barely be conscious, let alone lucid enough to concentrate on such minutiae of detail, but such was the relentlessness of Elrohir’s curiosity, such was the athleticism of his intellectual rigor. The archer had come to realize that their loving did not dull the elf-knight’s senses, but sharpened them.

When Legolas transported him into rapture, to that realm beyond the senses where only purity existed, Elrohir was not only one with his beloved, but one with himself. There, he could overcome the emotionality that clouds everyone’s vision—even geniuses such as himself— to observe with unique clarity the question at hand. In this way, their coupling was not merely therapeutic or nourishing, but transcendent. The fact that this enlightened state could only be achieved through an impermanent melding of the souls endeared Elrohir all the more to him. While the elf-knight chased down further insight into their ongoing investigation through this somewhat esoteric technique, Legolas had amassed all the evidence necessary to conclude that theirs was a forever love.

Still, he had not quite accustomed himself to the notion that Elrohir could enjoy his ministrations and give his full attention to the journal, but he persevered with his soothing of riotously red skin nonetheless, if only to enhance his lover’s sense of comfort. They could hardly give their villain chase if the lead detective could barely manage a trot, let alone full gallop. The latter thought proved prescient when, moments later, Elrohir let out a curt exclamation, wriggled out from under Legolas, then bounded off the bed. The woodland prince would have chided him if he were not so bemused, since the darkling elf scooted back in, smacked an impassioned kiss to his lips, then jogged back into his study.

Once Legolas had corralled robes for both of them, he found him frantically scanning the crusty, crackly pages of an ancient tome, which appeared to have been repeatedly plunged down a well since it was published. A fitting observation, he inwardly remarked when he managed to catch glimpse of the title: Talismans, Totems, and Tools of the Necromantic Arts. Finally, Elrohir hit upon the relevant page, then dove into its contents, so absorbed that the archer had to sloppily drape the robe around his more controversial areas of exposure when a coded knock sounded at the door.
After tightly fastening his own, he peered out into the corridor, catching a glimpse of the stable boy’s shadow as he darted around the corner. A small purse had been tucked in the loop of the door handle, undoubtedly containing the phial of rose water he had demanded of the Diagonal Alley vendor some weeks before. The timeliness of his communication was no coincidence. Their villain had either observed their intimacy that afternoon or had by now heard rumor of it, thereby necessitating a return visit to the one that supplied his spider’s venom. Though they could not be quick enough to catch him there, Legolas doubted the fiend had had time to properly disguise himself, thus they had only to secure an identification from the albino alchemist that owned the store in question. After snatching up the purse, he raced back into the study, nearly colliding with Elrohir in the archway that connected them.

“Melethen, make haste,” the elf-knight urged him. “You must direct me to the tunnels in the promontory. A vital clue to the mystery has been lying in plain sight for days! I require only confirmation from-“

“The vendor in Diagonal Alley,” Legolas chimed in, grabbing him by the arm and escorting him into their bedchamber. “I have only just received an alert from him, Elrohir. Our shelob means to fell another victim this very night!”

“Careful, my brave one,” Elrohir cautioned him, while yanking on one of his more impressive uniforms. “Even now, we cannot leap to unfounded conclusions, especially with so much at stake. The burden of proof may weigh heavily upon us, but we will not know the relief of resolution if we do not righteously bear it. We are the locus of his fury, but that does not mean we are his prey. We must roust up Gimli, Elladan, and Glorfindel, that they stand guard over those dearest to us. To my mind, Arwen, Adar, and the Hobbits are the likeliest targets.”

“Tis a perilous line he treads,” Legolas concurred. “With so little time available, he will strike at the weakest among us.”

“Yet we are fast on his heels,” Elrohir insisted, his noble visage alight with an almost childish excitement. “He cannot truly think to escape.”

“Perhaps he does not,” Legolas warned. “We must account for that, as well.”

“To arms, then,” Elrohir declared, as he shoved several reference books into his satchel, along with a few scrolls. “In duels of intellect, I am never outdone!”

Legolas threw on his quiver and bow regardless, then chased the elf-knight out of the Citadel, onto the scorching streets of the seventh tier. A harshly whispered word to the soldier stationed at the side entrance secured the compliance of their fellows, as well as the palace guard. Within the hour, they were storming through the underground market, sparking fear in the hearts of all who resided there, an unfortunate consequence of the suddenness of their intervention. A brusque shake to the albino vendor was the only means of reviving him from his stupefaction at seeing his humble shop invaded by two hallowed elven warriors, though that did not spare the investigators the evasive answers and the circuitous logic of one who aimed to dissemble.

Finally, Elrohir shoved him up against his jar-filled shelves, snatching off a pot of scorpion tails and threatening to force him to consume them unless he complied with the interrogation.

“My Lord,” the vendor mewled. “I swear to you, none of the sketches match those I bartered with today. As I told the messenger, I have no rhycl to sell!”

“Then what form of custom was sought of you?” Elrohir questioned, releasing the man from his hold but not retreating from his position of intimidation. “Potions? Spell-casting runes? Remedial tonics?”
“All of those, yes,” the vendor conceded, scurrying over to his ledger. “This morn, I sold several love charms – amulets and powders, mostly. A pouch of dragon’s bane went to a cripple, a porpoise’s whiskers to the matron of the Cave of Earthly Diversions, a brew of wargs’ claws to a tall, surly gentleman – these improve potency, and are not poisonous - preserved eleonor to an elderly woman in a long cloak… Oh, and a youth popped in for a phial of elderwood sap. Hardly a rare occurrence.”

Legolas could sense that Elrohir did not consider any detail without merit, his falcon eyes raptly focused on the vendor’s pallid visage and dun lips.

“From a southern, northern, or eastern crop?” the elf-knight shrewdly inquired.

“Only southern goods are left me,” the alchemist confirmed.

“And the rhycl?” Elrohir pursued. “What can you tell me of its properties? Can a similar substance be improvised with other materials?”

Legolas intuited that his lover was generally satisfied with their catch, now only fishing for small details that might enrich their yield.

“A paralytic is hardly of complex chemistry,” the vendor elaborated. “There are plants and herbs aplenty that would serve.”

“Not to our villain,” Elrohir murmured, scanning the shelves for ought of interest, or perhaps simply to antagonize their interview subject. “Show me the jar in question, if you would.”

“The jar?” the alchemist asked, befuddled.

“Your store of rhace,” the darkling elf reminded him. “How do you preserve it?”

“In here, my Lord, but…”

The vendor was too agitated to notice the subtle effect of the jar’s revelation on Elrohir, but Legolas immediately understood that somehow a rudimentary object of glass and metal revolutionized his partner’s concept of the case. He stared at the label with fearsome intensity, then unsparingly scrutinized the alchemist, clearly suspecting him of deception. Once satisfied as to the vendor’s honesty – if little else – his grip on the empty jar tightened such that Legolas feared he would shatter it.

“Is this the established symbol for rhycl or is it a cipher?” Elrohir inquired, visibly reining himself in.

“As you can see, I have no reason to disguise my wares,” the vendor explained. “How else could my clients browse?”

“Indeed,” Elrohir concluded, sparing a quick glance around to verify his claim. “May I keep this for a time?”

“Twould be my pleasure to assist you in any way I can,” the vendor assured him. “You need not return it. After all the trouble that wretched stuff has caused me, I will hardly restock.”

“Wisely put,” the elf-knight complimented, with nod of gratitude.

As soon as the jar was safely tucked away, Elrohir gestured towards the tight corridor, his keen mind clearly absorbed by a furious bout of reasoning. No sooner had they broke out onto the fifth tier than he let out a triumphant exclamation, which so startled the various passersby that they scuttled
indoors, like crabs at a seagull’s landing.

“Forgive my thickness,” Legolas wryly remarked. “But what insight is there to be derived from a phial of southern elderwood sap and a jar?”

“Incidental they may seem,” Elrohir mercurially elucidated, grabbing him fiercely by the shoulders. “Yet to every puzzle there are a few key pieces that allow you to imagine the totality of the image you aim to form, beyond the fit of each individual angle, nub, or hollow. There is some minor fiddling left to accomplish – since we are still burdened by proof and not mere conjecture – but an hour or so with my books will conclude the matter. Melethron, alert the King, and beg him to detain each of our suspects in a manner he deems befitting their respective stations – but unfailingly secure. Their guards cannot consume anything, or be constantly near them, for the duration of their duty. Invite also those among our familiar who have expressed an interest in the outcome of the case. And go with caution yourself, inden, for there is no telling how far he has progressed in his second, far more ruinous plot.”

Before Legolas could utter a syllable, Elrohir drank fulsomely from his lips, their kiss as blistering as any they had ever shared. For too brief seconds, he was enveloped in a giving embrace, his beloved imbuing this action with leonine heart.

“But to what end, moren vain?” Legolas whispered, so very loath to stray from that majestic body’s warmth. “Are you verily certain of-“

“I am,” Elrohir confirmed, with a smile that could enchant a siren. “This night, our villain will be unmasked.”

End of Part Nine
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not for profit.

Summary: On the eve of Aragorn’s coronation, our golden pair are charged with investigating a brutal murder at the Citadel.

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present…

A Slaying in Scarlet
A LOTR Mystery

Part 10

Come, friend Watson, the curtain rings up for the last act.
–The Adventure of the Second Stain, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1924

This looks like one of those unwelcome social summonses which call upon a man either to be bored or to lie.
–The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1892

Minas Tirith, Year 3019, Third Age

June 24th

He stared into the burgundy fathoms of the goblet in his hand as if in their depths lurked the secret of the universe. He meditatively swirled the viscous liquid around, mesmerized by the scarlet stains that bled slowly off the sides of the cup, then drank in the wine’s fruity bouquet. Not the finest vintage, but one that was unlikely to be tainted, since it had arrived fresh from the outland vineyards but minutes before. Though their villain was partial to bloodletting, he equally favored control. A poisoned chalice was a means of winning him said control, of spilling as much or as little crimson as he chose, of ruling over the fates of those who he believed had wronged him. The essence of a man’s life was the stuff of his madness as well as of his artistry, the carapace of body that remained of no interest to him.

Blood was his currency, the source of his power, his muse; he manipulated the very element of mortality against all that dared to abuse him.

After indulging in a sip, Elrohir relaxed into his armchair, stealing a few moments of peace before the carnival of arrogance and egos invaded. The throne room was awash in torchlight; plumes of hearth fire illuminated every corner, such that nary a shadow lingered in the rich amber glow. In addition to the banquettes the pages had hauled in, in the interest of his audience’s comfort, a small table was tucked beside the dais, piled high with the substance of his proof. Once he had established a clear chain of events, he had busied himself as any thorough student would: cryptic margin annotations, bookmarked pages, catalogued items, and, of course, a summary outline. This he kept on his person until such a time as the King would require it. Though it was rather unseemly, he was proud of his
work, and would relish the moment of revelation as few others in his life’s history.

Yet the thought of thrilling Legolas compelled him more than aught; it would be his lover he would look to as he spoke the murderer’s name aloud, reveling in the awe and adoration that would radiate from his archer fair. For the investigation would have been meaningless without the love of his woodland prince, just another riddle to be deciphered, another exercise of intellect. Instead, he had earned himself an eternity’s bliss, an idea that became more of an eventuality with each passing hour, with each glaring reminder that they would soon be free to do no more than devote themselves to one another.

Unfortunately, there would also be a sentence to consider, perhaps an execution to prepare for, all instigated by his conclusions. No matter how entranced he was by his paramour’s presence, he had to paint an accurate portrait of the crime – its impetus, its motivations – that Estel be guided towards true justice. Though Elrohir was well aware of how the demands of a royal office often interfered with personal opinions about capital punishment, he was certain that a balance could be achieved in this case, if, and only if, he could color the facts with the perfect hue. Of course, there was no accounting for the culprit’s behavior once identified, but hopefully he would be so incensed over being foiled that lunacy would reign.

As he downed the last of his wine, he gazed over at the incomplete mosaic depicting the fall of Mordor. Amidst the mob of warriors, there was a golden streak, a piece of sandstone from the sulfur bogs that lined the Dead Marshes. That streak, or the flaxen head it represented, had been his beacon through a devastating battle, a measure of how close or far they were from breaching the Black Gate. Elrohir realized that he had been following it ever since, and drew strength from the sight of it now, as Legolas himself strode into the room and quickly marched over to his side.

They shared a pregnant look as the archer perched on the arm of his chair, snatching up his free hand that he might cradle it between his own, offering what comfort and courage he could in the moments before their audience arrived. Elrohir squeezed into that doting clasp, quietly marveling at how he himself had evolved over the past two months, from a morose and solitary intellectual into a lover of means. A minuscule part of him acknowledged the meager debt he owed to Angbor’s murderer for engendering his emotional fulfillment. Though he was a pious enough soul to believe that he and Legolas would have found one another eventually, the speediness of their tumultuous courtship he could attribute only to the killer’s machinations, as well as Mithrandir’s prescience in pairing them. For that, he had forgiven any quarrel he presently had with the wizard, and would attempt to convince Estel to spare the villain’s life.

Indeed, there was a time in his life where he may have lashed out in the manner of the murderer they sought, though his form of vengeance would have been lauded, since it was against orcs and goblins. The realization that the killer and he were haunted by similar personal tragedies humbled him, especially as he came to understand that he was the only one obsessive enough to have caught the villain out. Despite this, Elrohir had chosen to sublimate his grief, whereas the killer repressed his such that it eventually consumed him whole. He had become the monster he initially railed against, and for that he could not be absolved of his crime.

A kiss to his crown woke him from his reverie, Legolas’ knowing smirk conveying both his affection and his acceptance of the elf-knight’s scholarly eccentricities. A brief, sensuous press of lips infused him with a final burst of confidence, then the echoing patter of footsteps in the corridor forced them apart. Fortunately, it was merely Estel and Arwen, come to inspect the chamber before taking to their thrones. Under the circumstances, the King had decided to eschew a formal entrance once his subjects were in place, instead positioning himself that he might observe them as they shuffled in. Since he was unacquainted with some of the suspects, he aimed to learn as much as he could of them before he was required to pass judgment on one of their lives. For the future Queen’s part, she was
too riveted by the playing out of the melodrama to be aught than wholly enthralled by every aspect of the evening. Yet she was also fiercely proud of her brother, and threw herself into his arms.

“Congratulations!” she exclaimed, then smacked a kiss to both cheeks. “Though I never for a second doubted your genius would prevail, I know you have felt choked by the time constraint.”

“I have been far more dyspeptic over the lack of reliable witnesses,” Elrohir quipped, to the amusement of all. “Tis an ill omen to praise me before I have unraveled even a thread of my logic. I would remind you that I am to present a certain theory of the crime, supported by evidence that does not concretely prove a thing, in the hopes of provoking the murderer into a confession.” He glanced pointedly over her shoulder at his king brother. “I would that you take note of this emphasis, as well.”

“Have I ever been one to court scandal?” Estel drolly inquired. “But days away from my wedding, no less. Though I am as eager as my sweetly bride to be enthralled by your insights, have no fear. A king, and one accountable to his subjects, is listening, not solely a judge.”

Elrohir was visibly relieved by this, though Arwen remained undaunted.

“Yet can a queen still courting said subjects not offer her guests something more tantalizing than wine and wheat cakes?” she impishly demanded, after taking a gander at the serving table.

“Not if you want to ensure their survival,” Legolas chuckled, earning himself a queenly glare. “The guards have done their best to monitor each suspect, but there is no telling what dark allies they may have accrued. We have ordered that the Citadel’s stores be disposed of and fresh produce be purchased on the morrow, from the dockside markets at Dol Amroth. We doubt there is any danger to the populace at large, but the kitchens here could already be tainted. Though rudimentary, wine and wheat cakes will have to suffice.”

Chastened by this news, Arwen gave a docile nod, then scampered over to her throne. There, she would silently digest the immensity of what might have transpired had the investigators not been so very intrepid. Estel, for his part, assayed a tight smile and also took his seat.

Since the first guests had begun to arrive, Elrohir stationed himself towards the rear of his evidence table, pretending to rearrange its contents while secretly evaluating the members of his audience. His extended family, of course, hardly merited scrutiny, though he met each scintillating look they shone in his direction, Erestor’s and his Adar’s promising support if called upon. As if by common accord, they positioned themselves near the exits, with Glorfindel and Elladan hovering near the principal door, while the more scholarly among them barricaded the side passage that the King escaped through. Gimli, unsurprisingly, staunchly defended the drinks table, while the Hobbits and Mithrandir fenced off the steps to the second floor, nominally to improve their view. A flush-faced Eowyn was practically carried in by besotted Faramir; he and Legolas were obviously not the only ones who had sequestered themselves for the afternoon. Thankfully, seats were prepared for them to the left of the dais, which they had little trouble locating.

Finally, a series of soldier escorts delivered their charges, only Imrahil having dismissed the guard upon his son. The Prince of Dol Amroth had established himself as a human divider between Amrothos and his paramour by serving as Thorondil’s crutch, and likewise forced the lovers apart by sitting between them. Though their mere association was enough to rouse curiosity, Elrohir imagined everyone was too focused on the murder’s resolution to bother questioning the nature of the two young men’s friendship. Far more spectacular was the entrance of an entire contingent from Lamedon; not solely Gaurobir and Heldoran, but all seven of those initially suspected. The elf-knight had to credit the former Steward for his foresight in this, since the collective would be a righteous chorus when they called for the killer’s execution. Yet he wondered what Heldoran had planned
should the wolf be lurking in his own flock. As ever, Nargomer’s beady eyes eviscerated any who dared glance his way, even sultry Vartanar, whose life had been spared when apprehended by the Lossarnachian guard on his way to the ruins of Osgiliath only by virtue of their leader not wanting to be accountable for another murder. The proprietor of the Charred Ring Guild was accompanied by his father, to whom all had apparently been revealed, given the surliness of his countenance. By the looks of it, Vartanar had twice avoided being slain in the past two days, though was visibly dubious with regard to his chances of leaving the throne room unscathed, given that his life was in spiritual and moral crisis.

This reminded Elrohir of all the deception, both necessary and undeserved, his investigation had exposed, and he inwardly renewed his vow not to complicate matters for those who had come to be exonerated. After all, he had necessarily persecuted many to punish but one. As King Elessar rose to greet his guests, he looked to Legolas, the sparkle of anticipation in those iridescent eyes bright enough to bolster his courage.

“Friends to the throne, my dear fellows, and my esteemed guests,” Estel announced in a booming voice. “We are gathered here to see resolved what some may view as a minimal injustice give the atrocities many suffered during the Ring War. To those of you who hold fast to their resentment, who would have your own nefarious dealings swept aside with the soot and ash, as well as those who have ventured here as a result of piqued interest, I say this: If the Kingdom of Gondor is to be free of the tyranny that so long oppressed, then the slaying of even one man is of paramount importance. That a noble man, a leader, one of the heroes of the war, was cut down in his moment of victory by one that fought in allegiance with him on those hallowed battlefields is not a crime that will go ignored, if this kingdom of ours is to be truly great, truly peaceful, bountiful for one and all. Our opponents during the war were wretched beasts, spawn of the bleakest landscapes of the Dark Lord’s befouled imagination. The murderer identified today is but a man; if he is indeed present among us, then he is also a privileged man. Yet his conduct, his actions are an abomination, which must be blighted from this kingdom of ours as surely as we will hunt down every remaining orc!” A stillness overcame the assembly, such that even the most pious among them momentarily feared for their own lives. Elessar’s righteous anger had ever been a glorious thing to behold.

“Therefore I ask that you listen attentively to the evidence, that, once every element of the detectives’ case has been introduced, you voice any rational objections, and that you trust in all of us to mete out due justice this night. Our two valiant investigators have also requested that I enforce a code of silence upon you, out of respect to those innocents whose personal dealings may be exposed in the course of said justice. In answer to this, I now decree that any who speak publicly of the intimate information divulged here or who act villainously upon these insights will be exiled from the Reunified Kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor for the duration of their lifetime.”

Many a shocked expression erupted on the faces before him, but none dared abandon their seat. Even if forced to flee the city and shout this knowledge into a hole in the ground to keep from sharing it, they would be among the chosen few to play audience to such tantalizing secrets.

“Be reassured that the murderer’s identity will be made public,” Faramir added, to temper everyone. “As well as a thorough explication of the crime.”

“Indeed,” Estel smirkingly concurred, then gestured towards Elrohir. “Hiren, you have the floor.”

The Elf-Knight of Imladris strode gracefully forth, calling to arms all his most elven traits, that he appear as poised, sage, and genial as so many have named him. In his hand was Angbor’s account of his life as Steward of Lamedon – he had not trusted anyone, not even Legolas, to guard it for him, though its contents would not be revealed until he was ready to seal the roof on his meticulously constructed case. He inhaled deeply, briefly glancing at Elladan, Erestor, his beloved, his Adar, then addressed his audience.
“Our investigation began as every other,” he commenced. “With the search for clues and the examination of the victim’s corpse. The murder of Angbor, Steward of Lamedon, was no random nor accidental slaying, but a premeditated crime which was meant to broadcast a loud, clear message. The scene of the crime was decorated as garishly as some aristocratic reception halls, the victim’s blood serving for ornamentation. The theatrical nature of the body’s placement, of the location of the murder, of the surrounding paraphernalia suggested a mind both unhinged and impassioned by its desire for revenge. Thus, the question that we investigators were charged with demanding an answer to was this: what injustice was, in the killer’s perception, committed against him by Angbor? I would underline this notion of perspective, since it was obvious from the start that if Angbor had suspected his life was in danger, he would never have invited his murderer into his bedchamber so late at night, with his guard dismissed.

This was one of our first observations upon arriving at the scene, that there was no sign of a struggle. I will now detail further elements of import. Angbor lay in the center of his bed, his body nested in shredded curtains, which were liberally doused in his blood. The only wound we discovered was a tiny slit on the side of his neck, from which the killer had drained him. This required the administration of a paralytic. Yet the victim was not entirely incapacitated by the drug; indeed, in death, his face was grossly contorted. He had watched our villain decorate the room whilst he bled out. The walls of the chamber had been dramatically painted with the remainder of the blood; their message was at first unclear, since it comprised a lone word, “rhace”, in three different tongues. The final element, if one excludes the open window from which all passersby could observe the fiendish masterwork within, was a charred ring placed on display in an open wardrobe.

These are the clues the murderer took painstaking care in presenting to us: a paralyzed, grimacing corpse posed in a nest, an overabundance of crimson, a cryptic word, a ring of unknown origin. With these key elements, I will created for you a composite of our killer.”

“Then you have entirely discounted a political motivation?” Imrahil stonily inquired, still cross with the elf-knight for what he believed to be a mishandling of his son’s affairs. “The King’s coronation was, in your view, but coincidental?”

“Hardly so,” Legolas interjected, as he was welcome to. “We mean only that Angbor was not slain to prevent Aragorn’s rise to power or to disrupt his rule. Yet this does not imply that the killer’s motivation was wholly personal. Rather, you must ask yourself why our villain did not enact a more basic version of his plan during the war. He had endless opportunity to dispose of Angbor unnoticed during the many battles they both participated in, or even quietly at night while our forces camped. He could have blamed his death on an orc scout! Instead, his crime has caused a sensation, his madness writ bold across the foundation of the reunited kingdoms, which in turn was meant to act as a shield. His message, he would scream to the rafters, but he would have his identity remain concealed. Thus, there is a political aspect to his motivation – only it is not to topple the government, but to promote his own agenda.”

Legolas proved so well-versed in the fine strokes of the image Elrohir hoped to depict that the darkling elf wondered if his lover had guessed the identity of their culprit. Regardless, there were further aspects of the killer’s mind to illuminate before unmasking him.

“Precisely,” Elrohir seconded, with a smile. “We will spare you the endless turns and twists that encompassed our investigation by summarizing the meaning of each clue. Immediately obvious was that the murderer meant to highlight the notion that Angbor was his prey, that he had ensnared him. The bloodletting method and the evocation of a cocoon married with the properties of the paralytic he employed, a substance sold exclusively on the black market. Though its common name is ‘rhace’, in alchemical terms the poison, ‘rhycl’, is a sack of shelob venom. Angbor, therefore, had been caught in a spider’s web: paralyzed, cocooned, then drained of blood as he bore witness to his own demise.

A more detailed portrait of our killer can thereby be drawn. The world was not to know his identity,
but Angbor was, the better to pay for the perceived injustices he had committed against our slayer. Like a shelob, our fiend possesses little physical strength – his wits are his stealthiest, deadliest weapon. A flight of conjecture leads us to conclude that his sharper qualities go unnoticed in daily life. He is perhaps prized for his intellect, but he is generally considered innocuous, reliable, efficient – and entirely forgettable. He has inwardly railed against this for so long that he purged himself all over the bedchamber during his first crime. For this is, undoubtedly, the first time he has killed in his own right, beyond duty and warfare.”

“Did you inquire as to the suspects’ prowess on the battlefield?” Glorfindel asked, his curiosity tickled by that particular insight. “Whether their particular techniques inferred an underlying frustration?”

“Any such testimony is rather inconclusive,” Legolas responded. “Training is standardized, while duels are by nature reactionary, situational. Besides, our killer does not draw attention to himself, therefore he would not be flamboyant when at arms.”

Satisfied, the Balrog-slayer gave a curt nod.

“But what of the missing clue?” Erestor queried, more for his own amusement than out of confusion. “The charred ring?”

“That element of the crime proved the most elusive of all,” Elrohir elaborated. “This was no mere band of gold, but one of the Nine Rings of Men. Indeed, it was the flame-broiled remnants of the Witch King of Angmar’s very own ring of power, recovered from the ash pile he combusted into.” He paused a moment while his audience gasped and murmured amongst themselves. “In truth, we were at first baffled by its inclusion. It raised a long series of questions, among which were: Did the ring initially belong to Angbor or to the murderer himself? Was the murderer implying that Angbor was in league with the Shadow? If so, why not simply alert the King or the authorities? Were we meant to sympathize with the killer’s act, perhaps even laud him as an unsung hero? Was this, in essence, a sign of the slayer’s modesty? Or a means of exonerating himself in the public eye? For certainly, if Angbor had been one of the Dark Lord’s minions, his killer would never be prosecuted. We therefore decided to assume that this was not the case, that Angbor was innocent of all wrongdoing until proven otherwise. A proclivity of his soon came to light that helped clarify our villain’s motivations.”

Here, Elrohir halted his narrative, keenly eyeing the members of his audience. Regardless of the effect of Estel’s preliminary warning, the thought that his following statements might very well alter the course of modern history gave him considerable pause. In private, he had carefully weighted his options, wondering if he could somehow explain the crime without elucidating the full breadth of the murderer’s motivation. Alas, he could not. It fell to him to hoist the banner high and proud for the way of life he – like so many now sitting before him – espoused, all the while convincing those opposed, those that would have executed Angbor for his desire, that one of their ilk was worthy of condemnation.

“A proclivity linked to his family’s kindred with the Elves,” Elrond regally pronounced, standing fast behind his son. “For his lineage flows from the font that my brother, the first King of Men, surrendered his immortality to establish. Such is the source of Gondor’s might, of Dol Amroth’s sagacity, of the adeptness that helped King Elessar win our war against the Shadow. It is an ancient way that, to my heart, repulses only near-sighted men; those who have fallen prey to the prejudice and bigotry that once perverted the kings that became the Black Riders.”

Even Elrohir was stunned by the vehemence of his Adar’s proclamation, though his own heart was in rapt concordance. He looked to Legolas, whose eyes glimmered with purest mercury, then
refocused himself.

“Oh, indeed,” the elf-knight concurred, nodding in deference to his elder. “Though it is controversial – to put it mildly – in this climate to be a lover of males when male yourself, Angbor harbored such desires.” A distinct murmur rumbled through the crowd, silenced by an incisive clearing of the King’s throat. “As do I, in the grand tradition of the Elves. As do my brother and his hallowed spouse. As do others – who will go unmentioned – in this room. Even as I defy you to judge us unworthy – Elladan of Imladris, Glorfindel of Gondolin, and I – I remind you that Angbor was just as valiant, as humble, and as charitable as we, and that his killer felt such hatred toward him for this above all perceived offenses that he put him to death.”

A palpable tension buzzed around his audience, but no one was brave enough to denounce such scandalous rhetoric publicly. At least, not as yet. Among those unsurprised by Elrohir’s declaration, only Imrahil was impatient enough to press him on.

“Aye, very well, he was a lover of men,” the Prince grumbled. “How does this count as evidence?”

“The charred ring,” Elrohir pursued, “was discovered to be a symbol of sorts among like-desired individuals in the city. These gentlefolk are minions of no daemon nor Dark Lord, I assure you. They wear a charred copper band to seek out the company of their kind, not an inferior version of a ring of power. The murderer, however, learned of this activity and sought to reveal it to the world, that his crime be justified and the members of this innocent sect prosecuted. I deeply regret that in detailing this evidence to you, I have abetted his aims. I apologize to those this endangers, and offer them safe harbor in Imladris if they so desire it. Beyond that, I would also mention that the Witch King’s ring was not obtained by trafficking with these men, but retrieved from the battlefield proper. Therefore, the murderer was in a position to pluck the ring from the detritus of the Bane of Angmar, then later to wield it against those he so abhorred. His hope was clearly that Angbor’s proclivities be discovered through our investigation, that we would follow the trail to others with similar tendencies, and that all would be condemned.

We have done so, but have found these intimate relations guilty only of mild indiscretion in their choice of lovers. Neither was I, as lead detective, much persuaded of their culpability, as impassioned as the crime certainly was. Thus, until this very morn, I was at an impasse. A half dozen suspects, most with the same form of relation to the victim, but none that stood out from the pack: Amrothos, the third prince of Dol Amroth, who had sojourned in Lamedon awhile in hopes of finding himself a wife; Nargomer of Lossarnach, a virulent opponent of Angbor’s political view on and off the battlefield; Heldoran and Gaurobir, two sons of Lamedon who profited from his death through promotion; Vartaran, a familiar acquaintance; and Thorondil, a laureled warrior who traffics in rumor and innuendo, himself targeted by his own fellows – who have themselves proved to be a different breed of villain. When all was accounted for, none of them gained much in the way of riches or satisfaction from Angbor’s death, nor did they outwardly fit the profile I have outlined to you.”

“Then the fiend is of another stripe entirely?” Merry piped up from the fifth stair, to the amusement of all.

This served to cut the tension some, a relief to those pinched and peaked among the suspects.

“Perhaps,” Legolas volleyed back, with a kindly smirk. “Though methinks not, Master Hobbit.”

“Patience,” Gandalf counseled, in a mellifluous tone that elongated his syllables.

During this exchange, Elrohir had begun to pace, all the better to rev up his energy for the argument to come, for the making of his case.
“I would again request that you consider the key question that confronted us,” he proposed to his audience. “What injustice had Angbor committed against the killer to justify such a heinous response?” He waited until enlightenment dawned in some of them to proceed. “Is loving males reason enough to kill in so theatrical a manner? Is such ruthless vengeance the result of a mere ethical conflict? And again, why personally dispose of him? Why not serve him to the wolves, who would surely string him to the nearest pole and set him alight? The answer, as must be plain to you, is that there was more at stake for our villain. Just as he, in his daily routine, dissembles at normality, when beneath this façade rages a diseased mind, so does his trumpeting of Angbor’s proclivities inveigle his true motive – one devastatingly personal to him.

It was Faramir that pointed me to the first real clue, though I considered it no more than anecdotal evidence at the time. Then, this morn, as I admired the coats of arms that now hang as one behind the throne, I was struck by the subtle changes to the shield of Lamedon. One quarter of the design was now a field of red thistles. It was some hours before I connected this symbol to its mythological origin, the Ballad of Eorlach the Bold, the only hero of the Second Age to have survived an attack by a spider. This was while I reviewed the contents of the ledger I now hold, which detail the events of Angbor’s political life as steward. One of the great crises of the early years of his reign was when a shelob nested in one of the high caves, where the maids of the Temple of Varda took their vapors. A local shepherd, his wife, and their son were among the faithful that day, and were seized by the beast. They hung paralyzed in their cocoons until the guard invaded and slaughtered the shelob. The boy had not been fed on, thus he was saved, but his parents had been infected and were killed on Angbor’s order. A mercy, of course, though the child in question certainly does not remember it so. A child who would go on to be fostered by the Temple maids, to apprentice at the Steward’s office, to fight alongside the man he blamed for his parents’ deaths in the great war of his time even though he had little to no military training.

For decades, that boy took the slow road to power, never distinguishing himself except in diligence and efficiency, his rage bubbling all the while, like lava within a dormant volcano. Even when he came close enough to enact Angbor’s political ruin, which had to be spectacular to satisfy such infernal hatred, he was prevented from doing so by two unexpected developments: the Steward’s alienating himself from the Council at Minas Tirith and Angbor’s establishing a permanent relationship with his guard captain, Inarthan, who thereafter protected him at night, every night. Yet this seemingly docile survivor’s challenges were far from over, even once Inarthan perished in the war and he could finally make good his revenge. In his moment of victory, when he was bequeathed the power he had come to crave as much as Angbor’s death, when finally the emblem of all that he was – the field of blood thistles – could hang in the place of honor on the Lamedonian shield, *then* his office was dissolved as a result of the complots of greedy fools. His own fault, when one considers it, for had it not been for our investigation into the murder, the Morthond Vale cabal would never have been discovered and the Council of Stewards would never have been disbanded.

That is why you commissioned Thorondil’s assassination, is it not, Heldoran of Lamedon? For foiling your plans, for being what he is – a hero; an honest, passionate man. But he was not so ugly that you had to act yourself. That is why you, as the only person in this room who does not hold a cup in their hand, have attempted to poison our wine through an intermediary. That is why *you* slew Angbor, who would have been as a father to you if he had not ordered the death of your own, if he was not, due to his political and personal mores, in your mind an abomination.”

Every member of the audience froze, as if administered a fatal dose of rhace by the spider in their midst. Heldoran, gaunt visage impassive, stared forlornly at the elf-knight, such that a trickle of pity poured out from that hallowed warrior’s heart, streaming through his veins to tinge the triumph of his investigation with melancholy. He recognized, in that pregnant moment, how once upon a time they had been brothers in anguish, how his own fury at the maiming of a loved one had nearly corrupted his own soul. But just as the bile that had corroded him had had to be expunged that his true, virtuous nature thrive, so did this venomous Gollum-in-infancy have to be shoved into the fires of Mount Doom in the name of the Kingdom of Gondor’s sanctity.
This was no chore for hobbits, but one for kings, thus Elrohir stepped back as Elessar took the floor, his elvish heart singing a private lament to the noble man Heldoran might have become if the Shadow had been earlier defeated, if the kings that came before his brother had not been so miserly and voracious themselves.

“Heldoran Hetrilorion, High Chief of Lamedon, do you refute this charge?” Estel imperiously asked, in a leonine tone even a pack of wargs would whimper before.

The former Steward rose to his feet, his face livid with barely suppressed rage, the shelob within having slipped its restraints and scuttled menacingly forth.

“If that is what passes for a crime in these parts, then, nay, I do not,” Heldoran seethed. “Though I have done no wrong by the strict letter of the law – your scholars will confirm this. Any man in any house on any tier of this city would have acted as I if appraised of Angbor’s perversion, and he would have been applauded for it!”

“By Denethor’s rules, you are correct,” Estel retorted, not a glint of compassion reflected in his own steely features. “Alas, his tyranny toppled with Mordor, and, until a new charter is established, my rule is law.”

“I am at the mercy of your whims, you mean!” Heldoran exploded, his face blazing with draconic ire. “You are no better than the black creature that stole away my parents, sinking your fangs into those who have suffered while they are powerless to watch! You and He That Slew Them truly are a grim pair of brothers, crippling those who would enforce the justice you are too cowardly to hold fast to, while deviants of every gruesome creed are allowed to fester and spore, ignored! Spawn of an ancient, elvish line – what do you know of true grief?!”

“Enough that I overcame the death of my father at a tender age,” the King stonily reminded him. “The passing of my mother when I knew no words to speak of my loss. Everyone in this room has been diminished by tragedy, by incensing grief. Only you broke faith with righteousness, Heldoran of Lamedon. Only you permitted yourself to become as heartless and bestial as the shelob that gutted your parents. Only you were so consumed by vengeance that you metamorphosed into what you most despise: a ruthless, savage killer, an enemy of Gondor, akin to a minion of the Dark Lord himself.” When Heldoran spat out no further bilge, Estel thrust out his hand and opened his palm to the sky, that both gods and subjects hear his decree. “Steward of Lamedon, Son of Gondor, I, as sovereign over this land, condemn you to death by public execution, in the central square at the morrow’s dawn. Unlike the prolonged torment you subjected your victim to, the blade of justice will be swift – that is the mercy I grant you. Now be gone from my sight.”

His eyes crazed with demonic fury, Heldoran lunged at the King. His advance was instantly stymied by his Lamedonian fellows, who anchored themselves to his arms and shoulders. Indeed, Gaurobir appeared willing to offer his services as executioner, tackling his former lord to the ground and stamping out his fire with a few vengeful pounds on his chest. The Gondorian guard, however, leapt into action, easing him off their prisoner with wary experience before shackling Heldoran into body chains. By now, the condemned man was as heavy as a sack of lard, the full weight of his predicament having settled upon him. His face was sullen as he was marched away – neither venomous, nor defiant, merely defeated.

Elrohir was so engrossed by the sight of his killer unmasked that he had barely noticed Legolas’ approach, let alone the protective, supportive arm he had latched around his waist. His own inner fire guttering in the wake of such mental exertion, the elf-knight leaned solicitously into his lover’s side, still too pensive to openly bask in the archer’s shining approval. Whilst he recovered, the Mirkwood prince made quite a show of spoiling him with affection, since their audience was yet too rattled by
recent events to offer much in the way of congratulations. Legolas was too enamored to deny him, despite the need for caution; he whispered such a scarlet tribute into his ear that Elrohir could barely tame down the blush that threatened to blaze a path across his cheeks.

“…and though I could have fallen to my knees and given you due worship,” Legolas murmured. “I could not help but wonder why my name was censored from the list of hallowed male-lovers among the elven aristocracy. Surely, you cannot doubt my allegiance in this?”

“Rather, I doubted my own forbearance should some black mischief befall you,” Elrohir insisted, squeezing into their entwined hands. “It was a superfluous form of safeguarding your interests, I concede, but nonetheless… I could not give him your name. No matter how I sympathize with his plight, I could not endanger you thus.”

“And if I choose to love you openly?” Legolas inquired, pressing eager lips to his temple. “To live without constraint, even in this as yet fractious place?”

“Then you do so with my blessing,” Elrohir confirmed. “Though be advised that I will be the more anxious for it.”

“But not for yourself,” Legolas gently countered, shifting his hold to convey just how dear the elf-knight was to him.

“That is your purview, melethron,” Elrohir mischievously replied. “Yours and no other’s, foremore.”

“Indeed?” Legolas responded, such that the darkling elf could hear the smirk to his tone. “Then I’d best get myself to the training ground as soon as we conclude here, as there is bound to be an army of oafs to fend off once word spreads of our entanglement.”

“And potential suitors,” Elrohir playfully reminded him. “Do not forget, you are revered by the entire populace. In this new age of permissiveness, there is no predicting what desires might rear their dizzy heads. Tis a wonder you wish to enslave yourself to me when presented with such a garden of variety.”

“Their beauty pales in the light of your phosphorescent bloom, my midnight violet,” Legolas eloquently whispered. Elrohir would normally have scoffed at such florid appraisal, but he was soon distracted by his suddenly lucid audience, some of whom had finally woken from the dark reverie of the past few months to discover themselves exonerated. As they turned their bright, piercing stares towards the elf-knight, he could not help but shiver, since each beseeched a moment of his time; some to compliment, some to berate, some to confirm that they were, indeed, free. “Your public awaits, my intrepid one.”

“They cannot think that I would have accomplished a thing without you as giving guardian, mercurial intellect, and dedicated foil,” Elrohir commented, intrigued by their solicitation but equally reluctant to stray from the warmth of his lover’s arms.

“Ah, but twas not my wealth of knowledge that brought down such a monstrous genius,” Legolas reminded him, with a daring – and unseen – pinch to his buttock. “Still, I’d best distract Imrahil awhile, that he calm some. Now there is a murderous look! Aragorn can manage Nargomer and Vartanar’s Adar, while the hobbits are already circling the Lamedonian contingent, in a rather adorable attempt to cheer them. You can slowly wade into the rush by chatting briefly with Thorondil and Amrothos, if that suits you.”

“Assure yourself that Imrahil keeps his son at close quarters,” Elrohir bemusedly warned, inwardly
tickled by his golden one’s organizational prowess. “I would have a private word with our mannish archer.”

If Legolas was attuned to the undercurrent to his words, he dissembled well, since the Dol Amroth contingent was by then too close for any further inquiries. Elrohir had not yet reconciled himself to the notion of availing his beloved of all the particular twists and turns of the case, especially given how fond he was of the youths involved, but neither did he care to at all deceive him. Later, he would muse upon the moral vagaries of his predicament; at present, he would affirm the accuracy of his instincts.

He struggled to remain sober as Thorondil caught him up in a celebratory embrace, his handsome face alight with excitement and relief.

““My Lord Elrohir, you are a marvel!” he crowed, jovially slapping the darkling elf on the back. “Though I suspect one of your solemn nature thinks only of the villain now caged, we who have been liberated by your tremendous efforts would see a smile dawn on your lips this day!”

“So one shall,” Elrohir conservatively answered. “Once this sordid affair is entirely concluded.”

Even as he closed some distance between them, Thorondil’s enthusiasm did not dim a flicker. Experienced confidant that he was, he easily intuited when someone meant to share a secret with him.

“Is there question of an accomplice, then?” the young man asked, lowering his voice to a discreet volume level. “Surely such a one could not have been aware what he was fetching.”

When they locked eyes, Elrohir was both astonished and impressed by the innocence of his look, which even he was utterly convinced by, despite his own suspicions.

“Aye, for certes,” the elf-knight concurred. “Messengers can sometimes be the true victims of circumstance.”

“That they can,” Thorondil remarked, then foisted expectant eyes upon him.

“As you would know, gwador,” Elrohir pointedly added. “Having been one for so long.”

“How now?” Thorondil queried, genuinely baffled by the comment. “My Lord, I-“

“While I do not understand what it is to be so cruelly denied your heart’s treasure,” Elrohir explained. “I have nurturing many a relative through such heartache, thus I only conditionally reproach you for certain… obfuscations in your personal history. Whether you eventually relate these to Prince Imrahil or not is none of my concern. But I am offended by your lack of faith in me, Thorondil, and your manipulation of Legolas, however well-meaned. I will acknowledge that it was a matter of life and death; however, you must realize that you hovered precariously close to the edge. It was my beloved’s faith in you that encouraged me to search out an alternate explanation for your… frankly, blatant half-truths.”

The eyes that bore into his were now spooked with desperation. The elf-knight was clearly no archer, since his threat had hit far too precisely and the youth was close to becoming unhinged.

“My Lord, I had no hand in-“

“I well know it,” Elrohir reassured him. “Neither could you have prevented such a heinous act; let your conscience be clear in this. But you manipulated the situation to your advantage, and that will not stand. You must confess yourself to Amrothos, or there will be no safe harbor, here or in
Imladris. I have not yet decided whether or not I will detail the breadth of your knowledge of Lamedonian culture to Legolas, but I would strongly suggest you steal a private moment with him in the coming days."

Rather than the submissive nod he expected, the young man shot him a curious look.

“Perhaps you should clarify the exact nature of your suspicions,” Thorondil proposed. “For they may not be as accurate as you have assumed. I can only guess that final confirmation arrived in the form of Angbor’s ledger?”

“Not entirely,” Elrohir responded. “But very well. My suspicions, as you call them, were these. Your font of knowledge and familiarity with people from other fiefs stems from your early years employ as a messenger, specifically to Lamedon. You were aware of the flirtation between Angbor and Amrothos because you witnessed it firsthand, inwardly acknowledging what it was because it chimed in with your own budding desires. Yet you developed your own attraction to the Third Prince of Dol Amroth, but had not the experience nor the wherewithal to act on it at such a tender age. For a time, I considered that you later began a liaison with Angbor himself, but I care to believe that you would never have concealed such knowledge from us. Amrothos, then, was your true focus. Perhaps yours is a fated love, since you harbored feelings for him all these years, and, when Legolas sought out your counsel and help with the investigation, you leapt at the chance to catch his eye. You never meant to deliver him to us before you yourself had ascertained whether he was guilty of the crime, hence the seduction and the notion of whisking him away to Osgiliath. Amrothos responded to your devotion more fervently than even you expected, thus providing the perfect excuse for your absence – a genuine expression of love between you. Yet still you had to steer Legolas in that direction, thus you met with him before you delivered Amrothos, assuring that your version of the tale was the established one. You meant no harm, of course, but that little justifies the risks inherent to your complot. It also casts a shadow over your future with Amrothos. How are you to proceed if this is how you began? If you have any chance of survival as a couple, then you must seek absolution.”

“I would gladly do so, my Lord,” Thorondil promptly replied. “If any were required from aught but your goodly self. I cannot confess myself to Amrothos since he is my conspirator in this. Your account justly lays the blame on my shoulders, but omits a few… rather breath-stealing encounters.”

Elrohir crossed his arms over his chest, not out of sternness but because he was shocked at being wrong. “I was, as you indicated, far too young by mannish standards to earn myself a suitor such as Amrothos when I first encountered him in Lamedon. He was, of course, involved with Angbor at the time, and I had seen but fourteen summers. Still, I have no words to describe to you what transpired upon our first meeting. It was as if the skies opened and one of the gods reached down to bless my brow with a tongue of flame. I knew instantly, irrevocably, that he was meant to be mine.”

“Even given the insecurities of such an age?” Elrohir inquired, startled by his account.

“Oh, I hadn’t the faintest notion of how this was to be achieved,” Thorondil chuckled in remembrance. “Indeed, I was mostly disgusted with myself, since I had not yet reconciled with the desires that still so confounded me. I was wholly befuddled by the entire endeavor, I assure you! Yet as the months passed, and we met with more frequency, I began to realize that Amrothos was… flirting. With *me*. Though our encounters were brief - as well as professional in nature, since he was the one who received Angbor’s correspondence – we established a casual friendship. I was extremely naïve, and I only half-digested some of his subtler indications that he found me attractive. Privately, I was a-swoon. I dreamed of him, I pined for him, I did everything in my power to prolong our time together.

One morn, I made an unscheduled arrival. It was a day of celebration, and I hoped to be invited to the festivities, that I might spend the night in Lamedon. I came upon him quarrelling with Angbor,
openly arguing about their affair, whilst everyone else was at the commons. Angbor broke with him quite rudely, then returned to his duties, to the people that had earned his devotion. Amrothos was not distraught, but morose, since his future was now uncertain. I made myself known, and we escaped together for a while, into the mountains.

Before I knew what I was about, he poured out his heart, about Angbor, his Adar, his circumstances. In my youthful vigor, I declared myself, insisting that he could come to Morthond Vale, that he could take shelter with me. He received this news far better than I expected, beseeching a kiss to confirm my honesty. In that first, singular press of lips, my world exploded. We lay beside one another in that glade through the night, though he, gallant that he is, would not spoil me. Instead, he gave me instruction on how to survive with desires such as ours. He encouraged me to seek out other lovers, to be brave, but also to protect myself from scrutiny. The only hope he left me was an offhand wish that I was older, then, once the sun rose, he bid me farewell. Nourished by his attention, I did not understand what was to come. That he would not be in Lamedon when next I visited. That there was no possible way to reconnect with him. I would have wept for days if I could somehow have explained this misery to my parents. Instead, I set about doing everything I could to improve myself so that, when we next met, I would be irresistible. I also used my considerable powers of persuasion to learn what I could of him from whomever I could. I trafficked in gossip not for sport, but to keep abreast of Amrothos’ dealings, activities, well-being.

I was nearly jubilant when we were called to war, since I knew I would see him again. Alas, we arrived into the siege on Minas Tirith, and there was no hint of him in the days before we rode out to Mordor. Upon our return to the capital, I attempted to locate him, but to no avail. He was ever where I wasn’t. Then Legolas came to me for help, spoke his name like a magic charm, and set me off in pursuit of him. When last I found him, there was no question of his guilt, only of his beauty, his passion, his heart. He finally felt the pull of destiny, and we have been embroiled ever since. I did indeed deceive Lord Legolas. Of that I am deeply ashamed, and will hasten to make amends. But Amrothos is, has been, aware of everything. Indeed, we are among the few who are grateful for this investigation, since it lit the path to our togetherness. Even if we had reconnected, we could not have moved forward without a myriad of impediments, many of which are now conquered for us. Methinks even Angbor would have been pleased by that, that his death was not entirely meaningless, to us and to the many couples this mystery has united.”

“Well reasoned,” Elrohir admitted, then let out a heavy sigh, somewhat awed by what good such a conniving fiend had ultimately engendered. “That is indeed an astounding tale, gwador. I would suggest you relate it to Legolas simply because it would inspire him, but I will not hold you to the strictures I earlier attempted to enforce. The pair of you deserved to exploit every opportunity available to you, and so long as it has not brought undue harm upon you or another, I cannot play schoolmaster and scold you further. Though I do hope you will consider immigrating to Ithilien, once the colony is established. We will require messengers of an affinity with elvish mores.”

“It would be our honor, my Lord,” Thorondil beamed, then slapped him on the back in a mannish gesture of fraternity the half-elf had never truly cottoned to. “Alas, you cannot longer now evade the public so eager for your personal comforts and reassurances as to the city’s stability, just as I am destined to retire with my future father-in-law to beg of him my beloved’s hand.”

“I wish you a hobbit’s luck in that endeavor, Thorondil,” Elrohir smirked. “Do call on us if Imrahil threatens to banish you from Gondor or some such nonsense.”

“You have my word I shall,” the young man confirmed, with a wry chuckle. “Though I am sensible enough to wait upon the morrow.”

“To my considerable regret, I fear there is no lusty interlude in my imminent future,” Elrohir sighed. “Not with a King to debrief, a father and a mentor to quibble with over the minutiae of my deductions, a murderer to see blighted from existence, and a looming exhaustion to succumb to.
Thankfully, I will surrender to the latter in *my* beloved’s arms.”

“Courage, then, my Lord,” Thorondil grinned, then set off in pursuit of Amrothos.

Before he was accosted by an admirer, Elrohir stole a moment to consider the monument of what he had just accomplished, then permitted himself a brief, blazing smile.

* * *

June 26th

Twas an uncommonly chill morn that found Legolas, Prince of Mirkwood, hauling buckets up a winding, rail-less staircase towards the domed tower above. This was but the climactic chore in an arduous sequence accomplished in the anemic glow of an overcast dawn. After dredging water out of a backyard well to fill the massive kitchen cauldron, he had realized that the store of kindling was woefully depleted, thus had found himself chopping wood. Once he had ignited a decent fire, he had gone scouting for a serviceable breakfast, but had managed far more after coming upon an oarberry bush and a local bakery, which had recently reopened to supply the reconstruction workers with hearty meals. Thus, a platter of sticky buns, a selection of fresh cheese, and two bowls of fruity muesli sat on a covered tray outside their bedchamber, ready to bedazzle the sleeping beauty within.

For the moment, Legolas was preoccupied with heating and transporting their bathwater. Some hours before, he himself had awoken primed by inspiration, unable to dismiss the image of he and Elrohir at the opposite ends of a steaming tub, the Battle Game set up on a bisecting plank along with various plates and cups. Alas, such a rudimentary domestic scenario required a wizard’s ingenuity – or, at the very least, a wood-elf’s pluck – to conjure up among the ruins of Osgiliath, to where they had retreated the previous afternoon, once Heldoran’s funeral pyre had been smote.

Though the execution itself had been an ordeal, especially after a long night of negotiation and resolution with the King, there had been a sense, if not of peace, then of calm that had descended over them as they had wandered back towards the Citadel. In an odd development, only the surviving members of the Fellowship, along with the brethren twins, had seen to the body’s ritualized disposal, as if some part of them had understood how close they had all come to such a fate, to having their hearts blackened by insanity during their dogged pursuit of the Dark Lord. Laying Heldoran to rest was not a tribute, but a means of acknowledging their own evasion of the darkness that had coveted them all.

Afterwards, Legolas had sought out not sleep, but distance, even from the friends he cherished so. He had wanted only Elrohir, the blissful quietude of their togetherness, the sacred promise inherent to their loving. By that time, his elf-knight had been so groggy that it had required little convincing to urge him onto the back of Legolas’ horse, to secure himself in the armor of Elrohir’s embrace as they rode off to their oasis of ransack and rubble. Due to concentration on the capital’s rejuvenation, the restoration of Osgiliath had been somewhat delayed, with work centering on the bridge and battlements. Upon their arrival, the gracious foreman directed them towards one of the sturdier manses, assuring Legolas that the eastern tower was entirely solid, unlike the three toppled others. Though Elrohir had chafed at having to climb the stairs that then challenged him, the ornate, amply covered bed above had tempered his annoyance, especially since he had had energy for little more than stripping off his raiment and crawling between the sheets.

Despite an equally egregious lack of sleep, Legolas had been more restless, though content to cradle his darkling lover through the night.

All the while, Elrohir had hung limply in his arms, as if a mariner that had just been dragged to shore, pried from the tempestuous fury of the waves after a shipwreck. The inky tendrils of his hair had
been splayed out like a fisherman’s net over them both, though Legolas certainly harbored no objections to being caught, whether literally or metaphorically. Rather, his mind had been immersed in contemplation of their recently completed case. While the evidence had been as damning as it had been indisputable, the archer had been wholly shocked by their investigation’s outcome. If he was honest, he had never entirely believed in Nargomer’s innocence, and the former steward was indisputably guilty of some punishable offense (if not this particular one). He had even gone so far as to beseech a private word of Vartanar, inviting he and his Charred Ring acolytes to immigrate to Ithilien, under Faramir’s protection; the implication being that Nargomer of Lossarnach would not follow. He had not expected to meet with immediate success, but then his campaign had only begun. That villain-in-all-but-name would come to rue the day he attempted to bully a Thranduilion.

While Heldoran was not the suspect he had deemed least likely to have orchestrated such chaos – that would be Amrothos – Legolas had considered his ambitions too obvious in light of what their killer had been hoping to achieve. Partly, the surprise of his wrongness in this allowed him to better appreciate Elrohir’s genius, but a deeper part of him was unnerved that his instincts had led him astray. How many more daemons lurked among the mannish ranks? Was he right to throw his lot in with such an unpredictable, perhaps fundamentally untrustworthy race? Or did this make his choice the more righteous, since, at such close proximity, he could protect Aragorn from his people’s avarice? As an elf, he had recognized the timelessness of these questions, thus had not wallowed the night away in self-doubt. Still, the wood-elf in him had longed as never before for the simplicity of the Silvan folk, for the forest his own people inhabited, for the communion with the natural world that even the most corrupt man could not tarnish. He was, he had discovered, finally ready to go home.

Yet even such a basic notion was riddled with complications, for where indeed was his home? In that somnolent moment, he could only have declared it to be the snug of Elrohir’s embrace. Legolas nevertheless sensed that even such an enviable position was not quite home yet, that there remained unexplored depths to their relation, ones he was prepared as never before to mine. Would he be better satisfied if he was with Elrohir in Mirkwood? Alas, no. Though his very self was as rooted as the trees in the great Green Wood, his branches had ever stretched beyond its bounds, across the whole of Arda. Legolas knew he would not truly feel at home until he was resident in his colony in Ithilien, with a people of his own to shepherd and the nourishment of his elf-knight’s flame within. Indomitable spirit that he was, he would not rest until this utopia had indeed been created, though he well understood that a measure of patience was also required.

Thus, after the replenishment of sleep, he had distracted himself with a peerlessly worthy endeavor, that of spoiling his masterly, magnificent paramour.

Twas with a sigh of relief that he rounded the corner into their bedchamber, careful not to knock the pole he balanced on his shoulders into the archway frame and thereby destabilize the half dozen buckets hanging off it. Yet he was perturbed to be greeted by the sight of an empty bed, the doughy mounds of mattress exposed to the elements by an absconded coverlet. A quick scan of the long, cylindrical room revealed a tassel poking out from under the heavy curtains that shielded the balcony windows. Whispering a quiet prayer to the gods of decency that Elrohir had had the good sense to swaddle himself in the thick sheet before venturing out of doors – given that it was the height of midsummer, this was far from a certitude – Legolas poured his buckets into the claw-footed tub, banked the heat in with the aforementioned wood planks he had retrieved from the kitchen, then tiptoed over to the slender crease that poorly concealed the tassel.

Shameless as an eavesdropping servant, he peered through the sliver of space between the sheathes of fabric, blinking as his eye adjusted to the harsh morning light. He chuckled to himself when he spied Elrohir, looking more regal in his half-naked state than a host of pretenders to the Gondorian throne. The darkling elf stood tall and proud before the rail, an epic vista the canvass upon which his
Legolas was almost embarrassed to suffer a stirring in his loins whilst thus beholding his lover, the crudeness of carnality the result of baser instincts the likes of which so kingly an Elrohir did not deserve. He would have been too cowed to interrupt him if not for the simultaneous blaring of his emotions, which trumpeted him on like a hound at a fox hunt. He, the fifth prince of a self-proclaimed, miserly monarch, had somehow won the favor of one of the legends of Elfdom. He, a mere archer beleaguered for centuries by wanderlust, had earned the heart of the most stunning intellect in all of Arda, and by flaunting his wiles, no less! He wondered if his withy body could truly contain all that he felt for Elrohir, as well as all he would doubtlessly come to feel as their lives knit, like the images from Vairë’s loom, into an endless tapestry. Never one to hesitate when challenged, he broke out onto the balcony, and was soon invited to hug himself against the elf-knight’s sculpted backside. Thusly tucked into his beloved, peace reigned over him anew.

“The city is so picturesque even in ruin that I almost question the need for restoration,” Elrohir murmured, after entwining their hands. “If they were to clear the rubble and rebuild only the southern quarter, this would be a haven for artists, poets. A place such as this deserves to be rhapsodized.”

“If I were of creative bent,” Legolas absently contributed. “Of which I am decidedly not, I would sing of the myriad love affairs that found sanctuary here. We know only of ourselves, Thorondil and Amrothos, Faramir and Eowyn, but surely we were not the only ones to quit the capital for a few days of delirium.”

“I dare say not,” Elrohir chuckled, sinking deeper into his embrace. “I even suggested to Estel that he and Arwen should repair here for their honey time, but the captain of his guard soon quashed that ambition.”

“As would I, had I been appointed to the office,” Legolas remarked. “Tis a pity they did not wed in Imladris. The Rivendell Valley’s serenity lends itself to such ease, and if even that is too cumbersome, they could have escaped to a cabin in the mountains.”

“There is also a cottage near the Ford of Bruinen, in a fairly isolated area,” Elrohir added, with such unspoken emphasis that the woodland prince’s ears pricked up. “It is far enough from the thoroughfare of the west road for relative silence, but yet near enough to the Loudwater to bathe and fish. The surrounding woods are thick enough with wildlife to hunt in. I cannot fathom why no mannish clans established a village at the site; it is a lovely place. Glorfindel and Elladan resided there an entire summer after their spring espousal, not once trekking to Imladris for supplies.”

“A hallowed place, indeed, if the famed Balrog-slayer there made his binding bed,” Legolas commented, drinking deep of Elrohir’s addictive scent, of conifer pine, of orchard clover, of waterfall spray and mountain crisp.

Drifting into reverie, he imagined them there, strolling hand in hand along the pebbled shore, stealing into a deep-forest grove for a pair of barely ripe apples, trolling the upper walks for a wild boar that had strayed from the safety of the lower woods, swimming in the basin of one of the cascades, bare and sleek and tremendously blessed. He cinched his hold upon Elrohir, wanting to blink and transport them across miles of distance, that they might lounge in the Hall of Fire that very eve, that they might skulk through the stacks of the Great Library and couple upon the cushions in the alcove that night. He shivered at how profoundly this inspired a sense of home, not because of his particular
attachment with the Last Homely House, but because of how perfectly these places defined Elrohir. He wanted to be one with his elf-knight in every way, and the quickest means of achieving such enthrallment, beyond dragging him back to bed, was to inhabit the place that had formed him, to plunge into the crucible of his soul. If their flames could not yet burn as one, then at least Legolas could reside in a region that was quintessentially Elrohir with the darkling elf himself.

Well aware of how fanciful he was being, the Mirkwood prince was nevertheless loath to let his daydream evaporate into the ether of his subconscious, especially when such a swollen silence had fallen between them. Finally, Elrohir nudged him away that he might turn about, then foisted blissfully entranced eyes upon him.

“Melethron,” he ardently declared. “The tumult and tragedy of these past days has prompted me to revise my vow with proceed with cautious deference in our relation. I have been almost afflicted by the terror that if I do not act now, I will lose my chance to be the one you adore evermore. In but a few days, we ride for Rohan, and then northward to Lorien, where we will be parted. My heart accepts that our paths will diverge for a time, but it cannot abide by its earlier resolution to defer talk of… of a deeper commitment until after our reunion. Legolas, you are as vital to me as the air I breathe and the flame that lights my spirit. Now that our duty is done, I long only to be one with you, to begin the adventure of our eternal lives. Not only have you proven yourself a worthy foil to my obsessions and a partner of riveting insight, but you are the most giving, gentle, amiable and true creature I have ever known. I love you more than I ever thought myself capable. Your warmth and grace has utterly revived me; I would ever bask in the effervescent glow of your regard. Miren, inden, maltaren, be forever mine. Say you will bind with me next summer, the first summer of this Fourth Age of peace, in Imladris fair. Say you will be my beloved and cherished mate.”

Legolas unleashed a smile of such radiance that he almost forgot to accept him. He cackled wildly, thrilled to the core, then tugged Elrohir into a breath-stealing embrace.

“I shall indeed,” he beamed, reverent before his darkling one’s resultant elation. “I have been yours since our last sojourn in Osgiliath and would have accepted you then. You have owned me from our first kiss, lirimaer; I will ever be yours to command, confide in, commiserate with. I would not miss a word expelled by your genial lips, nor a beat of the heart I worship so. I am already your husband, Elrohir; tis only the strictures of tradition that would belay us. Yet I will still speak my vows faithfully on that sacred day, just as I will exult in celebrating with our families.”

At that, the elf-knight assayed his most rakish look, then dove in for an incendiary kiss, which turned eloquent as they waded into the deep of their passion. When finally they eased away, they remained engrossed in one another, eyes locked on the exquisite features of their future spouse. There was no dimming their smiles as they wandered into their bedchamber, to bathe, banter, and battle, as was there wont, and also to be burnished by the thought of their recent betrothal.

* * *

July 1st

Upon the fairest day that had yet dawned over Minas Tirith in the wake of open war, the citizens of that peerless city flocked in droves to its crowning Citadel in order to bear witness to the nuptials of their King returned. Even though the elegant promontory that bisected the seven tiers like a knife slicing into a wedding cake was not of breadth enough to accommodate every kindly resident, those that had risen too late filled the winding streets beyond the royal gate, some perching on particularly high rooftops, some scaling the neighboring peaks, all for a glimpse of the pageant about to unfold.

By order of the King, a dais had the day before been erected over the front steps, with stalls flanking either side for the noble classes. Though Gandalf the White would be officiating, there was no altar;
elvish tradition would be observed later that night, after the celebrations and away from the prying eyes of the populace, who would ill interpret the bloodletting that permitted the binding of souls. Besides, the royal couple would be expected to be alert at the banquet feting them, an impossibility when afflicted by the elemental fission of their fear. The wizard had advised against condensing the normal two months of honey time to a mere fortnight, but there was, alas, a kingdom to restore and Elessar could not be longer spared. Although the ceremony itself would aid in uniting the people of Gondor towards the renewal of their land and society, many advisors secretly resented the King’s insistence on marrying so soon after the establishment of his rule, fearing that even a mere two-weeks distraction was enough to invite rebellion, or outright invasion.

Regardless, the aristocrats theatrically flaunted their wealth, arriving in a sluggishly moving parade of ornate carriages from which they effected exaggerated, almost pantomime exits. Bedecked in a vulgar array of plumes, gems and baubles, these haughty peacocks provided stark contrast with the minimalist hauteur of the elvish lords, who preferred opulent fabrics and intricate embroidery to costume accents. Those not dressed in long, lite robes of shimmering silk, such as Lords Elrond and Erestor, had selected exquisitely tailored, thigh-length tunics and fetching suede trousers, the preference of the brethren twins and Lord Glorfindel. The only trace of jewelry were the circlets the Imladrian royals wore, humble arcs of mithril etched with ancient runes.

From his privileged vantage behind the Doric columns that flanked the entrance to the Citadel, Gimli struggled not to bellow in laughter, so amused was he by the contrast in styles between the bride’s guests and the groom’s. Besides him, the Elf pretended to be awed by the garlands of flowers strung around seemingly every inch of stone, but in truth he had eyes only for the Elf-Knight of Imladris, who was presently being teased into a stew by his twin and law-brother, if the flaming of his cheeks was any evidence. Gimli would have been volleying similar taunts at his flaxen friend, but Legolas was far too moony that morn to be impacted by any of his jibes. Even his sharpest observations had been casually deflected, the archer still to engrossed by memories of his recent sojourn in Osgiliath to wake from his romantic fugue.

While the dwarf was pleased that his once zealously abstinent friend had found a worthy paramour, Gimli was not unaware of how the preternatural alchemy between the darkling peredhel and the woodland prince threatened to spoil his friendship with Legolas. Though innately testy, the axe-wielder was not churlish enough to begrudge the archer his relationship with the potential mate of his soul, neither had he expected Legolas to found a permanent residence in Mirkwood once their business in Gondor was concluded. Still, he was mildly aggravated that plans they had sworn to on the bleakest night of their lives were now at risk, if not subject to permanent delay. After all, Legolas would not be around to ignite the Son of Elrond’s passion were it not for his faithful guardianship over the long months of their quest. He did not deem it likely that Elrohir would recognize, let alone acknowledge, such a debt of gratitude by respecting the adventuring schedule that he and Legolas had already set, but it irked him even more that the archer himself had not bothered to inform him of their cancellation.

If, indeed, they were cancelled. Yet, by the starry gleam in the Mirkwood prince’s eyes, Gimli did not doubt it, nor that he would be forced to spend another few months in loathsome Imladris, land of elves who thought his grouchiness a pretence and never failed to insist that he harbored a soft-hearted center. A more revolting prospect, he could not fathom.

“Where is our surly groom?” he demanded, genuinely out of humor. “Do not tell me he is still fretting over his appearance.”

“We wait upon further pomp and circumstance,” Legolas quietly commented, so as not to be overheard by the pages milling about the inner corridor, assigned the vital task of shepherding the lower fronds of Lady Arwen’s train out onto the dais. “The Gondorian aristocracy is not to be
rushed. Truly, their egotism knows no bounds. I sometime wonder if ostentation should be considered a capital offense.”

Startled by the vehemence of his statement, Gimli scanned his features for signs of illness or possession.

“That is a bold utterance for one normally so charitable towards even the orcish hordes,” he exclaimed. “Has the investigation so tainted your view of humanity?”

“Rather, I was merely anticipating your own garrulous remarks,” Legolas smirked impishly, his lucidity revived.

“Have I grown so predictable?” Gimli sighed, reminded of his early musings on the limitations to their friendship.

“Twas in jest,” Legolas huffed in blatant imitation, then snickered to himself. “‘That slip of skin of yours is so flimsy that it won’t deflect jibes, let alone arrows!’”

“We’ll see who’ll be smarting when I send a gaggle of your admirers after that bookish lover of yours,” Gimli slyly retorted. “The faintest hint of truth to the current gossip and they’ll have him in their crosshairs.”

“Unless they fancy him in their own right,” Legolas gamesomely suggested. “Many who share our preference for the hirsute sex have already made themselves known to us. They seem to have mistaken our espousal of such proclivities for proof of our promiscuity.”

“What they mistake is a glimmer of hope for a blazing hearth of opportunity,” Gimli opined, chuckling at the thought of these amateurish advances and rueing that he had not been there to witness a few. “I expect some of them stumbled over each other in the interim.”

“I pray so,” Legolas concurred. “I am generally a patient sort, but far less so where my beloved is concerned. I should be tamer now that I have won him, but the idea is still so incredible to me that I cannot quite temper my behavior. How you will abide all my nerves and nonsense whilst we are exploring the Glittering Caves, I cannot fathom, but I hope you remain steadfast to our plans, Gimli.”

The dwarf himself was so astounded by this reaffirmation that he allowed the ensuing silence to be unduly prolonged. Yet he was quick enough with a barb once he had centered himself, relief and affection for his ever-loyal friend conspiring to sharpen his tongue.

“I am well accustomed to your simpering, Elf,” he shot back. “Whether you be mewling over the dearth or the wealth of prospective suitors matters little to one exasperated by both.”

Comforted by his grouchiness, Legolas could not suppress his smile, especially when he was in a position to compound his diminutive friend’s irritation.

“Then you will be even more happily disgruntled to learn that we are betrothed,” the woodland prince mercurially informed him, closely monitoring his reaction. “I imagine an invite to summer in Imladris will surely goad your ever-ready vitriol into a truly epic fit of vehemence, which is why I have chosen this precise moment to forward it.”

“Blundering as ever,” Gimli snorted, unwilling to concede defeat (and inwardly glad for his friend). “I suppose I must attribute you a wit of intelligence, since you have engaged a most genial soul to save you from your many feats of ineptitude. My congratulations, Elf. I will later forward my condolences to Elrohir.”
“He will elatedly receive them,” Legolas assured him, unable to entirely cage his excitement. “And, if you can abide it, I would further impinge upon your services. Think you I might commission a pair of betrothal rings, to be completed with due haste? I would not quit the city without securing Elrohir’s claim upon me with a formal declaration.”

Even Gimli could not bring himself to befoul such an earnest request with feigned irritation. Indeed, he suddenly found himself beset by a torrent of all too pure emotion, at the prospect of Legolas’ eternal happiness, at the imminence of Aragorn’s personal fulfillment, at his own future’s glorious potential as friend to so many hallowed souls.

“It would be my honor,” he sincerely confirmed, then shared a look with the archer that conveyed the multitudes of feeling they had together experienced. “If there is a particular gem or stone that catches your eye in the Caves, do make mention, since I hereby commission myself to fashion your binding rings.”

Before he could steel himself, Legolas gripped his arm, his face shining with gratitude and gladness. Thankfully, a discreet clearing of throat interrupted the execrable scene, Aragorn shrewd enough not to pass comment.

“Come, gwadoren,” the King bemusedly commanded. “The reckoning hour is upon us. Into the fray once more!”

With a communal chuckle, they ventured out, the two valiant warriors standing fast beside their leader, their friend, their heart-brother. Yet, once Aragorn was delivered to his beatific lady, Gimli remained true to both his partners by bullying away those that sat beside Elrohir, that Legolas might take his rightful place at his beloved’s side.

The ruckus of the murder, the investigation, and their controversial romance had mightily challenged the denizens of Minas Tirith, but there was no greater reward than the unity displayed before him: a people revitalized, a kingdom restored, and a pair of forlorn warriors blessed by the benevolent gods with a forever love.

End of Chapter Ten
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Warning: Characters belong to that wily old wizard himself, Tolkien the Wise, the granddad of all 20th century fantasy lit. I serve at the pleasure of his estate and aim not for profit.

The Untold Annals of the Third Age present...

A Slaying in Scarlet
Epilogue - Gondor Revisited

Minas Tirith, Year 1, Fourth Age

June 25th

Twas upon a rose blush dawn that the Star Rider sailed into the port of Harlond, her prow scything through the docile flow of the Anduin like a seamstress’ shears through satin. With the dainty click of a teacup being set down in its saucer, the hull jolted into alignment with the dock, the tremor enough to nudge the lone starboard figure out of his reverie.

Reverence was perhaps a more fitting description of Elrohir’s mind state as he beheld the Kingdom of Gondor once more, for never had she appeared more enchanted, more worthy of her hallowed repute than in that breathless moment. Against a peachy sunrise canvass, her meadows were lush with silvery dew, her forests crowned with sparkling auras, her mountains epic in their diamond majesty, her river’s fathoms of the most opulent blue. The domes of Osgiliath shone out like beacons in the distance, while the wasteland of Mordor was now a wild mess of green; though none yet dared inhabit the region, neither did its neighbors have the heart to raze a blade of the long grass that now carpeted the terrain, nor trim a branch on the maze of shrubs, nor temper the slow climb of moss and lichen over the intermittent outcroppings of boulder.

The elf-knight veered his gaze towards the magnificent capital city, his destination, its alabaster tiers gleaming with imperial might once more. In that indelible instant, the first rays of sun refracted off the spire of the Citadel, sparkling off towards the far corners of the kingdom, that no denizen fail to be encompassed by its light. As his brow glowed with a shimmer of that preternatural benediction, Elrohir shut his eyes, still mercilessly afflicted by unpredictable and unsparing flashfloods of emotion in the wake of his sacred bond. Though they would soon ring in their second year of marriage, his heart was still as mercurial as during their honey time, prone to soul-cinching aches, suffocating surges of feeling, and moments of sensitivity so intense that Elrohir sometimes wondered if the binding ritual had gone awry, fusing his normally stoic spirit with that of a resurrected bard.

Thus ensorcelled by (he prayed) the view, he lingered at the rail well into the first hour of morning, contemplating what was to come, the long-ago promise that would finally be fulfilled. Atop those tiers restored, his beloved sister awaited him, her elven fea dimmed but no less lovely for it. He smiled in anticipation of her excitement, of the toddler nephew that he would scoop into his arms and finally, fondly squeeze. As the hearty elves that had seen fit to accompany him on this, the most
ambitious adventure of his long life, unloaded the portion of the Great Library he had temporarily pilfered from Erestor, he turned to regard the long swathe of forest that undulated like the verdant train of Varda’s evening dress to the south of Osgiliath, his imminent future home.

After a brief sojourn in the capital, Elrohir would ride out to recover his mate, to make berth in this new colony of his, to dedicate himself to the rather daunting office of doting husband. The elf-knight had, in his time, battled legions, rallied his spirit through excoriating grief, shepherded his twin through three millennia of strife, solved mysteries aplenty, and identified one of the most dastardly murderers in Gondorian history, but a secret part of him still doubted his domestic abilities, especially where the care and comfort of a certain wily archer was concerned. He had sworn the oath, allowed his soul to meld with his beloved’s, but a minute part of him was still irresolute, as well as abjectly terrified that he would inadvertently inflict hurt upon his gentle, gorgeous spouse.

Yet even as he suffered through thorn-pricks of anxiety, his besotted mind conjured up images so blissful that he could not help but be seduced by them. Sneaking into the library on the eve of their binding, only to find his mate-to-be trolling the stalls for a diverting historical tome. Burrowing under their coverlet, and into his husband’s arms, after racing out into the chill night unclothed to fetch firewood. Rocking enticingly back against Legolas as they lounged in the hot spring, in a blatant attempt to lure him into a sultry clinch. Entwining their hands under the table between courses of an interminable supper on the night before Thranduil’s departure from Imladris. The final, emotional hug he shared with Legolas before they parted ways some fifteen months ago, under the ageless trees of Lothlorien. It was some time before the realization dawned that this inner shadow play was the result of Legolas’ efforts to temper him from afar. Giving sway to his husband’s thoughtful attentions, he further opened himself to the ethereal heat of their soul bond, until he was so thoroughly infused that if a random stranger had dared an embrace, he would have kissed them with the fervor he ever reserved for his golden one.

Even as he swooned back against the mast, not quite trusting his feet to support him, he marveled at the power of this connection now that they were in relatively close proximity. He would have been little surprised to discover Legolas awaiting him on the dock below, though surely if his husband were so close he would have been toppled over by now, a thought that made his knees quiver. When no such flaxen force of elf assaulted him, he rallied his senses enough to right himself, though the impulse to forgo the planned family reunion and ride at breakneck speed to Ithilien nearly overwhelmed him.

Fifteen months they had been separated, nearly double the span of their brief cohabitation as newlyweds. Though Legolas himself had insisted he remain in Imladris through his Adar’s last months there, Elrohir had had soon come to rue that decision. A series of weather and duty-related incidents had delayed Elrond’s departure by almost a year, prolonging their time apart and obliterating any chance the elf-knight had of participating in their colony’s foundation. While they were not the first newly bound couple to be deprived of each other during the crazed, lusty months of early marriage, all the smutty encoded missives in Arda - which Legolas had so religiously couriered to his spouse that Elrohir had regularly sprouted tears upon their reception, intuiting that his sweet husband ached with longing even more than he - had not been able to even marginally soothe their heavy hearts. His endlessly un-slaked desire had soon proved to be the least excruciating aspect of the distance so cruelly forced between them; it was the emptiness that resulted from the absence of Legolas’ company that had been a torment, a hollow that no amount of fraternization or paternal vigilance could fill. They had both soldiered on as best they could, singing to each other through their bond in the still of night, such that their impending reunion, in addition to being as impassioned and incendiary an event as ere the aged skies above had witnessed, would be an immeasurable relief.

Just to see Legolas standing before him would inspire such boundless joy that Elrohir was preemptively embarrassed for himself, though not so much that it would prevent him from showering
his beloved with care.

Instead, he gave his swoony head a brisk shake, patted the mast in a humble gesture of gratitude for the safe southerly voyage, then set about locating his steed. The horse in question was a tawny stallion not quite in his prime, bred from his stalwart wartime companion Virgor, who had been retired to the grassy pastures of Ithilien some months before on the transport ship that had carried animals both equine and domestic, as well as their larger pieces of furniture, into the southlands. Elrohir planned to regularly exercise both his old friend and his new second once he was settled, but sage Virgor had conceded his more arduous duties to his excellently dependable son, Rhogir, who now bore him down the hoof-worn plain to the capital.

Behind those newly sterling gates clamored a city revitalized, its streets bustling, its citizens invigorated, and its integrity restored. Though his path was occasionally shadowed by a leery gaze, the ride up to the Citadel was one of welcome and good cheer, as many a denizen, upon recognition, smiled or nodded in his direction, some even going so far as to shout out his name, wish him well, or beg that he give their regards to the King. When his pace was slowed by foot traffic, gangs of children would skip alongside, asking their adorably astute questions when not hollering at some communal delight. As he trot through the fifth tier archway, a man lifted his pig-tailed daughter that she might gift him with a sprig of woe’s cotton for his hair. Elrohir demonstrated his gratitude with a peck to her hand and a pinch to her cheek; her giggles echoing off the ancient stone as he crossed the threshold to the sixth tier.

By the time he dismounted in the stable yard, the fragile branch was carefully hooked into the clasp that bridged his pair of side braids atop the sleek ebony wash of his hair. Thus encouraged by the generally enthusiastic mood, he made haste towards the Citadel proper after thanking the head groom, who bowed with a rather ceremonious hand over his heart. For one so keenly observant as Elrohir, it surprisingly required a half dozen more similar gestures of deference from random passersby, as he crossed the expanded military complex towards the palace road, then hopped up the front steps before segueing into the labyrinthine corridors, for its frequency to register in his admittedly distracted mind. Prior to the notice of this peculiarity, he had been too absorbed with rallying his senses towards an acceptable level of excitement as regarded his imminent reunion with his sister. He was, of course, excited to see Arwen, Estel, and their growing family, but he had underestimated how viscerally his soul would object to being at such close proximity to Legolas yet still denied genuine togetherness. He would have to feign the most authentic ease he had ever attempted in order to avoid his sister’s near clairvoyant scrutiny, a prospect that weighed on him even more heavily than the burden of separation from his spouse. Thus, the recurrence of these odd, ardent gestures did not pique his curiosity until he was well on his way to the Queen’s offices, where he had been warned to report, flouting custom, by the door guards. Yet mere seconds before he ventured in, another unknown passerby performed that by now familiar hand-over-heart bow, with a gleam in his eyes so sincere that the elf-knight felt equally baffled and becalmed.

“Good sir,” Elrohir inquired of the man, a clerk by his manner of dress. “To what do I owe your allegiance? My deepest apologies if I have forgotten some prior acquaintance… Did we serve together in the Ring War?”

“Alas, I am no soldier, my Lord,” the clerk replied, much to his companion’s amusement. “Nor was I of age to serve even but three years ago. I am merely… That is, you are the most honorable and valiant Lord Elrohir Elrondion, are you not?”

“Indeed,” he acknowledged, more befuddled by the second. “Has my reputation been so inflated that good people feel compelled to unfailingly prostrate themselves before me?”

“We simply would not burden you, my Lord, by impinging upon your undoubtedly valuable time
with incessant declarations of gratitude,” the clerk explained. “Also… Not everyone has accustomed
themselves to the new laws, those that you so selflessly championed into being. It is but our humble
way of… of thanking you for our freedom. Our precious, precious freedom to love whomever the
gods will.”

Thus enlightened, Elrohir assayed a faint blush, stunned that such an inconsequential act on his part
had consequences for so many. Consequences that they were obviously quite eager to embrace him
for. His head rang with the chuckles Legolas would no doubt trill at being recounted the tale, such
that he nearly became so overwhelmed by emotion that he could not respond to the adorably
forthright man.

“I see,” he responded, still unable to reconcile with the monument of his achievement; for if he had
encountered seven affected souls in but a quarter hour, how many about the city would sing his
praises? “Thank you for your eloquence on the subject. My only response is that I hope Lord
Angbor is justly remembered as the true voice in the wilderness who finally caught the ear of the
King. I was but his conduit, by royal appointment.”

“Ah, but you are only newly arrived in the capital!” the clerk exclaimed, a twinkle to his eye. “You
will discover much to please on that score, once you venture about.”

With that, the pair performed the gesture anew, then set about their business, leaving Elrohir to his
characteristic introspection.

Twas in just such a daze that he wandered into the Queen’s offices, his mind clogged with images
both riveting and rose-hued from their two-month investigation of the Steward of Lamedon’s murder.
Indeed, he and Legolas had interrogated Amrothos in the very room he now stood in, though, given
recent refurbishments, a less keen eye might have failed to recognize it as such. Where once an air of
austerity ruled, an abundance of color now flourished, from the vibrant poppy red of the tapestries
and curtains to the warm caramel tone of the furniture. As he inwardly revisited the conversation they
had shared whilst ensconced in the spacious anteroom that was now the Queen’s study, he cast
unseeing eyes upon her secretary, who regarded him with an expression that mingled curiosity and
bemusement.

“My Lord Elrohir, I presume,” the man welcomed him, in a rich baritone that had undoubtedly
recalled their father to Arwen. It also served to wake the elf-knight to the moment, as Elrond’s often
had. “On behalf of their Royal Highnesses, I bid you welcome to King Elessar’s court. I trust your
journey was swift and easy?”

“It was swift,” Elrohir chuckled, acknowledging his formal bow with a nod. “Is my sister about?”

“Alas, it falls to me to inform you, My Lord, that their Majesties were suddenly called away to Dol
Amroth,” the secretary explained. “A Prince of Harad arrived without warning, hoping to quickly
form an alliance before his ship was set to depart anew. He will sail on the morrow, when they will
promptly return, and so the King and Queen beg your patience through but a day’s delay.”

“They surely have it,” Elrohir assented, marveling at the news of a rupture in the formerly seamless
Haradin power structure. He also implicitly understood the need for Arwen’s presence. In the desert
empire, women were still little more than ornamentation, bartered as one would a prize heifer or
camel. Yet for a leader to be without one was a sign of weakness, a tradition Estel could ill-afford to
flout at such an early stage in his relationship with the prince. Though how Elrohir wished his arrival
had been more timely, that he attend *that* conversation with Gondor’s willful elf-queen. “Is my
nephew about?”

“He is not old enough to be away from the Queen,” the secretary delicately informed him, obviously
appraised of the intricacies of the elf-knight’s own situation. “Your usual suite has been prepared for you, my Lord, but Her Majesty has indicated that if you do not wish to tarry here…”

“So long as I am appraised of any further delay, I shall remain,” Elrohir at once decided, unwilling to allow himself to contemplate the alternative, for he was leagues from objectivity in this matter. “Please have my supper delivered to the suite. I have no appetite for court.”

“It has already been arranged, my Lord,” the man concluded, with a sympathetic smile that must continually endear him to Arwen, though Elrohir was hardly surprised that his sister had expertly handpicked her staff. “The gardens have also been emptied for your convenience.”

“My thanks,” Elrohir replied, with fond grin aimed not at the secretary before him, but one he suddenly ached to embrace.

As he ambled back into the corridor, he remembered a strain of conversation from the eve of his departure, a night spend trolling the starlit Imladrian walks with Elladan. Anxious about their imminent separation, he had too forcefully pressed his twin into a commitment to venture south within the decade, which had unconscionably cut Elladan to the quick. The elf-warrior had then confessed something Elrohir could not even begin to contemplate, that from then on every moment with their sister would be counted among his last and he had not yet rallied the courage to confront such a bleak timeline head on. Elrohir, he had insisted, was far more fortunate. His hourglass would not be overturned for decades yet. Elladan, alas, already felt the sands spilling through his fingers, but could not get enough of a grip on himself to hold fast. If it had not been for Legolas’ guiding flame, Elrohir would have found it impossible to leave his brother after that heart-rending admission. But he, too, had made his choice, and Arwen had been awaiting him along with his spouse, while Elladan had Glorfindel to bolster him. Still, the elf-knight was newly impacted by the grim reality of their circumstances, that he had just lost another day with his sister, for his soul would not spare him a moment’s further absence from its golden mate.

Indeed, were it not for his preternatural reserves of inner fortitude, Elrohir would not have been able to steer himself toward the gardens, let alone set one foot in front of the other in the opposite direction of the stables, to which a lesser might would have summarily fled. He was marginally comforted by the thought of the temporary sanctuary he would find there, among the trees that Legolas loved so well, against which they had, in a bygone year, fervently loved. As he walked towards the whitewash glare of sunlight refracted off the mountain peaks, he felt as if he were crossing a threshold into an otherworld, one where a certain woodland prince reigned supreme. Elrohir reveled in the scald of Anor’s harshest rays against his skin as he padded down the steps, so blinded by the light that he could easily imagine Legolas beyond the gate, awaiting him. He dotingly retraced the path they always took, molding his grip around the fence post as he had during one of his then-lover’s stealth assaults, raking his fingers through the bushes that had oft concealed their copious hand-holding, lingering in repose against a sturdy maple that had supported him through a series of breath-stealing kisses.

In that moment, Elrohir felt such ache for Legolas that he nearly bayed out in despair, his devotion to his now-mortal sister warring with fifteen excoriating months of separation within the sizeable confines of his heart. Whence in Imladris, the distance between them had unknowingly been a blessing, since their innate sense of one another stretched thinly across the miles. Now that they were in relative proximity, Legolas seemed to shadow his every step, the emotions his spouse was experiencing easily communicated between two that had not been bound long enough to exert more than a small measure of control over this indelible, yet oft unwieldy, connection. As such, he was every so often suffused with a trill of amusement, a wave of joy, a rather distracting stream of pleasure. Worse still, Legolas felt impossibly near, as if he would turn a corner and discover him there, with eyes shining.
Aware that he had to escape such an evocative place, yet incapable of abandoning the path that had led to so many delirious encounters, Elrohir meandered along, a servant to sweet memory. By the time he came to the glade where they had once eloquently coupled, he was so wracked with feeling that he sank to his knees, then spread himself across the cushy bank of grass, the scent and the familiar sensations utterly overpowering. He flopped onto his back, soothed by the dapples of sunlight that speckled his face, and wondered if Legolas had permitted himself a similar moment of serenity in Ithilien, if his husband’s influence had inspired his own repose. He reached out to him through their bond, clumsily searching for a more visceral experience of his beloved, but Legolas - perhaps preoccupied, perhaps simply avoiding a painful reminder of what he could not yet have – was unavailable. Elrohir was yet unskilled enough in that cosmic art that he could delude himself into thinking he had failed to properly navigate the ether, which was better than considering what Legolas might have been about, for the answer would unerringly cause him to ache all the more.

With a heavy sigh, he more observantly absorbed his surroundings, wondering anew how he would endure the night to come. Yet one so hawkeyed as he swiftly caught sight of the symbol etched into the bark of a tree that, if he was not mistaken, he once spent himself most vociferously against. He sprang to his feet, immediately centered, then strode over to the placid elm in question. After close examination, there was no doubt that the cipher was recently drawn by his beloved’s hand, a fact that warmed him immeasurably, since its message was clearly meant for him. Elrohir deduced that Legolas had premeditated his visit here upon his last audience with the King, and had left this cryptic welcome for him. The cipher in question was in an ancient tongue, one most scholars might misinterpret. It was also quite lovely, decorating rather than marring the tree, especially given the elegance of the script.

Its meaning was hardly a revelation: “Love transcendent and eternal.” It was also, to the discerning eye, a clever amalgamation of their initials. Elrohir himself had come upon it in the days prior to their binding rite, yet in time enough to have it embroidered on tablecloths and painted onto place settings. Legolas had gone so far as to commission parchment decorated with the symbol, and had gifted Elrohir with a pendant in the cipher’s shape. It presently hung over his heart, which beat out a lilting tattoo in tribute to the fair woodland prince who claimed it for his own. Thusly revivified, the elf-knight resolved to pass a peaceful night awaiting his sister’s return, reminded anew of the strength and depth of his forever bond.

Such tranquility within, alas, was not to last. No sooner had he scaled the garden steps than he was stopped short by a glance at the pillar before him, on which was etched, in turquoise chalk, the very same cipher. Before his agile mind hunted down the obvious conclusion, his blood began to race; he was very nearly suffocated by excitement. He stormed into the Citadel with fearsome determination, only to be summarily halted by a pair of foreign ciphers at the first intersection of hallways, one directing him towards the residential wing, one suggesting that he veer towards the staircase to the spire. He soon spied the coded message written in wax on one of the darker window panes, a riddle that somewhat stymied his ardor. While Elrohir appreciated his husband’s efforts towards entertaining him, he hardly required such impediments, given what hurdles he had already had to clear during their fifteen months of separation. Regardless, there was naught to be done except devote himself to the task at hand, one that would potentially yield such bounty that he snapped out of his stupor and set about deciphering the riddle.

Alas, the resulting instructions were maddeningly ambivalent.

If tis solace you seek, follow the common route
Not all escapades need be touted
If tis kinship, scale to the stars
Some rules deserve to be flouted
A decision between solace and kinship, the translation of the two navigational ciphers he had choice of, was unexpected; neither conveyed the intensity of what Elrohir aimed to discover at the end of his search. Perhaps he was being misled? Perhaps his dear husband was still at large in the wilds of Ithilien, tending to his forest and awaiting the elf-knight’s arrival, innocent of this latest mischief Elrohir had stumbled upon? For all those prepared to deify him, Minas Tirith still harbored factions that could be branded enemy. Elrohir exhaled longly, then shut his eyes, attempting to probe his marital bond for a stronger sense of direction. Minutes later, still neither corridor particularly beckoned, though the futility of this assay expertly smote the last flames of his excitement. With a dull grunt, he resorted to logic, despairingly considering that this might be an elaborate ruse on Arwen’s part. ‘Kinship’, after all, had some rather obvious connotations, ones that suggested that a welcome party was perhaps the only event on the palace calendar this eve. His sister may have gone so far as to invite Legolas; if so, then she truly meant to torment him, for the only thing more execrable than her present machinations would be to be in the company of his mate and be unable to properly express his elation (among other, less politic emotions). Surely Arwen knew well enough not to tease him so?

Just as he was about to curse the impishness that afflicted both his siblings, a faint pulse blinked within, prodding him into action. Elrohir’s heart somersaulted at the ethereal intrusion, encouragement enough that he bolted down the ‘solace’ corridor, for naught beckoned him more than the thought of burrowing in his beloved’s arms. When he slowed to a jog, scanning for the next clue, the pulse kept pace with him, tempering its rhythm but expanding in breadth, until the flame of curiosity was newly ignited within. As suddenly as it had emerged, it rescinded, but Elrohir was now appraised of the stakes and would not give up the hunt until he had nabbed his prey.

After locating the latest symbol, he exited onto the gabled terrace that housed the sacred altar. Beyond the seeing stone was a mosaic of leaves and petals, patterned to depict...what? Frantically, he scoured the recesses of his mind for the relevant connection. His reasoning was further impeded by the arboreal scents that wafted about - juniper, marsh lily, and acorn - the fragrances he most associated with their honey time. Memories of that incendiary month in the cabin by the Ford of Bruinen all but kidnapped his subconscious, thusly luring him into salacious imaginings of the night to come. Legolas well knew how powerless he was when in the grip of such intoxicating emotions; his husband often, and masterfully, wielded such potent suggestions to his advantage, as he undoubtedly was now. Yet Elrohir only delayed their reunion in tarrying so, thus he rallied his senses and set the last sober vestiges of his mind to work on the puzzle at hand, now all too aware that the true intent of his sunny mate’s game was to painstakingly and rakishly unravel him.

It was some time before he realized that, if he was to proceed forward and not retrace his steps, there was only one route available to him. Still tipsy-headed, he held fast to the rail of the outer staircase, which spiraled down the King’s private dining room. Estel’s usual seat was askance, inviting him to sit at the head of the long oak table, before a Battle Game board. Instead of the usual, nondescript military figures, the game pieces were sculpted in the shape of epic heroes. These were either gloriously on display, their nudity exquisitely rendered and their maleness fulsomely endowed, or performing acts of eroticism that had flared his cheeks when Elrohir had first beheld them, when Elladan had presented them the set as a binding gift. Indeed, the figures were so handsome that the elf-knight had lost every game he and Legolas had attempted, though he usually trounced his husband when they played with a regular set. Here, his precocious one had arranged the two king pieces in a classic checkmate position, wherein either one could claim victory in a single stroke, while the rest of the fallen armies engaged in an orgy (Elladan had proudly insisted to the craftsman that some of the pieces interlock). Inwardly vowing to contort Legolas into each and every one of the tawdry poses, Elrohir contemplated the adjoining message, which was blessedly succinct:

Claim your king and follow suit.
Elrohir duly had Ereinion conquer Turgon, in a tribute to Erestor’s reunion with his longtime paramour, but had no notion of which direction this meant he should follow. After a vain search of the room, he momentarily succumbed to the surge of desire and direst longing that flood through him via the binding channel – Legolas, as he, was growing impatient. Never one to fail his spouse, the elf-knight scrutinized the message, then focused his attention on the orgiastic figures in order to determine the two respective suits. He could have smacked himself when he recognized that they were leaves and stars. Attributing his density to duress, he suddenly recalled that two separate sets of secret passages led to this room.

Once he located the leaf emblem that marked the eastern exit, he crept along the low-lit corridor, which had been smoked with an incense vividly reminiscent of Legolas’ woodland scent. He came to a familiar staircase, which led, he marveled, either to his suite of room or to the Citadel’s spire, depending on the landing one exited from. On the first floor landing, he discovered that his path was blocked by three podiums. Upon each, an alternative was presented, with either option attached to a telltale envelope, with further instructions he presumed. The first presented him with something to fortify his nerves, either a goblet of wine, labeled ‘Tang’, or a cup of tea, labeled ‘Tonic’. Elrohir downed the extremely potent wine in one sure draught, then tore open the envelope. To his surprise, it contained a small pane of glass, with squiggles of black that formed no discernable pattern. With a shrug, he proceeded to the second podium, assuming that all would be revealed in due time.

There, another choice lay before him, its aim to tantalize the tongue. He paused before the spoonful of ‘Sugary’, a berry jelly with a daub of cream, and its complement ‘Savory’, a slice of pungent cheese. He nibbled on the cheese as he slit into the envelope, which bequeathed to him another pane of glass. Intuiting what was afoot, he shuffled over to the final podium, where he was compelled to decide between ‘Pretty’, a peacock’s feather, and ‘Peaceful’, a gull’s wing. Gleaning that one of these would soon be the instrument of his sensual torture, Elrohir boldly plucked the peacock feather from its stand. His prizes secure, he bounded up the stairs to the second floor, where, as he had presumed, a peculiar device was stationed before a candle so that, once the three glass plates were locked into its slits, an image would be revealed.

Wondering whether he had chosen aright, Elrohir gazed through the viewfinder at his juxtaposed squiggles, which combined painted such an explicit image that he nearly conked his head on the metal eyepiece. Upon closer, and calmer, inspection, they clearly directed him to the spire, where he prayed Legolas would be waiting to reenact the coital gymnastics of the image now seared onto his mind’s eye.

As he raced up the stairs, his exotic fantasies were burned away by the sheer, wrenching need to be reunited with his mate. By the time he stormed into the parlor at the base of the spire, Elrohir was almost keening with want of those wiry arms, that withy frame, that peal of a heartbeat beneath his clenching palms. The scene that greeted him had been dotingly set, a crackling fire in the hearth, a plush bundle of fur pelts laid out before it, a banquette laden with heaping trays of food, a steaming tub by the southern windows, so as to better appreciate the spectacular view. The parlor itself was bathed in the light of a dozen candelabra and a few strings of lanterns, such that its amber atmosphere beckoned the elf-knight’s road and distance-weary soul. Yet there was not a flaxen sheath of hair to be spotted amongst the cozy opulence, not a twinkle of aquamarine amongst the glinting goblets and the shimmering suds, Stricken, Elrohir slouched where he stood, unable to bear the thought that this elaborate game had been concocted to revitalize his spirits on a night he would be spending alone.

Indeed, the weight of the realization almost crushed him, though he was yet too proud to collapse into sobs. Those would come later, in the depths of night, in the dark, when Legolas was asleep and hopefully untroubled by his distress.

Yet he became so mired in despair that he failed for the second time that day to mark an intrusion,
one so very welcome to him that, when those wiry arms did finally weave around him and that withy frame pressed into his back, Elrohir wailed in relief. He spun about, slamming into the embrace of his altogether-too-pleased-with-himself husband, whose snickers soon gave way to a colossal squeeze, as the solemnity of the moment overswept them both. Thus enveloped in Legolas’ giving arms, he basked in the heat of their commingled flames, which fired bright in the wake of their reunion. Before long, Elrohir sensed that he would go mad if he did not see that comely face. A beatific smile erupted across his noble features as his gaze locked in with those effervescent eyes, which regarded him with a spellbinding intensity. Legolas’ adoration was writ bold upon his pristine features; Elrohir hoped his own reflected a similar affirmation. They stood there, unspeaking, utterly enraptured, until their innate curiosity overwhelmed them, demanding to know firsthand if their beloved was well, stable, at peace.

“Forgive the delay, melethron,” Legolas sincerely begged. “I had wagered on you choosing the gull’s feather and had preemptively installed myself in our suite.”

“No matter,” Elrohir sighed, able at last to relinquish the tension that had coiled tight within for so long. “You are here.”

“So I am,” Legolas chuckled, grazing his knuckles down his cheek. “Did you verily believe I would keep away with you so near?”

“Twould have been just punishment for my foolishness,” Elrohir insisted, eager to berate himself. “I should have come to you. I should have-”

“Hush,” Legolas soothed. “I have yet to claim my kiss, berethen. At present, that does me far more injury than…”

The archer was silenced by such a blistering kiss that he might have swooned had he been a less solid sort. Yet it was this very quality that had reassured the elf-knight as to the sanctity of his beloved’s heart during their separation, indeed had permitted it to be accomplished; for Elrohir knew that, beyond the minimal angst and loneliness, there was no question of their forever. Their first sojourn in Minas Tirith had sealed their destiny, and no force in Arda, Aman, or the celestial fathoms could rend it asunder now that they were bound. They were lovers, partners, friends, fellows; their spirits had, unbeknownst to them, been entwined since time immortal. Yet even if the gods had not intended them for one another, Elrohir was certain he would have pledged himself to Legolas all the same, he was that enamored, that enthralled by his stalwart mate.

When they dizzily emerged from their embrace, they managed only a few lurches in the direction of the tub before Legolas drew them together again, all notion of conversation blighted out by kindling flame of their passion. Fortunately, no words were necessary to convey the urgency of his need, as those nimble fingers most sensationly mapped the taut curves and firm ridges of the elf-knight’s brawny frame, all whilst a textured tongue tangled with his own. Elrohir, however, was not one to submit lightly, even to his dashing spouse. He snaked his hands until his wood-elf’s tunic and stroked up the plane of his back, thrilled by the definition he discovered there. Fiercely intrigued by this hint of a newly tight physique, he concluded their kiss with a volley of flirtatious pecks, then eagerly set about stripping Legolas down, his silver eyes gleaming with anticipation.

Legolas chuckled softly, abetting his efforts, proud of the muscle-coiled body the building of his colony had honed into a perfect specimen of elven physicality. Elrohir emitted something between a gasp and a purr when his meticulously sculpted chest was exposed, the sound devolving into a raspy moan as he beheld the lean cut of his arms and thighs. Panting slightly, Legolas guided his hands over the slopes, flats, and crevices of his feral form with soulful deliberation, that his husband might revisit the expanse of his dominion. Elrohir barely drew breath as he caressed his beloved, in awe of...
how months of rustic living had rendered him even more agile and immaculate. As his hands
abandoned their guide to explore on their own, the darkling elf could not longer deprive himself of
the sensual press of those pink, pouty lips. He suckled the bottom petal languorously as he all but
mauled his mate, a primal hunger rising in him such as he had not felt in fifteen endless months. Yet
neither would Legolas defer his own progress in baring the elf-knight, scrabbling to rip his garments
off even as his body was petted and his mouth plied, desperate for the sublime clash of flesh on flesh.

A thunderclap of desire razed through Elrohir when he felt the first jab of his lover’s hard-swollen
errection into his now-bare hip. With a rough tiger’s tongue, he lapped up the glisten of sweat on the
slope of Legolas’ neck, though anxious for a thicker, cruder taste of him. After pushing him against
the edge of the tub, he prowled down to savage his sensate nipples, soon an angry, used red. Elrohir
then delved into the reservoir of his navel with such relish that the archer reared with impatience,
bucking testily up, not to be longer denied. Conscious that, as a younger elf, his beloved was not able
to endure such indelible torments for quite so long as his own capacity, as well as raring for that
auspiciously salty quench, Elrohir dutifully kneeled before Legolas’ towering tumescence, pausing to
admire its scarlet magnificence before unleashing his lascivious tongue.

There was an artfulness to his licks and lashes that Legolas did not fail to appreciate, even as he dug
his fingers into his husband’s scalp in a vain attempt to fully penetrate his mouth. Though his
ministrations were slowly driving the archer mad with pleasure, there was no question that Elrohir
considered him a delicacy sans pareil, that he savored every swipe, every swirl that he performed
upon him. In one of his rare moments of erotic candor, Elrohir had once expounded upon how
delicious he found him, how uniquely flavorful he found Legolas’ nether regions. Ever since, he
resurrected the monologue whenever his stoic mate devoured him, since it unfailingly amplified his
pleasure. Indeed, as Elrohir sucked on him with uninhibited ferocity, he gave sway to a seismic
eruption, giddy with the knowledge that his beloved could not get drunk enough on his scalding
seed.

The vise-hold grip laxed into a series of slack but well-meant strokes as Elrohir rested a woozy head
on Legolas’ thigh, since he was indeed quite intoxicated by his first, heady draught on his lover in far
too long. Still, one of his arms remained bolted around his husband’s back, lest in his delirium he slip
down into the bath. Though fiendishly needful of release in his own right, Elrohir scooped him up
once he’d somewhat recovered himself, reluctant to allow the sultry waters to damper their loving.
Within seconds, Legolas was sprawled out beneath him, blonde and bare and awesomely beautiful,
as well as writhing fitfully as the elf-knight’s caresses sought to build upon his afterglow. He might
have lingered there for a time, pawing playfully at his kittenish mate, were it not for the look Legolas
then shone at him, one so reverent, so pristinely intimate that Elrohir became overwhelmed by the
eloquence of his husband’s love, by the answering grace within him.

He crushed a kiss to his lips, then spooned their hips, every further moment that their bodies were not
one the purest agony. He was beyond relieved to discover that Legolas had prepared himself in
advance, for he had not the forbearance. As it was, the fresh swab he did apply nearly undid him,
since his sweet spouse was nearly as tight as on the first night they laid together. Eager to keep sight
of him, Legolas hooked an arm around his middle, ably contorting himself that he might marvel at
being filled, at the preternatural devotion in the elf-knight’s eyes as he claimed him anew. Elrohir
exhaled blithely as he sheathed himself, the feel of Legolas’ molten channel, the steady beam of his
eyes, the bloom of their soul flame within conspiring to unman him. While he fluttered kisses over
his beloved’s lips, cheek, and neck, he pierced him soundly, delving to the core of his being as their
skins ignited with the shimmer of their bonded spirits. This initial gentility soon succumbed to a
ravaging passion, Elrohir thrusting as deep as he dared, with Legolas meeting every buck with
violent contraction of muscle that literally sought to gird him into a thrall of ecstasy.

Finally, they broke through to the place of serenity, to the otherworldly oasis where they were one.
There, Elrohir floated in the ocean of his beloved’s soul, communing with the very ether of his being, such that he was enlightened as to everything Legolas was, wanted, cherished, championed. He tarried there awhile, ravished by his husband within even as he wrecked himself upon him without, then felt himself dissolve back into the present, where he was slammed by the tidal wave of his climax. He heard Legolas’ diminishing moans, he felt the hot spill of essence over his hand, he was alight with the inferno of their orgasmic soul flames, then he crawled, delirious, into his archer’s embrace to ride out the golden rush. He was so comfortable in his bliss that it was only some time later, when Legolas tenderly daubed at his eyes, that he realized he had wept in passion’s wake, though there was no need to express his tremendous relief to one who had recently been possessed by his spirit. Elrohir unabashedly buried himself in Legolas’ arms, relishing the sanctuary that would be his forevermore. He quietly vowed that he would never again stand for them to be parted for longer than a fortnight.

Yet wood-elves being the restless and precocious creatures of renown, the tranquility of their post-coital repose was soon disturbed by his fidgety spouse, who promptly shooed him off the fur pelts, then angled him towards the bath, where indeed the still-steaming waters felt as luxurious as spun satin to a road-weary traveler such as he. The claw-foot tub Legolas had commissioned was enormous, as wide as a two-seater canoe and easily the length of a Corsair javelin. After plunging him into the middle of what some would consider an elevated pond, Legolas treated him to a rigorous scrub, his nimble hands wielding the washcloth so winningly that Elrohir soon felt as polished as a fine porcelain plate. His own efforts to scour his slinky one proved far less meticulous, given that he was still hopelessly distracted by the flawlessness of his adventure-honed physique. Eventually, there was nothing to be done but pounce on him anew, though the resulting frolic emptied the tub more than aught. When finally they settled into a prolonged soak, Legolas stationed himself at the opposite end with the intent of massaging the elf-knight’s feet, a worthy, yet scientifically impossible plan. Instead, Elrohir gave his grouchy arches over to the soothing waters and tuckered into his beloved, whose silken locks fanned out along the sudsy surface like the golden mane of that legendary mer-creature of lore, Albion Idhanir. In that pensive moment, he was reminded anew of how absurdly fortunate he was to have earned himself such a mate, a hearty, affable, affectionate soul who gracefully endured his bouts of intellectual surliness and who supported him even if he doubted the success of his ambitions. He knew Legolas would always endeavor to shake him out of his reserve, to force him away from his solitude, and to succor him through times of shared despair. After millennia of strife, the Valar had been overgenerous in their post-war dispensation, but from the darkling elf nary a cluck of protest will ere be heard.

He knew what a treasure was his, and how best to cherish it.

“Tell me of our home,” he beseeched his husband, eager to be ensorcelled. “What triumphs have you lately celebrated? What challenges remain? How are our fellows settling in?”

Legolas chuckled softly, no longer accustomed, after so many months of absence, to the simultaneous frankness and flattery of his stare. Elrohir had a way of looking at him, in the manner of an enamored mentor, that regressed him to early adolescence; he felt that even his awkwardness was being appreciated. Still, he was no longer a gawky teen – not that he ever had been, spitfire that he was – thus he quietly basked in his husband’s scintillating regard and fought to ignore the syrupy feeling that queered his insides.

“The village has sprouted up almost overnight, to one as busy as I,” Legolas informed him. “A common hall, a school, and a tavern are already in place, along with a tented marketplace. Few have chosen to build far from the central glade, but there is space enough that there are already residential sections. We have already constructed homes for those immigrating from Imladris, though of course everyone is free to stake out their own land claim. We certainly do not lack for timber or stone given
that we can scavenge the entirety of Mordor. The refinement of these supplies will be our chief resource until our fields have weathered a few crop seasons, but since we cannot meet the demand, I predict no foreseeable hardship. By summer’s end, we aim to finalize the division of labor, complete construction on the Steward’s offices and the library, and polish the village landscape with torchlights and marked pathways. As for the population… I pray the healer you brought is well-rested, since there are a half-dozen babes gestating as we speak.”

Elrohir smiled readily at this, pleased that their compatriots were already proving fruitful.

“It sounds a veritable paradise,” the elf-knight exclaimed. “Though it must have been torturous for you, melethron, to be surrounded by such enthusiastic procreating while your own bed remained empty.”

“I will allow that there were… tense moments,” Legolas admitted, though his shining face did not flicker from its good cheer. “But mostly exhaustion reigned. I was not afforded much contemplation, nighttime or otherwise. Though now that I may parade about with one of your handsomeness… I will flaunt my prowess at every opportunity, and do my ready best to have you fat with child come midwinter.”

“I am, as ever, your willing accomplice,” Elrohir declared, as they both succumbed to laughter. Yet his own soon petered out, as his thoughts turned to more poignant issues. “And our residence? Is it complete?”

“To a point,” Legolas explained. “I did not care to lock us into a particular arrangement only for it to later prove unsatisfactory. I have chosen what I think to be a splendidly romantic location, and have built a durable talan, whose expansion awaits your invaluable input. Thus, if you are not as entranced by the setting as I, we can surrender our abode to another family and move elsewhere.”

“I cannot think I will fail to adore the location you chose,” Elrohir assured him. “So long as we reside there together, I will be little bothered by the colors of the walls or the layout of the furniture. The place I live is between these arms, tucked into this limber frame. There I am home, melethron.”

“As you will ever be,” Legolas murmured, his ardor chastened some by his husband’s emotionality. “And might a doting husband inquire as to how his long-burdened mate fares? I confess, I nearly boarded a soon-departing northbound ship when I read your last letter. Did I falter in remaining south through your struggles, inden? I was perhaps too naïve a newlywed in heeding your insistence—”

“Harbor no regrets on my account, lirimaer,” Elrohir reassured him, ghosting a kiss over his brow. “I wanted for you, but… In a way, I had to conclude my time in Imladris as I ever lived there, alone. Though Elladan will be exceptionally well cared for and you are ever the beacon that guides my soul, there has never been a time when we have been so long apart. In order to pay proper tribute to that, I had to concentrate my last months home on him. He has to bear witness to the slow decline of our family’s accomplishments and prosperity. I wanted to devote myself to similar endeavors, if only for a short time. I had to put that part of my life to bed.”

“Is Elladan unwell? Troubled?” Legolas asked, his features livid with concern for both his law-brother and his spouse.

“Rather, he is well content,” Elrohir elaborated. “Methinks there is a part of him that relishes the chance to lead, and is proud to be the refuge’s caretaker through her final years. And certainly he is excited to be alone with Glorfindel, that they might fully concentrate on their relation, just as we are similarly glad of our isolation from our families. This Fourth Age is a time for love.”

“It is certainly in abundance now that you have come home, berethen,” Legolas smiled, his eyes
“Long may it reign,” Elrohir whispered, then surrendered himself to his singular desire for his spouse, to the sacred communion of souls with the one that would ever be his sovereign.

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Two Days Later

Twas with the casual ease of warriors on leave that they clopped under the archway that divided the fourth tier from the third, their loud, jovial bickering, as well as their spectacular handsomeness and kingdom-wide renown, catching the eye of all who had cause to observe them. No one about came close to rivaling them as a public attraction, if indeed anyone ever could, for even in Minas Tirith the sight of a posse of princes and the lone survivor of the Morthond Vale scandal strolling freely about the streets was a rare one. That two of these were elf princes made their appearance in the city’s common quarters even more incredible, though no lurking rogue nor squirrelly rumormonger was fool enough to impinge upon the leisure time of such hallowed war veterans. Yet their camaraderie evoked both a sentimentality and a malaise in those that tracked their progress towards a not unexpected destination (as it seemed the local gossip was, for once accurate); the sentiment rising in those that understood just how much the elven pair had personally sacrificed through their long millennia of life and through the grueling months of the Ring War, and the malaise the product of an instinct that no survivor of the siege would ever entirely quiet within, the sense that with such valiant defenders came the evil they fought against.

Regardless, the foursome themselves were so enjoying their afternoon that they paid little heed to their surroundings, only enough to navigate the circuitous streets of the third tier. Legolas was so invigorated by the good company and the sultry presence of his mate that he felt light enough to skip across the rooftops. When he was not preoccupied with lobbing softball quips at Thorondil, conversing animatedly with Amrothos, and basking in the balmy splendor of the day, he was itinerantly concentrated on schooling his gestures that he not overly embarrass Elrohir with some too-doting demonstration of his care. Having spent the better part of the past two days worshipping his feral majesty in every possible way available to him, which was interspersed with brief visits with the royal family, his level of distraction was understandably high, but he was also sensitive to his husband’s more reserved nature, that some still considered grandiose displays of affection between males taboo and that they would soon be ensconced in a quarter where ‘liberty to all’ was a strictly held creed. Thus, he concentrated on marveling at the wit of his fine companions and holding fast to Elrohir’s hand, a connection that if he had not been allowed, he would have insisted upon.

Yet through it all, Legolas was wholly aware of how fortunate he was. Every few hours, he stole a quiet moment to express his gratitude to the gods, who continued to bless him in ways heretofore unimaginable. Not only was he the leader of a thriving colony and a warrior whose reputation was nigh legendary, but he had won himself the most exceptional elf of his time, a humble, hearty soul with intellect and integrity to spare. During each lull in conversation, he permitted himself a lengthy glance at Elrohir, who was more relaxed than ere he had observed him. The conclusion of his affairs in Imladris, as well as their incendiary reunion, had utterly revitalized his spouse, such that Legolas was able to dismiss the anxieties he had unnecessarily harbored about the potential difficulty of the elf-knight’s transition south. Though he could not accept all the credit, since Elrohir was far more comfortable amongst their friends than at court, he became even more excited about their future, both immediate and thereafter; for their stroll was not just a random outing, but an unofficial visit to a place he had long heard of, but had never sought out until now.

As they rounded the corner onto the high street, he heard Elrohir catch his breath. Giving his hand a squeeze, Legolas led him slowly forward, that they might both better absorb their surroundings.
Amrothos and Thorondil fell silent as they passed under the tall gable that delineated the boundary to Angbor’s Close, a neighborhood dedicated to the interests and safety of those in the city that, as the denizens now termed it, “harbored unknown, ancient elven traits in their bloodline.” The former Charred Ring Guild had been converted into a formal guildhall, where sat an elected representative recognized by the King. Otherwise, it was a quarter like any other, except perhaps a bit cleaner and greener, with shops, pubs, inns, and residential streets, as well as a central square. Their mannish companions quickly embraced the celebratory atmosphere, since they had come on a festival day, tightly latching arms around one another to officially present themselves as a couple (mostly to dissuade the few buck trolling about).

Before Legolas could invite his husband into a more tender clinch, he found himself knit to Elrohir’s side, where coyly twisted lips did not hesitate to steal a smooch off his cheek.

“Why did you not tell me of this place?” Elrohir inquisitively murmured, indulging in an overgenerous peck when he turned to respond. “What a marvel!”

“Hardly so, when compared to the genial detective who solved Angbor’s murder,” Legolas replied.

“And made this sanctuary possible,” Thorondil, eavesdropping as ever, underlined.

“You are the architect of this village, Elrohir,” Amrothos rather poignantly chimed it. “Though you hammered not a nail, nor sketched a blueprint, your courage, your tenacity, your dedication to truth is inherent to its design. You are revered among its denizens. Indeed—“

“Elbereth keep your tongue, my love,” Thorondil gently upbraided him, before Legolas could. “Let Elrohir discover for himself.”

“Discover?” the elf-knight questioned, in the cutting tone of a high inquisitor, suddenly conscious of being lured into an uncomfortable situation.

The sharp spike of his stare, however, he reserved for Legolas, who assayed his most scapegrace grin.

“Would I, inden, deliberately involve you in—“

“You know very well you would,” Elrohir sternly interrupted, but could not swallow his own smile. “You are as incorrigible as you are beautiful, as I believe your second brother well warned me on the eve of our binding.”

“And yet we are happily wed,” Legolas reminded him, tickled as ever by their banter.

“We are,” Elrohir slyly concurred. “Therefore I must take some pleasure in being foisted into unfamiliar circumstances by my incorrigible spouse. Come, then, what is afoot?”

Before any of them could answer, the crowd that they had not been aware had amassed itself around them parted to permit the approach of Vartanar, who sped towards them with open arms.

“My Lords!” he warmly greeted them, then received embraces from Amrothos and Thorondil, who had oft frequented his new establishment, The Intrepid Elf Inn, during their sojourns in the city.

Or so the three of them proceeded to explain, while Elrohir gaped, more incredulous with every passing minute. Taking pity on his visibly overwhelmed husband, Legolas drew him close that he might decipher this particular mystery sotto voce.

“It is the closing night of the festival,” he whispered into that delectably pointed ear. “A plaque in
your honor was bricked into the outer wall of his inn. They would that you attend the formal unveiling, then receive their grateful applause. Afterwards, we have been invited to the fete at the inn, a place that, in the grand tradition of the Charred Ring Guild, has... private upstairs facilities.”

“Indeed,” Elrohir purred, but he would not be deterred from voicing his annoyance. “Then you’d best exert every effort, well beyond your usual means, towards luring me up there, for I will not so lightly dismiss your deception in this.”

Though Legolas accepted this for the challenge, rather than the genuine reproof, it was, he shivered at his spouse’s expertly chilling and simultaneously scorching delivery. That he coupled this with a hard, secret smack to his buttock only inspired further penitence in the woodland prince, who would turn his mind to seduction once the ceremony had concluded. Also, it suddenly seemed as if the entire population of the quarter had exited their homes and were avidly interested in their every twitch. Intuiting their discomfort, Vartanar offered to give them a brief tour, thus dispersing the few onlookers with enough grace to be shamed by their gawking.

Yet even the short walk to their primary destination transformed into a parade of sorts, though an oddly moving one. As they made their way towards a small patch of green, many of those who preceded them took the opportunity to perform that heartfelt gesture of thanks that had so stunned Elrohir upon his arrival, when they were not bowing outright or shouting out a more personal message. By the time they reached the monument, the elf-knight’s cheeks were rose-pricked and he tethered himself even more closely to his spouse, but he gamely turned out to acknowledge each individual who came forth despite his discomfiture. Legolas only prayed that the telltale glisten to his eyes did not pool into a more substantial stream; for his part, he beamed with pride and something like exaltation, since he did not think anyone but a few years ago could have foreseen such a place, such a time.

When they came to the monument, he saw that his own forbearance would imminently be tested, and moved slightly behind Elrohir, that he might hug to him.

“My Lords, welcome to Angbor’s Seat,” Vartanar declared. There was indeed before him a long, sturdy bench, behind which a miniature spire stood, inscribed with a pertinent message. “It is said that on misty nights his ghost can be observed resting here, watching over his people.”

“Aye, a ghost with two backs,” someone called out from the crowd, to the amusement of all.

“It also serves as a podium of sorts,” Thorondil explained, then hopped up to demonstrate. “My friends, I have come to attest that I new not what desire was until I first beheld the gentleman who now captivates my heart. Though he was in the arms of another, I knew that with patience and careful planning, we were meant to be. After surviving trials aplenty, and thanks to the vigilance of my two guardian elves, I have known him as a lover, a true friend, a partner in all things, and my devoted mate. I call to the mountains and the wind and the sky! Behold my beloved, Amrothos, Prince of Dol Amroth!”

As a cacophony of cheers erupted around them, Legolas knew his mind. Yet even as he lunged forward to declare his love for his fearsome elf-knight, he was, to his astonishment, brusquely shoved back by the only one who could ever command him. He eventually registered the sight of Elrohir standing tall before him, looking as sheepish as he did shocked by his own behavior, moments before that comely vision began to speak, in the low, eloquent tones that ever entranced him.

“My friends,” Elrohir commenced, with unyielding conviction. “Firstly, I must declare myself amazed at our reception. We did only our duty, and sought not to be celebrated for it, though your tributes have touched me deeply. Beyond my humble thanks, I must confess that during the investigation I paid little mind to championing the love between males that came to play such a large
part of the crime and its solution, mostly due to the fact that I was embroiled in a compelling and all-
consuming romance. Perhaps I pled for the cause because it was my own, because I found it beyond
detestable that Angbor be slain for emotions that so nourished me, that gave me reason for being.
Regardless, there is one reason and one reason alone that I stand before you, eternally bound to a
magnificent elf, one who completes me as no other and who is the fire that lights my immortal soul.
He is the true champion, not only of my heart but of every form of righteousness. He is a tireless
support, one that I counted on most during the investigation and since, a blithely affable spirit, and in
possession of a lethal charm. He is my Legolas, as I am now and forever his Elrohir. He was once a
son of Greenwood the Great, but now he is both the Lord of Ithilien and my priceless treasure. He is
my partner, my husband, my deepest love. Behold my beloved, Legolas Thranduilion!”

The elf himself wasted no time basking in the crowd’s cheers, instead leaping up to Elrohir’s side
and embroiling him in a breath-stealing kiss. Within seconds, he was transported from the chaos that
surrounded them into that oasis of ether and starlight that only existed when their spirits melded into
one, a place usually conjured by their coupling but which occasionally welcomed them in more
humble, romantic moments. There, peace reigned; it was as if they waded through the font of their
love, hand in hand, their heartbeats as constant as the ebb and flow of the elemental waters pooled
around their legs. There, he could read Elrohir’s mind like a cartographer a map he had himself
charted, like the speech an orator had set on the podium before him, but somehow the entirety of this
understanding did not translate into the real world. When finally they eased apart, there was only the
shimmer of this mithril eyes, the grip of those nimble fingers into his shoulders, the curve of those
sensual, smirking lips. As the crowd before them chanted their names, Legolas chuckled at the
madness of it all, then stole a final peck for his trouble.

Elrohir capitalized on their proximity to whisper a thinly veiled threat into his ear, one the archer
prayed would indeed be wrecked upon him.

“I will not easily forget your complicity in this, berethen,” the elf-knight murmured. “I’ll have you
bent and raving over this bench by night’s end, or I am no son of Earendil’s line.”

A bolt of lightening could not have more viscerally zapped Legolas’ body alight. A flurry of torrid
images blew through his mind, a mixture of scenes from their previous escapades and explicit
imaginings, such that he had to be dragged off the bench and further along the route of their tour.
Closely tethered to Elrohir’s side, he absorbed not a word of Vartanar’s explanations until they
reached the inn, so preoccupied was he with keeping tight hold on the reins of his unruly libido.
Such was the length of their separation that he had forgotten his early months vigilance against the
too-easily ignited desire of a newlywed, which required no more provocation that a discreet yet
quick-striking sentence to flame to life. Not for nothing had they mostly shunned the company of
their family and fellows during the nine months of marriage they had enjoyed together; indeed, their
physical exuberance was, in part, the catalyst that led to their decision to part for so long a period of
time, since, if Legolas had stayed in or Elrohir had departed Imladris for the southlands at that time,
neither could have accounted for their behavior when confronted by vital circumstance. Yet
prolonged absence had not cured them of these sudden, indefatigable inflammations. Legolas was
especially prone to them, given his purely elven heritage, thus he knew there was no antidote but to
endure; not that he particularly cared to exorcize himself of all-consuming need for his beloved mate.

The ceremonial unveiling of the plaque was blessedly brief, the crowd fatigued after nearly an hour
of incessant applause, though Vartanar himself cheered heartily, glad to have finally redeemed
himself in Elrohir’s eyes. Whether he had truly done so Legolas thought debatable, since the elf-
knight had never judged the relatively young man for his liaison with the villainous Nargomer of
Lossarnach, despite how Vartanar felt his past had tarnished him in his hero’s view. Regardless,
Legolas fought to temper himself during the embrace that encompassed them both, his body’s
instincts warring within, as part of him could not bear to be touched by anyone but Elrohir just then
and part of him was riled by the notion of anyone save him touching Elrohir. Recognizing these impulses for what they were, he inwardly berated himself, then allowed his gallant spouse to escort him into the already rowdy ale hall.

“Is anything amiss?” Thorondil quietly inquired, as they wound their way towards the table reserved for them.

“Only the pangs of a newlywed too long away from the sweet sanctuary of his honey bed,” Legolas discreetly commented, though there was such ruckus around them that his whisper was something of a low shout. “It will pass.”

“Verily?” Thorondil dubiously retorted. “When?”

“By the morrow,” Legolas admitted, with a smirk.

They both laughed heartily at this, which was a small relief.

“My husband claims that the rage of his desire and his preternatural ability to resurrect himself even when thoroughly exhausted are the boons of an elven heritage,” Thorondil confided. “Is the act of love so different between two bound elves?”

“I wager, since in far less country matters we are more capable than men,” Legolas affirmed. “Elves bind their spirits as well as their physical forms. I would not be so rude as to suggest this an intrinsically deeper connection, for love felt is love earned, but along with its attributes come certain rather violent side-effects, such as I am experiencing now. There is a period of vulnerability and adaptation that lasts about five years, and can reoccur if the couple is same-gendered or never conceive children. Needless to say, your intimate moments are scorching, but the timing of these fevers are often… inconvenient.”

“Especially when you are in the crucible, as now,” Thorondil remarked, his brow furrowed in sympathy.

“Indeed,” Legolas concurred, though until that mention he had not noticed the veritable orgy of flaunt and flirtation they were entrenched in.

Much to his dismay, his veins pulsed with need, his body primed to heed carnality’s sultry purr. It became impossible to ignore the myriad flattering looks shot in his direction, the flagrant pets and clinches established couples uninhibitedly doled out, the suggestively dressed singles writhing gamesomely about the dance area. When finally they sat, he still could not keep his gaze from roaming about, since the very sight of them was both heartening and arousing, the liberty they so exultantly reveled in as affecting as the salacious gestures they indulged in. The thought that they would eventually retire to chambers that both partners inhabited, that they would couple behind doors no longer barricaded, that they could keen and moan and shout out their ecstasy without fear of censure struck Legolas to the core. He maneuvered his seat that he hugged Elrohir from behind not merely to give his hands free reign upon his beloved’s muscular torso, but also that he might feel the weight of that brawny frame against him, an emblem of the solidity of their commitment and the immensity of their love. For despite their ability to grope around, and sometimes grasp, true devotion, Legolas understood that only a few of those he observed would be as lucky as he, would be able to secure themselves someone of unimpeachable heart, like his Elrohir.

The Valar favored them, and cherished them besides, so perhaps the sacrifice of one was indeed worth the benefit of many. He prayed that Angbor, whatever higher plain he and his beloved now roamed, felt thusly, and that he was somehow privy to the bawdy, heartening chaos that surrounded them. What once was an impossible dream that haunted the nights of so many beleaguered souls had
become a gallingly wondrous reality, one that Legolas celebrated with every cell of his being.

He sipped a kiss from the blunt edge of his husband’s jaw, then pressed into the broad canvass of his back. Though his body still simmered with too-long unspent desire, he chose to humbly embrace both the moment and Elrohir, for he would have eternity to ravish his darkling beloved, but only a woefully limited number of nights with their mannish friends.

“Behold them,” he whispered, more hotly that intended, into his mate’s teardrop ear. “How they bedazzle the eye. How guilelessly they shine. Your brilliance has freed them.”

“Elessar’s benevolence, you mean,” Elrohir bemusedly corrected him, ever the reluctant hero. “Along with Angbor’s boldness. “I only interpreted the facts that were before me. Twas the bravery of others that brought about such revolution.” His smile conveyed a deep, earnest satisfaction that belied him, as well as a judicious amount of pride. “What a garden of manly delights is ours to revel in this night; that, I will concede. Yet for all their painted eyes and tousled manes, I would not be free to roam, as I was before the Ring War. I am snugly berthed within our sacred bond, and crave nothing more glamorous than the singular flame of your passion. Once all these gilt-eyed youths have repaired to their boudoirs, once our faithful friends have skulked off to their own scarlet beds, I will hold in my arms all I ever cared to possess: your mercurial spirit, your flint-sleek body, your elemental heart. Then, I will call to Angbor for sensual inspiration. There, I will be enlightened by eternal truths of such beauty and profundity that all else will be washed away. This marvelous place may be the sanctuary of the masses, but mine is here, with you; our togetherness.”

By this time, Elrohir had turned about that their gazes were fervently locked. The kiss they then shared promised much, as well as underlined many a prior vow, and Legolas was warmed by the thought that this was but one of the more eloquent chapters in an epic tale, one that would astound and beguile him for millennia onward. As he basked in the heated gaze those mithril eyes beamed out in the wake of their affection, Legolas hoped that he would never unravel the greatest mystery of all, the ferocity of Elrohir’s love for him.

“Would it be churlish to suggest we retire?” he queried, with a pointed smirk.

“Alas, it would,” Elrohir confirmed, with marked disappointment. “Though you might consider that the longer we delay, the more amenable I will be to a thorough and rapacious unravelling.”

“Perhaps I am mistaken,” Legolas coyly retorted. “But I recall an earlier threat to savage me so thoroughly upon Angbor’s seat that I will not be myself sitting for night on a week.”

“Fear you not, I will make good on it,” Elrohir insisted, with an air of dominance that nearly reduced Legolas to groveling. “I aim, you see, to ravage you with slow deliberation. Yet I find myself so riled at present, I fret that I will be incapable of suitably spelling you unless I suffer a few… volcanic eruptions. Your mouth, for instance, I find rather desperately enticing. Though you have many molten channels down which I am fiercely eager to spend-”

“Say no more,” Legolas croaked, while his hands, as if against his will, delving under the elf-knight’s tunic to cup his muscular buttocks. “Or these impressionable youths will indeed glimpse an eyeful of elvish ecstasy this night.”

“Very well,” Elrohir conceded, though not a whit chastened. “Until the midnight hour, melethron.”

As he settled back into the archer’s embrace, Legolas hugged tightly to him, tempered by his husband’s consoling weight, which had been well missed through five long years of absence. He sought out the faces of his companions both loyal and fair, wily Vartanar, hearty Amrothos, genial Thorondil, and whispered a blessing over their table, one that he was certain Angbor’s guardian spirit
would grant.

Legolas stole another kiss from Elrohir’s slender lips, then gave over to the evening’s hard-won, convivial atmosphere, one a-swoon with a dozen budding romances.

The End

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